

# *Edi Rama's image strategies 2013-2023*

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## **Abstract**

*This scientific paper focuses on the study of political communication strategies aimed at creating a clear and effective leader image. The descriptive analysis in this study centers on the political image of the leader and the forms of communication that shape this image, which also serves as a brand for the political party. It examines how this image is curated and maintained, even up to the point of communication or political crises. The communication content, its stages, forms, and functions are analyzed, with particular attention to the image curation of the leader and the methods of communication for ensuring proper state functions. The study focuses on an important figure, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, and specifically on the communication methods he uses as a leader in state and political institutions, as well as professional communication processes. All this is analyzed based on theories from Communication Science.*

**Keywords:** *Political communication, communication strategies, leadership theories, crisis, image marketing, mass media*

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## Introduction

A significant factor in mass communication today is political communication, which is a complex process involving many actors. The media is one of the main actors in the construction and promotion, as well as the dissemination of information in this communication. Political communication is a key part of political activity in a democratic system and of public opinion, from which strategies, management, and important decisions for society are derived. Communication is both information and a strategic organization of procedures and institutions. Here, image plays a key role in the construction of institutions and their importance.

The leader's image is one of the most important aspects of political communication in society, as it builds a symbol of the leader's role in an organization, institution, or society. This symbol, which also becomes a brand for the institution, is continuously curated through proper communication tools. In the era of mass media, these tools are diverse, as are the media and forms of communication.

The subject of this study is political communication as a strategy to build a relationship between the public and the Albanian leader, the Prime Minister, and the communication strategies over a 10-year period. The geographic focus of this study is Albania, specifically Tirana.

The goal of this study is to clearly highlight communication as a process in politics within the triangle of media, politics, and society. It explores the communication strategies of the Albanian government, particularly the Prime Minister's office, during crises, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects.

This study aims to scientifically present arguments about this interactive process, which is as challenging as it is fruitful for the future and well-being of not only politics but also societal development.

## Hypothesis

The leader's communication strategy from 2013-2023 is a well-constructed approach aimed at achieving political goals and vision.

To verify this hypothesis, we ask several research questions:

- Why has the Prime Minister built this kind of mass communication strategy?
- What are the consequences of constructing such a communication strategy?
- How and why might this communication lead to a political crisis, affecting the government's longevity?

## Importance of the Study

This case study is important because it examines communication sciences and a specific phenomenon in this field. Firstly, it sheds light on the theoretical aspects of leadership communication, with the leader being the most important actor in the country. With certain qualities, the leader has a vision and strategy for maintaining power. Analyzing this communication process offers a special focus on political communication studies. There are few studies related to image-building and its curation, which adds importance to this paper, as it captures and analyzes unique events. The study aims to fill a gap in these areas, contributing to research on image-building as a process, making it part of communication science studies.

## Literature Review

### *The Leader and Political Communication*

The leader is an inspirational figure for a group or society, connected to ideas and visions. As a central pillar, the leader creates a positive image that must be followed by everyone, forming a brand and continuity of visions for an organization. The leader's image is as much the image of the organization as it is the organization itself, especially if the organization is built around the leader's image. Unlike an authoritarian figure who elevates their image through orders, the leader works similarly to other actors to elevate the image and becomes integrated into society to shape this image.

One of the greatest military strategists in history, Sun Tzu, viewed leadership as an interplay of tactics. He said: "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat."

## Political Leaders

According to scholar Ornela Elezi, "Leaders represent the most important factor in the development of society." (Elezi, 2018: 27) A leader possesses the abilities to think, act, and lead a group or society, which naturally places them at the top. In summarizing leadership concepts, one can say that the leader possesses special skills, either innate or learned, related to leading society.

Political science scholars Wilhelm Hofmeister and Karsten Grabow state: “Political leaders lead the process of forming political thought and decision-making, as well as legitimizing decisions.” (Hofmeister & Grabow, 2017: 65)

Therefore, the leader is closely tied to the form of governance and the culture stemming from the system they live in. The leader provides visions that are legitimized through public opinion and party decision-making, supported by the leader’s unique qualities. A leader can be a key factor capable of changing a country’s future based on their vision and actions.

“Many contemporary elite scholars have emphasized that the role of elites in transforming political systems and democratization is decisive. One of the main characteristics of elites is their ability to appropriate sources of political power and mobilize the masses.” (Baliqi, 2017: 145)

## **Characteristics of the Leader**

“What characterizes all leaders is their discourse, which generally makes them unique and distinguished by their style, topics addressed, intonation, and gestures.” (Elezi, 2018: 27)

However, it’s not just the style and topics but also the gestures and all these elements combined that create an aura aimed at achieving their goals. Depending on the leader’s thoughts, attitudes, and actions, specific traits or characteristics are formed, shaping the leader’s myth and elevating them to a legendary status, both symbolically and semiotically.

“The way leaders behave towards their subordinates in achieving set objectives, known as the entrepreneurial leadership style, varies from leader to leader, as well as depending on the style used to achieve long-term goals or objectives.” (Elezi, 2018: 27)

## **The Leader’s Image for the Organization**

In election scenarios, many authors emphasize the importance of having a leader in political parties with traits that, according to Nimmo, Mansfield, and Savage in their studies, relate to “voter perceptions of candidates influencing electoral decision-making.” They focus on the character and attributes of the person.

“They determined that this perception was based on personal appeal or, in other words, physical and personality attributes. In fact, the researchers found that ‘the candidate perceived with the best character won five out of six presidential elections.’ In their later study (1976), the researchers found that the candidate’s image was the best predictor of electoral behavior.” (Londo, 2015: 263)

It is also crucial, according to the same research, that the leader's image holds meaning and importance for public opinion, as well as for their followers.

## **The Image and Brand of the Political Leader**

According to Londo, drawing from various researchers, one of the most important being Kolter, the emotional connection of the electorate is tied to the political leader as a consumer product. This is achieved through branding, which creates an association with a product in political communication. As Lees-Marshment states, "Brand and image, under the effects of politics as a consumer product, link consumerism with politics in the design phase of the political product, a process that is more important than the campaign or how individual candidates organize themselves" (Lees-Marshment, 2004).

Like other products, this political brand is consumable, which establishes trust in the interaction and communication relationship. This brand serves as a fundamental guide in shaping social thought as long as it is followed by others. For the electorate, this means a great deal, and in a symmetrical relationship, the leader must hold the same value. For this reason, according to scholars, politicians are encouraged to "consider themselves as brands" and to effectively use "public relations strategies" to communicate.

## **Political Communication and Image Marketing**

In an Oxford Dictionary definition of political communication, the focus is placed on political power, stating: "Political communication implies the symbolic exchange concerning the exercise of joint power" and "the presentation and interpretation of information ... with possible consequences for the exercise of shared power." (Gërguri, 2021: 29).

Pippa Norris, a scholar of political communication, defines it as "an interactive process of transmitting information between politicians, the media, and the public" (Norris, 2001). This reflects the interaction between communication actors and the discursive process through which political information is distributed, involving elements like awareness, ignorance, manipulation, and consensus. This process of communication stems from press offices and PR offices. Norris sees this as connected to the development of the political system, where she emphasizes that: "It is related to developments in the political communication industry (the presence of professional market researchers, pollsters, advertisers, campaign managers) and the goals of non-public campaigns" (Londo, 2015: 260).

## Political Communication in Public Relations

In relation to the political system, we refer to the liberal democracy system, as this study is based on the approach that the Albanian state has toward the political system and its orientation. In his book *Contemporary Political Systems: Institutions, History, and Developments*, Llambro Filo provides insights on the overall discourse of this political system.

“A liberal democratic political system is generally defined as the interrelation and interaction between; - the environment (both internal and external) with its three resource types (natural, human, capital); - governing institutions with their organizational structures and political procedures; - the political culture with its features and manifestations” (Filo, 2008: 7).

It is important for this interaction and understanding between communication actors to include another factor in this relationship: the internal and external environment is an organizational and functional method for both dialogue and cooperation in the political and social life. Politics and its elites create their own discourse in political communication, while society forms its own sphere of thought, guided by intellectuals to form interest groups and non-public organizations that protect social aspects and rights. This public sphere must be continually informed about the political discourse.

“A public sphere, above all, refers to an area of our social life in which something resembling public opinion can be formed.... Citizens act as a public body when they engage in discussions in an unrestricted manner—within the guarantee of the freedom to assemble and form groups and the freedom to express their opinions.” (McNair, 2009: 34).

## Media's Importance in the Political Process

According to McNair, the media plays an important role in the political process for several reasons:

- a. To convey the message of political actors to the desired audience.
- b. To transmit the most impartial communication of political discourse.
- c. To relay the message from citizens to their political leaders. (McNair, 2009: 25)

Within this framework of political communication through agencies and political organizations in public relations, communication is generally conducted within normal parameters. “Political organizations here refer to political actors,

defined narrowly as those individuals who, through organizational and institutional means, seek to influence the decision-making process which they should achieve through institutional political power.” (McNair, 2009: 19).

## **Managing Political Crises**

There are several stages of managing crises. Governments and leaders must take decisive steps to overcome situations that may destabilize governments, states, and societies. According to NATO’s manual, Detection, Prevention, and Management of Crises, among the key crisis management activities, which include those related to the framework and perspective of their stages, two activities are directly connected to the timely detection and notification of crises:

- a. Monitoring the situation.
- b. Supporting crisis detection activities. (KOSN, 2002: 19).

The giving and receiving of information must be timely and target the weak points where there is a lack of communication or miscommunication between actors during the crisis. The action plan conducted by the Public Relations sector must be structured to channel all media and communication paths, which is an ongoing process. It is ineffective for the government or the leader to show indifference or neglect, as this would further escalate the situation. In such conditions, an initial consensus is reached for dialogue and discussion between the parties.

## **Political and Media Agendas: Their Influence**

The media’s agenda constructs reality for the public, which depends heavily on various factors, including the political agenda. According to important studies by international scholars in political science and communication, McComb and Shaw (1972) highlighted the way reality is reflected by the media regarding politics:

“In their ability to produce cognitive changes in individuals and structure their thoughts lies the most important effect of mass communication—its ability to mentally organize and rank the world around us. In short, the media cannot tell us what to think, but they can tell us what to think about” (Mari, 2011: 95).

Scholars in both political science and media studies emphasize the importance of communication tools in mass media. These tools are important both for the work of political organizations and for television companies with mutual or individual interests.

The media's interests and power can determine the importance of issues and personalities, influence how they are addressed, or even conceal immediate political problems depending on its interests. The media has the power to divert attention from political actors or goals in the media market of information and communication. However, when politics is at the center of attention, it is crucial that information and communication are properly conveyed, benefiting both media and politics.

## Methodology

The methodology of this study is both quantitative and qualitative. Qualitatively, the study reviews both national and international literature on political communication, image, leadership, and communication strategies employed by active participants. To analyze this scientific topic more clearly, the paper draws on a wide range of literature related to media, politics as a democratic institution, and leadership rooted in its image. We rely on both local and foreign authors, such as:

- Professor of political science Llambro Filo's "Contemporary Political Systems: Institutions, History, and Developments"
- Hofmeister, W. & Grabow, K. (2017). *Political Parties: Function and Organization in Democratic Societies*, West Print, Tirana, Albania.
- Ornela Elezi's "The Discourse of the Albanian Political Leader"
- Eva Londo's "The Marketing of Election Campaigns in Albanian Media"
- Baliqi, B. (2017). *Public Policies and Governance*, Pristina, Kosovo.
- Ramadan Çipuri's "Political Communication in the Age of Social Media"

Additionally, the work is supported by foreign authors like Brian McNair's "Introduction to Political Communication", Rudy Giuliani's leadership principles, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Kate Kenski's "Political Communication: Then, Now, and Beyond", and Bernard Valade and Renaud Fillieule's "Introduction to Social Sciences". Quantitatively, the study will observe and analyze communication forms of the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office. The data collected will help verify our hypothesis. Media communication forms used for image curation during politically tense events, as well as electoral strategies, will be studied.

## Study Limitations

The theoretical literature available for this study has been extensive regarding theories related to political communication. However, we encountered difficulties in finding literature specifically related to image marketing and the tactics for



maintaining this image. Material on this aspect was limited. We relied on some works related to image in political communication, but they were insufficient. Moreover, we faced challenges in physically obtaining the necessary literature, which required time for reading and analysis.

## Results

Edi Rama, one of the most prominent representatives of the Socialist Party (PS) during this long political transition, has managed to dominate in power for over a decade through various strategies for managing his political image, which directly influences the leadership of the PS:

- a) Edi Rama's political background
- b) Creation of the leader's brand  
His image emerges as a personality with intellectual and artistic tendencies.
- c) Tendency to involve young people in politics, presenting a positive image for the country.
- d) Public trust in him as a hardworking, uncorrupted, and persistent figure.
- e) Aggressive approach towards his political opponents with the same intensity during elections.
- f) A strong-handed manager of the party and government power, aided by the weaknesses of the opposition.
- g) Skilled manager and propagandist in the public eye and a proficient user of new media.
- h) Capable of handling government crises, something we will analyze further below
- j) His eccentric character in centralizing power, particularly noticeable in the later years of his governance, aligns with the views of the aforementioned authors regarding his authority and significant power in this position.

## Conclusions

This case study aimed to thoroughly explore the political communication strategies of the leader and his efforts to maintain a politically stable and secure image. The study reviewed numerous references and theories from internationally renowned authors regarding image, political leadership, communication tactics, and leadership styles. It delved into various theoretical details on how a democratic state manages communication and communication crises, explained

by international theorists. The study also relied on local authors to compare the Albanian context with theoretical paradigms.

The study examined key moments in the government and leadership of Edi Rama, analyzing how his image was managed, especially during major crises such as the student protests and the arms crisis, which required concrete responses.

On one hand, Rama's image experienced ups and downs in all cases but effectively served both his identity as a leader and his communication strategies during crises. Crises were chosen as the focus because during difficult times, the power of the leader's image and brand is tested. Through these cases, we validated our hypothesis that: "The leader's communication from 2013-2023 was a well-constructed strategy for achieving political goals and vision." We also addressed key questions about why these strategies were employed by the Prime Minister and what impact they had on future leadership.

Firstly, Rama utilized mass communication tactics with numerous messages, being highly engaged on social media and in various interviews or debate shows.

Secondly, his message strategy was powerful. Like during the 2013 election campaign, he created advantages by not directly confronting his opponents but rather aligning with their thoughts, understanding their concerns, and showing interest in their issues as a prime minister, portraying himself as one of them. This gave him the advantage of time to leverage during crises.

Rama is direct in his communication and as transparent as his role as a high-ranking state official allows, which makes him charismatic. His pragmatism, down to seemingly insignificant details, strengthens his image as a leader. However, when challenging opponents or critics, he has also experienced ups and downs, often getting caught in a whirlpool of personal or family accusations, which makes him similar to other politicians.

His longevity in power is another indicator of his high perception in society as a strong leader, further contributing to his image as a high-profile and timely figure.

By descriptively analyzing the most significant cases over the past ten years, this study successfully shaped the leadership image. The work intends to be a unique study that can be referenced and continued in the future.

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