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## Charismatic Leaders in a New Perspective: Reality in Estonia and Italy

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### Abstract

The purpose of this explorative study is to put the existing theories on charismatic political leadership in a current post-web media context. It also seeks to better understand why “charismatic politicians” seem to have success in present-day cyber politics. The paper considers political charisma in a Weberian perspective and aims to explain what elements it includes in a current electoral environment characterized by a fast-changing media landscape. The paper places the existing theoretical models in the context of two European societies, by comparing Estonia and Italy as case studies. Estonia, a small ex-Soviet country has emerged in recent years as an advanced e-society with highly “internetized” media. At the same time, Italy became known by the phenomenon of the “Berlusconization” of the media, a popular subject of study in political communication. The analysis considers existing research, mostly based on the work of Max Weber, and aims to test the index of charisma, developed by Pappas (2011), in the two observed countries. The paper concludes with a discussion on if and how charismatic political leaders fit a deliberative democracy. Finally, attention is drawn to the need for further systematic comparative research to better understand the phenomenon of charismatic leadership in the post-web media environment.

**Keywords:** political charisma, leadership, elections, political communication, democracy

### 1. Introduction

The relationship built between persons while interacting is an important factor affecting the success of that interpersonal communication. In this process, both, the verbal and non-verbal elements matter. Charisma tends to be a special quality (Weber, 1994), emotional energy (Toode, 2014), or “secret ingredient” (Hosu, 2012) of human beings that includes such elements. Charisma is one of the commonly used words in everyday speech that only few can explain. One of the oldest uses of the term “charisma” comes from the New Testament, indicating “gift or grace of God”, while the Greek word “χάρισμα” means “divine favor”.

In 1947, Daniel Bell used the term “charisma” for the first time in journalistic language and soon it appeared in public discourse (Lingeman, 1968), yet the exact signification of the word remains unclear. The academic use of the term by sociologists relates to describing the qualities of a politician or considering “charisma” as a success factor for a leader. The American Heritage Dictionary currently introduces charisma as “personal magnetism or charm” and links the meaning of this word directly to leadership and emotions: “A rare personal quality attributed to leaders who arouse fervent popular devotion and enthusiasm”.

In recent decades, some scholars have tried to conceptualize the charisma phenomenon in leadership studies, while others have suggested to withdraw it entirely from the vocabulary of researchers (Schweitzer, 1974; Spinrad, 1991). Ake (1966), for example, argues that due to the conceptual uncertainty of the term “charismatic leader”, it is not possible to get meaningful data for epistemological analyses. Moreover, Friedrich considers Max Weber’s typology of legitimate authority “unsound” and suggests that it is “discarded” (Friedrich, 1961:16). One reason for dropping the term “charisma” from the academic lexicon has been its close relation to emotions and the irrational side of human beings. Nevertheless, the research in political psychology and behavioralism in recent decades, finds evidence that voting decisions are an irrational act and strongly relate to emotions (Brader, 2006, 2011, 2012; Dean & Croft, 2009; Hofinger & Manz-Christ, 2011) and, therefore, could have a strong relation to charisma of political leaders (Tempest, 2013).

It can be concluded that, in the current academic world, the term “charismatic leader” still seems to seriously suffer from two main defects. The first difficulty is the looseness of the concept. The second problem that charisma-researchers are confronted with, is the question how and if the idea of a “charismatic leader” fits into traditional theories and the understanding of liberal democracy (Bensman & Givant, 1975; Loewenstein, 1966; Pappas, 2011, 2012; Shils, 1958; Spinrad, 1991). The next section further explores this.

## 2. Political Leader in Crisis – A Charismatic Hero

With the phrase “Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes” Bertolt Brecht, in his work “Life of Galileo” (2013), was able to alter the common belief that it is a happy country that creates heroes. Brecht’s sentence has often been repeated when analyzing the trend that charismatic political leaders are increasingly called for in the current environment. Whereas, in the last decades the term “charismatic leader” has been used more and more frequently in political communication vocabulary, successful political leaders are also increasingly referred to as celebrities or “heroes” outside of an ordinary political context (Louw, 2005; Rees, 1991). It is suggested that a charismatic leader receives more attention from voters in times of social change and imbalance, while during a period of stability his or her role diminishes (Bruns, 1978; Grint, 2000; Weber, 1994).

In broad brush strokes, political leadership can be characterized as being formal or informal (Möller & Schierenbeck, 2010). In the first case, a leader holds authority because of his or her formal position in society. In the second case, a person is considered a leader even without a legally assigned high societal position. Such informal leadership would be close to what Weber considered a charismatic leader, as in this case personal charm and charisma play a predominant role (Bruns, 1978; Möller & Schierenbeck, 2010: 4; Weber, 1994).

The question raised here is: whether the increase of “charismatic leaders” in recent decades, in Western traditional democracies, represents a crisis of the democratic political system in societies where a democratic regime has been adopted since the end of World War II?

## 3. Political Charisma Revisited

The German sociologist, philosopher and political economist Max Weber, already a century ago, described the kind of leader who can easily gain follower support by his or her personal “charm” or “extraordinary charismatic” qualities (Weber, 1978). By explaining the leader’s charisma as a *power term*, Weber gave the word “charisma” a clearly political meaning, although he later questioned its irrational nature and began to believe in the decline of charisma as a political phenomenon (Weber, 1978). Weber considered charisma to be a different type of leadership about which the literature offered limited research. However, despite of the confusion around the concept, increasingly, scholars in the field of political communication and electoral behavior study phenomena related to what Weber described as the charismatic qualities of a leader.

Charisma is described by various authors as a certain warmth or personal capacity to “affect electorate emotionally” (Cwalina, Falkowski, & Newman, 2011; Falkowski & Cwalina, 2013), whereas Nye (2008) in addition mentions “personal magnetism”. Tempest (2013) links political charisma with a leader’s verbal and non-verbal image and body-language. It should be mentioned that in this field, already decades ago, some researchers pointed out, that the dynamics which connect the leaders with their followers are of irrational origin (Bensman & Givant, 1975; Spinrad, 1991).

From Max Weber’s theory, two main schools that study the emergence of the charismatic leadership are derived, that focus on psychological or sociological characteristics (Weber 1994). In the first school, psychology and organization studies concentrate on leaders who thanks to their extraordinary qualities get to a position to transform society. In the second school of thought, the attention is on the societal context that creates the need for a charismatic leader (Pappas, 2011; Weber, 1994).

To analyze charismatic leaders from the perspective of “political charismaticness”, Pappas reevaluates the meaning of charisma in the context of, first, *individual* and, second, *structural reductionism* (2012). In the context of individual reductionism, charisma means a set of personal or psychological characteristics specific to a leader. Much research here has focused on how to identify the qualities necessary for charisma to emerge (Bandura, 1982; Marcus, 1961; Shils, 1965), usually describing them as “presumed charismatic effects”. These studies focus on testing leaders for possession of such effects. In case of structural reductionism, the approach is crisis-based and focuses on the structural preconditions for the emergence of charismatic leaders. Charisma in this context is a result of social unrest and emerges in times of crisis.

Weber (1978) considers as one of the most important characteristics of charisma *extraordinariness* or *exceptional powers or qualities*. He uses term “charisma” to refer to the “quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which, he or she is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber, 1978: 241). What matters, foremost, is how the individual is regarded by his or her “followers” or “disciples” (Weber, 1968: 4). Weber explains that charisma can also be presented as a result from collective anxiety or enthusiasm in “unusual, especially political or economic situations, or from extraordinary psychic, particularly religious states, or from both together” (Weber, 1978: 1117, 1121). Weber also brings forth that charismatic domination has a tendency to develop, later, towards a more stable structure in the society.

Pappas further develops the approach of *extraordinariness* in two directions, either by reducing this notion to a set of personal or psychological characteristics possessed, or by collective anxiety and enthusiasm in a “crisis-ridden situation creating an appropriate environment for the emergence of a charismatic leader” (Pappas, 2011). Based on this, Pappas suggests distinguishing two leadership styles in a democracy: usual or ordinary, next to unusual or extraordinary. Pappas (2011) also brings out measurable and empirically testable personal aspects of a charismatic leader under the term of *charismatic personalism*. This involves:

- the almost absolute and centralized control exercised by a single leader over some political party or other mass organization;
- the great, and unmediated emotional passion that accompanies the leader-led relationship, which may create deep social divisions;
- and the capacity to be delegate and missionary - as opposed to deliberative and procedural - character of leader-led relationships (Pappas, 2011: 3).

The second feature of political charisma is charismatic radicalism, described as a radical force which aims to destroy traditional patterns and disturb the legal-bureaucratic and procedural type of authority (Pappas, 2011: 4; Parsons, 1964: 64). To be precise, Pappas, in line with Weber (according to Weber, 1994), considers political charisma as a “distinct type of leadership which is personal and aims at the radical transformation of an established institutional order” (Pappas, 2011:10). He emphasizes the need to consider charisma as a “political power term” as an alternative focus to earlier foremost psychological and sociological connotations of the phenomenon of charisma (Pappas, 2011, 2012).

The next paragraphs discuss charismatic leadership in the changing media landscape dominated by social media.

#### **4. The Media Environment and Political Charisma**

When looking back on recent developments in the past half-century in relation to political communication and media environment, four main interrelated phenomena can be brought out:

- rapid technological progress bringing about drastic changes in the media environment;
- the rise of the network society (Castells, 2000);
- “professionalization” or “Americanization” of political campaigning (Ben-Ur & Newman, 2002; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Negrine, 1995; Rees, 1991; Swanson & Mancini, 1992);
- “celebritization” and personalization of political leaders (Louw, 2005; Rees, 1991).

All these developments have directly or indirectly influenced leader presentations and ways in which political candidates have been perceived by the electorate. This is the era of the collapse of the traditional mass media environment, which is being replaced by a new personalized communication environment.

Candidates and their image-makers fight for the attention of voters, while their communication advisers implement the innovative strategies to compete in the new media environment. In these conditions, politics has become an over-PRized phenomenon with parties all over the world using new innovative marketing techniques and approaches (Fox & Lees-Marshment, 2002; Harris & Lock, 2001; Louw, 2005).

The following points are argued to be important for voters in making their decision in favor of a candidate: (1) his/her image; (2) principles; (3) capability; (4) quality; (5) availability; (6) representation of society; and (7) optical phenotype, the observable characteristics as a whole (Schweiger & Adami, 1999: 353-354).

The mass media has always had an important role on the outcome of the elections (Harris & Lock, 2001; Shea & Burton, 2006) and, already more than two decades ago, it could be stated that the majority of voters tend to be indifferent to politics (Newman, 1999: 104). This caused a depoliticization of modern politics in which, to attract voters, the electoral promises given by different parties and candidates have become more similar (Cwalina, Falkowski & Newman, 2011). This situation, in turn, led to a “personalization” of politics, making image dominant over political issues (Newman, 1999; Schweiger & Adami, 1999). The latter has been called “mediation” of politics or “media-driven democracies” (Mazzoleni, Stewart & Schulz, 1999).

Thus, the acceptance or rejection of a political leader can be seen as a largely emotional decision driven by the image and personal qualities of the leader (Nimmo, 1970). The personalization or professionalization of political campaigns has been blamed, to a certain extent, on the influence of the USA, in other words “Americanization” of political campaigning, as in the USA politics have always been more personality-oriented and money or media driven. In Europe, campaigning has been considered distinct and dominated by widely divergent ideologies of the contending parties, free TV-time and public funding (Plasser, Scheucher, & Senft, 1999: 90-91). The use of marketing strategies in political campaigns has seen a trend increase, which often is called “professionalization” of politics (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004;

Schweiger & Adami, 1999).

While describing the context of the growing importance of politicians' personalization and image, it should be noted also that research conducted worldwide has shown an increase in the phenomenon of "floating voters". In other words, people are no longer loyal to one party or one particular leader, they were used to vote for in the past, which makes it difficult to predict voter behavior in future elections (Habermas, 2006; Worcester & Baines, 2006). Moreover, research pointed out that, in a situation of low party loyalty, the candidates' image and personal qualities gain meaning in elections (e.g. Schweiger & Adami, 1999).

### **5. Personalization and PR-ization in the Post-Web Environment**

Audiovisual image-based media play an important role in "personalized" political campaigning. TV as a mass media environment could be easily compared to Internet-based communication, which is also increasingly focused on audiovisual image and telegenic appearance. New media offers direct access to free (meaning unpaid for) media to political candidates. In this case, political consultants can directly control the message, as voters tend to trust free media (Toode, 2009).

For audiovisual (TV) coverage, both, the verbal and the nonverbal signs such as dressing, hairstyle, charisma, body-language, and tone-of-voice, became important components in the process of image formation (Newman, 2001). Louw (2005) describes "Americanization" of politics as PR-ization of liberal democracies, explaining that each country has been impacted differently by this phenomenon because of their different political cultures and the process of PR-ization starting at different dates in each country. Increasingly, power shifted away from the party leadership towards consultants and spin-doctors (Louw, 2005; Newman, 2001).

It means that the "message" of the party or the candidate is often created by PR professionals who in general are not faithful party members. In other words, "Brokers now need to possess media and research skills in order to analyze and steer public opinion" (Louw, 2005: 150). These professionals increasingly select suitable political leaders based on how well they perform on a TV or computer screen. In other words, how well they fit the image manufacturing and personality branding mechanism in the current media environment.

In the context of the audiovisual and web-based media environment an ideal political candidate apparently needs to be: (1) a credible (convincing) television performer; (2) visually appealing to voters; and (3) able to speak in soundbites and slogans because of the shortened format in case of TV but also in the environment of micro-blogs such as Twitter and Facebook.

Consequently, party power relationships changed in favor of communication experts who best understand the rules of the marketization or PR-ization and tele-visualization (Louw, 2005). Here one could draw a link with charismatic candidates, as it could also be argued that politicians became celebritized thanks to spin-doctors and management techniques (Louw, 2005: 172). In other words, politicians have become experts in wearing "masks" and performing scripts written by media consultants for audiovisual audience appearances.

As in the era of mass television, political leaders similar to other celebrities, have been obliged and willing to entertain and steer the public, in order to attract and keep the attention of the voters (Louw, 2005: 180). The same situation was by Mazzoleni et al. (2003) described as "neo-populism" in the mass-media environment.

In this context, politicians have been trained to be political celebrities who must be able to "perform" at any given hour. In the "live" new media environment these qualities are even more important. During a public appearance, leaders may attempt to project a charismatic image, showing an impression of being simultaneously "ordinary" but also a "leader". Besides understanding complicated and divers political marketing strategies including, for example, positioning and segmentation, successful politicians need to be attractive charismatic personalities that get on well with so called "ordinary people", so that voters can identify with them. At the same time, they have to be appealing on the screen. As Louw puts it: "Politicians now attempt to portray themselves as "Mr. Everyman" or "Ms. Everywoman" (Louw, 2005: 180). This phenomenon has smoothly moved to the cyber space and the web environment of the new media.

### **6. Method**

Although charismatic leadership might also arise in a pluralist democratic system in times of political stability (Pappas, 2012), this paper explores the phenomenon of charismatic leadership in times of political crisis or instability. It compares the leadership styles of the leaders of three most successful political parties in Estonia and Italy during the European Union elections in 2014. In the case of Estonia, these party leaders are Taavi Rõivas (Eesti Reformierakond – Estonian Reform Party), Edgar Savisaar (Keskerakond – Centre Party) and Urmas Reinsalu (Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit – the Pro Patria & Res Publica Union). In Italy the observed leaders are Matteo Renzi (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party), Peppe Grillo (Movimento Cinque Stelle – Five Star Movement) and Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia party). The aim is to map the similarities and differences of the emerging charismatic leadership in both countries. The

study explores how political leaders in the two observed countries use charisma in their communication in the changed media environment.

To begin with, the cases of Estonia and Italy are described using statistical data. Next, for both countries, the leadership style of the three most popular political leaders is compared. This analysis is based on insights of Pappas who states that charismatic or extraordinary leadership differs from other leadership types in two aspects: first, by its personal character of rule and, second, by its radical nature (Pappas, 2012). Based on this, Pappas created a charisma index. This comprised the following elements: “*personalism* (absolute control over party/movement, power centralization; leader-led relationship, unmediated and emotional, often divisive; missionary politics and extra-institutional authority delegation) and *radicalism* (subverting by delegitimization of old authority structures; instituting a novel authority structure; new hegemony)” (Pappas, 2011: 5). According to him, in this way it is possible to investigate political charisma empirically and gain scientifically valid data on this phenomenon (Pappas, 2011). Here, also socio-psychological aspects of charismatic leaders are taken into consideration, particularly non-verbal elements such as body language and gestures deemed important by Schweiger & Adami (1999).

For observing the elements of charismaticness, a critical discourse analysis of video recordings of political speeches and audiovisual spots of the observed leaders was implemented. To begin, the party programs for the European Parliament elections were studied to better understand the socio-political context. The speeches were chosen from the year 2014. The focus was not on the EU elections as such, but on the elements important for political charisma studied in this paper, as the aim of the analysis was to find the verbal and nonverbal elements that fitted the criteria of the “index of charisma” (Pappas, 2011) and non-verbal “image attributes” presented by Schweiger & Adami (1999). This included an evaluation of indicators related to power relations, such as the control over the political party, the character of the leader-follower relationship, trends towards extra-institutional authority and the will to create a novel power-structure. For this purpose, it was considered how the words “I”, “You”, “we/us”, “them/they” and “change” were used in speeches and audiovisual spots. Both verbal and non-verbal elements (look, dress, body-language, tone of voice), expressions communicating power relations with followers, qualities such as ethos, pathos, logos were taken into consideration.

For evaluating the activities of the leaders in the social media, the Twitter and Facebook profiles were observed during the two weeks prior the EP Election day. In addition, some statistical sources presenting data of social media use of political leaders in Estonia and Italy were taken into consideration.

## 7. The Case of Estonia and Italy

Estonia is a transitional post-communist country that entered the European Union in 2004. Estonia’s political history, after the restoration of its independence in 1991, has been characterized by a relatively high degree of political fragmentation and volatility. The center-right liberal Estonian Reform Party and the center-left Estonian Centre Party have remained two of Estonia’s largest parties since 1999. Next to these two leading parties the center-right and conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union and center-left Social Democrats have gained popularity. ([www.electionresources.org/ee](http://www.electionresources.org/ee))

Italy is considered to be a so called “old-European” society, which together with Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and at that time West Germany, established the European Economic Community (EEC) which later became one of the three pillars of the European Union. After the Second World War and the overthrow of Mussolini’s fascist regime, Italy has had a complex political history. Initially it was dominated by the Christian Democracy, when at the end of the 1980’s, after the corruption scandal of the previous political elite, media magnate Silvio Berlusconi became one of Italy’s most important political and economic figures in the next decades.

Electoral volatility is in Italy very high with 37,3 % (Emanuele, Angelucci, Marino, Puleo, & Vegetti, 2019). In the 2013 general elections, the “outsider movement”, the 5 Star Movement lead by the actor and satiric Beppe Grillo, obtained 25,6 % of the votes and emerged as the most voted single party in Italy. Next, in 2014, during the EU elections, the Democratic Party led by the young and charismatic Matteo Renzi obtained 40.8% of the votes, which was the best result ever achieved by an Italian center-left party.

Compared to other “old” democracies Italy is a special case, as it has a long history of instability in government and fluid electoral laws, whereas Estonia is a former Soviet state which, after the collapse of the Soviet-Union in 1992, developed as an Internet society. Although Estonia and Italy seem to be two very different societies, remarkably, the voter behavior and trends during the EU election campaigns in 2014, show some curious similarities. For the comparison of these two societies the used economic, social and political indicators are: voter volatility, electoral polarization against one leader, average income polarization, government formation without the legal elections, trends towards centralization of power and media fragmentation, and trust in political parties. These characteristics help evaluate the conditions in society which might favor the rise of charismatic leaders, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Estonia and Italy compared based on economic, social and political indicators

(Sources: Eurobarometer, 2014; Ipsos, 2014; Statistics Estonia, 2014; TNS/Scyti in cooperation with the European Parliament, 2014)

	ESTONIA	ITALY
Voter volatility	High	Very high
Electoral polarization	Very high	Very high
Income polarization	Very high	High
Government without elections	Since February 2014	Since November 2011
Centralization of power	Very strong, via e-state	Very strong, via reforms
Fragmentation of the (mass)media	Very high	Moving towards high
No trust in political parties	Low/medium 67%	Very low 89%
Trust in political parties	Low 36%	Very low 20%

In Estonia, for example, the electoral perspective has largely been “Centre Party leader Edgar Savisaar versus everyone else”, while in Italia the political polarization focused on “media magnet Silvio Berlusconi versus everyone else”.

Voter volatility has been high in both countries and, in both societies, the political and economic polarization tends to be high also. Estonia and Italy have both had a Prime Minister nominated without general elections. In the public and media debate in 2014, the discourse has been strongly crisis and fear dominated. In Estonia, the security of the state has been questioned and fear has been evoked for a possible attack by the Russian Federation. In Italy, the discourse has been dominated by economic problems.

The results of the European Parliamentary elections in 2014 are presented in the following two figures, resp. Figure 1 for Estonia, and Figure 2 for Italy. For this study, in both countries, the leaders of the three parties that received the most votes during the European Parliament (EP) elections were chosen.

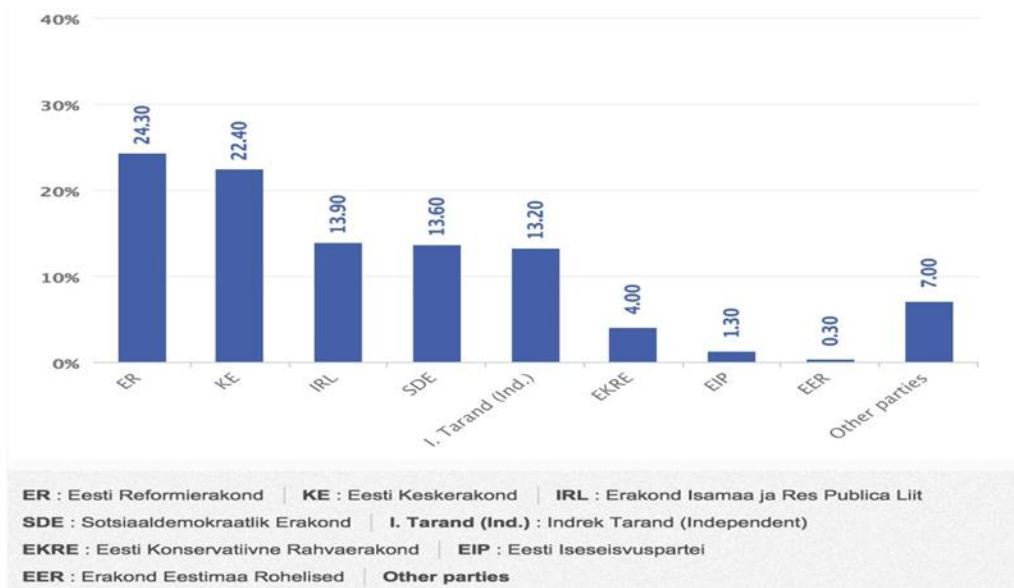


Figure 1. European Parliamentary election results by national party in Estonia, 2014 (Source: TNS/Scyti in cooperation with the European Parliament)

For Estonia, the Prime Minister and leader of the Reform Party Taavi Rõivas (born in 1979), the leader of opposition and head of the Centre Party Edgar Savisaar (born in 1950) and the leader of Pro Patria & Res Publica Union Urmas Reinsalu (born in 1975) were chosen for this study, even though the Social Democrats and the independent candidate, Indrek Tarand, got almost the same number of votes in May 2014. The Reform Party, led by Rõivas got 24,3% of the votes, the Centre Party led by Savisaar gained 22,4% of support and Pro Patria & Res Publica led by Reinsalu won 13,9% of the votes.

Taavi Rõivas has been the Prime Minister of Estonia since March 2014. In February 2014, the previous Prime Minister, Andrus Ansip, unexpectedly announced his resignation from his role to apply for the role of European Commissioner. Later, the Party chose the young Rõivas as the new head of the Party and the government.

Former Prime Minister and leader of the Center Party, Edgar Savisaar, could be considered the strongest leader of the Estonian center-left opposition, often criticized for using populist methods in order to achieve votes and popularity.

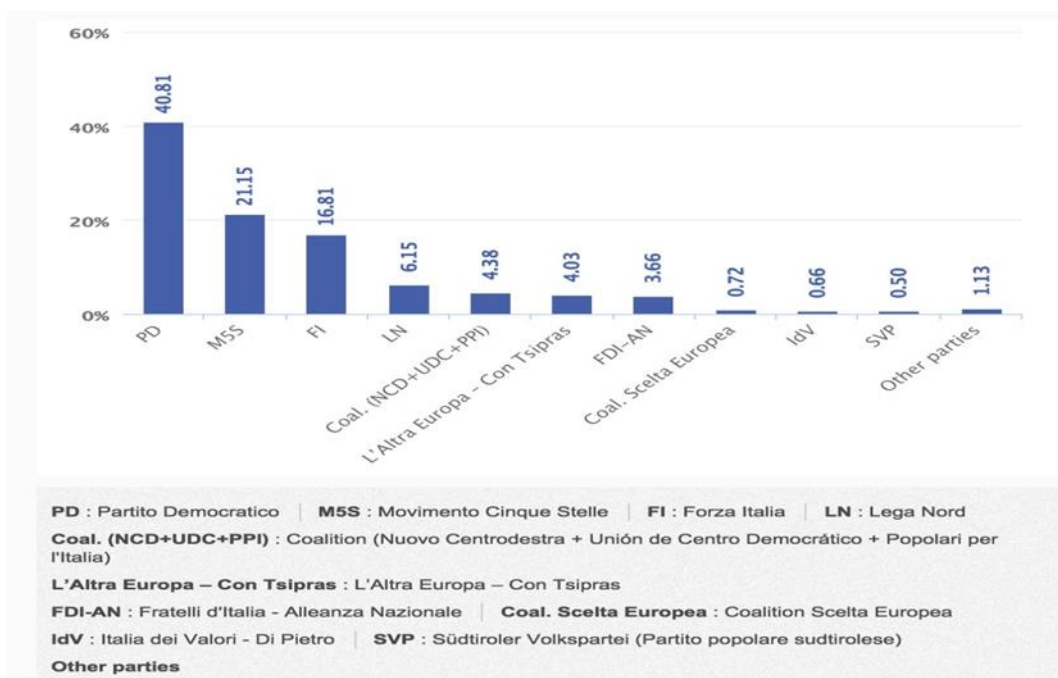


Figure 2. European Parliamentary election results by national party in Italy, 2014

(Source: TNS/Scyti in cooperation with the European Parliament, 2014)

In Italy, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Democratic Party Matteo Renzi (born in 1975), the leader of the Five Star Movement Beppe Grillo (born in 1948), and the well-known media tycoon and leader of the Forza Italia party, Silvio Berlusconi (born in 1936), were chosen for this study as the leading figures of the three main political forces in Italy. Democratic Party won 40,8% of the votes, the Five Stare Movement 21,2% and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia 16,8 % of votes.

Matteo Renzi became the head of the government, without elections in February 2014, after a crisis in the Democratic Party. The Party had been looking for a new leader in order to regain popularity. After the collapse of the Silvio Berlusconi era in November 2011, Matteo Renzi became the third Prime Minister in Italy, who gained power not through general elections but through being nominated as head of the – so called – technical government. Before Renzi, the technical government had been led by Enrico Letta and Mario Monti. At the age of 39, Matteo Renzi became the youngest Prime Minister in the history of Italy. He has also been described as the – de facto – leader of the European Socialists. The American magazine, Fortune, ranked him as the worldwide third most influential person under 40, and Foreign Policy mentioned him in the Top 100 Global Thinkers.

### 8. Comparing the Estonian and Italian Leaders

Following the five elements of the index of charismaticness given by Pappas (2012), Table 2 shows the analysis of Estonian and Italian leaders.



Table 2. The index of “charismaticness” applied to six Estonian and Italian political leaders in 2014

	PERSONALISM		RADICALISM		
	Absolute control over party/movement; power centralization	Leader-led relationship; unmediated and emotional, often divisive	Missionary politics and extra-institutional authority delegation	Destroying by de-legitimation some old authority structure	Instituting a novel authority structure, new hegemony
Rõivas	Yes	Medium	Medium	Low	Low
Savisaar	Yes	High	High	High	High
Reinstalu	Yes	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Renzi	Yes	High	High	High	Very high
Grillo	Yes	High	High	High	Very high
Berlusconi	Yes	High	High	High	High

When comparing the results of Italy and Estonia and those leaders of the three parties gaining most votes during the European Parliament elections in 2014, the following conclusions could be drawn.

The score on the index of “charismaticness” (developed by Pappas, 2011) is high in the case of Italy’s political leaders. In Estonia, the index score is high for veteran-politician Edgar Savisaar. For the rise of charismatic leaders, the role of the media environment cannot be forgotten. In recent decades, there has been a drastic move from a mass-media driven environment towards the social media. In other words, the “push” or broadcast media model has changed to a “pull” or new (narrowcast) environment (Gobbo, 2006). Leaders need “followers” to convince the masses. From the analysis different types of leaders, based on the media model, emerge.

Silvio Berlusconi and Edgar Savisaar can be seen as leaders who own their success mainly to the mass-media environment. Savisaar finances, through the city council, the TV station Tallinna TV, which aims to promote his political activities on the local level. Both are often called “populist” politicians.

Beppe Grillo represents a new type of charismatic leader, who comes from the show-business environment. In that sense, he could be compared to Silvio Berlusconi who (next to mass-media elements) also used show-business elements in his TV programs and sees himself as a performer.

In Estonia, Taavi Rõivas is a young and charismatic politician who makes much use of social media. The relatively young and charismatic Matteo Renzi, similarly to Taavi Rõivas, represents a new kind of leader whose charisma is largely based on his performance in the new media. Matteo Renzi has also been nominated as Europe’s top digital leader in March 2014.

The most outstanding new-media leader still is Beppe Grillo, who owns his political success almost only to the new-media environment. Radical social mass movements are often considered to be bottom-up phenomena which appear depending on societal conditions. The Italian 5 Star Movement, at first glance, seems to be a grass-root-level citizen movement, whereas it has been organized by their charismatic leader, Beppe Grillo, and in that sense can be considered a movement organized from above. Grillo can be seen as a highly charismatic leader who, by a strong personal authority combined with a radical message, attempts to engage followers for radical political change in Italy. For communication with his followers he mainly uses live performances, his blog ([www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)) and the social networking portal “meet-up” that facilitates offline group meetings in various locations. As a former TV-comic he has often been accused of using populism in his communication.

The comparison shows that those leaders who tend to be more charismatic in terms of “charisma index” and at the same time use innovative emotional image-strategies in cyber space beside the traditional media channels, seem to rapidly gain more popularity among their followers.

In a traditional liberal democracy, there is not much space for charismatic leadership, as most leaders in a democracy carry out moderate politics within an already existing legal-bureaucratic institutional system and the charismatic nature of a leader does not fit that framework. In any case, the question rises, if and how political charisma can be used in a favorable way in the democratic system?

Developing Weber’s theory further, Pappas (2012) describes three types of legitimate political leadership, being traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. In case of the latter the basis for authority is personal and individual (Pappas, 2012). The personal aspect of charismatic leadership involves at least three elements: a direct, unmediated form; emotional passion; and the absence of institutional control over the charismatic leader (Pappas, 2012: 6). At the same time, charismatic leaders can emerge in a liberal democracy in two ways: 1) in an emergency situation or time of crisis, and 2) in times of normality (Pappas, 2012: 8-13).

In the case of the normal situation, it is important to consider the role of charisma in social mobilization and engagement (Ake, 1966: 6). A charismatic leader can mobilize people and create new identities and allegiances through the mechanism of symbolic framing (Goffman, 1974; Pappas, 2012). Frames are complex belief formation mechanisms, consisting of symbolic narratives that offer people new meanings about the world, create novel identities and social roles, widen the political agenda, offer the meanings for defining good and just society, and determine existing authority relationships (Goffman, 1974; Lakoff, 2011). Here the question arises, which frames are more effective for mobilizing followers in the direction of radical political action? It is argued that, for radical action to take place, people must first define their situation as unjust (Brader, 2006; McAdam, 1982). This explains why many leaders prefer to attract followers on the basis of social injustice or anger.

**9. Discussion – Charismatic Leaders: Revolutionary or Debauchee**

In present times, societies all over the world suffer continuous crisis and turbulence on all socio-political. This is also evident in traditional democracies in Western countries. In addition, there is a transition of the communication environment, from a pre-web mass media dominated and more predictable situation, to a post-web and less predictable scenery. Political leaders have had to adapt themselves to the new rules of the game. However, according to Kellerman (2008), science should also emphasize research focusing on followers, as the current changing times also requires well educated followers due to democratically ethical norms and common good of the community. Similarly, Pellizzoni (2013) suggests paying more attention to “citizen empowerment” and policymaking as a way for problem solving.

In times of turbulence, a leader should be able to change the behavior pattern continuously between the state of predictability and unpredictability. In other words, changing his or her style depending on the situation and the issue at stake. If an issue is stability-related in a stable context, the leader should take a different approach than in the case of an issue related to instability, when aiming to recreate stability in the environment by offering “surprising” solutions. Following this line of thinking, a model is proposed here, depicting a leader who needs to continuously change between stability and instability.

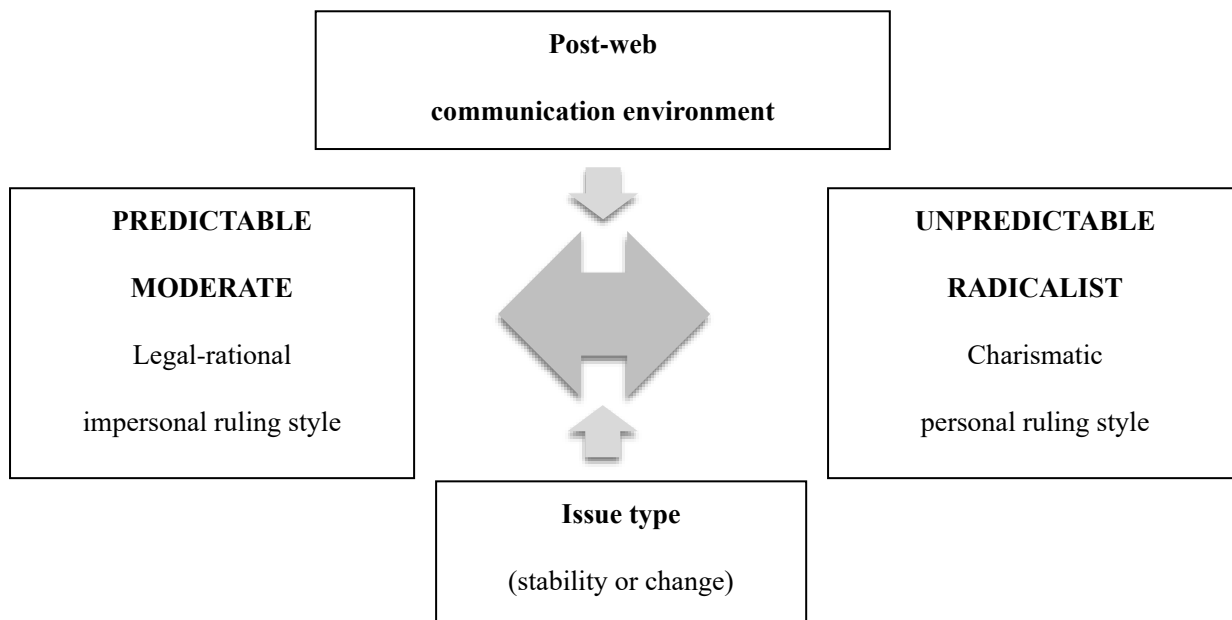


Figure 4. Post-web charismatic leader changing styles

As shown in Figure 4, a leader in the post-web context needs to flexibly approach different issues and be able to adapt his or her style from ordinary to extraordinary. This enhances the competitiveness of the political leader in issue arenas, virtual spaces where multiple actors are involved in issue debate (Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014) and compete for agenda setting power. For example, social media function as platforms for issue debate that can, depending on the

topic, fast gain large numbers of messages (Zhang, Vos, Veijalainen, Wang, & Kotkov, 2016).

While comparing the main leaders in Estonia and Italy, some interesting trends have been observed. In both countries, the Prime Minister had been nominated without elections. In both societies, a discourse of crisis and fear had been communicated, justifying the necessity of a technical government. Similarly, a centralization of power could be observed. In the case of Estonia, it was the use of info-technology and the system of an e-state. In Italy, Matteo Renzi has been carrying out several reforms which aim to centralize power.

In 2014, Silvio Berlusconi was the last elected leader in Italy, and he has since been followed by three technocratic governments until the general elections of 2013. This might be a sign of post-political establishment in society, as a “regime of truth” (Pellizzoni, 2013:11) might be created in situations of economic crisis, terrorism threat or climate change, where even the most contesting parties could be accepted to be a part of it (ibid).

The charismatic leader can be depicted in two different systems, the mass-media dominated environment versus the post-web environment. In the traditional mass-media dominated environment, charismatic leaders, mostly, stayed in contact with their followers using television and other traditional media. This made it easier to build a favorable solid image (e.g. Berlusconi and Savisaar). In the post-web era, television still has much influence on public opinion formation but social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook have come to dominate the agenda-setting in issue arenas (Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014), calling for a flexible personality and communication style in cyber politics.

Concerning mass media, while analyzing problems of a democracy, critics have often placed blame on the marketization of political communication, the process which considers voters as consumers (Coleman & Blumer, 2009). In the traditional environment of market politics, the voter participates in information consumption and chooses (relatively) rationally for a decision, which gives the leader who fits most expectations the highest chance of winning. However, the post-web era is dominated by the emergence of a new kind of digital charismatic leader which goes together with followers that are often characterized by a lack of involvement in decision-making and interest in politics in general (Lilleker et al., 2011). Thus, as this research demonstrates, digital charismatic leaders can easily mobilize their followers using a highly emotional communication style in post-web media (Novelli & Johansson, 2019).

Pappas (2011) places charisma in the context of democracy and accentuates the “extraordinary” (disruptive) role of charismatic leaders in a political system that relies on a traditional form of democracy. Charismatic leaders tend to emerge as a radical force in society, which may attempt to destroy traditional patterns and disturb the existing lawful and rational standard structures which govern society. This means that charismatic leaders can be seen as political reformists or even revolutionaries. As such, the society that a charismatic leader brings, could be characterized through the personalization of power and the related radical changes of existing institutions.

According to Pappas (2011, 2012) an “ordinary” leader is elected based on rational lawful principles and his/her governance is impersonal as befitting a representational democracy. Such governance depends on the need to mediate between voters and decision makers. The unusual or the emerging charismatic leader governs with a personality trait and his or her governance aim is to radically disrupt the *status quo*.

## **10. Conclusion: Political Charisma, the Old-New Phenomenon**

When The essence of charisma was researched in depth, almost a century ago, right before the emergence of historically significant authoritative and charismatic leaders at the beginning of the 20th century, in a democratic context. We can only hope that the newly found interest in this topic by scientists is not a forewarning of possible grave things to come, but rather an endeavor to better understand human nature. The impact of charismatic leaders may also inject belief in a better tomorrow during crisis situations and shape a society which allows for a safer environment for generations to come.

It could be concluded that we still have very limited knowledge of charismatic leadership. The emergence of radical charismatic leaders in a situation of normality might easily relate to such phenomena as mass radicalization and neo-populism. This underlines why this field of charisma studies should be of special interest for further research.

For future research in the field of political charisma, this study recommends a focus on key analytical categories as “extraordinary” phenomena, connected to leaders’ charisma as (neo)populism, social movements development and mass contention, and the emergence of radicalism and insurgent politics.

At this point, the Habermasian normative conditions for deliberative democracy could be recalled, according to which new technology and cyber space could offer conditions for a “new public sphere” and renewed initiatives of participatory democracy (Boulianne, 2009; Habermas, 2006). Not all theorists are convinced that post-web media have brought radical changes. The new media environment does not always enhance democracy (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005), but it can help bridge the “knowledge gap” in society (Toode, 2013; Witte, Reutenberg, & Auer, 2009: 6).

As demonstrated by applying the charisma index, charismatic political leaders might be more successful in the new media environment. Still, to gain a critical number of followers, the leaders need to construct their audience. This can be supported by involving citizens in the decision-making process, as responsible co-thinkers and not just as policy consumers (Coleman & Blumler, 2009), rather than just being passive followers.

Does the above mean that the democracy, as it is understood in the western world so far, is in danger? The answer to this, can be that a new democracy is emerging in a new form and that this also calls for a commitment of the academic world to provide, in this rapidly developing environment, the vivid and rational debate, new concepts, and multidisciplinary research on ways in which to enable the new democracy to offer fruitful conditions for, both, the new-style emerging leaders and the new-style empowered citizens.

To sum up, one could remind of the famous line from Samuel Huntington's *Democracy's Third Wave*: "For democracies to come into being, future political elites will have to believe, at a minimum, that democracy is the least bad form of government for their societies and for themselves" (Huntington, 1991: 33).

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