# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION DURING THE 2014 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN: ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE

**Cristina Cîrtiţă-Buzoianu**
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău
cristina_buzoianu@yahoo.com

## Abstract

*The election campaign has lately become a real challenge where all the political actors display their skills, the communication ones, but also those related to the electoral marketing and public relations which play a vital role in creating the image of a particular candidate. The interest that the public manifest towards the presidential debates, as well as towards all the means of political communication used by the actors involved represents a reference point in the construction of an election campaign. Our paper aims to achieve a quantitative analysis of the communicational messages sent during the 2014 presidential campaign in the online media. In this respect, we are going to conduct a media monitoring on two central newspapers, namely "Evenimentul Zilei" ("Daily Event") and "Jurnalul Naţional" ("National Journal"), to track the online media visibility of the political communication starting from several indicators predefined in order to measure the efficiency of the political communication. Thus, our approach considers the influence of political communication in the election campaign as it appears in the online press in Romania.*

## Context of the 2014 presidential campaign

Nowadays, the electoral communication is influenced by the principles that underlie marketing and advertising, evolving during all these years, from a spontaneous form of the speeches which a candidate produced, up to the online election communication integrated into a campaign plan well-defined before the official start of the election run. Thus, the political communication is a complex phenomenon that must be distinguished from the elements of political marketing. Electoral communication and electoral marketing communication become synonymous when the approach to be adopted by a political candidate is evoked: market analysis, elaboration of the election strategy, choice of the means of communication, building a communication plan and application of the evaluation measures.

"Nothing is more doubtful than this limited approach by which it is presented as a new instrument what a man has long considered as a form and a condition of participation in the society's life. The development of commercial advertising, the marketing and public relations, the use of the survey techniques and quantitative analysis, the massive dissemination of the political messages by mass media have competed in the emergence of a political industry with which we easily associate the political communication" (Gerstlé, 2004). Political communication is a tool which allows voters to participate in making political decisions and it can help to assess as

well as to sanction the politicians' activities by voting. The effects of the political communication are not usually entirely determined by the sent message, but also by the historical context in which they are produced, in other words, by the political climate at a certain moment. "The political activity is not reduced to a strategy of conquest. A political campaign is nothing but a moment of crystallization and acceleration of conflicts and decisions made and matured before and which will subsequently be managed" (Gourévitch, 1998). Any of the politicians should improve their media presence, which is a guarantee of their reputation and prestige among the public. In this context, the political marketing is considered one of the new ways which power makes use of in order to control communication and implicitely, the media. Marketing techniques allow politicians to react to media constraints (Săftoiu, 2003), but the main objective of the political marketing is to enhance the informational role of the media, but also their persuasive potential. Therefore, the media do not present only political reports, but they also constitute an essential part of the framework where politics takes place, often playing the role of real political actors. Our paper aims to analyze the 2014 presidential campaign in Romania in relation to the found online media messages related to the main two frontrunners in the election race.

The 2014 presidential elections developed the online campaigns for the first time in the Romanian politics. This was achieved by Iohannis's marketing team, who managed to bring him to Cotroceni, and also to turn him into the most popular politician in the online environment in Europe. Thus, it was the most spectacular online political campaign ever made in Romania. Political analysts have confirmed the fact that it is the first time when a candidate successfully uses the Internet, without promoting the populist messages or having a negative campaign, managing to impose by its simplicity and authenticity.

Victor Ponta's campaign relied more on accusations, supported by his strong communication abilities, but also by the political experience derived from his position, as Prime Minister. One of the messages around which he built his presidential campaign was *A change all the way,* alluding to the idea that Traian Basescu is the embodiment of absolute evil in the Romanian politics. The other candidate, Klaus Iohannis, adopted a peaceful strategy, did not try to attack Victor Ponta, although he had several vulnerabilities that could have been speculated. He created the image of a serious man who does not just talk, his campaign slogan being *The Romania of the things well done*.

Following the 2014 presidential election, Klaus Iohannis was declared a winner undoubtedly, after having obtained 54.43% of the votes, while his opponent, Victor Ponta received 45.56% of the votes. The total number of voters who came to vote was 11,719,344 people, representing 64.10% of those registered on the permanent electoral lists (www.bec2014.ro).

## Klaus Iohannis's Presidential Campaign – *The Romania of the things well done*

The candidate of the Liberal Christian Alliance (LCA) promoted the idea that *The Romania of the things well done* is a Romania where the president fulfills all his duties and promises to voters that aims at an effective achievement of changes, a president who is truly concerned about the developments in his country and not about talk shows or political conflicts. *The Romania of the things well done* means for Iohannis, economic and social development for all the Romanian citizens, a governance that does not operate only on television, but one which will implement all

the projects and promises made and the results will be visible in the citizens' living standard. Therefore, Iohannis promoted a Romania to be proud of and the dignity to be Romanian not just as a slogan, but to become a state of mind. Opinions on this slogan were split, the political analysts stating that Iohannis tried to refer to the ethnic group which he comes from, managing to win confidence based on stereotypes made about the German people. In addition, specialists also believe that the chosen slogan managed to create a connection between the electorate and Iohannis, starting from the stereotypes about Germans, on the one hand, and a segmentation of the two mental plans which could be interpreted as an inadequacy between the typologies of both societies.

The most important strategy of the campaign for the candidate Klaus Iohannis was the presence in the social media, especially on the Facebook social network. Some experts in communication and online state that social media did not work in favour of Iohannis or of another candidate, social media simply functioned as it usually works. The electorate which is active in the online environment had, this time, one candidate who gained in popularity quite rapidly, thanks to the strategies applied. Iohannis's team created on the official Facebook page a section entitled *Powerful together* where his supporters could find materials text, video, PowerPoint presentations, speeches, any information about LCA candidate activity. These messages easily captured the attention of his electorate due to their quality and simplicity. Iohannis, unlike his opponent, used more video materials, while Victor Ponta relied too much on image processing and common messages.

Another strong point of this campaign was the connection between the candidate's image and message, between the online and the offline, as well as between all the materials and the messages promoted. The benefits of such consistency were that the public would see and hear the same message continuously and voluntarily or involuntarily. Once perceived, the message would become easier to reproduce. The compatibility between the candidate's personality and the online campaign managed to create the impression of honesty among the electorate, and this was a key point in the election race. Therefore, Iohannis's stake was to create, on the one hand, consistency between the politician brand and the image he promotes in a certain campaign, and, on the other hand, between the messages communicated and the needs of the target audience.

On the Facebook page of the candidate Iohannis, a feedback would appear immediately after each event from the campaign. Videos or text messages were published, sometimes before they were taken over by the news agencies. An immediate feedback creates a good image both in the press and among voters, demonstrating that the presidential candidate is spontaneous and up-to-date, emphasizing the voters' need to be informed about the activities he performs.

Klaus Iohannis's online campaign was rated as a successful campaign. He managed to identify his target audience, objectives and action plan and also managed to win the first place online, with over 1,000,000 likes and a search of over 5,000,000. The established plan aimed at conducting a campaign with a clear message, consistent with the candidate's image. The campaign focused on a strategy of avoiding clichés and focused more on the elements that define and differentiate Iohannis, as a political actor, from the other candidates, namely: a simple and understandable language, decency and coherence in discourse and behaviour, and, not in the least, the guarantee of a job well done.

**Victor Ponta's presidential campaign – 'A Unifying President'**

Victor Ponta entered the presidential race from the position of the candidate in office, being labelled as the youngest Prime Minister.

Throughout the entire election race the Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate had several slogans, but the most memorable was *A Unifying President*, this slogan promoting the idea of unifying all the Romanians everywhere. Victor Ponta argued that currently, Romanians are more divided than ever, adding that the Great Union means erasing the borders between the Left and the Right, and this would contribute significantly to the development of Romania. This message is well built because it addresses all the Romanians promoting the territorial unification with Moldova and bringing together a country torn apart as population.

Therefore, the slogan has a double meaning being considered a good choice and specific for the party supporting him. Another message of this slogan suggests that despite all the daily political scandals, Ponta is a man who can unite and change the way in which politics is conducted in Romania.

One of the main objectives of Victor Ponta's campaign was to promote the profile of the country and that Romania is a beautiful country, which we should be proud of.

The SDP presidential candidate's campaign started with the presentation of Ponta's political achievements over the two and a half years as the Romanian Prime Minister, promising Romanians further on a presidential vision focused on continuity and stability. Initially, Ponta's campaign messages had promoted anti-Basescu messages, stating that he would try to rebuild the post-Basescu Romania. Building an election campaign based on negative arguments against the opponents does not represent something new for the Romanian electorate. Ponta resorted to systematic attacks against his opponent and also allowed himself to emphasize the differences between the various regions of the country, as well as between the different categories of citizens. Most offenses made against the presidential candidate Klaus Iohannis were related to the differences between him and the majority group, including personal attacks, being accused that he was not a good family man, because he had no children. Victor Ponta argued that his presidential project is one for the entire Romania, for its citizens and, unlike his opponent who addressed things, he addressed the people. During the same period, other SDP members of the Parliament said *they would never vote for an alien from nation and law* adding that Iohannis would become president of Romania when Victor Ponta became President of Germany.

The candidate Victor Ponta focused on a predominantly negative campaign, in which his speech was virulent and violent, using communication strategies to attack and intimidate the political opponents. Thus, there was a discrepancy among voters between the idea promoted by the second slogan, *A Unifying President* and the urge to conciliation after Basescu's government and the ways to promote the candidate.


**Methodology**

Our case study is based on a quantitative analysis of the communication messages sent by the two presidential candidates in the online media in Romania from October 3rd to November 15th, 2014. Our analysis corpus was represented by the articles in two central national newspapers online, such as *Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul Național.*

During the media monitoring, we watched two actors (the two candidates: Victor Ponta and Klaus Iohannis) according to 6 preset indicators:

➢ political project;
➢ slogan;
➢ values;

> speech efficiency;
> communication with the public;
> communication with the opponent.

Following the monitoring, we identified 252 references out of which 144 in *Evenimentul Zilei* and 108 in *Jurnalul Național*. The visibility share of the two candidates was quite close, with no major representation discrepancies, which reveals that the two newspapers were trying to maintain their objectivity.

## Main findings

The quantitative analysis of the themes communicated in the two national newspapers highlighted numerical values fairly close between the two candidates, showing differences on certain indicators. Out of the 252 references inventoried, Iohannis cumulated 131, while Victor Ponta 121. This hierarchy is maintained at the level of each newspaper: in *Evenimentul Zilei*, the difference between the total of themes communicated by Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta is represented by 8 references, while in *Jurnalul Național* is represented only by 2 references.
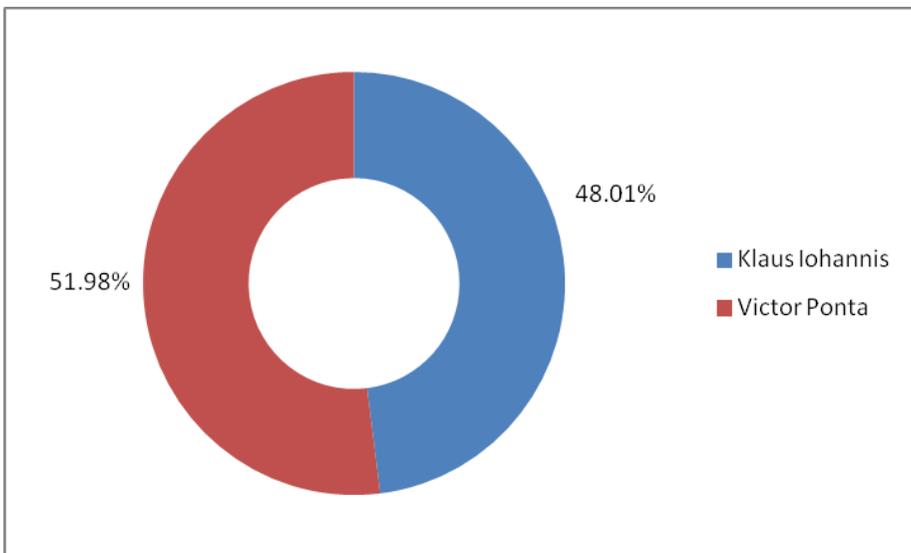


**Figure 1. Communication messages of the two candidates reflected in the online press**

At the level of indicators accumulating articles from the two papers for the two political actors we can say that, on the first place, *political projects* stand out with 56 references, *communication with the public* – 44, *values* – 43, *speech efficiency* - 41 and on the last two positions, *slogan* - 35 and *communication with the opponent* - 33 references.

In *Evenimentul Zilei*, the candidate Iohannis had a high percentage at 4 out of the 6 indicators, namely for *political projects* - 27.63%, for *slogan* - 18.42%, for *communication with the public* - 14.47% and for *communication with the opponent* - 7.89%. The lowest data were recorded at the level of the *values* indicator with only 11.84% compared with only 29.41% recorded by his opponent. For the *political*

*project* indicator, we can find in the article entitled *Klaus Iohannis has launched his presidential project* an example: "I want the citizens of Romania in 2018-2019 to feel that they live in a country of the things well done, to feel that Romania is on a way with precise objectives and a stable future for the next generation."

Victor Ponta's percentage distribution brings forward two indicators, namely the *discourse efficiency* and *values*, and on the third place, the *communication with the opponent* recorded almost equal percentages for both candidates, around 7%. "Ponta has attributed to himself all the political issues that Iohannis could have used in his campaign, so to speak and not stolen". Some topics, such as *church, family* and *ethnicity*, were not among the strengths of the left parties and this would have favoured Ponta quite a lot.
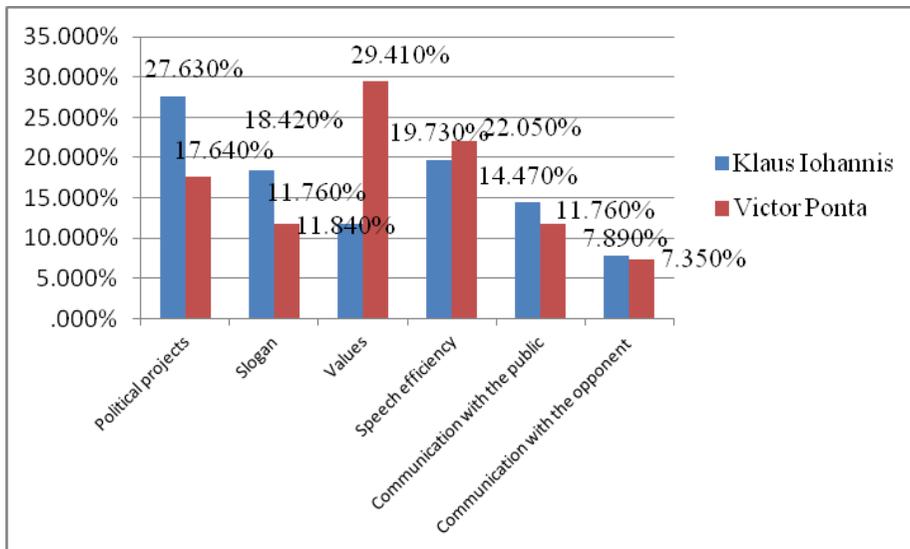


**Figure 2. Indicator distribution in 'Evenimentul Zilei'**

"Victor Ponta might have some reasons to panic, among them the diaspora vote and unexpectedly weak results in several counties that were considered under the influence of the Social Democratic Party". This statement was made by a member of the Liberal Party. Regarding the *speech efficiency* indicator which reached a total of 22.05% for the SDP candidate, it is said that: "Victor Ponta has the great advantage of being Prime Minister for two and a half years, being accustomed to TV shows and appearances before the audience, and his speeches are fluent and authoritative". For the indicator related to the *communication with the opponent*, in an article entitled *Iohannis flees from confrontation,* we can find the following reference: "Victor Ponta scored at courage for confrontation just before the end of the second round, and Iohannis did not profit from this, instead he chose to flee". Another indicator is the *slogan* where we find quite a few references in the article entitled *Ponta criticizes Iohannis's slogan*: "The Prime Minister Victor Ponta expressed his opinion on the Klaus Iohannis campaign's slogans saying that they are very poorly designed and that Iohannis refers to things and not to people".

In *Jurnalul Naţional*, Victor Ponta stands out in particular for indicators, such as the *slogan* with 14.54% and the *communication with the opponent* with 27.27%. Regarding the indicator related to *values,* there are similar percentages for the two

actors, whereas the candidate Iohannis has higher percentages for *political projects*, namely 26.10%, for *communication with the public* - 26.41%, for *discourse efficiency* - 11.32%. In an article entitled *Klaus Iohannis, the election campaign final for the first round* we can find the following statements: "When we look around and especially on television we can see only the negative side of the Romanian politics in the last 25 years, basically a Romania which Victor Ponta wants". In this speech, presented in Sibiu, Klaus Iohannis promises not to forget about the citizens and that together with his team he will do everything possible for Romania to become a country of the things well done. His opponent, Victor Ponta appeared in front of the voters with more political projects. Thus, in an article entitled *Ponta raises pensions,* we identify the following example: "I want to announce publicly that it has already been adopted the fiscal-budgetary strategy and measure on increasing pensions to all the elderly in Romania".
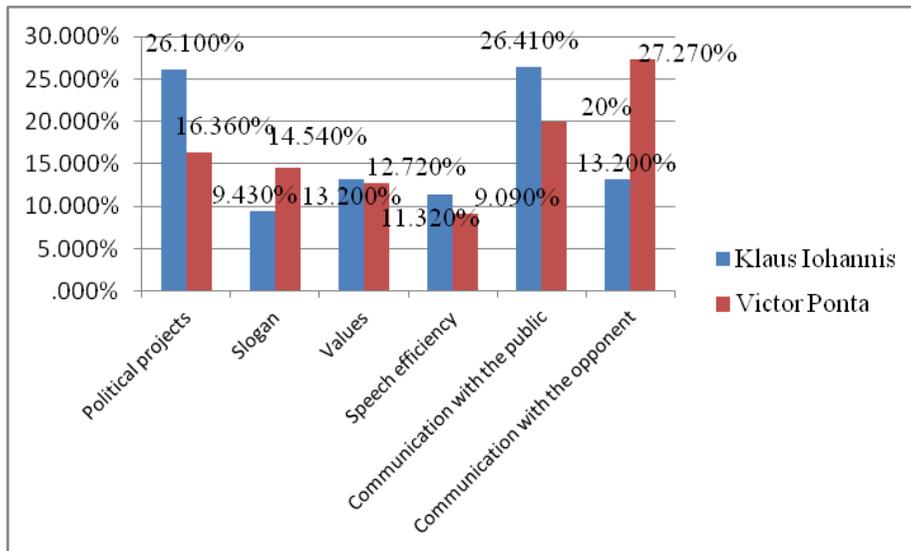


**Figure 3. Indicator distribution in 'Jurnalul Naţional'**

For the indicator regarding the *slogan,* we find both appreciative and critical references: "*Klaus Iohannis urging voters to go to vote to get rid of Victor Ponta's Romania and to win our Romania, a Romania of the things well done*", and in another article called *Ponta's Slogans,* we find the following statement: "The SDP party's slogan: *A Change all the way* is plagiarised", some political analysts claiming that it was not the only plagiarism that the SDP appealed to in the election race.

For the indicator related to *values*, we notice topics, such as religion, ethnicity and family. "When I was little, I went to church very often because my grandfather was a priest and he would take me with him", said Ponta in an interview. For the *speech efficiency* indicator, we find posts related to the LCA candidate: "In his TV appearances to date, Iohannis has shown that he is a very good speaker, although protected and helped by the moderators". For the *communication with the opponent*, we identified the following statements: "Mr. Ponta has deliberately hampered the diaspora vote" and Ponta did not delay to answer these charges: "Mr. Iohannis even when he speaks still fails to say something real and interesting".

## Conclusions

The indicator distribution in the two newspapers shows that the highest percentage was recorded for the indicator related to *political projects* with 22.22%, followed by two indicators with close values, namely the *communication with the public* with 17.46% and *values* with 17.06%, *speech efficiency* with 16.26%, and on the last two places, there are the *slogan* with 13.88% and *communication with the opponent* 13.09%. By making a comparative analysis between how visible these communication issues are, we can note both similarities and some differences between the two candidates by comparing the two newspapers monitored. In *Evenimentul Zilei*, the candidate Klaus Iohannis was distinguished by the indicators related to *political projects, slogan* and *communication with the public*, while Victor Ponta, especially to *values* and *speech efficiency*. The indicator regarding the *communication with the opponent* recorded similar values of 7% in this newspaper for both the political actors. In *Jurnalul Național* the candidate Victor Ponta is much better represented, being a winner at 4 of the 6 indicators: *political projects, values, speech efficiency* and *communication with the public*, while Iohannis obtained higher percentages for the *slogan* and *communication with the opponent*. We can notice that 3 of the 6 indicators follow the hierarchy in the two newspapers. In both publications, Iohannis obtained the best percentages for *slogan* whereas Victor Ponta for *values* and *speech efficiency*.

Our analysis shows that in the newspapers monitored Iohannis is successful for more than half of the indicators proposed, although in the television confrontations Victor Ponta was designated a winner. This indicates, on the one hand, the gap between the written and audio-visual media as well as the role which the political communication plays among the electorate when voting preferences are defined.

## References

Beciu, C. (2002), *Political Communication* (in Romanian *Comunicarea politică*), Bucharest, Comunicare.ro.

Gerstlé, J. (2004), *Political communication* (in French *La communication politique*), Paris, Armand Colin.

Gourévitch, J.P. (1998), *The Image in Politics. From Luther to the Internet and from posters to videos* (*in French: L'image en politique. De Luther à Internet et de l'affiche au clip*), Paris, Hachette Littérature.

Marcu, L. (2010), *Mass-media and the election communication* (*in Romanian Mass-media şi comunicarea electorală*), Târgovişte, Bibliotheca.

McNair, B. (2007), *Introduction in Political Communication* (*in Romanian Introducere în comunicarea politică*), Iaşi, Polirom.

Rus, F.C. (2006), *Political PR (in Romanian PR politic)*, Iaşi, Institutul European.

Săftoiu, C. (2003), *Political Journalism. Politicians' Manipulation by Mass-Media. Mass-media Manipulation by the politicians (in Romanian: Jurnalismul politic. Manipularea politicienilor prin mass-media, manipularea mass-media de către politicieni),* Bucureşti, Trei.