

Ewa Maj

The Mastering of Political Image: the Case of Narodowa Demokracja (1918–1939)

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**THE MASTERING OF POLITICAL IMAGE:
THE CASE OF NARODOWA DEMOKRACJA
(1918–1939)**

The political image plays a special role in the process of a political actor's creation or in consolidation of its presence in political life (be it an individual, a political grouping, a political milieu). It becomes an element of the actor's marketing practices (being a product thereof) but it might also constitute the actor's asset or political capital (Cichosz 2004: 81; Pawełczyk, Piontek 1999: 105–109). In the literature, one may come across the claim that the shape of the image of a politician results from a combination of premeditated image-shaping activities and incidents – both favorable and unfavorable (Ulicka 1996: 164; Freedberg 2005: 447). It is a special type of imagining that is to trigger associations in those to which it is addressed and to crystallize emotions which will attribute some additional value to the actor behind it (Cwalina; Falkowski 2006: 153). The political image is created in order to achieve specific aims, i.e. to regulate, transmit and control information concerning the actor (an individual, a political grouping) during the actor's struggling to intercept power or to retain it (McGraw 2008: 360; Boorstin 1992). In the process, the actor's traits are presented in a premeditated manner and a kind of subjective knowledge about the actor as well as convictions concerning the actor are produced. Practices that are to produce a political image are jointly called image creation, which denotes conscious actions that serve to present the actor in a manner desired by the image creator. Experts in the field stress that the image is dependent upon its producer's creative abilities. However, to a degree, it is also dependent upon its addressee – his/her personality, sensibility and finally upon the addressee's perceptive capabilities (Bakalarski 2004; Schulz von Thun 2007; Dobek-Ostrowska 2006).

The leadership of Narodowa Demokracja [National Democracy (ND)] took care to produce its positive image – the one making a good opinion about ND crystallize and enabling the political grouping's good name to emerge and consolidate which was, in turn, to inculcate trust in its addressees. The ND leaders tried to earn political recognition for their grouping and worked hard to make it popular with the image addressees since this could translate both into their parliamentary election results and territorial self-government elections' outcomes. The shape of the ND image was built out of generalizations, auto-stereotypes and chains of associations that served to build a positive opinion about it and optimally facilitated the delivery of its intended message that was needed to have the political image inserted in the public communication circuits. This image was being created within a specific structural, historical, relational and situational context that itself had been a product of social hierarchies, the grouping's history, ND's relations with other political actors and competencies of its leadership (Goban-Klas 2009: 175; Dobek-Ostrowska 2006: 360–363; Nęcki 2003: 11–14; Schulz von Thun 2007: 162). The ND's self-constructed image consisted of some imagined traits of this political organism which was – according to its leaders – predisposed to exercise power in the state. Those traits included many features that are desired in political life. Their sum added up to form an auto-creation that presented a picture of an immaculate political grouping which was worthy emulating, especially as far as its pursuit of Poland's national interests.

The mastering of ND's image meant that the party members had opportunities to inform the public in a systematic and intentional manner about their political grouping, which had been preceded by building a communicative strategy which was coherent and clear for its addressees. Their communicative instruments involved important carriers of information concerning ND, its past and its present, its political successes and its participation in Poland's political life. This strategy was premised on its ideological identity and the grouping's external and internal identification. As far as its external identification, ND took care to emphasize values inherent in its name (its brand identification), in its organizational symbols (its visual identification), and in its publications (its corporate identification). As far as its internal identification, the addressees were presented with ND's unified political program in which the Nation continued to be the most cherished value (Maj 2010: 369–396).

The name of Narodowa Demokracja had acquired its shape in the course of building and developing its organizational structures and in the process of reinforcing its linkages with the national ideology. It constituted an expression of plans to politically integrate those who supported the political program which emphasized the prime value inherent in the Nation with those who were in favor of linking the national issues with processes to open up the access to elite functions and political roles for the masses. Its components, taking the form of political parties such as Stronnictwo Demokratyczno-Narodowe (1897–1919), Związek Ludowo-Narodowy (1919–1928), and Stronnictwo Narodowe (1928–1939), prodded with their names towards the consequences of liberation and political empowerment of the popular masses which were related to the consequences of growing mass national movements. Only in the name „Obóz Wielkiej Polski” [Great Poland Camp] (1926–1933) some reminiscences had been retained of an all-Polish ideological principles (*zasady wszechpolskości*) alongside the slogans of Great Poland (*hasła Wielkiej Polski*), which were also traceable in the popular nickname „wszechpolacy” that was applied to ND members. Notably, references to religion were not abused. Despite some individual efforts to include the adjective *katolicki* (Catholic) in the party’s name, ND gave up its attempts at direct „politicization” – or rather „nationalization” – of religion in order to consolidate a feeling that the concept of the Nation and the concept of this religious denomination were complementary, which was evidenced by the term „Polak-katolik” [the Pole-the Catholic] (*Program...* 1928: 5; Żółtowska 1927: 3, 59; Giertych 1938: 118). Within the ND circles a sense of their exclusive political superiority as compared to the other political groupings had developed. In addition, a sense of being privileged which stemmed from the status of a Pole was inculcated – being a national democrat („narodowiec”), a member of a national grouping. An attempt to intercept the adjective „narodowy” was visible already in the ND naming strategy, which was to monopolize this adjective in the political language, whereby the label „partia narodowa” (a national party) was to become synonymous with Narodowa Demokracja’s party-political milieu. However, the exclusive nature of those political bonds was not meant to signify elitism. Rather, ND wanted to create mass political organizations that would embrace the Polish mainstream. However, it was to be associated with the notion of honor derived from one’s being a member of the Polish Nation and with the aforementioned feeling of a privileged status as far as exercising and implementing the Nation’s rights.

In the course of the party's image creation, an opinion was consistently built that presented ND as a political grouping for those Poles who felt responsible for Poland. This responsibility involved a constant care for the Polish state's condition, both in its internal and external relations. The mastering of the ND image ran in parallel to efforts at discrediting its political rivals. Virtually over the whole twenty-year interwar period, time after time ND publications promoted an idea that political power in the independent Polish state had been taken over by such political milieus that were ill prepared to perform the top public functions. The ND publications critically emphasized those milieus' imputed self-interest which was supposedly demonstrated by their drive towards political and material benefits. In 1925, during Krajowa Konferencja ZLN, Roman Dmowski declared that immediately after Poland had regained its independence, „a race to the trough, a race of the competing interests” was begun (Dmowski 1936: 106). Almost ten years later, in his speech at Rada Naczelna SN's congress, he repeated his critical opinion that was aimed against his political competitors. He accused them of misunderstanding the Nation's interests and of putting their own affairs above the Nation's affairs. Dmowski added that such attitudes were fostered by the existing political regime which „produced a numerous stratum of professional politicians of diverse degrees and levels” (Dmowski 1936: 139). Polish public opinion was constantly reminded at such occasions that the ND milieu had elaborated a political program aimed at improving the quality of the Nation and the State. In the process catchy political slogans were coined such as the one authored by Jerzy Zdziechowski: „Koniec ery Państwa dla wszystkich, początek ery Wszystko dla państwa” [The end of an era of the State for all, the beginning of an era all for the State] (*Sprawozdanie...* 1923: 36).

In order to compete with their political rivals effectively, ND politicians had consistently used methods designed to reinforce positive reception of the ND image by deploying a contrast with its discredited rivals. However, sometimes they used phrases and expressions that were to introduce into the public communication circuits statements devoid of empirical evidence. This technique was used to circulate opinions about the rival political parties and their leaders. Just by creating a contrast an authoritative message was delivered that „wszechpolacy” were patriots who cherished the Nation and that they were predisposed to influence the directions of the State's foreign policy because they had correctly foreseen the outcomes of the political and military clashes during the Great War (1914–1918). By contrast, their

enemies were stigmatized. They were „cosmopolitans” and „philogermans” who had authored wrong political conceptions which had been based upon their erroneous predictions as far as the course of international relations. Some historical incidents were quoted and publicity techniques were intentionally used to spread news about Józef Piłsudski as the one who had supposedly exhibited a pro-German attitude. The same was done about other politicians. For instance, in the independent Poland Ignacy Daszyński became a target of harsh mudslinging, against whom a letter to the Sejm Marshal was sent in 1921 by the ZLN parliamentary club’s chairman. In that letter, signed by Stanisław Głabiński, the following sentence was found: „for a very long time I had had the knowledge, since I have known Mr. Daszyński in the capacity of a politician for a long time already, that he really [...] had taken a pro-German stance” [*Sprawozdanie...* 1921: 54]. The words mentioning the many-year acquaintance were to validate the message included in the whole utterance. Their aim was to disclose the supposed continuity of Daszyński’s anti-Polish attitude. By creating that kind of a contrasting background, they were able to reinforce the message encapsulated in the ND’s and its leadership’s image which presented them as those politicians who could correctly anticipate political events as well as the ones who opted for the right political allies – meaning the Entente’s great powers. The message concerning their „political wisdom” was reiterated, while demonstrating ND’s supposed historical supremacy *vis-à-vis* its rivals. It gave rise to the reinforcement of another important component of the image, namely the supposed infallibility of Dmowski which was contrasted with a diagnosis of political mistakes made by Piłsudski and his adherents.

The national democrats were sensitized to their political rivals’ undertakings. As a rule, they vehemently reacted to any attempts at deconstructing their own image. This might be exemplified by the case of some interventions in the parliament, during which hostilities were shouted against them. Such shouting was frequently heard during Głabiński’s speeches. He was called „His majesty”, „a steward of big landowners”, „a white Bolshevik” etc., which was to emphasize the very diverse stages in his political life. Such words served to remind about the past and reflected some evolution in the attitudes and political behavior. They were trenchant and worked to undermine the image of that particular politician and of his grouping alike, which was why they provoked immediate responses. However, such exchanges only rarely led to rhetorical battles, which actually testified to rhetorical prowess of

the ND deputy and evidenced the force of his persuasion. The aforementioned sensitivity was a factor to make ND monitor its political competitors' initiatives and take preventive steps whose aim was to block attempts that threatened to weaken or dismantle the ND image – *the* political grouping which was reliable and composed of individuals who were dedicated to the national cause. Occasionally, ND's actions to neutralize their adversaries' initiatives were aimed against politicians who used to be associated with ND. Exactly this kind of a situation took place in mid-1925, when the paths of Władysław Grabski and ND leadership were ultimately separated. The ND leaders tried then to prove that it was ZLN that had been the actual author and *spiritus movens* behind the monetary reform in Poland, which was why ZLN should reclaim „the monetary reform [*sanacja*] as its achievement (because it was ZLN that had prepared it in such a way that the national majority government of Mr. Grabski only added some remaining bits to the already done job), especially that it spent a lot of effort during the [budgetary] committee proceedings not to let balloon the budget expenditure and that it voted consistently against all, even most popular, proposals to increase the expenditure” (Zamorski 1925: 5). This statement by Jan Zamorski, who was a well-known politician and a journalist, encapsulated the gist of the ND image which – in the ND's own interpretation – was this political grouping which was unaffected by populism and did not seek societal support at the expense of Poland's interests. The ND's self-created image carried with it a characteristic conviction that the grouping's national program was exceptional because it aimed at maximization of the state's economic-financial policies, while simultaneously counteracting any attempts by other politicians who tried to take advantage of the national democrats' successes.

While building and promoting their image, ND leadership took advantage of the press which became an effective instrument of political propaganda. They used press publications to inform and to persuade. They worked to build a Narodowa Demokracja brand, transmitting ideas and political values but also creating a platform by means of which to get in touch with the public opinion. Almost all of ND dailies and weeklies ran a column under the heading *Listy do redakcji* [Letters to the Editor] in which the readers' correspondence was published. In part, the readers' letters focused on down-to-earth, ordinary matters. However, some other letters were of ideological-political nature. Occasionally, it was the weeklies' editors who stimulated their readers' reactions. Notably, the readiness of the ND editorial teams to go beyond the

ideological frames typical of the grouping – at least in declarations – testified to their keenness with which they wanted to produce trustworthy messages that promoted a positive image of ND. In any case, they did publish even such readers' letters that strayed far away from the national orthodoxy. This is well exemplified by the tactics practiced by the weekly „Zorza”'s editorial team. „Zorza” readers were encouraged to send in their comments which were promised to be published even if they diverged from the national program – this was to prove the editors' and publishers' trustworthiness. Such comments were only accompanied by an explanatory note which stated that „not all [materials] may reflect in its contents the editors' views, but we publish them anyway because the national camp is large enough and coherent enough to let voice and accept even such off the wall opinions” (*Listy...* 1934: 39). Another example of the manner in which letters to the editor could be prompted is provided by an initiative authored by Cracow's „Trybuna Narodu”'s editorial team. They stimulated one of the discussions by publishing a heading which read: *Jakiej ordynacji do parlamentu potrzebuje Polska?* [What kind of electoral law is needed in Poland?]. In the ensuing press debate prominent experts on constitutional issues in Poland such as Antoni Peretiatkowicz, Professor at the University of Poznań, took part (*Jakiej ordynacji...* 1927: 11). The accompanying questionnaires were also filled out by Feliks Koneczny and Wincenty Lutosławski. The press appeal and the reaction to it in the academic circles, in the milieu of scholars who were experts on the discussed issues, served to confirm the ND image as a political formation that was composed of educated individuals, who were competent and prepared for meaningful participation in public debates that concerned the national issues.

This manner of the press reflecting those features of their image that were most desired by ND leadership let them broaden or stabilize the circles of their followers. In addition, it allowed them to systematically and consistently recapitulate those elements. On the other hand, this image was by no means unchangeable. Nor was it created in order to be used for ever without any need of a touch-up. Indeed, it consisted of both permanent and exchangeable components that could be decomposed. Permanency was typical of those elements that were related to the standing of the whole grouping and of its members, including their participation in state-building processes, their role in consolidating and reinforcing the strength of the Polish nation, and their ability to evaluate political phenomena. As far as this category of their image-making

activities, ND leadership systematically reinforced such an image of their grouping that portrayed it as the one that could unite competent, generous, responsible and reliable individuals who were role models of political behavior because they were able to combine historical experience with requirements typical of the current political games. By contrast, the set of the exchangeable components included those elements of the ND image that could be adapted to social and political conditions – as exemplified by the aforementioned naming strategy (*strefa nazewnictwa*).

In the process of their image mastering, the national democrats used methods that allowed them to pre-select information about themselves. Any detailed information about internal tensions was avoided just as information about personal conflicts and the partial disintegration of their political milieu, especially during the period when young radical nationalists abandoned the ND ranks. Likewise, controversies and conflicts related to their political tactics were concealed. News about Dmowski's critical views regarding the parliamentary status of ZLN was hushed up. On the other hand publicity was also avoided as far as the older generation politicians' critical opinions about Dmowski's initiative to establish OWP (Kawalec 2000: 58). In the category of external messages, in accordance with its image makers' intent, ND remained a monolith formation, internally coherent. Cases of political secession were neutralized by means of statements confirming ND's unity and infrangibility of its ideological and programmatic substance.

Nevertheless, in the period 1918–1939 the national democrats were forced to face their image's crisis at least on four occasions: (1) during the defensive war against the Bolshevik invasion in 1920, (2) during the presidential election in 1922, (3) during the May *coup d'état* in 1926, (4) when the opposition members, including the nationalists, were eliminated from public life by the camp of political recovery (*sanacja*). In each of the crisis situations ND found itself on the verge of losing its status of an influential and opinion-making grouping which enjoyed considerable following and public support as reflected in the results of elections to representative institutions. The image crisis after the murder of the Polish Republic's President Gabriel Narutowicz was especially deep. Even within ND ranks doubts were wide-spread as far as the chances to recover its political reputation. However, counter-measures were enforced as early as the very day on which the President had been assaulted. In the afternoon editions of ND press organs ru-

mors were contradicted that hinted at linkages between ND and the assassin. The ND press reminded the readers that ND activities were based on the principles of rightfulness and legality, which testified to ND's ability to respond quickly to crisis situations. Even though the later propaganda efforts did not manage to neutralize their opponents' accusations completely, they did confirm the effectiveness of this line of defense. This was evidenced – just a few months after the assault – by a parliamentary coalition that was then created as a result of which the national democrats were able to participate in the cabinet for the first time under their own political banner (brand).

The creators and promoters of the ND image addressed it to the groups from which they expected political loyalty. They practiced the principle of national solidarity, which let them emphasize selected elements of their image in such a way that they could meet their addressees' expectations. The selection and adjustment of those features to pander to the tastes of both rural population and urban dwellers, peasants and landowners, intellectuals, the clergy, civil servants and many other social-professional strata required from ND an internal discipline and a high level of organization. Occasionally it necessitated some modernization of the way in which the image's targets were conceptualized as exemplified by creating images specifically designed for groups defined by definite socio-demographic features, such as women or young people. The ND circles proved to be prepared to constantly monitor their image-making activities. They tried to make their brand visible in the political market. They skillfully took advantage of techniques to keep their image current. However, they updated their image in an evolutionary manner, thus avoiding any radical or rapid changes in the ND image.

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