THE MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS AS CURRENT POLITICAL STRATAGEM

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Rezumat. *Articolul, focalizat pe elucidarea paradigmei mediatizării în activitatea mediatică, examinează diverse aspecte ale conceptului mediatizării, prezentând experienţa acumulată de mediile din România şi Republica Moldova în acoperirea mediatică a procesului politic prin intermediul modalităţilor ce ţin de mediatizare, înţeleasă drept o funcţie primordială a mijloacelor de comunicare de masă contemporane. Autorul se referă la particularităţile mediatizării, discută despre consecinţele procesului mediatizării, caracterizează fenomenul mediatizării drept expresie a sporirii implicării mass-mediei îm procesul politic. Analiza realităţilor politico-mediatice relevă faptul tentativelor clasei politice de a-şi păstra funcţionalitatea în faţa puterii extinse a mediei.*

Cuvinte cheie: *democraţie, comunicare politică, mass-media, mediatizare, influenţă mediatică.*

Abstract. *The article focuses on the mediatization paradigm in the media activity, examines diverse aspects of the concept of mediatization, and presents the experience accumulated by the Moldovan and Romanian media in the coverage of political process through the comprehension of the mediatization as the primordial current function of the media institutions. The author looks at the peculiarities and the consequences of the mediatisation process, interpreting the mediatisation as expression of the growing intrusion of media into the political domain. Close inspection of the evidence reveals that ruling class has retained their functions in the face of expanded media power.*

Keywords: *democracy, political communication, mass media, mediatization, media power*.

Lately the studies dedicated to media provide an increasing frequency of the term „mediatization". This word (placed in the dictionaries in the category of neologisms) used to refer to the general activities of the media seems to encompass the full set of features that describes the mission of journalism in a society.

The examination of different contexts regarding the media processes reveals an ambiguous treatment of the concept of mediatization, understood at a first glance, as an elementary information dissemination either as a set of specific media activities that exceed the limits of a mere reflection of events, providing in this way, grounds for a finding an ambivalence of the concept of mediatization and thus the concept of mediatization of politics.

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Therefore, the interpretation of the term *mediatization*, in most cases, leans towards its understanding as *media coverage* of the reality (of the political area, in our case), as a *presentation* of these realities on the media pages. Precisely this is the most common interpretation. We will record only a few examples of the use of the term in such a perspective: „*Mediatiser La Paix*", named his intervention one of the authors of *Le Monde*, launching a call for more actions of media coverage in defense of peace; „The state television has *mediatized* 15 times more actors of power than opposition actors and the private television 13 times more…"; „*The better mediatization* of the power agents had brought with itself the concern with issues they care for, a fact which overshadowed the many issues important to the public ...". In all these examples it is highlighted the correlation between our term and the notion of *reflection* or *cover*.

With such an approach, interpreting the circulation of messages in the media may surprisingly gravitate toward quantitative aspects at the expense of qualitative a vision, diminishing the consistency of concept representations. This made observation, however, does not affect the use of the term for the analysis of the media practice: the mediatization of the reality is, no doubt, and perhaps primarily, its intense and multidimensional reflection, if by reflection we understand the purpose of providing public with relevant and varied information.

Accordingly, we will recognize as a first acceptation of the phrase *mediatization of politics*, all actions taken by the media to reflect in its pages the political aspects of reality. We conclude, however, that such a feature may partially include the essence of the phenomenon, which lately due to product developments in the political sphere and in the media, marked by new relationships established between them reveals new meanings. Certainty, the mediatization is not only about recording action and informing the public but also evaluating, commenting, interpreting facts, events, positions, phenomena, which may manifest both within information materials and in special programs and events.

No matter how tempting it is, limiting the term *mediatization* to the creation and dissemination of media messages, the media reality dictates the need to consider the perspective of the narrow sense that it incorporates, based on the persuasive potential of the message produced by the media. The persuasive intentionality (sometimes even unconcealed) of the media determines the frequency of transforming journalists into „directors of the social and political reality" [1] even more incisive, *handlers*, manipulators of the image whose field work should be none other than the puppet theater" [2]. Criticizing journalists for how they address the reality – „towards what do they prepare the society and whose name turns out when they speak transforming the republic into a virtual theater?" asks the experts [3], - basically became a common thing. Communication in this context is understood as persuasive action (and persuasion

as communication). Understood as a communication meant for the modification of the behavior, of the values hierarchy, of the preferences and choices of the public, the persuasion can be manifested both in a direct form, promoted and controlled by political actors in their carried out political campaigns, as well as in a indirect form, presented as information disseminated by the media. Thus, if by mediatization we understand all actions carried out by the media to reflect current events, it is natural to include here and those specific actions (inherently abundant) concerning the persuasive communication of the media. Just about the features of this second interpretation of mediatization (condensed, according to some authors in the phrase „intervention" [4]) indicates the definitions included in specialized dictionaries, for example, the one cited by Mihai Coman from the *Dictionnaire encyclopedique des sciences de l'information et communication:* „the mediatization refers to the act by which certain messages are transformed under the influence of media system during the production and distribution specific to mass communication" [5]. With the same meaning – of *construction / representation of reality* – our given term appears, as well, in the following findings, belonging to American authors: „One of the main features of the current transition towards the era of mass media is that we increasingly come in contact with mediated representations of a complex physical and social world, rather than coming in contact with the objective aspects of our environment" [6]. The creation of the *pseudo-environment* (Lippmann), of the *second reality* (Lang), of the *virtual* and *symbolic reality*, constitutes the essence of mediatization (in its narrow meaning). The fact that the media in the contemporary era is not limited to the dissemination of the message: the conventional, „information only" or the transmission of opinions in a society, but rather adopts the biased position of a genuine creator of reality, appears as the cardinal prerequisite for the proliferation of this type of media action. Just tendency of the media for creating and building a reflected reality, to impose a specific vision of this reality interests the researchers concerned with political and media process analysis.

The availability of politics to be mediatized lies in the very mechanisms of political action, which is directly linked to the creation of symbols. „Any event or political process involves a symbolic register" - shows the Romanian researcher Grigore Georgiu [7]. And it is by the means of the media the circulation of political symbols occurs. „For most people, politics is a series of mental images generated by current affairs on television, newspapers and magazines, as well as daily discussions - notes Murray Edelman. - They create a moving panorama, conducted in a world that though the public never comes in contact with, people come to fear or cheer it, doing it so often with passion and sometimes by action. They are told about the new enacted laws, about foreign political figures representing a threat or about the make trade treaties, about starting or ending wars , about the candidates that lost or gained in the fight for public positions,

about decisions about spending huge sums of money to reach the moon…" [8]. Pierre Bourdieu, in turn, reveals the specific political domination through the correlation to the construction of the symbolic field, showing that the balance of the objective forces tends to reproduce in favor of the symbolic force, in the perception of the social universe. In such a framework, the representation of the social universe, according to Burdieu, is no more „a given, rather than being a record, a reflection, it is the product of numerous actions of construction which are always done and should always be restored. It is stored in common words, in performance terms forming the meaning of the social universe equally as much as it records it in slogans that contribute to the social order by informing the thinking of this world and by producing groups that names and mobilize them" [9].

But in this world, as noted by H. Lasswell, the found solution of controversies, is most of the times, „a magical one, and it does not change anything from conditions affecting the tension level of the community, but only allows the distraction of its attention and its focus on another set of symbols just as irrelevant. The number of laws that pass through the legislature or the number of executive decrees that does not change anything in the society's permanent practice is an indicator of the role of magic in politics" [10].

The thorough analysis of the phenomenon of symbolization in politics (even if it includes fewer references to the role of the media in this process), conducted by researcher M. Edelman on the pages of his work *Politics and the use of symbols*, allows the American author to conclude that the virtual image of the reality produced by symbolism is nothing but „a simplified model or an appearance of reality". The resorts of this situation must be sought, according to the researcher, within the fact that „the majority of our society is typical to think in terms of stereotypes, to personalize and simplify to the maximum, to cannot recognize or tolerate complex or ambiguous situations and therefore to react to symbols that simplify to the maximum or distort". In circumstances determined by economic and political events affecting the individual in the deepest and intimate areas of his life, explains the author, following T. Adorno and H. Lasswell, only trust in stereotypes and escape from reality attenuates, psychologically, the feeling of unease and uncertainty, giving the illusion of a certain type of intellectual security, political symbolism meets, in this case, a cathartic function.

The reference framework suggested by these statements involves understanding *the politics mediatization* as *a set of specific actions promoted by the media, made within the construction of the symbolic space of politics*. Following the emergence of a world more receptive to the production and the use of symbols, media awards itself increasingly not only with the role of land for politics and for its practitioners, but also the role of base element of the political process, expressing its claim to be able to influence it and even manipulate it.

The principles of the mediatization focus the attention of the media on the construction of „virtual characters". Such characters have been for the Russian media during the election campaign of 1996 the person of President Yeltsin [11] and for the Moldovan media, to name only to two names, general Alexei and Ilie Ilascu [12]. *The Virtualization* of these media characters was possible by providing them with maximum visibility with media. However, it was not followed, in this case (and others), by a consistent coverage for a configuration of profiles of these media heroes: the detailed and explicit presentation and thorough explanation of the factual circumstances that led to their release in the visor of the journalistic attention remained (deliberately or by default) outside the media, were not known to the general public. Yet, there were emphasized certain aspects of an outside origin, meaning that these characters were linked to political interests and political agendas, seemingly blurring the reality. In fact, it is a law of the political mediatization oriented to explore the layers of the surface of things, highlighting some form casual message, highlighting the appearances, providing a virtual image of the reality.

One relevant example of this mediatization is the case of the article "Operation Golgotha", published in Moscow and reprinted in translation in Chisinau almost immediately by the *Moldova Suverana* newspaper and on the eve of parliamentary elections in 2001 by the *Jurnal de Chisinau* newspaper. Michael Liubimov, was exposing in this article an operation of the secret service, led by Yuri Andropov, with a precise purpose: the Soviet transition from socialism to ... socialism. „The system has died, the head of the KGB, involved in the project, explained to the author, - hence, the task consists of its final annihilation and its replacement with a genuine socialism, supported by the whole people. But based on free elections!" The author describes in detail the implementation plan details of a „wild capitalism" in the Soviet Union along with the preparation stages of the reaction of the society. The abundance of factual arguments, apparently truthful, created the impression of a sensational disclosure and has captivated the interest and prompted perhaps editors to make way for an article in their newspapers. What failed, however, to detect those who decided to translate and publish „Operation Golgotha" was the grotesque and absurd emphasis on situations already describing a signal indicating an apocryphal form of a satirical fantasy like Jonathan Swift. „The Memoirs" of M. Liubimov were only one version of the events, a virtual version, and deeming his work truthful was a really inappropriate response of the Moldovan journalists (and not only theirs) to a political action quite subtle, achieved through the media channel. Ultimately, the cited article can serve as an eloquent illustration of the potential of the political mediatization.

The cited case is, however, a somewhat special case, while a special interest for analysis is the systematic mediatization, eloquently illustrated by the election campaigns. These are designed and organized (themes, slogans, types of

speeches, means and manners of presentation and dissemination), according to the Romanian researcher Ion Dragan, „in a media style, a style that is appealing, if not exciting and spectacular in shapes entering the patterns of the media builds" [13], of the political mediatization, one may add. Particularly in the virtual reality of the electoral field occurs the creation of political option during the elections. It is eloquent the experience of Russia in 1996 and 2000. The myth created by the media in Russia of Boris Yeltsin – the fighter against communism, as well as the messianic myth of Vladimir Putin which has been developed and successfully implemented in the consciousness of the electorate by the Russian media [14]. The same trends of mythologizing can be traced to the electoral campaigns in Moldova. Just the appropriate exploitation of the myth of „savior of the country" assured in the 2001 election campaign the success of PCRM leader Vladimir Voronin (although the extent of political and media activities carried out in Russia in terms of proportions, resources invested, as well as the professionalism of performance, is incomparable).

Once we certify as a characteristic sign of the mediatization the creation and implementation of a virtual reality in the consciousness of the social, appears one justified question: Was the Soviet period characterized by the same creation and implementation of virtual reality? The difference and similarity must be sought, probably, in the specific of the used methods. The propaganda method claims an open persuasive influence; it is unidirectional and oriented towards the organization of a system of actions of ideological indoctrination. From the historical point of view, it was more common during the totalitarian period, undergoing significant changes along with the affirmation of television as a means of mass communication. The mediatization implies a fundamental difference: the transition from the use of information as a (additional) way of political struggle in the application of manipulative technologies, aimed at changing meanings, manifesting itself more like an *informational war* between different political forces. Consequently, the rational interpretation of events, typical to propaganda, becomes a myth, turning into mass character representations, irrational and exciting. The fact that brings the mediatization and the propaganda to be more similar is the ability to manipulate the public opinion, and one its basic features is "the implementation into the consciousness, as objective information, of desirable content favoring certain groups" [15].

However, media possibilities in this direction are estimated by experts as being very high. Experts note that, the average consumer of information, according to statistics, daily seeks the television and radio for about four hours: this time is quite enough for a specialist in neuro-linguistic programming, using the phonogram and video sequences to form in the consciousness of the audience the necessary representation for the buyer of that time, even though they may contradict reality.

It is clear that we can talk about political mediatization as a phenomenon only when the media is the main field of political communication, when the interests of the owners become political positions of the media that they control, while, finally, the entwining of politics and the media becomes definitive.

In any case, the phenomenon of political mediatization, at present, causes different attitudes and conducts relevant consequences. According to a poll, cited by Jacques Gerstlé [16], the mediatization of the political life arouses a reserved feeling, including a critical one for a part of the population, for which the mediatization is a sign of the poverty of public debate. Only a minority of respondents saw the mediatization as a sign of modernization. As for the consequences posed by the phenomenon, the most important of them was observed and summed by Jürghen Habermas: „the turmoil in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Romania have been a chain reaction, which occurred not simply as a historical event broadcasted by the television, but itself was made according to the laws of TV broadcasts" [17]. The German thinker's observation draws attention to the very important phenomenon which condenses, in fact, the essence of political mediatization: *the current political action, produced to be disseminated through the media, shows the signs of subordination to the media logic concerning the terms of deployment and mode of delivery*: precisely, the imprint of political action of media manners is a basic characteristic of the current political mediatization. We could highlight such components more pronounced lately by the political and media action such as personalization and showmanship [18, 19].

In fact, the proliferation of political mediatization, understood primarily as the intrusion of the media in politics is due, on the one hand, to media logic itself (concerned with commercial interests that cannot be neglected), which dictates the capture of the attention of an audience as great as possible through the use of engaging media means (sensationalistic information, talk shows, the personalization of politics, spectacularisation - making the message into a show), and on the other hand, to the logic of political action that finds a convenient ally in the media, with the potential and the resources that can be used successfully (although there are cases when media claims and autonomous role). At the intersection of these two noted trends, the media, using the political phenomenon linked to the daily life, face the need for a more pronounced inclination towards political mediatization as a way of existence.

In the new media environment, because of the enormous increase of volume and diversity of content, the recipients can choose according to their individual needs among an excessive variety of ready-made media products, and they can select more freely in terms of time and location, we can expect not only „the end of mediatization", as an author predicts [20], but also a mainstream of the phenomenon of mediatization.

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