HABILITATION THESIS

Gamifying Political Communication in the Age of Populism

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Abstract

The present thesis is entitled "Gamifying Political Communication in the Age of Populism" and it represents a synthesis of the most important scientific achievements of the candidate since obtaining his doctoral degree. The paper also sheds light on the research trajectory that the candidate wishes to pursue, especially once he will be able to coordinate PhD candidates. As shown throughout this thesis, the work of the candidate pertains to the field of political communication, with a special focus on two main research topics: *populism* and *political compasses* – which represent tools for the gamification of political communication. Another dimension characteristic for the research of the candidate is the comparative approach, which is clearly visible for many of his publications, presented in the current thesis.

Populism has become a very popular topic of research, but its growing complexity makes it difficult to research, having arrived at a stage that sometimes blocks the advancing of the academic debate on this issue. The work of the candidate shows his dedication for a more sophisticated understanding of populism, that integrates the existing major scientific contributions, and conceptualises populism as a broader phenomenon, analysing it from a communicational point of view. The conceptualising of 'populist vulnerability' that the candidate has proposed through his research and publications is one such example of the holistic understanding he supports for this concept.

Moreover, the thesis also presents the academic experience of the candidate vis-à-vis political compasses – which represent tools for research in political communication, in many ways related to the rise of populism. Political compasses seek to scientifically present the ideological position of competitors and/or to rigorously explain the political identity of their users. The thesis also shows that one's understanding of their ideological/political identity is the first step towards developing a critical view on populism. The paper demonstrates the experience of the candidate in studying populism and (and through) political compasses For both topics, the current thesis engages into theoretical approaches that have been adopted and applied by the candidate with the occasion of different publications. The interest of the candidate *vis-a-vis* the two topics is a

reflection of current major trends in the field of political communication in the majority of European and North-American universities.

The academic output of the candidate is also represented by a considerable number of conference participations, in panels dedicated to the field of political communication. The European Communication Conference (organised by ECREA in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2022), the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (organised in Toronto, Canada, in 2023), the Conference of the Italian Association of Political Communication (organised in Torino, Italy, in 2023), and the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (organised in Los Angeles, USA, in August-September 2023) are some of the over thirty international conferences that the candidate has participated to since obtaining his PhD diploma. Apart from Romania, the conferences were organised in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Czechia, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Spain, United Kingdom, Canada, USA etc. The candidate is also part of professional associations in the field of political communication, such as the International Communication Association and the American Political Science Association.

The expertise of the candidate in the field of political communication - with a particular focus on populism and political compasses - has been enhanced by working in a number of projects developed by the *Kieskompas* Institute in Amsterdam, The Netherlands - before, during and after the candidate's doctoral studies. A selection of these projects can be observed below:

2020: Elections for the Romanian Parliament - political compass, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2019: Elections for the European Parliament - online survey and collecting panel data, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2018: Constitutional Referendum in Romania - online survey and collecting panel data, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2017: Social Unrest in Romania - online survey and collecting panel data, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2016: Political compass for the Romanian Parliamentary elections, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2015: Political compass for the Israeli Parliamentary elections, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2012: Political compass for the Presidential elections in France and parliamentary elections in Mexico, *Kieskompas*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Moreover, the candidate has been project leader, research coordinator, and member in a number of research projects, amongst which:

2022: Research coordinator. *EU-RO-metru*, Babeș-Bolyai University in partnership with Europe Direct Cluj (local bureau of the European Commission).

Since 2021: Project member. *DigiWorld*, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany.

2020 - 2022: Project member (country team coordinator). [PRECEDE] *Populism's Roots: Economic and Cultural Explanations in Democracies of Europe*, University of Münster, Germany.

2019-2021: Project member. [CamforS] *Campaigning for Strasbourg*, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany.

2017-2018: Project leader. *Communicating European Union: Voices of Europe's "Second Speed"* (internal competition), Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

However, the candidate's skills in coordinating research projects has been significantly enhanced by winning in **2022** (through national competition) the **research project entitled "*Measuring Vulnerability to Populist Narratives Using an Online Interactive Platform*"** [PN-III-P1-1.1.-PD-2021-0267], through which he conceptualised 'vulnerability to populist narratives'- a concept that is tested in six European Union countries: Romania, Hungary, Poland, The Netherlands, France, and Italy. The political compass that represents the core of the research project is available at the following website: www.compasshub.eu. Given its international dimension, the project brings a significant advancement to understanding populism beyond the paradigms that seem to have recently led the concept into a scientific impasse. The main aim of the project was to add to the existing research on populism, by reaching not only *voters* who are online, but also internet users at a pre-voting age, equally (or sometimes even more) exposed to populist narratives under guise. The online platform allowed users to comprehend how vulnerable they are to populist narratives, and at the same time enabled the candidate to collect original and scientifically relevant data on public opinion, political dynamic and participation, as well as other salient issues. The data collected permitted the candidate to construct the profile of those who are

most vulnerable to populist narratives, as well as of those who least exhibited such characteristics in all of the countries that represented the case studies.

Therefore, the project aims to increase knowledge on political behaviour and to allow for extensive academic research beyond the party choice or voting preferences. The project was able to tap into sections of the population that are more difficult to reach with traditional survey techniques, and therefore to pave the way for identifying tools and practices that challenge populist narratives.

This habilitation thesis is divided into two main parts: the first refers to the professional and scientific achievements of the candidate – among which articles, book chapters, books, conference participations, projects coordinated as Project leader or that he was part of, as well as academic partnerships he was actively involved into. The second part of the thesis refers to future research perspectives of the candidate in the field of political communication, his teaching perspectives, as well as plans for community engagement.