

Albanian political parties PR strategies in the mediatization of Mayor Candidates in Local Elections 2015

*Arta Sakja**

Abstract

In the contemporary elections' political world public relations plays a crucial role.

Political Parties Public relations is a method that political parties broadcast messages to their supporters/ voters, specially this activity, intensifies during election periods.

The main purpose of political parties PR is the use of media to communicate to voters the political party policies.

This article will analyze the effective use of online media by political parties in pre-election periods of local elections held in Albania on June 21, 2015, focused on the strategy used by, the announcement of the names of potential candidates for mayor until their final selection, and their coverage by the media.

The article aims to investigate the strategic interplay of responsible communication experts in political parties and the journalists who cover politics in the seven bodies of the media that were scrutinized: Tema Online, Dita Online, Shqiptarja.com, Shekulli, Mapo, Panorama, English, and Standard.

The article also aims to assess the effectivity of PR strategies in providing news coverage produced by PR experts (either in the form of a press release, or press conference, or news, without allowing the identification of the source) in the media and how to reach this.

As a result, it was observed a good cooperative relationship between communication managers in political parties PR units which will be handled by this article as part of the PR machinery (Spin doctor) with Political journalists, but the result of the strategies coverage is determined not only and simply out of this relationship. It is established by the attitude of media entrepreneurs towards political parties, whose stance has been adopted already by the media political reporters.

Key words: *Public Relation; Strategy of Political Public Relation, journalist, local pre-campaign, spin/doctor*

* PhD Candidate, e-mail: artasakja@hotmail.com

Introduction

On 21 June 2015, Albania will local elections for the seventh time since the collapse of the communist regime in December, 1990. Over the pre-election period, media and politics found themselves amidst a situation when public investigation processes were conducted by a special parliamentary committee and by the General Prosecutor Office regarding a political scandal in which some important political actors were involved. In such a situation the PR machines of the main political parties involved in the Doshi-Frroku case had widely elaborated during the first part of the pre-election campaign, the rhetoric about decriminalization without deepening in other election campaign issues. But the legal deadlines of the elections demanded total commitment of the political forces and the media to the electoral campaign, therefore the spindoctors not only had to manage successfully the communication activities of their own political force, but they had to take care of their relationship with the political journalists as well.

The PR teams of the Albanian political parties are nowadays part of the establishment of the political parties carrying out duties from drafting the news up to accurately every single detail of a candidate's image. They are responsible for constructing or manufacturing the events and contexts through which leaders and candidates can acquire free media access¹

During the election campaign, the PR apparatus has to work more with regard to the campaign's goals. On the other side, while seeking the news, media conquers the political environment. PR apparatus is always an open door, the principal source of the news. This is the reason why journalists consider the relationship with PR teams of a crucial importance.

¹ Brian McNair - *An introduction to the political communication* 2011, fq. 120

Methodology

This article sees the election pre-campaign part of the election campaign, therefore, will be backed on political communication theories in the campaign. It was built in two parts under a literature review on PR, during (pre) election campaign as well as a study of the PR strategies used in the launch of mayor candidates in local elections 2013. The literature review means the provision of a definition of what is considered by scholars as Public relation up to its history, people who left signs in this field, either on research perspective or practical perspective, as well as comparing with the actual pre campaign in the Albanian case.

The article looks at the position of the current political journalist and his role as a mediator of transmitting the message designed and processed by Spindoctor machine to public voter.

The theoretical part is based on studies of Strombcak MPP and Kiouisis on the history and definition of MPP. Forms of public relations are seen under the optic of Brian McNair and political journalist - spindoctor relationship is seen under the optic of Eric Louw – at “The Media and Political process”. Candidates and their image”, were seen under perspectives of researcher Dan Nimmo who directs us to the concept of the image in political campaigns.

The Article uses the qualitative interview conducted for this purpose with four PR managers in the competing political parties running for Mayorship (SP, DP, LSI PDIU), as well as 10 journalists covering politics in the above mentioned newspapers, as well as reviewing all the numbers of newspapers from April 7 (when the launch of the first Candidate for mayor) to May8 (the day when the Electoral Code Foresaw as the last date for submission of nominations by political party coalitions).

Public relations in Politics

Political Public relations can be defined as "the management of the process by which an organization or an individual player, for political purposes, through communication and action, sees the influence,

establish, build and maintain a useful relationship and reputation with the public, to help support the mission and meeting its goals”² (Stromback and Kiousis). He has therefore process management, communication and relationship at the center of definition, as well as the traditional definition of Public Relations.

History

"Commentarium petitionis " pamphlet of Tullius Quintus Cicero , in the year 64 BC on how should compete to win an election campaign is thought to be perhaps the first publication of political public relations under Stromback and Kiousis .

Pamphlet stated that to win a race for the post, need “to obtain the support of your buddies to win over the general public, but also to know your enemies and those who are against you as well as to overwhelm the mass voters. However, although the practice of public relations is old, the attempt to apply theories of PR in the political context is new, according Stromback and Kiousis. ⁽²⁾

According to Bloom, cited by McNair, politicians were the first who understood the importance of Public Relations and embraced it as an initiative. In 1917, US President Woodrow Wilson filed a federal committee for public information of the American public on the First World War. Democratic Party established the office of public relations in 1928, while the Republicans in 1932.

While "the first office for public relations politics was created by the couple Whitetakker and Leon Baxter in 1933 in California. (Campaigning inches). This company developed the international services industry, which facilitates communication between the political parties, candidates and their public and designed, produced publicity and propaganda materials, collected funds; advising on policies and their presentation, and conducted public opinion polls -

² Stromback and Kiousis – *Political Public Relations: All practice, new theory building* – fq 2

becoming an industry of stage managers and policy makers authors in the theater of life".³

The Political actor thinks direct performances are authentic. This, as McNair says, "Does not mean that politicians do not impose a check on this product. To this end, they employ public relations experts".⁴

"Nowadays, to gain access to free media , - emphasizes McNair - requires a professional apparatus of public relations advisers, who should be paid by political organizations"⁵

Four are the forms of public relations that political parties during the election campaign with the help of consultants use their media to manage, order, provision of media coverage, according to Brian McNair in "Introduction to political communication":

1. The forms of media management (activities that are designed to detect the needs and requirements of modern media and increasing the access of politicians to free media).
2. Managing the image in public relations (personal image of the candidate and how it handled and appears to conform to the goals of the organization, as well, on the other hand, the image of political organization). This is also related to political marketing.
3. Organization's Internal communications (this brings success or failure of the two) and includes internal communication channels of the organization, coordinating the activities and treatment response.
4. Information management activities. Here, the methods used to change and manipulate information in favor of political actors, are also widely used in an electoral pre campaign of local elections in Albania, held on 21 June 2015, according to those responsible for PR in the Albanian political parties, interviewed for this study.

³ Brian McNair - *An introduction to the political communication* 2011, fq. 130

⁴ Brian McNair - *An introduction to the political communication* 2011, fq. 130

⁵ Brian McNair - *An introduction to the political communication* 2011, fq. 119

The concept of Strategy in political public relations

To describe and measure the interplay of communication experts with political journalists, it relates to the description of the concept of strategy. With Political strategy, political communication researchers understand any communicative activity governed by specific strategic interests. (Manheim, 2011).

Image

In his book "The candidates and their image," researcher Dan Nimmo orients the concept of image in political campaigns. He refers to another researcher, Albert J. Sullivan, to distinguish the relationship between image and reality, "images are reflections that look to carry information on the situation of the things that lie outside the mind."⁶ "Always according Nimmos, Sullivan wrote that the work of public relations is to present the true image.

Interplay pr / spin doctors - political journalists

In the reality show that political machinery and staff give to the public media during the electoral campaign interplay four sets of actors, according to Eric Loue in "The Media and Political process": Politicians as performers, industry spin, media workers (journalists, analysts, scholars) and media audiences.

In election periods, the power to create these four sets of actors, is shared by several variables that, according to Eric Loue, are "resources that possess the players' whereas usually the player with more resources is advantageous on other sources; how smart are spindoctors in agreement with the media (smarter they are, the more they dominate the relationship); the level of political concern over the mass public.

⁶ Dan D. Nimmo, Robert L. Savage - *Candidates and their images: Concepts, methods, and findings* 1976 fq. 3)

A public unhappy and concerned generates challenges for politicians and spin machines, which often increase bargains with journalists' positions, in view of the timely issues of policy.

Smarter the spindoctors are in guiding public opinion of the mass, the more power accumulate".⁷

Using resources

Some journalists use the resources offered by spindoctors totally in the service of a political family who is funding them, keeping silent about any kind of abuse to them. In this context, there are reports of socialization of political power by the media and vice versa. In the developed societies, the media operate independently from their source and therefore do not allow for any interference in the handling of information. They are there to control political power. But what happens in the Albanian reality in the interplay PR machinery / Spin doctor- political journalists? The "Pact " between them produces a match with a tie as the preferred outcome for both parties.

Study

PR / Spin Doctor profile

Who are responsible for the PR of political parties?

PR responsibilities of political parties interviewed for the purposes of this article.

Gender: two boys and two girls. Age: The younger. They have a basic training in communication sciences and journalism at the University of Tirana, Faculty of History and Philology and are looking to deepen their studies in the fields of social sciences. One of them chooses second jurisprudence as education, the other in-depth studies in Communication Sciences.

One of the girls has selected the deepening of studies abroad in the field of Public Relations. Studies abroad preference was the other girls in the field of political science. In majority students are coming from

⁷ Eric Louw - *The media and political process* sage publications 2005, fq.148

districts (only one of the girls is the capital). They belong to intellectual families and pursue in their political alignment, that of their parents.

Their motivation to politics: 1. positioning in favor of a political ideology; 2. Positioning pro leader; 3. Cause

They have a very good relationship with the book; research is further, with historical documents.

Political Parties PR structures are filled in as follows:

PS	7 persons
PD	8 persons
LSI	4 persons
PDIU	4 persons

Press specialists are students bearing master degree in Journalism and Communication Sciences, Faculty of History and Philology. PR structures have also a photographer, cameraman and IT specialist (major parties) and a photographer / cameraman smaller parties.

Strategies used by the PR machinery

Political marketing is the most used strategy by the PR staff of the Albanian political parties in the electoral pre campaign combined with the construction of the agenda. In the pre-election period, the parties approached political marketing strategy. "We started with the identification of problems in the areas that were left vacant by the coalition to candidate; subsequently, program design and selection of candidates based on issues, winner of course, provided the candidate with the best solution.

At the moment we decided to make public our candidates, we approached the press conference. During this phase of the campaign, we used to promote the image of the candidates and social networks". Excerpts from representatives of (PDIU).

How journalists are informed

They used the press conference in 3 cases (2 LSI, 1 PDIU)

Press releases, in 8 cases (3 LSI, 1 PDIU, 1 SP, 3 PD)

Press Release (1 PD on Korce candidate, Mr. Gjergj Goro)

News fabrication without conceding the identification as the source (several times)

Political Reporter (Journalist) profile

Who are the political journalists/ reporters in Albania:

According to our interviews, political journalists in Albania are the majority of sex male. Unlike an image of the capital city that they have in the public perception, they come from different districts of Albania. They have the majority a basic training in journalism and communication sciences (7 of them). One of them, over the judiciary, one social science / philosophy, sociology , with master in political sciences and other stories . Reporters who cover politics have completed public universities in the country.

In majority they have basic training in journalism and communication sciences (7 of them). One of them, graduated in law, one in social science / philosophy- sociology, graduated with master in political sciences and the other in history. Reporters who cover politics have completed studies in public universities in the country.

Those in the majority belong to the middle class.

Three of them come from parents teachers. None of them has journalist parents. They do not come from families with radical political beliefs. Since the very beginning they wanted to become political reporters / journalists.

Their route to political journalist follows a smooth flow; they have started their journey 75% in journalism in this position by changing the newspapers, but not direction.

Only 25 % of them have been previously journalists in other sectors. Motivations for choosing this position in the starting moments of career are different. But mostly, they are divided into three: politics

as the most valued sector / paid; policies such as faster career opportunities; driven by parents.

How political journalists are informed

The way how political reporters are informed. Firstly, the press offices of political parties, high-ranking personalities. Secondly, direct relationships with political leaders, with "people that surround them." Thirdly, the monitoring of accounts in social networks of political party leaders or parties' charismatic personalities. Some journalists have a network of contacts because of their length in this sector, to whom they trust and who know that they are always prepared as sources (press advisers, politicians). The youngest among them, has 4 years in this sector (Shqiptarja.com); the oldest among them, have 15 years in this sector (Journal Mapo). 1-5 years are one of them; 5-10 years have 6 of them, 10 to 15 years have three of them. Exchanges between political journalists are frequent in this period. They already constitute a friendly force to exchange information, but not the source.

Political services

Mainly political services are not a political journalist difficulty; s/he follows without the need of the advice of the editor or owner, the media line where s/he works. "(LT Journalist)

From the study, it appears that the structure of political service has three main lines: SP, DP, and SMI.

PDIU is attached to the pole position corresponding to the coalition to which it belongs.

Polls

During pre campaign periods, opinion polls and pre-election surveys naturally find a publication in the press. A poll can not pass without being turned into "an event" in the pre-election period and to not find coverage in the media, which see them as permanent referendum that

competes directly legitimacy of political representatives evaluated by the opinion in the framework of the elections.

Political journalists, asked for the purposes of this article, are critical to the surveys conducted in the pre-election period, because , according to them, they lacked transparency and organizers (party, association), and , as such, was not trusted by them as a real snapshot of reality.

Journalists are aware that they were used by the PR machinery of political parties to create the background for the selection of candidates who in most cases can be considered as a selection schemes. "I noticed very easily distrust, a faith in the instrumentalization of the survey for the selection of candidates from my secondary sources at parties" - (BH journalist).

The use of social networks as a source

They used social networks as a source in 2 cases (1 DP notification of Gjirokastra District candidates on FB account of Mr. Tritan Shehu, 1 SP of the FB account of Mr. Erion Veliaj

The use of television as a source

They used television as a source several times. It is more frequent in newspapers belonging to major media companies in the country (Shqip, Shqiptarja.com).

Press monitoring

Online media were monitored for the period from April 7 to May 8, 2015. From this report, it turned out that the agenda of the press follows, or rather, it is determined by politics. Printing media outlets were caught napping to perform their/its monitoring role on the selection procedures of candidates for mayor.

The Electoral Pre-campaign did not follow a normal course in Albania due to the situation created by Doshi - Frroku issue. This issue has also increased its echo in this period, so that decriminalization remains one of the issues covered and handled

mostly by the press. It built no images on the contestants. It simply contributed to the PR machinery commitment to build images of favorite candidates from political leaders. It reflected every intercoalitional meeting on the process, every press release, press release or press conference, part of the process. It emphasized as per political direction, conflicts and argues in opposing coalition.

Shqiptarja online 19 articles

- the process and 15 articles
- *Construction of the image of the candidate* 7 articles (articles dominate over Veliaj)
- *Issues in the DP and the coalition around it* – 6 articles :
- *Debates on the decriminalization of candidates* 6 articles

Gazeta Tema 20 articles

- The process and ad (publishing), 10 articles (positive approach for ASHE meetings)*
- *The debate over incriminated candidates, 4 articles*
- Building a negative image, 3 articles*

Shqip Newspaper 19 articles

- *The process and results of candidates* - 12 articles
- *The debate on the decriminalization of nomination* 4(candidates):
- *Use of FB as a source* (1)
- *Use the Top Chanel as a source* - 3 articles

Mapo 28 articles

- Process and results of candidates* 15 articles
- Building the image (Dogging positive image for Grida Duma)* 13 articles

Shekulli 20 articles

- *Process and announcement* 10 articles
- *Building a positive image for the candidates of the ruling party and the opposite*
- *Focus on the Vlora Region (County)* 4

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- *Raising the image of Saranda Municipality SP candidate Floriana Koka-
3 articles*

- *Tracking surveys for counties Durres, Tirana -3 articles*

Standard 21 articles

Process and announcement 11 articles

-*Focus on the lack of transparency of the selection process by the
Left wing, focusing on replicas of Mr. Blushi -3 articles*

-**Decriminalization**

- *Building a positive image of opposition candidates and the negative
image of the majority candidates 7*

Panorama 16 articles where's observed a neutral attitude

-*The Process and announcement of candidacies 10*

-*Decriminalization 6*

Dita online

15 articles

The process and results 7

Decriminalization of candidates 4

Building a negative image of DP candidates 4

Conclusions

In conclusion, there is an effective use of online media by political parties in the pre-election period of local elections which took place in Albania on 21 June 2015. The dominant Strategy used by teams of PR is that of political marketing, combined with building agenda.

Industry PR / Spin is growing at the expense of journalists (as news producer); spindoctors are growing, using both forms of old and new media, thereby overcoming the problems of journalists.

The PR industry is being adapted by planting stories in the media, using journalists to set the agenda. Journalists use PR machines as resources to build stories that can serve to their agenda. Regardless of who dominates this relationship, spindoctors are integrated in the party organization.

In general terms, the power of journalists has fallen to frame and interpret the news not only because of new forms of alternative media as sources of information, but also because the media has already a political direction that they “respect”.

Press observation results revealed that press reflected 100 % the activities offered by MPP in this period and that it has organized its agenda in this election period, under the political direction it affiliates. It was revealed that press agenda follows, or more precisely, is set by politics.

It is perceived as a good cooperative relationship of communication managers in PR units of political parties with political journalists, influenced by the same professional training / background, the same age , duration in the respective positions of the two actors, but the result of the coverage of strategies is determined not only and simply out of this relationship, it is determined by the behavior of media owners to this or that party, whose attitude towards journalists and policy are already adopted.

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