

# COVID-19: HOW THE PRESIDENT OF ROMANIA USED FACEBOOK TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE POPULATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY FROM 2020

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**Abstract.** *The present article aimed to analyse the way in which a political leader used the Facebook social network to communicate with the population at the beginning of the state of emergency from 2020. Thus, in order to achieve this objective, I have chosen to analyse the Facebook page of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, starting from indicators such as: the total number of posts, the total number of posts about Covid-19 out of the total number of posts, but also the type of communicated messages. We are going to observe the manner in which all the communication was directed towards restrictions and preventive measures, the strategy aiming to influence the population in these directions.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Political communication, communication strategy, pandemic*

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic created a lot of instability at the level of the public opinion, especially in the first months after the outbreak, moments when uncertainty was still high. Little was known about the typology of the virus, there was still no vaccine, while the authorities were mainly focused on restrictions.

As in any other situation with too few answers and far too many questions, people turn to the one whom they consider, more or less directly, the leader of the society. In our case, it was the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis.

The role of the leader in society goes back to the time of the nomadic tribes, when one of their roles was to provide the group with security (Gherghina, Țap 2020).

Thus, the President of Romania found himself in the situation of managing not only a medical crisis, but also a social one, the risk of instability increasing as the Covid-19 pandemic advanced. Also, we must not forget the fact that the first real measure of the president was to establish a state of emergency, an unprecedented aspect for a large part of the population.

Romania started the "adventure" of the pandemic with a single confirmed case, so that less than a week later we witnessed a galloping increase of the cases. Coincidence or not, the televisions only discussed about this thing, by daily reporting the new number of the infected people and by presenting images that were at least frightening.

The rumors did not take long to appear, on the sources circulating all kinds of documents about restrictions or states of emergency. Initially, the authorities denied such a decision, so that later the president would decide in this regard.

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As I explained above, this new situation represented a premiere /a first for the vast majority of the population. With the legislative cover "in the pocket", the authorities have made decision after decision, imposed restrictions and some would even say that they limited or restricted certain rights.

The students were forced to learn from home, and people to work from home. The access of the Romanians to different locations was restricted, the famous statement being introduced. The police and the army swarmed/littered the streets, and trips abroad were also restricted.

The closing of the markets, the suspension of jobs (in a society like the one in Romania, I think this was the decision that led to the loss of the elections by the PNL) and also the interruption of the activities of certain entrepreneurial companies, from different fields of activity, represented other decisions that were difficult to accept for a large part of the population.

As was to be expected, people's fear for the financial situation began to grow. People quickly understood that, beyond the epidemiological danger, all the financial measures such as postponing or delaying installments will "claim their rights".

We are thus looking at a difficult context, new for the vast majority of people, dominated by uncertainty and fear. We are looking at a context where the role of the leader becomes, as we saw above, more and more important. It is even crucial, if we look at it from the perspective of the communication objectives. Explaining the situation, calming the population and providing guarantees or explaining and convincing people to accept the restrictions were just some of Klaus Iohannis' communication targets at the beginning of the pandemic.

To an equal extent, the communication channels play an extremely important role in a crisis situation. Of course, we have the traditional mass media, but in order to ensure that the message reaches the population correctly and quickly, we must also use Social Media.

In this article I am going to analyse the manner in which a political leader utilized Social Media during the time of an unprecedented crisis. Consequently, we analysed the page of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, by starting from indicators such as the total number of posts since the beginning of the pandemic compared to the total number of posts from the months preceding the pandemic, the total number of posts about Covid-19 from the total number of posts and the communicated messages.

## **2. The Importance of Groups and Leaders**

The leaders have always played an extremely important role for any society, regardless of the time interval that we are analysing or the socio-political context. One of the most developed human instincts is the gregarious instinct or, in simple terms, the herd effect (Bernays, 1923). In other words, it is in our essence to surround ourselves with people who think the same as we do or share the same opinion, with the same principles or values, and to form groups that help us progress, evolve or solve all kinds of problems.

Whether we like it or not, ever since we are born, we live in all kinds of groups, such as family, communities, cities, neighbourhoods or even countries (Stewart, 2005: 186). There are countless reasons for which people prefer to gather in groups, but starting from the idea of this article, one of them deserves to be mentioned in this chapter, namely the positive way in which they feel referring to the group in question. For example, to a political party or to a group of supporters of a certain political leader: "well-being is often related to the performance of their party or political tendency at the polls" (Steward, 2005: 188).

This need of people to belong to groups with similar opinions has been and is often exploited by the political leaders, whose main objective is to gain enough support in order to influence perceptions or win elections: "In politics, group identities and divisions are often emphasised by political leaders ('ethnic entrepreneurs') to gain support" (Stewart, 20015: 187).

Equally, many political leaders "faced" a complex situation, because any benefit - the possibility of influencing the masses - comes with a series of other obligations. For example, a leader can have an enormous impact in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the influence upon the masses is much easier via Social Media: "Leadership has a large impact whether via social media, which is an important outreach tool in the current millennium" (Antonakis, 2020: 211).

This means that whatever they do and say will influence the perception of the public opinion, people's behaviour or even their decisions. Thus, looking at the positive perspective of things, leaders can even "manipulate" the actions of the individuals or even solve problems of public interest issues (Antonakis, 2020: 211).

### **3. The importance of leaders during crisis situations**

At the same time, beyond the moments of peace, a leader can face all kinds of sensitive or delicate situations, from minor incidents to serious crises, special contexts, rarely encountered or involving the saving of human lives. Unfortunately, most of the time, when we think about the rare events that can turn into a serious crisis, we think about a lot of ambiguity, but also about the need for an urgent reaction (Alkharabesheh, Ahmad, Kharabsheh, 2014: 283).

Obviously, in order to understand how a crisis can be successfully managed, we must first of all understand what the role of a leader is in such a sensitive moment. Being pressed by the serious expectations of the groups that they represent, during a crisis a leader can provide stability, trust and control (Alkharabesheh, Ahmad, Kharabsheh, 2014: 282).

But in order for this to be successfully accomplished, people must have full confidence in the leader who will lead them out of the crisis. The expectations can be high, the trust in the political leaders is not always at the highest levels, so one of the main objectives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century leader is to gain the trust of the groups (Alkharabesheh, Ahmad, Kharabsheh, 2014: 283). Only by relying on the unconditional trust of the people he follows, a leader will be able to take decisions with very little information (Alkharabesheh, Ahmad, Kharabsheh, 2014: 283).

To an equal extent, everything starts from the mentality of the leaders and from the manner in which they view or take into account the crisis they are facing. Some leaders will interpret the situation as a challenge, while others as an opportunity (Rameshan, 2021: 3). This aspect, the way in which the leaders relate to the crisis they are facing, is particularly important, especially if we think that a serious response can influence or even change the community from different points of view, such as social, economic or by building a solid foundation or background (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, Majzun 2020: 2).

### **4. Leaders and their communication during the covid-19 crisis**

Starting from the discussion about the need of the leaders to gain the trust of the groups that they represent, discussion mentioned in the above –mentioned section, a correct communication strategy must be based on transparency and specific sources (Nur, Al-Mandhari, El Rabbat, Hafeez, Abubakar, Obaid Al Saidi 2020: 2).

During a crisis, it is important for an assumed leader to communicate clearly and frequently (Fernandez, Shaw 2020: 43), using at the same time all available communication channels (Stoller 2020: 2).

The Covid-19 pandemic has represented a great crisis for the vast majority of the leaders from this world, in particular because of the uniqueness of the situation: a pandemic with a virus that nothing was known about. Panic had become the order of the day, "delayed action could lead to worse outcomes" (Nur, Al-Mandhari, El Rabbat, Hafeez, Abubakar, Obaid Al Saidi 2020: 1).

Obviously, since we were facing something new and different, each leader chose to approach crisis management in his own way, both from a medical perspective as well as from a leadership and communication perspective. It did not take long until these methods were classified, thus appearing all kinds of leadership typologies. The most relevant includes the following typologies (Rameshan 2021: 9):

- Missionaries are those with a single-minded pursuit - in this case, public health and life.
- Strategists are those leaders who tried to reconcile among the three motives and had partial success on each.
- Politicians are those who, indeed, wanted results on public health and life, but were embroiled in their political priorities (political constituency or legitimacy).
- Gamers are the leaders who had difficulty in leaving their political priorities and who focused largely on their political constituency or legitimacy.

Leader	A. Public Health & Life Motive	B. Political Constituency / Legitimacy Motive	C. Global Opinion/ Image Motive	Action Style*
Donald Trump	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Pedro Sanchez	Yes	Yes	–	Politician
Giuseppe Conte	Yes	Yes	–	Politician
Boris Johnson	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Vladimir Putin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strategist
Emmanuel Macron	Yes	Yes	–	Politician
Angela Merkel	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Jair Bolsonaro	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Recep T Erdogan	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Hassan Rouhani	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Xi Jinping	–	Yes	–	Gamer
Narendra Modi	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strategist
Lee Hsien Loong	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Benjamin Netanyahu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strategist
Shinzo Abe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strategist
Moon Jae-in	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Cyril Ramaphosa	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Scott Morrison	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Jacinda Ardern	Yes	–	–	Missionary
Tsai Ing-wen	Yes	–	–	Missionary

**Figure 1. Leaders and their communication**

Rameshan, 2021:9

Another classification, made as a result of a study accomplished by Bogusky-Halper, involves 6 different approaches "leaders need to communicate with honesty and transparency; staying calm and leading by example; helping employees stay safe and healthy; being factual; checking in and caring; and being clear and direct." (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, Majzun 2020: 5).

Moving on to much more specific examples, the leadership model of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, was characterized as strong and balanced (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, Majzun 2020: 7): "The element of sanity comes through in her communication style. It is her ability to communicate purpose to the people of her country in a clear and frequent manner".

Briefly, people perceived this approach as being a correct one, especially due to the fact that the lack of information was permanently covered by the presence of the prime minister (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, Majzun 2020: 7).

At the opposite pole, Donald Trump tried to wage a war with an "invisible enemy" coming from China, and the attention on the economic war with China created the perception that he is almost totally neglecting the protection of Americans from the danger of Covid-19 (Johnson, Williams 2020: 944). Obviously, Joe Biden, using both metaphors of war as well as of compassion, managed to counter and even defeat Donald Trump in the (Johnson, Williams 2020: 944).

## **5. The Communication of the President of Romania**

In order to analyse the way in which the President of Romania communicated on Social Media during the state of emergency, we analysed his Facebook page from the following perspectives:

- The total number of posts from January, February, March and April 2020
- The number of posts about Covid-19 from the total number of posts, from the months of January, February, March and April 2020
- The type of messages communicated on Social Media during the state of emergency

### **Total number of posts**

In January 2020, the total number of posts on the Facebook page of President Klaus Iohannis was 5. In February 2020, the President of Romania posted 8 times on Facebook, the first post about Covid taking place on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020. As we will notice later, the number of posts increased as the health crisis also broke out in Romania.

Thus, in the month of March Klaus Iohannis posted 18 times, and in April 17 times.

### **The number of posts about Covid-19, from the total of posts made in the months of January, February, March and April 2020**

The month of January did not include any posts about Covid-19, the reason being obvious: the pandemic had not yet broken out. The month of February also represented the debut month in the president's communication about Covid-19, the first post being made on February 27<sup>th</sup>. In other words, out of a total of 8 posts, only one was about the pandemic.

In March, out of a total of 18 posts, 15 were about the pandemic, and in April, out of a total of 17 posts, 14 were about Covid-19.

### **The type of communication messages on Social Media in the months of March and April 2020**

In addition to the traditional appearances in the mass media, as we are already used to, President Klaus Iohannis chose to use the social networks - Facebook in particular – in order to convince the population of the existence of the virus, of the measures that are or are going to be taken, but also the importance of the imposed restrictions.

The month of March was dominated by messages that aimed at respecting the restrictions, 10 of the total posts being about encouraging the Romanians to respect the rules imposed by the institutions of the state. The month of March also represented the announcement of the state of emergency, together with the necessary measures to stabilize the economy or support the population. Last but not least, although we also had a change of government - announced by the president - the attention of the communication turned towards restrictions.

In April, the President of Romania continued the communication about the restrictions, 12 of the posts being, again, about encouraging people to comply with the imposed measures. The month of April was mainly about Covid, the 3 posts that did not touch this topic being about the two Easter holidays and only one about the political fight in the Parliament.

### **Conclusions**

Like the other state leaders, the President of Romania focused his communication on the pandemic context, the social networks representing one of his main communication channels. There, in addition to the classic use of the text, he used photographs and video materials.

### **The importance of the leader**

Furthermore, in any crisis, regardless of its form, people look towards the leader expecting answers and solutions. As it was expected, although Mr. President had not excelled in public appearances, Klaus Iohannis took a step forward, the pandemic time interval representing one of the most active time intervals from a media point of view. As we noticed at the beginning of this article, leaders play an essential role in the life of the groups. Equally, any crisis amplifies this context, so a well-constructed communication is necessary.

### **Clear objective**

The Romanian President's communication was based almost exclusively on the pandemic context, which means that one of the objectives of his leadership was to draw the attention of the public opinion to the dangers that we face. Obviously, in such a situation it is very important that people understand perfectly everything that is happening.

By moving from the general to the particular, Klaus Iohannis insisted on respecting the restrictions, this representing the main objective of his communication during the pandemic time.

### **Repetitiveness**

In order to ensure that people will obey the restrictions, Klaus Iohannis opted for repeating the messages, this being one of the best known methods of changing the perceptions. The large number of posts about restrictions, out of the total number of posts about Covid-19, is as clear as proof as possible.

### **Additional details and the avoidance of ambiguities**

As we have already discussed throughout this article, an effective communication involves providing information so that the subject is covered as clearly as possible, without too many gaps or ambiguities. In addition to the posts about restrictions, the president also spoke about the manner in which the resources will be directed, about the economic measures or about supporting the population during the state of emergency.

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