

East/West: New Divisions, New Connections in a Populist Political Reality

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Abstract: This paper takes as its title the overall theme of the 25th Conference of The International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS). Delivered as the brief presidential address at the opening of the conference, the paper first outlines the purpose and organization of IAICS, then dwells on the concepts of populism, nationalism, political rhetoric and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Populism, nationalism, political rhetoric, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Dear chair of the organizing committee Dr. Lenka Waschkova Cisarova and members of the organizing committee, dear members and officers of IAICS, dear conference participants, dear keynote speakers, dear colleagues and friends. Let me first thank you, Lenka, for your kind words of welcome! This is the 25th conference of IAICS and we are delighted to be here at Masaryk University in lovely Brno. Two years ago at our 23rd conference at Macau Polytechnic Institute, the Board of Directors gave me a mandate to find a European partner for our conference in 2019. This would be the first time IAICS convened in Europe, which was one of my priorities as the first IAICS President from Europe. One year ago at our 24th conference at DePaul University in Chicago, Dr. Michael Elavsky presented Masaryk University as the host of the 2019 conference. He convinced us that no better choice could be made than Masaryk University and Brno in the heart of Europe! The impressive program that has been arranged counts around 100 abstracts on a wide range of issues, all addressing the conference theme “East/West: New Divisions, New Connections in a Populist Political Reality.” We are all looking ahead to the presentations and discussions over the next few days.

2. IAICS

IAICS today counts around 175 members from 25 countries. Since becoming President in 2017, I have had the privilege of cooperating closely with our Board of Directors, especially with our Executive Director Prof. Mao Sihui and President Elect Prof. Margaret D’Silva. Margaret will succeed me as President after this conference and we shared many thoughts on the train yesterday from Vienna. I don’t think you could have a better President than her. Our journal *Intercultural Communication Studies* is edited in Macao by Prof. Joanna Radwanska-Williams and by Co-editor Prof. Roland Sussex based in Australia. Our website with free back issues of our journal going back to 1991, has since 2014 been hosted by The University of Rhode Island by my predecessor as President, Prof. Guo-Ming Chen (Vaagan 2016,2019). Earlier today during the meeting of our Board of Directors and the Editorial Board meeting we decided on several organizational issues that will affect our statutes, our activities, our

journal and our website. One very significant change is that our new Executive Director, Dr. Monika Metykova, University of Sussex, will succeed Prof. Mao Sihui with effect from this conference. I have known Monika for some years now; we have been doing accreditation in Croatia together and she will be a very capable Executive Director. It is therefore with great optimism and confidence that I am handing over the responsibilities of my office to the new leadership of IAICS.

Although our Board of Directors today has decided to adjust somewhat our constitution (statutes and bylaws) so we can be incorporated as a legal entity in the state of Virginia, our organizational goals and structure remain much the same as in the past: IAICS is a non-profit organization dedicated to educational and scholarly purposes only. The goals of our annual conferences remain the same:

- To bring together international educators and scholars to share ideas and experiences from diverse interdisciplinary perspectives on communication across cultures.
- To provide a forum for the exchange of scholarly research on issues relating to communication across language and culture.
- To disseminate through monographs, journals and websites recent research and thinking on emerging issues relating to language and culture.
- To bring different academic disciplines together to share theoretical insights and findings about communication across cultures.

3. 25th Conference Theme

The conference theme is *East/West: New Divisions, New Connections in a Populist Political Reality*. This is also the title of my presidential address. The Call for Papers spells out the current political situation in much of Europe, and it is perhaps more explicitly political than we are accustomed to in IAICS, since individual countries and politics are specified. But again, this is the situation we are facing in much of Europe and a situation that I as a North European will be addressing in more detail in a joint presentation with a colleague from the Netherlands later in this conference when we discuss the rise of the political rhetoric of the extreme right in Norway and the Netherlands. In our joint presentation, we will trace the influence of a mass killing in Norway in 2011 by a right-wing terrorist on the political rhetoric of the extreme right in Europe and beyond, including the Christchurch killings in New Zealand in March 2019. The results of this research are forthcoming in Vaagan (2020).

As the Call for Papers to this conference spells out:

“...the rise of populism in the US and in Europe has been linked to a number of socio-cultural and political phenomena. Divisive migration policies and political discourses have resulted in an increase in racially motivated crime and racist attitudes and overall in less tolerance for difference, which applies to a broad range of countries from the US to the United Kingdom, and from Hungary to Austria. Far right and populist parties have enjoyed electoral success in some liberal democracies and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán openly declared his goal of building an illiberal democracy. 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, with many of the central European countries that once formed part of the Soviet Bloc now being

members of the European Union and NATO. However, the tensions surrounding deeply held attitudes that exist between the new "Eastern" and the old "Western" members keep re-surfacing, most recently in relation to the so-called refugee crisis that peaked in 2015. The relationship between Russia and the European Union is at a critical low point, with some referring to the return of the Cold War era *realpolitik*. The US has declared a trade war on China as well as the EU; President Trump withdrew the country from the Paris Agreement and the UN Human Rights Council. Concerns about the crushing of freedom of speech and stricter censorship have been raised in a number of countries, including Egypt, Russia and Turkey.”

4. Populism, Nationalism

A key concept in the Call is “populism”. ‘Populism’ is often used pejoratively about politicians’ cheap and emotional propaganda. Populists offer simplistic solutions to complex political problems in a very direct and demagogic language, appealing to the common sense of the people and denouncing the intellectualism of the established elites. This is partly why it remains a contested concept in the social sciences, according to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Abts and van Kessel, 2015, pp. 609-612). Some clarity was attempted to be introduced by Reinemann et al. (2019) who saw it as a form of political communication characterized by some crucial key elements, notably reference to or the construction of ‘the people’ combined with anti-elitism and the exclusion of out-groups, e.g. various minorities and migrants that are not seen as a legitimate part of the ‘real’ people.

Several analysts have warned that legal developments in many European countries are weakening the basis of democracy, especially a) concentration of executive power, b) weakening of judicial independence, c) restrictions on the freedom of associations and meetings, d) restrictions on democratic participation, e) weakening of legal individual security, f) reinforced laws on morality, and g) academic freedom. In addition, there have also been internments of asylum seekers and bans on offending political leaders (Tartar, 2017).

During the recent European Union parliamentary elections in May 2019, the far right gained ground but far less than pre-election polls had predicted and what pro-EU forces had feared. A united European far right seems less likely after the elections because divergent views persist regarding migration and sanctions towards Russia (Anderson, 2019).

The rise of populism in the West has been attributed to various factors such as economic insecurity, a backlash against immigration and fake news, increased nationalism and even xenophobia, perceived islamization, and probably also a lack of shared spaces where people can meet and mingle. Lochocki (2018) bases his analysis on case studies of France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. He argues that a “crisis of conservatism” occasioned the rise of nationalist parties, and that the populist radical right’s “political messaging” on identity issues such as the European Union and immigration has been instrumental for its success.

Judging from our conference program, the distinguished keynote speakers and many presenters will address these questions over the next two days.

It might therefore be of some use to remind ourselves that the Latin phrase ‘Vox populi, vox dei’ (The voice of the people [is] the voice of God’) shows that in a European context the term ‘populism’ is certainly not new and can be traced back to Antiquity. Nonetheless, in the social sciences it is usually argued that the Russian *narodniki* movement of the 1860s-1870s was the first appearance of modern populism in the West (Abts and van Kessel, 2015, p. 609).

5. Political Rhetoric

Martin (2014) argues that the study of rhetoric “is now an inclusive term for a wide range of themes related to communicating, arguing and persuading through symbols” (p. 9). He notes that rhetoric is currently studied in fields as diverse as classics and history, literature, law, philosophy, culture studies, psychology and even economics. While rhetorical analysis has traditionally addressed written and spoken communication, it now comprises visual forms. The approach adopted by Martin is to introduce elements of rhetoric as they concern the study of politics and political theory. His main focus is on political discourses – that is, speech oriented towards relations of power and practices of citizenship.

Rhetoric always had its critics, like Plato, who considered it as deceitful or empty verbosity. Yet Aristotle and subsequent scholars regarded rhetoric as a neutral art to be used for good or ill. In contemporary information and communication societies where social media play an increasingly important role (Vaagan, 2015) there are grounded fears that entire populations can be manipulated by rhetorical politicians, “fake news” and uncritically receptive audiences (Larsen, 2015). In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in late September 2019, President Trump praised patriotism, state sovereignty and nationalism while criticizing globalization. Speaking a few days later, the President of The European Council, Donald Tusk, rejected these views and delivered a strong defense of international cooperation. He added that instead of accusing others of spreading “fake news”, Trump would be best advised to stop lying (Ording, 2019).

6. Intercultural Communication

Finally, a few words on our discipline: intercultural communication studies. There are many books and journals dedicated to intercultural communication that all reflect its increasing importance. What the opposing worldviews of President Trump or President Tusk have in common is that they both mean that there is a growing need for intercultural communication. As an example of our discipline’s relevance, let me mention a recent textbook titled *Introducing Intercultural Communication. Global Culture and Contexts* by our Australian colleagues Shuang Liu, ZalaVolcic and Cindy Gallois (2019). I came across it only a few days ago at the IAMCR conference in Madrid, at the book stand of Sage. One of the topics addressed in this third edition of the book is the European refugee crisis from 2015 that I mentioned earlier. So we see that issues that many see as controversial and sensitive are being addressed by our colleagues. In my view this indicates that the choice of theme for this year’s conference is very relevant for our discipline.

In conclusion, my last presidential address has hopefully reflected on how IAICS and its many scholars can reach out through trans-border and cross-cultural communication and dialogue to bridge gaps like the East/West division and forge new connections. On behalf of IAICS, I wish all participants a successful and productive conference here at Masaryk University in the heart of Europe.

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