Short Term Scientific Mission at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan

Host: Prof. Dr. Gianpietro Mazzoleni

Period: 20/05/2016–30/06/2016 (6 weeks)

Scientific report – Short Term Scientific Mission

Political Communication as a Tool for Populism

By Norbert Merkovity

Introduction, the work carried out at University of Milan

I have spent 6 weeks (May 20 – June 30) at the Social and Political Sciences of Milan university in the Short Term Scientific Mission framework of COST Action 1318. My host was prof. dr. Gianpietro Mazzoleni, one of the first European scholars, who analyzed the connection between the media and 'neo'-populism (*The Media and Neo-populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis*. Westport: Preager, 2003.).

My aim was to create a theoretical framework on populist politicians' communication style during the STSM visit. The analysis of Hungarian (Jobbik's Gabor Vona, and Fidesz's Viktor Orban) and Italian (Five Star Movement's Beppe Grillo and Forza Italia's Silvio Berlusconi) populist leaders gave a great opportunity to do comparative analysis, since there are previous articles that find similarities between the two country (e. g. Fabian, Gyorgy (2006): Két választás Európában: A magyar választási rendszer a 2006-os magyar és olasz választás tükrében. *Politikatudomanyi Szemle* Vol. 15, No. 2–3, 109–131.).

However, the current stage of project did not make possible to develop a broader examination of two countries; therefore, the online (social media) communication has been chosen as the focus of my work carried out during the stay. The narrowed scientific interest allowed to highlight characteristics of populist political communication (in terms of communication style) and to make general statements about the role and nature of populism in political actors' communication.

Results

Preliminaries

1. In the past fifteen-twenty years researchers of political communication have turned their attention from media actors to political actors. However, traditional fields of research are also trying to combine new results about citizens, and citizens and social media. The research of Anglo-Saxon and Western European political communication has begun to integrate the results about the new communication technologies into their own methods. The best example for this is in the Handbook of Political Communication Research edited by Holli Semetko and Margaret Scammel (2011). Out of its 32 chapters ten is discussing the new research areas of political communication.

2. This STSM visit was an integral part of my systematic political communication research carried out at the University of Szeged, which was the topic of my doctoral thesis (2011), the topic of my research during the Magyary Zoltán Postdoctoral Fellowship, and the topic of the research made for Hungarian Scientific Research Fund, as well. One of the major findings from these works was the following: when examining the political system I emphasized that politics is able to address the voters with the new communication technologies. With an empirical research, I supported the idea that party websites for parties and social networking profiles for politicians are in the focal point of communication during election campaigns, since these platforms combine those communication elements that are important for candidates. However, in my opinion the development in politics does not only mean the changes in communication (blog, microblog, social networking sites, video sharing, etc.), but the paradigm shift of the governance, as well. Governance here is taken to mean regulatory capacities of states, and regulatory regimes of states, rather than 'governance' in the field of what has become 'governance studies' derived principally by neo-Foucauldians such as Nikolas Rose (*Powers of Freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.).

General conclusions

The general conclusion could be detailed through one question: what we know about representatives' activity on new information and communication technologies?

1. Within this field my aim was to classify the relevant studies, to summarize their results and to introduce the most important connections. A good starting point for this was the book of Balázs Kiss – Zsolt Boda: Politika az interneten [Politics on the internet]. They wrote it in the middle of the years of 2000, and it was based on their own Hungarian Scientific Research Fund research. There has been many changes since then, which makes it necessary to prepare a newer, more up-to date summary, which could highlight the changes, as well (e.g. spread of Facebook, the Obama-election, the Arab spring, the Trump 'incident', just to mention the most important ones). My conclusion is that the use of social networking sites in politics has brought forth the intensification of the self-mediatization phenomenon. It is important for politicians how they look in old media channels and what is shared in connection with them in social media, but it is equally important for them to mediate contents to their followers intentionally by eliminating gatekeepers, and to control their attention. The latter only depends on them; they do not have to set the agenda for editors or journalists to reach their goal.

2. Discourses on the new ICTs and political communication can be traced not only in political science and communication research. It is a recent development that beyond many other fields, internet studies, cultural anthropology and democracy research in general are also discussing these issues. Therefore, it is necessary to have a summary of political communication research in a broader sense. However, the most important theory for the research came from the field of economics, the attention economy. "By the Attention Economy, then, I mean a system that revolves primarily around paying, receiving, and seeking what is most intrinsically limited and not replaceable by anything else, namely the attention of other human beings" (Goldhaber, Michael: The Value of Openness in Attention Economy. *First Monday* Vol. 11, No. 6, 2006). Since the populist political communication gain a lot of attention from the electorate I found Goldhaber's statement useful, to explain the starting point and the nature of populist political communication.

Results

In short, the results of my STSM visit are the following:

1. The new ICTs pluralize social communication; therefore it affects not only the citizens but the world of politics, as well.

In the outcome of the STMS I came to the conclusion that scholars of political communication should put more emphasis on the analysis of politicians' self-mediatization through self-broadcasting/self-representation, and on the media (network?) logic. The limits of this kind of research do not allow fully explain the quality and characteristics of online political discourse. However, it is able to outline the trends that specify politicians' communication on social networking sites, which implicates that information technology and formats enabling MPs to personalize their messages. The further examination of this personalized message could be able to give answer to the importance of populism in politicians' communication as a tool for political communication.

2. New political behaviors, institutional challenges themselves are forming the ever changing information and communication environment.

Communication techniques support the populist style of politicians' communication (see the following two results, too). Generally, I agree with Jay Blumler's findings on the consequences of self-mediatization (Blumler, Jay G.: Mediatization and democracy. In: Esser F and Strömbäck J (eds) *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the transformation of western democracies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 31–41.) and I would also add that these observations are suitable for the analysis of populist political communication, as well. Some of the consequences are: politicians often tend to force their own information on followers and journalists through social networking sites, by which they frame information in advance before they get embedded in public consciousness. By reason of the nature of informational communication, "here and now" type of information prevails.

3. Claiming the existence of populist political communication on social media in Hungary and Italy.

Politicians typically use online communication means as one-way channels, just like they use vertical media. This form of representation, more particularly, self-representation function prevails MPs discourses in horizontal media as well and ends in self-mediatization, which is driven by populist communication style to reach and maximize the attention. The one-way channel of communication can be explained by the fact that representatives can effectively avoid unintended consequences of interactivity (e. g. criticisms) in social media use in such a way that they make (by nature) multi-directional platforms uni-directional with their communication. This

brings us to the most important finding of the STSM, *social media formats enabling politicians to personalize messages, what they use to maximize the attention of the followers*. Therefore, I claim that populist political communication is observable in Hungarian and Italian politicians' communication.

4. Claiming the existence of popular political communication on social media in Hungary.

Modern politicians are forced to use social media platforms as a communication tool during their work, in order to demonstrate their engagement with the issues what voters consider to be important. This will mean that MPs should identify with the public and while they are doing this they will share contents what considered to be popular. While they are doing this the politicians will also self-surveille they communication in order to get the highest attention from their followers. This communication style will mean race for popularity: which profile will be more followed by the public?

Outcomes

My previous and current research interest and expertise on political communication concentrate mainly on social networking sites and the proposed project followed this stream. Past and current researches made for e.g. European Social Fund or Hungarian Scientific Research Fund, and international researches made, for instance, during the European Parliamentary Elections in 2014 or the COST Action IS1308 "Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics" project have acquainted myself both the theoretical and methodological knowledge in the field of populist political communication. These factors gave me the background to do my research at University of Milan.

The STSM at the Department of Social and Political Sciences provided the academic environment where I could continue my research work in a stimulating milieu, while the scientific past of the Department also helped me to achieve a progress in my scientific work that could enable me to take a step forward at my university in Hungary. I am sure that the cooperation was mutually beneficial for both parties involved.

The collaboration with Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni was extremely useful. During my stay in Milan, I had the opportunity to elaborate the above mentioned points that will serve as starting point for my forthcoming articles and conference papers. I learned new methods on research of

populist and/or popular political communication and gained access to literature and knowledge of a respected Department at University of Milan.