Reputation and Credibility. Mistakes in… Mistake Management

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Abstract

The core value and ultimate purpose of the image policies is Credibility. Unfortunately, nothing is more mysterious in the public communication field than the subject’s credibility. The credibility formula is the “cornerstone” of Public Relations and if it were a scientific formula we would teach it in schools. Should someone discover this formula he/she would master the world or at least would control his/her own life horizon. For starters, two things must be said regarding credibility. First of all, it is an excellent strategic reserve for possible image crisis; in other words, credibility represents a sort of “save money for a rainy day”. Second of all, it is never gained once and for all, we cannot anchor it on solid ground; its world resembles the moving sands. If we represent a player in the public arena, it is a crime not to have a damage limitation strategy that is a mistake management strategy. Mistakes can be made in any field of activity but its management implies the same elements. When a mistake is acknowledged, the first steps must be taken towards its management. We shall see that this may lead us to a credibility gain.

Key-Words: Public image; Reputation; Credibility; Mistake management.

1. Introduction. Save money for a rainy day; a world of moving sands

Specialists in public image management speak of two basic coordinates: the “visibility” of the subject and its “reputation”. The subject may be a public person, a company, a political party, an institution or a country. It is common knowledge that visibility per se does not contribute to the fulfillment of managerial, political or geopolitical objectives of the subject; for this purpose, visibility shall go hand in hand with a good reputation. But what does good reputation actually mean?

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The core value and ultimate purpose of the image policies is Credibility. Unfortunately, nothing is more mysterious in the public communication field than the subject’s credibility. When entering the reign of credibility, we cross the border between chemistry and alchemy. The credibility formula is the “cornerstone” of Public Relations and if it were a scientific formula we would teach it in schools. Should someone discover this formula he/she would master the world or at least would control his/her own life horizon.

For starters, two things must be said regarding credibility. First of all, it is an excellent strategic reserve for possible image crisis; in other words, credibility represents a sort of “save money for a rainy day”. Second of all, it is never gained once and for all, we cannot anchor it on solid ground; its world resembles the moving sands.

He who has a considerable credibility capital is able to make a stand not only against unfortunate events that may affect its public image but also against a negative campaign aiming at denigrating its image. The advisors of the Romanian president, Emil Constantinescu, have failed to take this into account when they persuaded him to launch the two negative campaigns against the former President, Ion Iliescu, namely the „Costea” affair and the „Red telephone” scandal. This happened in 1999, one year before the elections in 2000, and Constantinescu hoped to get rid of his main opponent – Ion Iliescu, probable candidate for a new mandate.

We all know the results: Iliescu suddenly gained ground in opinion surveys, reaching values that he hadn’t reached in the elections campaign in 1996. He rapidly exceeded the 30 percents that he could always count on, without any election campaign, reaching a confidence quota of over 40%. What had happened? The enormous credibility capital Ion Iliescu rejoiced at triggered the now famous „victimization mechanism” translated by sociologists as follows: “Poor Iliescu, they don’t get off his back! Why on earth do they hold a grudge against him?” In exchange, the “collateral victim” was Teodor Melescanu, leader of a recently established party. Affected by both negative campaigns in capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melescanu began to decrease in surveys until he reached bottom-end where he remained up to the present day. As many other ministers of foreign affairs, he sat pretty good in terms of sympathy capital but the absence of a credibility capital has been fatal to him!

Nothing seems more volatile than credibility. Being linked to the dynamics of social representations, credibility is always exposed and never shield from “bad weather”. Similar to an individual who felt in a swamp of moving sands, an unadvised or poorly advised subject struggles to save its confidence capital but his uncontrolled moves cause him to sink even more in the lack of credibility swamp.

The most striking cases in Romania are Muscă (August 2006) and Traian Băsescu (January-April 2007). In both cases we witnessed a spectacular fall, from stunning quotas of credibility. In the former case, the absence of a mistake management strategy stands out at least in the first phases of the image crisis. In the latter case, the determining factor has been the discursive strategies that Băsescu treated as “image strategies” but which slowly but surely led to the erosion of his credibility capital. Should this erosion had never occurred, the parliament decision on 19th of April 2007 to suspend the Romanian President would have been utterly unconceivable.

2. Mistake management and reputation improvement

Ancients used to say: „Errare humanum est”, but as humane is to be mistaken, as stupid is not to learn from our mistakes. If we represent a player in the public arena, it is a crime not to have a damage limitation strategy that is a mistake management strategy. Mistakes can be made in any field of activity but its management implies the same elements. When a mistake is acknowledged, the first steps must be taken towards its management. We shall see that this may lead us to a credibility gain.

John Molnar, vice-president of the Property Management Commission in the USA Congress talked in an article in the Washington Post about mistake management within project execution but, by extensor, his theory applies to the public domain as well: “Mistakes are a given fact. They differ only in terms of the degree they reach and the way they are managed. There is no such thing as too much theory on mistake management. In fact, there are good mistakes and bad mistakes. Mistakes are integral part of the learning process and the way they are managed make the difference between a good manager and the poor manager. There are quantitative and qualitative mistakes; expensive and inexpensive mistakes; small mistakes, easily forgettable or on the contrary” (Molnar, 2000).

The company or the individual who develops an open policy or philosophy of mistake management shall outrun its competitors. As a rule, companies hate and avoid washing their dirty linen in public, but they don’t do it even in house. This happens because the great majority of people are not honest enough with themselves in order to
overcome the first obstacle: admitting their mistakes. Not even the managers! In exchange, managers encourage
their subordinates to do it: “Let’s admit that the great majority of managers would rather deal with an employee who
admits its own mistakes than with one who tries to cover or deny them” (Lea, 1999).

Why do people fail to admit their mistakes? One reason would be shame. Another one is the lack of self-esteem;
some people do not trust their own abilities and mistakes enhance their uncertainty. Other are simply astute, hide
their incompetence behind a shallow personality; the more incompetent the cunning are the harder they try to seem
infallible. Most people are afraid of mistakes because they assume it is socially sanctioned; if their environment
confirms their assumption, they develop this tendency to hide and deny their own mistakes.

The best approach that a company may have is to develop a set of rules and procedures regarding the mistake
management, meant to encourage honesty and the capacity of admitting mistakes, whether we are dealing with small
or important mistakes. Thus, the mistake shall not be perceived as a catastrophe but rather as an opportunity to learn
how things should be done and inherently how to make fewer mistakes…

3. The perfect mistake

The efficient management of mistakes comprises four “key-moments”:
1. admit the mistake;
2. affirm that you regret it and promise not to do it again;
3. repair as promptly as possible and/or keep to the minimum its consequences;
4. show others what you have learnt from the mistake as a guarantee that you won’t repeat it;

The forth component, together with the previous ones, entails the creation of a social and cultural environment in
which any mistake has minimum costs. Thus, “the perfect mistake” is the one acknowledged right from the start, is
immediately remedied, does not imply considerable costs and from which we learn how to avoid doing it again.

1. Admitting the mistake. When a leader commits a mistake, he/she must admit it right away. Instead of hiding it,
the leader must openly confess the mistake. More often than not honesty in acknowledging one’s mistake may dilute
its negative consequences. In addition to that, he who admits a mistake may gain image capital which would have
otherwise remained inaccessible. If he would not have mistaken and wouldn’t have acknowledged his mistake, it is
likely that nobody had known the courage, the honesty and backbone that lay in him. This is how mistakes may
offer a good opportunity for improving one’s reputation: admitting mistakes may turn “negative” into “positive”.

2. Apologies. It may seem superficial for leaders to apologize once they admitted a mistake; but usually a sincere
apology is a cure that heals many wounds. An honest and immediate apology may melt down the honesty of others,
regardless of how severe the Jury that judges the mistake may be. An apology is not only something socially
“expected” but also a practical action that may open many doors towards future communication. Sincere apologies
are most useful when the mistake offended someone or created resentment among various people.

3. Repairing the mistake. After admitting the mistake and apologizing, the leader must repair it. Otherwise,
he/she may loose credibility. People want mistakes to be immediately rectified. It is a sign that the wrongdoer
deserves their compassion; there is nothing more comfortable than the confirmation of one’s own feelings.

4. Applying a treatment. The leader must make sure that the mistake is never repeated. The repetition of a
problem is a definite sign that the leader doesn’t care about the problem or doesn’t know how to solve it. Very few
leaders are in a permanent search of problem solving. But the ones that are obtain valuable information by
preventing possible future mistakes.

For years now in Romania we have been witnessing mistakes execrably managed by important people of the
political sphere. We shall further analyze four unsuccessful strategies used by failed characters – three ministers and
one president: Hildegard Puwak, Mircea Beurean, Mona Musca and Traian Basescu. These cases have a common
denominator: neither of them has been able to go beyond the first two key-moments: admitting the mistake and
apologizing.

I have previously showed that the “perfect mistake” is the one acknowledged from the very beginning, immediately repaired, does not imply considerable costs or regrets and from which we learn how not to make it again.
There is nothing more costly for our credibility capital than to repeat a mistake; paraphrasing the Latin dictum „Errare humanum est”, we may say: “To err is human. To repeat is…stupid”. The one who makes a mistake sends the following messages:
- I am incapable of learning (to learn from mistakes and to learn in general);
- I am irresponsible (I ignore the consequences of my actions on others or even on myself);
- I have no backbone (after affirming that I regret the mistake, I repeat it);

The image indicators shown above concur to a disastrous image of the one who persists in committing a mistake: he shall be perceived as an unpredictable person. Could you imagine something worse in terms of credibility? The two terms are virtually opposed since the issue of our confidence in something or someone is shaped on the certainty-uncertainty axis. In fact, the whole adventure of coming to know the world may be synthesized as follows: people try to reduce the degree of uncertainty and to increase the degree of certitude. Or, predictability is the certainty peak that we may have with reference to what is to come.

In the previous paragraph I also said that mistake management presupposes the honest acknowledgement of the fact that we made a mistake, showing that the person that admits the mistake may gain an image capital that he/she could not have otherwise obtained if he/she had not made the mistake! Thus, we find out that the mistake becomes an opportunity for reputation improvement: if the subject had not committed the mistake and acknowledged it, nobody would have known that he/she is a courageous, honest and trustworthy person.

In the culture of the great majority of Romanians, such a mechanism is more difficult to grasp. In a culture in which children call each other names based on physical deficiencies, in which gossip at the workplace is exclusively directed towards the flaws and mistakes of others and the characters at the summit of the political hierarchy pick on the posture of others or on the fact that someone wears a bow tie, it is hard to understand the mechanism through which open acknowledgement of a mistake doesn’t make you more vulnerable but on the contrary makes you more powerful. But this mechanism really works! This habit is not encountered only in children, but also among active solders that call each other names from the first days of the military service. Those who skipped military services cannot even image the cynicism that shows through these nicknames which refer not only moral flaws but equally physical flaws for which the nicknamed cannot be held responsible.

4. The boomerang effect of credibility

At the beginning of this study I promised my readers a series of analyses of the errors made in the process of mistake management. We shall start with the “Hildegard Puwak case”. The scandal emerged in August 2003 when Adevarul daily newspaper discovered that the companies managed by the son and the husband of Mrs. Hildegard Puwak, then minister of European Integration, have obtained non-reimbursable European funds allotted through the „Leonardo da Vinci” program. This occurred on January the 19th 2001 that is in three weeks after Hildegard Puwak became minister.

Later on, European experts ascertained that the four companies of Puwak family have made “ineligible expenses” amounting to approximately 124.000 EUR, expenses which “were not accounted for in the documentation”. The National Agency for Community Programs requested the reimbursement of the said amount, taking legal action against Mihai Puwak, the son of the minister, who has refused to give the money back. The businesses of Puwak family have been investigated by the National Prosecutor's Anticorruption Department but prosecutors discovered that the law had not been eluded and the European funds had been spent according to the program. Even if no illegality, traffic of influence or conflict of interest has been detected, Mrs. Puwak was held in contempt by the most important Romanian publications. How can we explain the escalation of this “moral scandal” which had a bigger impact than many other scandals among which some were downright of criminal nature?
This situation brought about at least two things: 1) Mrs. Puwak tried to minimize the case instead of minimizing its effects by its transparent exposure and by honestly apologizing for the said events; 2) she refused to cooperate with the journalists that she ended up ignoring and that she finally perceived as “enemies”†.

As things become more serious, instead of admitting her mistake and assuming its moral significance, Mrs. Puwak preferred to stick her head in the sand, leaving prime-minister Adrian Nastase, the minister of Foreign Affairs Mircea Geoana and even the chief of the European Commission delegation in Bucharest, Jonathan Scheele, defend her.

Leaving herself in the hands of others has not been the best solution, especially since the prime-minister had nothing more appropriate to say than that the accused had “irreproachable professional qualities”, being “indispensable to the process of Romania’s joining the European Union” and, by the same token, that the scandal could jeopardize this process§. The position of the prime-minister aroused all the more the indignation of the main newspapers which qualified the Government’s decision as “defiant”.

The evolution of the case proved that Mrs. Puwak worsened her situation by the wrong attitude toward mistake – hers or of her family members. Such an attitude is utterly devastating and neither the party, the Government or the European Union Commission could get her out of trouble. Finally, Mrs. Hildegard Puwak had to lay down office and the prime-minister had to accept her resignation...

The catastrophic impact of this scandal in the image plan is accounted for by the subject’s great credibility prior to its occurrence. Being a family-oriented woman, university teacher and of German nationality, Hildegard Puwak embraced four of the most powerful arguments of credibility granted by the stereotypes set in our collective mentality†. Until someone can argue against it, the hypotheses of popular psychology were on her side and the invalidation of such hypotheses has been so much chocking for the public opinion.

5. Self-victimization of the wrongdoer

The scandal emerged in the autumn of 2003 when Cronica Romana daily newspaper published various articles arguing that the Minister of Health, Doctor Mircea Beuran, had copied whole pages of text, tables and graphics from the “On Call” volume of the American doctors Shane A. Marshall, Jean H. Gillies and John Ruedy. Their book was published in 1900 by the W.B. Saunders Publishing House; it has been reproduced, word-by-word, in 1997 by Mircea Beuran and Gerald Popa, under the title “The guide of the on call doctor”. But misfortunes never come alone!

On September 9th Deputy Eugen Nicolaeescu (the spokesman of the National Liberal Party in opposition at that time and, after the 2004 elections, Health Minister!) accused Mircea Beuran of plagiarizing medical guides edited in France that he appropriated by putting his signature as author and drawing other specialists in this intellectual theft. The accusation came after the “Puwak scandal”, which enabled Nicolaeascu to politicize the case referring to the entire Nastase cabinet: “I thought that one single minister, Hildegard Puwak, lies, and that it can be considered a

† From the personal discussions with an advisor of the minister I know that at that epoch Hildegard Puwak avoided journalists to such an extent that she was leaving her cabinet only after making sure that on the hallways no “journalist was haunting”. When the advisor suggested changing her attitude toward mass-media, Mrs. Puwak replied: “Don’t tell me you’re on their side now!” This episode highlights both the neurosis commonly encountered amongst Romanian politicians and their quasi-general ignorance as regards the management of their own image. In such terms, the image counseling becomes a Fata Morgana (an unusual and complex form of mirage)…

‡ Miron Mitrea, the vice-president of the Social Democrat Party, the government party, had the most embarrassing intervention: „Hildegard Puwak is an icon for us, the members of PSD (…). Why should we make such a fuss bound 124.000 EUR? (…) If Mrs. Puwak herself steals, than it means that nobody is honest anymore: (recollected quote). At that time, the statement has been downright hilarious since we could read behind the lines that „In PSD the level of corruption is so high and the frauded amount are so large that the Puwak business is not worth considering. Compared ti us, Mrs. Puwak is a saint…”

§ In Romania there has been a considerable German community (around 800.000 Germans at the beginning of the 20th century) which radically dropped off during the communist regime; this allowed the emigration in the Federal Republic of Germany under the guise of “family coming together” but in exchange of important amounts paid by the German state. In the Romanian collective imaginary, the Germans are serious, hard-working, disciplined and honest. At the same time, the great part of Romanian believe that women that acquired public positions are more honest, more trustworthy and more hard-working that men which are more predisposed to moral compromise, more prone to blackmail and to breaking the law or forming criminal groups. Romanians believe “corruption” is of masculine gender.
singular case, but, as we can see, another minister breaches the copyright law and steals the work of others, refuses to admit it although it stands out a mile. Things are even worse considering this minister is still in office and founds his entire medical work on plagiarism, as shown by the enquiries performed by the journalists” (Paun, 2003).

The Nicolaescu’s statement – an official statement made from the highest political stand of the country – turned the “plagiarism scandal” into a political scandal, placed it in the sensitive area of public persons’ morality. Aspect which the Prime Minister Adrian Nastase pretended not to observe: “The problem of copyright and university titles and minister positions are two distinct topics” (cf. Hriban, 2003). President Ion Iliescu applies the same “disjunction of cases” strategy declaring that Mircea Beuran “made a mistake because he was not scrupulous” but that he trusted the “correctness and honesty” of the Health Minister (Hriban, 2003). We don’t know if Mircea Beuran’s reaction has been influenced by the party colleagues or if they took the motivations of the accused and turned them into “arguments”. What we know is that Minister Beuran played a losing game of statements.

As shown in the paragraph dedicated to credibility, mistake management implies four key-moments: (1) admit the mistake; (2) affirm that you regret it and promise not to make it again; (3) repair as promptly as possible and/or keep to the minimum its consequences; (4) show others what you have learnt from the mistake as a guarantee that you won’t repeat it. We shall further see that doctor Mircea Beuran missed from the very beginning the efficient management of his mistake: he did not have the moral strength to admit his mistake. Finally, he paid the price of the disciplinary termination of the employment contract within the University of Medicine and Pharmacy (UMF) “Carol Davila” as well as of the loss of minister position. I shall thenceforth try to prove that if Mircea Beuran had correctly managed his mistake, he would have probably lost his statute in the academic hierarchy, but would have kept instead the ministerial position.

How did Health minister, Mircea Beuran, react towards the plagiarism accusations of the French medical guides? He alleged that the publication in Romania of these works has been the “result of some prior, serious, responsible and civilized discussions and of a partnership established with a reputable French institution” (namely Assistance Publique - Hopitaux de Paris, the copyright holder). The minister added that in 1995 he received by fax the authorization granted by Assistance Publique - Hopitaux de Paris allowing him to use the French model for editing some similar guides in Romania. Beuran affirmed that “the authorization of the French copyright holder stipulated that, if they did a word-by-word translation of each chapter – then and only then a written consent of each French author would be necessary”, and that the volumes published in Romania “had an original part – belonging to the creators of the respective volume”. Acting as works coordinator, he asked his colleagues to process the materials from the French books; as regards the texts signed by him, Beuran argued that he did not copy word-by-word the materials from the French volumes.

In order to gain credibility, the Health minister affirmed that he “made mistakes”, in the volumes in which ad litteram translations prevail, they failed to mention the copyright. To this timid acknowledgment of a punctual mistake, Mircea Beuran added a justification not nearly connected to the ethics of intellectual work and the deontology of publishing activity: “at that time in Romania the term copyright was not clearly defined and substantiated in a law regulating this field””. Pretending that he did not understand the nature of the problem he was facing (a moral one), the accused moved the debate in the legislative reign; in addition, he tried to hide behind the fact that “at that time in Romania this term was not clearly defined”, deliberately eluding a long-lasting tradition in the Romanian academic environment in which “copyright” is known and recognized and where the strict observance thereof is at least theoretically requested.

But the biggest mistake made by Mircea Beuran has been the statement according to which behind this scandal, emerged many years after the publication of the works (strange argument!) lay groups of interests which apprehended the measures that he initialized as health minister. "I strongly affirm that this violent attack is accounted for only by the convulsion felt by many groups of interests in the sanitary system and from the system of drugs supply and procurement that fell that the new measures I initiated shall prevent them from gaining the huge privileges, material or of any other kind, that they had been having up to this point” (cf. P.M.P., 2003). It goes

** In fact, Romania had had such a law for seven years – Law no. 8/1996 on copyright and assimilated rights – to which various normative acts and articles of law were added meant to “regulating this field of activity”.}
without saying that this statement does not work as argument since it is not “to the point”. Even if things would have been as Beuran described them, their invocation had nothing to do with the problem under discussion: “Did Mircea Beuran commit plagiarism or not?”. We are dealing here with a typical case of breach of the “cooperation principle” which demands each participant to a verbal exchange to meet the expectations of the interlocutor, regulated by the purpose of the verbal exchange and the moment in which it takes place. The British linguist Herbert Paul Grice (1913-1988) synthesized these demands as follows: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Mainguneau, 2007). This rule is known under the name of “the peak of relevance” and its observance is an elementary pre-requisite for the credibility of the talker; as a matter of fact, it requires a very simple thing: any intervention in a talk exchange must correlate with others and must be closely related to the topic under discussion. By this change of the subject-matter under debate, Puwak case resembles Mona Musca’s case.

6. Denial, avoidance and sincere lie; change of the subject-matter

As shown above, the honest admittance of the mistake is the first step in the correct management thereof; the second consists in affirming that you regret it and in promising not to make it again; the next step implies the limitation of its consequences (as Romanians put it “to repair your mistake”); last but not least, you have to show what you have learnt from your mistake, which represents for others, along with the expression of regret and assurance that you will never repeat it, a guarantee that you will not repeat it. Moreover, the subject that manages its mistakes according to the above-mentioned scenario may gain an image capital which he/she could not have otherwise obtained!

Unfortunately, due to the irrational fear of the consequences triggered by the acknowledgement of the mistake, some people tend to mystify their biography, actions reaching self-mystification. Lying to themselves they lie to the others. We are dealing with a … sincere lie! I shall further illustrate the sincere lie by “Mona Musca” case.

The scandal surfaced on 8th of August 2006 when the National Initiative Party deputy Lavinia Sandru declared in a press conference that CNSAS†† was recently tacking with Mona Musca file. The next day, the 9th of August, Lavinia Sandru’s statement reaches the front pages of all central daily newspapers. In the afternoon of the same day, Mona Musca goes to CNSAS to see her file in a Ana Ipatescu‡‡ style, declaring: “I came as soon as possible after seeing what happened in the media. I came to CNSAS because I cannot be insulted like this and leave the public opinion be manipulated” (Corlatan, 2006).

Therefore, instead of admitting from the very beginning that she has a problem that she neglected to solve for 16 years, Mona Musca embraces two hypotheses: on the one hand she is a victim of mass-media (she feels insulted) and on the other hand preoccupied as always by the fate of the public opinion that she cannot leave in the hands of mass-media (that is manipulated). In fact, the heroine of the day hit the roads not because something really happened but because something happened in the newspapers.

Leaving the headquarters of CNSAS, Mona Musca declared the files regarded her legal prosecution but there was no proof whatsoever that she did political police; she promised to make the files in question public. Declaring that “I never, not even for a second, did political police”; Mona Musca opted to change the subject of discussion as a strategy to avoid the honest admittance of the mistake. If we were to pass over the semantic ambiguity of the expression “political police”, reproduced in the content of “Ticu Dumitrescu Law”, we could reproach Mona Musca with the fact that her claim is not “to the point”. The problem that she ought to have clarified right from the outset was whether she signed a commitment with Securitate and whether she gave informative notes to this institution.

†† CNSAS is the abbreviation for the National Council for the Study of the Archives of the Securitate (Communist secret police). The institution was founded in 1999 with the mission of verifying, ex officio or on request, the affiliation or non-affiliation as agent or collaborator of the Securitate officers, of persons that run for elections or who are to be appointed in public positions. Securitate was the political secret police of the Communist regime (the term is an abbreviation of the official name: Department of State Security which functioned within the Ministry of Interior).

‡‡ Ana Ipatescu is seen as a heroic personality of the Romanian history, full of courage and dignity.
She applied the same idiom, the change of the subject-matter, when she frivolously adverted to the political players that longed for her political execution: “If you are not part of a political gang, if you live in a three-bedroom apartment, if you are not part of any Board of Directors or of an economic clan and, on top of all that, you have the guts to say what you think, you become rather disturbing” (Corlătan, 2006).

This statement is strikingly similar to the one given by Mircea Beuran, evoked in the previous case, according to which beyond the scandal there were groups of interests that were afraid of the measures he initiated as Health Minister. As in “Mircea Beuran” case, Mona Musca’s statement did not function as argument because it had nothing to do with the question it should have answered to: “Did she collaborate or not with Securitate?” The following day, on 11th of August, Mona Musca admitted that she signed a commitment with Securitate, arguing that she never supplied written informative notes, just oral information, to the vice-dean in charge with the foreign students, who in his turn sent the information to the Securitate officer. Hence, a partial admittance: Mona Musca admitted the part that could not have been denied official papers could prove it, but did not admit the interpretable part that could be called in question by the ones unable to access the files.

Unfortunately for her, the documents stated the contrary as regards the informative notes as well. In one of the CNSAS files, comprising one single page, there was a list of documents attesting that within the period 8.09.1977-13.10.1978, Mona Nicoara, alias „Dana”, had given 15 informative notes. But these notes were not in the file, which encouraged her to say: “I didn’t supply written information because it was not necessary but I may infer that the person who wished to account for the activity of Securitate officer in front of the foreign students compiled a list and handed it over without adding any substance to it” (cf. Corlătan, 2006). By the way, the Securitate officer who kept in touch with Mona Musca, namely Eugen Lacatus, died in 1998, and could not say whether the list of informative notes had or not substance”. Finally, two informative notes appeared, but they referred to a “secretary and a madam: that worked in the University of Timișoara where Mona Musca once taught. As far as she is concerned, the two notes “prove not only her good intentions, but also her good deeds”, being the “best proof” of good faith (according to the daily newspaper Ziareul from 23rd of August 2006).

On the 14th of August 2006, the Central Permanent Bureau of the National Liberal Party advanced to the Permanent Delegation of the National Liberal Party the proposal of excluding Mona Musca from the party. She persists in unbelievable statements: “As far as I’m concerned, I didn’t take it as collaboration with Securitate, but rather as a procedure”. Her purpose changed from denying her collaboration with Securitate to justifying the reasons why she had hidden this for 16 years: she failed to make it public because she was unaware of the collaboration with Securitate because she thought that what she had done in 1977-1978, as Romanian language teacher for foreign students, had been “a procedure”, a sort of obligation, part of her job description. Mona Musca misses one more time the opportunity of admitting she was wrong and of expressing her regrets. It was only on the 3rd of September, when the Permanent Delegation of PNL decided her exclusion from the party that Mona Musca apologized to the public opinion for having signed a commitment with Securitate. This is, after more than three weeks of pure denial, retraction, misinterpretation and partial confessions. But she failed to fully confess it: “I regret having done it, not realizing that it could be interpreted as collaboration with Securitate. If I had realized it on time, I would have come clean much sooner” (Bogdan & Gheorghiu, 2006). Thus, Mona Musca regrets the collaboration with Securitate but not the fact that she kept a sordid episode of the biography secret. By recurring to this stratagem, she tried to save just a bit of credibility, as reserve for a possible political career. But the great majority of critics that assaulted her in those harsh days pinpointed exactly this aspect: that she kept secret a sordid episode of the biography. Let’s ignore the fact that the critics failed to raise a basic question: if Mona Musca had confessed the said episode from the beginning of her political career, we would have no career to talk about in the first place, Mona Musca would not have been a public person and the debated problem would not have hit the surface.

I personally find it essential that the ethical idealism of certain opinion leaders led them to make statements such as: “In fact, failing to disclose your past events, you missed climbing the supreme morality ladder to which a Romanian may gain access to: to say by free will and out loud that he/she has been an informer. Then we would all have melted into tears, we would have forgiven you in all possible ways, you would have become, to make a long story short, a true moral hero. But you did it your way and became a poor liar who if I’m guessing right, will be held responsible the lie” (Liiceanu, 2006). No comments…

At that epoch, very few lucid analyses were to be found in the newspapers, while a pertinent analysis of the communicational behavior of Mona Musca was entirely lacking. I found one single analysis of this type in the
readers’ comments to the column of Pavel Lucescu “Who is this, Liiceanu?”, published in Cotidianul on 17th of August 2006 (see Lucescu, 2006). Why couldn’t Mona Musca regain the confidence of people by just assuming her own past? Why did she chose to continue lying, to go back on the facts, to lower herself by lying? In my opinion, she followed this track because she could not go back on the role she played 16 years ago which she internalized so powerfully that she could not think the idea of dignity outside it. If she were indeed dignified, she would conflict with this role, it would have been “undignified” from its perspective.

In the following paragraph we shall see that in “Traian Basescu” case. The source of the mistakes in the mistake management is exactly the opposite: the insufficient appropriation of the institutional statute, the partial assimilation of the role deriving from this statute and, from here, the incapacity of duly performing his communicational part.

7. Leaving the role and recognizing only half of the error

The Romanian President became conspicuous by a series of disrespectful appeals towards the press, especially to women journalists. In January 2005, he told Roxana Nica: “The Romanian Police is prettier than you”. In September 2006, Basescu addressed to Dana Grecu in the following way: “Madam, you are as blonde as Elena Udrea”§§. Last year, in December, he told Oana Sultanoiu from Realitatea TV to “sit on the table” [i.e. lie down], to show her what he learned at first aid courses, regarding mouth to mouth breathing techniques. In May 2007, Andreea Pană, from Antena 1 TV Channel, heaved in his sight. He addressed her with the appellation: “Hey, pussy”. It was she whom he called later, in a private discussion, a “dirty Gypsy”. On October 4th 2007, he told another journalist from Antena 1, Sorina Matei, accredited for the Cotroceni Palace: “I will come directly into your office to do it”, as a reply to the journalist’s request to make a statement regarding the rejection of the censure motion, initiated by the main opposition party ***.

These “out of parameters” expressions are all mistakes in relation to the press. Any person who has completed a PR course or participated at least in one workshop about “relationship with mass media” would not make such mistakes. But President Basescu will make them!

Not only he makes such mistakes, but he does not learn anything from them; and the evidence is the sequence of the above mentioned errors.

Usually, Basescu’s attitude toward his own mistakes has nothing to do with regret, and his behavior following a blunder does not inspire confidence that the gaffe would not be repeated. Instead, people wonder what blunder he will utter or who will be the next victim. There is one exception to this general picture: he tried to mend matters after the incident of May 19, 2007, with Andreea Pană (TV Antena 1), when he confiscated her mobile phone and, moments later, in a discussion with his wife†††, named her “dirty Gypsy”. That is why we dwell on this episode: this is the only case when we could find an attempt to repair a fault and we can talk, therefore, about errors in ... mistake management.

The first reaction belonged to the press. Naturally, the journalists made common cause with their colleague from Antena 1. Romanian Press Club issued a statement that disavowed the President’s behavior, and the main television channels have agreed to boycott Basescu’s reinstalling at Cotroceni Palace, after his suspension by Parliament††††.

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§§ Elena Udrea was President Basescu’s adviser at Cotroceni Palace, where she left from, after a scandal. Many publications have accused her of incompetence, traffic of influence and onerous business relationships. Some journalists have hinted that she might have been closer to the head of state than it was the case.

*** Basescu’s reply came after journalists accompanying the President on a visit insisted to get a statement on the failure of the motion against the Liberal government, introduced by the main opposition party. At first, the President was calm: “Not here, let’s go to Bucharest”. The journalist had the imprudence to ask: “Where, in Bucharest?”, And the President replied: “I’ll come directly in your office to make it”.

††† The conversation was recorded, by negligence, directly on Andreea Pana’s mobile phone. When the President people gave her back the device, she could hear the private conversation between the President and his wife.

†††† By the way, the suspension had not been possible if Basescu would not have passed through a severe credibility crisis, caused by his so-called “communication style”. In fact, President Basescu’s communication style has meant a long series of rule violations - written and unwritten - that underlie the civilized communication: first, the principle of politeness, which means ”to spare the image of the other”. 


Civic organizations also condemned the “discriminatory attitude” and “racist expression” (Soros Foundation) or the President’s “criminal gesture”, which was “likely to encourage aggressive behavior towards journalists in the entire society” (Media Monitoring Agency). Association for the Freedom of Conscience (ASLC) asked President Traian Basescu to resign or publicly apologize. The next step was made by the Steering Board of the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD), which announced that it would appeal to court in connection with this event, qualified by NCCD as “discrimination” at the highest institutional level - the head of state. President Basescu sent his regrets via his spokesperson: the suspended President Traian Basescu “asks Mrs. Andreea Pana to accept his sincere apology for the situation” and regretted that an improper expression, used in a private talk, became public causing an “undeserved moral damage”.

He sent his lawyers to plead against the NCCD warning, and they invoked the right to privacy and insisted that the discussion between the President and his wife was a private one, not to be made public. As if this matter of fact counted in the President’s attitude to an ethnic group (by the way, a well represented group in the Romanian society - about 10% of the population). Thus, he recognized only half of his error, and the initially expressed regret was reduced also by half: the mistake was shared by those who did not censor the “private conversation” and, as a matter of fact, the regret expressed by his spokesman had acquired a different meaning: it targeted not necessarily the “private conversation” but the fact that it reached the public!

In previous episodes we have seen, however, that admitting the mistake and expressing regret were the first two steps in managing a mistake. They ought to be followed by mistake repair and treatment. The first thing Traian Basescu ought to have done was to address an invitation to all (or to most important) Roma organizations, to propose a partnership in order to develop policies related to social problems of this ethnic community. Traian Basescu could have been the first head of the Romanian state in the last 150 years – the time elapsed since the liberation of Gypsies – to launch a National Strategy for Roma in the Romanian society. He would have carried out a so-called “difficult political act”, the kind of act that enshrines a politician in history. Had it been intelligently and consistently managed, the mistake would have changed into a success. In a word, we can say that mistake of May 19, 2007, gave him the chance to remain in history.

But Basescu missed this opportunity too, simply because he did not relate intelligently to his own errors. As shown in the first episode of this series, authentic leaders are in a constant search for solutions, and when make mistakes they acquire valuable information in preventing future mistakes. On the other hand, those people who become leaders owing to the force of circumstances make mistakes but fail to learn from them. That is why they repeat the mistakes and the problem remains unsolved. This is a certain sign that the leader does not care about the problem or does not know how to solve it. Nothing worse for the credibility of a leader!

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