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CONCEPTUALISING ‘VULNERABILITY TO POPULIST NARRATIVES’.
THE MESSIANIC CLAIM OF POPULIST LEADERS

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Abstract: Populism has grown immensely in the last decade - both as a political phenomenon and as a research topic. The burgeoning scientific literature on populism seeks to understand its electoral success by looking into the profile of those who manifest propensity towards voting for politicians and political organisations employing populism as a communication strategy. However, capturing the nuances of populism seems to be very difficult, especially in the context of the current profound societal changes. As such, we argue that scientific efforts need to look beyond what has been studied so far. Moshe Idel is a well-known scholar in the field of Jewish studies. However, his research proves to be valuable even outside his primary field of expertise. A close re-examination of Moshe Idel's writings reveal explanations for a general frame in which the attraction towards populism can be understood. Building on Moshe Idel's argumentation and looking into original data collected through an online interactive platform during the 2020 elections for the Romanian parliament, the current paper offers an early conceptualisation of 'populist vulnerability', and argues that it is primarily fed by the messianic claim of populist leaders.

Key words: populism, populist vulnerability, messianism, saviour, leadership, political proximity, vote advice application.

1. Introduction. Populists posing as 'Saviors of the People'

The proclivity of populist politicians to pose as 'saviours of the people' was extensively studied in recent years (McDonnell 2017; Mao 2017; Welsh 2018; Asavei 2022). The success of such narratives has been mostly attributed to the charisma of populist leaders (Pappas 2016, 2). However, political charisma has evolved into quite of a contested concept, especially given the advent of modern political advertising, which perfected strategies to construct charisma - even in the absence of a truly charismatic leader (Oleshchuk 2020, 39). What is more, recent studies also point to the fact that social media represents a breeding ground for a sort of artificial charisma, given the possibilities it offers for strict content control via self-presentation and profile-editing (Kissas 2020, 272). The personalisation of political communication is a strategy that populists have come to master, and scientific literature constantly underlined this trait (Martinelli 2016; Glukhova 2017; Berti, 2021).

Earlier research pointed out that populist leaders pursue a role that can also be deemed as religious, given the fact that they project upon themselves the image of a prophet, with a messianic task (Mao 2017, 68). It is not uncommon for populist leaders to resort to emotional appeals that publicly inflate their image of selflessness, to highlight their profile of 'saviours' that act solely in the benefit of the People (Welsh 2018, 96). This profile of a 'macho' saviour is sometimes supported by references to myths of national-religious unity (Stoica 2017; Ungureanu & Popartan 2020, 38).

Like many other countries, Romania has quite a rich history of populist political communication. Ever since the fall of the communist regime, several parties have employed discursive techniques that pivoted the many at the bottom of the society against the few elites at the top. Championing this style of communication were, more or less successively, the Party for the Unity of the Romanian Nation (PUNR), Greater Romania Party (PRM), Dan Diaconescu People's Party (PPDD), and now the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). Their communication was deeply personalised, and their leaders portrayed themselves as saviours - many times referring to religious symbols. As was highlighted by Asavei (2022), "religiousness constitutes the common cultural ground between the leaders and their people".

The current paper continues with conceptualising 'populist vulnerability' by referring to the tendency of populist leaders to portray themselves as saviours of the People, claiming to resemble Messiahs. We then examine Moshe Idel's scholarly work on messianism from the perspective of communication sciences, in order to define one of the main characteristics of 'populist vulnerability', namely the belief that political leaders always need to closely listen to the needs of the people. We then test the concept by analysing data collected through a Vote Advice Ap-

plication designed for the Romanian parliamentary elections held in Romania in 2020.

2. Defining Vulnerability to Populist Narratives

The Coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine have propelled populist political figures to unprecedented electoral heights. At least partly, explanations rest on the extraordinary ability of populists to use communication strategies to position themselves against mainstream political actors (Mazzoleni 2008), who seem to be overwhelmed and many a times outdated. Moreover, the wide-ranging societal implications of both events mentioned above have tested trust in politics to a breaking point. Both earlier and more recent literature on populism strongly emphasise the link that is established between crises and the rise of populism (Taggart 2004; Mudde 2010). Some scholars even argue that populism is actually one of the main triggers of a political crisis (Moffitt 2015: 194). Recent elections in European countries ended up with a significant number of voters turning to parties that exhibited a strong populist discourse. As such, populism has become one of today's most prominent topics of research in various fields, ranging from communication, political science, to cultural studies, with a considerable number of scholars concentrating their attention towards understanding its development, success and effects. However, given the very recent nature of the Coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine, studies have only marginally managed to capture current political perception in relation to populist communication. Moreover, a significant limitation of the existing research on populism is represented by the fact that most of the literature focuses on the sources of populist communication, rather than on those exposed to it. This leads to at least a two-fold problem: on the one hand, focusing only on sources that are labelled as populist could partially bias the research, as non-populist sources are not always and necessarily free of populist narratives, and on the other hand it allows research to explore beyond the contradictions and paradoxes that characterized the populist discourse during the pandemic (Brubaker 2020, 2).

Successful political communication relies on narratives, which are very powerful tools of communication that allow speakers to portray themselves – whether as active agents or passive experiencers – in opposition to others. Narratives explain why life has developed the way it did, finding both causal and moral explanations (Patterson & Monroe 1998). They construct the basis for a sense of collective identity, therefore representing the means through which identities are created, conserved or changed over time. Narrative and identity are fundamental for the maintenance and reproduction of political conflict (Hammack 2010). Even more so, an emergency or crisis – as was the pandemic and is the war –

develop a “blaming system” (Abraham 2011) that allows populism to flourish, exploiting the declining trust in democratic institutions and mobilising discontent with politics altogether by fueling sentiments of distrust, cynicism and alienation (Krouwel & Abts 2007).

Populism is a communication strategy that frames politics as a struggle between the many but powerless people on the one side, and the few but powerful elites on the other (Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Stoica 2021). In sending their message across, populists tend to employ conspiracy theories which many times fuel disbelief in others, discontent and radicalization (Van Prooijen et al. 2022). However, such narratives become efficient only when finding a favorable context and when they reach individuals who accept and eventually multiply them. There is an abundant literature on ‘populist attitudes’, which represent attempts to map the profile of those who exhibit high propensity towards adhering to such narratives. It is in this sense that scientific literature points to a number of variables, among which: income difficulties, low capacity of coping with modernisation and/or globalization (Betz & Immerfall 1998), anger (Rico et al. 2017), and in some cases anxiety and fear (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). However, it is often the case that research on this topic is fragmented, looking towards single-issue explanations for populist attitudes. In a recent study, Van Prooijen et al. (2022) look at a multitude of variables that explain attraction towards populism and, in this sense, study the tendency of individuals to accept unsubstantiated or even obscure claims as being true. The study found that populist attitudes were explained by increased credulity of politically neutral news items, nonsense receptivity, and paranormal beliefs.

3. The significance of Moshe Idel’s explanations on messianism in understanding ‘populist vulnerability’

Through his works, Moshe Idel offers prodigious explanations for what Messianism is and how it is employed as an object of research in various fields of study (Idel 1998; Idel 2004; Idel 2012). What is of remarkable relevance for the research of populism is what the author refers to as the “sources of messianic consciousness” (Idel 1998: 1). The arguments that we will touch up, based on these specific ideas presented by Moshe Idel, seek to clarify why in our perspective populist movements do not present their leaders as simple ‘saviours’ of the People (McDonnell 2017, 27), but as outright Messiahs.

Relevant to note is the fact that Moshe Idel underlines how the personality fulfilling the Messianic role should ideally be much less important than the messianic function in itself. However, usually the tendency is to elevate the personality to such an extent that it downplays the function (Idel 1998, 13). This perspective can offer a valuable

explanation for why populist political figures tend to be very successful, given their mastering of the personalization of political communication. Moshe Idel continues by explaining that whenever more attention is concentrated towards the persona and not towards what should be a "transpersonal function", the personalization generates an attitude of faith, and less so of hope - which is ultimately what messianism entails (Idel 1998, 14). Connecting this idea to conclusions that research on populism have reached, 'faith' is used by populist political actors to exclude, rather than include (Van Kessel 2016, 76). Therefore, populists embody a false Messiah, because their political communication strategies function as weapons for polarisation (Palonen 2009, 322).

One of the initial conclusions that Moshe Idel arrives at in his work and which is of utmost relevance for studying the messianic claims of populists is that "messianism stands both for the general belief in someone's messianic role and for someone's belief in his own messianic role" (Idel 1998, 15). The methods used in the academic research of political communication render it very difficult (if not impossible) to truly understand the profound objectives and motivations of politicians who employ populism as a style in their political communication. For such research purposes, scholars can resort only to data that represents self-presentations of populist politicians. Scientific literature identified the tendency of such politicians to present themselves as victims of the 'system' or of the political mainstream. The 'self-victimisation' strategy or the 'victim narrative' are a common trait of populists around the world (Sükösd, 2022, 170). The victimhood narrative allows populist leaders to pose as authentic, as opposed to mainstream political figures, and thus appeal to those who feel left behind and who hope for historical vengeance (Al-Ghazzi 2021, 46).

This leads us to considering yet another perspective offered by Moshe Idel in his account of factors that contribute to the emergence of messianism, i. e. the 'traumatic-historic' interpretation, which the author recognizes to be the most popular explanation in Jewish studies for the appearances of the Messiah (Idel 1998: 6). Idel also recognizes that "not every historical trauma will necessarily precipitate an outburst of messianism" (Idel 1998, 126), therefore scholars should be very careful in discriminating between what does and what does not constitute historical instances that can be interpreted as 'traumatic'. Moshe Idel brings two amendments that clearly explain why one should be very careful with this interpretation. On the one hand, he mentions that the perspective of a crisis triggers most of the time a feeling of opportunity, and less of a motivation. In addition, we find out that the 'apocalyptic man' actively seeks a crisis, which makes him incompatible with a Messiah (Idel 1998, 7). On the other hand, Moshe Idel rightfully stresses that one should look for messianic awareness in situations that bring hope, rather than those that develop in situations of despair (Idel 1998, 8).

This brings another solid argument for why the messianic claim of populists rests on falsehood, as they feed on crises, and even contribute to their escalation. Both earlier and more recent literature strongly emphasize the link that is established between crises and the rise of contemporary populism (Taggart 2000, 2002, 2004; Mudde 2010; Mişcoiu 2014). In fact, some scholars even argue that whenever there is an opportunity in doing so, populism is actually one of the main triggers of a political crisis (Moffitt 2015, 194).

Moshe Idel also tackles the ambiguities of the concept "messianism". The author clarifies that messianism can refer either to one's self-reflection and understanding of their own messianic role, or to the popular belief in someone's messianic role (Idel 1998, 15). Idel continues by explaining that "phenomenologically we are speaking about different religious orientations" which require distinct research tools. While the first resorts to psychological tools, the latter uses scientific tools that are appropriate for the analysis of mass movements (Idel 1998, 15). Researching the degree to which messianism influences populist vulnerability represents primarily a question of political behaviour, and therefore rests on research methods that are appropriate for mass movements.

Idel's reflections on the pyramidal structure of messianism are very relevant, as the concept explains the connection between the Messiahs at the top of the pyramid on the one side and the ordinary people at the bottom on the other. The author recognizes that "in the popular forms of messianism the pyramid seems to be much flatter since the elaborate ideology is less important and the distance between the top and the base is smaller" (Idel 1998, 12). As such, the re-examination of Moshe Idel's writings from a political communication perspective offers a revealing understanding of the concept of 'populist vulnerability'.

4. Testing the concept of 'populist vulnerability' by linking it to the 'flat pyramidal system'

For the purpose of this study, we conceptualise 'populist vulnerability' as the inclination of voters to project upon and request from politicians qualities of Messiahs that maintain a flat pyramidal structure between them and their followers, in an effort to break down intermediaries between them and ordinary people. We will test the concept by looking into data collected during the electoral campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania. The data was gathered through an online interactive platform under the form of a Vote Advice Application (VAA), launched in November 2020, at the beginning of the campaign. VAAs are online voter information tools that allow users to find the party or candidate that best matches their preferences, after filling in a questionnaire (Germann & Gemenis 2019, 150). VAAs provide rich data,

given the fact that they feature more items than representative surveys usually do, and receive answers from large numbers of citizens (Toshkov & Krouwel 2022, 464).

“Busola electorală” (the name of the online VAA for the Romanian elections in 2020) allowed users to compare their political preferences to those of the main political competitors at the time, i. e. the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL), the Save Romania Union (USR PLUS) and the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR). Although the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) was rarely present in the traditional media and was usually omitted in most of the national surveys, “Busola electorală” did include AUR, thus allowing us to collect valuable data related to the voters of this new populist party, which eventually became the fourth largest political force in the Romanian parliament (Stoica et al. 2021).

In order to tap into the expectations of voters related to the behaviour of political leaders, we use a question that asked respondents how important they considered politicians to always closely listen to the problems of the People. As such, we test whether the ‘flat pyramidic system’ mentioned by Moshe Idel in his work is indeed a characteristic of voters of parties that are labelled as populist (in our case, AUR) and can thus constitute one of the characteristics of ‘populist vulnerability’. This allows for testing the relationship between the propensity to vote for each of the competitors in the elections and the subjective understanding of the ideal political proximity between the leader and the People.

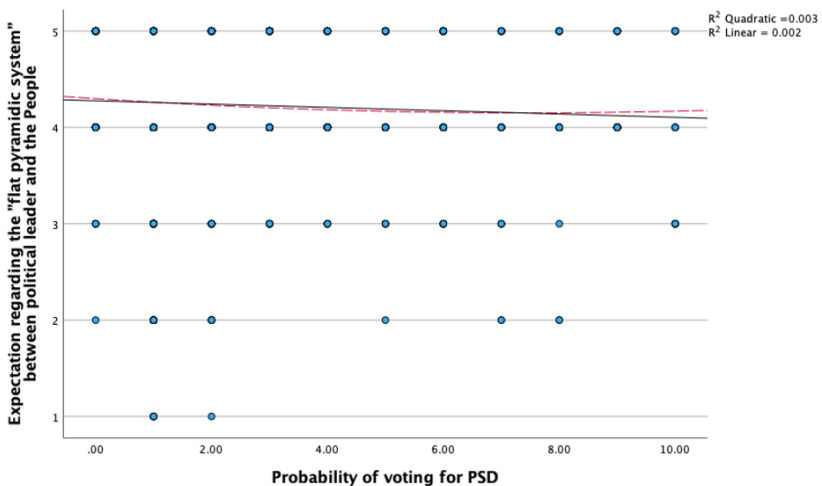


Figure 1. The “flat pyramidic system” expectation as a linear and quadratic function of voting preferences for the Social Democratic Party (PSD)

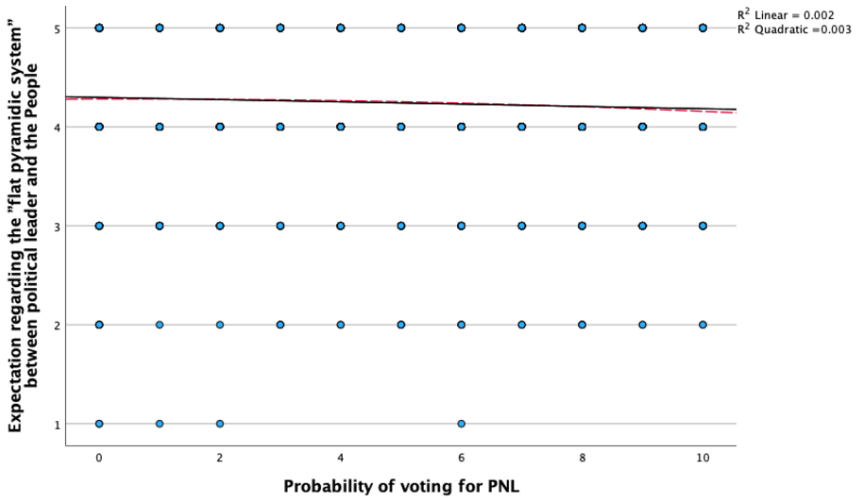


Figure 2. The "flat pyramidal system" expectation as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the National Liberal Party (PNL)

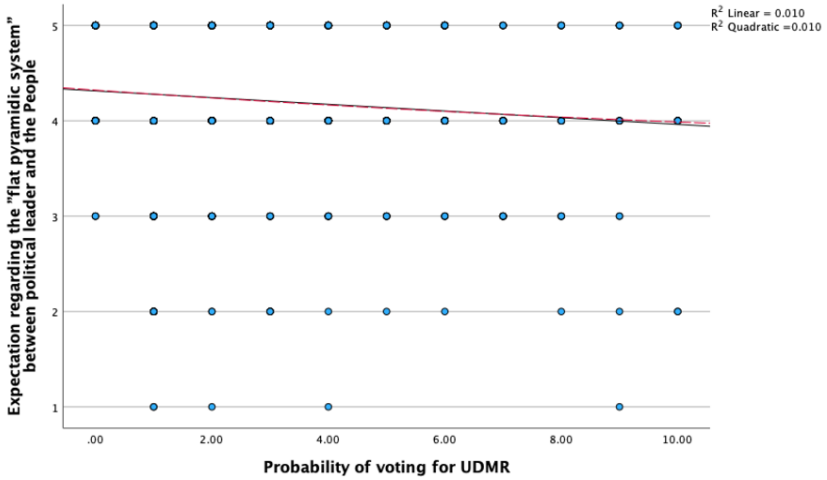


Figure 3. The "flat pyramidal system" expectation as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania (UDMR)

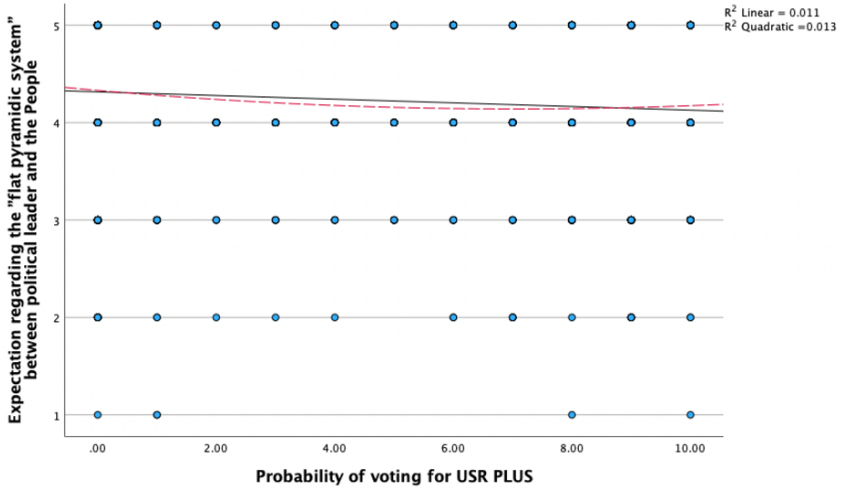


Figure 4. The "flat pyramidal system" expectation as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Save Romania Union (USR PLUS)

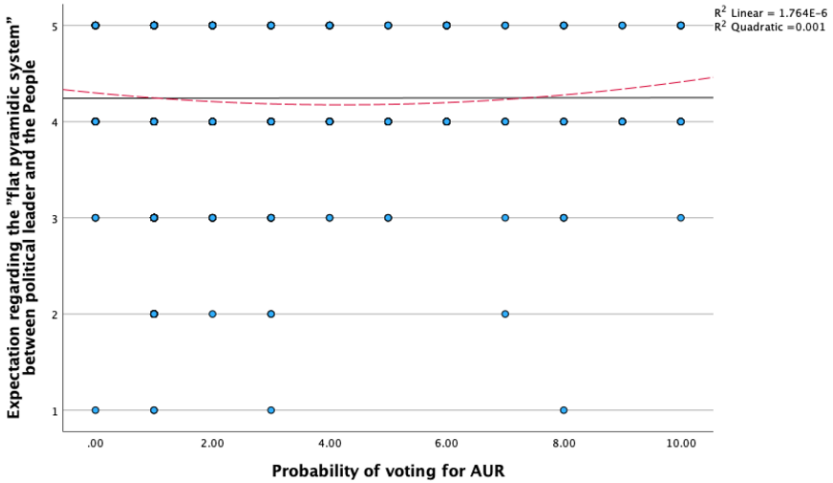


Figure 5. The "flat pyramidal system" expectation as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)

The tests presented above bring to light interesting results, as there are a number of possible interpretations regarding how expectations related to political proximity differ relative to the propensity to vote for the parties that ran in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania. The linear effects show which respondents are more likely to be in favour of a 'flat pyramidal system', i.e. whether it is those with a low or those with a high propensity to vote for the party under analysis. However, the quadratic effect reveals more of a nuanced perspective, as it shows if there

is a curvilinear pattern, i. e. if perceptions of respondents at the extremes differ as compared to the more moderate respondents. In other words, the results indicate both the general tendency that characterises the public under analysis, as well as a more complex insight on the relation between propensity to vote (as an independent variable) and the expectation related to the 'flat pyramidic system' (as a dependent variable).

Most political parties, i. e. PSD, PNL, USR PLUS, and UDMR, seem to have electorates that each tend to agree less with the fact that politicians always need to closely listen to the problems of the people. Differences appear when we look at the curvilinear patterns: the electorates of PSD and USR PLUS seem to have higher expectations at the extremes, which means that respondents who exhibit a very low or a very high propensity to vote for these parties manifest a higher 'flat pyramidic system' expectation. Answers related to PNL exhibit the exact opposite behaviour: the more we look towards the extremes (i. e. those who have a very low and those who have a very high propensity to vote for this party), expectations related to a direct connection between political leaders and the People decrease.

Answers related to AUR represent the only outlier. Regardless of their propensity to vote for AUR, respondents remain consistent: they agree with the fact that the relation between political leaders and their followers should resemble a 'flat pyramidic system'. Moreover, there is a clear curvilinear pattern, as both those who have a low and those who have a high propensity to vote for AUR consider political proximity to be more important than those who do not manifest strong sentiments towards this party. The current results represent an initial indication that the electorate of populist parties expect higher political proximity than the electorate of parties which are commonly labelled as non-populist. This attitude can also stem from the low levels of trust in intermediary decision-making structures that characterise voters of populist parties (Fieschi & Heywood 2004, 290). Whereas voters of other parties rely to a greater extent on the functioning of democratic institutions, those of populist parties tend not to do the same, probably also influenced by the inclination of populist politicians to assault these institutions (Levitsky & Loxton 2013, 125). More recent studies point to the fact that voters of populist parties display a greater need for leadership also because of the self-uncertainty of the voter. Populist leaders can instil a sense of belonging, as they are usually considered to represent "one of us", so the opposite of an external threat (Hogg 2021, 252). In fact, the People and the populist leader function as one, and in the populist discourse both of them are elevated above secular political institutions (Mao 2017, 62).

It might also be useful to look into another aspect that reflects expectations related to political proximity. Respondents were also asked if they agree with the fact that politicians don't have to spend time among

people to do a good job. Results reveal an even more nuanced perspective of the ‘flat pyramidic system’.

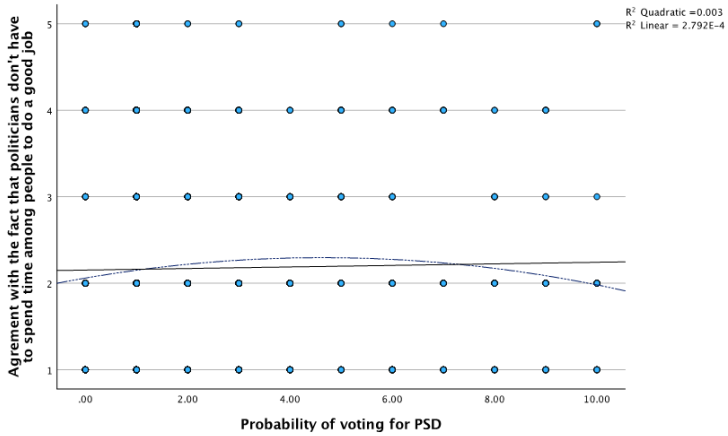


Figure 6. ‘Spending time among people’ as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Social Democratic Party (PSD)

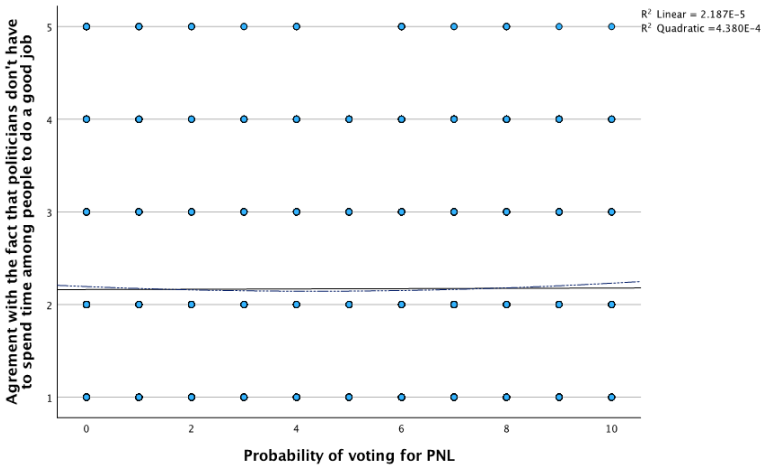


Figure 7. ‘Spending time among people’ as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the National Liberal Party (PNL)

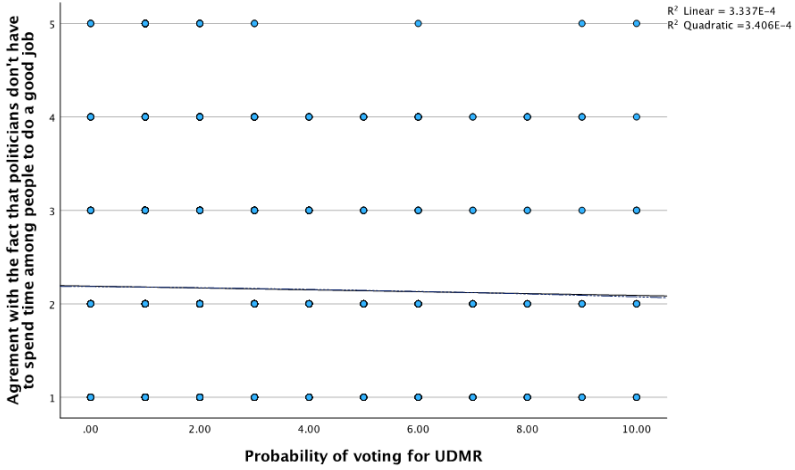


Figure 8. ‘Spending time among people’ as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR)

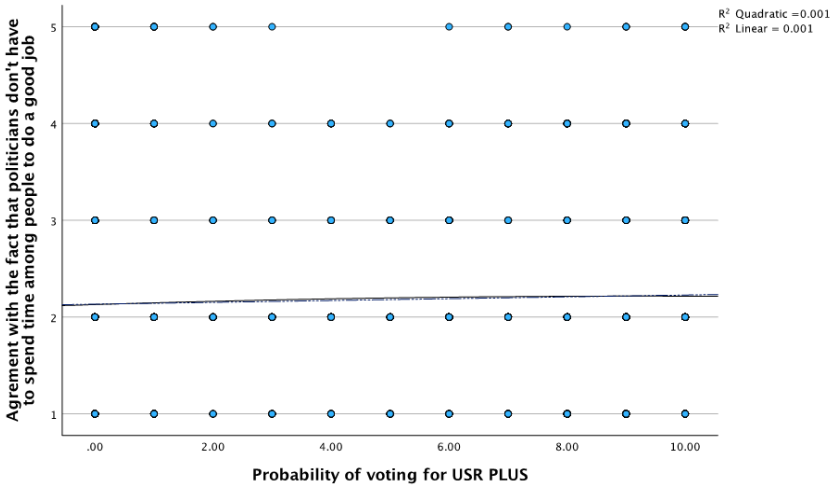


Figure 9. ‘Spending time among people’ as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Save Romania Union (USR PLUS)

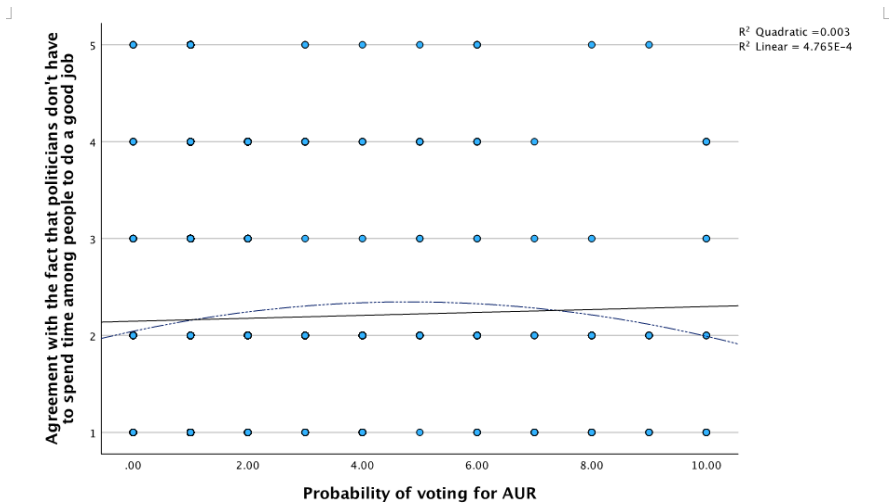


Figure 10. 'Spending time among people' as a linear and quadratic function of voter preferences for the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR)

Results indicate that, except for the electorate of UDMR, all respondents – even those with a high propensity to vote for AUR – consider that politicians do not have to spend time among people to do a good job. However, AUR and PSD manifest similar patterns: the higher the propensity to vote for these parties, the greater the perception that politicians need to spend time with their followers. This perspective adds to the efforts of understanding the logic of political communication for each case study separately, as well as for comparative purposes. It also brings a contribution in the direction of identifying what contributes to the success of self-proclaimed 'political Messiahs'.

5. Final remarks

The current paper explored the concept of 'populist vulnerability' by employing a framework that is offered by Moshe Idel for understanding messianism. We found Idel's reflections on the pyramidal structure of messianism to be relevant in understanding the expectations of individuals regarding the behaviour of political leaders. We also built our reasoning on previous research that identified the tendency of populist leaders to pose not only as 'saviours', but much more than that: as Messiahs that are ready to make any sacrifice needed for the betterment of the People. To understand whether the political discourse of populist politicians echoes the perceptions of their voters, we looked into original data collected by an interactive online platform in times in which populist attitudes flourished, more precisely in the midst of the Covid-19 pan-

demic, December 2020, when Romania became one of the few countries to hold elections.

The results of our study indicate that there is not only a 'supply' side of messianism - manifested through the political communication of populists, but quite a robust 'demand' side as well. Compared to the electorate of other parties, the voters of populist parties believe that political proximity should be an indispensable characteristic of politicians. As such, voters of populist parties advocate for a flat pyramidal structure, which matches Moshe Idel's model of a direct communication between the top and the bottom of the 'pyramid', in the absence of an elaborate ideology. The conclusions we reached add to the existing scholarly efforts and represent premises for further work that seeks to understand what drives individuals into voting for populist parties and politicians worldwide. However, expecting politicians to closely listen to the problems people face is not a dangerous attitude per se. However, if coupled with lack of trust in institutions and incapacity to understand the need for strong institutions, or if it is understood outside the context of political accountability, such an attitude can develop into 'populist vulnerability'.

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