# HOW TO BUILD A CONVINCING ELECTORAL BRANDUSING SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

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*Abstract: Semiotics may, at times, appear to be a purely theoretical field with little connection to the world at large. At present, strives are being made to make semiotics a more approachable subject in light of the many uses that it can provide when it comes to meaning-making, meaning transfer, identity building, etc. The aim of the present paper is to identify and to analyse semiotic principles and the ways in which they can be applied to a real life situation in which building and promoting a coherent and compelling identity is an absolute prerequisite for success. To this end, our approach will be based on the theoretical tenets of social semiotics and discourse analysis, and they will be applied to the images of the two most important candidates in Romania's 2014 presidential campaign. Social semiotics provides the theoretical background for an interrogation into the ways and means necessary to build a public image that is captivating to several social backgrounds and that can convince society to rally around it.*

*Keywords: social semiotics, presidential election campaign, semiotic resources, discourse analysis, ideology.*

Creating an identity, both at a visual and at a discursive level, is a complex undertaking that presupposes the combination of several overt elements: images and logos, and of covert meanings: ideologies, values, beliefs, philosophies. The aim of the present article is to analyze these elements and meanings and the ways that they are intertwined in the 2014 Romanian presidential election campaign.

In order to achieve a clear image of how overt and covert elements interact in order to create an identity for a presidential candidate, concepts from the fields of social semiotics and discourse analysis need to be integrated, as an interdisciplinary approach is called for. Social semiotics provides the apparatus for interpreting the components, the integral parts of an artefact and the methods employed to make these components interact and interconnect in order to produce meaning in a certain social context. Discourse analysis can be based not solely on textual, verbal material; it also extends to storylines, images, explanatory frameworks and it is aimed at uncovering the ways in which all these elements combine to reflect certain ideologies, and, on this basis, to create certain identities that a particular social milieu requires. The discursive models that such an analysis uncovers help to clarify further how semiotic resources are employed in the embodiment and transference of ideologies, which are a particularly relevant issue in the proposed examination of the 2014 Romanian presidential election campaign. More precisely, social semiotics provides the necessary instruments for interpreting discourses (we use this term in its broadest sense), while discourse analysis provides the key concepts for an in-

depth investigation of the ways ideologies, beliefs, values, traditions, etc. are incorporated in discourse.

## 1. Discourse analysis in a semiotic setting

As Jean-Marie Floch explains, "identity is always differential, whether in its production or in its recognition" (Floch 2000: 27). Identity is established on the basis of two processes. Firstly, the recognition of the elements and relations that make up the image in question is needed and, therefore, any semiotic structure is constructed by transforming an already existing material whose significance must be uncovered by the receiver in order for the meaning to be transferred. The recognition of these signs implies automatically that a second process is at work, that is differentiation. The elements that make up an identity are also the ones that separate it from any other; differences create a unique plane of expression and content in which an identity becomes a material construct that cognitive interpretation of its constituent signs can make sense of, can decode. Therefore, and analysis of the signs that are the primary material in the make-up of an identity will need to address the relationships between "the expressional units or the content units" (Floch 2000: 27) of the signs in question.

However, there is no difference unless there is also continuity, and visual identities are built on difference, but they also need to imply continuity. The former is needed to ensure that an identity is specific enough to be recognized as an individual identity, while the latter ensures that certain values, beliefs, ideologies are still adhered to and that, thus, the audience will be familiar enough with the result so as to be able to integrate  it in their personal representation of the world. This play between continuity and differences is of vital importance when creating and presenting the identity of a presidential candidate. It needs to be different enough so as to set him/her apart from the opponent, while still embodying the values that voters can consider important and relevant for their next head of state.

Identities are made up of discourse models which are, as James Paul Gee explains, "theories that people hold, often unconsciously, and use to make sense of the world and their experiences in it. They are always oversimplified, an attempt to capture some main elements and background subtleties, in order to allow us to act in the world without having to think overtly about everything all at once" (Gee 2005: 60). It is these theories that ensure recognition of identity, while, at the same time, deviation from these fairly routine and automatic assemblies create differences needed to assert an individual character, to distinguish between one candidate and the next. These novel assemblies that appear through deviation help to alter the existing discourse models and, in turn, the way in which society sees itself and the discourse that define it.

Continuing along the same line of thought put forth by Michel Foucault (1994), Siegfried Jäger (2001: 38) and Norman Fairclough (2005: 9), emphasize the fact that discourses reflect the power plays that exist in society at a certain moment in history as they are the embodiment of contrasting and possibly conflicting ideologies. Discourses, as embodiments of these ideologies, are connected to "specific socially and culturally distinctive identities that people can take on in society" (Gee 2005: 60) and, as such, have power as people's individual and collective consciousness feeds on them. As Fairclough explains, "ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and expectation" (Fairclough 2005:9). Ideologies are militant, they struggle to assert themselves in society, to control the ways in which people view certain

events, act in certain situations and even perceive themselves as members of that particular society. However, ideologies cannot perform any change if they are not embraced and enacted, if they are not adopted and promoted by an individual or a group. In order for this to occur, a discourse position needs to be adopted, whether consciously or unconsciously. The processes that shape and define any society are based on the discourses that formulate it, and these discourses are reflections of certain ideologies. "Semiosis in the representation and self-representation of social practices constitutes discourses. Discourses are diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned - differently positioned social actors see and represent social life in different ways, in different discourse" (Fairclough 2001: 123). No matter how hard one might abstain from consciously adhering to one particular ideology, such an endeavor is impossible. All members of society partake in its discourses, assume at one point or another a discourse position which is, in fact, as Jäger explains, "an ideological location" (Jäger 2001: 49) and which becomes port of any individual's identity. A discourse position is "the result of the involvement in, of being «knitted into», various discourses to which the individual has been subjected and which it has processed into a certain ideological position during the course of its life" (Jäger 2001: 49). In the case of presidential candidates, a discourse position needs not only to be adopted willingly and consciously, but also promoted openly, as it forms the very basis of that candidate's identity in the political arena, it is what sets him/her apart from the competition and what allows voters to recognize and to feel allegiance to the values that the candidate puts forth.

## 2. Social semiotics toolkit

The goal of social semiotics is practical, as it aims to identify the ways in which semiotic resources interact in order to create meanings in a social context. As Fairclough explains, "semiosis includes all forms of meaning-making – visual images, body language as well as language. We can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts (economic, political, cultural and so on). […] The motivation for focusing on social practices is that it allows one to combine the perspective of structure and the perspective of action – a practice is on the one hand a relatively permanent way of acting socially which is defined by its position within a structural network of practices, and a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them" (Fairclough 2001: 122). Semiosis can be analyzed and decoded by identifying and interpreting the semiotic resources at work within its framework. This process allows the semiotician to uncover the structure of an identity, as in the case of the present study, and to understand how this identity's inner workings, its mechanisms which are the engines for social action.

The most important notions in social semiotics applied to visual products are put forth by Theo van Leeuwen and from his catalogue, several have been selected for the purpose of this paper: framing, metaphor, connotation. Framing refers to the ways in which the elements of a visual composition interact, either by means of making a connection or of suggesting disconnection in order to render a certain meaning or message visually clear for the audience.

Moreover, in order for an image to be gripping, to capture the audience's attention and to increase the chances of retention and identification with is message, it needs to be innovative. As Leeuwen explains, "Semiotic change is brought about through metaphor and connotation. Because every semiotic resource and every use of every semiotic resource was once an innovation, metaphor and connotation are always there in the background, but this often gets

forgotten" (Leeuwen 2005: 27). Metaphors create new ways of expressing ideas but they could also become new ideas and practices. A metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated, is people's most basic mechanism for understanding and categorizing experiences. It assists people in the meaning-making process by allowing them to transfer something from one context to another on the basis of a perceived similarity between the two contexts and thus associations particular to one context become available in the new context as well.

Connotation is the second mechanism of semiotic innovation and it is of extreme relevance for the current study. While denotation focuses on the more obvious, accessible level of what or who is represented in a discourse, connotation focuses on the matter of what ideas and values are represented beyond the overt level of the denotation and of how these ideas come to be accessible to the audience. Leeuwen focuses on the ways in which connotation functions within visual images and, to this end, he mentions the role of photographic techniques such as the posing of objects, framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed, as being of paramount importance in communicating or inducing the audience to accept a certain idea or association. In this way, connotation could lead to the appearance of symbols, which could be considered veritable embodiments of different ideologies, and of particular relevance for an analysis of election campaigns. Symbols, once generated and accepted, have great power to influence the voters, to rally them around the cause of one particular candidate or to make them become detached from the cause of another.

The tools of social semiotics are best suited to analyze how identities are created through discourse, as well as to pinpoint the ideological stances that each identity embodies.

## 3. Presidential candidates' identities uncovered

The current studyfocuses on the ways in which semiotic resources were employed in the Romanian presidential election campaign in 2014. The two main candidates at that time were Victor Ponta, the then prime minister, and Klaus Iohannis, who was, at that time, the mayor of Sibiu, a Romanian town in Transylvania. To this end, we shall analyze their billboard messages, as well as the visual postings that they made on-line, on their respective social media pages, with a view to identifying the methods employed to get their respective campaign messages across to the general public by making use of images and logos. Moreover, the analysis will reveal the ideological components of their respective campaigns, as no message in the public space lacks an ideological load. As analysis will show, Victor Ponta's campaign relies heavily on traditional groupings of images that invoke well-established associations in the voters' minds. On the other hand, Klaus Iohannis' campaign engineered a new discourse model to suit the needs of a different generation of voters, one for which ideals such as European and NATO integration are no longer ideals to be pursued but realities to be respected and promoted.

Victor Ponta's campaign revolved around the feeling of national pride, as his messages attempted to awaken the feeling of patriotism in his voting pool, which in turn could lead to their participation in the election process. The most ubiquitous of his billboards (Figure 1), which also best synthesizes his message.

Figure 1. Victor Ponta's election campaign billboard

Paradigmatically speaking, the choice of images embodies two key aspects on Ponta's campaign: the focus on national landmarks as a source of national identity and pride and the focus on the people and on being surrounded and supported by the people whose wishes, hopes and dreams he aims to embody and fulfill.

On a denotative level, it can be noticed that the image employs icons of historical, cultural, natural and architectural landmarks in Romania as well as images of Ponta surrounded by crowds of supporters who want to shake hands with him.

On a connotative level, the landmarks represent parts of Romanian identity, Romania as a country with a definite identity, past, which are a source of pride. Symbolically, the landmarks come to reinforce the idea that the Romanian people have what to be proud of, that their country has a culture, natural beauty and traditions that are worth embracing and promoting. The images of supporters and of hand-shaking illustrate the fact that he is a president of the people and for the people and that he is welcome in their midst because they feel that he represents them and their interests. It is a feeling of communion and shared interests that beckons others to join in, to partake in the euphoric feeling of belonging.

As far as framing is concerned, the text and the picture are integrated, that means they occupy the same space, generating the idea that they are one, that if one adheres to the images then the text is self-understood, it is intrinsically accepted. There is a separation between the upper part of the image and the lower part – this separation can be interpreted as a shift from the general statement of pride taken in the fact that we are Romanians combined with the images that reveal what being a Romanian actually refers to, what the Romanian identity is composed of to the more particular statement of how this pride can be manifested, of how it could be instantiated in this concrete case of the presidential election campaign, namely support for one particular candidate. Between these two parts of the image, there is a border made up of traditional motifs

used to decorate Romanian folk items such as traditional dishes, garments etc. These motifs also exhibit Romanian national colors: red, yellow and blue, yet another statement of patriotism and of respect for, adherence to and promotion of traditional values that are seen as the foundation of the Romanian identity.

With respect to difference and continuity, Ponta's visual identity-building campaign is based on promoting continuity with traditional Romanian values, on showing respect to national identity, to what makes the Romanian people, to those values that bring and keep us together as a nation in the face of outside/foreign/unknown challenges and difficulties. As the message states, "Proud to be Romanians. We vote for Victor Ponta president." These values are well known and reliable, they have been around for generations and they have seen the Romanian people through tough times before and continuity can guarantee future prosperity.

Finally, the big stamp superimposed on the images of the people coming together around Ponta and on the traditionally drawn and colored border comes as a guarantee that if we want to act in the name of these values, that if we want to guarantee their survival and promotion, then voting for Ponta is the only possible option. The same idea is enforced by the fact that the first person plural is used "We vote", as an expression of our common desire, common goal and unity in front of outside challenges.

Another poster was developed along the same lines, this time featuring Victor Ponta's picture prominently, as it makes up two thirds of the image. This poster continues the identity-building process along the common thread of traditional values that reinforce the Ponta's image as a candidate who stands for maintaining the connection with the Romanian people's past and history. The same border is noticeable to indicate adherence to national values. Moreover, in this case, the framing is different as there are two integrated images and the text is superimposed on one of them. The fuzzy background presents an idyllic, pastoral scenery which brings to mind the idea that this is what makes our national identity stand apart from others, as Romanian identity was born in rural areas and that is where we need to return in order to retrieve and preserve it. In fact, Ponta is addressing his most faithful electorate, the people who live in the countryside and are over a certain age, the people who speak of the good old days when there were fewer problems and Romania faced fewer dangers. By making use of more or less subtle icons and symbols to indicate that he respects those values as well, Ponta hopes to convince voters that if they choose him, those values will be preserved and returned to center stage.

Logos are also important in a campaign, as they are the synthetic manifestation of a candidate's ideological platform. In this particular case, Ponta's campaign is based on two important slogans: "Victor Ponta the president that unites" and "I call on you to see the change through to the end". The meanings of the two logos complete each other. The first one gives information about the candidate himself and the values that he promotes, namely standing together in the face of adversity because this is what makes a people strong and helps to protect national identity. The second logo calls to action, it is an imperative in order to enforce those values and to change the nation, to put it back on track. It is, however, unclear what the change actually refers to. The notion of standing together is what unites the two logos, reflecting the idea that power is in numbers.

One aspect that Ponta's campaign also makes use of is endorsement of the candidate by famous public figures from different walks of life. In this case, the framing technique of integration is again employed in order to present possible voters with the image of the endorser, his/her identification, as well as a relevant quote that justifies the support they give to Ponta, in

some cases. Furthermore, the stamp of approval is once more in a prominent position on the image in order to inculcate in the voters' minds the association between the respect they have for those public figures and, implicitly, for the opinions they espouse, and the action that is required of them, namely voting for the candidate Victor Ponta, if they want to join this group of elite figures, to belong to this group. Part of the message in these posters is common to them all, namely the statement "I vote for Victor Ponta." The fact that the statement is in the present tense, not in the future, indicates the fact that this action is certain, unequivocal, it is a given, meant to set a forceful example for these public figures' supporters.

When it comes to the campaign of the other candidate, Klaus Iohannis, the analysis reveals a completely different approach to all the components of what makes a viable brand and creates a strong public image. When it comes to Klaus Iohannis, the campaign images and banners are completely different both in composition and in the messages that they transmit. The audience they address is also different from Ponta's. In this case there is discontinuity as far as the paradigmatic choices are concerned. Iohannis does not rely on tradition in order to promote his candidacy, but rather on modernity, on the break with tradition and the orientation to a new set of values that are a reflection of Romania's current position in the world, as part of the European Union and NATO.



Figure 2. Klaus Iohannis' campaign billboard

When considering the poster in Figure 2, on a denotative level the following aspects can be noticed. Firstly, the color blue is the background for all the posters and banners and, secondly, the only icon used is the image of the candidate. On a connotative level, the color blue activates several of its significances in this context. It is the color of an ideal, an ideal of peace and security, and its use implies that Romania should also adhere to these values for its future development. The Romanian flag is absent, but the color blue also stands for the European Union and NATO (as it is the background color of their respective flags), and this means that Romania

should open itself up to the international community because as an individual, separated country it could not prosper in this current security context.

Klaus Iohannis's image is determined, that of a man who does things rather than talk about them, who has one goal in mind and will follow it relentlessly, namely to associate Romania with the concept of a job well-done, as his logo states (to which we will refer in more detail later). The image that he promotes is that of a man of few words, who lets his actions speak for themselves.

One other aspect that could also be noticed on this level is the absence of the candidate's first name from the billboard. This actually helps with the creation of a visual identity, as he makes his name into a brand, a brand to be associated with German values of working efficiently and focusing on results. Romanians have always looked up to Germans, considering them to be professionals and people of their word, and Iohannis makes excellent use of his German name to promote these values for Romania. A German name could have been considered, otherwise, a deterrent for patriotic voters, but by turning it into a brand, Iohannis manages to steer interpretations away from feelings of alienation and alterity and focus them on the positive connotations that a German origin brings to people's minds.

With respect to framing, the Klaus Iohannis' image is overlapped on all the other aspects in the poster, thus suggesting that he is the embodiment of his German name, of his logo and of the connotations of security and a European and Euro-Atlantic orientated Romania. The image created seems to connect directly and inextricably all these values to the person of the candidate and to suggest that the only way they can be achieved is by voting for him. He seems greater than all the individual components taken separately and somehow larger than life and all powerful.

As far as difference and continuity are concerned, his campaign is in stark contrast with other presidential campaigns, as it is clean, sharp-lined and simple, there are no complicated images, no large amounts of text, no combinations of photos. From this point of view, it could be seen as discontinuity, since this is not the Romanian tradition when it comes to election materials (traditionally, candidates believe that the more information is included in their promotional materials, the better their message will be transferred to the audience). It is obvious that he addresses a different voting pool than his opponent, namely that of young people who have grown up with talk of the European Union and NATO around them, who are keen to adhere to the values that these organizations promote and to see Romania as a powerful actor in the international arena.

On the other hand, his campaign is built on the idea of continuity, of pursuing the road to full integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, as a member with fully equal status and not as a poor relative. Thus, his message indirectly tackles the greatest concern that these structures have expressed with respect to Romania, namely corruption, because his logo is "Law, not thievery. Action, not small talk."

In another quite similar poster, the candidate is presented this time looking forward to the future with confidence and anticipation, rather than staring at the camera, thus creating the image of a candidate who believes in Romania's future and in what it can bring, rather than focus on the past. This poster also brings more information with respect to the ideological message of Iohannis' campaign. In his logos, quotes are used, and they are short and to the point, all having in common certain values that are the engines of his campaign: (1) The law must be abided; (2) Projects and reforms must be carried out; (3) Institutions should be respected. All these aspects

combined guarantee the end of corruption. Ideologically speaking, Iohannis' message is not focused so much on creating a sense of patriotism in an ideal, less defined way, but rather on seeing exactly what could be done so that a feeling of patriotism is justified. His messages focus on those weak aspects of Romanian society, such as overbearing corruption, which need to be remedied so that the population would feel once more proud to call themselves not only Romanians, but also European citizens. The sentences are short, almost like maxims, to enforce the idea that they speak only the truth, they resemble commandments, and thus do not need verbose formulations to convince. They reinforce his image as the man who does, not the man who talks.

In what follows, the analysis will focus on the visual elements of Iohannis' Facebook campaign. In the case of this candidate, the social media campaign was well put together and run, with different messages and visual images being used in order to reinforce and consolidate the visual identity of the candidate and to put forth his ideological platform. All Facebook messages rely on clever manipulation of typography and of representational imagery.

The overall logo of the campaign presented "The Romania of a job well-done" and by clever use of typography, the capital R in Romania is made up of the values that the candidate promotes for Romania, such as separation of powers, freedom, rule of law, family, respect, balance, protection of private property, efficiency, patriotism, dignity, etc. Thus, there is an identification between these values and Romania as a whole, and all these are presented as Iohannis's inventory of values (see upper right corner of Figure to - Klaus Iohannis from A to Z). They spell out his platform, his mission and his goals, which perfectly make up Romania, as his voters would like it to be.

In the case of this second Facebook message, Romania becomes a star in the constellation of European states, as it promotes those values that are also at the core of the European construct, more precisely, "In the Romania of a job well-done, we shall graduate from the school of European integration and we shall become a powerful, mature state, respected in the EU." Romania will no longer be perceived as the student who is behind in class, but will become a proud member with an equal say in the affairs of Europe.

Klaus Iohannis' overall focus in all his messages is to the future and to the ways in which Romania and the values that its citizens adhere to can become part of the overall European project that Romania is now a part of and that cannot be overlooked or undermined, if the future is to be preserved, as another Facebook set of images demonstrates. These images exhibit a compelling use of different kinds of typography, a combination of a typography that imitates handwriting, and which brings a personal note to the messages and the name of the candidate in a larger, more visible font, together with the position that he is running for. By personalizing the message, through the use of handwriting, the poster appeals to individuals, it does not appear to be mass produced but rather to be the expression of individual opinions and wishes, of actual people who will follow this course of action and who thus, indirectly, beckon others to follow their example.

Klaus Iohannis' campaign focuses more on the image of the candidate, relating the ideology behind his governance program to the visual identity that is created for him. In this case ideology is more overtly presented, either through key words or through clever use of chromatics and body posture.

In conclusion, the two election campaigns are very different both in point of concept as well as in point of realization, since the identities of the candidates are distinct and their voting

pools have little in common. The use of semiotic resources in the instantiation of the two candidates' identities espouse their different social and political values. Victor Ponta's campaign is based on continuity and tradition, with few relevant and specially-designed materials posted on social media, indicating that he addresses an audience mostly made up of middle-aged, more rural population, and that his ideology promotes patriotism as an expression of healing, of returning to the right path, of becoming once more a single nation. Klaus Iohannis' campaign starts from discontinuity, as it bears little resemblance to other campaigns as far as the visual content is concerned. His visual identity revolves around European values and ideology and it makes ample use of materials specially created for social media and that can determine a younger audience to become involved in the voting process. Discourse analysis has revealed that images and messages associated with both campaigns exhibit different ideologies: Victor Ponta focuses on what it means to be Romanian from a traditional standpoint, while Klaus Iohannis envisions Romania as part of greater structures, with a role and a say in the international arena.

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