

Routledge Studies in Media, Communication,
and Politics

Digitizing Democracy

Edited by Aljosha Karim Schapals, Axel Bruns, and Brian McNair

Communicating Populism

Comparing Actor Perceptions, Media Coverage, and Effects on Citizens
in Europe

*Edited by Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank
Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese*

Communicating Populism

Comparing Actor Perceptions,
Media Coverage, and Effects
on Citizens in Europe

**Edited by Carsten Reinemann,
James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg,
Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese**

First published 2019
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 Taylor & Francis

The right of Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-39272-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-40206-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
1 Introduction: Comprehending and Investigating Populist Communication From a Comparative Perspective	1
CARSTEN REINEMANN, JAMES STANYER, TORIL AALBERG, FRANK ESSER, AND CLAES H. DE VREESE	
PART I	
Populism and Communicators	15
2 Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Qualitative Comparative Approach to Studying the Views of Journalists and Politicians	17
SUSANA SALGADO AND JAMES STANYER	
3 Journalists' Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews	34
JAMES STANYER, SUSANA SALGADO, GIULIANO BOBBA, GERGŐ HAJZER, DAVID NICOLAS HOPMANN, NICOLAS HUBÉ, NORBERT MERKOVITY, GÖKAY ÖZERIM, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, KAREN B. SANDERS, DUSAN SPASOJEVIC, AND LENKA VOCHOCOVÁ	

4 Politicians' Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews	51
SUSANA SALGADO, JAMES STANYER, GERGŐ HAJZER, DAVID NICOLAS HOPMANN, BENTE KALSNES, GUIDO LEGNANTE, ARTUR LIPIŃSKI, NORBERT MERKOVITY, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, AND KAREN B. SANDERS	
PART II Populism in the Media	69
5 Dimensions, Speakers, and Targets: Basic Patterns in European Media Reporting on Populism	71
SINA BLASSNIG, PATRICIA RODI, KEREN TENENBOIM-WEINBLATT, KINGA ADAMCZEWSKA, LILIA RAYCHEVA, SVEN ENGESSER, AND FRANK ESSER	
6 Journalistic Culture, Editorial Mission, and News Logic: Explaining the Factors Behind the Use of Populism in European Media	102
PETER MAURER, NICOLAS HUBÉ, VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA, CRISTINA CREMONESI, ANTONELLA SEDDONE, SIGNE RINGDAL BERGAN, JAMES STANYER, MARIAN TOMOV, NAAMA WEISS, SVEN ENGESSER, AND FRANK ESSER	
7 Event-, Politics-, and Audience-Driven News: A Comparison of Populism in European Media Coverage in 2016 and 2017	123
FRANK ESSER, AGNIESZKA STĘPIŃSKA, ONDŘEJ PEKÁČEK, ANTONELLA SEDDONE, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, DOBRINKA PEICHEVA, ANA MILOJEVIC, SINA BLASSNIG, AND SVEN ENGESSER	
PART III Populism and Citizens	141
8 The Persuasiveness of Populist Communication: Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication From a Social Identity Perspective	143
MICHAEL HAMELEERS, CARSTEN REINEMANN, DESIRÉE SCHMUCK, AND NAYLA FAWZI	

9 Investigating the Effects of Populist Communication: Design and Measurement of the Comparative Experimental Study	168
MICHAEL HAMELEERS, IOANNIS ANDREADIS, AND CARSTEN REINEMANN	
10 Cognitive Responses to Populist Communication: The Impact of Populist Message Elements on Blame Attribution and Stereotyping	183
NICOLETA CORBU, LINDA BOS, CHRISTIAN SCHEMER, ANNE SCHULZ, JÖRG MATTHES, CLAES H. DE VREESE, TORIL AALBERG, AND JANE SUITER	
11 Attitudinal and Behavioral Responses to Populist Communication: The Impact of Populist Message Elements on Populist Attitudes and Voting Intentions	207
IOANNIS ANDREADIS, CRISTINA CREMONESI, EVANGELIA KARTSOŪNIDOU, DOMINIKA KASPROWICZ, AND AGNIESZKA HESS	
PART IV Conclusion	233
12 Adapting to the Different Shades of Populism: Key Findings and Implications for Media, Citizens, and Politics	235
CLAES H. DE VREESE, CARSTEN REINEMANN, JAMES STANYER, FRANK ESSER, AND TORIL AALBERG	
<i>Appendix A: Comparative Experiment: Stimuli for All Eight Conditions</i>	253
<i>Appendix B: Comparative Experiment: Background Characteristics of Respondents (Entire Sample vs. Cleaned Sample)</i>	261
<i>Appendix C: Comparative Experiment: Blame Perceptions (Overall Means by Country; 7-Point Scale)</i>	264
<i>Appendix D: Comparative Experiment: Stereotypes (Overall Means by Country; 7-Point Scale)</i>	266
<i>List of Contributors</i>	268
<i>Index</i>	271

- Van Dalen, A., & Van Aelst, P. (2014). The media as political agenda-setters: Journalists' perceptions of media power in eight West European countries. *West European Politics*, 37(1), 42–64. doi:10.1080/01402382.2013.814967
- Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D., & Wirth, W. (2018). News media as gatekeepers, critics and initiators of populist communication: How journalists in ten countries deal with the populist challenge. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 476–495. doi:10.1177/1940161218785979

4 Politicians' Perceptions of Populism and the Media

A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews¹

Susana Salgado, James Stanyer, Gergő Hajzer, David Nicolas Hopmann,² Bente Kalsnes, Guido Legnante, Artur Lipiński, Norbert Merkovity, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, and Karen B. Sanders³

Introduction

Why is it important to study politicians' perceptions of populism? The way in which something is regarded and understood is of the utmost importance for its impact on politics and society in general. Given the complexities in defining 'populism' and understanding its meaning, and in view of it being commonly referred to as a 'vague', 'slippery', 'elusive' concept (e.g., Canovan, 1981, 1984; Taggart, 2000; Barr, 2009; Lucardie, 2009; Woods, 2014), this study addresses the concept and its potential implications through the views of politicians who represent some of the most important political parties in 11 European countries and who are therefore important opinion-makers. The main objective is to discern what politicians from the various countries and different types of political parties understand by populism and how they perceive the causes and implications of these phenomena in their countries, and, more broadly, in European and global contexts.

Interviews were conducted with politicians from 11 European countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. The sample is therefore composed of countries representing different regions in Europe, including from Southeastern, Eastern, Central, Northern, and Southern Europe. The political parties were selected taking into account their overall electoral expression in their respective countries and their representativeness on the right-left political spectrum. In addition, populist and non-populist parties were included in all countries, except Romania. The study therefore includes a varied sample of political parties, including mainstream and fringe, center-left and center-right, radical and/or extreme left and right, and populist and non-populist parties (for further information about the

research decisions and the methodological approach, see the chapter by Salgado and Stanyer in this volume).⁴

This chapter is divided into five main sections which correspond with the five main topics addressed in the interviews with politicians, namely: ‘What do you understand by populism?’, ‘What are the consequences of populism?’, ‘What explains the popularity of populist leaders and parties?’, ‘What social issues are most related to populism?’, and ‘What role do the media play in populism?’

What Do You Understand by Populism?

For several years, populism in Europe was a synonym for far-right parties and closely related to the issues of immigration, law and order, and often also nationalism (see Mudde, 2004, 2007; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rydgren, 2017). The Euro crisis and the emergence of successful social movements, which in some cases evolved into political parties (e.g., Podemos, Syriza), launched the discussion regarding what populism means and what it is in Europe currently. The fact that Podemos, for example, identifies itself as a populist party, is extremely interesting (see Sanders, Molina, & Zoragastua, 2017), since often even commonly labeled populist parties avoid the denomination due to its negative connotation in European politics.

In this study, we seek to learn more about what politicians recognize as populism and how they perceive this phenomenon today. The sample included a variety of countries from different European regions and politicians representing various political parties with different political orientations, including populist and non-populist parties. Both the descriptions and the examples given by politicians in the interviews were assessed to see whether they had a clear view of what populism is and what it means, and if they perceive it as something inherently negative, positive, or both, depending on the context.

Politicians from most of the countries included in our sample stated that populism had multiple, often contradictory, meanings (e.g., Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Romania). The ambiguity of the concept, noted by more than half of the interviewees, clearly reflects the current use of the word to refer to different and often contradictory matters such as far-right ideology and nationalism, citizen participation, advocacy for the people, Euroscepticism, demagoguery, empty rhetoric, exploitation of emotions, and so on.

Also adding to the ambiguity is the fact that in the politicians’ descriptions of populism there is also some propensity to label as populist all politicians and parties that have a more aggressive political strategy (e.g., openly confrontational with opponents, clearly aiming to convince voters at any cost), since they seem to be willing to do more than others to gain popularity and achieve power, but when asked to provide examples,

a large majority of politicians focused on the most well-known cases of European populism, such as Marine Le Pen and the French National Front, Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom, or Donald Trump in the US. Interestingly, Greek politicians referred mainly to examples in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, or even to Angela Merkel’s position in relation to the Euro crisis.

An overwhelming majority of these politicians perceive populism as something mainly negative, including all politicians interviewed from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Romania. In most other countries the results were mixed, with some politicians referring to populism as being predominantly negative, while others stated that they perceive it to be mainly positive. A third group tended to shape this answer according to the specific examples they had in mind.

There is nonetheless a clear pattern to be noted in this particular aspect of the perceptions of what populism is and what it entails. As expected, in general, politicians from populist political parties have mostly associated populism with a positive change in democratic politics and with positive political behaviors (e.g., Podemos in Spain, Forza Italia and Lega Nord in Italy, the Hungarian Jobbik, the National Renewal Party in Portugal, and the Danish People’s Party). They view themselves as the true democrats and the only ones truly concerned with the people and the people’s interests and needs. However, it is worth noting that even for some politicians from populist political parties, populism can be both negative and positive in certain instances (e.g., Fidesz in Hungary, the Bulgarian Coalition Patriotic Front, Syriza in Greece, MS5 in Italy). Interestingly, in some cases, such as the Norwegian Progress Party, the Polish party Law and Justice, or the Greek political party Golden Dawn, which are widely considered and recognized as populist, their politicians characterized populism as negative. The most likely explanation for this is that they do not accept being labeled as populist because society in general perceives populism negatively and they do not want to be associated with those negative perceptions and sentiments; or, another possibility is that they want to distinguish and distance themselves from other known national or international populist political parties and leaders.

The definitions of populism provided by these interviewees confirm this. Although occasionally politicians from mainstream parties recognized that the centrality of the people in populist politics is the spirit of democracy itself (and therefore something that in itself has to be considered positive), and some politicians from populist parties alluded to demagoguery and to the exclusionary nature of many populist ideals (e.g., the invariable presence of out-groups whose composition changes nevertheless according to ideology), as expected, most politicians from mainstream parties gave definitions of populism that presupposed negative perceptions of populism, and most politicians from populist parties considered it positive in their interpretation of what populism is and what it means today.

The most common themes in these politicians' definitions of what populism is and what it means were thus mainly related to negative perceptions: deceitful rhetoric; demagoguery; manipulation; deception; a strategy to gain power and win elections; vain promises; simplification of issues; misconception of reality; exploitation of emotions such as fear, anxiety, and resentment; aversion to mediation; and code words for racism. Above all else, populism is perceived as a communication style and a political style based on opportunism and exploitation of emotions to gain power. It is not frequently associated with specific issues and, where it is (e.g., Norway), the issue is mainly immigration. A Civic Platform MP from Poland, for example, linked populism directly to the 'fear of terrorism and outsiders'.

The idea of populism as ideology as defined by Canovan (2002), as a 'political appeal to the people' and the 'ideology of democracy', is present in the populist politicians' own perceptions of their approach to politics and is substantiated in the following themes that are simultaneously positive perceptions of populism: 'a form of politics focused on the people's interests and concerns' (M5S); 'speak the people's case' (Danish People's Party); 'caring about the people's real problems' (Jobbik); and 'hegemony of the people' (Syriza). Politicians from opposite sides and ideologies, right and left of the political spectrum, gave these very similar definitions of populism. Podemos' self-perception is slightly different; it appears to be particularly focused on changes in society and technology since it perceives populism mainly as a 'reaction to processes of modernization' and a form of popular mobilization.

As we can observe, there are no notable differences according to region in perceptions of populism from this sample of politicians: There are no marked differences across regions in Europe, north and south, west and east. There is also no clear dividing line between right- and left-wing populism, at least in what constitutes the way in which these politicians perceive populism.

What Are the Consequences of Populism?

For the vast majority of politicians interviewed across countries and mainstream parties, the effects of populism were negative. However, there were some exceptions. Although more rare, there were positive perceptions of the impact of populism on democracy which were largely, although not exclusively, confined to representatives of populist parties, similar to what we have already noted regarding perceptions of populism.

In Hungary, a politician belonging to the right-wing populist political party in government, Fidesz, considered populism not to have consequences since it was, in his view, a feature embracing the entire political system. In particular, he described it as an 'effective tool' for all politicians

being thrown into the fight of the elections, which is devoid of any effects on society. In Denmark, a Danish People's Party politician noted that populist parties were a check on elected elites. These views were also apparent from a Lega Nord politician in Italy. A politician of a center-right populist party (Forza Italia) also noted that it may contribute to making known unheard needs of citizens. In Portugal, the National Renewal Party representative perceived populism as putting the nation first. In Bulgaria, a politician from the party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria claimed that neoliberalism is more dangerous than populism. And in Norway, the Progress Party provided a more nuanced view but one that was largely positive as well. There were no major differences between left- and right-wing populism. For example, in Spain a member of Podemos talked about the positive effects of populism as putting the 'last ones in front of the first ones'.

The interviewees were also asked specifically about what kind of effects populism and populists have. A wide range of effects were mentioned, both in a negative and positive context. Although there were no clear patterns, concerns tended to focus around societal impacts; in fact, the most commonly mentioned were some possible social effects. Social crises seem to be common (at least in the countries in our sample) and therefore a range of social effects were mentioned in the interviews. This kind of crisis takes many different forms but all directly affect the quality of people's life: social chaos and citizenship in 'virtual' reality and in a deficient democracy marked by the over-simplification of public debate (Greece); polarization (Poland); general social division and confrontation resulting in a negative context of discouragement and frustration (Spain); demagoguery and treatment of people as inferior (Portugal) or idiots (Hungary); decline of the public debate (Greece, Spain); as well as marginalization of significant issues (Italy). In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, interviewees pointed to a possible growing intolerance among citizens and a fracturing of societies.

Some respondents mentioned specific political effects. Politicians from the populist parties included in the study attribute populism to the many weaknesses of democracy, such as the malfunctioning or destruction of democratic institutions (Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary, respectively), irresponsible policies against the common good (Law and Justice in Poland), and inflated political conflicts which render the formation of coalitions and governments a difficult process (Lega Nord in Italy).

In three Southern European countries (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), the representatives from the left-wing parties (Syriza, PSOE, and PCP, respectively) seem to share a common perspective: They associate the undemocratic forces derived from populism with a tendency of the political system to oversimplify issues, adversely affecting the public debate,

which is regarded harmful to democracy. But positive political effects were also mentioned in Poland: The perception of the positive aspect of populism is adopted by a left-wing politician (Democratic Left Alliance) who considers populism to be a double-sided phenomenon, and its positive side lies in the fact that it can assist political systems in addressing policy issues and implementing policy plans which would otherwise be difficult to address and implement.

When the interviewees were asked to reflect on the consequences of populism, both for their own countries and democracies more widely, a range of consequences were mentioned for democratic regimes in general and for their specific countries. No obvious patterns emerged among those interviewed, but the consequences of populism are widely regarded by politicians as detrimental to the effective functioning of democracy. With some exceptions, it seems to be a position that goes beyond political orientation. Some respondents spoke about the undermining of the entire democratic process (the Greek politician from Golden Dawn, for example, explicitly stated that democracy is not working due to populism). Others raised the specter of increased polarization and conflict across democracies; some mentioned declining faith in democracy and trust in politics, while still others pointed to the perennial simplification of complex factors that affect all states.

The consequences for specific countries were similar. Many mentioned social disorder and chaos and a wider fracturing of society as a risk to peace in extremis. Others noted increased polarization and a disillusionment with national politics and politicians. Some of those interviewed also mentioned the negative effects of populism on the economy and what this might mean for democracy. But some pointed to positive consequences for their countries, including greater inclusivity and political engagement. In addition, populism has, in some countries, led to a greater awareness of key issues, such as immigration, which could no longer be ignored by political elites. In Spain, a Podemos politician considered that there had been a re-politicization of society, including a kind of rapprochement of people with politicians, resulting in further involvement of citizens in political life as well as in politicians' obligations to think about programs and aspirations more adapted to popular claims. In Portugal, the leader of the extreme right-wing populist party, PNR (National Renewal Party), argued that populism benefits national identity, social justice, national production, and security forces in the context of a democracy that requires corrections and repairs.

In sum, the interviewees' perspectives do conform to the commonly held expectation that populism has a negative impact on democracy; however, there are important exceptions in which populism is viewed as a response to ill-functioning institutions that brings the promise of revitalizing democracy.

What Explains the Popularity of Populist Leaders and Parties?

The politicians interviewed characterized a situation in which populists have been more or less successful in describing problems in their national context and proposing solutions. This means that, in their view, disillusionment and disappointment with established parties and mainstream politicians, neglected voters, and real problems remaining unresolved are some of the most important reasons which explain why populists have been gaining electoral support in several European countries. While established parties have failed to address significant issues such as immigration and social issues in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis in Europe, populist parties and politicians have taken the opportunity to occupy the empty space.

Political actors, particularly those from Eastern European countries and mainly from Hungary, maintain that the low level of education, dictatorship, and communist political socialization have given leeway for populist politics and a popular demand for simple solutions. Disappointment with the establishment is not only directed towards national parties, but also towards European institutions such as the European Union: The more disappointed people are with mainstream national parties or the EU, the more vulnerable they appear to be to populism.

To solve these problems, populist political actors are offering new approaches to democratic politics and different models of government to the disappointed people, according to our interviewees. In Norway, politicians described populists as talented at describing and appealing to conflict, creating dividing lines to engage people based on their description of society, and identifying 'the others' who are different from 'us'. They argue that populists will say anything the people want to hear and anything that is popular and engaging to them. The interviewees also described populists' adroit management of the complicated balancing act between triggering fear and offering hope as one of the reasons for their success: 'They know how to take advantage of the citizens' fears and anxieties' (Italy, Portugal) and 'playing with the most intense emotions and presenting themselves as saviours' (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Personal characteristics were not mentioned frequently by the politicians to describe the reasons behind the popularity of populist leaders and parties. Charisma, which is often identified in the research literature (e.g., Weyland, 1999; Mény & Sured, 2002; Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Eatwell, 2004; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008) as a typical characteristic of (successful) populist leaders, was hardly mentioned in these interviews. In fact, personal characteristics were not mentioned at all by the interviewees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Portugal. When personal characteristics were mentioned, populists were described either in terms of looks and personality

traits, charisma, rhetoric, or networking skills, such as (*looks*) amiable, handsome (Bulgaria); attractive (Greece); (*charisma*) charm (Bulgaria); charismatic leader (Greece); (*rhetoric*) attractive, but superficial rhetoric (Greece); communicate in a more understandable manner (Italy); leaders foster people's fears, peoples' mouthpiece and elite at the same time (Italy); communicate in a simplified, tabloid-style manner (Norway); (*networking*) connected to both left- and right-wing voters (Italy).

With varying weight, four political factors are mentioned in explanation of the popularity of populist leaders and parties. We can divide them according to 'issues', 'European Union (EU) relations', 'the established political system', and 'populists' solutions'. First, among *issues*, examples include references to the ethnic division of the country and the election system (Bosnia), migration and immigration (Bulgaria, Norway), poverty (Bulgaria, Norway), and centralization (Norway), all of which are specifically mentioned by most of the interviewees in these countries. Secondly, along those same lines, *EU relations* are repeatedly voiced as troubling, either because of the North/South cleavage in the EU (Italy), EU and NATO relations (Bulgaria), or that the EU mode of functioning has distorted democracy (Portugal). Thirdly, criticism of *the established political system* weighs in as a major political factor to explain the popularity of populists; factors include disappointment with mainstream parties or the political system (Portugal, Greece, Italy, Spain); established parties have failed to discuss significant issues (Norway, Poland); lack of reforms (Spain); incapacity to fully implement policies (Greece); abuse of power and corruption (Spain, Italy); and that political socialization (as a communist country) has discouraged critical debate (Hungary). Fourth and lastly, *populists' solutions* are mentioned as an important factor. In this regard, interviewees argued that populists are addressing issues of concern for many people (Italy, Norway), as well as reaching out to those neglected by other parties (Norway). Nevertheless, it was also mentioned that populists are making unrealistic electoral promises (Romania, Portugal) and that they are destroying past consensus on which the status quo was based (Greece).

Social and economic causes were also mentioned by these interviewees as potential explanatory factors for the success of populist actors. Although there are differences in the emphasis placed on specific aspects of economic hardship, its impact on social grievances is reflected in most interviews, with the exception of the Northern European countries included in our sample. The strongest statements are provided by Bosnian and Romanian politicians, who spoke about poverty and unemployment as the major social forces driving support for populism. All the Bulgarian politicians argued that populism is linked to poverty, which permeates socio-political issues. Also, in Poland, social welfare issues and unequal redistribution of the effects of economic modernization were noted as important factors.

Many Southern European countries' interviewees linked some of the causes behind the success of populism to the economic crisis. The rise of populist parties was explained by the unemployment and fear of becoming peripheral (Italy), the economic crisis and inability of the institutional structures to deal with it (Spain), economic insecurity and social uncertainty (Greece), and overall social dissatisfaction and economic hardship (Portugal). Greek politicians even referred to 'real problems' faced by the population as the genuine reason behind the success of populism.

Additionally, some of the politicians interviewed, mainly from Hungary and Romania, have also related economic hardship and poverty to the low level of education among sections of the electorate, which makes some people uncritical and more prone to believe in this type of electoral promise. Other politicians placed more emphasis on country-specific ethnic problems, for example, stigmatization and scapegoating of various minorities, i.e., Roma people or immigrants, as a tool for building political capital (Romania), or specific, long-lasting inter-ethnic conflict (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The role of mainstream and social media as a factor in the popularity of populist actors was mentioned in several countries. The interviewees described different situations. On the one hand, news media actively engage in populism in their news coverage through the use of populist strategies: for example, some politicians (e.g., Hungary, Norway, Portugal) referred to appealing titles and tabloid simplicity as important factors facilitating the popularity of populism, while simplified dichotomizations and the over-personalization of political leaders were mentioned by interviewees from Italy and Romania. On the other hand, the cases in which news media simply cover populist political actors were also mentioned. A Spanish politician assessed this as a failure of the media system, but it was also considered both a structural, inadvertent effect of news values, as well as a consequence of commercialization and an attempt to garner more audience attention by covering the most spectacular aspects of party politics (Norway, Portugal). Or, simply, it was as a result of successful political communication strategies by skillful politicians (Portugal).

Some of these politicians have also emphasized the deliberate decision of specific news outlets to openly support populist political actors, such as the Polish public media. The Hungarian politician member of Jobbik recognized the weight of political control over the media, which coerces journalists into promoting the Fidesz agenda, thus providing Fidesz with extra salience and media visibility. A similar situation was reported by the interviewees from Bulgaria, where the politicization of news media is an issue (Raycheva & Peicheva, 2017).

Finally, the role of social media in amplifying populism was also emphasized (e.g., Greece, Portugal, Spain, Poland). Because social media allows for direct communication without barriers and in bypassing gatekeepers,

it contributes to augmentation of the visibility and, in some cases, the appeal of populists.

Although other more specific and country-related factors were also mentioned by these politicians (such as, for example, the efficient organization of populist parties (Spain) or the religious slogans used by populist politicians to attract support in the most traditional sectors of society (Romania)), they have clearly highlighted the effects of economic and political representation crises, as well as of communication and media factors, as causes explaining the success of populist actors.

What Social Issues Are Most Related to Populism?

In and of itself, populism does not need to be tied to specific social issues in the political debate. That is, by defining a political actor as populist, one has not implicitly defined which social issues that political actor primarily campaigns on. Populist politicians often argue that they address popular grievances and opinions that are supposedly ignored by governments, traditional parties, and mainstream media in order to show that they are on the side of the people (Canovan, 1999, p. 2). Often politicians will not define the people, but the appeal to ‘the people’ will be demonstrated in their campaign, to show how they would defend them from outsiders or economic downturns (see, e.g., Csigó & Merkovity, 2017; Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017; see also the introduction to this volume).

Yet, some social issues may be more suitable to populist political campaigning than others. First, immigration as an issue in public debate is often tied to anti-globalization policies where the main goal of the politicians is to defend ‘national’ or ‘traditional’ values. When this topic is used, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ political rhetoric becomes evident. Moreover, the issue is often linked to economic questions because (im)migrants are seen as a problem and political discourse often turns into debate about immigrants exploiting the welfare system and committing crime (Rydgren, 2004, pp. 485–486; Wodak, 2015, pp. 46–69).

Another important issue linked to populism is the economy itself. Recently, we have seen major economic upheaval in the Western world, e.g., the financial crisis beginning in 2007–2008, which was followed by the Euro crisis. During these crises, politicians were often faced with the dilemma caused by a clash between long-term economic interests and short-term benefits. Previous research has argued that populist political actors ignore this dilemma by focusing on short-term benefits (Gál, 2011, p. 159). Crises and economic uncertainty are considered important reasons behind the emergence and success of some forms of populism (e.g., Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Salgado & Stavrakakis, 2018).

We therefore expected populist politicians, in particular, to focus mainly on immigration and the economy. To examine this expectation, politicians were asked the following question: ‘Which social issues are

most related to populism in your country?’. In line with our expectations, the economy—including poverty, social-economic inequality, and corruption—was mentioned frequently by politicians in the majority of the sampled countries (including Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain). Also in line with our expectation, (im)migration and ethnic differences were frequently mentioned across numerous countries (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and Portugal). Often, the immigration debate is linked to a debate about the European Union, which was mentioned by Bulgarian, Danish, and Polish politicians. Less often, welfare issues such as childcare or healthcare were mentioned by these politicians.

Immigration and the economy are international topics that could originate from the so-called European (im)migration crisis of 2015 or the financial crisis beginning in 2007–2008. Yet, it is important not to overlook substantial differences across countries and their historical roots. For instance, Hungary was one of the countries most severely affected by the migration crisis (see, for example Thorpe, 2017). This circumstance was exploited by populist parties, namely by Fidesz and partly by Jobbik. Yet the Hungarian media outlets were already divided long before the migration crisis, with one section of the media providing a platform for populist style communication (including on topics related to immigration), and the other section split between adapting to a populist and simplified debate or a critical approach, but in the latter case likely facing consequences (e.g., refusal of interviews or rejection of factual information on certain issues). The Hungarian interviewees emphasized that Fidesz was partly responsible for the previously mentioned media environment (simplification, lack of criticism in mainstream media, etc.), because the electorate were resonating positively with anti-immigrant messages, which served Fidesz’s aim to be re-elected.

To mention other examples, immigration has been discussed in populist terms for several decades in Denmark (Bächler & Hopmann, 2017). Since at least the late 1990s, immigration has been one of the major political issues in Danish politics, clearly linked to the rise of the Danish People’s Party founded in 1995, but also driven by a number of individual pundits who were given access to newspapers’ op-ed pages. Immigration has emerged as the most decisive issue in Danish election campaigns since at least 2001, yet we have not witnessed a polarization of the Danish media landscape or of public opinion as we have in Hungary. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political debate is less concerned with recent migration, but more with the outcomes of the 1995 Dayton Agreement and its power-sharing across the culturally and religiously diverse population of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Looking in more detail at the politicians’ answers to our study, two noticeable results emerge. First, the answers provided by the politicians

did not reveal systematic differences between populist and non-populist actors within the analyzed countries. That is, both the group of politicians typically described as non-populist and those considered populist stated that populist political communication is mainly concerned with immigration or the economy. Second, in response to the question about what are the drivers of the populist political debate, the vast majority of politicians across countries see these issues as a cause for populism. That is, the reasoning appears to be that certain issues on the political agenda, such as immigration, for example, clearly call for a populist political style. A reverse reasoning, arguing that it is populist actors who promote issues such as immigration because they accord with a populist style of communication, did not receive support from those interviewed.

In short, across the sampled countries, issues relating to the economy (crises and economic uncertainty) and migration were most often perceived to be related to populism. Moreover, the politicians argued that these issues call for a populist style, rather than arguing that certain issues are promoted if they lend themselves more to a populist style of political communication.

What Role Do the Media Play in Populism?

As well as exploring politicians' perceptions of political populism, we were also seeking to understand whether politicians believed that populism extends beyond the political realm and is considered to be a feature of their country's media environment. In particular, we wished to examine whether politicians view media outlets themselves as being populist and whether media outlets in their country are supportive, or critical of, populist actors. In examining their responses, we sought to identify commonalities and differences in views related to politicians' place on the political spectrum and whether they were in government or in opposition.

Politicians were questioned on their views regarding whether or not leading media outlets were supportive or critical of populism, and if they consider that media outlets themselves behave in a populist manner. Their responses enabled us to understand further details about politicians' perceptions of the relationship between the media and populist politicians, namely, whether populist political actors are in fact covered by the media; whether they believe that the dominant perspective, if there is one, is primarily critical or supportive of political actors in either leading and/or populist media, and the reasons they consider this to be so; and, finally, whether they consider that leading media cover populist actors in a populist way.

Most politicians in most countries reported that populist political actors are indeed covered by the media, with the exception of Bulgaria, where only one centrist opposition politician thought that this was not the case. Asked whether the dominant perspective of this coverage by leading

media outlets was critical, the majority of politicians from Bosnia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, and half of the Bulgarian interviewees, considered it to be uncritical. However, in some cases, even if the coverage was considered to be uncritical, it was suggested that it unintentionally works in favor of the populist agenda because of its over-simplified and sensational character, aimed at attracting higher ratings. A variety of reasons were offered for the media's uncritical stance, including economically weak media (Bosnia), a dysfunctional media system (Hungary), the alignment of the media's news values with populist communication (Poland), and political instrumentalization (Bosnia). Most politicians from Denmark, Italy, Poland, Spain, Portugal, and Norway, and half of the Bulgarian interviewees, considered the media to be generally critical of populists. Politicians from Italy and Spain argued that a critical perspective was connected to the capacity of the media to be objective and independent.

Media in Bosnia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Romania were considered by politicians from these countries to be supportive of populist political actors. Two main reasons were given by the interviewees for media support. The first was a form of dependency on the political sphere derived from either financial or ideological factors. This reason was emphasized by politicians from more than half of the countries included in our research (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Portugal). The other main reason offered for media support, indirect or otherwise, of populist political actors was related to the form, style, and narrative adopted by media outlets so that, according to a Portuguese politician, 'populist political actors make good front pages and headlines that sell', and, according to a Norwegian politician, 'populists fit so well into what is the media's parameters' or, as one Greek politician stated, 'moderation does not sell'.

Among the basic characteristics of media coverage noted by many interviewees is an emphasis on short, catchy, clickbait-type headlines, too much focus on strategy and personalities, and too little on substantive politics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Poland, and Portugal). According to a Polish politician, the media provide a simplified vision of reality using language which bolsters populism—a view also shared by politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, and Norway. Politicians from Italy were particularly critical of what they thought to be superficial and poor-quality media news coverage. Media support for populist actors was also attributed to the competitive pressure being brought to bear on traditional news outlets by an increasingly fragmented media landscape and fierce competition for audience share (Greece).

Politicians were also explicitly asked whether they believed the media in their country to be populist, or whether mainstream media covered events in a populist way, and, if so, which. A number of interviewees named media outlets they believe to be populist, including politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal,

Romania, and Spain. In the case of Greece, only the representatives of the two populist parties considered this to be the case. This was also true of Spain. Most of the media named are in private hands; however, in some cases (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, and Poland), public service media were also thought to have adopted a populist style. Every Hungarian politician considered the country's leading media to be populist, including the public service broadcaster which they described as 'government media'. Most politicians from Bulgaria and Spain, on the other hand, reported that they did not believe that there are populist media or that mainstream media cover issues in a populist manner. However, a Spanish politician stated that the media are unwittingly playing the populists' game by over-simplifying the political conversation (for a different approach on factors that promote populism in the media, see Maurer et al. in this volume).

Our findings lead to the following conclusions. Politicians from across Europe, in government or in opposition, and from almost every ideological stripe, regard the media as increasingly adopting, or having already adopted, news values which are populist—understood as over-simplifying and sensationalizing coverage—and therefore contribute to populist politics. Politicians identified with some populist parties, however, do not accept this understanding of populism. In Spain and Portugal, for example, politicians identified with populism from widely diverse ideological families (left-wing in the former case and right-wing in the latter) argue that mainstream media reject populism and that this is a cause for regret. They argue that truly populist media are of the people. In general, however, politicians are concerned that populist—in a negative sense—news coverage is intensifying, while critical and high-quality political coverage, understood as objective and independent reporting, is decreasing.

There is also widespread concern in countries as varied as Denmark and Hungary that the media are either insufficiently critical, utterly uncritical, or supportive of populist actors. A Danish liberal-right counterpart stated that she considers the media to be 'supportive to such an extent that I become furious about it'. Politicians from former communist countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, and Poland) attribute this uncritical and/or supportive stance to the political instrumentalization of the media and clickbait approach to politics, while politicians from Northern and Southern European countries (Denmark, Norway, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) attribute it more to a tabloid approach to politics. However, the outcome is, in their view, similar: reinforcement of the populist agenda with the attendant problematic implications for liberal democracy.

Conclusion

A first noteworthy conclusion is that, although the sample includes countries from different parts of Europe with different experiences of populist politics and varying amounts of electoral success, as well as different types

of populism, there are no clear discernible patterns in these European regions regarding how politicians perceive populism, its consequences, and explanatory reasons, as well as the role of the media in spreading or containing populism. There seems to be some general consensus, however, regarding the issues that are most related to populist approaches to politics in Europe, namely immigration and economic hardship, which are in turn linked more recently to the migration crisis and the financial and economic crises (see also the introduction to this volume).

From among the various results obtained through this study based on interviews, it is interesting to note that charisma is not considered an important component of populism in Europe. Extant literature often relates charisma with crises, presenting the latter as opportunities for charismatic leaders to engage in simple, emotional, political communication that exploits peoples' anxiety and fears and offers straightforward, uncomplicated solutions to problems (e.g., Eatwell, 2004). Regardless, at least as politicians across these different regions in Europe perceive it, the spread of populism in Europe is not linked to the politicians' personal characteristics, and particularly not to charisma.

These politicians have mainly pointed to the malfunctioning and even failure of established democratic institutions, including mainstream political parties, in addressing problems and in producing convincing discourse and solutions as one of the main reasons behind the development of populism in Europe. Alternative political proposals then have a fertile ground upon which to grow and capitalize on existing crises. In fact, our sample of interviewees referred to the migration crisis and the Euro crisis as being the main issues exploited by current populist political actors in Europe.

These politicians have also pointed to broad understandings of populism, from ideology (democracy, left and right) to communication and political style and strategy. But populism is usually perceived as something inherently negative, either because it is based on over-simplified (mis) conceptions of reality, or because it is deliberately intended to deceive. There are, however, some exceptions, especially from populist politicians, that link populism to the roots of democracy (sovereignty of the people) and perceive it as a logical response to an ill-functioning system. It is also noteworthy that the notion 'corrupt elites', often present in definitions of populism, was not emphasized by these politicians, probably as a result of the presence of self-serving bias.

A lingering disillusionment with politics was also presented as an explanation of the success of populist political actors, as well as a negative consequence of populism. Given the perceptions of populism as over-simplification of issues and vain promises, for example, it should be no surprise that citizens would also feel disappointed with populist parties and governments, in addition to being disillusioned with mainstream politics. However, some of the interviewees have also referred to contradictory positive consequences of populism as greater inclusivity

and political engagement. Different types of populism as well as different effects of populist discourse on citizens (for further insight into the effects of populism on citizens, see the theoretical chapter by Hameleers et al. in this volume) might easily explain the contradictory perceptions of the consequences of populism.

The media, both mainstream and social media, are also seen as an important part of the equation by these politicians. Factors such as the instrumentalization of the media by populist governments (e.g., Hungary, Poland) or high market competition and commercialization objectives (identified everywhere) are usually seen as determinants heightening the salience attributed to populist actors and to their messages in political news coverage. Additionally, mainstream media were also seen as responsible for facilitating an environment of over-simplified and distorted political debate, due to some of their news values and personalization (overall tabloidization), which fits perfectly with populist political styles and tends therefore to result in more media exposure for populist political actors. Social media, as a means through which to communicate directly with citizens, bypassing mainstream media gatekeepers, allows a conveyance of non-mediated, user-generated content, and has a great deal of influence on facilitating an environment conducive to increased polarization and to greater levels of populism (see also Salgado, 2018).

In sum, this study of the perceptions politicians hold of populism has shown that, although this sample includes politicians from different types of political parties and countries that have experienced various levels of success of populism as well as different types of populism, there seems to be strong similarity in their views. Populism is mainly perceived as something negative and with damaging consequences for democracy; there is a crisis of political representation and a crisis of democratic values that seem to be opening up space for alternative, and sometimes, extremist, political actors; and the media are not seen as a neutral bystander.

Notes

1. This study benefited from funding from the following institutions: Bulgarian Science Research Fund, references DCOST 01/01-17.05.2017 and DCOST 01/02-17.05.2017; Danish research program 'Reforming Welfare State Institutions' from the University of Southern Denmark; Hungarian budget and European Social Fund, project number EFOP-3.6.2-16-2017-00007; Polish National Science Center, grant number 2015/18/M/HS5/00080; and Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, reference IF/01451/2014/CP1239/CT0004.
2. David Nicolas Hopmann is thankful for the support of his student, Mie Foged Filtenborg.
3. In addition to the listed authors in this chapter, there were other members of the COST Action who were also involved in the data collection and analysis stages: Delia Balaban (Romania), Nedzma Džananović (Bosnia and Herzegovina),

Dobrinka Peicheva (Bulgaria), Dorota Piontek (Poland), and Lilia Raycheva (Bulgaria).

4. The political parties included in the study were as follows: Bosnia and Herzegovina: Democratic Front, Serb Democratic Party, Alliance for a Better Future, Independent Block; Bulgaria: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, Coalition Patriotic Front, Will, Coalition for Bulgaria; Denmark: Danish People's Party, Venstre (Right-Liberals), Social-Democrats, the Alternative; Greece: To Potami (The River), Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy), Chrisi Avgi (Golden Dawn), Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left); Hungary: Fidesz, Jobbik, Independent, Politics Can Be Different (LMP); Italy: 5 Star Movement, Forza Italia, Democratic Party, Lega Nord; Norway: Conservative Party, Progress Party, Center Party, Socialist Left Party; Poland: Civic Platform, Nowoczesna (Modern), Law and Justice, Democratic Left Alliance; Portugal: Communist Party, National Renewal Party, Socialist Party, Social Democratic Party; Romania: The Democratic Union of the Hungarians in Romania, Social Democratic Party, National Liberal Party, Union Save Romania; Spain: People's Party, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, Ciudadanos, Podemos. Anonymity was not an issue for most of these politicians, except in the cases of Bulgaria and Poland, where all interviewees have requested that their names not be disclosed.

References

- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2008). *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bächler, C. M., & Hopmann, D. N. (2017). Denmark: The rise of the Danish people's party. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 29-41). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bart, R. R. (2009). Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics. *Party Politics*, 15(1), 29-48. doi:10.1177/1354068808097890
- Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Canovan, M. (1984). 'People', politicians and populism. *Government and Opposition*, 19(3), 312-327. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.1984.tb01048.x
- Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2-16. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.00184
- Canovan, M. (2002). Taking politics to the people: Populism as the ideology of democracy. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the populist challenge* (pp. 25-44). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Csigó, P., & Merkóvity, N. (2017). Hungary: Home of empty populism. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 299-310). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Eatwell, R. (2004). Charisma and the revival of the European extreme right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *Movements of exclusion: Radical right-wing populism in the Western world* (pp. 101-120). New York, NY: Nova Science.
- Gál, Z. (2011). Duna-völgyi Argentina: Populista gazdaságpolitika mint a fenntartható gazdasági növekedés első számú ellensége. *Fórum: Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, 13(1), 141-172.
- Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319-345. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x

- Kriesi, H., & Pappas, T. S. (Eds.). (2015). *European populism in the shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Lubbers, M., Gijsberts, M., & Scheepers, P. (2002). Extreme right-wing voting in Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 41, 345–378. doi:10.1111/1475-6765.00015
- Lucardie, P. (2009). Populism: Some conceptual problems. *Political Studies Review*, 7(3), 319–321. doi:10.1111/j.1478-9302.2009.00192.x
- Mény, Y., & Surel, Y. (2002). The constitutive ambiguity of populism. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the populist challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist Zeitgeist. *Government & Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raycheva, L., & Peicheva, D. (2017). Populism in Bulgaria between politicization of media and mediatization of politics. *Mediatization Studies*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://journals.umcs.pl/ms/article/view/4062>
- Rydgren, J. (2004). Explaining the emergence of radical right-wing populist parties: The case of Denmark. *West European Politics*, 27, 474–502. doi:10.1080/0140238042000228103
- Rydgren, J. (2017). Radical right-wing parties in Europe. What's populism got to do with it? *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4), 485–496. doi:10.1075/jlp.17024.ryd
- Salgado, S. (2018). Where's populism? Online media and the diffusion of populist discourses and styles in Portugal. In S. Salgado & Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.), *Populist discourses and political communication in Southern Europe (symposium)*. *European Political Science*. doi:10.1057/s41304-017-0137-4
- Salgado, S., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2018). Introduction: Populist discourses and political communication in Southern Europe. In S. Salgado & Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.), *Populist discourses and political communication in Southern Europe (symposium)*. *European Political Science*. doi:10.1057/s41304-017-0139-2
- Sanders, K., Molina Hurtado, M. J., & Zoragastua, J. (2017). Populism and exclusionary narratives: The 'other' in Podemos' 2014 European Union election campaign. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(6), 552–567.
- Stanyer, J., Salgado, S., & Strömbäck, J. (2017). Populist actors as communicators or political actors as populist communicators: Cross-national findings and perspectives. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 353–364). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Thorpe, N. (2017). Europe migrant crisis: Hungary rages at EU asylum verdict. *BBC News*, 6 September. Retrieved from www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41177420
- Weyland, K. (1999). Neoliberal populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. *Comparative Politics*, 31(4), 379–401. doi:10.2307/422236
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: Sage.
- Woods, D. (2014). The many faces of populism: Diverse but not disparate. In D. Woods & B. Wejnert (Eds.), *The many faces of populism: Current perspectives* (pp. 1–25). Bingley: Emerald.

Part II

Populism in the Media