Framing the 2009 Presidential Elections Electoral Campaign Coverage in Opinion Articles

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Abstract. *The 2009 presidential elections from Romania were preceded by an electoral campaign with a strong conflicting character. The characteristics of the campaign produced numerous controversies regarding the practices and strategies used both by the mass media and the political actors. Generally speaking, the discussions about political programs passed into the background while huge spaces were conferred to the conflicts and mis-understandings which often degenerated in ad-hominem attacks between candidates. Another characteristic of the 2009 presidential campaign was related to the role assumed by the mass media, which, in most cases, seemed to disregard the requisite of impartiality while presenting the political actors and events.*

This research assumes as purposes to substantiate that the electoral campaign received a high visibility in the written press and to investigate which were the coverage strategies used in framing the electoral event. My study starts from a content analysis of the opinion articles written during the entire campaign in three of the most important (both as printed version circulation, and as number of online visitors) generalist newspapers, namely Evenimentul Zilei (Daily Event), Gândul (The Thought) and Jurnalul Național (The National Journal).

Using an approach related to agenda setting, framing and priming studies, the research assumes as purpose to prove that mass media offered mainly a negative interpretation – attack/conflict type – to the electoral campaign

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*and focused mainly on secondary themes, related rather to the candidates'
moral conducts and characters than to their political programs.*

Keywords: *framing, priming, 2009 Romanian presidential elections,
opinion articles.*

I. Mass media effects: from *agenda setting* to *framing* and *priming*

Mass media influences the public opinion by channeling attention towards topics and themes that they consider to be important. The approaches mass media uses regarding these themes can induce specific effects in their evaluation by the public, mass media trying actually to deliver the interpretation frames for the issues that they propose to the public.

Starting from Walter Lippmann's theory regarding the formation of public opinion, *agenda-setting* model addresses the manner in which mass media influences public opinion by creating certain hierarchies between the tackled issues. Emerged in a period when the limited effects theory reached its complete formulation, the *agenda-setting* paradigm underlined that the doubts regarding mass media's capacities to actually form or change opinions and attitudes regarding a specific subject are legitimate, but also stressed that, unquestionably, mass media can guide attention upon different topics by offering to these the needed prominence. Bernard Cohen asserted that mass media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963: 13).

The first study to consider agenda setting hypothesis was realized by the American professors Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw while investigating the 1968 electoral campaign from the perspective of mass media effects upon forming election options in the town Chapel Hill (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In its initial form, "*agenda-setting* has studied how the salience of «objects» in the news is transferred from the news media to the public" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In addition, the *agenda-setting* presupposes "an on-going competition among issues proponents to gain the attention of professionals, the public and policy elites" (Rogers & Dearing, 1996: 1-2).

Subsequently, the theory supported different transformations, especially when discussing the emergence of public agenda and the role mass media occupies in the equation. Cobb & Elder (1972) referring to the concept of *agenda building*, an extension of *agenda-setting* model, argued that public agenda is actually a result of the interactions between mass media, political actors and public which negotiate in order to impose their own agenda.

While approaches in *agenda-setting* and *agenda building* started from the idea that the selection and the hierarchies proposed by the mass media determine the focalization on certain issues, the so-called *attributes agenda* considers that mass

media imposes to the public not only the issues, but also certain interpretation and evaluation frames.

The *framing* approaches in media studies relate to the psychological and sociological theories that sustain that the individuals need certain interpretative frames for being able to establish an opinion or an evaluation about a matter. Erving Goffman emphasized that individuals cannot understand the surrounding reality in its thoroughness without possessing a prior knowledge related to the new information and that they are making efforts to interpret their own experience for understanding the significance of the new situations. Consequently the individuals need some *interpretative primary frameworks* (Goffman: 1986), in order to categorize and to confer the right significance to the new information that emerge in everyday life.

The two strategies considered to be used by the media in order to produce a certain interpretation and evaluation of the events or situations are *framing* and *priming*. Entman (1993: 52) argues that "to *frame* is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" McCombs (1997: 37) asserts that "*framing* is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed" and that by *framing* the issues "the media also tell us *how to think* about some objects" (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001: 69). In the same time, "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. *Priming* refers to changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations". (Iyengar & Kinder 1987: 63)

II. The political context of 2009

The autumn of 2008 meant for Romania legislative elections that led to the formation of a new parliament, whose members were chosen through uninominal vote by 35% of the population. The results brought almost equal numbers of mandates for the Democrat-Liberal Party and for the Alliance between the Social-Democrat Party and the Conservator Party. In the Romanian Parliament also entered the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Union of the Hungarians from Romania and the representatives of other minorities[2]. The situation led to a coalition between the two most important parties in the Parliament which formed in this way a comfortable governing majority, sustained by more than 2/3 from the members of the Parliament. This coalition lasted until October 2009.

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2   For the exact results of the vote see http://www.alegeri.tv/alegeri-parlamentare-uninominale-2008.

The autumn of 2008 meant also the moment when the global economic crisis showed its effect in Romania. The spring of 2009 brought an ingravescence of the crisis. Many people lost their jobs, the salaries were decreased and the national currency lost terrain in front of Euro, facts that cumulated led to the diminish of the incomes for the active population.

At the end of 2008, on December 22, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu's government was replaced with Emil Boc's government, which took in 2009 a series of unpopular measure while trying to cope with the already generalized economic crisis. The dissensions in the PDL-PSD-PC coalition led to its breakage at the beginning of October 2009, moment when all PSD-PC ministers resigned from the government.

As a result, the electoral presidential campaign started in a conflicting political context. The Boc government had been relieved from its position by the Parliament in October 2009 and the lack of consensus between the parliamentary parties made impossible the formation of a new government.

Started in these tumultuous circumstances, the 2009 Romanian electoral campaign had a violent and aggressive character, being dominated by different types of accusations between political actors and a focus on irrelevant matters. The theme that aroused the most accusations (from all parts involved in the campaign) was that of corruption and of affiliation to different groups of interests. As a specific for this campaign, the candidate Traian Băsescu (the president in function at the moment) introduced the theme of the so-called "moguls" in the electoral equation, theme quickly assumed by other candidates (Crin Antonescu).

The conflicting atmosphere reached its climax between the two tours of the presidential elections, while in the electoral race remained only Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană, with the scandal provoked by the presentation on Realitatea TV (by Dinu Patriciu, one of the media "moguls" identified by Traian Băsescu) of a short film in which the candidate Traian Băsescu seems to hit a child during the electoral campaign from 2004 and with the disclosers made by Traian Băsescu during the last debate regarding Mircea Geoană's visit at Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the owner of Realitatea-Cațavencu Group (also one of the media "moguls" identified by Traian Băsescu).

Another characteristic of the campaign consisted in distracting attention from real governing programs and an excessive focalization on false problems or solutions, for example the referendum for unicameral parliament and the reduction of parliamentarians from 471 to 300 and the so-called solution "Johannis", the well-known mayor of Sibiu, which was Antonescu's proposal for prime-minister.

III. Objectives

A main objective of my research is to find out if the opinion articles conferred a large space to the electoral campaign in order to affirm that the mass media considered the electoral campaign to be a major theme. I have analyzed the number

of appearances for the selected candidates and the attitudes that were expressed by the journalist regarding each candidate. Another dimension of the analysis consisted in observing the frequency of different themes that could be considered as representative for this campaign. Furthermore, I considered the political program theme as being an essential one although it is one of the themes that was less mentioned in comparison with other themes that should have been of secondary importance like the candidates' ethic conduct or apparently rescue solutions for Romania that were not accompanied by real political programs.

Thus, I used three types of categories. The first category focuses on the visibility of both campaign and candidates. The second relates to the media frame of the electoral campaign and the third monitors the emphasis put on certain themes that related to the specific of 2009 Romanian electoral campaign.

IV. Methodology

The method I used for my research is content analysis. The corpus included the opinion articles published during the campaign in the three national daily newspapers, which have the highest number of unique online readers and have also printed versions, namely *Evenimentul Zilei* (*Daily Event*), *Gândul* (*The Thought*) and *The National Journal* (*Jurnalul Național*)[3]. I have not included *Adevărul* (*The Truth*) although it occupied the first position in October 2009 because this newspaper assumed a clear delimitation from the political area in 2009, preferring a neutrality position during the electoral campaign.

The monitored period is the interval between October 23 and December 5 2009, period of the electoral campaign for the first tour (October 23-November 21) and for the second tour (November 23-December 5) of the presidential elections. Knowing that different mass media channels openly criticized one (or two) of the most important candidates for Romania presidency, it has to be underlined the fact that the selection of the newspapers ensures the representation of all political positions. Each of the newspapers included in the corpus has a special rubric reserved to editorials and other opinion articles, which contains 3 to 10 articles (dependent on the newspaper, day and events). The rubrics have different character from newspaper to newspaper. In *Evenimentul Zilei* (*Daily Event*) the rubric is entitled *Opinii EVZ* (*EVZ Opinions*) and includes an average of 4-5 articles per day. In *Gândul* (*The Thought*), opinion articles are integrated in a special section entitled *Puterea Gândului* (*Thought's*

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3 Unique visits according to http://www.sati.ro/.

Newspaper	October 2009	November 2009	December 2009
www.evz.ro	934 208	1 247 655	1 162 681
www.gandul.info	848 532	972 494	1 072 628
www.jurnalul.ro	766 188	894 421	986 430

Power) and contains an average of 3 articles a day. *Jurnalul Național* comprises the opinion articles in *Editorial* (*Editorial*) section with an average of 6-7 articles every day. The opinion articles from the mentioned newspapers are focused either on the political situation, either on economic, social, cultural or sports subjects.

The analysis included 523 articles, namely all the opinion articles that were published in the three monitored newspapers during the entire period of the campaign.

A particularity of this research is given by the composition of the corpus, the opinion articles being that kind of journalist productions that do not present the rough information about different issues, but especially an interpretation of the tackled topics. Although a certain interpretation is specific to any media product, the opinion articles assume explicitly this function. I have selected this type of articles because I considered that they hold a special function in shaping opinions, permitting to the journalists to transmit direct messages about specific situations and establishing a close connection to the public which they address "sometimes telling what only a friend or a neighbor can say" (*Manual*, 1992: 87). At the same time, the opinion articles, written usually by journalists or newspapers' contributors that possess a definite prestige, regularly address agenda or first page issues.

V. Findings

The analysis proves that, indeed, the topic of the electoral campaign had the highest visibility among the events presented in the opinion articles during campaign period, the percent varying from one newspaper to the others dependent to the character of the opinion articles section of each of the analyzed journals. For *Evenimentul Zilei* the percent of articles allocated to the campaign in the entire period was of 58.64%, while political topics unrelated to the campaign were covered by 3.7% of the articles and the other themes (economic, social, cultural, sportive) were covered by 37.65% from the opinion articles. The Rubric *Puterea Gândului* belonging to *Gândul* mediatized the electoral campaign through 60.15% from the articles included, assigning to other political subjects without connection to the elections and to the unrelated to politics topics 9.05%, respectively 30.83% from the articles. *Jurnalul Național* conveyed to the electoral campaign 39.47% from the published opinion articles, the political events unrelated to the presidential elections were treated in 6.14% from the editorials, chronicles and analysis included in *Editorial* rubric of the newspaper, while the economic, cultural, social, sportive and entertainment topics were discussed in 54.39% from the opinion articles (See Chart 1).

The difference of percentage between *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Gândul* on the one hand and *Jurnalul Național* on the other hand comes from the specificity of *Editorial* rubric belonging to *Jurnalul Național* which includes a higher number of opinion articles and accustomed its readers with a more heterogeneous composition.

However, the numbers of opinion articles that covered the electoral campaign are quite similar for all three journals. *Evenimentul Zilei* assigned to the presidential campaign 95 opinion articles (from a total of 162), *Gândul* 80 (from a total of 133), and *Jurnalul Național* 90 (from a total of 228).
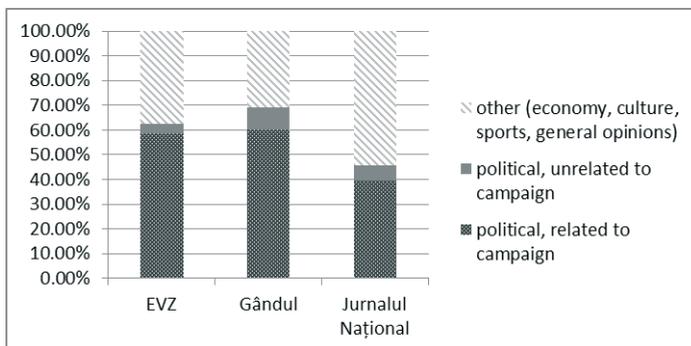

Chart 1: Electoral campaign's visibility in opinion articles

In order to investigate the presence/absence of the conflicting component in the opinion articles, I have used a classification in two categories: conflict/attack (for those circumscribed to the conflict/attack frame) and non-conflict/non-attack (for those unrelated to the conflict/attack frame). All opinion articles were considered as belonging to one category or another. I have included in the non-conflict/non-attack class all the articles that either presented detached points of view, either didn't contained the indication of a conflicting state or only made positive consideration regarding one or more candidates. In the same category, I have included the articles that presented the evolution of the campaign or the chances different candidates had without referring to any accusation or negative conduct of a candidate. In conflict/attack group I have included the articles which presented a conflicting state or evolution of the campaign, inducing in this way a negative interpretation of the campaign. In this category, I have also included the articles that expressed the journalist's negative or conflicting point of view regarding either one or more political actors caught in the competition, either the entire campaign.

The findings of the analysis indicate that the opinion articles imprinted a negative frame to the electoral campaign. For *Evenimentul Zilei* from the total of articles that referred to the electoral campaign the percent of articles that imprinted a negative frame is 90.53%. The corresponding percent for *Gândul* is of 88.75%, while the opinion articles from *Jurnalul Național* imprinted a negative interpretation to the campaign in a proportion of 91.11%. It can be noticed that the number of articles that didn't induced a negative tackling to the topic of the campaign is quite insignificant, somewhere between 9-10% from the total of opinion articles that covered the campaign (See Chart 2).
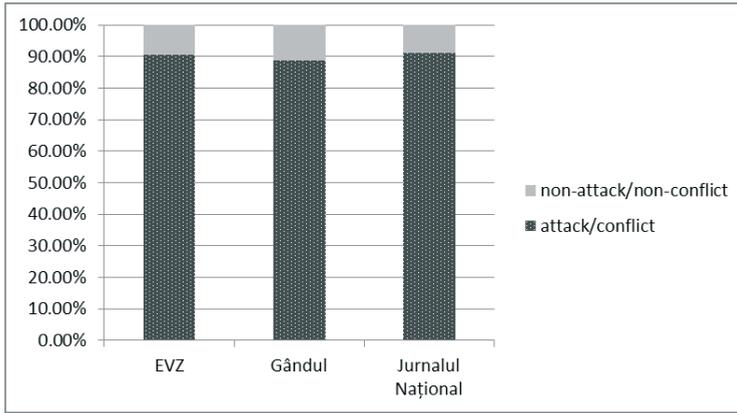
Chart 2: Conflict frame in opinion articles referring to the electoral campaign

Regarding the candidates' visibility in the editorials and analysis that regarded the subject of the campaign presented in the pages of the three journals, it must be said that there were created visibility conditions for the three candidates that, according to polls, had the greatest chances for winning the presidential elections, namely Traian Băsescu (candidate of the Liberal Democrat Party and president in function at that date), Mircea Geoană (candidate of the Social Democrat Party) and Crin Antonescu (candidate from behalf of the National Liberal Party). The biggest visibility was ensured to Traian Băsescu, followed by Mircea Geoană, respectively Crin Antonescu (See Table 1 and Chart 3).

Table 1: Candidates' visibility in opinion articles referring to the electoral campaign

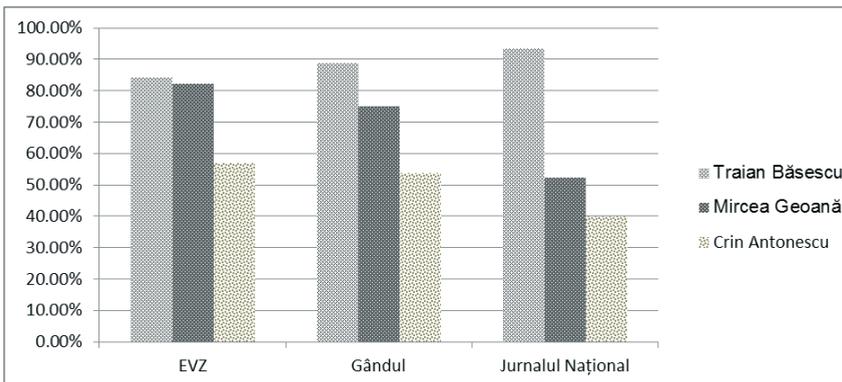| Candidate	Evenimentul Zilei	Gândul	Jurnalul Național
Traian Băsescu	84.21%	88.75%	93.33%
Mircea Geoană	82.11%	75.00%	52.22%
Crin Antonescu	56.84%	53.75%	40.00%

Chart 3: Candidates' visibility in opinion articles referring to the electoral campaign

Referring to the visibility ensured to the candidates, it has to be mentioned the fact that it was a two-type visibility: positive and negative.

Table 2: Expressed opinions towards candidates in opinion articles referring to the electoral campaign

Newspaper	Expressed opinion	Traian Băsescu	Mircea Geoană	Crin Antonescu
Evenimentul Zilei	favorable/appreciative	44.21%	1.05%	2.11%
	unfavorable/depreciative	30.53%	66.32%	36.84%
	unmentioned	25.26%	33.04%	61.05%
Gândul	favorable/appreciative	5.00%	6.25%	7.50%
	unfavorable/depreciative	60.00%	46.25%	21.25%
	unmentioned	35.00%	47.50%	71.25%
Jurnalul Național	favorable/appreciative	16.67%	14.44%	10.00%
	unfavorable/depreciative	68.89%	18.89%	12.22%
	unmentioned	14.44%	66.67%	77.78%

For example, the newspaper that provided the highest visibility to the candidate Traian Băsescu contains the biggest number of unfavorable opinions regarding this specific candidate (68.89% from the articles that referred to the electoral campaign). As a matter of fact, the results (See Table 2) show that the editorialists of *Jurnalul Național* did not expressed in too many cases positive opinions regarding the two other candidates, but usually expressed depreciative opinions referring to Traian Băsescu. It also has to be mentioned that some of the articles were accompanied by caricatures representing Traian Băsescu, the focus being put on this candidate, the other two not being even mentioned. A similar method was used by *Evenimentul Zilei*, which in 66.32% from the opinion articles regarding the campaign expressed unfavorable positions towards the candidate Mircea Geoană. At the same time, this specific journal, through its editorialists, favored in a proportion of 44.21% from the opinion articles that regarded the campaign the candidate Traian Băsescu. The candidate that received least direct opinions, according to the results of this study, is Crin Antonescu (See Table 2).

Taking into consideration the fact that the opinion articles have as major characteristic the expression of certain points of view belonging to their authors, in most cases either the journalists clearly delimitated from a certain candidate and presented him in an unfavorable light, or deliberately expressed a positive point of view and put him a favorable light. I took into consideration only direct formulation, ignoring that the simple criticism of a candidate can favor another one although he is not directly mentioned.

An often used practice in the analyzed opinion articles was the presentation of specific negative aspects regarding more candidates and the accentuation of the need to choose the "less worse", explicitly a certain candidate. In these situations, I have considered that the opinions favor the candidate indicated as the preferable solution.

The negative frame was accompanied by a definite priming process, namely the focus put on certain subjects and the total or partial neglect of others in order

to induce a certain evaluation of the candidates and their conducts or characters. By analyzing a sample of the articles, I decided to extract the themes that appeared most often. New topics, emerged in this campaign, or older ones, from previous campaigns, these themes responded to the negative attack/conflict frame that characterized the monitored articles.

Table 3: Themes tackled in the opinion articles regarding the electoral campaign

Tema	Evenimentul Zilei	Gândul	Jurnalul Național
Moguls	57.89%	31.25%	24.44%
Corruption	61.05%	26.25%	38.89%
Incapacity/Incompetence	31.58%	32.50%	43.33%
Communism	47.37%	16.25%	23.33%
Political program	28.42%	33.75%	16.67%
Referendum	4.21%	18.75%	11.11%
Johannis Solution	24.21%	11.25%	16.67%

The most used themes within the articles were corruption, moguls (introduced by the candidate Traian Băsescu, but quickly assumed in an ironic attitude or as a stringent problem by other voices in the political spectrum or in mass media), communism topics (either former affiliation to the before 1989 structures, either the usage of certain practices that were specific to the communist regime), incapacity and incompetence to govern the country (either because of the political vision, or because of a weak personality or due to the affiliation to certain corrupted groups). Furthermore, it can be noticed the neglect of certain themes like political program in favor of others like corruption or media "moguls" (See Table 3). In addition, some of these themes were already used in previous campaigns and were actualized and modified for the 2009 electoral campaign[4].

For identifying the themes, I took equally into consideration the terms' frequency or the mentioning of certain characteristics related to them. Generally, the opinion articles did not referred at only one topic, usually the themes being combined in order to create a certain image about a candidate or another.

Extremely revealing for the framing and priming effects induced by the media channels is the approach the editorialists gave to the subject emerged after the presentation (in November 26, 2009) of the small film in which the candidate Traian Băsescu seems to hit a child during his 2004 campaign. From the analysis of the opinion articles published between November 27 and December 6, 2009, it results

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4 For example the "moguls" theme can be considered an actualization of "oligarchs" theme that the candidate Traian Băsescu successfully used in 2004 electoral campaign. Corruption theme, on the other hand, a usual theme of the previous campaigns, acknowledged a generalization during 2009 campaign, all candidates formulating corruption accusations in connection with the other candidates.

that *Evenimentul Zilei* mentioned the subject in 8 from the 33 opinion articles that referred to the electoral campaign (24.24%). *Puterea Gândului* rubric mentioned the subject in 10 from 17 articles (58.82%) and the *Editorial* section of *Jurnalul Național* included references to this subject in 28 from the 79 that were related to the electoral context (namely 35.44%).

VI. Conclusions

The subject of the electoral campaign was considered by the editorialists a particularly important issue and, therefore, it occupied a large spaces in the media. In terms used by the agenda-setting theory, it can be asserted that mass media (regarded through opinion articles in this study) "told the public to think" about the campaign. The results of the analysis show that the electoral campaign passes in the limelight and tends to confiscate the entire space destined to political issues.

At the same time, it can be affirmed that media told the public "how to think" about the campaign and preferred a negative attack/conflict frame. Unquestionably, conflict is implicitly connected to electoral campaigns because every vote means a confrontation between political opponents. However, when the competition reaches the level of an exacerbate conflict, the attention moves from differences between political programs and solutions to a more personal confrontation between candidates, one that is characterized by discussions regarding the candidates' characters and personalities and encourages ad-hominem attacks (provoked both by candidates and the media). Therefore, the themes that were of major importance for the media related commonly to the candidates' ethic conducts and only rarely to the economic and social programs that the candidates proposed. The preferred themes were those able to stimulate a negative approach like corruption and affiliation to certain interests' groups or even the accusations regarding connections with the "red" past of the country.

Mass media constructs the interpretation of a situation by ensuring certain frames and inducing priming effects in tackling the subjects. Mass media, in fact, indicate to the public the evaluation criteria for political actors' actions by including these criteria in the interpretation of the events.

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