



**Doctoral School of  
International Relations  
and Political Science**

## **THESIS SUMMARY**

**Xénia Farkas**

### **VISUAL POLITICS: VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Article-based doctoral dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Márton Bene, PhD**

Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science

Budapest, 2022

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## 1. Background and aim of the dissertation<sup>1</sup>

A decade ago, Schill (2012) published a review article on visual political communication (VPC) research aiming to increase scholarly attention in the field. By describing the functions of visuals in politics, the main argument of the study was that due to the prominent role of visuals in political communication, research should also focus on them. As Schill (2012) stated,

“One myth that must be challenged is that visuals have limited importance in politics, operate superficially, or are of trivial consequence. Not only is this myth incorrect, it has exerted a chilling effect on research in this area. When scholars only examine written or verbal texts, they are only seeing a small part of the political communication process.” (p. 133)

Indeed, visuals of politics remained “one of the least studied and least understood areas” (Schill, 2012, p. 119) for a long period. As Bucy and Joo (2021) strengthen it, “only in the last decade or so have social scientists begun to take visuals seriously” (p. 5). Accordingly, in the last ten years, scholars seem to react to this call, and the number of studies on VPC has grown markedly. Articles on the topic have been published in journals such as *Political Communication*, *Visual Communication*, *Political Psychology*, *Social Media + Society*, *New Media & Society*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, or *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, and books with a specific VPC focus, such as *Election Posters Around the Globe Political Campaigning in the Public Space* (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2017), *Visual Global Politics* (Bleiker, 2018), or *Visual Political Communication* (Veneti et al., 2019) have been published.

As Schill’s (2012) article could capture scholarship that mostly predates the rise of social media in political communication, its main arguments were derived from the prominent role of television as a source of political information. Although television is still an important source of news (Newman et al., 2022), in the age of the Internet and social media platforms, different questions are formulated regarding visually constructed political messages. As Lilleker and colleagues (2019) argue, the new communication platforms are widely used in political communication by campaigners, as “they offer to deliver compelling visuals directly to their target audience. In turn, citizens seek to consume, understand and influence the political reality using various visual representations” (pp. 5-6). Social media has not only increased the importance of VPC (Lilleker, 2020) but has contributed to the (1) distinguished attention on individual political actors instead of parties (Enli & Skogerbø 2013); (2) highlighted the role of emotions in politics (Coleman & Wu, 2015); (3) application of new communication strategies (Russmann et al., 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction is partly based on a manuscript titled “Visual Political Communication Research: A Literature Review from 2012 to 2022” that has been submitted to the Review of Communication Research and is currently under revision and resubmission.

Hence, this article-based dissertation focuses on VPC on social media and aims to provide a synthesized understanding of different political actors' social media-based VPC strategies, the external factors that shape these strategies, and their effects on citizens.

At the beginning of the doctoral research program, the investigation had an open research interest and aimed to provide a better understanding of how visuals are used by political actors. Later on, it has become clear that two major, current political trends are inseparable from visual political communication on social media: personalization and populism. Hence, these two concepts are the focus of the research.

Based on the literature review, there are several research gaps in the field of VPC. First, visuals in political communication are often investigated without a systematic approach, considering both visual and political communication foundations. Second, there is still a great need to provide more information on the research methods that can be applied flexibly to study visuals in political communication to facilitate scholars to include images in their investigations. Third, although the connections between personalization and VPC started to be examined, comparisons between different social media platforms are still rare. Fourth, research on populist visual communication on social media shows fragmented results. There is a lack of knowledge on whether a specific populist VPC exists, and findings are not connected to the theoretically grounded conceptualizations of populism. Finally, international comparisons, visual and verbal comparisons, and comparisons between different time periods are also limited.

Further, the increased role of social media both in verbal and visual political communication is clear. It is also known that social media is widely used as a source of information and news (Newman et al., 2022). The literature review demonstrated that political actors are building on this widespread use of social media by the voters, and use the platforms as part of their strategic toolkit. Hence, the articles of the thesis focus on the strategic use of visual political communication on social media. However, each article has a different actor focus: the first article investigates Hungarian candidates who are present both on Facebook and Instagram; the second article focuses on political parties from all EU countries on Facebook; while the third article examined the Hungarian Prime Minister's social media-based VPC on Facebook. With this wide actor focus, the thesis provides comparisons not only between different social media platforms but spatial and temporal comparisons as well.

Although all three articles of the thesis formulated specific research questions, based on the research gaps identified through the literature review, three overarching questions are drawn up as general interests of this article-based dissertation:

RQ1: What kinds of social media-based visual political communication strategies can be identified in the case of different political actors, such as:

RQ1a: In the case of politicians?

RQ1b: In the case of parties?

RQ1c: In the case of Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who is an exemplar case of populist leaders?

RQ2: Is visual communication strategy conditioned by external factors, such as:

RQ2a: Are there differences across social media platforms?

RQ2b: Are there differences between populist and non-populist actors?

RQ2c: Are there differences across different time periods?

RQ2d: Are there differences between social media-based visual and verbal political communication?

RQ3: What are the effects of visual political communication on social media in terms of user engagement?

## 2. Applied methods of the thesis

As the thesis works with a large amount of visual data on social media and aims to provide reliable, replicable, and objective results, all three articles of the dissertation apply content analysis. The main features of the three content analyses are discussed shortly here, however, more details of the datasets are listed in the articles. Further, as Gerodimos (2019) argues, there is a lack of studies that ensure systematic, portable, and adaptable analysis of visual data, hence, each coding book of the articles is also attached to the thesis.

### *Article 1: Inductive and deductive visual qualitative content analysis*

The first article relies on a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis. Inductive content analysis is a useful method in the case of is a literature gap (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Accordingly, the inductive part was created to study visual personalization both on Facebook and Instagram, as there was no previous systematic visual content analysis that could capture the essence of personalization through different social media platforms. For that, categories were created with open coding of a sample of the image-posts, then after the creation of an exhaustive coding scheme, it was applied deductively on the whole dataset of the research. Categories were focused on the visual nature of the pictures, their content, feature, and sentiment, the depicted people, the depiction of the candidate, and the cultural and political references.

The dataset included all Facebook posts (N=2,925) and Instagram posts (N=858) containing pictures of those Hungarian candidates who owned both Facebook and Instagram accounts at the time of the 2018 election (N=51). Coder reliability was ensured in the coding process: each post was coded by three undergraduates, and only those codes were accepted, which were recorded at least by two coders.

### *Articles 2 and 3: Quantitative visual content analysis*

Both the second and third articles apply quantitative visual content analysis. However, the categories were devised differently. As the second article aimed to compare populist and non-populist visual communication on social media, categories had to be able to capture general and populist communication as well. Accordingly, the coding instrument contained categories related to the visual types of the pictures, the applied visual tools, the context and content of the posts, the depicted actors, and the number of the people, also the depicted symbols, objects, connections, and clothing. The third article's focus was on the visual and verbal elements of populism. For that, Moffitt's (2016) theoretical work on the populist style has been translated into a coding scheme that can capture the bimodal populist communication. A group of categories was aimed to measure general visual features, while three groups of categories were derived from Moffitt (2016) to code 1) populist appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 2) bad manners, and 3) crisis, breakdown, and threat communication.

The dataset of the second article contained a random sample of all EU parties' image-based Facebook posts from the last 28 days of the 2019 EP campaign (N=997). Coding was carried out by two coders. The inter-coder reliability showed acceptable Krippendorff alpha values for each category (>.69).

The third article was based on a dataset of all image-based Facebook posts of Viktor Orbán (N = 492) over a three-year period (2018-2020). Photos and their verbal post texts were coded by two coders, and the inter-coder reliability showed acceptable Krippendorff alpha values for each category (>.80).



### 3. Main findings of the individual publications

#### 3.1 Article 1: **Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media**

Xénia Farkas, Márton Bene

Originally published:

Farkas, X., & Bene, M. (2021). Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 119–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220959553>

The first article aimed to describe the visual political communication strategies of Hungarian politicians on Facebook and Instagram during the 2018 parliamentary election campaign, and their success in triggering user engagement. One of our main arguments was built on the fact that visuals in political communication were treated as illustrations to verbal and textual communication for a long, and not as interests of their own. Hence, our article put focuses on images and visual strategies. Our first Research Question was related to visual political communication strategies.

(RQ1): What kinds of visual communication strategies are applied by political actors on social media platforms?

Built on the results of verbal political communication studies on social media— we had a special focus on personalization, the process in which “individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen 2010, p. 4). We hypothesized that visual communication on social media is predominantly used by politicians to personalize their appearance (H1).

We differentiated two types of personalization: individualization and privatization. Individualization refers to the process in which the politicians are at the forefront of politics instead of parties, while privatization means that politicians' private and personal features are highlighted instead of their professional ones (Van Aelst et al., 2012). In our approach, individualization was treated as the depiction of formal political work, while privatization showed informal characteristics. We expected that both types of personalization are applied in social media-based visual political communication: e.g. settled images and the candidates' official clothes can be understood as rather formal elements, while spontaneous images and casual clothes are signs of informality. However, it is worth noting that the aim of the coding was not to identify individualized or privatized images per se but to describe the extent of the use of formal and informal visual elements.

Further, as the literature was limited to single platform studies, we put a special focus on the comparison of two social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram. Accordingly, the first Research

Question was specified in two sub-questions related to our comparative approach in terms of the platforms.

(RQ1a) What features can be considered general characteristics of social media visual communication?

(RQ1b) What are the platform-specific strategies?

Based on the findings of single platform studies, we assumed that Instagram is rather a place for informal visuals and privatization (H2), while on Facebook, images are used to depict more formal and individualized visual elements (H3)<sup>2</sup>.

As we were interested not only in the visual communication strategies applied by candidates on the two social media platforms but in their success as well, our research focus was widened to the effects of their visual posts in terms of user engagement—reactions, comments, and shares. The second Research Question and two sub-questions were formulated accordingly:

(RQ2) What kind of images perform well on social media platforms?

(RQ2a) What types of visual tools trigger “likes” as the most widely used and comparable reaction form?

(RQ2b) What cross-platform similarities and differences can we identify in the liking response to politicians’ visual communication?

Hence, the number of reactions, comments, and shares of the posts was also measured on Facebook and Instagram. As previous works (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al. 2019) demonstrated a stronger like-provoking potential of personalized posts than those without personal elements, we assumed that images with personalized aspects are more liked both on Facebook and Instagram (H4). However, we also expected differences between the two platforms: we also assumed that formal, individualized visuals are more liked on Facebook (H5), while informal, privatized image posts are preferred by Instagram users (H6).

To answer the research questions, inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis was applied on the still image-based Facebook (N = 2925) and Instagram posts (N = 858) of Hungarian politicians, who were active on both platforms in the period of the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign (N = 51).

Findings supported our first hypothesis, as visual political communication is highly personalized both on Facebook and Instagram. However, data showed that Instagram image posts are more personalized (95 percent of the image posts) than Facebook images (66 percent), in terms of depiction of the candidates and/or being self-made, original images by the candidates themselves. Images that are posted on both platforms are exceptionally personalized, which tells us that although

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<sup>2</sup> In the published article, the third hypothesis was incorrectly described as „on Instagram images should be used to display more informal aspects of candidates’ life, relevant to the individualization dimension of personalization (H3)” (Farkas & Bene, 2021, p. 125). The dissertation demonstrates the corrected version of the hypothesis.

Facebook images are not always personalized (44 percent), only the personalized pictures are posted on Instagram as well.

Further, results supported our second and third hypotheses also, as formal elements are more often depicted on Facebook than on Instagram, while informal visual features are more common on Instagram. However, this does not mean exclusivity. Formal visual elements are present on both platforms but on Instagram, informal images are also common. Hence, it can be said that individualization is present both on Facebook and Instagram, while privatization is rather an Instagram communication feature.

To reflect on intertextuality, the additional meanings of post texts and captions were also investigated. Results suggested, that although texts are frequently added to images on both platforms, these kinds of messages had no additional meanings on Instagram, and only half of the Facebook post texts contained other information than messages carried out by the images.

User engagement patterns of visual posts were examined by multilevel negative binomial regression models. Results of the analysis supported our fourth hypothesis, as personalized images had more likes on both platforms than pictures without personalized features. Further, the fifth hypothesis is also confirmed by the data: formal, individualized visual elements are more likely to be liked on Facebook, and less popular on Instagram. Nonetheless, although informal, privatized images are popular on Instagram, they are not more favored on Instagram than on Facebook. Consequently, our sixth hypothesis was rejected.

Nevertheless, our investigation contributed to the emerging area of visual political communication research by 1) focusing on visuals in political communication as objects of interest on their own; 2) creating a coding scheme that can be applied to study visual political communication strategies; 3) moving beyond the commonly applied single-platform approach; 4) examining engagement patterns of different visual tools.

### 3.2 Article 2: **Strikingly similar: Comparing visual political communication of populist and non-populist parties across 28 countries**

Xénia Farkas, Daniel Jackson, Paweł Baranowski, Márton Bene, Uta Russmann, Anastasia Veneti

Originally published:

Farkas, X., Jackson, D., Baranowski, P., Bene, M., Russmann, U., & Veneti, A. (2022). Strikingly similar: Comparing visual political communication of populist and non-populist parties across 28 countries. *European Journal of Communication*, Online first, 1-18.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221082238>

Article 2 had a special focus on visual populist communication. Unlike in the case of Article 1, where Hungarian politicians' VPC was investigated, this article examined the visual communication of 28 EU countries' parties. This allowed us an international comparison between populist and non-populist communication on Facebook, which is the most commonly used social media platform in Europe (Newman et al., 2020). The investigation time frame stretched through the last 28 days of the 2019 EP campaign.

In this article, we contributed to the increased attention on visual political communication research: as the emerging number of studies on visual populist communication are based on single country analyses, we aimed to broaden our knowledge on the field through an international focus and more generalizable results.

From the various definitions of populism (see Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001; Hawkins, 2009) we applied a mixed approach. As we focused on the differences and similarities of populist and non-populist communication, Mudde's (2004) actor-centric approach was useful to focus on the question of *who* and identify populist and non-populist parties. However, as we were interested in the question of *what* as well, our hypotheses were formulated on the basis of the populist communication style approach (de Vreese et al., 2018). Nonetheless, besides the content elements, the question of *how* was also raised, and as visuals in populist communication can only be understood from the perspective of Moffitt's (2016) style approach, this was applied to describe symbolically mediated performance elements.

Although social media-based visual communication seemed naturally fit to populist communication (Kriesi, 2014), it was not investigated so far whether a distinct populist visual communication style exists. Hence, our Research Question was formulated as follows:

(RQ1) What are the differences and similarities between populist and non-populist actors' image-based visual communication on Facebook during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign?

Based on the concepts of populism and previous works' results, hypotheses were formulated to describe our expectations related to populist visual communication. Application of the codebook and the quantitative visual content analysis showed mixed results related to our hypotheses.

We assumed that photos without superimposed texts (text applied on the image) are less used (H1a), while photos with text are more common (H1b) in populist visual communication, as superimposed texts can specify the complex visual messages with simplification. Although this can be considered one of populism's main features, both hypotheses were rejected by the data. Populists are less likely to use photos with text than non-populists, while the use of photos without text showed no significant difference.

The second hypothesis was also rejected by the data. Based on populism's tendency to arouse negative emotions towards 'the elite' or 'the others' (Moffitt, 2016), we also assumed that compared to non-populist parties, populists upload more images with negative contexts (H2). However, images are mainly positive both in populist and non-populist communication.

Further hypotheses were formulated related to the depicted content of the images. Based on populism's ordinariness focus, and its anti-elitist claim that is in contrast to the traditional elite-like appearance, three hypotheses were formulated. We assumed that personalized, privatized images are more common in populist visual communication (H3a), while policy issues (H3b) and traditional political work (H3c) are more frequently depicted by non-populists. Built on populist anti-elitism, crisis, and threat-communication, it was also hypothesized that critical visual contents (unfavorable depiction of political opponents) are more frequently applied by populists than non-populists (H3d). Although H3a was rejected, as in the visual communication of parties, personal images are marginal both in populist and non-populist communication, H3b is confirmed by the data with more policy images in the case of non-populists than populists. H3c and H3d are rejected, as both traditional political work and unfavorable depictions of political opponents are rarely present in both cases.

Considering populism's leader-centric nature, we assumed that populist parties more frequently depict their own leaders (H4a), and this hypothesis was confirmed by the data. Further, based on anti-elitism and the creation of crisis and enemies, it was hypothesized that populists depict other parties' leaders (H4b), as well as other countries' leaders (H4c) more often than non-populists. Although H4b was rejected, as other party's leaders and politicians are rarely depicted in both cases, other country's leaders are significantly more often depicted by populists than non-populists, which confirms H4c. Nonetheless, as populism is about 'the people', we expected that populist images depict random people more frequently than non-populists (H4d), which was confirmed by the data. As part of the populist crisis and threat communication, armed forces were assumed to be present more often in populist images than in non-populist ones (H4e). We also expected that populist parties depict more people in their pictures than non-populists (H4f), as it can be a sign of people-centrism. However, both H4e and H4f were rejected by the data.

As signs of ordinariness, casual clothes (H5), politicians' interaction with crowds (H6a), or random people (H6b) were expected to be more often depicted in populist images. The depiction of approving audiences was also assumed to be a populist visual element (H6c). As casual clothes were exceptional in both cases, H5 was rejected, however, politicians' interaction with crowds was more commonly depicted by populists, which confirmed H6a. Nonetheless, H6b and H6c were rejected by the data, as there is no significant difference between the populist and non-populists depiction of interaction with random people, or approving audiences.

Finally, hypotheses related to political symbols and election-related objects were also formulated. It was expected that political symbols, such as EU, country, and party symbols are more often depicted by populists (H7a) in order to trigger positive or negative reactions towards the in- and the outgroups. Data showed that although national symbols were more often depicted by populists than non-populists, there was no significant difference in the presence of EU and party symbols, rejecting H7a. Popular cultural symbols were also assumed to be used more often by populist parties (H7b) to express ordinariness, however, this was also rejected by our data. Media symbols, such as microphones and cameras were expected to be less frequently shown by populists (H8a) based on their negative communication about mass media. In lack of significant differences in populist and non-populist visual communication, this was also rejected by the data. However, election-related objects, such as ballots or ballot boxes were assumed to appear more often in populist images (H8b) as signs of their mobilization focus, and this was supported by our data.

To sum up, Article 2 showed little differences in populist and non-populist visual party communication on Facebook during the 2019 EP campaign. Although research on verbal and textual communication suggests a distinctive populist communication, the analysis of party visuals resulted in only a few remarkable populist features. Its leader-centric nature, ordinariness, and the important role of national symbols can be grasped in the visuals. However, our study suggests that based on populist party visual communication on social media, populists are very similar to their non-populist counterparts. Hence, Article 2 underlined that focusing on visuals of politics can contribute to a more nuanced knowledge on political communication.

### 3.3 Article 3: **The visual and verbal populist style of Viktor Orbán on Facebook**

Xénia Farkas, Márton Bene

Originally submitted:

Farkas, X., & Bene, M. Orbán Viktor vizuális és verbális populista stílusa a Facebookon. Accepted by the journal *Politikatudományi Szemle*, will be published in the 2022/3 issue

Just like Article 2, Article 3 also focused on populist visual communication. However, as Article 2 showed only a few differences in populist and non-populist visual communication in the case of parties, in this article, we turned our attention from parties to an exemplary case of populist leaders, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary. Further, built on the results of Article 2 that contradicted the previous verbal results on populist communication, in Article 3, we created a bimodal coding scheme, which allowed us to focus both on the visual and verbal aspects of social media-based political communication. For that, Moffitt's (2016) populist communication style theory was translated into a measurement system with the use of a few categories from Article 2's coding system. This approach considers populism as a "symbolically mediated performance" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46) that contains not only verbal but visual elements as well, thus we could compare these two modalities. Further, as both Article 1 and Article 2 focused on campaign periods, in Article 3, we broadened our investigation's period into different periods as well: from 2018 to 2020, besides election periods, we examined the whole first and the half of the second wave of COVID-19, and periods of slow news that is called cucumber time in the news industry.

Research on the visual aspects of populism has already shown a variety of visual populist characteristics, however, they could offer only fragmented results. Nonetheless, Moffitt's (2016) political communication style approach allows a more complex and amalgamated investigation by connecting the now dispersed findings into an integrated framework of a theoretically grounded approach.

As Moffitt (2016) describes it, the populist communication style is built on three main elements: 1) appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 2) bad manners; 3) crisis, breakdown, and threat communication. These dimensions have further sub-dimensions, such as people-centrism, closeness to 'the people', distance to 'the elite', the distinctive role of the leader, the leader's ordinariness and extraordinariness, the use of slang, coarse words, politically incorrectness, the creation of crisis and enemies, and oversimplification of complex issues. After translating these into visual and verbal categories, we applied the coding instrument on the posts of Viktor Orbán to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which dimension of Moffitt's (2016) populist style was applied most prominently in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts?

RQ2: Are there differences between the image and textual messages of Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts?

RQ3: Were there differences in Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication across the campaign period, the COVID-19 crisis period, and the non-campaign period?

Results of the bimodal quantitative content analysis suggested that the Prime Minister is often presented in the pictures, which is not only in line with populism's leader-centric nature but the findings of Article 1 about the increased personalization of social media-based visual communication as well. However, verbal self-references were rare. Further, although the people-centric characteristics of populism would suggest the common presence of 'the people', results showed an only moderate visual depiction of and verbal reference to them. Nonetheless, 'the elite' was the second most commonly presented actor in the posts. Surprisingly, the valence of the posts where 'the elite' are present, was not predominantly negative, as populism's anti-elite feature would suggest. On the contrary, these posts were more frequently positive. Another striking finding is that the supposed enemies of Viktor Orbán, such as the migrants, George Soros, or Ferenc Gyurcsány were not present in the image posts of the Prime Minister.

Considering the first Research Question, it can be said that Moffitt's (2016) dimensions, in general, were applied differently: the appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite' categories were applied often, the creation of crisis, breakdown, and threat was applied moderately, while the bad manners categories were hardly applied. The details of the dimensions show that closeness and ordinariness categories are often present through performative rituals, expressions, national symbols, and the informal clothing of the leader. Extraordinariness is mainly presented by the depiction of media interest around the leader and his accomplishments. Elites are presented not only by elite actors but through the depiction of a setting that signifies wealth.

To answer the second Research Question it can be said that closeness categories are presented rather verbally, while ordinariness and the elites are depicted more frequently visually. As national symbols and casual clothing of the leader are the main conveyors of ordinariness, it is not surprising that this dimension is predominantly visually presented. Extraordinariness is also more presented visually than verbally, while bad manners and threats appeared similarly verbally and visually.

Results showed only slight differences across the time periods. Closeness categories are more common during the campaign period than in the other periods, while threat categories are applied more frequently during the COVID-19 period than during the campaigns or the cucumber times. There are no remarkable differences during the periods in the application of ordinariness categories, but they are more common during the period of COVID-19 than during the cucumber period.

Hence, as a conclusion of Article 3's findings, it can be noted that the Hungarian Prime Minister's social media-based populist style can be only partially grasped by the application of Moffitt's (2016) approach. Viktor Orbán's communication on Facebook is mainly built on the appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite' dimension, however, the presentation of the elites is far from negative.



Orbán's communication does not truly differ across the time periods, it stays predominantly consistent across the campaign, crisis, and cucumber periods. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that some populist communication style elements were identified more commonly visually than verbally, which fact underlines the importance and necessity of visual political communication research.

#### 4. Conclusions

- Although visuals are important part of political communication, research on the field of visual politics just gained momentum only in the last decade. The dissertation aimed to contribute to this emerging research area, where a number of research questions remained unanswered still.
- The thesis' general research questions are related to 1) the social media-based visual political communication strategies of different political actors, 2) the influence of external factors –such as the different social media platforms, time periods, modalities, or the identification as populist or non-populist– on visual political communication, and 3) the effects of social media-based visual communication. To this end, the thesis provides three related studies.
- The three articles of the dissertation contributed to a better understanding of visual political communication on social media at least in three general ways: highlighted and compared visual personalization strategies and their effects on different social media platforms, described the similarities and differences of populist visual communication of parties and tested the populist style of an exemplary populist leader across different periods and modalities.
- The first article discussed visual personalization strategies and effects on two different social media platforms: Facebook and Instagram.
- Our results showed that personalization is an important visual political communication strategy on both platforms. However, on Facebook, its more formal dimension, individualization is present, while on Instagram visual communication is characterized by its more informal dimension, privatization.
- Further, user engagement indicators showed that personalized visual contents are more liked on both platforms than images without personalization. Nonetheless, on Facebook, individualized visuals are more likely to be liked than on Instagram, but privatized images are not more liked on Instagram than on Facebook.
- The second article's results showed that there is no strikingly distinct populist visual communication in parties' Facebook communication. However, there are some features that might signal visual populism: the remarkably frequent depiction of the leaders, national symbols, and ordinariness in terms of the presence of 'the people'.
- The third article's findings suggested that Moffitt's (2016) populist style approach is only partially able to describe Viktor Orbán's populist style.
- The Hungarian Prime Minister's Facebook posts mainly applied the appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite' dimensions of populism, crisis and threat communication was somewhat relevant, while bad manners categories are not common.

- Further, the article showed only minor differences across the different periods, which result indicates the consistent communication of Viktor Orbán. However, we could describe that some populist features are predominantly depicted only by visuals, which underlines the need to examine visuals in political communication.
- Although all three studies had a different research focus in terms of research questions, in general, some differences and similarities in the visual communication of the three examined actor types –a populist leader, Viktor Orbán, European parties, and Hungarian candidates– can be highlighted.
- One of the main similarities is personalization: all three actors often use images to depict individual politicians and leaders.
- A further similarity between the European populist parties and Viktor Orbán is the remarkably frequent depiction of national symbols, and ordinariness, however, not in the case of the presence of ‘the people’. Also, positive valence was common in all three cases.
- Considering the differences, ‘the people’ are often depicted in the case of European populist parties, which is not true for Orbán, whose images depicted less often ‘the people’ than ‘the elite’. Further, European parties do not depict leaders or candidates in casual clothes, while Viktor Orbán’s shirt is almost always casual, unbuttoned at the top.
- Considering the findings of the dissertation on the strategic visual communication of politicians on social media, the following concluding ideas can be drawn.
- Personalization, the focus on the leader, and application of a positive tone, and certain populist elements (e.g. depiction of ordinary people, the elites, and national symbols) are prominent visual political communication strategies.
- Further, visual political communication can be considered quite consistent. Although there are some differences in the use of the different platforms, between parties, and periods, these are not remarkable: there seems to be a kind of professionalization, thereby a standardization of visual political communication.
- Finally, as the emerging research area of visual politics is still in great need of portable coding systems, the dissertation has an additional contribution to the field by providing three coding instruments that allow visual, and bimodal investigations related to political communication strategies, personalization, and populism.

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