

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL NETWORKS

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Within the natural and social scientific domains alike, one of the most successful and useful principles underpinning our collective accumulation of knowledge is the act and art of reductionism. By breaking down larger systems into smaller segments, analyzing and comparing individual, assumedly independent parts in isolation, our understanding, modeling and prediction of both social and natural systems have undoubtedly benefited greatly. This principle has thus, rightly shaped the various analytical tools we have at our disposal, where assumptions of independence of observations is often foundational.

Network analysis and the branch of science it represents can be seen as a counter-movement to the above. Surpassing the ‘Hobbession’ with individual isolated entities, their properties, and the statistical comparisons thereof, the network perspective draws our attention to what is found in the in-between. With this explicit focus on the bonds that tie parts into larger, interdependent wholes, network analysis in the social sciences guides us back to the ‘social’, where the patterns of relations – or the lack of such – become part of both descriptive accounts, as well as crucial components when modeling social change.

Network-analytical applications in the social sciences have produced outcomes with real impact: from strategic positions of exchange in the networks of global trade, to flow patterns of migration and human mobility, the resilience of international financial networks, the digital and physical infrastructures of organizations, to the mapping and disrupting of terrorist and organized crime networks, corruption machines, and the virulent spreading of fake news and disinformation.

Research applications in this field are thus not only of academic interest, but of significant importance for our understanding, influence, and control over real-world

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social, political and economic systems, processes, and policy. The theoretical and methodological toolkits proposed by network science are uniquely designed to tackle the interconnectedness and inherent interdependency of humans, cities, organizations, countries, or concepts. By explicitly modeling complex phenomena, and the emergence of complex outcomes at the macro-level from relatively simple behavior or mechanism at the micro-level, contemporary network research enhances our abilities to understand, visualize and control such intricate interdependencies.

This special issue of the Romanian Journal of Political Science is exclusively concerned with addressing the complexities of empirical social and political networks. Capturing both the substantive and methodological breadth of social-scientific network analysis, the four original research articles address a variety of topics, with different approaches, methods, and relational data: counter-narcotics organisational cooperation in Afghanistan, collaboration networks among European cities, networks of employment prospects and destinations of higher education graduates, and the political networks of party switchers.

In Ebrahimi and Lim's study on interagency collaboration between counter-narcotics stakeholders in Afghanistan, the authors follow the classical sociological approach of mapping multiple types of relations between a given set of actors. Having collected a rich multi-layer dataset that captures seven different ways that various organizational stakeholders – governmental- and non-governmental organizations, foreign entities, etc. – relate to each other, Ebrahimi and Lim examine how these networks compare with three types of network governance: shared governance, lead organization-governed, and network administrative organizations governance. Through this, the authors provide novel and substantial insights on the state of contemporary counter-narcotics collaboration in Afghanistan. Their insights could potentially contribute to the design of policy for reinforcing and coordinating the fight against an internationally recognized menace. It is hoped that the authors will delve even further into the structures of their impressive multi-layer dataset in future work – such as disentangling any would-be interdependencies between the different collaborative relational layers.

Remaining within networks of collaboration and cooperation, the study of Turşie and Boata maps collaboration networks between another type of human organization: cities. Collecting and compiling data on Romanian cities that were jointly involved in

territorial collaboration projects (INTERREG), their study demonstrates how such affiliation network data can be analyzed as a network of inter-connected cities. Starting off with framing their study in the existing literature and theories on multi-level and polycentric forms of governance, the authors demonstrate how network analysis and the relational perspective it represents is not only compatible with, but constitutes a natural extension and formalization of contemporary popular concepts in the field of political and spatial governance.

Proteasa and Fierăscu's study tackles the issue of universities' interest in and abilities to match employment prospects with actual employment destinations of their student graduates, by examining the overlap between the two in four social scientific disciplines: sociology, administrative studies, communication studies, and political science. Using a sample of register data from Bachelor's level programs across seven years at a Romanian university, the authors assess the overlap between normative and empirical employment networks. They show that the mechanisms of institutionalization of these disciplines lay in their exclusivity profiles. These mechanisms are under the direct control of higher education curricula and institutional designers, so their explicit exploration allows for timely and systematic matching between educational outputs and labour market dynamics.

The study of Fierăscu, Părvu, Topîrceanu and Udrescu addresses a phenomenon that is often overlooked by scholars of legislative studies – party switching. By exploring the shared party membership networks of Romanian MPs from 1990 until 2018, the authors focus on the role of party switchers in shaping the dynamics of the entire party system. They propose several more sophisticated measures of penalty scores for party switching at both the individual, as well as the party level, and make explicit the unintended consequences of individual MPs' direct moves on the entire parliamentary party scene, which challenge a long-lasting perspective on the issue.

Although the four articles are captured within the umbrella of network analysis and they all address relationship of some sorts among entities, each paper uses and emphasizes a different methodological approach to provide novel perspectives on the core problems they tackle. Their contributions are innovative and necessary for policy-making in their respective fields: Ebrahimi and Lim's rich multi-layer networks of counter-narcotics stakeholders, to better understand the complexity of

collaboration and to optimize the implementation of counter-narcotics policy; Tursie and Boata's Romanian cross-border collaboration networks, to make explicit the potential for more productive exchanges of good practices and successful projects of European cities; Proteasa and Fierascu's normative and empirical graduate employment destination networks, to inform decision-makers in higher education about their opportunities to better prepare and support graduates on the labour market; finally, Fierascu, Parvu, Topirceanu and Udrescu's exploration of the role of party switchers within the broader party system, to better understand incentive schemes for successful political collaboration.

The papers adopt vocabularies and topics that are of interest to and easily digestible by a broad and diverse audience. Students and academics will find the questions addressed and contributions in this Special Issue intellectually stimulating. Policy makers will find scientific rigour behind evidence that can potentially inform and support their initiatives. Practitioners and decision-makers will find practical ways of tackling a variety of issues and types of social and political problems.

The promise of studying social and political networks is also their demise – while the questions asked and the answers provided contribute to improved knowledge of social and political phenomena, the difficulty of predicting complex human behaviour, both individual, as well as collective, is taunting. It is our hope however that the current research efforts will inspire and spark productive discussions and follow up research over constantly improving – incrementally or radically – the outlooks of society and peoples.