

PROFESSIONALISM AND IMPROVISATION IN THE IMAGE CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: This paper tries to uncover some elements of what some authors claim to be a total disaster of the *content* and *strategy* of public communication carried out by Romanian authorities in the Higher Education System. The paper does not disclose a systematic empirical approach, but aims at revealing aspects concerning recent image crises at the highest level of the Romanian Education system. A brief analysis of the causes follows and the paper ends with some recommendations for improving the crisis management in the given area.

Keywords: Image Crisis Management, Higher Education System, Public Communication

1. Introduction

With few exceptions, Romania does not enjoy a positive public perception, in terms of prestige, honesty and professionalism, regarding its Education system at all levels. This is a remark easy to make and unfortunately it seems to be true especially for the management levels within the system. Even more, those very few figures which in the past had successfully gained the respect of public opinion proved to be nothing else but singular examples. The negative situation has accelerated in the last years, augmented by a series of major image crises throughout the Romanian Higher Education System. This short paper aims to present two distinct aspects. Firstly, we draw a sketch of what we call an image crisis in the top level management of the Romanian Higher Education System. We mean by this the level of ministry, or at least the level of the minister. We will provide some brief empirical descriptions, excerpted from the reality in recent years. Secondly, the aim is also to identify some of the causes which, in our opinion, are responsible for the poor management of these crises in today's Romania.

In the end we will make some recommendations which, if implemented at the level of the working team of the system can dramatically improve the capacity of public communicators in managing image crises in the future.

Before we continue it is important to mention the fact that, as far as we know, there are no systematic empirical or theoretical studies regarding the way in which different forms of crises from within Romanian Higher Education System had been approached by communicators in charge of with crisis management. Most of the cases were present in the media which disclosed structural flaws in crisis management, but these positions were limited to pieces of journalism investigation and did not benefit from a systematic approach from the point of view of public communication theory. This is the main reason for the relatively short list of *scientific* bibliographical support of this paper, which relies mainly on cases with high public visibility in the media.

2. Image Crisis Management Disaster: A Brief Anatomy of a Recent Public Communication Failure in the Romanian Higher Education System

With respect to image crises and especially to the manner in which these crises had been treated by the public communicators' teams, in charge with this task we have to

state that there appears to be nothing special about their occurrence in the public space. In short, it is easy to notice the same set of structural flaws and mistakes which is present in almost any other example of contemporary Romanian public communication crisis.

2.1. Structural Mistakes in the Public Communication Process during Image Crisis Management in Contemporary Romanian Higher Education System

As far as we know, up to this moment there is no systematic research regarding the image crisis management in Romanian contemporary public space. This is also true, of course, with respect to the crises in the Higher Education System. Instead of repeating some general things from the general theory of public communication we try to uncover those types of mistakes which are symptomatic for the way in which Romanian authorities deal with almost any form of PR crisis. Of course, this means that the vast majority of mistakes mentioned by PR theories are already present in Romanian authorities' efforts to stop and control the damage produced by different crises which negatively impacted the image of these authorities. Among the most prominent problems we mention here the absence of professionals employed in the public sector, the incoherence of the message and the media overexposure of some of the high ranking public officials. Another set of mistakes which in our view is specific to Romanian top level management in the Education System includes, firstly, the fact that *every time* when an image crisis appears, the persons sent to deal with the media are usually those who are responsible for those crises. We bring as an example the image crisis triggered by the issue of *plagiarism* used by various high public officials in order to augment their professional CVs. There are, unfortunately, relatively numerous such examples in which persons who in theory should have stayed for a while outside of the media exposure did exactly the opposite thing. Maybe the case of Ioan Mang (minister of Education in 2012 for only 8 days) is the most illustrative examples but there are others, investigated by the National Committee on Academic Ethics only after they have been pointed at by the media. This PR mistake is often made in addition with another, also very unprofessionally handled, when a prominent political figure from the public space steps forward in the media to defend the accused person (Andronesco, 2012).

Secondly, when this type of severe image crisis appears, with the issue of plagiarism on the table, the players involved usually try either to deny the real amplitude of the facts, or to deny, in various forms, even obvious facts. Even if the process takes a while, the public figures involved seem to have no real concern about the efficiency of their undertakings and they usually try to prolong incertitude as much as they can, with the hope that the scandal will die out. However, since the debate takes place in the media space, it can be controlled only within certain limits by those who desperately try to save their public image. In time, the issue of plagiarism, regardless of its relatively large forms, ends in a hilarious, incoherent denial of the facts. Usually in Romania nobody resigns because of a media scandal, regardless of how severe it is, and also nobody seems to ever consider necessary to bring some sort of apologizes or at least to find *credible* excuses for the breach of academic ethics. From the point of view of PR theory, the tactics of prolonging a cascade of denials in the media is a faulty one.

Thirdly, another negative step, in terms of a professional PR approach to image crises, is the step through which those accused of plagiarism usually blame their political opponents for the scandal. In their view, the accusations and the image crisis are merely elaborate tools designed to destroy or at least to undermine their acquired political position. We do not challenge the validity of such a perspective because

sometimes it proves to be true. However we want to underline the fact that this manner of approaching the image crisis does not follow the rules of a professional behaviour. This is true because of the fact that, by blaming the political opponent for ongoing events, a political figure resorts to changing the subject of media coverage and to diverting the debate towards a secondary direction.

Finally, in the fourth place of our general frame of resuming the most obvious mistakes in approaching image crises by the Romanian Higher Education System officials is their appetence of *hiding indefinitely behind rules and regulations*. This approach, which we qualify as negative, allows for a stretch of time for serious responses required by the public opinion and usually ends with the loss of interest in the topic on the part of the public opinion (Ciulac, 2012). Even more, the risk is not only to lose public opinion's interest but also to sink the whole public discussion about a particular image crisis or another into confusion and into an endless line of denials and contradictory public positions. And at the end one also risks to be blocked out by the *real confusion* of rules and regulations. This can easily happen because a vast number of Romanian rules and regulations, and not only those concerning education, is often contradictory and incomplete. In short, the temptation to postpone the outcomes of a public debate concerning an image crisis or to simply prolong the process of dealing with an image crisis is very strong. Officials targeted by scandals try to divert the debate towards procedures and regulations, thus causing more negative effects at the level of public opinion. This is true due to the fact that in a scenario of this kind the reality of those ambiguous and contradictory rules, procedures and regulation surfaces in an ugly light. Instead of putting to bed the crisis involving the image of public officials, such scandals trigger serious crises of credibility of entire institutions. In our opinion a new theoretical approach is needed because in this scenario the institution is affected on a much more large scale than it is in the first situation, when only isolated individuals, in the first instance at least, are responsible for the burst of image crises. We do not insist further in this direction, but it is important to notice that in the last period the Romanian Higher Education System encountered serious image crises triggered by allegations of plagiarism which degenerated into scenarios like the one we described earlier. In this context another issue is worth mentioning: the distinction between the penal dimension of plagiarism and the so called strictly "academic dimension" of this phenomenon. This is important because in dealing with an image crisis built on the issue of plagiarism the legal charges have a deeper impact upon the public general perception than the academic solutions. Usually a legal resolution needs a more solid preparation and solving the crisis in legal terms proves to be a difficult challenge (Marian, 2013).

It is beyond doubt that, at least theoretically speaking, Romanian authorities try to implement a Western style of solving any form of public communication malfunctions, but it seems that solutions imported from the West cannot work in frames which lack the underpinning content. This theory is known in Romania under the name of "forms without substance" (Boia, 2012: 38 – 43).

3. Conclusions – The Present and the Future of a Public Relation Professional Approach. The Particular case of Higher Education System.

Unfortunately, we believe that there are no ready-made solutions at least for the near and medium future, for the improvement of the general activity from the PR image crises regarding the Romanian Higher Education officials. In our view, one cannot simply adapt the general theories of managing image crisis to this particular case. Surely more is needed than a simple and rough process of adaption of Romanian PR skills to a Western approach to public communication. Only a surface effort cannot

lead to the change of mentalities of experts responsible with crisis management. It may seem redundant to remind here what efforts are required to improve the situation from a PR perspective. The theory is well known and we do not have the intention of repeating it once again. Another thing we consider worth mentioning in this context is the way in which Romanian public officials working in education perceive their own audience. The change in perspective is very important, since the vast majority of the relevant public in severe image crises triggered by plagiarism is formed by academic staff and personnel. And, as far as we know, is very hard if not impossible, to manipulate a professional public.

Another fundamental reason for the need of a fresh approach in dealing with image crises in Romanian Higher Education System is given by the fact that the current way of managing such crises ends up in damaging the relation between media and authorities. This degraded relation leads to *the loss of credibility* public officials might have in front of the media and of the journalists, and this leads to the loss of credibility shared by the entire public opinion. Furthermore, an additional risk can be noticed: a degraded relation with the media bears, as a supplementary effect, the risk of turning the media against those which were responsible, in a way or in another, for managing different image crises in Romanian Higher Education System. And, as it is very well known, a hostile press is the last thing one needs when having to manage a public communication crisis, regardless of its particular content.

Maybe it seems redundant, but still we feel the urge to underline the fact that, generally speaking, in order to overcome the actual negative situation of public communication in Romania it is absolute necessary to work towards the professionalization of the human resources working in PR and in crisis management. Such a task definitely requires much more than a simple process of course offerings. In terms of PR skills, professionals now responsible with the PR crisis management regardless the content of the crises have to undergo lengthy training. This task implies a deeper change, also impacting the human quality of the individuals employed in PR teams. This is not an idealistic view. In order to ensure a better future of public communication in Romania such concerns have to be addressed. To successfully overcome the current status of a relatively perpetual *improvisation* in the field of crisis management, there is a need for a significant number of individuals with greater responsibilities in PR and with skills in developing anti-crisis scenarios, prevention plans and activities specific for crisis management, underpinned by a more serious and pragmatic understanding of the public. In our view and in relation with the topic of our paper, such measures are vital for restoring the credibility of the Higher Education System, where the so called "relevant" public is mainly formed by academia and therefore it is not so easily pleased or subjected to manipulation.

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