

COMMUNICATING IN STYLE: THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF EDI RAMA

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the political communication style of Edi Rama, an Albanian politician. The theoretical basis for this analysis is the concept of *aesthetic politics* (or aestheticization) a term employed by numerous authors such as Ranciere (2004), Sartwell (2010), Lilleker (2006), Beck (1994), Ankersmit (1994). Also by analyzing different articles on foreign and domestic newspapers, magazines and websites, we draw a comparison between points of view of western journalist and Albanian ones. While the Western media focuses on the exotic of the aesthetic, the Albanian one hunts for the vanity and exactly as such scrutinizes and criticizes the PM. So this article develops a twofold approach: 1- a dissemination of Edi Rama's political communication style seen through the eyes of journalists, foreign and local and 2- an effort to pinpoint theoretically through analytical and qualitative approaches his efforts of governing using propaganda tools that are close or express the idea of aesthetic politics. How is Rama's tendency to present policy through aesthetics, and through the beautiful, perceived by domestic and international media and is all this documented or debated in theory. This article will also view the so called aesthetic state, through the thesis of different authors who have worked either within communication or politics, or aesthetics, providing a certain historical chronology of the concept and its application in politics. The main thesis, against which the research is set, is that of the American author Crispin Sartwell, and what he calls aesthetic politics: not political features of an aesthetic system, but aesthetic features of a political system.

Keywords: Aesthetic politics, aesthetic state, political communication, political system, propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, is a politician who communicates aesthetically. In 2003, when he was still mayor of Tirana, the capital city, he stated to a British media outlet: "I am a pop star among the mayors and a mayor among the pop stars" (BBC, 2002). An Albanian scholar author of a book on Rama's political communication (Budini, 2008), has highlighted, among other things, the controversy of the "pop star" and his status as a political outsider. In this sense, it is easy for this paper to follow in "the footsteps" made before, but also because Rama's media and aesthetic protagonism is of high voltage. He provides plenty of background for setting the guideposts for this research. Such as his activities after he came to power becoming the head of the Albanian government, in the June 2013 elections.

This paper's analysis will, however, focus on a much shorter period, which includes the spring-summer of 2015. This coincides with a series of aestheticizing actions undertaken by Prime Minister Rama, in what became a kind of prep-test for German Chancellor Merkel's visit to Tirana.

The following analysis attempts to build an explanatory map of his aesthetic actions, to better understand if they have an inherent purpose: 'art for the sake of art' or 'politics for the sake of politics'. The study's hypothesis focuses on the question: is Rama's a stylized 'political

system' or politicized aesthetical system. Through the scholar Crispin Sartwell, and other authors, the paper aims to attest that the first is true.

METHODOLOGY

We do not aim to build a quantitative table of specific aesthetical terms of Edi Rama's discourse, but rather to have a qualitative map of his propaganda tools. In other terms we do use a qualitative approach instead of a quantitative one. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory research and it is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. Qualitative approach focuses on reports of experience or on data which cannot be adequately expressed numerically (Hancock, 2009).

Taking a qualitative angle on Rama's political communication is wired to the very idea that political communication has become a lot about style and presentations. Some scholars argue that the increasing obsession with appearance rather than substance; the style in which one appears; the push for good looks or appearance, the image one projects and the presentation of this image, can be as important to the audience as what is actually said or done (Beck, 1994). Others (Ankersmit, Pels, Street), argue that his phenomenon noted by Beck went beyond popular culture and became a tool of politicians, too. This process of caring for the image as much, or sometimes more than substance, is labeled aestheticization of politics.

According to Lilleker (2006) the recent personalization of politics, and the transformation of some politicians into celebrities, with media interest focusing as much on their lifestyles as their policies, could be classified under aestheticization. Ankersmit (1994), on the other hand, offers a more calculated view stating that for a politician to project an aesthetic quality it is not enough to appear the same as the people – so reflecting those they represent. Instead, he argues that political actors should represent an ideal of the society or ideal self of the audience member. In other terms the audience, the masses, the electorate, seek a leader, or a candidate that embodies or presents an image that is aesthetically better than them, an image they aspire to.

Rama in foreign media

The foreign media, which under all circumstances, in Albania is seen, and accepted, as more professional and balanced than the local one, has not been immune to the "enchantment" with Edi Rama's communication style. A series of credible international publications, in headlines and within articles, express some sort of awe with Rama's style. An American magazine calls what the Prime Minister is doing "Edi Rama's Albanian Renaissance" (Newsweek, 2015). The journalist begins his work by approaching the Albanian politician in the aesthetic realm, more or less as if in front of him as a sculpture or work of art: Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, is a fiery, statuesque and decidedly well-attired politician who stands nearly 6 ft. 7 inches tall. He continues by mentioning Rama's influence as a painter and pushes on towards the 'aesthetic': *Prior to entering politics, Rama was a respected artist and exhibited in Paris, Frankfurt and New York. He still doodles on his working papers, particularly his daily schedule. These doodles are transformed into his wallpaper. Violin concertos play in adjoining hallways.* Out of 13 paragraphs of Newsweek's article, five of them focus either on Rama's portrayal as an individual, with his *politics of beauty* or with his actions of the aesthetic format, thus on Rama the artist and not Rama the politician. This, clearly,

legitimizes the title of the article. Newsweek categorizes the tribute to Rama in the *Politics* section.

Another Western paper classifies its piece under *Life and Arts*. Its reporter also portrays the Albanian Prime Minister as more aesthetical than political. In *The art of nation-building in Albania*, (Financial Times, 2015), Peter Aspden writes about Prime Minister Rama's "surprise" for Chancellor Merkel, during her visit to Albania. "*Rama took Merkel inside a small room, where she was introduced to some of the most eminent European contemporary artists of our time.*" When asked by Aspden about how they felt, one the artists replied: "*'awkward' and a little 'surreal'*". The writer continues *the journey into the wonderland* of the Prime Ministry's garden, where three 3D mushrooms are installed: one edible, one poisonous, and the third hallucinogenic. An Albanian official explains to the journalist that the symbolism of mushrooms targets Albanian politics. Signs of this political transformation are encountered by Aspden, from the government's headquarters to Rama's office, where he had a long meeting with the Prime Minister. Conversation focuses on arts and according to Rama, its changing power. The article takes an interesting turn when Rama himself starts talking about the line between art and propaganda.

This is the magical power of art, believes Rama. It can change you, even if you don't realize it. Which is not the case with propaganda art, which lets you know that it wants to influence you. Free art influences you without letting you know you are being influenced.

The angle of domestic press

Albanian dailies have regularly reported as 'everyday stories' Prime Minister Rama's efforts to reform the country aesthetically. All of them have written about the plan to redesign Albanian city centers, a move called by Rama's government Urban Renaissance (Shekulli, Tema, Mapo, Panorama et al, 2016). The most attentive, the pro government papers, were in line with Prime Minister's claim of Urban Renaissance, while the critical ones reacted harshly towards Rama's efforts for a *belle époque*.

Mainstream pundits or political analysts have called his efforts "politics of façade" (Lubonja, 2015). According to such critics, his art is just propaganda used to cover the defects of political governing. One of the most prominent supporters of this thesis, Lubonja has been the harshest in challenging the Prime Minister's *pro-art regime*. In one of the articles (Panorama, 2015), he makes it clear from the title: *Rama's art-politics as a perversion of both*. He goes on with a stretched analysis of the much-debated relations between arts and politics in society. The author gives psychological overtones to the analysis by attributing Rama's behavior to "the desire to show off since childhood; to be famous in a closed society."

Aestheticization, it seems, is no longer one of the tools of communicating a politicians message, rather becoming the aim itself. Yet another Albanian author notices what he calls 'artistic governing'. *It looks like our Prime Minister has invented an all new way of governing: Artistic governing—which remains to be a form of power exercise, where the people are not guaranteed food, safety, dignity, care or services, but art, colors, rhetoric, shows and museums* (Mërtiri, 2015).

Foreign and domestic views: Results and analysis

Other authors have pressed on the Albanian Prime Minister's tendency towards the aestheticization of politics. This point of view can be seen in titles such as *Merkel's visit or*

Biennial of Tirana (van Gerven Oei, 2016) by a Dutch architect living in the Albanian capital who refers to the various interventions around and inside the government's headquarters. The most debated among them a suspension awning called *Marquee Tirana*, work of Philippe Parrenos. Some of the most critical voices expressed the opinion that Parrenos' suspension awning makes the Albanian government headquarters look like a movie theater (Gjatolli, 2015). Someone on Facebook added: brothel.

One thing requires evaluation: when debating political communication we should keep in mind a varying degree of political leaning and what that does to one's point of view. With this in mind we can conclude to a clearer perspective of different angles taken by foreign and domestic reporters or authors. While all of them concentrate on the aesthetic, they differ on the view they take as to why this artistry on politics. The foreign journalists are reluctant to point out or to observe the exotic: they see Edi Rama as this towering figure descending from two seemingly nonpolitical backgrounds: basketball and painting. Unwillingly, perhaps, they add to it a touch of *orientalism* (look up Said, 1979) by coloring for their Western readers a Balkan leader whose authority is not expressed in the old ways, but in aesthetic interferences. On the contrary, the Albanian authors ignore the exotic. So much that it can be said they are angry with it. They avoid the tools of political communication sparing the public from the annoyances of it and seek not the aesthetic but the 'sublime'. Which, in their view, as Mërtiri (2015) points out, is categorized as *food, safety, dignity, care or services*. Not *art, colors, rhetoric, shows and museums* which is what their Western counterparts see, seek and communicate.

In short, if foreign journalists have not searched Rama's potential aim (external propaganda or internal inclination) by easily treating it as a *wunderkind*, domestic ones have read in Rama's colors and "grandomania", a political *enfant terrible*. Someone who overcompensates with arts, where he can't, or doesn't know how to, produce politically.

Politics of beauty?

Many authors, albeit in different forms or definitions, have contributed to the study of aesthetic politics, starting from the Greek Antiquity philosophers to the Middle Ages with Burckhardt, Schiller and Goethe later on. In modern times the study of aesthetic politics starts with the dictatorial regimes of Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolph Hitler in Germany. Hence, *the aesthetic state* accompanied, or was attached to, totalitarian propaganda (Arendt, 1951). The pompous in architecture, or even social engineering, was fabricated with the scope of it being accepted as *the beauty of power*. In post-modernity, political communication received a boost thanks to the birth of television. Many authors argue that in the U.S. elections of 1960, in the debate between the photogenic Kennedy and the boring Nixon, the winner was television (McNair, 2003).

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama would surely agree with the American scholar who stated that not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic (Sartwell, 2010). They would not come to terms on the separation of art from propaganda. Rama insisted that the Prime Ministry's awning, the reconstructed façade, mushrooms in the yard, the Centre for Dialogue in the internal grounds of the government headquarters, and many other works with an aesthetic edge, are not propaganda but art (Financial Times, 2015).

All the actions of Rama, interpreted on Albania's everyday political stage, and where it is possible even outside of it, can be categorized as aesthetic politics, but should not be understood as *political features of an aesthetic system* (Sartwell, 2010). Sartwell seeks to prove the opposite: they are aesthetical features of a political system. Such features can be found from Ancient times today. The most spectacular case of the aestheticization of politics remains Emperor Nero, who ruled over Rome 54-68 A.D. Contemporary authors and successive historians consider Nero an "extravagant" emperor who spent a great deal on grandiose projects, but raise questions about "his economic policies" (Seutonius, 1914). Among his extravagances one can count singing in public to boost popularity, and participating in the Olympic Games. Nero, according to historians, was conceited and demanded others' attention (Philostratus, 2005). Sartwell and other authors see vanity, Liberace style and extravagance as expressions of "aesthetic politics" of later times, especially that of the 20th Century, which became the bed of two of the biggest and most destructive ideologies, Fascism and Nazism. How about those who go further by calling the idea of beauty as a unifying political idea (Chytry, 1989) in use since the start of German nationalism, but its roots can be found in Democratic Athens.

Sartwell is not fond of this sort of unification: the fact that the Nazis made aesthetics central to their politics comes as a sign of the destruction that came. To the relief of politicians who communicate style more than they do policies, the author adds that the fact that the Nazi's aestheticized politics doesn't mean that the idea of aesthetic politics is wrong.

As Brian McNair (2003) argues, political communication is not just an oral or written statement, but also the visuals, such as make-up, hairstyle, and all those communication elements for which it can be said generate the political image or identity. To take this even further on Sartwell's (2010) account '*at their heart political ideologies, systems and constitutions are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments*'. If clothes, make-up, hairstyles, etc., create the political image or identity, what can be said about installations, works of arts, architecture and so on so deeply embedded on Rama's approach to politics? Category, it seems, doesn't matter at all: All politics is, to a certain degree, aesthetic, be that nationalistic, democratic or anarchist. According to Otto von Bismarck, *Politics is the art of possible*. One of what can be called the greatest impossibilities of life is eternity. Apparently, this is the main pertinacity of "politics through beauty": to be there forever.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not an easy task to draw a line between aesthetic politics and propaganda. Even more so in the case of an individual who spent most of his life involved in arts as is the case with Edi Rama. There are, however, examples, of the qualitative analysis of different authors that make this possible. For this paper, articles and analysis from newspapers and magazines, are used to determine, initially, a *chronology* of aesthetic politics, and then these findings have undergone a controlled analysis, based on books and the theses of well-known authors. What Burckhardt calls the 'aesthetic state' can also be understood as an 'aesthetic condition'. The 'illuminated dictators', the well-known patrons of the Italian Renaissance, were at once implementers of the legal dictatorship and baptizers of a new approach, caretakers of art. This benevolence was nowhere close to political communication as propaganda, but by using instruments of aesthetics, however, it is an example taken into consideration by scholars. Sartwell's thesis, that aesthetic politics means the aesthetic features of a political system, is the pillar of this article and remains convincing, even though not exhaustive. Edi Rama

communicates exactly this: his aesthetic politics. Not an aesthetic system with political features, but the opposite, a political system with aesthetic features.

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