

STSM at Ludwig-Maximilian Universität München within the COST Action IS-1308 „Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics”

Scientific Report

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My stay at Ludwig-Maximilian Universität München took place starting April 13 until May 2, 2015. It has been a very rewarding activity for me, both from the point of view of my role in the COST action and for my development as a young researcher.

I will briefly report on my activities during the STSM, correlating them with the main objectives, as they were formulated in my Work plan.

1. Work with the Chair of the working group “Citizen and populism” and his team at LMU on possible research ideas for future research: effects of populism specific frame on citizens, populist discourse as hard vs. soft news, populism and euroskeptic attitudes

This objective was met during several encounters with the colleague from LMU (Carsten Reinemann, Magdalena Obermaier and Benjamin Krämer). Several ideas related to future research emerged during these discussions. I will briefly summarize the main research directions suggested during these meetings:

1.1. Measuring “media populism”

The concept of “media populism”, although mentioned in the academic literature, has never been properly operationalized and measured. Starting from the article written by one of the LMU colleagues (Krämer, 2014), on media populism, we plan on trying to find appropriate scales that could measure the degree of populism of a media outlet, thus further helping in measuring effects of media populism.

An important issue raised by this research direction is related to the choice of media outlets to be used in such a research: what are the criteria of choosing them, what are the differences among various online media outlets in different countries (starting with the comparison between Romania and Germany), what kind of content should be considered relevant for each media outlet.

1.2. Effects of “media populism”

Finding ways of measuring degrees of populism of various media outlets (see 1.1.) will provide us with the tools of further matching media use of each outlet with the level of “media populism” and obtaining nuanced and accurate data regarding effects, in terms of activism, trust, efficacy, powerlessness etc. This could be accomplished through the use of questionnaires using both scales of media consumption, media dependency, and dependent variables, such as political trust, activism/cynicism, etc.

1.3. Measuring populist frames

Another path of further joint research is related to the idea of a possible “populist frame”, as general frame (in the classical line opened by Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, using dichotomous variables scales), reflecting journalists’ routine of writing or reporting for various media outlets. During the discussions, emerged the idea of an exploratory study trying to measure the reliability of such a scale, further refine (and possibly adapt it to a cultural space), in order to understand the relationship between media populism, populist style, and populist rhetoric.

1.4. Other ideas

A few other research ideas, which are yet not fully crystallized, concern: relationship of media populism and the distinction hard news / soft news, comparison between routine vs. special time periods (Are media “more populist” during election campaigns than in routine periods?), pre-populist attitudes, profile of the voters of populist parties or leaders, relationship between euroskeptic attitudes and populism, etc.

2. Plan for future joint research: identifying funding sources for future research, planning research design

The second objective of the work plan is a medium term objective. At this stage, we investigated the possibility of conducting an exploratory study, starting the fall of 2015, possibly working with students as coders and/or subjects of surveys in both countries, in order to evaluate what research design would be worth investigating in a further research, should a funding opportunity present itself. To this end, we planed on focusing on the first two directions of the first objective (see 1.1. and 1.2.). In a first stage, we plan on conducting a content analysis of media news of

various online outlets, in order to measure the degree of “media populism”. In the second phase, we will try to match these results with people’s use (consumption) of each of these media outlets. To this end, we will gather the results of a survey distributed among students. The third step is to combine the results obtained through the two methods in order to evaluate possible media populism effects. We plan on conducting this small joint research in the fall 2015, after further trying to jointly elaborate and refine the instruments (content analysis guide, questionnaire).

3. Learn new insights or methods specific to the actions’ general topic

The future plans of the WG3 in the Cost Action involved joint research based on experiments, using online panels. To this end, during my stay at LMU, I have been able to learn (with the help of my colleagues at LMU) how to use the online platform developed by a researcher at LMU, <https://www.soscisurvey.de/>, which will allow conducting online experiments. The use of the platform is free of charge, if used for academic purposes. I believe this is an important tool to be further used in the Cost Action (WG3).

Another important point for me was the access to the Library of LMU. In my own country, I have access to online databases, which allows me to have access to the academic literature related to populism from academic articles. However, in Romania I have poor access to books. During my stay at LMU, I had the opportunity to consult several seminal works in the field of populism. Just a few examples:

Gerber, E. R. (1999). *The populist paradox: Interest group influence and the promise of direct legislation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ionescu, G., & Gellner, E. (Eds.). (1969). *Populism: Its meanings and national characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld.

Mazzoleni, G., Julianne S., & Bruce, H. (Eds.). (2003). *The media and neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

McGuigan, J., & Jim M. (2002). *Cultural populism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. Strengthen and possibly further grow the network of dedicated scholars and a basis for comparative research

This objective is one that I consider to be in the making. My work with the colleagues from LMU is only a first step in this direction. I believe that, working together in the future, we will not only strengthen the network created around the academic interest related to populism, but also growing this network, by adding interested colleagues from both countries. As a first step, upon my return, I have shared my experience and ideas for the future with my colleagues working on the same topic, Elena Negrea-Busuioc (substitute for Romania in the Action), and Liliana Lupescu, PhD student interested and working on the topic of populism for her PhD dissertation. This is a starting point of coagulating a Romanian research team working on the specific topics of the Action.

Summing up, the STSM at Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München has been a very good opportunity for me to grow as a young researcher, as well as to contribute to the aims and objectives of the COST ACTION IS-1308 „Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics”. Through this STSM, I believe to have contributed to the general AIM of the action (as proposed in the MoU): “defining and explaining populist communication as well as examining the similarities and differences between European societies with respect to the effects on citizens, and more widely European societies and the European public sphere”.