

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Alena Kluknavská, PhD.

Habilitation thesis

Populist communication: content, actors, opportunities, and impacts in times of crisis

Reviewer

Assoc. Prof. Alessandro Nai

Reviewer's home unit, institution

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam

Dear members of the MU FSS Scientific Council,
Dear colleagues,

It is with great delight that I was invited earlier this year to provide my assessment for the habilitation thesis submitted by Dr. Dr. Alena Kluknavska. I would like, first and foremost, to thank you for inviting me to this important task, which I was happy to humbly accept.

I would like also to start by saying that I have had the pleasure to know dr. Kluknavska for a few years – and am of course very familiar with her excellent work. Before detailing my comments related to her thesis, I would like to stress my admiration for what I believe is one of the most original, unique, and ground-breaking voices in the field of populism, campaign rhetoric, media framing, and political communication more in general.

It was a great pleasure for me to be able to read and assess her habilitation thesis, which I consider genuinely excellent. Several features of the thesis make it, in my view, an outstanding piece of scientific research.

First, it tackles a societally relevant phenomenon (to say the least) – populist communication – in a holistic and comprehensive way. Along the ten studies that compose the thesis, dr. Kluknavska investigates, in turn, the content of populist communication (that is, the offer), the mechanisms of dissemination of such content (the mediums and mechanisms), the intervening role of the content in which such communication unfolds (the opportunity structures), and the effects of such communication in the public (the so-called demand). In taking a bird-eye view on the thesis, one cannot help but applaud the commitment to apply to the topic investigated one of the most foundational guidelines for the study of political communication, urging us to consider “who says what, to whom, how, why, and with what effects.” Dr. Kluknavska’s thesis is, quite simply, spot on. In an academic environment that pushes us to focus on increasingly tiny and super-specialized matters, reading a work that really adopts a comprehensive approach to investigate a phenomenon under its various angles is not only refreshing – is vital.

Second, the thesis is ambitious – as any good thesis ought to be. While there is a clear *fil rouge* that connects all the studies, each of them also addresses a wealth of proximate and

related phenomena – political incivility and post-truth communication (study I), accusations of untruthfulness as means of political attacks (study II), identity politics (study III), protest and protest mobilization (study IV), minorities, ethnicity, and far-right voting (studies V and IX), economic crises (study VI), the mediatization of elites' discourse (study VII), the relationship between perpetrators and victims of “enemy-making” on social media (study VIII), and cross-national media coverage of minorities (study X). And this is an extremely non-exhaustive list. As a result, the thesis as a whole manages to put the study of populist communication within a much broader, and interconnected, research agenda. The ambition here is to show, directly and indirectly, that one cannot study populist communication without engaging with, say, the literature on incivility, far right, identity politics, and much more. This is an important ambition, and one that was successfully executed here.

Third, the thesis is innovative – it looks at dynamics for which there is an increasingly wide literature, but it does so by often adopting a genuinely “fresh” approach that pushes the literature forward in a clear way. For instance, study I relies on specific social media behaviors (using a “emotional reaction” icon), study II adds a very interesting spin on the literature on attack politics (which I now quite well), asking what the effects are of accusing political opponents about being untruthful, study VI tackles on the nuances and differences between xenophobic, nativist, and populist rhetoric, and so on.

Fourth, the thesis is methodologically impressive – combining a wide array of methodologies (and empirical epistemological traditions), from manual content analysis to claims analysis, analysis of cross-sectional data, and everything in between. The mixed-method approach in full display throughout the thesis is done in a robust, clear, and convincing way. This is really an interdisciplinary thesis from a methodological standpoint, and this is no easy feat. As scholars we tend, naturally, to gravitate towards empirical traditions that we are most familiar with, with the cost of being forcefully reductive in what we do. This is not the case here – Dr. Kluknavska is clearly at ease both with qualitative and quantitative research, and I applaud her for that.

Fifth, the thesis opens the way for new important research by asking some fundamental questions (and providing some preliminary answers to those): to what extent are structural conditions (economic crises, surges in immigration, and even pandemics) an important factor to explain the rise and (changing) discourse of far-right and radical right populist movements? How does the logic of political attacks and targets unfold? Who are the victims, and how can they respond? All in all, who or what “shapes the discourse” of extreme political actors, and with what effects? In times of rising dark politics, these questions are at the heart of what we *need* to investigate.

Taking stock, this excellent thesis investigates an urgent phenomenon in a comprehensive and holistic way, by embedding it into the broader field of mediatized political communication via a political psychology approach, leveraging a sophisticated multi-method approach, and opening the way for important new research. Perhaps the best indicator of the excellence of this thesis is that it can be seen as the first step into an exciting, rich, and promising new research agenda. This is not a thesis that feels like a door is closing – rather, the feeling here is of excitement for the many new doors that are opening. Further research will have to expand more in the international comparison, ideally adding a temporal component, and diving more into the micro and psychological mechanisms (perhaps leveraging experimental or physiological data). A great thesis is one that opens up a research agenda. This thesis accomplished this with flying colors.

It was my great pleasure and honour to read and evaluate this thesis. It is even a greater pleasure and honour to applaud Dr. Kluknavska for an impressive, cogent, and all-around convincing piece of empirical research. I very much look forward to what comes next.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

Q1. Let's say that you could go back in time, remove one of the studies, and replace it with a different study. Which would you remove, and why? And what would you do instead?

Q2. Due to the nature of the ontological stance you have taken throughout the different studies, the thesis does not always dive in-depth into the psychological mechanisms that could intervene to explain some of the trends. Thinking of recent research in political psychology, which psychological mechanisms would you say could be a good complement to the thesis as a whole – for instance for future studies?

Q3. Based only on the results discussed in your thesis, please provide evidence to justify both of these two statements:

- Statement A. Populism is bad for democracy
- Statement B. Populism is good for democracy

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled Populist communication: content, actors, opportunities, and impacts in times of crisis by Alena Kluknavská, PhD. **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political Science.

Date: 15 August 2024

Signature:

