

The premises that influenced the 2012 general elections in Romania

Assoc. Prof. **Flaviu Călin RUS**, Ph.D.

Babeş-Bolyai University

Department of Communication, Public Relation and Advertising

Email: calinrusro@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Through this paper, I want to emphasize the most important premises that, from my point of view, contributed to the voting result in the general elections of December 2012 in Romania. I have also analysed several aspects referring to the winning parties, that have become part of the Social Liberal Union, as well as aspects related to the defeated party in these elections, which, in my opinion, was the Democratic Liberal Party. Furthermore, I want to mention the fact that the premises presented in this article are not the only ones that have contributed to the electoral results of December 2012, but I consider that these are the most important.*

Keywords: *political parties, electoral results, general elections, local elections, alliance, crisis, demonstrations, strategy, entities.*

Introduction

The December 2012 general elections were important for both the USL¹ (Social Liberal Union) and the PDL² (Democratic Liberal Party), respectively ARD (Right Romania Alliance), as it represented a turning point in the Romanian politics. For a better understanding of the general elections, we will describe in this article the

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- 1 USL (in Romanian: Uniunea Social Liberală, in English: the Social Liberal Union) is a political alliance formed of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL), the Conservative Party (PC) and the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR).
 - 2 PDL (in Romanian: Partidul Democrat Liberal, in English: the Democratic Liberal Party) is a centre right political party.

economic, social, political and electoral situation at the moment of the elections, as well as the evolution of the political parties during 2012. According to CSOP and IMAS surveys, "USL looked set to win between 48 and 57% of the vote. The pro-Basescu ARD was expected to garner 16 to 24% and Dan Diaconescu's PP-DD was polling at about 14%" [BBC, 2012]. Based on all opinion polls, we considered that one of the certainties of this campaign would be represented by the fact that the USL was going to win the elections with a very good percentage.

Romania's economic situation

The political situation created in 2012 was, in its turn, based on certain actions undertaken by the Emil Boc Government in the previous years. In fact, the problem started in 2009 when President Traian Băsescu, obviously wanting to win a second term at Cotroceni, announced through the Romanian TV shows that the crisis did not exist, although the entire world was affected by it. Most of the opinions expressed by the Government's representatives and by the Prime Minister at that time were positive when referring to the Romanian economy, encouraging the population to trust the realities they presented. From my point of view, the above-mentioned messages had only a propagandistic character, as the PDL was supposed to support Traian Băsescu in his presidential campaign.

In fact, Romania's economic situation was completely different, the crisis being omnipresent in our country as well. Many were those who believed in the messages delivered by the President Traian Băsescu and voted accordingly so that President Băsescu would win the elections again. A basic rule in PR and in the creation of image through different messages states that, in order to persist, any form has to be at least 80% filled with content, otherwise, in time, the image becomes eroded due to the lack of content. In other words, a reality can be embellished by a better form of presentation, but based on a truth of the respective reality. This is where the PDL made a mistake in the long-term strategy, because they embellished a reality that was completely different from the real one. That was the main reason that made the PDL lose the trust of their electorate. Mr. Traian Băsescu's purpose was attained, i.e. a second term at Cotroceni, but, on the long term, the economic policies adopted by the PDL were not able to face the realities of the crisis, an aspect which forced them to adopt extremely unpopular measures for economic recovery.

During the years following the 2009 presidential elections, the propaganda was no longer able to face the tough economic realities the population was dealing with. Consequently, the Romanian state had to borrow more and more money, but, along with the loans, the IMF (International Monetary Fund) also imposed certain conditions that Romania had to obey. The Government chose to propose austerity measures which culminated in the extremely unpopular measure of 25% wage cuts [Law No. 118/30 June 2010]. The interesting fact was that the measure was not

announced by the Prime Minister at that time, Mr. Emil Boc, but by the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, during a live broadcast. From the political PR perspective, the purpose of that strategy was to protect the Government (which, in fact, was supposed to deliver the message) from the people's reaction and to direct the complaints towards the President (who had been elected for a second term). The specialists behind the PR strategy of the Government and of the PDL, the ruling political party, were again wrong. From that moment on, the popular dissatisfaction was directed towards three poles: the President Traian Băsescu, the Prime Minister Emil Boc and the PDL. Consequently, the three political entities mentioned previously decreased dramatically in the surveys. In the collective mentality, that moment was corroborated with other mistakes of Emil Boc's Government, and all those mistakes contributed to the placement of the PDL on a decreasing trend, which could not be stopped anymore and led to disastrous results for the PDL both in the 2012 local elections and mostly in the general elections in the same year. The content mistakes were doubled by the communication mistakes of the members of the Government and of the leading party at that time, by contradictions in the statements made, by the refusal to recognize certain realities or to assume certain gestures or actions.

All those summed up created a negative trend for the PDL image in the collective mentality and, as a result, people started to find the one to blame for their precarious economic situation. As all surveys showed, in the collective mentality, those responsible for Romania's situation at that time were: the President of Romania Traian Băsescu, the Prime Minister Emil Boc and the PDL. At a certain point, the members of the ruling political party tried to explain to the population the fact that the unpopular measures adopted were a consequence of the crisis and that through those measures the national economy had been, in fact, saved. Maybe that was the case; however, due to the numerous inadvertencies and communication contradictions that appeared during the mandate of the Emil Boc Government, the latter was no longer credible.

All attempts to stop the negative image trend of the PDL, all communication strategies, and all targeted messages promoting positive elements of the Government were not smartly enough thought, elaborated and implemented, a fact proved by the continuous decrease in the electorate's preferences of the three entities: President Traian Băsescu, Prime Minister Emil Boc and the PDL. During that period of time, the opposition started to gain ground in the electorate's preferences. Slowly, an anti-Băsescu pole was created, having two strong engines, that is: the PSD (Social Democratic Party) and the PNL (National Liberal Party). Soon after, the PC (Conservatory Party) joined them. The niche televisions, which had political TV shows (especially those that critically analysed the governmental policies), had a larger audience; we consider the TV station Antena 3 to be the spearhead. Other TV stations, such as B1 TV, or some newspapers tried to counteract that media trend, but they were unsuccessful.

Romania's social situation

The popular pressure increased each year after the austerity measures imposed by Emil Boc's Government, reaching its maximum at the end of 2011 and at the beginning of 2012. The three political entities (Băsescu, Boc, the PDL) were forced by the circumstances to find a solution in order to save as much as possible from those entities and they agreed on sacrificing the Boc Government, hoping that this action would reduce, as much as possible, the popular dissatisfactions and that the other two entities (Băsescu and the PDL) would be saved. That strategy was again unsuccessful, as in the Romanians' minds the three entities formed a whole and could not be separated anymore one from the other.

The street demonstrations at the beginning of 2012 clearly brought into light those aspects that underlined the fact that in the collective mentality the negative trend referred both to Băsescu and to Boc and the PDL. The moment when those street manifestations started was interesting, but even more interesting was the sparkle triggering the phenomenon. It all started from a statement made by President Traian Băsescu, which referred to a possible dismissal of the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Health, Mr. Raed Arafat, M.D., as a consequence of the latter's different perspective on the national emergency system. Again, there was a serious communication mistake made by the President. Mr. Raed Arafat, the founder of SMURD³ in Romania, was a respected person for the simple reason that the medical emergency system functioned very well. Or, attacking a person like Mr. Raed Arafat during a live TV show was a serious mistake made by the President, because in the collective mentality the President attacked the man who helped many suffering people. That verbal attack was combined with the economic reality of those times, a moment when the population was not very fond of President Băsescu. As any other street demonstration, or any other popular mass demonstration, the popular demonstrations in 2012 needed a sparkle as well, to trigger the gathering of several people in order to protest. As I was previously saying, those demonstrations contributed to the decision to sacrifice the Boc Government. Emil Boc's place was taken by Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu. It was a back-up solution or a transition solution, as it was clear from the very beginning (despite Prime Minister Ungureanu's statements saying that, essentially, he was planning to spend another four years leading the Government after the elections that were approaching) that the new Government did not stand a chance. Noticing that, and analysing the new political situation at the level of the Parliament, i.e. the approach of the UNPR led by Gabriel Oprea to the USL (respectively to the PSD, the PNL and the PC), as well as the approach of certain Hungarian members of the Parliament to the idea of changing the Ungureanu Gov-

3 SMURD is the acronym for Serviciul Mobil de Urgență Reanimare și Descarcerare (in English: the Mobile Service for Emergencies, Resuscitation and Extrication).

ernment, the leading party at that time – the core of which was the PDL – decided to let go of the power and, implicitly, of the governing and give the opposition of that time the possibility to form a new government that could ensure the proper course of the upcoming elections. The PDL's purpose (which was wrong from my point of view) was as follows: to hand over the power before the elections so that, by the time of the elections, the new government would not have time to accomplish anything and, therefore, the PDL's representatives would have the possibility to criticise the future government and make it exclusively responsible for the economic situation of the country. As I have previously stated, that was another mistake. Several years of ruling and especially the austerity measures imposed by the Governments led by the PDL could not be erased from the collective mentality and replaced by a few months of governing by another political party. Consequently, that strategy was not successful either for the PDL.

The analysis of the political situation

In this context, it is worth mentioning an extremely important aspect, i.e. the creation of the USL (Social Liberal Union). The USL's protocol for political collaboration was concluded on 5 February 2011 [Mediafax, 2011]. The document was the starting point for an alliance that would win the 2012 elections. The fact that the alliance was formed at the beginning of 2011 was a good thing for the members of the composing political parties, as, starting from that moment, they still had two years until the parliamentary elections and approximately one year and four months until the local elections, enough time for the alliance to strengthen in the collective mentality until the elections.

As follows, I would also like to mention certain aspects related to the reason underlying the creation of this alliance. In my opinion, the explanation is the following: the members in the ruling boards of the political parties that composed the alliance, having analysed the surveys and realizing that none of those party was going to have an electoral score of over 50% to allow them to form the government, being also aware of the fact that President Traian Băsescu was entitled, according to the law, to appoint the Prime Minister, and being sure of the fact that, together, they could win more than 50% of the electorate's preferences in the upcoming elections, they decided to found the alliance, which, at the beginning, was composed of three political parties: the PSD, the PNL and the PC. During the pre-electoral period, the UNPR joined them as well. Although it may seem unbelievable, the one who represented the basis for the way of thinking of the members of those parties was Traian Băsescu himself. Those parties united also because they wanted to form an anti-Băsescu pole, an idea that the collective mentality at that time approved of. From the electoral point of view, that political structure was a very good idea for the member parties as, under its aegis, the respective political parties clearly won

both the local and the parliamentary elections. From my point of view, the moment chosen for the birth of that alliance was extremely well chosen, as it allowed it to be known and accepted by the electors at the moment of the voting. Consequently, after the fall of the Ungureanu Government (although President Băsescu had previously stated that he would not appoint a Prime Minister from the PSD), the President appointed Victor Ponta (president of the PSD and co-president of the USL) as Prime Minister of Romania on 7th May 2012 [presseurop, 2012]. The event was a powerful shock for the PDL, which contributed to its significant decrease in the electorate's preferences.

During the same period of time, another extremely important event took place, which I considered to be very interesting at that time, and I tried to figure out to whom the event is going to be useful and to what extent. I am talking here about the referendum organized for the suspension of the Romanian President, which took place on 29th July 2012 [BEC, 2012]. The referendum was important from several points of view and allowed us to have an ampler perspective on the power phenomenon in Romania. The first aspect I want to mention is that President Băsescu had gone through the same procedure in 2007 [BEC, 2007]. At that referendum, 74.48% of the electors voted against President Băsescu's impeachment, therefore he continued his term at Cotroceni [BEC, 2007].

The year 2012 was represented by a completely different political reality, i.e. the Romanian people was no longer fond of the President, and the mistakes he made during his mandate summed up in the collective mentality and the probability of obtaining an overwhelming number of votes against him was extremely high, a fact that was also emphasized by all polls. Still, there was a problem the supporters of the President very well thought of, namely, in order to validate the referendum, the voter turnout had to be over 50% (of the registered voters), a figure that was hard to attain. Traian Băsescu based his entire media campaign before the popular vote on that aspect. The President's statements before he was sure that the regulation regarding the 50% voter turnout would be applied were very interesting and contradictory; he used to state he wanted everyone to go to vote, he did not want himself to be a President who won due to an artifice at the arbitration commission, he would distance himself from the PDL if the party encouraged the population not to go to vote and other messages supporting the same idea. After he was convinced that the regulation regarding the compulsoriness of a voter turnout of over 50%, he radically changed his statement, considering the referendum unfair and that it would be better if the voters didn't validate the referendum, encouraging them to stay home. Those statements shrunk his credibility even more and everyone was looking forward to seeing the result of the elections. With only 46.24% voter turnout, the result was still crushing, i.e. those who voted for the dismissal of the President were 7,403,836 people, which represented approximately 87.52%, while those who

voted against his dismissal were 943,375 people, which represented 11,15% [BEC, 2012]. Although, according to the law, the referendum was not valid and he remained in office, the President and his supporters were painfully shaken by the result of the referendum, which had incalculable effects for the upcoming general elections. I consider that the President's supporters acted wrongfully again, stating it was a great victory and that all those who did not go to vote were actually supporting the President. The reality was different: they either did not have the power to accept the crushing result or their strategy was not the most appropriate one. It was not appropriate as the reaction of cheering the President's victory mobilised even more those who voted for his suspension and strengthened them even more in their attitude against the President and against the PDL.

From my point of view, the results were crushing and had disastrous effects over the PDL and the President. Most of those who chose not to go to vote did not support the President by not participating, as the President's supporters stated, but rather they were not interested in the referendum or, simply, they were not in the mood to go vote. Certainly, among those who did not go to vote, there were as well supporters of the President, but, in my opinion, their number was low. Still, what I have just stated referring to the participation or refusal to participate to the referendum was my own belief as this is how I evaluated the reality at that time, but my hypotheses had to be confirmed by the elections carried out in December 2012. They were confirmed when the USL won the general elections with a crushing result, higher than the percentage (50%) debated in all electoral and pre-electoral TV shows.

Another aspect to be taken into account related to the referendum refers to the opinion expressed by some of the EU member-states leaders [BBC News, 2012], who, through their statements regarding the decisions of the Romanian Constitutional Court (favourable to the President by maintaining the 50% threshold), tried to help the President in office. It is not my intention to label in any way their stands, especially since the statements of the EU member-states leaders were made to support the democratic system in Romania (not explicitly in favour of the President), but this is how I understood their stands, i.e. they somehow favoured the President. It was perhaps the fault of the parliamentary majority around USL, which carried out rapidly the approaches to the dismissal of the President, a period of time to which the representatives of the democracies with a longer tradition in Europe are not used.

The consequences of the referendum were harsh for both the President and the PDL. The USL representatives would remind in every TV show they participated in about the vote of the more than 7 million Romanians and the reactions of several journalists (especially those working for Antena 3 TV station) were going in the same direction. I am positive that the situation was not comfortable for the President, especially if one remembers the fact that before the referendum he himself stated he did not want to return to Cotroceni as a result of an artifice. The members of the

PDL continued with the same argumentation, considering that all those who did not vote were actually supporters of the President. During all this period of time, one has to notice UDMR⁴'s position, which was rather closer to the PDL than to the USL, mainly due to the fact that the two political parties had governed together.

Another aspect I have noticed during that period of time refers to Dan Diaconescu's People's Party (PPDD). The Dan Diaconescu phenomenon was a predictable one as during hard times, offers from political parties that are not usually approved by the electors appear. Dan Diaconescu mainly addressed to the most discontent of the discontent people, developing a programme that was extremely credible for that target segment. As such, Dan Diaconescu's party had constantly gathered over 10% of the voters' preferences in all surveys preceding the parliamentary elections and it was predictable it would enter the Parliament. That was exactly what happened, and the PPDD became a parliamentary party after the December 2012 elections [BEC, 2012].

The elements of political parties' visual identity

An important aspect I want to underline through this article refers to the way in which the two large political parties were presented during the general elections of December 2012. The USL marched on a logo that would make the alliance as visible as possible at the level of the ordinary voter, an intention that, from my point of view, was actually successful.

The PDL also had an approach but I consider that it was less successful; they did not want to compete under the same logo and colours that were already familiar for the population and they preferred to create a new identity, hiding under the ARD logo, an alliance composed of several smaller centre-right parties, having a heart as electoral symbol and having other colours than the PDL. I believe their decision was made in order to avoid the erosion resulted from several years of governing and so they believed that strategy would attract a higher number of voters.

Essentially, the decision taken was less appropriate mainly because the ARD alliance was set up too late, very close to the elections, as even those living in the rural area, who would have normally voted for the PDL, had difficulties in recognizing the PDL in the ARD alliance; this may have been one of the reasons why the PDL obtained a low number of votes in the general elections.

Any strategy and any rebranding campaign can be welcomed and may be a plus for the image of a given party only if the process has enough time to strengthen in the collective mentality so that the respective symbol be recognized and accepted by the electors when they have to vote.

4 UDMR (in Romanian: Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România, in English: the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania)

The President's interventions during the general campaign presented in Mass-Media

Finally, the last aspect I want to emphasize in this article refers to President Bănescu's interventions during the general campaign. Believing that, though his interventions, he would be able to bring clarifications especially related to the future Prime Minister, President Bănescu had a series of interventions during the campaign for the general elections, which, from my point of view, strengthened even more the anti-Bănescu pole and did not bring a plus for the image of a certain party or alliance, but on the contrary.

It was obvious for everyone that the President came from the former PD (Democratic Party), subsequently transformed into the PDL. Any hint, to which President Bănescu would have made reference as to the appointment of a Prime Minister other than Victor Ponta, would have strengthened even more the great mass of USL supporters. The President was aware of the reality of the surveys and still he preferred to intervene in the campaign. As such, the campaign for the general elections, instead of being a campaign for the debate of programmes and ideas, turned into one dealing with the issue of who is for Traian Bănescu and who is against him. As a result of the aforementioned polarisation, it was the PDL that had to suffer in what regards the number of votes.

Conclusions

Those were, from my point of view, some of the most important premises that had substantially contributed to the result of the voting in December 2012. As a result of the voting, the USL won a large percentage of places in the Parliament (around 67%), while the other parties took the rest. The great loser of the elections was the PDL, which, in my opinion, has to change its orientation in what concerns their political PR strategies and their means of communication with their electors. It is highly recommended for the USL, in the following period, to protect the parties that have a lower electoral score for the well-being of democracy and to be careful because this great power, given by this increased electoral score, brings along great responsibilities.

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