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

This volume brings together leading scholars on populist political communication and truly demonstrates the relevance for populism as a research area within political communication research. The book provides a substantial leap forward in our empirical and theoretical understanding of populist political communication through comparative empirical evidence on its consequences. Rarely does a volume present such rich and original comparative empirical evidence. This volume should be on the shelf of any scholar interested in populism and political communication, as it lays the foundation for future studies within this emerging research field.

—**Erik Knudsen,** *Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen*

The book addresses crucial questions about how populist messages are perceived by politicians and journalists and what effect they might have on target audiences. It is a must-read for everyone interested in studying populism.

—**Otto Eibl,** *Department of Political Science, Masaryk University*

If populism often (but not always) goes along with nationalism and the rejection of expertise, this is a decidedly non-populist book: based on the international collaboration of experts from all over Europe and on elaborate comparative empirical research. And it is 'populist' in the best sense: accessible and enlightening also to the uninitiated (while essential to everyone in the field), and with a bit of critical advice to journalistic and political elites.

—**Benjamin Krämer,** *Department of Communication Science and Media Research, LMU Munich*

Communicating Populism

The studies in this volume conceptualize populism as a type of political communication and investigate it comparatively, focusing on (1) politicians' and journalists' perceptions; (2) media coverage; and (3) effects on citizens.

This book presents findings from several large-scale internationally comparative empirical studies, funded by the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST), focusing on communication and the media within the context of populism and populist political communication in Europe. The studies are based on comparative interview studies with journalists and politicians, a large-scale comparative content analysis, and a comparative cross-country experiment using nationally representative online surveys over 15 countries. The book also includes advice for stakeholders like politicians, the media, and citizens about how to deal with the challenge of populist political communication.

This enlightening volume is 'populist' in the best sense and will be an essential text for any scholar in political science, communication science, media studies, sociology, and philosophy with an interest in populism and political communication. It does not assume specialist knowledge and will remain accessible and engaging to students, practitioners, and policymakers.

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7 Event-, Politics-, and Audience-Driven News

A Comparison of Populism in European Media Coverage in 2016 and 2017

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on trends in reporting over time. It examines the presence of populist key messages in 'news coverage of immigration' and 'commentaries on current political events' in European newspapers at two points in time, namely spring 2016 and spring 2017. The chapter has a twofold aim. First, it will explore similarities and differences in the populist content of European newspapers between the two periods. Second, it identifies a set of extra-media and intra-media explanatory factors contributing to the understanding of the emerging differences in a year-to-year comparison.

The chapter by Blassnig et al. in this volume provides more detailed information about the newspaper stories we content-analyzed. Two types of stories are analyzed: 'news articles on immigration' and 'editorials commenting on current political events', irrespective of the topic. While the chapter by Blassnig et al. pooled and jointly investigated the data from 2016 and 2017, and the chapter by Maurer et al. used only content data from 2017, this chapter will evaluate and compare the data from 2016 and 2017. These two periods are seen as two phases of a news and policy cycle that responds to real-world cues. The two phases are understood as stages of a crisis, which offer more or less favorable opportunity structures for populist discourse (Moffitt, 2015). As stated in the introduction to this volume, a whole range of contextual factors influence the populist worldview of crises and, subsequently, the use of populist communication in news reports and commentaries about theses crises.

There were three important contextual factors to consider in our media content analysis, namely real-world events (such as migration movements

and political responses to them), the role of political actors (such as whether populists are involved in government), and public opinion (what issues are perceived as problems by the population). The chapter by Maurer et al. demonstrated that there are important country differences in the use of populist key messages. While Maurer et al.'s cross-sectional data analysis focused on the temporally invariant factors of journalistic culture and news logic as explanatory factors, in this chapter the focus will be on real-world events, political actors, and public opinion, since these factors changed between 2016 and 2017. Links to journalistic culture and news logic will also be examined where necessary. While real-world events and political actors belong to the supply-side conditions of populist communication, public opinion refers to the demand-side conditions.

Theoretical Background

Supply and Demand-Side Conditions: Events, Politics, and Audience-Driven News

As previous studies on the rise of populism have shown, immigration is a key source of concern for the general public (Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002; Vliegenthart, 2018). Our study follows the European refugee crisis, which reached a first high point in the fall of 2015. In many countries, right-wing populist actors in particular used popular fears as an opportunity to raise their profile in electoral contests (Pisoiu & Ahmed, 2016; Wodak, 2015). One example is Bulgaria, where the leader of the conservative party GERB, Boyko Borissov, used immigration for his election campaign in spring 2017 and subsequently formed a government coalition with the right-wing populist party United Patriots. Another example is Matteo Salvini, leader of the Northern League and, from 2018, Deputy Prime Minister in a government coalition with the 5 Star Movement in Italy. His campaign wins in the 2018 Italian election were also due to his use of populist, anti-immigrant rhetoric.

In line with previous research on immigration news and mediated populism, the expectation is that country differences in media coverage are related to supply and demand-side factors (Eberl et al., 2018; Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Vliegenthart, 2018; see also the introduction to this volume). So-called event-driven and policy-driven models for explaining news content react to supply-side factors, while audience-driven models for explaining news content refer to the relevance of demand-side factors.

With regard to *event-driven news*, it has long been demonstrated (Peter, 2003) that journalism is contingent upon real-world conditions. Journalists interact with political events and sources when writing news items or commentaries and focus on those that help them construct compelling stories. The event environment is relevant insofar as journalists regularly attribute

news values to various aspects of political reality. The chapter by Maurer et al. demonstrated that journalists prefer those political events which they regard to be newsworthy, and they enrich them with elements of news logic and journalistic culture. Political reality, transformed by journalists for the sake of increasing attention, offers populist actors a favorable entry point into the news cycle to disseminate their ideas to the public.

Politics-driven news suggests that powerful political actors and their policies and strategic maneuvers determine the media agenda (Wolfsfeld, 2011, pp. 1–44). News and commentaries are influenced by so-called primary definers to whom journalists preferentially turn to in their search for orientation, original insights, and authoritative interpretations of social reality. Populist actors in privileged positions (e.g., media darlings, survey winners, strongest party, government participants) also benefit from this. Mazzoleni (2008) claims that the often seamless integration of populist messages in editorial decisions and media content is due to a sort of media complicity, namely, a certain dependence of the media on charismatic figures, provocative rhetoric, and mobilizable issues. In this chapter, however, we also want to focus on audience-driven models for explaining news content.

Audience-driven models assign the audience a significant role in the formation of the news agenda. This model assumes that certain events and policies attract public attention and interest. This, in turn, influences subsequent media coverage because it corresponds with the professional aspirations and economic necessities of journalism to respond to the concerns and anxieties of its audience. While there are some topics that can be better explained with media-centered perspectives of agenda-building, there are other topics for which audience-driven models should be considered (Uscinski, 2009). An audience-driven model would expect that it is the public perception of problems, rather than the underlying events directly, that have an influence on journalistic decisions when writing news articles and commentaries on these problems—including the question of how much populism goes into the story.

We will examine our data to discover which of these three explanatory models for changes in populism reporting offer the most evidence. We cannot statistically test the validity of these three explanations in a strict sense, but we can draw plausibility conclusions. Therefore, we refrain from hypothesis testing and limit ourselves to research questions:

> *How does the extent of populism in the news and commentaries of European newspapers in 2016 and 2017 relate to supply-side conditions (expressed in immigration trends and the role of populist parties) (RQ1)?*

> *How does the degree of populism in immigration news and political commentaries relate to demand-side conditions, more precisely to citizens' perceptions of the issue of immigration and citizens'*

assessment of the overall course of the country in 2016 and 2017
(expressed in survey responses) (RQ2)?

In addition, another theoretical possibility should be considered.
Recall that the chapter by Maurer et al. found, in their cross-sectional
analysis, that it is not so much *extra-media* contextual conditions, but
rather *intra-media* conditions of journalistic working modes (profes-
sional culture, news logic) that best explain populism in news and com-
mentaries. Our longitudinal analysis may also find evidence for this;
therefore we must ask:

How does the degree of populism in immigration news and politi-
cal commentaries in 2016 and 2017 relate to intra-media aspects of
journalistic work (expressed in reporting practices) (RQ3)?

While politics-driven news mainly focuses on the importance of pop-
ulist parties in national government policy (we will discuss this later),
events-driven news focuses on immigration figures and audience-driven
news on public opinion moods. We start with background information
on the latter two aspects.

Events and Their Perception

To understand the perception of events, we must first turn to events them-
selves. To provide an idea of the migration dynamics in Europe during our
study period, Table 7.1 presents the official numbers of refugees recorded
by the EU for the ten countries that will be examined in more detail below.

Table 7.1 Eurostat data on asylum and first time asylum applicants (raw numbers)

Country	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*
Bulgaria	20,365	19,420	3,695
Czech Republic	1,515	1,475	1,445
Germany	476,510	745,155	222,560
Greece	13,205	51,110	58,650
Israel	–	–	–
Italy	83,540	122,960	128,850
Norway	31,110	3,485	3,520
Poland	12,190	12,305	5,045
Serbia	–	–	–
Switzerland	39,445	27,140	18,015

Source: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en.

Notes: No EU data available for Israel and Serbia.

According to Eurostat data (of which Table 7.1 presents an extract), more than one million people migrated to the European Union, via the Mediterranean, in 2015. A total of 848,000 took the Balkan route and first arrived in Greece; 153,000 took the central Mediterranean route and landed in Italy. In 2015, 1,294,000 people applied for asylum in Europe, and 1,260,000 in 2016. By far the most applications for asylum were filed in Germany. Observers attested that the EU had temporarily lost control in the context of rising figures and the lack of regulation. There was no orderly registration and distribution of refugees. Critics attributed a significant share of the increase in the number of asylum seekers to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose public statements in 2015 could be regarded as suspending the Dublin Regulation (setting rules for registering and distributing asylum seekers in the EU) and 'inviting' refugees to Europe. An initially widespread refugee welcome mood gave way to a more critical mood among the population.

In the wake of the refugee crisis, the issue of immigration made a huge leap on the list of concerns held by EU citizens. While in autumn 2014 only 25 percent of EU citizens saw immigration as an important problem for the EU, in autumn 2015, at the peak of the refugee crisis, it was 58 percent. The Eurobarometer asks citizens regularly, 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing the European Union at the moment' and 'facing your country at the moment'. In spring 2016—at the time of the first wave of our media content analysis—the proportions of citizens by country who regarded immigration as a central problem *for the EU* were Bulgaria: 57 percent, Czech Republic: 67 percent, Germany: 57 percent, Greece: 40 percent, Italy: 44 percent, and Poland: 51 percent (no data available for Israel, Norway, Serbia, and Switzerland in Eurobarometer no. 85). EU citizens also answered the same question in relation to *their own country*, and the approval rates for immigration as a *major national problem* are shown in Table 7.2.

From the point of view of populism research, the question naturally arises as to whether citizens in those countries in which immigration is perceived as a pressing national problem will doubt the ability of the political elite to solve those problems (indicating anti-elitism). The Eurobarometer regularly asks whether EU citizens have the impression 'that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction' in their home country. A high level of approval for 'in the wrong direction' expresses public dissatisfaction with the political situation and—importantly—those responsible for it. Table 7.3 shows the findings for those countries included in the content analysis. Public dissatisfaction with national institutions and political leaders has a connection with societal pessimism and anti-elitist populism (Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018). In other words, in a country where the public is dissatisfied with the course of national institutions and political decision-makers to date, the chances of populist communication in politics and the media are likely to increase.

Table 7.2 Eurobarometer question whether citizens perceive immigration as one of the two most important issues 'facing their country' at the moment (agreement in percent)

Country	Spring 2015	Autumn 2015	Spring 2016	Autumn 2016	Spring 2017
Bulgaria	8	21	13	29	15
Czech Republic	18	47	32	25	23
Germany	46	76	56	45	37
Greece	11	20	20	15	12
Israel	–	–	–	–	–
Italy	31	30	28	42	36
Norway	–	–	–	–	–
Poland	9	17	16	11	16
Serbia	3	14	6	7	8
Switzerland	36[a]	–	26[a]	–	11[a]

Source: Standard Eurobarometer no. 84 (2015), 85 (2016), 86 (2016), 87 (2017).

Notes: No Eurobarometer data available for Israel, Norway, or Switzerland.
a For Switzerland, data from the Credit Suisse Barometer of Concerns was added.

Table 7.3 Eurobarometer question whether citizens believe that things are going in the right or in the wrong direction in their country; agreement with 'in the wrong direction' in percent

Country	Spring 2015	Autumn 2015	Spring 2016	Autumn 2016	Spring 2017
Bulgaria	49	49	53	66	58
Czech Republic	30	39	40	49	47
Germany	30	48	46	40	39
Greece	49	77	86	92	89
Israel	–	–	–	–	–
Italy	52	51	53	70	65
Norway	–	–	–	–	–
Poland	37	27	50	55	46
Serbia	34	36	41	45	46
Switzerland	–	–	–	–	–

Source: Standard Eurobarometer no. 84 (2015), 85 (2016), 86 (2016), 87 (2017).

Notes: No Eurobarometer data available for Israel, Norway, or Switzerland.

We will return to the findings from Table 7.1 when we search for an explanatory basis for event-driven news, and we will return to Tables 7.2 and 7.3 when we search for an explanatory basis for audience-driven news. All three tables should help us to answer *RQs 1* and *2* by linking them to our media content analysis data.

Method

With regard to the central parameters of the design of our media content analysis, please refer to the chapter by Blassnig et al. In that chapter you will find more information on the composition of the sample of newspapers and stories, our operationalization of populism and populist key messages, and the reliability of our content-analytical measurements across coders and countries. In the present chapter, we focus on a comparison over time, but in contrast to the previous two content analysis chapters, we must exclude France and the United Kingdom because their newspapers were not examined in 2016, only in 2017.

To calculate the extent of populist communication in European press coverage over time, we use the same overall populism sum index as described in Blassnig et al.'s chapter in this volume. It can assume values from 0 to 4. A value of 0 means that no populist key message was contained in any of the analyzed stories. A value of 4 would mean that each story analyzed contained key messages from all four dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, restoring national sovereignty, and exclusion of others). Accordingly, a value of 0.5 means that every second story contained key messages of at least one dimension.

Results

Event and Politics-Driven Populism in the Media, 2016–2017

Table 7.4 provides an overview of how often newspapers in the ten European countries analyzed have supplemented their news reports on immigration with populist key messages in 2016 and 2017. However, the findings of Table 7.4 are not interpreted in isolation, but in combination with the findings from Tables 7.5 and 7.6, which help us to maintain an overall picture and avoid the danger of obscuring the true picture.

Table 7.5 shows how often European newspapers have also used populist key messages in their commentaries on political events. In order to be able to interpret Table 7.4 meaningfully, it is of further interest to discover what the most frequently discussed topics were in the newspaper commentaries. This is shown in Table 7.6, which lists the three most commented on topics in 2016 and 2017 (we have recorded an additional 20 topics, but they were much rarer); in addition, the table shows how strongly the newspaper commentaries presented these three topics in a populist way. Table 7.6 reveals that immigration was the most commented on topic in 2016; in the following year, 2017, most comments were about Europe and the question of whether it can meet its challenges.

With regard to the first research question, there are links between the frequency with which the topic of immigration is discussed in news items and commentaries using populist key messages—and the presence of refugees and populist actors in the respective countries. For example,

Table 7.4 Frequency of populist key messages in news stories about immigration in 2016 and 2017, expressed as mean values of the populism index

Country	2016		2017		Difference in means between both periods
	M	SD	M	SD	
Bulgaria	0.53	0.57	0.77	0.60	+0.24
Czech Republic	0.44	0.58	0.32	0.55	−0.12
Germany	0.79	0.78	0.76	0.83	−0.03
Greece	0.75	0.64	0.57	0.69	−0.18
Israel	1.0	0.98	0.71	0.86	−0.29
Italy	0.23	0.46	0.30	0.58	+0.07
Norway	0.20	0.43	0.19	0.39	−0.01
Poland	0.60	0.55	1.0	0.63	+0.40
Serbia	0.32	0.54	0.11	0.32	−0.21
Switzerland	0.47	0.57	0.47	0.59	0.0
Total	0.53	0.61	0.52	0.60	−0.01

Notes: *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Number of key messages analyzed: $N(2016)$ = 761, $N(2017)$ = 762. Periods of media content analyses were spring 2016 (February to April) and spring 2017 (February to April).

Table 7.5 Frequency of populist key messages in commentaries in 2016 and 2017, expressed as mean values of the populism index

Country	2016		2017		Difference in means between both periods
	M	SD	M	SD	
Bulgaria	0.64	0.71	0.68	0.87	+0.04
Czech Republic	0.52	0.62	0.23	0.48	−0.29
Germany	0.80	0.68	0.86	0.67	+0.08
Greece	0.95	0.53	0.98	0.61	+0.03
Israel	1.17	0.75	1.15	0.81	−0.02
Italy	0.36	0.51	0.40	0.54	+0.04
Norway	0.22	0.48	0.19	0.39	−0.03
Poland	0.96	0.47	1.17	0.52	+0.21
Serbia	0.76	0.69	0.59	0.62	−0.20
Switzerland	0.83	0.76	0.59	0.67	−0.21
Total	0.72	0.62	0.68	0.62	−0.04

Notes: *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Number of key messages in commentaries analyzed: $N(2016)$ = 588, $N(2017)$ = 632. Periods of media content analyses were spring 2016 (February to April) and spring 2017 (February to April).

Table 7.6 The three most frequently addressed topics in the commentaries of European newspapers, and the combination of these topics with populist key messages

Topic	Frequency N (%)			Overall populism index (mean)		
	2016	*2017*	*Year-to-year difference*	*2016*	*2017*	*Difference in means*
Immigration	149 (15%)	86 (9%)	–6%	0.80	0.63	–0.23
Societal values and norms	124 (13%)	124 (13%)	0%	0.83	0.75	–0.08
Europe	111 (12%)	131 (13%)	+1%	0.80	0.78	–0.02

Notes: Up to three topics per commentary could be coded; frequencies were summed up. Missing data to 100 percent concern commentaries on other topics which we have not listed here for reasons of clarity.

the high populist values of German and Greek newspapers in their news (Table 7.4) and commentaries on immigration and Europe (Table 7.6) can be interpreted as a reaction to the many arriving refugees and the associated political challenges in the context of an unenforced Dublin Regulation. On the other hand, in countries where the number of refugees had been restricted rapidly (e.g., Norway; see Table 7.1), the proportion of populism in immigration news and commentaries was low (see Tables 7.4 and 7.5). In Serbia, where few immigrants stopped during the refugee crisis, immigration never became a big topic for the media.

The finding that reporting on immigration is higher in the regions more affected by it has been well corroborated in research literature. For example, Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano (2010) found, for the United States, that media attention to immigration is greater in border states than in non-border states. In view of the high populist values for German and Greek newspapers in 2016, however, it is rather the populism-using reporting of the immigration issue that can be explained in this way. A similarly high trend of populism-infused coverage could also have been expected for Italy. However, although public concern about rising immigration flows and media coverage of the immigration issue was high in 2016–2017, Italian newspapers were reluctant to use populist key messages (Tables 7.4 and 7.5). At the same time, however, these newspapers focused strongly on tightening immigration controls on boat traffic with Libya and tightening the naturalization law for babies born to foreigners in Italy, as was revealed upon closer scrutiny of Italian news stories and commentaries.

In the newspapers of the three countries most affected by arriving refugees (Germany, Greece, and Italy), it is striking that the populist

coloration of their reporting was not determined by xenophobic, exclusionary messages, but by anti-elitist statements (on the prominence of anti-elitist media coverage, see also Blassnig et al.'s chapter in this volume). This is particularly noticeable in the case of Greece. In 2016, the Greek newspapers voiced their criticism of an ineffective 'EU relocation and resettlement scheme', which would not bring relief due to the refusal of many EU states to accept Greek and Italian immigrants. They also criticized the 'EU Turkey refugee deal', which would not bring relief due to various problems between Greece and Turkey at the time. The anti-elitist criticism by Greek newspapers was also directed against Brussels because its 'Dublin III regulation' would contribute to even more catastrophic conditions in Greece's already overburdened first-time reception centers, by returning refugees back to them from countries such as Germany. Between 2016 and 2017, the use of exclusionary populist statements in immigration news and commentaries decreased in all countries studied—including those countries most affected by new arrivals—whereas anti-elitist statements predominated.[1]

Other countries revealed a different pattern. This brings us to European countries where immigration figures were low and were reduced even further from 2016 to 2017, but the degree of mediated populism was high, and increased even further from 2016 to 2017. This applies, for example, to Bulgaria and Poland (see Tables 7.1, 7.4, and 7.5). Here the reporting obviously does not react to the actual immigration, but rather to what populist actors have done with the topic (politics-driven news instead of event-driven news). As previously mentioned, Bulgarian populists took advantage of the issue in their 2017 general election campaign. In countries with strong populist actors, some of whom had governmental responsibility (this includes Poland, Israel, and Switzerland), news and commentary reacted more strongly to the handling of events by politicians than to the genuine events themselves.

In summary, to answer *RQ1* there was some tentative evidence of a connection between (1) the extent of populism in the news and commentaries of European newspapers in 2016 and 2017 and (2) supply-side conditions, in this case immigration events and political actions.

Audience-Driven Populism in the Media, 2016–2017

The topic of immigration is such that an audience-driven effect on news content can be expected. Certain problems stimulate public interest and awareness to such an extent that for professional and economic reasons, journalists feel compelled to respond in news and commentary (Uscinski, 2009). The second research question asks how citizens' perceptions of immigration as an important issue and their assessment of the overall course of the country relate to the subsequent populism-infused reporting of immigration.
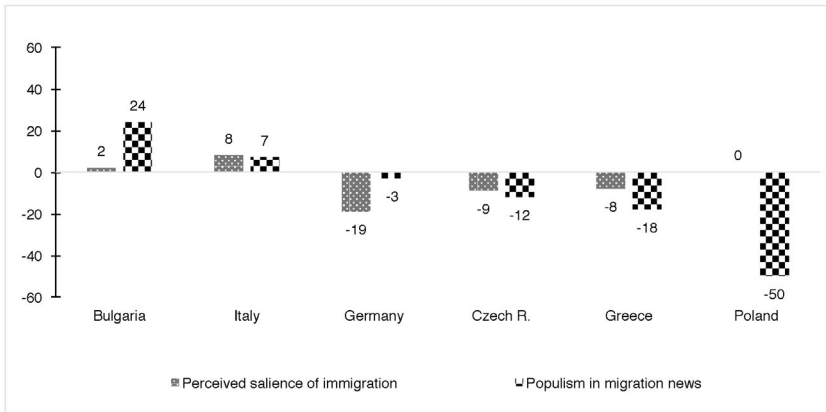
Figure 7.1 Co-development of populism in migration news and perceived salience of immigration among citizens/the audience (difference between 2016 and 2017 in %)

The data in Figure 7.1 give us initial indications that there may be parallels between longer-term trends in the public perception of the immigration problem and longer-term trends in news reporting on immigration. It would be wrong to overstretch the data, but what Figure 7.1 reveals can be seen below (countries with different or missing data sources cannot be considered).

In countries where there has been an increase in the public perception of immigration as an urgent problem, there has been an increase in populism-using reporting on the issue over the same period. According to Eurobarometer data in Table 7.2, the increase in the perceived importance of the topic between spring 2016 and spring 2017 was +2 for Bulgaria and +8 for Italy, and the increase in reporting over the same period was +24 for Bulgaria and +8 for Italy (according to Table 7.4). Correspondingly, we find that in countries where concerns about immigration among the population decreased between spring 2016 and spring 2017 (Czech Republic –9, Germany –19, Greece –8), populist coverage of immigration also decreased (Czech Republic –12, Germany –3, Greece –18).

Audience Perceptions, Events, and Media Examined Together, 2016–2017

The findings presented in Figure 7.1 can only be considered a weak indication of the audience-driven model for explaining news content. An alternative is to compare relevant data from 2016 and 2017 and check their correlative relationships more comprehensively by integrating other

relevant variables into a systematic overall model. We constructed such a model with the data provided in the previous tables, and we offer a graphical presentation of it in Figure 7.2. The model includes data from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Serbia, and Switzerland. Where data from Eurostat or Eurobarometer was not available, the cases were excluded on a case-by-case basis. The correlations between the cases were calculated using Pearson coefficients. Where for logical reasons there can only be one-sided influence relationships, we worked with one-sided significance tests (represented by → arrows); where there can be two-sided influence relationships, we used two-sided significance tests (represented by ↔ arrows).

Figure 7.2 has three levels: events, perceptions, and media. On the level of perceptions—at the center of the chart—two variables of the audience-driven model are located: 'share of citizens perceiving immigration as a major national issue'[2] and 'share of citizens expressing dissatisfaction with the direction of the country and political decision makers'.[3] According to the assumptions of the audience-driven model, the perceived salience of the immigration issue and the widespread anxiety and political dissatisfaction (of the public) is seen as a cause for populism-infused immigration reporting or populism-infused commentary on the current political situation (by journalists). While the first variable suggests that journalists react to the topic of immigration (and its implications) with people-centrist and perhaps even exclusionary key messages, the second variable suggests that anti-elitist and perhaps even national-sovereigntist messages will also be included in the coverage.

At the highest level, Figure 7.2 also takes into account real-world events which are likely to influence the perceptions of the population on one hand, and media coverage on the other. As reality cues, we have included the 'number of arriving asylum applications in country'[4] as a potential influencing factor. Finally, at the lowest level of Figure 7.2, we find media coverage broken down by the two indicators, 'populist key messages in commentaries on current political issues'[5] and 'populist key messages in news coverage on immigration'.[6]

How do we interpret the findings of Figure 7.2? Our interest in the audience-driven model first draws our attention to paths (2), (3), and (4). They tell us that journalists using populist key messages in 2016 were equally responsive to the population's concerns about the immigration issue (2) and to citizens' dissatisfaction with directional decisions taken by political elites (3, 4). These audience-driven influences are only marginally weaker than real-world influences, i.e., the actual number of arriving refugees (path 1), on the use of populist messages in the immigration news. However, all mentioned influences of the paths (1) to (4) are only between $r = .41$ and $r = .51$; they are comparatively low and insignificant in a statistical sense. The soft evidence for audience-driven news presented in Figure 7.1 cannot be corroborated substantially in the more complex
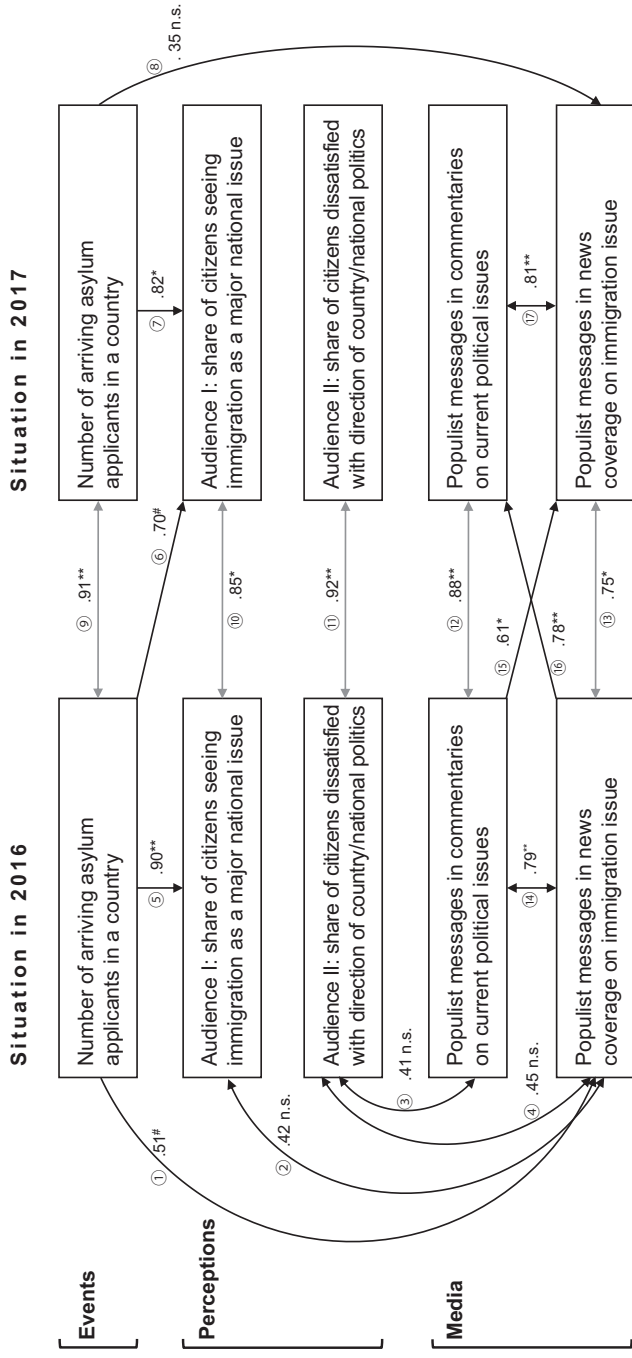
Figure 7.2 Path model comparing relationships between real-world events, audience perceptions, and media coverage in 2016 and 2017

Notes: *N* = 9 countries. Only Pearson coefficients *r* ≥.35 are shown; #*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01.

model of Figure 7.2. In other words, neither for 2016, nor 2017, do the correlations in Figure 7.2 give us statistically significant indications that journalists' use of populist messages in news or commentaries is related to audience-driven processes.

Events, on the other hand, have a greater influence than the audience. The number of arriving asylum applicants in a country in 2016 and 2017 largely determined the share of citizens perceiving immigration to be a major national issue in 2016 (path 5) and 2017 (paths 6 and 7). However, the influence of immigration figures on the extent of populism in the immigration news coverage remained very weak both in 2016 and 2017 (paths 1 and 8). While Tables 7.4 and 7.5 had found soft evidence for the validity of the event-driven news model in some selected countries (e.g., Germany and Greece), this influence disappears when all countries are considered together (as in Figure 7.2).

According to Figure 7.2, the best explanation for events, audience perceptions, and media coverage in the year 2017 was the previous conditions of 2016. The highly significant autocorrelations of paths (9), (10), (11), (12), and (13) indicate that conditions in the various countries did not develop arbitrarily, but followed path-dependent patterns. Political decisions on how many asylum seekers are allowed into the country have evolved as consistently as public opinion and the practices of national news organizations.

A Deeper Look at the Role of the Media

This seemingly great consistency in news organization practices deserves a closer look—and it brings us to our third research question. The fact that we find hardly any noteworthy evidence in Figure 7.2 for the assumptions of the event-driven and audience-driven model to explain *populism in media coverage* draws our attention to the explanatory factor introduced by *RQ3*, namely, intra-media aspects of journalistic work.

Indeed, the extent of populist key messages in political commentaries and immigration news in 2017 is not primarily determined by public opinion or the events of the same year, but by processes of journalistic self-referentiality (see the multiple mutual influences at the level of the 'media' in Figure 7.2). Various scholars such as Stanyer (2014) have pointed to the fact that newspapers monitor each other's coverage closely and respond accordingly; they align their reporting and commenting with the practices of journalists from other media, or with previous publications of their own staff. Inter-media agenda-setting and journalists' herd behavior can influence news decisions and editorial positions; processes of professional socialization and social control within news organizations can further promote convergence of attitudes and practices. In terms of our topic, mediated populism may be less determined by extra-media factors and more by intra-media factors.

To explain paths (14), (15), and (17), Schoenbach's (2008) concept of synchronizing news and opinion is helpful. In his understanding, 'synchronization' means the selection and presentation of news to favor a medium's marked editorial policy or stance. Synchronized news, then, is news selected and presented to support a medium's anti or pro-immigration sentiments, for instance, or its liberal or conservative philosophy (Schoenbach, 2008). This argument is congruent with Kepplinger, Brosius, and Staab (1991) 'theory of instrumental actualization'. It describes the tendency of journalists to align their news decisions with their previous editorial positions in an attitude-fitting fashion. Path (16) further indicates that journalists rely heavily on examples and events they have covered in the news (and their framing) to comment on what is going on in the world. This is line with Scheufele's (2006) work on journalistic framing, which argues that journalists set frames with their earlier reporting that influence their later editorial decisions.

Recall that *RQ1* and *2* asked if growing populism in immigration news could be a response to immigration-related real-world trends or to growing public concerns about immigration and directional decisions taken by political elites. The answer is that there is hardly any convincing empirical evidence for it. This does not mean that the events and concerns of the population do not play a role, but rather that they are not the main explanatory factors for how much *populism* there is in media reports. However, the comparison of two time periods further supports conclusions we already made in Maurer et al.'s chapter on the basis of cross-sectional data analysis—namely, that *intra-media factors* such as journalistic culture and news logic play a powerful role in explaining populism in the news. We can thus answer *RQ3* in the affirmative.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter is based on the same content analysis data presented in detail in Blassnig et al.'s chapter of this volume. Unlike the previous two chapters, the focus here is on a comparison of 2016 and 2017 in order to understand *trends* in the use of populist key messages in news articles and commentaries. Theoretically speaking, the two periods under study can be seen as two phases of a crisis in which different conditions prevailed with regard to migration movements, political reactions, and problem perceptions of the public.

The findings show that the presence of populism in news and commentaries in some countries is loosely related to actual migration dynamics (in the sense of event-driven news; see Germany and Greece), whereas *in other countries* it seems to follow more intensive political debates, although actual immigration is less dramatic (in the sense of politics-driven news; see Bulgaria and Poland). There are fewer indications than expected that the populist tendencies in news and commentaries are a reaction to the

intensity with which the population views immigration as an important national issue or is dissatisfied with trend-setting decisions by political elites (in the sense of audience-driven news; the weak evidence in Figures 7.1 and 7.2). Finally, there are strong indications that the great importance of intra-media factors in explaining populism in news and commentary—already highlighted in Maurer et al.'s chapter—are also clearly present in our temporal comparison. This is the essential finding of Figure 7.2.

For an overall assessment of the situation, it is also necessary to emphasize that, on average, there was a decline in populist news and comments in all the countries we examined between 2016 and 2017. We attribute this primarily to three developments: first, the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 and the resulting decline in immigration figures; second, political searches for solutions at EU and national level (e.g., with regard to dealing with the Dublin Regulation); and third, a more reflective approach by journalists to aspects of migration, migration policy, and populism. The last point is supported, for example, by the finding that the proportion of exclusionist populism in the immigration news of all the countries studied decreased between 2016 and 2017.[7] However, the decline in populism was also attributable to a fourth factor, namely the fact that newspapers, which in 2016 had focused considerably on the international and Europe-wide dimensions of the crisis, returned to focusing more on national conditions in 2017.

This study also has some limitations, many of which were already discussed in the chapter by Blassnig et al. However, there are some additional restraints specifically with regard to the comparison over time. First, we are comparing only two time periods that are one year apart. While these two waves capture important phases during the European refugee crisis, a longer investigation period would have allowed more long-term analyses and broader conclusions. Secondly, because internationally standardized data was not available for all countries, our investigation of the co-development between the perceived salience of immigration in the public and populism in migration news had to remain largely descriptive. Thirdly, and in connection with the second point, the path model presented in Figure 7.2 is based on a small sample and its results should therefore be generalized only with caution.

In conclusion, the findings in this chapter support the theoretical position that contextual and situational factors influence, in *some* countries and to *some* extent, the use of populist communication in media coverage. However, it is mainly intra-media factors that explain the *general* development of reporting between 2016 and 2017.

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Notes

1. These analyses, differentiated according to dimensions, are not shown in the tables.
2. For this, the Eurobarometer data for spring 2016 and spring 2017 from Table 7.2 have been included in the calculations.
3. For this, the Eurobarometer data for spring 2016 and spring 2017 from Table 7.3 have been included. These periods correspond to the periods of our media content analysis.
4. For this, the Eurostat data for 2016 and 2017 from Table 7.1 have been included in the calculations.
5. For this, we used the data for 2016 and 2017 from Table 7.4.
6. For this, we used the data for 2016 and 2017 from Table 7.5.
7. See endnote 1. This is an additional finding that is not shown in the tables above.

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