

Berlusconi? A communication wizard

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Key messages

Berlusconi is both a political and a communicative phenomenon. Since entering politics, the successful businessman has changed Italy's political landscape tremendously. Being under attack for a variety of political and personal issues, Berlusconi has managed to remain highly popular and visible as Prime Minister. He has uniquely combined financial, communicative and charismatic resources making him a lasting phenomenon in Italian politics. Especially, the countless careers that depend on Berlusconi's presence in politics are a resource of his lasting success.

1. Introduction

The Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has often hit the headlines of the international news media since his sweeping electoral victory in 1994. He still is very much object of close interest, curiosity and criticism from many international observers, from the top politicians of several European countries, to the national and international news outlets, down to the man on the street. Berlusconi does nothing to turn away the general attention, at home and abroad, on his political deeds and especially on his private life.

The recent stories about sex-parties in his apartments told by the media with plenty of piquant details reveal an individual who defies the risk of being toppled by his controversial conduct. More than this is Berlusconi's stubborn pursuing the intent to swindle any attempt by the Judiciary to prosecute him on several penal accounts. While the country's economy is under stress, unemployment is rising and major structural reforms are long-demanded, he constrains Parliament to discuss and pass various kinds of immunity laws.

His indisputable grip on the majority in Parliament and his far-reaching media influence allow him to defy the indignation that is mounting domestically and is voiced also in international circles. The opposition parties are too divided and weak to contain Berlusconi's bullying actions against key-institutions of democracy such as the Constitutional Court and the Judicial power, actions accompanied by fiery public statements that spew further controversy spreading in TV talk shows and on newspapers unfriendly to him. The quitting in the fall 2010 of a leading member of Berlusconi's party, Gianfranco Fini, and of dozens of his followers, seemed to force Berlusconi to step down and call for new elections. Instead, the government coalition survived for a few votes. Once again Berlusconi, considered on the verge of collapse, scored a victory that he commented as mirroring the large popularity he personally enjoys, in spite of the political

snare plotted by his foes, in spite of scandals, in spite of judicial actions against him. Berlusconi indeed enjoys a huge popular support that the recent blows have only slightly undermined.

2. The Berlusconi phenomenon

What makes Berlusconi such a powerful and "rust-free" political leader? How to explain his ceaseless influence on domestic politics? Three keywords give account of most of the "Berlusconi phenomenon": money, media and charisma.

2.1 Money

Berlusconi is one of the wealthiest men in the world. According to Forbes' list "The World's Billionaires"¹, Berlusconi ranks 118th, with a personal and family worth of \$ 7.8 bn, just next to Steve Jobs (110th) and ahead of Rupert Murdoch (122nd). He struck gold in the 1970s-1980s in the construction business, building satellite cities around Milan, in the affluent Northern Italy. With that money he entered into the media business taking advantage of a wild de-regulation of the national broadcasting system. In few years, he successfully built a huge media empire ranging from advertising and commercial television to cinema and book, magazine and newspaper publishing, to football teams. His financial fortunes have never suffered any significant downturn, a fact that has periodically stirred an array of suspicions (and accusations) of illegal doings. Berlusconi likes to show off his wealth, buying and living in luxurious villas around the world, flying with his personal jets and helicopters, making magnificent gifts to public personalities (and chiefs of state), giving away in charities. This is clearly a communication strategy he has always cunningly adopted, because he claims that his wealth is the sign and the reward of skillful entrepreneurship.

2.2 Media

Money alone, however, does not explain the successful bid for political leadership of Silvio Berlusconi. Only few billionaires have coupled their wealth with political ambition, and none so conspicuously as the Italian media tycoon. His stepping into the political fray in 1994, after having founded overnight a brand new party, and becoming prime minister with no previous political experience, was something that Italian political scientists found for long hard to explain. The rapidity of success, after about half century of dominance of

1 See <http://www.forbes.com/wealth/billionaires> (11.3.2011)

the old political class (Christian Democrats and Socialists on one side and Communists on the other), was indeed a shock-wave for much bard culture. Perhaps the best explanation of why that had happened was the one given by the renowned Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio, who observed that it had not been the media-driven election campaign that had made the miracle for Berlusconi but rather the commercial and life-styling culture that his three TV networks had woven and disseminated for more than a decade.²

Even if it is naïve to call Berlusconi's 1994 triumph a "*coup d'état médiatique*" as some improvised French commentators claimed the day after (Mazzoleni, 1995), there is significant evidence that the media were a crucial tool of the electoral communication machine. A marketing-wizard himself, he prepared his campaign by commissioning a secret market research to a French firm that revealed that the time was ripe to step into politics and present a totally new political offer. The dismantling of the old political system prompted by an unprecedented judicial action (the so called "Clean Hands" investigations) by the Milan's prosecutors had created a dramatic political vacuum that could be filled only by an extraordinary communication effort. Berlusconi heavily used his media machine, bombarding with electoral commercials the wide audience of his TV networks. He presented himself as the savior of Italy from the communist threat³, and as the author of a "new Italian dream".

A sizable help to his political bid came from engaging the managers of his advertising and media-planning company, Publitalia '80, in the marketing activities in the various electoral constituencies. They turned into political activists/propagandists of the "Berlusconi's dream", and many of them became eventually MPs and even members of his first cabinet. It is definitely an unprecedented case of selection of political personnel with no political background in Italy.

While the in-house communication machine in the first decade of the Berlusconi's leadership did not overtly involve the journalists working in the news programs, the increasing confrontation between Berlusconi and the country's political and judicial institutions has registered a rising resort to the support of the newsrooms to his personal battles.

2.3 Personal charisma

In a memorable interview to *The Financial Times* Berlusconi candidly declared: "Most people know that if the richest man in Italy wants to govern the country, it is not because he wants to get wealthier, but because he wants the complete confidence, the affection, the love and respect of the people."⁴ Only Berlusconi could masterfully sum up in such a "sound-bite" the reasons of his enduring appeal to the majority of Italian voters. He enjoys a widespread affection by millions Italians, clearly matched by the detestation of other millions. Even his foes, however, acknowledge him as a charismatic personality (in the good and in the bad), with a strong appeal on popular sentiments.

His communication is all but similar to the one that distinguishes the radical populist leaders. His own is a "soft populism", capable to strike the sensitive chords on several popular issues, a "mix of entrepreneurial talent, Machiavellian savvy, conspicuous narcissism and bewitching charm" (cf. Mazzoleni, 2004). An entrepreneur crowned by successes to be taken as a model; a cunning politician who in spite of his short political record manifests political shrewdness; a man who "likes his self" immensely. He manages to be at the center of every relevant (and irrelevant) events of the national life, be it the G-8 at L'Aquila in 2009 in the midst of the rubble of the earthquake-stricken city, or the strolling with a bandana accompanying the Blairs through the streets of his village in Sardinia, or in the numberless one-man-shows that are the conventions of his party; a *persona* with a rare magnetism that subjugates collaborators, employees, females of every age, fans, and occasional citizens that he happens to meet when visiting cities and communities.

For his fans he is a "pop-idol", with manifestations bordering on personality cult⁵. The recent allegations of frequenting minors, sleeping with an escort girl and holding debauched parties at his Sardinian villa, did not hurt his popular appeal significantly⁶. By far the most important indicator of Berlusconi's charisma is the creation of a "personal party" (Calise, 2010). He did it twice: in 1994 he launched "Forza Italia" and in 2007 "Il Popolo della Libertà (PdL)". These parties have been nicknamed by critics "plastic parties", "flash parties", and also "media-driven parties" to denote their flimsy internal organization, their dependence on media & marketing buildup, their total loyalty to the leader (at the expenses of any internal dialectics) who is the only "master and commander" and who can really shut down and re-open overnight a new party. It is not implausible to imagine that present party "Popolo della Libertà" might disappear as soon as Berlusconi leaves the national political stage.

3. A leader permanently at "communication war"

Money, media and charisma are the rare mix that account for most of the Berlusconi's phenomenon. There is a further question on how and why Berlusconi manages to maintain his political power in spite of the massive criticism coming from international media⁷, of the mounting strife of many

2 See the interview with Norberto Bobbio in *La sinistra nell'era del karaoke, Milano, Libri di Reset, 1994*.

3 Anti-communist rhetoric targeted efficaciously the former supporters of the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties.

4 See *The Financial Times*, 16.10.2000

5 There exist several "fan clubs" around Italy. The most famous one is "Meno male che Silvio c'è" [Thank God Silvio exists!]. See the official hymn: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXf-YbsShoY> (31.3.2011)

6 Several opinion polls taken during the heated months of the scandals showed short-lived ups and downs of Berlusconi's popularity. According to some commentators (like Ilvo Diamanti on *La Repubblica*), Berlusconi would have easily won if a new election had been called.

7 One famous example was the cover story of *The Economist* (2001a). Why Silvio Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy, (28.4.2001)

domestic political adversarial organizations⁸, and the continuous pressure kept on him by the Judiciary. The accusations against the Italian prime minister are so severe that in another country he would have long resigned. What does allow him to continue undaunted and even relentlessly fight back his opponents?

There are many interpretations of Berlusconi's ability to keep afloat in the rough seas of Italian politics. We can divide them into hard and soft explanations. The former call into account his alleged connections to covered powerful circles (like the banned masonic lodge P2), or even to mafia; the latter disregard the conspiratorial features of the Berlusconi story and focus instead on the communication strategies of his public *persona*. The former are matter of journalistic and judicial investigations, the latter deserve some more cultured discussion.

Berlusconi's rise as successful businessman in Italy's industrial/financial environment is due to the man's undoubted entrepreneurial talents. Above all he possesses a strategic vision of reality and of the means to undertake a task and to achieve results. When he stepped into politics he carried and implemented it to attain his new goals. As mentioned, his first election campaign was carefully concocted and conducted. He continued to apply these methods also in the following campaigns, complementing them with crafty exploitation of his accrued popularity.

Vis-à-vis the changes in the national moods – not always completely favoring him, Berlusconi responded engaging his personal charisma in the political struggle, canvassing the entire national territory, shaking hands and talking to thousands voters, making controversial statements that monopolize the news agenda⁹, circumnavigating Italy with a cruise ship accompanied by his garrulous old mother, and the like. In brief, while the oiled and powerful and opulent marketing machine¹⁰ is functioning Berlusconi enjoys the “throne-baths” that help him to capitalize on people's positive sentiments. “Image-building” has been and is a constant worry of the Italian leader, who is by far the most narcissist politician.

Berlusconi's communication flair reaches the peak of performance when he is under heavy attack – something fairly frequent in the last couple of years. Media management and belligerent tactics are scientifically implemented to circumscribe and defuse the threats. Berlusconi commands his own media fleet and, as prime minister, has a strong (if indirect¹¹) say on RAI's affairs. This allowed him, since his return to power, to place friendly editors and anchorpeople in Mediaset's and in RAI's most popular news programs, and to use his family's daily *Il Giornale* as a warhead to crush his accusers and political foes¹².

Berlusconi shrewdly managed to be surrounded by devoted political personnel whose political fortunes and destinies depend totally on his enduring in power. Most of them are sharp and aggressive debaters who distinguish in defending tenaciously the leader in the most popular “talk shows”. Last but not least, Berlusconi is assisted and defen-

ded in courts by an unbeaten group of lawyers who have always succeeded in keeping him out of trouble.

One thing is indisputable about Berlusconi: nobody can teach him the secrets of effective communication. They are embedded in his personal and political DNA. No such controversial politician in old western democracies would survive as he has for almost two decades. A communication wizard indeed!

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- 8 Like “Il popolo viola” (www.ilpopoloviola.it), the Grillo movement (<http://www.beppegrillo.it/>), the Partito Democratico, various women's movements, many movie stars and directors (like Nanni Moretti), and a number of popular TV celebrities.
- 9 One memorable example was when Berlusconi insulted the Italians who voted for the Center-Left parties, calling them “jerks”. It was during the 2006 campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Shre4CMbigl> (31.3.2011).
- 10 One cunning strategy of Berlusconi's campaign machine is to anticipate the official campaign [when many limitations come into effect] by airing enticing political commercials on his TV networks, by filling squares, stations and airports with huge posters and banners, by sending all households a copy of lavishly illustrated magazines telling the story of his life, portraying his family, friends, celebrities, etc. (<http://www.repubblica.it/gallerie/online/politica/libro/1.html>) (31.3.2011)..
- 11 In Italy the government has no official say in the decisions of RAI, the public broadcasting company. However, in some wiretappings disclosed by the prosecutors there is evidence of direct interventions of Berlusconi in the decision-making of the top management.
- 12 *Il Giornale* orchestrated several investigations into the private lives of some key antagonists of Berlusconi, succeeding in crippling the reputation and credibility of the targeted persons. The newspaper has been nicknamed by critics “the mud-machine”.