

## **SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF FORMING LEADER'S IMAGE**

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### **Abstract**

*The author analyzes the image of leader as a symbolic product of political and social communications. Study of the image requires examination of individual in the system of social and political relations, where many dependencies exist between participants in the struggle for power, groups and institutions.*

**Keywords:** *image; political communication; social base; political leader; political capital.*

### **Introduction**

In our view, the image of a politician has symbolic nature. This image is a symbol of a particular social group, through which the image is able to exist and function as a political entity. Thus, the image of the politician occurs as a product of communication processes between the politician and his social groups. In this sense, the image is important both for the politician and those social groups that identify themselves as followers of this politician. This means that the image of the politician is a sort of the symbolic product that sets the scope of public policy specific to the civil society. An idea of the image as value is set in modern political consciousness, the availability of which depends on the success of individual and group activities. That is why study of the image essence, mechanisms of its formation, identifying trends and patterns of its functioning is a step forward in creation of the general theory of image. And it certainly gives our research a specific *aspect of topicality*.

**Goal of research.** Study of the politician image requires examination of individual in the system of social and political relations, where many dependencies exist between participants in the struggle for power, groups and institutions. This very aspect of the image problem as the politician's symbolic image, its place and role in the process of information exchange between political players presents a relevant interest to researchers.

Study of the politician's image is a complex and interdisciplinary challenge. Theoretical background of this phenomenon is widely represented in Ukrainian and foreign research literature. A historical aspect of the theoretical and methodological ideas development about the politician's image nature was made by representatives of social-psychological school G. Le Bon, G. Tarde, S. Freud, K. Jung, E. Durkheim, and H. Lasswell.

A number of famous Ukrainian authors dedicated their research works to theoretical analysis of the politician's image. Among them the works by V. Bebyk, G. Pocheptsov, S. Kara-Murza, L. Kochubey, M. Variy, V. Vasiutynskyi, T. Liapina, V. Korolko, V. Poltorak, and Ye. Tykhomyrova. V. Bebyk's works are worth paying special attention, including his monograph *How to become popular, win elections and stay on the political scene*, which contains theoretical generalization attempts of voting technology. In this respect the works of Russian scholars are also worth noting: L. Gozman, V. Grachev, G. Diligenskiy, A. Dontsov, F. Ilyasov, E. Egorova-Gantman, V. Shepel, E. Shestopal.

In the 1960s, the works on theoretical and practical problems of image creating were published. There is a large amount of literature on image formation that has been published abroad. The first who wrote about the use of image in politics were D. Boorstin, D. Lilleker, L. Sabato. The Ukrainian experts also published some works in this field. The works by V. Bebyk, L. Kochubey, G. Pocheptsov, R. Starovoitenko are devoted to the analysis of issues related to creating and updating the political image.

The analysis of recent publications and sources suggests that the political image as a complex phenomenon is a potentially fruitful field of psychological research. Despite the fact that both foreign and Ukrainian researchers focus on the role of the politician's identity, analyzing mechanisms of interaction of the political personality and society, and there are not many works dedicated to theoretical issues of the image of politicians formation. As the generally accepted fundamental theory of imagology has not been formed yet, its formation remains a task for the researchers of different aspects of the image.

Introduction of elections at all levels of power required familiarization with foreign experience of organizing and conducting election campaigns. In the early 1990s the works of western scholars of applied significance were published in our country. Those were the works on organizing and conducting elections, and the issues of the politician's image formation and promotion were partially touched upon. The works of Ukrainian political consultants and image makers where the problem of image formation of the politicians were mainly presented in the form prevailing in the global practice guidelines with little analysis of nature of this social and

psychological phenomenon (Bebyk, 1996). However, these research heritage enriched with an experience of the local political advisers has become a good empirical basis for more serious theoretical generalizations of the image research. There was a series of works in which the image of politician was the subject of analysis not only for constructing promotion technologies, but also for theoretical understanding of its nature combined with the type of political consciousness and political culture of the society (Ilyin & Koval, 1991,227).

In some studies, the image of the politician is often seen as a product of political and social communications. A striking example is the work of psychologist E. Perelygina “*Psychology of the Image*” where the author reveals prospects of constructing the overall social-psychological theory of the image showing the possibility of using the most advanced research methods of modern psychology to study this phenomenon.

Analyzing the symbolic nature of power French sociologist P. Bourdieu introduces the concept of political capital. In his view, political capital is a form of symbolic capital, a credit based on faith and recognition, but rather on numerous credit operations when agents give people the same power they recognize for them. Thus, we will use this definition as a methodological principle to explain how the image of politician is functioning as it represents a symbolic resource that is part of the political capital. The image is used by the politician as a means of his own political capital accumulation and as a means of reducing the political capital of his rivals.

Public nature of the politician interaction with his social base is explained by the fact that there are several politicians at the political scene, and all of them offer voters their programs, the image of future, and themselves as guarantors of that future. All these processes are open and they are publicly discussed. And they inevitably involve citizens whom the politicians present their initiatives. Therefore, the social base of the politician is a dynamic set of his followers. The politician's image depends on the dynamics of his social base, which in its turn is determined by many factors: politician status, the level of his claims, presence of competitors, nature of resource support of the politician, novelty of his initiatives, etc.

At the early stage of his career, the social base of the politician is small and is concentrated in certain social groups. The number of politician's followers is increasing during his progress and can be found in all social strata and their number is higher than in his opponents and at the end of his political life the leader is supported only by a small group of loyal supporters who are grateful to him. Thus, the “life cycle” of the politician's image observes the laws of social exchange and is determined primarily by the social base of the politician (Fukuyama, 2004, 55-59).

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he politician's followers can be organized in various associations that are entities of civil society. They can be grouped based on certain values, such as patriotism, respect for laws or

positive attitude to political parties. However, the majority of voters are in a state of “Brownian motion”.

The politician's image is the symbolic means that forms a homogeneous community of diverse groups of voters who are ready to support this politician. This phenomenon is especially characteristic of the Ukrainian political arena where power is personified: the attitude towards government institutions is formed through the prism of the attitude towards particular politician. It is no coincidence that analyzing peculiarities of the politician's image formation and operation in our country Ukrainian researchers M. Variy, V. Vasiutynskyi, V. Bebyk, V. Korolko, L. Kochubey, T. Liapina, G. Pocheptsov, and V. Poltorak develop the image concept as a psychological phenomenon.

The political leader interacts with specific social groups trying to formulate voters demands to government institutions, economic entities, religious communities and other social groups. He should clearly feel that their demands are dictated by their social and demographic position, real or imagined political interests, ideological preferences, and the situation in the country. In this case, the task of psychologists, political consultants working on the formation of the image of the leader is to identify and encourage desired associations so that voters believe the candidate will fulfill their dreams, hopes, and needs (Kochubej, 2006, 142). In this sense, the image is not only and not so much the politician's image but a “mirror” of the most voters. The image of politician causes certain voter expectations regarding realization of their social demands and requirements. Spin doctors who are engaged in shaping the politician's image use an expression “put voter standby”. It is a state of mind of voters that allows the spin doctor to manipulate their behavior. Thus, an effective political image is always meaningful; it reflects the problems and needs of the voters. Due to this the image of the politician contributes to his leadership functions fulfillment.

A universal component which brings politician into position “above community” must necessarily be present in the image of any politician. This is necessary in order to fulfill functions at a higher level than the community level. For example, candidates for the position of governor liked to use such characteristics as a “leader of the regional level”. This meant that the candidate enjoyed the respect and authority not only in his region but also around the country.

The social-psychological analysis of the image as a symbolic product leads to understanding that every politician is responsible for leadership “request” by the particular social group. The leader cannot be a *strangeman*; he cannot be a random person or emotionally unacceptable one. To meet the *social demand* the politician should meet the needs of *his* social group and its mentality. A type of communication, in light of which the identification of politician and *his* social group is made, plays an important role in this process. The politician must be understood and accepted by even the least-developed intellectual community members. This does not mean that the politician has to be primitive, but his image should have *identity definitions* that allow him to be recognized by every member of *his* community.

Perception of the politician by the citizens offers their inclusion in political communication and willingness to socialize with him. The politician offers his social group various projects like *crisis recovery, stability, economic development* and so on. He makes goal-setting for his community. This feature can be implemented as a rational method based on calculating the costs and results of teamwork, public discussion of the proposed objectives' admissibility, methods, and ways and means of achieving them as well as irrational ways: putting the community in a special state of *waiting for miracles, blind faith* in the leader, etc. In any case, the politician organizes teamwork, which outcomes will bring political capital to him.

Firmness of the politician's image in his social community depends on two basic factors: the level of his popularity and the level of voters' credibility. In the case of would-be politicians rising of their popularity, as a rule, leads to increased trust in them. Trust is a measure of voter's personal attitude to politicians. It is a fundamental social category, which captures sustainability of social relations. The trust index indicates the willingness of voters to actively communicate with this politician. According to F. Fukuyama, trust is "the expectation that arises within a community and lies in the fact that other members of the community will demonstrate correct, honest behavior, designed in a spirit of cooperation based on generally accepted standards of society"(Fukuyama, 2004, 21).

Thus, trust is an indicator of their own attitude towards the candidate, and it is based on estimates of the politician's activity. The citizens' own impressions formed at the meetings with politicians, during which they receive information both of his identity and his initiatives, are of particular importance. The politician's involvement in some socially significant events, such as salvation of the village, region or entire country from natural disasters, aggression, invasion of the enemy, resistance to authorities' pressure, is another source of their attitude.

The issue is the politician's popularity can have both positive and negative modality. Therefore, one of these indicators is not enough to assess the level of his political capital. Such indicator as trust shows that popularity of the politician is positive. Moreover, the politician's image, due to the accumulated information in it, begins to live its own life, regardless of actual political processes. For politicians who have long been on the political scene, the popularity and trust in them may differ. The burden of unfulfilled promises inevitably undermines the credibility of politicians. Consequently, the level of popularity and trust is the fundamental feature of the politician's image, which shapes his political capital.

Let's try to analyze typical situations of the politician interaction with *his* community, which resulted in the outlined image of the politician. This analysis allows us to better understand the mechanisms of politician's identity formation with *his* social groups. However, each of these situations demonstrates the peculiarities of political capital and reveals image functions.

The first typical situation presents that the politician is not known in the constituency, where he is going to run, and he has no image, and of course there is no social base or those social groups who are willing to support him. This is the situation of image design and formation in the political process. This is the typical situation for the would-be politicians, who have to build their relationship with social groups and communities in the constituencies from the very beginning. In this situation, the politician has no political capital; he has to get it during the election campaign. The second typical situation is contrary to the first one when the politician is well known, but credibility indicators are negative. This is the situation of political failure or collapse.

Thus, the image is a source of unification and mobilization of diverse social groups in electoral support of the politician. Moreover, the image creates electoral groups in the process of political communication. When political communication decreases after the elections the electoral groups also disintegrate. However, the experienced politicians continue their contacts with their basic electorate after the elections, hold meetings with them, gradually solve the problems highlighted during the campaign, etc.

The leader fulfills promises given during his election campaign and his image gradually transforms into reputation. Reputation is the image filled with politician's deeds, numerous situations in which he showed his social role. All mentioned above encourages public opinion to form the positive image of the politician. The politicians who care about their reputation, reach a higher level of social responsibility, they care do not care a lot of the position but of the fact that their name will remain in history. The high level of popularity and the low level of trust inevitably lead to lower electoral rating of the politician.

The fourth typical situation that demonstrates the peculiarities of the politician's image in Ukraine – is preserving the image of the politician for a long period. The problem of preserving stability and image is one of the most pressing for the politician in Ukraine. It is assumed that efforts to establish the image of the candidate are needed only during elections. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the elections are seen as a battle for power (when the irreconcilable confrontation between the government and opposition is quite clear) after which “success is never blamed”.

To verbalize general principles of political capital accumulation the following should be noted. First of all, it is important for the politician to respond the “social demand” of even a small social group. This will form his *base* electorate that is necessary to promote the image. It is important to start the communication process between the politician and his voters. His basic electorate can be stalwarts positively perceiving image characteristics of the politician. In the first phase, they may be few, but they should be represented on the public stage. At this level, the final political capital is formed which could later help in getting additional credits. The second factor is a lack of high negative rating, which prevents spreading the positive politician's

image. A young little-known politician has the advantage because he has no negative rating and that is why he attracts attention of voters and creates a new hope. The absence of negative characteristics is quite important for gaining trust that surrounds the politician. And he will not be able to receive additional credits without that trust.

Saving the image requires constant communication of the politician with his voters during which the politician offers new initiatives to modify his image. The image can be saved only by updating it in the process of political communication moving the emphasis from professional to personal or political features of the politician. In this case, accumulation of political capital is a self-development process of maintaining the political leader by his followers. This process is supported by the broad social base, where all social strata and key political positions are represented.

As a conclusion, it should be noted that while designing the image of the politician it is desirable to provide for every main category of the population some traits of the candidate that they will be impressed with. However, it is worth remembering that the politician can't be satisfactory for all voters and that is why it is not worth exaggerating the role of the image that political leaders are trying to impose on the public consciousness. If there is no real unity between personality traits and personal qualities of a real politician and those formed by the media, a direct contact with ordinary citizens can do harm, which will be extremely difficult to compensate.

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