„Babeș–Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Doctoral School of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising

PHD THESIS
SUMMARY

Online political participation among Hungarians in Transylvania

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Introduction

The Internet and the social media now play an important role in citizens' daily lives, both in terms of communication and entertainment, as well as political and civic participation. The pandemic in 2020 has made the online world even more pronounced, and the lack of internet access would have made it impossible for students to progress in their studies. Since various regulations prevented several people from coming together to debate, organise and try to influence political decisions, these activities were also - at least in part - transferred to the virtual space. Recent years have been marked by a gradual increase in internet penetration, so that by 2023, 85.7% of Romanian households had internet access (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023).

One of the aims of my dissertation is to gain a deeper insight into the online and offline political and civic participation of Hungarians in Transylvania, and to examine how the virtual world transforms these actions. Furthermore, my goal is to explore the mobilization attempts of Hungarians in Transylvania on online forums, and finally to examine the young generation's attitude towards movements promoted on social media sites. In the introductory part, the thesis emphasizes that the present paper contributes to a more accurate understanding of the political participation of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, and does not enrich the international literature on participation. The situation of Hungarians in Transylvania is special in several respects, since, on the one hand, their political decisions are largely determined by being a minority, and on the other hand their media consumption habits are mostly based on Hungarian language sources, and they (also) typically inform themselves from the Hungarian press, which in turn determines how they think about politics (Kiss & Barna, 2015; Papp Z., 2014). Furthermore, I consider it necessary to emphasize that my primary goal was to examine grassroots (civil) initiatives, but I could not exclude from my analysis the proposals of political parties and politicians, which are also joined by Hungarians from Transylvania. This is mainly due to the fact that the Hungarian civil society sphere in Transylvania is highly dependent on party politics and often appears as an (ostensible) partner in political initiatives (Bodó, 2002).

Structurally, my thesis includes a literature review consisting of six chapters, a methodological review, and finally, the results of my research are presented along three chapters. First of all, I introduce the concept of civic and political participation, and then I

discuss the issue of online " politicizing" and the factors influencing online activity. This will be followed by a general introduction to virtual public spheres, as well as an explanation of the affordances of social network sites and the mobilisation effect of social media sites. In the case of the chapters discussing civil and political participation, influencing factors and the mobilisation effect of platforms, I will specifically mention the situation in Romania and Hungary in Transylvania. In the methodology chapter, on the one hand, I describe the methods used in previous research published in the relevant literature, followed by more information on the implementation of the questionnaire, content analysis and focus group discussions on which my thesis is based. Finally, I present my results along the different methods: first, I present the online and offline participation models for Hungarians in Transylvania (the results of the questionnaire), then the civic and political activities on Facebook (results of the content analysis), and finally the attitude of university students towards initiatives appearing on social media (results of the focus groups).

Brief summary of the literature

An important starting point is the literature's observation that in the last quarter of the last century, developed Western democracies have witnessed an increasing decline in traditional political participation (participation in elections and interest in public meetings organised by political parties), mainly due to a significant decline in citizens' trust in institutions (Norris, 2002; 2011; Putnam, 2000). These citizens tend to take the initiative into their own hands and are much more likely to intervene directly in the process, raising their voices against the decisions of the political establishment, participating in protests, demonstrations and submitting various petitions (Jakobsen & Listhaug, 2014). At the same time, there is also a sense of issue-orientation among these citizens, who are not interested in party politics and the "big political picture" in general, but are concerned about issues that transcend borders, such as poverty and environmental pollution (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Farthing, 2010; Norris, 2004). It is in this context that online civic and political participation emerges, influencing the way citizens are informed, providing an opportunity to engage with the political process from home and, in the case of repressive regimes, it means an alternative channel of communication for opponents of the regime.

In connection with the widespread use of the Internet, utopian ideas have emerged that this could solve the problem of citizens' passivity, and thanks to online participation, a significant part of users will become active agents – this is challenged by Loader and Mercea

(2011) already in the early 2010s. Overall, views on online political participation in the literature can be grouped into three broad categories. There is a critical view according to which, although many online forms of participation have offline equivalents, the simplicity and low cost of the former make them insignificant. Sharoni (2012) also draws attention to the danger that low-cost forms of participation can give citizens the feeling that they are effectively influencing decisions and that they no longer take real action once they have expressed their views. The second group includes those who see the online world as a new opportunity and present low-cost actions as a positive factor encouraging participation. They argue that these forms of participation can strengthen direct democracy, involve people who would otherwise stay out, provide opportunities for content creation, stimulate party competition and reduce the distance between government and citizens (Szabó & Mihályffy, 2009; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). A third perspective is that online forms of participation are virtual equivalents of different offline types, which are part of the same phenomenon and can be seen as a kind of complement. Therefore, they will not attract 'new' people into politics and will not change citizens' political views (Theocharis et al., 2023; Vissers & Stolle, 2014).

In the literature review of this thesis, I will attempt, among others, to find an appropriate definition for online political and civic participation. This is a challenge because social networking sites are constantly appearing, offering new functionalities that make new activities available (Cantijoch & Gibson, 2019; Cornet et al., 2017). Based on the definitions and measurement tools used in studies published between 2006 and 2023, I have finally identified seven types of online actions - which are also included in the questionnaire: (1) gathering information; (2) contacting politicians or representatives; (3) debate, discussion, expression of opinion on policy-related topics; (4) e-petition; (5) e-donation; (6) online volunteering, joining a support group; (7) call to action, mobilization, e-demonstration. It should also be noted in this section that while previous research has discussed online and offline participation as two separate dimensions (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Oser et al, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014), more recent studies on online participation have paid more attention to the fact that, on the one hand, there are clearly offline equivalents of some virtual activities (e.g. online-offline donations), which are practically indistinguishable in their execution, and, on the other hand, activities that can be performed on different platforms belong to different factors (Theocharis et al., 2023).

The affordances of social media sites, which are today the main arena for grassroots organisations, contribute greatly to the success of citizens' initiatives. In my thesis I mention the following general affordances: affordances favourable to the development of different forms

of association, the possibility for users to consume content in other forms besides text representation, affordances related to mobile devices, thanks to which one can take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media at any, navigating between information and content, easy access to content recommended by algorithms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Hase et al., 2022). However, it should be pointed out that problems related to public affairs and politics are often discussed in groups that were not originally created for political purposes. Users engage in online conversations mostly to discuss everyday issues (Dahlgren, 2006; Graham et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2016). During the discussions, participants can come to the point of identifying the source of the (common) problem, then start organizing and mobilizing to find a solution and influence political decisions in their favour (Graham et al., 2015, 2016). The thesis discusses in a separate chapter the international online actions, the Romanian ones, including those initiated by Hungarians from Transylvania.

Description of methods used

Overall, my thesis seeks answers to six research questions:

Q1: What are the different types of political participation forms among Hungarians in Transylvania and which are the most popular?

Q2: Is there a category that is exclusively interested in online participation? (So is it possible to attract new people into politics?)

Q3a-Q3b: What categories are distinguished along the spectrum of online and offline participation, and how can these groups be characterised? What influences whether someone belongs to one group or another?

Q4: How can online forums and groups popular among Hungarians in Transylvania be described?

Q5: What are the most common topics, narratives and mobilization attempts that appear on social media sites and groups popular among Hungarians in Transylvania?

Q6a-Q6b: What factors influence young Hungarians from Transylvania to join movements and demonstrations promoted on social media? What main functions do they identify in each platform and how would they use them in a civic initiative?

These questions are answered in three steps, combining three methods: questionnaire (Q1, Q2, Q3a, Q3b), content analysis (Q4, Q5), and focus group discussions (Q6a, Q6b).

Questionnaire:

Using survey based on questionnaire, I examined the online and offline participation of Hungarians in Transylvania, the categories that emerged along these dimensions, and the factors influencing participation. I had the opportunity to include my questions on political and civic participation in the Bálványos Institute's survey entitled *Internet usage habits and online public participation among Hungarians in Transylvania*. The responses were obtained from 70 municipalities through stratified sampling and reflect the opinions of a total of 1,844 Hungarians from Transylvania.

The most important variables of the questionnaire are:

Dependent variables: offline participation, online participation, participation on Facebook (the latter is also included as an independent variable in online and offline regression models). In the case of offline and online activities, I measured actions where the two forms can be examined in parallel: petitioning, donating, contacting a politician, protesting. These were complemented by actions on Facebook: sharing political opinions, liking such content, joining a political group created by politicians or civil society.

Independent variables that may influence participation: gender, age, income, education level, activity, occupation, obtaining information from traditional sources, obtaining information from online sources, digital competences, online leisure activities, general activities on Facebook, trust in institutions.

Content analysis:

Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, I seek answer the question of how online forums and groups popular among Hungarians in Transylvania can be characterized, and I try to map the mobilisation attempts that appear here. The results of the questionnaire revealed that Facebook continued to be the most popular platform among Hungarians in Transylvania,

and based on the answers, 70 pages and 15 groups could be identified, where the respondents discuss topics related to public affairs and politics (only Romanian pages and groups that communicate in Hungarian). My aim was to analyse posts that generated a significant number of reactions from followers, therefore for each page and group, I included the 10 posts that generated the most likes, 10 posts that got most comments, and 10 posts with the most shares in my database. It is necessary to highlight that they often coincide, so a total of 1684 entries are analysed.

During the content analysis, I coded the following: (1) whether or not it is a political/ public issue, (2) whether or not it calls for active action, (3) the type of action identified, (4) the topic, (5) who it communes with, (6) who constitutes the opponent/enemy, (7) level of action.

Focus group discussions:

Since the young generation is present on several different social media sites, during the focus group discussions with them, I sought to answer how they could utilize the affordances of each platform in a bottom-up civic initiative, and what they think about online participation overall.

Two focus group discussions took place: one with university students majoring in social sciences and the second with students who did not belong to this group. The reason for separating the two groups is that the international literature reports that social science students are more active when such initiatives are taken and that they can also learn about these kinds of movements during their studies.

The main topics of the focus group discussions were: (1) political and civic activism, (2) social media, (3) online political and civic participation, (4) online opportunities in the implementation of initiatives.

Main results of the research

Data show that among Hungarians in Transylvania, offline forms of political and civic activities are still proving to be more popular than their virtual counterparts. Furthermore, at the time of the survey, actions on Facebook were less popular than, for example, signing a petition. This also means that the concern expressed in the international literature according to

which easily performed virtual opportunities, dissolve the notion of participation (Sharoni, 2012), has not been proven in the paper.

Along the online-offline dimensions, it can also be observed that more than a quarter of Hungarians in Transylvania can be classified as "offline citizens", on the contrary, if we construct these categories of citizens along the forms that can be examined in parallel, the online world hardly brings in "new" people. However, if we include activities on Facebook in online actions, the group of "new people" increases by 7 percentage points, so in fact, social media sites are somewhat capable of driving previously passive people to act. Furthermore, the principal component analysis shows that for Hungarians in Transylvania, online and offline forms of action go hand in hand and are part of the same process, i.e. for those who would otherwise be active, the virtual world represents a new alternative. The principal component analysis also shows that Facebook activity is a completely separate dimension.

In my thesis, I examined what influences offline-online-Facebook activity and which independent variables affect the activity groups (supporting, contacting, protesting) outlined in the principal component analysis. The results point to a process: first of all, it is necessary to acquire certain digital competences, so that Hungarians in Transylvania can then start to feel confident in using the different online platforms and to adopt a positive attitude towards technology. This could lead them to start organising themselves on different social media sites, to express their own opinions, to join different groups. Finally, political activity on Facebook has a positive impact on the types of actions where offline and online forms can be examined in parallel. Developing the digital competences of citizens and an appropriate strategy to facilitate this is essential, especially for those who are lagging behind in offline participation: those living in small towns or rural areas, and those with low educational backgrounds. Furthermore, in the context of trust in institutions, it can be observed that it is necessary to discuss each level and type of institution separately. In the case of Hungarians in Transylvania, trust in the classical institutions of representative democracy (parliament, government, president of Romania, political parties) has a negative impact on participation, whereas trust in local institutions has a positive impact. This can be explained by the fact that the respondents see in the parliament, the government, the President of Romania and political parties in general a level distant from them and the "Romanian" politics. These institutions are often portrayed as political opponents on the social media sites they follow. In contrast, they see local government as an ally, which also appears as a partner on the social media sites they mentioned; typically, they also join their initiatives.

During the content analysis, I categorized the 1684 Facebook posts already mentioned in the methodological part according to the – active or passive – actions found in the texts: (1) civic cooperation, (2) donation, charity, volunteering, (3) contributing to the community with presence, (4) census participation, (5) formulate an opinions, (6) communication of representation and organization, (7) information about applications, projects, administration, (8) participation in elections, (9) obtaining Hungarian citizenship, (10) demonstration, active protest. My primary goal in my research was to analyse bottom-up initiatives, but there are only a few of them among the posts. Initiatives from the grassroots level are emerging on local issues and on some divisive topics. In a significant number of posts, NGOs and grassroots Facebook groups, are thematising the same issues as parties and politicians and adopting their narratives. This is mainly the narrative of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and the Government of Hungary. The main conclusion of the content analysis is that there is a lack of Transylvanian grassroots initiatives and independent narratives, detached from party politics. As the focus group discussions show, this is what the young generation is looking for.

The focus group discussions reveal that university students actively use several social media sites and are aware of the platforms' affordances. If a civic initiative were to take place, they would be able to use them properly. There are three main factors influencing young people to join a cause in the online space: they care about who the information comes from, they show interest if it is a cause that is close to their community, and they become active if they feel involved. However, they tend to want to exclude politics from their everyday lives in general and do not trust the initiatives of politicians and parties.

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