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COST Action IS1308 | Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics

Short Term Scientific Mission - Scientific Report

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Communication Studies Department

Host: Benjamin de Cleen, Assistant Professor, Communication Studies Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, COST IS1308 Management Committee member for Belgium

Duration: 10/12/2017 – 16/12/2017

1. Aims and scope

This STSM aimed at the strengthening of ties between myself and the host, our networks and home institutions, as well as at the exchange of ideas, research methods and findings, the generation of constructive feedback and the coordination for future collaborative projects. In particular, the main activities of the STSM comprised: (1) face-to-face meetings/interactions between myself and the host; (2) a public lecture; (3) a masterclass with MA dissertation students working on left-wing populism; (4) a closed feedback session with doctoral and postdoctoral researchers and members of the [Centre for the study of Democracy, Signification and Resistance](#) (DESIRE).

It is worth mentioning that we had recently collaborated with the host in a special issue for the journal *Javnost – The Public* ([vol. 24, no 4](#)) on nationalism and populism and that we are currently discussing the prospects for future joint publications on the relationship between nationalism and left-wing populism in Europe. The STSM also gave us the opportunity to further and deepen the links between the DESIRE research centre and the [POPULISMUS](#) team, but also to discuss the prospects of collaboration with the Department of Politics, History and International Relations (PHIR) at Loughborough University, where I was recently appointed as lecturer in European and International Politics. Moreover, as I am currently completing an edited volume on *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (Routledge, forthcoming), it gave me the chance to get constructive feedback on left-wing populism and crises of representation, that will be particularly helpful while doing the final edits and concluding the introductory chapter.

Overall, the theme and activities of this research visit fit perfectly with the aims and scope of the COST Action IS1308 'Populist Political Communication in Europe,' as it takes a discursive approach to populism and populist communication, it problematizes the notions of 'crisis' and 'antipopulism,' and further clarifies the peculiarities of left-wing populism in Greece and Europe.

2. Activities

The STSM kicked off with an informal meeting between myself and the host, during which we discussed and finalised the scheduled activities, while identifying a series of additional issues that could be added to the agenda.

On Monday, 11 December, I gave a public lecture titled 'Populism and antipopulism in times of crisis: a discursive perspective,' which was attended by undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Communication Studies and Political Science Departments, as well as researchers and faculty members. The lecture was followed by a productive and lively Q&A session that lasted about an hour. During the lecture I presented an approach that draws its inspiration from the work of Ernesto Laclau and the so-called 'Essex School' of discourse theory, trying at the same time to establish a creative dialogue with other analytical models that understand populism as ideology, political style and strategy. (More details on the contents of my lecture can be found [here](#)).

On the same day, I coordinated a two-hour masterclass on radical left populist politics with MA students that are preparing their dissertations on relevant topics. We focused especially on issues of theory and methodology related to a discursive approach to populist phenomena and communicative strategies, while stressing the merits of the comparative method.

On Wednesday, 13 December, I participated in a five-hour feedback and discussion session on ongoing research with VUB PhD students and postdoctoral researchers of the DESIRE team, where I had the opportunity to comment on projects focusing on populism and got useful feedback for a chapter I am currently preparing for a collective volume, which examines the case of Syriza in Greece, its discourse and communication, but also the antipopulist reactions of mainstream parties and media that have gained momentum during the recent years of crisis.

On Friday, 15 December, we had our last meeting with the host. Firstly, we discussed our ideas, materials, structures and best practices regarding the undergraduate modules on populism that we are both going to teach during Semester 2 in our departments. Modules on populism have only very recently started to be incorporated in the curricula of an increasing number of universities around Europe and the US, and such exchanges between academics can be very productive, as the teaching agenda is still under development. Second, we discussed a series of details around the organisation of the first DESIRE international conference (scheduled to take place in early 2019), key themes and areas on which I could contribute, but also the prospects of taking this opportunity to launch a DESIRE-affiliated PhD research group on populism. Lastly, we had a more general discussion on our ongoing projects and exchanged information on our teaching and tutoring activities in order to facilitate the planning of future collaborations.

Apart from the aforementioned activities, I had the chance to benefit from informal chats and exchanges with faculty members and students at VUB, but also from other institutions, like the Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles. In this sense, I was able to broaden and

strengthen my network with populism researchers and to communicate my views, arguments and research findings to younger colleagues working on related areas.

Last but not least, during this STSM I formally became a member of the DESIRE research centre, to the activities of which I hope to contribute more actively in the future.

Concluding remarks

I consider this STSM as a crucial milestone in the collaboration between Dr Benjamin de Cleen, the POPULISMUS team and myself, as well as the PHIR department at Loughborough University. It gave me the opportunity to present parts of my research on the populist radical left's discourse and communicative strategy in Greece and Europe and discuss relevant issues of theory and methodology with a diverse audience. Importantly, it also gave me the chance to test a series of ideas and teaching techniques that I aim to incorporate in my future teaching on populism. In this sense, apart from the dissemination of research findings, knowledge transfer activities and the generation of constructive feedback, the STSM enabled me to strengthen the links of research co-ordination and co-operation between myself and the host, as well as our networks.

The STSM's contribution to the scientific objectives of the Action was multifaceted, as my research offers an up-to-date understanding and critical assessment of populist discourses and communicative strategies, as well as of a rather under-researched area: that of the antipopulist discourses of the elites in Greece and Europe. Moreover, it contributed to the furthering of collaboration and coordination between researchers that work in institutions that play a key role in the Action's scientific efforts. Lastly, this collaboration could potentially lead to grant proposals and outreach/dissemination events (workshops, seminars, conferences, training schools, etc.) in the future.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Benjamin de Cleen and the Communication Studies Department at VUB for the invitation and hospitality, but also to the COST Action IS1308 for their generous financial support.

GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS
19 December 2017