Aurelian Giugăl – Abstract (Habilitation Thesis)

TERRITORY, COMMUNICATION AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION: ELECTORAL DYNAMICS, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL STUDIES IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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This habilitation thesis, *Territory, Communication and Symbolic Representation: Electoral Dynamics, Political Communication and Cultural Studies in Post-Communist Romania*, investigates the ways in which political, electoral, and cultural realities are produced through the interaction of territory, communication, and symbolic representation. Bringing together research conducted in the fields of political communication, electoral geography, media studies, and cultural studies, the thesis argues that contemporary politics cannot be adequately understood solely through institutional arrangements, party competition, or electoral outcomes. Instead, political life should be approached as a continuous process of producing, negotiating, and contesting social meanings. Electoral behavior, political identities, and cultural imaginaries emerge from the complex relationships among geographical spaces, media systems, social networks, and communication practices.

The central argument of the thesis is that space constitutes a fundamental dimension of political communication. Rather than treating geography merely as a physical setting or an academic discipline, the research conceptualizes territory as a socially produced space in which political meanings are created and negotiated. Electoral geography in post-communist Romania therefore represents more than the statistical distribution of voting preferences; it reflects the ways in which communities interpret political messages through their own historical experiences, socio-economic conditions, and collective identities. Persistent regional divisions, including the East-West cleavage and the contrast between urban centers and economically marginalized peripheral areas, demonstrate that political change unfolds within territories already shaped by memory, identity, and social practice.

This perspective draws extensively on Nigel Thrift's relational understanding of space. According to this approach, space is not a passive container in which social processes occur but rather an outcome of relationships, mobilities, networks, and everyday practices. Applied to electoral analysis, this theoretical framework moves beyond descriptive cartography by interpreting localities and regions as socially constructed spaces produced through interactions among economic structures, communication flows, mobility patterns, and political discourse. Electoral behavior therefore becomes inseparable from the spatial production of social life.

Building upon this conceptual framework, the thesis introduces the notion of mediated geographies as an integrative analytical concept. Contemporary societies experience places not only through direct interaction but also through mediated representations produced by television, newspapers, digital platforms, maps, and popular culture. Media do not simply depict territories; they actively participate in constructing their symbolic meanings. In post-communist Romania, some regions have become associated with modernization, European integration, economic development, and innovation, while others have been represented as

peripheral, underdeveloped, or resistant to change. These mediated constructions influence public perceptions, political identities, and electoral competition.

Electoral cartography is examined from this communicative perspective. Political maps are understood not merely as technical visualizations of election results but as forms of symbolic communication that shape public understandings of society and power. Electoral maps produce narratives about communities as stable or unstable, modern or conservative, central or marginalized. Consequently, territory itself becomes a political message, while electoral competition involves not only the struggle for votes but also the symbolic definition of social spaces and collective identities.

The thesis further demonstrates that electoral institutions themselves function as mechanisms of political communication. The 2008 Romanian electoral reform, designed to strengthen the relationship between Members of Parliament and their constituencies by introducing single-member districts, communicated the promise of more direct political representation. However, the practical operation of the electoral system generated discrepancies between public expectations and institutional outcomes. This mismatch affected citizens' perceptions of democratic legitimacy, illustrating that electoral rules simultaneously regulate political competition and communicate broader understandings of representation, accountability, and democratic participation.

Another major contribution concerns the significance of proximity communication in electoral politics. The research on political clientelism reveals that electoral success in post-communist Romania depends not only on ideological programs or national campaigns but also on parties' capacity to establish local networks of trust and mobilization. Mayors, community leaders, and other local actors function as communication intermediaries who translate national political messages into forms adapted to the everyday realities of local communities. Political communication therefore operates not only through mass media but equally through interpersonal relationships and localized social networks.

This communicative perspective also explains patterns of political participation. Case studies focusing on the 2018 constitutional referendum and the 2020 local elections demonstrate that public agreement with a political issue alone is insufficient to generate electoral mobilization. Political themes become electorally effective only when they are framed as socially relevant and personally meaningful for citizens. Likewise, local electoral campaigns show that communication strategies emphasizing community identity, continuity, and interpersonal trust often prove more successful than purely ideological appeals.

The thesis also explores the transformation of political communication within an increasingly fragmented media environment. Digital platforms have fundamentally altered the relationship among politicians, journalists, and citizens by enabling direct communication while simultaneously encouraging message personalization, emotional framing, and simplified political narratives. Electoral competition increasingly revolves around capturing public attention, controlling interpretations of reality, and maintaining visibility within hybrid media systems. Political communication thus becomes a continuous process of constructing public perceptions rather than merely transmitting political information.

Beyond electoral politics, the thesis extends its analysis to the cultural dimension of communication. Drawing upon cultural studies, it argues that media actively contribute to the production of the social imaginary. The Romanian television sitcom *Las Fierbinți* serves as a case study illustrating how entertainment products function as sites where ideas about class, rurality, modernization, education, and social belonging are negotiated. Representation is conceptualized not as a neutral reflection of reality but as a process through which symbolic hierarchies and social differences are constructed and normalized.

Within this framework, *Las Fierbinți* is interpreted as a mediated geography. Its fictional semi-rural setting represents more than a geographical location; it constitutes a cultural construction produced through characters, language, clothing, humor, and narratives about everyday life. Costume design functions as a form of visual communication, symbolically distinguishing rural identities from urban imaginaries associated with education, professional success, and modernity. The analysis demonstrates how visual and narrative elements contribute to the production of broader ideological meanings.

Employing a Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony, the thesis further argues that humor may serve as an effective vehicle for disseminating dominant social values. Comedy can naturalize neoliberal assumptions by presenting poverty, educational inequality, and social exclusion primarily as consequences of individual behavior rather than structural inequalities rooted in Romania's post-communist transformation. Consequently, popular culture participates in legitimizing particular ideological interpretations while marginalizing alternative explanations based on historical, economic, or institutional factors.

Taken together, the research demonstrates that politics and culture should be studied as interconnected communicative processes. Electoral behavior, political identities, and cultural representations are simultaneously shaped through interactions among geographical spaces, institutions, media systems, and everyday social practices. Post-communist Romania emerges as a landscape of mediated geographies in which territories function both as lived spaces and as symbolic objects of political and cultural representation.

The principal theoretical contribution of the habilitation thesis lies in integrating electoral studies, political communication, media studies, and cultural studies into a common interpretative framework centered on the concept of mediated geographies. Political communication is understood not simply as the transmission of electoral messages, while cultural communication is viewed as more than symbolic production. Both processes actively organize the ways in which societies imagine territories, construct political actors, and negotiate collective identities.

Building upon these achievements, the second part of the thesis outlines a coherent scientific and academic development plan structured around four complementary research directions. The first focuses on television culture, ideological hegemony, and audience reception in post-socialist media systems, extending previous research on *Las Fierbinți* by incorporating Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model and investigating how audiences interpret, negotiate, or resist ideological meanings through digital ethnography, online discourse analysis, interviews, and focus groups.

The second research direction examines Romanian cinema as a site of historical memory construction. Through a comparative analysis of films produced during the communist and post-communist periods, the project investigates changing regimes of historical representation. Particular attention will be given to the contrast between Sergiu Nicolaescu's heroic national narratives and Radu Jude's critical reinterpretations of Romanian history, emphasizing cinema's role in shaping collective memory, national identity, and public debates about historical responsibility.

The third direction expands the research agenda toward environmental communication and the resilience of socio-ecological systems. Using the Danube Delta as its principal case study, the project proposes an original theoretical model that incorporates mass media as an internal component of socio-ecological systems. Introducing the concept of asymmetric media coupling, the research seeks to explain how unequal information flows influence institutional adaptation, community resilience, and environmental governance.

Finally, the fourth research direction investigates the transformation of political communication through social media in local electoral competition. Drawing upon theories of hybrid media systems, digital political communication, and platform governance, this project explores how Facebook reshapes electoral campaigns, redistributes political resources, and enables new political actors to challenge established local elites. Comparative studies of rural and urban communities will examine the implications of algorithmic communication, message personalization, and artificial intelligence for democratic participation and local governance.

Overall, the proposed research agenda consolidates an interdisciplinary program that bridges political communication, media studies, cultural studies, environmental communication, and electoral analysis. Its overarching objective is to advance theoretical and empirical knowledge about communication as a central mechanism through which contemporary societies produce meanings, construct representations, organize political life, and negotiate social change. By combining spatial theory, communication studies, and cultural analysis within a unified conceptual framework, the habilitation project aims to contribute both to the international scholarly literature and to the development of interdisciplinary research on post-communist societies.