# REFLECTIONS ON EMOTIONS, POPULISM AND POLARISATION

**HEPP5 Conference Proceedings**

**Edited by Ilana Hartikainen and Olena Siden**

**Working Paper series in Emotions populism and polarization**

**Volume 5: Issue 1**

Research Council of Finland

European Commission

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Trans-Atlantic Platform
Social Sciences and Humanities

CO3 PLEDGE

The Working Paper Series on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation
VOL. 5, Issue 1: Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation, HEPP5 Conference Proceedings

Editors:
Ilana Hartikainen and Olena Siden
HEPPsinki Research Group University of Helsinki

*The Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation* is an academic series that publishes both double-blind peer-reviewed and non-blind peer-reviewed papers on a bi-annual basis. The publications include the HEPP conference proceedings. The series is run by the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPPsinki), established in 2020 as an umbrella organization and meeting point for a set of interdisciplinary teams collaborating within several externally funded projects since 2017, mainly in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki.



Working Papers in Emotions, Populism and Polarisation

Vol 5.

Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPP5 Conference Proceedings)

ISSN: 2737-3657

Authors: Chris Burden, Vincenzo Gannuscio, Ilana Hartikainen (ed.), Dom Holdaway, Aboubakar Kouakou, Jan Křovák, Silvia Modena, Fedja Pavlovic, Maria Plucinska, Yosua Praditya, Sierra Salazar, Olena Siden (ed.) Jyot Sikhar Singh, Avdi Smajljaj, Raquel Tarullo, Tommaso Valastro, Olga Vlasova



HEPP5 Conference Proceedings

Helsinki 2026

# Table of contents

FOREWORD: The Social Contract in Politics ..... 6

Introduction ..... 7

by Ilana Hartikainen & Olena Siden

The Good Underdog: On Populism's Construction of 'the People' ..... 10

by Fedja Pavlovic

Populism, Elitism, and Civic Nationalism: An Explorative Framework ..... 21

by Tommaso Valastro

Epistemic Populism and the Quest for Common Ground: Navigating Hegemony in Polarised Democracies ..... 33

by Jyot Shikhar Singh

Populist Narratives in Film and TV: A Conceptual Framework ..... 50

by Dom Holdaway

Tradition as Self-Expression: Values in the *Shistdesiatnytstvo* & the Silent Revolution in Ukraine ..... 64

by Sierra Salazar

Populism, Persona and Performance: Queer Understandings of Left-Wing Populist Discourses and Audience-Informed Reciprocal Performance Online ..... 77

by Chris Burden

Populism and the Media as a Love-hate Relationship? Analysis of Elections Coverage in the Czech Republic ..... 93

by Jan Křovák

Emotions, Belonging and Transnational News Consumption: Latin American Migrants and Affective Citizenship in Spain ..... 117

by Raquel Tarullo

The Politics of Pacification During Russia's Partial Mobilisation ..... 128

by Olga Vlasova

The Short-term Power of Narrative on Populist Developments: The Tremendous Rise and Apparent

Decline of Vetëvendosje in the Kosovo Party System ..... 141

by Avdi Smajljaj

Islamism and Nationalism in 212 Rally Jakarta: A Populist Convergence in Indonesia ..... 153

by Yosua Praditya

The Role of Emotion-driven Narratives and Rhetoric of Unreason in Reinforcing Polarization: The Case of Polish Debates on Drug Policy ..... 166

by Maria Plucinska

The Rise of Anti-French Sentiment in the Sahel: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Polarization in the Speeches of the Junta Leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso ..... 178

by Kouamé Aboubakar Kouakou

The Politics of Belonging: Gendered Identity and Populist Exclusion in France, Germany and Italy ..... 191

by Vincenzo Gannuscio & Silvia Modena

HEPP Working Paper Series ..... 208

Previous Volumes of the Collection

# FOREWORD: The Social Contract in Politics

This volume of articles from the HEPP5 conference is already the fifth in our Working Paper series. Our conference in 2025 was themed with the Horizon Europe Continuous Construction of the Social Contract (CO3) consortium, which we have been leading along with Demos Helsinki. The conference was an effort where the editors of this issue and Laura Horsmanheimo made important contributions, and they are also to be thanked for both efforts. We received high quality contributions from the conference participants, whose number exceeded those from previous issues. In HEPP5, we gave space to 212 participants from altogether 42 countries and every continent except Australia and Antarctica. It is also the content that matters. A warm thanks to the authors of this for submitting and revising their texts after review for this issue of the HEPP Working Papers! It is published in the lead-up to the HEPP6 conference in May 2026 and will hopefully offer inspiration for the participants of the next conference.

Furthermore, we would like to thank the keynote speakers of the HEPP5 event. The conference opened with a keynote from Allan Dreyer Hansen, my colleague for 25 years. Allan was kind enough to engage with my Laclaudian formula of populism, which was not familiar for all participants, but I hope that the publication of my monograph on Hungary after the event in open access from the Helsinki University Press will make it more accessible. Allan's work on the spectres of populism also connects with the way in which the social democrats in Denmark have adopted anti-migrant discourse but forgotten about the constitutive role politics has for the people, in a Laclaudian sense.

The Eastern and Central European space and even the former Soviet area are important for us as a geographical location, but beyond that, Asel Doolotkeldieva in her keynote was able to capture the way in which the social contract is generated in particular spaces and for particular people in transitional societies. Her work impressed me at the Aleksanteri Conference, a large international conference on the region, and I was happy that we could also recruit her for HEPPsinki.

The last but not least of the keynotes was the great orator Marina Prentoulis, known by many for her pro-EU left-wing argumentation in the UK. Her engagement with the social contract as a concept was an important contribution for the research group. With the background of the social contract of the Brexit debate, it raises an important point – one that is echoed also at the time of writing this foreword here in Budapest.

The theme of the conference, the Social Contract, may appear at odds with our research group theme, but indeed the idea of social contract in explicit and implicit references has become part of the political debate. How does this fit with populism research? Social contracts can also be used as heuristic tools for understanding inclusion and exclusion. It enables asking, for example, the following questions: Who are the "us" assumed to be contracted? What are we contracted on? What is the imagined transaction about? Who gets to ask or answer these questions? Answers may differ from context to context, and they can be a fruitful object of debate – also tangible in contemporary populist discourses.

Emilia Palonen, Leader of the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation

# Introduction

by Ilana Hartikainen[1] & Olena Siden[2]

The present volume draws together a fascinating collection of working papers from the HEPP5 conference, held at the University of Helsinki on March 5-7, 2025. As HEPP5 was our biggest and most thematically expansive conference yet, it is no surprise that this issue of the HEPP Working Paper Series is similarly expansive. The conference featured a key focus on the social contract, following the work done in our Continuous Construction of Resilient Social Contracts Through Societal Transformations (CO3) Horizon Europe project. While the papers collected in this volume do not directly deal with social contract theory, they present a wide range of approaches on how to study the societal crises that the CO3 project looks at through the lens of fracturing social contracts.

The papers break down into four categories: theoretical innovations, historical analyses, media approaches, and global case studies. We are proud that the topics addressed here showcase what we see as HEPP's main strengths: our focus on interdisciplinary populism research, especially highlighting the importance of emotions and the media; and our global outlook. The HEPP conferences have been hybrid, with a hybrid panel in HEPP1, fully online HEPP2. HEPP3 in 2022 ushered us out of our pandemic cocoons, and while this requires substantial additional organization on our side, you can witness the payoff of this approach in this very volume. Several of the authors could only participate online, and this option greatly widened the geographical scope of the case studies featured both at the conference and here. As you read through these pages, the authors will take you across four continents, and from an analysis of populism in Italian pop culture to a quantitative look at Czech populism in the media.

## The Papers Collected Here

We open the volume with three theoretical explorations of populism, each emerging from a different theoretical tradition and arguing for a reframing of the phenomenon and how we study it. Fedja Pavlovic's contribution builds on the work of Michael Kazin, Margaret Canovan, Pierre Ostiguy, and Benjamin Moffitt to suggest an approach that conceptualizes 'the people' in a populist movement as 'the good underdog', integrating both normative valuation and a consideration of power hierarchies in the populist articulation of a collective identity. He argues that this fills the gap left by the conceptual and empirical issues with the

[1] University of Helsinki

[2] Univeristy of Helsinki

widely accepted ideational and political-strategic approaches, on the one hand, and the Laclaudian discourse theoretical approach, on the other, ultimately adding nuance to the study of populism as a way of discursively articulating collective identities.

Tommaso Valastro starts from the ideational approach, but, similarly, uses his contribution to argue that our understanding of populism would be improved by incorporating a third dimension into the traditional two-dimensional model that considers populism as anti-pluralist and democratic (albeit majoritarian): namely, communitarianism. He proposes that pro-democratic actors might incorporate communitarian forms of civic nationalism to address the anti-pluralist, majoritarian character of many populist movements. Jyot Sikhar Singh moves to the Laclaudian, discourse theoretical approach, in order to discuss epistemic populism, where 'the people' are discursively constructed as the bearers of true knowledge, in opposition to the elite and the institutional knowledge structures linked to them. Through a case study of Donald Trump's first term as president and a few examples from Viktor Orbán's Hungary, he argues that epistemic plurality might provide a safeguard against the anti-democratic character of such knowledge-based populisms.

The final theoretical piece takes us away from the usual suspects and into the world of Italian television. Here, Dom Holdaway draws on Herkman's notion of cultural populism to argue for the existence of a so-called populist narrative, which might contribute to cultures of populism outside of the world of entertainment. As you read Holdaway's Italian examples, similar examples from your own TV and movie consumption will certainly come to mind.

As the volume's historical case study, Sierra Salazar offers a theoretically ambitious reassessment of the Ukrainian Sixtiers Movement through Ronald Inglehart's Silent Revolution framework and World Values Survey categories. Drawing on archival materials, memoirs, samvydav, interviews, and KGB files, the article argues that so-called "traditional" values – national pride, family, and cultural heritage – functioned as forms of self-expression and resistance under Soviet secular totalitarianism. By critically interrogating modernization theory's coding of values, the study challenges linear assumptions about value change and highlights the specificity of the Soviet Ukrainian case.

Several contributions approach populism and crisis through the lens of media studies. Chris Burden develops a conceptually innovative framework for analyzing digital populism, showing how platform infrastructures and algorithmic logics shape populist performance, visibility, and affective mobilization. Jan Křovák takes a quantitative approach to media coverage of populist politicians over three parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, and this impressive dataset reveals two main findings, namely the candidates attract more media attention while holding office, and that the media rarely actually use the term 'populist' in referring to these political actors, despite their broad recognition in political science research as populist. Similarly situated within media research, Raquel Tarullo examines the emotional dynamics of news use among migrants, demonstrating how nostalgia, anger, and hope sustain transnational engagement and constitute a form of affective citizenship. Olga Vlasova also engages media as a site of governance, analyzing how the Kremlin used propaganda, reassurance, and informational control to manage anxiety and depoliticize society during the September 2022 mobilisation.

The volume's global case studies further expand its geographical and thematic reach. Avdi Smajljaj takes readers to Kosovo, analyzing the electoral success of the Vetëvendosje party and their subsequent failure to deliver on campaign promises through an emotional les, tracking voter anger and anxiety. Yosua Praditya delivers a fascinating analysis of the 212 Rally in Indonesia as a case where religious and nationalist groups that would normally find themselves in opposition to each other were able to unite when faced with a shared Other. Maria Plucinska investigates how moralization and emotional framing intensify polarization in contemporary Poland. Aboubakar Kouakou examines speeches by the junta leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso to show how anti-colonial rhetoric constructs a polarized "us versus them" dynamic and legitimizes geopolitical realignment. Finally, Silvia Modena and Vincenzo Gannuscio provide a comparative Western European study demonstrating how gendered identity and emotional appeals function as central tools in populist boundary-making across linguistic and national contexts.

## Conclusion

Across diverse contexts and approaches, the contributions gathered in this volume demonstrate the analytical depth and geographical reach of contemporary populism research, while also speaking – often implicitly, yet powerfully – to the question of the social contract that framed HEPP5 and the broader CO3 project. Across theoretical innovation, historical reassessment, media analysis, and global case studies, the papers illuminate how political actors construct "the people," mobilize emotions, and redefine the boundaries of belonging and legitimacy. In doing so, they shed light on the processes through which social contracts are contested, strained, and, at times, reimagined.

Although few contributions engage social contract theory directly, many address its core components: expectations of representation, mutual obligations between rulers and ruled, access to knowledge and truth, and the emotional foundations of political trust. By bringing together cases from four continents and combining qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical approaches, this volume also highlights the comparative and interdisciplinary promise of HEPP's work. It shows that the resilience or fragility of social contracts cannot be understood without attending to emotions, narratives, media ecologies, and historically specific value configurations. We hope that this collection will serve as both a snapshot of the intellectual energy of HEPP5 and a stepping stone for further research on how democratic societies confront contestation, polarization, and transformation. In times when social contracts appear increasingly under pressure, sustained dialogue across disciplines and regions is not only academically fruitful but politically necessary.

# The Good Underdog: On Populism's Construction of 'the People'

by Fedja Pavlovic[3]

## Abstract

How does populism envisage 'the people'? Does it depict them as morally pure and homogeneous entity, or primarily as the underdog in a struggle against entrenched power? This paper critically reviews two prominent theoretical positions in contemporary populism studies, which address this question – the 'homogeneity and morality theses' prominent in ideational and political-strategic approaches, and the 'people-as-underdog thesis' developed within the Laclauian discursive tradition. Arguing that both perspectives have significant conceptual and empirical limitations, I propose a third, synthesising perspective derived from the writings of Kazin, Canovan, Ostiguy, and Moffitt. According to this 'good underdog thesis', two distinct but interrelated criteria are at play in populism's construction of 'the people': normative valuation (ethical, aesthetic, ideological) and power (hierarchies of status and cultural capital). I conclude by outlining key theoretical questions raised by this dual-logic approach, which could guide future research into populism's discursive articulation of collective identities.

**Keywords**: Populism, The People, Homogeneity, Morality, Subalternity

## Introduction

Populism, as the name suggests, centres on 'the people'. The promise to empower 'the people' – the idea that politics has escaped the people's control, and that the people should reclaim their rightful hold on power, taking charge of their lives and deciding their own future – is widely recognised as the central message spread by a diverse assortment of populist political actors throughout the world (Canovan 2002). It is well-established that left-wing and right-wing populist discourses tend to employ different criteria in determining what Laclau (2005a) would call the people's ontic content – that the former emphasise socio-economic status, and the later cultural and ethno-national attributes. But what of 'the people' as an ontological category of populism *per se*? Are there any features inherent to the populist conception of 'the people', and if so, what are they?

One striking feature of populism's 'people' is the vagueness of its intention. This vagueness is evident in

[3] University of Montenegro

the tendency of populists to use diverse and shifting descriptions when referring to the popular subject – "the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the burdened taxpayers, the 'common man', the moral majority, and so on" (Arditi 2003, 22). 'The people', as a category of populist discourse, appears to be an infinitely malleable entity: "an idea that is as ductile or flexible as populism needs it to be" (Taggart 2000, 92).

This inherent conceptual flexibility has inspired a rich body of literature dealing with the question of how populism conceives the popular subject. From that body of literature two prominent theoretical camps can be readily discerned.[4] According to one perspective, populism envisages 'the people' as a morally pure and homogeneous entity (the 'homogeneity and morality thesis'); in the other perspective, populism conceptualises 'the people' primarily as the underdog engaged in a struggle against entrenched power (the 'people-as-underdog thesis').

This conceptual intervention seeks to introduce and articulate a third, synthetising perspective implicit within the scholarship on populism. According to this view, populism constructs 'the people' *both* as the underdog *and* as a normatively valorised entity. I call this the 'good underdog thesis'. I begin by sketching the two familiar perspectives, highlighting some of their respective limitations. I then proceed to stake out the proposed third perspective – the good underdog thesis – and conclude by considering the broader theoretical implications arising from this dual logic in populism's construction of 'the people'.

## The Homogeneity and Morality Thesis

Scholars working within the ideational and the political-strategic approaches to populism tend to claim that populism depicts 'the people' as a homogeneous and a morally pure entity – a position some have termed the 'homogeneity and morality theses' (Katsambekis 2022). From this standpoint, populism depicts 'the people' as a single, organic and indivisible whole, "with each individual member of 'the people' sharing exactly the same key interests and values" (Mudde 2021, 579). Moral purity, in this view, constitutes the very essence of the populist notion of 'the people' (Mudde 2017, 51). Correspondingly, populism is said to depict 'the elite' as an equally homogeneous entity, whose defining feature is moral corruption (Galston 2018, 12).

These two interrelated claims find their clearest expression in Cas Mudde's classic definition of populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (2004, 543). Another prominent articulation of the homogeneity and morality theses is offered by Jan-Werner Müller, who defines populism as "a way of

[4] My own understanding of this debate is indebted to a recent survey of the most influential conceptual approaches in the contemporary field of populism studies (Kim 2022).

perceiving the political world that sets a *morally pure and fully unified* – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior" (2016, 22, italics mine). The 'homogeneity and morality theses' are also found in Paul Taggart's account of populism's conception of 'the heartland', as an imaginary place in which populists believe that a virtuous and homogeneous population resides (2000).[5]

Populism, in this per, operates with a distinctly Manichean conception of politics as the site of a cosmic struggle between "a knowing good and a knowing evil" (Hawkins 2019, 60). Within this Manichean framework, 'the people' and 'the elite' are not merely positioned as groups with irreconcilable values and interests. Rather, they become embodiments of the two sides of a cosmic duality: good versus evil. Seen through these hyper-moralised Manichean lens, political struggles transmute into ethical confrontations, and politics becomes "a fight between good and evil, spirit and matter, honesty and dishonesty, sincerity and insincerity, morality and immorality" (de la Torre 2000, 67). Populism's affinity with a Manichean moral framework is similarly acknowledged by proponents of the political-strategic approach to populism, who regard the deliberate effort to turn political conflicts into "an epic struggle between the forces of good and evil" as an essential component of the populist political strategy (Weyland 2019, 324).

This line of interpretation, with its underlying 'homogeneity and morality theses', has been challenged on at least two grounds.

First, several authors contend that the moral framing of the us/them distinction – the logic of 'we are good / they are bad', which simplifies the field of political antagonism by idealising one own camp and vilifying the enemy camp – is by no means a peculiarity of populism, but, rather, a feature inherent to all forms of partisan aggregation, and indeed to all passionate attachments and all identification, including political identification (Urbinati 2019; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018). In fact, it is precisely this impulse for moralisation – the tendency to 'play out the political in the *moral register'*, turning the struggle between 'right and left' into a struggle between 'right and wrong' and effectively collapsing political issues into moral ones – that scholars like Mouffe identify as characteristic of the post-political *Zeitgeist* and of the ostensibly non-adversarial 'Third Way' politics of Europe's (neo)liberal mainstream in the aftermath of the Cold War (2005, 5). The same could be said of the ideological contraposition between the 'honest' many and the 'corrupt' few, reflected in the popular denigration of the ruling elite as out-of-touch, corrupt and unrepresentative. That trope, according to Urbinati, is a central theme of the republican tradition, and can be traced back to the patrician-plebeian cleavage in the Roman Republic (2019, 38). Overall, the argument is that the postulation of morality/moralisation as a defining criterion for populism obscures the specificity and distinctiveness of the phenomenon in question (Katsambekis 2022, 60).

---

[5] The 'homogeneity and morality theses' do not always appear in tandem. For instance, in their influential contribution to the ideational approach to populism, Abts and Rummens (2007) endorse the 'homogeneity thesis' while rejecting the criteria of moral purity/righteousness and corruption in favor of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction. Populism, in this reading, is as a thin-centred ideology which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body (2007, 409).

Second, the 'homogeneity and morality theses' have been criticised on empirical grounds for giving an inaccurate account of how populist actors in Latin America and various left-wing populists in the West, tend to speak of 'the people'. Ostiguy, for instance, argues that in the discourse of Latin American populists 'the people' are characterised as deserving, suffering, neglected and oppressed – but never as morally pure and virtuous. The world of the plebs, he explains, is "the world of petty thieves, of street smarts, *lazzaroni*, *patoteros*, *arrabeleros*" (Ostiguy 2017, 130). According to Ostiguy, populist moral indignation in these contexts pertains to the idea that 'the people' have been betrayed by the elite ("hurt, damaged, ignored, "unrepresented"), and not that their purity does not reign supreme (Ibid). Furthermore, the notion of a homogeneous 'people' is questionable in the context of left-wing populism. Pointing to SYRIZA's record of protecting immigrant, refugee and LGBTQ rights while in office, to Podemos' discursive representation of the Spanish people as plurinational and culturally heterogeneous, and to the emphasis on the diversity of the American people found in the discourse of Bernie Sanders during his 2016 presidential campaign, Katsambekis argues that, in each of these prominent cases of left-wing populism, we encounter an explicitly inclusive, heterogeneous and plural notion of 'the people' (2022, 60).

## The People-as-underdog Thesis

A second perspective, prominent among scholars influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau and associated with the 'post-foundational discursive approach' (Kim 2022), identifies power rather than morality as the key criterion according to which populism constructs 'the people'. In this perspective, populist discourses, insofar as they are populist, construe 'the people' not as a morally pure or righteous entity but as the *underdog*, and the populist distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' is interpreted as being about "power, hierarchy, recognition and socioeconomic or sociocultural position", rather than about good and evil (Moffitt 2020, 35).

In Laclau's strictly formal conception of populism, no particular ontic content – whether political, ideological or socio-economic – is necessarily inscribed into 'the people' (2005b, 44). In this sense, within the Laclauian framework, it is difficult to claim that populism endows the popular subject with any fixed property. However, insofar as 'the people' of populism is described as emerging through a dynamic that presupposes a stark asymmetry of power relations, at least one identifying feature can be discerned: 'the people' figures as the *underdog*.

The very notion of *demand*, central to Laclau's theory of populism and taken by him as the minimal unit of analysis, contains within itself what Nietzsche would call 'the pathos of distance' (1887/2007), namely the chasm between a place of power and a place removed from power, between the act of asking for something and the ostensible capacity to make that thing happen. A demand, by definition, "has to be addressed to an instance different from that within which the demand was originally formulated" (Laclau 2005b, 35-36). Its very emergence, we are told, presupposes some kind of exclusion or

deprivation – what Laclau calls 'deficient being' (2005a, 117). Unsatisfied demands, which bring to the fore the chasm between pleading and enacting, enter into an equivalential chain precisely by virtue of their one shared negative trait: the fact that they remain unsatisfied. And as in Laclau's theory the aggregation of demands is what constitutes the identity of a social group, the chasm between power and powerlessness – the "essential asymmetry between the community as a whole (the populus) and the underdog (the plebs)" (2005a, 200) – can be seen as inscribed into the identity of the popular subject generated by a populist chain of equivalence, i.e. 'the people' of populism. That is why, for Laclau, populism involves the division of the social field into two camps – an antagonised seat of power (e.g. the 'regime', the 'oligarchy', 'the establishment') and the oppressed underdog (e.g. 'the people', 'the nation', 'the silent majority') (2005a, 84).

This idea, which might be termed 'the people-as-underdog thesis', is evident in Stavrakakis' formulation of the two basic components of populist discourse – (a) *people-centrism* and (b) *anti-elitism* – where *anti-elitism* is defined as "a dichotomic representation of the socio-political field between *Us* (the marginalized, the underdog, "the people") and *Them* (the establishment, the 1%, the elite)" (2017, 528). It is also found in the joint work of De Cleen and Stavrakakis, who define populism as "a dichotomic discourse in which "the people" are juxtaposed to "the elite" along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which "the people" is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to "the elite" conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group" (2017, 310). They specify that the axis of 'down/up antagonism' pertains to power, status and hierarchical position. According to De Cleen, the reliance on down/up antagonism in discursively constructing of 'the people' is precisely what differentiates populism from other discourses that also invoke 'the people' as a central signifier but construct 'the people' in a different manner – whether the-people-as-demos in the case of democratic discourses, or the-people-as-nation in nationalistic discourses (2017, 456). What is crucial, in this view, is that populists take the side of a powerless down-group ("the ordinary people," "the little man," "the common man," "the man in the street") against a powerful up-group ("the establishment," "the political caste," "the ruling class") that is rejected for not representing 'the people' and for endangering its interests (Ibid; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 311).

Laclau's theory of populism has faced notable criticism for its tendency to treat populism as synonymous with the political as such (Arditi 2004; Stavrakakis 2004). While 'the people-as-underdog thesis', as developed by De Cleen and Stavrakakis, seeks to circumvent this line of criticism, it nonetheless remains vulnerable to it. Stavrakakis argues that, if populist discourse is understood to mean any equivalential discourse articulated around 'the people' as a nodal point – and if any signifier can potentially step into that role by becoming the empty signifier of the equivalential chain – then there can be no clear conceptual distinction between a populist discourse and any other equivalential discourse (Stavrakakis 2004, 97). Consequently, he argues for specifying the structural location of populism's 'people' within a vertical down/up axis of power, status and cultural capital. This allows the 'populist' label to be reserved only for those equivalential discourses that have as their nodal point 'the people' conceived as the underdog (Ibid.; Stavrakakis 2017). But does this specification truly succeed in mitigating the risk of conceptual stretching?

The rhetorical adoption of a subaltern stance – framing a political conflict as the fight between David and Goliath in which one's own side is David – is among the oldest tactics in politics, and a ubiquitous feature of contemporary political discourse. As an identity position, subalternity takes varied forms: the counter-hegemonic disruptor, the oppressed victim or persecuted minority, the relatively underprivileged or dispossessed class, and so on. In all cases, a claim to subalternity is a privileged means of discursively constructing political identity. That is not merely because persuading one's audience that 'our side' is facing an uphill battle is a potent tactic of political mobilisation (as it gives potential supporters the feeling that *their* support is crucial to success of the whole enterprise), but also because it leverages a widespread normative sympathy for the underdog.

In this sense, the previously outlined critique of the 'morality thesis' may well be applied to the 'people-as-underdog thesis'. If the logic of 'we are good / they are bad' is, as Urbinati suggests, "the motor of all forms of partisan aggregation" (2019, 38), could the same not be said of the logic of 'we are David / they are Goliath'? While the 'David v. Goliath' frame may not be quite as ubiquitous as the logic of 'we are good / they are bad', it is still far too common in contemporary politics to serve as a sole differential criterion of populism. Calling all equivalential discourses articulated from an assumed position of subalternity populist leaves us with too few instances of non-populist equivalential discourse. Hence, the problem of conceptual stretching persists.

## A Third Perspective: 'The People' as the Good Underdog

In addition to the two outlined perspectives on populism's depiction of 'the people', it is possible to discern a third approach to the question at hand – one that has yet to be explicitly formulated, and to which I shall try to give rigorous form in this remainder of this discussion. In that approach, which runs through a number of influential theorisations of populism, populism is described in a way that suggests there is not one, but two distinct criteria involved in its construction of 'the people'. These two criteria are (a) *normative valuation* and (b) *power*.

I propose 'normative valuation' as a term with a somewhat broader connotation than 'morality'. Notions such as 'moral purity', 'moral virtue' and 'moral righteousness' carry a specific inflection, evoking an ascetic religious imaginary and a rather determinate framework of moral valuation. They leave out a variety of modes of normative appraisal, in which the ethical is closely intertwined with the aesthetic and the ideological. Affirmations of the authenticity, vitality and warmth of the 'common people'; clichés about the fundamentally benevolent nature of flawed characters, who in spite of their transgressions embody a certain spirit, which is appreciated and beloved; the intimation that, underneath the knavish facade, those 'petty thieves, street smarts, *lazzaroni*, *patoteros*, *arrabeleros*' of Latin American populism (Ostiguy 2017, 130) carry something essentially valuable and worth defending – those are all expressions of normative appraisal that do not fit, and in fact deliberately eschew, the language of moral purity, virtue and righteousness. For that reason, 'normative valuation' presents itself as a more inclusive, hence more appropriate term. As regards 'power', I interpret it in line with Stavrakakis and De Cleen, so as

to refer not only to the ability to determine political outcomes, but also to notions such as status and cultural capital.

With that in mind, to posit *normative valuation* and *power* as the two criteria at play in populism's construction of the popular subject is to identify them as two mutually irreducible logics, two distinct axes of the us/them antagonism, with which populist discourses operate in demarcating the formal boundaries of 'the people' as an ontological category. In other words, when populists juxtapose 'the people' to an 'elite', they mobilise both of these symbolic frameworks: good-versus-evil (or right-versus-wrong) and underdog-versus-power.

This idea, I suggest, is not new. Let us consider Michael Kazin's description of the "images of conflict between the powerful and the powerless", which make up what he calls "the language of populism" in American politics:

> The haughty financier wraps chains of debt around small farmers who grow food and fibers for the nation. The stout industrialist – top hat on his fleshy head and diamond stickpin gleaming from his silk tie – dashes with the working man dressed in overalls or secondhand suit, his jaw firm and his muscles taut. The federal bureaucrat, overeducated and amoral, scoffs at the God-fearing nuclear family in its modest home, a crucifix on the wall and a flagpole in the yard (1998, 1).

As Kazin's illustrations clearly convey, in the 'language of populism' representatives of power tend to be normatively denigrated (as callous, arrogant, complacent and cynical), whereas the powerless are normatively valorised (as the nurturing, humble, self-sacrificing and devout salt-of-the-earth). The two relations – good-versus-evil and underdog-versus-power – are posited as overlapping in the populist imaginary.

The same idea is found in Canovan's conception of populism as "an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (1999, 3). Populism, as Canovan makes clear, is not just any kind of anti-establishment politics that mobilises against 'the system' – its differentiating quality is that it challenges "not only the established power-holders, *but also their values*" (Ibid, emphasis mine). Canovan further argues that populist values are always articulated in opposition to whatever values the establishment is seen to promote in a given context. Hence, for instance, if a political elite happens to endorse a set of liberal values, such as individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, permissiveness and belief in progress, populists will react by developing an illiberal worldview, and so on (4). We therefore have in Canovan's theory of populism the criteria of normative valuation and of power – of right-versus-wrong and of underdog-versus-power – recognised as two distinct yet interrelated dimensions of populism's us/them antagonism.

The role of normative valuation and power in populism's discursive articulation of political identities can also be identified in Ostiguy's account of the high-low axis in politics, along which he defines populism as "the flaunting of the 'low'" (2017, 107). The high-low axis, according to Ostiguy, pertains to distinct "ways of being and acting in politics" (111), with its 'high' and 'low' poles representing contrasting "ways of relating to people" across life's various dimensions. Its socio-cultural dimension, the high-low axis is primarily associated with levels of cultural capital, distinguishing the "proper/refined" from the

"coarser/folksier" (116) through manners of speaking, gesticulations and demeanours, vocabulary choices and accent, body language, ways of dressing and other such markers of a person's cultural milieu (112-114). In its political-cultural dimension, it is about preferred forms of political leadership and modes of decision-making, with "formal, impersonal, legalistic, institutionally mediated models of authority" associated with the high pole, and a preference for personalistic leadership associated with the low (118). Ideologically, it aligns 'the low' with nativism and 'the high' with an affinity towards cosmopolitanism, while in the political domain the high-low axis is said inform judgements that are simultaneously aesthetic and ethical, involving "different criteria for judging what is likeable and morally acceptable in a candidate" (113).

Given the polysemic nature of the 'high' and 'low' in Ostiguy's account, to flaunt the 'low' as populism does involves at least two things. For one, it is an act of pure transgression, a finger in the eye of those decent, proper and refined representatives of the 'high' pole and their hegemonic norms of acceptability – in short, a revolt against an existing structure of power. For another, it is an act of positive affirmation. According to Ostiguy, the 'low' that populists flaunt and in whose name they speak is, in the populist narrative, "linked to the most profound, "truest," authentic, and most deserving part of the homeland. The "Other" [...] is thereby in reality not an "Other," but rather, the "truest" (too often forgotten) Self of the nation, of "the people" (111). Populist discourse thus represents this '*unpresentable Other*' as embodying some repressed truth or reality – a truth swept under the rug by official discourses and policies, but boldly brought to the fore by populist discourse. 'The low' in this sense is the locus of that which is not only oppressed by power, but also valuable in itself – which is perhaps why it is oppressed in the first place. For Ostiguy, then, the high-low axis encompasses both relations of power and relations of normative valuation, positing 'the low' that populism flaunts as both the subaltern and the true/authentic.

Moffitt's account of 'bad manners' as a core element of the populist style echoes this idea (2016). By 'bad manners' Moffitt means the seeming disregard for 'appropriate' ways of acting in the political realm, and the deliberate flouting of these norms that populists leverage with the aim of 'performing ordinariness' and differentiating themselves from the other politicians (66). 'Bad manners' point to a variety of associated cultural (if context-specific) markers – for instance, in the case of Sarah Palin in the U.S, these include "directness, playfulness, a certain disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready resort to anecdote as 'evidence', and a studied ignorance of that which does not interest her or which does not go to 'the heart of the matter'" (53). In a more general sense, 'bad manners' involve "acting or presenting oneself in more 'colourful' ways than we usually expect from politicians or representatives" (68).

The symbolic function of 'bad manners' in Moffitt's account of the populist style can be understood in the same way as the flaunting of the 'low'. The ostentatious display of 'bad manners' is a transgressive act, usurping the entrenched structures of power from a position of subalternity by rejecting the hegemonic norms, mores, and 'good manners' associated with that power structure and its ruling elite. In that sense, it represents a challenge to the hegemonic order, a challenge to power, by way of symbolically asserting the identity of the-people-as-the-subaltern. At the same time, the flaunting of 'bad manners' offer populists a way to denigrate the values of the 'high' pole, ostensibly expressed by the elite's 'good manners' as hollow, worthless and false, while affirming as authentic, true and normatively superior the values that the

'bad manners' supposedly express in a raw and unfiltered way – i.e. the values of 'the people'. Thus construed, 'bad manners' are not really *bad*, as much as unfairly disparaged by a false hierarchy of values. In Moffitt's account, then, populist utilisation of 'bad manners' involves *both* a rejection of one set of values, associated with 'the high', *and* the normative valorisation of values associated with 'the low' (53).

Taken together, the works of Kazin, Canovan, Ostiguy and Moffitt exemplify a substantial strand of scholarship in which criteria corresponding both to normative valuation and to power are recognised as playing a role in the way populism constructs 'the people'. As a distinct perspective, it synthetises elements of the 'homogeneity and morality thesis' and of the 'people-as-the-underdog thesis'. On this view, populism conceptualises 'the people' as an entity that is *normatively valorised* (though not necessarily morally pristine) as well as *powerless* (in comparison to a seat of power) – in short, as *the good underdog*. This perspective complements ideational theorists' 'homogeneity and morality thesis' by paying heed to the power asymmetry underpinning the 'people v. elite' divide, and it adds to the Laclauian 'people-as-underdog thesis' by highlighting the normative valorisation implicit in subalternity, as regards 'the people.

## Conclusion

In order to integrate these various implicit insights into a coherent and defensible theoretical position, several crucial questions must be addressed. By way of conclusion, I shall outline three tasks, which could be of particular interest in this regard.

The first task concerns clarifying the precise relationship between the criteria of normative valuation and power in populism's construction of 'the people'. Specifically, is one criterion contingent upon another? Does populism normatively valorise 'the people' because they are oppressed – an innocent victim exploited by a malevolent 'elite'? Or, alternatively, does populism regard the people's subjugation as a direct consequence of their moral goodness, exploited by an elite that takes cynical advantage of their earnestness and decency? Or perhaps populism views the people's normative valour and their subaltern position as two independent and merely coincidental attributes?

A second task would involve examining how the interplay between normative valuation and power in the construction of 'the people' differs across various populist discourses. In particular, is there a meaningful distinction between right-wing and left-wing populisms in this respect? Do left- and right-wing populisms envisage the relation between normative valuation and power, as pertains to 'the people' and 'the elite', in fundamentally distinct ways?

Finally, a third task would involve exploring the possibility of alternative configurations of normative valuation and power in populist discourse. Is populism capable of conceptualising a political entity that is simultaneously normatively valorised and powerful? If so, would such an entity represent 'the empowered people', embodying the ultimate fulfilment of populism's redemptive promise, or rather a 'counter-elite'

represented by populist leadership? Conversely, can populism envision entities that are simultaneously normatively denigrated and powerless? Might the non-native 'Other' depicted in contemporary right-wing populism represent precisely this combination?

These questions open promising avenues for further exploration.

.

## References

Abts, K., & Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus Democracy. *Political Studies*, 55(2), 405-424.

Arditi, B. (2003). Populism, or politics at the edges of democracy. *Contemporary Politics*, *9*(1), 17-31.

Arditi, B. (2004). Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan. *Political Studies*, *52*(1), 135–143.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political studies*, *47*(1), 2-16.

Canovan, M. (2002). Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy. In Y. Meny & Y. Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (pp. 25-44). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

De Cleen, B. (2017). Populism and Nationalism. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (pp. 449-476). Oxford University Press.

De Cleen, B., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism. *Javnost - The Public*, *24*(4), 301-319.

de la Torre, C. (2000). *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*. Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Galston, W. A. (2018). The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *29*(2), 5-19.

Hawkins, K. A. (2019). The ideational approach. In C. d. l. Torre (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (pp. 57-72). Routledge.

Katsambekis, G. (2022). Constructing 'the people' of populism: a critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *27*(1), 53-74.

Kazin, M. (1998). *The populist persuasion: an American history*. Cornell University Press.

Kim, S. (2022). Taking stock of the field of populism research: Are ideational approaches 'moralistic' and post- foundational discursive approaches 'normative'? *Politics*, *42*(4), 492 –504.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books.

Laclau, E. (2005). Populism: What's in a Name? In F. Panizza (Ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. Verso Books.

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press.

Moffitt, B. (2020). *Populism*. Polity Press.

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. Routledge.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541-563.

Mudde, C. (2017). Populism: an ideational approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (pp. 47-74). Oxford University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated.

Nietzsche, F. (1887/2007). *Nietzsche: 'On the Genealogy of Morality' and Other Writings Student Edition* (K. Ansell-Pearson, Ed.; C. Diethe, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Ostiguy, P. (2017). Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (pp. 106-137). Oxford University Press.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2004). Antinomies of Formalism: Laclau's Theory of Populism and the Lessons from Religious Populism in Greece. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *9*(3), 253–268.

Stavrakakis, Y., & Jäger, A. (2018). Accomplishments and limitations of the 'new' mainstream in contemporary populism studies. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *41*(4), 547–565.

Taggart, P. A. (2000). *Populism*. Open University Press.

Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Harvard University Press.

Weyland, K. (2019). Populism and authoritarianism. In C. d. l. Torre (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (pp. 319-334). Routledge.

# Populism, Elitism, and Civic Nationalism: An Explorative Framework

by Tommaso Valastro[6]

## Abstract

The present paper is situated within the ideational approach to populism, proposing a reconceptualization through a three-dimensional framework. It reviews prevailing two-dimensional models, underlining their limits in testing contingent ways in which anti-pluralism may emerge without a specific demand for it and arguing that they overlook tensions between individualist and communitarian values. By introducing communitarianism as a distinct axis, the framework reveals how more inclusive forms of nationalism may reconcile democratic and pluralist commitments with a communitarian ethos. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of ideological alternatives to both populist and elitist narratives, as inclusive forms of civic nationalism may offer a pluralist and democratic form of communitarianism capable of addressing representational demands without undermining liberal democratic principles.

**Keywords**: Populism, Elitism, Civic Nationalism, Communitarianism

## Introduction

The rise of populism as an object of academic enquiry has been accompanied by a mounting debate over its ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations (Weyland, 2001; Van Kessel, 2014; Müller, 2016; Mazzoleni, 2024). Over the years, divisions over the ontology of this essentially contested concept (Mudde, 2017) have led the literature on the topic to develop into parallel – though interconnected – branches, with ideational (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), discursive (Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), and strategic-performative (Weyland, 2001; Moffitt, 2016) definitions trying to account for the diverse ways in which the phenomenon manifests itself. Recent research has tried to overcome these issues in different ways, including the implementation of new signifiers (Newth, 2023; Vulović & Palonen, 2023), the synthesis of different approaches (Kefford et al., 2022), and the adoption of multiple levels within the same concept (Olivas Osuna, 2021; Mazzoleni, 2024). Harmonizing this fragmented paradigm is an ambitious challenge, but differences among competing branches are substantial rather than formal, which is the reason why this paper is developed within the ideational approach. The purpose of engaging in

[6] University of Helsinki

academic debate over definitions is far from aesthetic, as it addresses specific concerns of scientific utility (Mazzoleni, 2024) and cumulative progress (Olivas Osuna, 2021) – which are hardly achievable if harmonization efforts prioritize form over substance. By proposing the inclusion of a third core dimension of Populism within ideational approaches, this paper gives therefore precedence to this substantial perspective.

The article proceeds as follows: first, it provides a brief review of the main ontological approaches to the concept, distinguishing between discursive, strategic-performative, and ideational perspectives. It places its reasoning within the ideational approach, arguing for the prioritization of ontologies that enhance substantial comparability. Moreover, it dives further into the shortcomings of different ideational definitions of populism, arguing for the introduction of a third dimension in the face of the prevalence of bidimensional approaches.

The second part of the article proposes a new conceptual framework through the introduction of communitarianism as an independent dimension of populism. It argues that the inclusion of communitarianism within the thin core of populism enhances the heuristic power of the category, as it allows researchers to decouple populism from other forms of democratic anti-pluralism, thus meeting the demand for more conceptual clarity.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications and possible limitations of the proposed framework, especially in relation to the positioning of key concepts such as elitism and civic nationalism. It proposes further possible steps in developing and testing a conceptualization of populism that independently accounts for communitarianism.

## The Ontology of Populism and the Limits of Bidimensional Frameworks

Ontologically, populism emerges in the literature as a multi-level category, thus requiring conceptual clarity with respect to semantic, definitional, dimensional, and empirical levels (Mazzoleni, 2024). Semantically, recent reflections underline the emergence of at least three main ways of “specifying populism” (Goertz, 2020; Mazzoleni, 2024): ideationally, discursively, and strategic-performatively. To be sure, such groups are often aggregated or disaggregated depending on the preferred criteria, with some authors claiming that it is, for instance, “fairly irrelevant in most empirical studies” to distinguish ideational approaches from discursive ones (Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 41). In line with this reasoning, Kriesi (2020) narrows down the distinction to ideational and strategic approaches, underlining the contrast between populism as a set of ideas and populism as a way to exercise power. Despite the frequent convergence of ideas and discourse at the operationalization level, this paper maintains that the distinction between ideational and discursive approaches remains crucial. Discursive-theoretical approaches deny the possibility of identifying a fixed ideological content of populism, defining it instead as a discursive strategy, a logic of articulation relying on "the people" as an empty signifier, the meaning of which is produced contextually (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2017; Palonen, 2020). Ideational approaches, however, define populism as a thin-centered ideology, in which signifiers are not completely empty. Descriptively,

populism retains a view of the world as separated into two antagonistic and homogeneous camps, the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). In terms of prescription, populism identifies the solution to this moralizing antagonism in the transformation of politics into the expression of the people's general will (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In should be noted that the opposition of a "pure" camp to a "corrupt" is the foundation of the "thin center" described in ideational approaches, as it denies the possibility of opposing camps with other criteria (like interest-based oppositions). In this sense, as Mudde (2017) puts it, "most of those who adhere to the ideational approach define populism in a specific manner, in which the key opposition is moral, and it is empirically oriented, positivist, and aimed at developing mid-range theoretical levels."

Ideational approaches tend to define populism as a thin-centered ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Mudde's definition, albeit relying on four "core concepts" (Mudde, 2017) – ideology, the people, the elite, and general will – can be reduced to the two fundamental dimensions of pluralism and democracy. As a system of governance, pluralism occurs when "political outcomes are the product of competition among multiple groups" (Dahl 1961). As the ideological premise is the legitimation of such outcomes, pluralism is here defined as the recognition of the existence and legitimacy of diverse and competing groups, interests, and values within society (Heywood 2019). Despite the variability of power exercise and citizenship criteria, democratic ideological constructs are consistently centered around the prescription of "government by the people, as opposed to government by one or by a few" (Bobbio, 2005). In the ideational definition of populism, the homogeneity of "the people" and "the elite", together with the moralization of the people as "pure" and the élite as "corrupt", outlines an essentially anti-pluralist democratic ideology or, as Mudde himself put it, an "illiberal democratic response to antidemocratic liberalism" (Mudde, 2021). Far from being an exclusive characteristic of Mudde's definition, this two-dimensionality emerges frequently within ideational definitions. Kriesi's (2020) three-points definition of Populism, for instance, still relies on two dimensions. In this reconstruction, populism is defined through three core concepts: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and unrestricted popular sovereignty. The third feature, however, is a normative derivation of anti-elitist people-centrism in the face of any description of the political reality in which the élite is still in power. This effectively classifies the definition as bi-dimensional, despite the three-point structure of the syllogism.

The stress of anti-pluralism and democracy is a welcome underline to the democratic (though illiberal) nature of the set of ideas standing at the core of populism. The opposition to liberalism emerges as a logical implication of the opposition to pluralism, as pluralism is a necessary condition of liberalism, at least in its "civic" conception which is adopted here (Galston, 2002, 2017). This underlines both the thin content and the implicit structural implications of populism (e.g., the opposition of an underdog general will to ruling elites). Through this two-dimensional framework, moreover, one can already make sense of populism as opposed not only to undemocratic liberalism, but also to democratic liberalism and elitism (fig. 1). The most common version of pluralism without democracy is technocracy, in which the plurality of views and interests is recognized as legitimate but solved through interventions by experts. This

undemocratic (or technocratic) version of liberalism is opposed to populism on both the democratic and the pluralistic ideational dimensions. Elitism, akin to populism, dichotomizes society into categories of the "pure" and the "corrupt," yet it reverses the evaluative framework by depicting negatively the "people" and elevating elites as morally superior, thereby legitimating political authority as the prerogative of a select minority rather than the broader citizenry (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This effectively makes populism and elitism at odds on the democratic dimension but overlapping in their opposition to pluralism (figure 1).

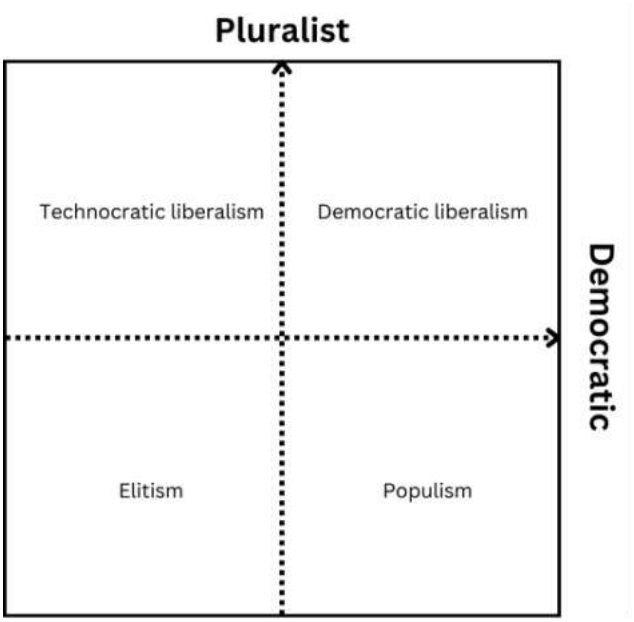



*Figure 1: Populism conflicts with elitism on democracy and with liberalism on pluralism*

This bidimensional framework offers a simple but effective way to conceptualize how the breakdown of core processes of political representation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) may create the conditions for an anti-pluralistic political offer to meet the emerging unrepresented democratic demand. In other words, populist political enterprises meet the need for representation through their democratic character but end up undermining pluralism in the process. While this could very well be the case, this approach may fail to capture other dimensions behind populist success, while broadening the definition excessively. For instance, as of now, democratic pluralism has not emerged as a viable alternative, which means that there is either a genuine demand against pluralism or an offer gap in a third dimension. This paper proposes that 1) including this third dimension in the thin center may be more fruitful than treating it as a host ideology; 2) such dimension may be captured by the tension between individualism and communitarianism. Including a third dimension, of course, means altering the very definition of populism, which means proposing to use the word "populism" as a signifier for something else than just "democratic anti-pluralism" or, with Kiesi's words, people-centric anti-elitism (Kriesi, 2020). This means that, rather than being a falsifiable claim, it remains a proposal of reconceptualization at a theoretical level, the advantages of which will be discussed below. Before delving deeper into the implementation of communitarianism, it can be helpful to briefly analyze the case of nationalism to further illustrate the

potential of a third dimension.

Much like populism, nationalism has been described as a thin-centered ideology (Freeden, 1998), with the author of this distinction more recently describing populism as "emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centered" because of its incapacity to be a "potential center for something broader" (Freeden, 2017, p. 3). Following Gellner (1983), I here refer to nationalism as an ideology prescribing the congruence of the political and the national unity. This thin center of nationalism makes it capable of hosting other ideologies, evolving elastically towards or against pluralism and democracy alike depending on the inclusion/exclusion criteria defining the national unit (fig. 2).

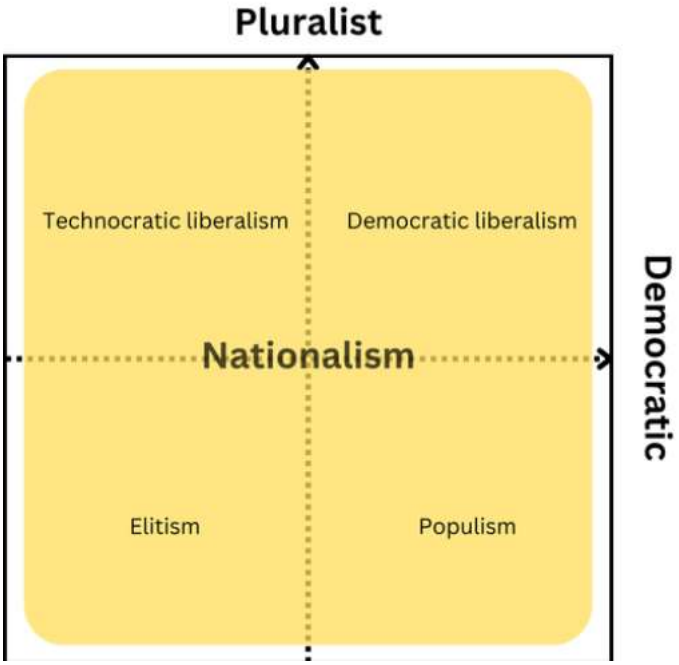



*Figure 2: Nationalism can position itself in any of the quadrants of the bi-dimensional space*

Nevertheless, populism has been more successful in a nativist radical right version emerging from nationalist subcultures (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), articulating "the people" and "the nation" in an exclusive, anti-pluralist way. Once again, one could make the case that this stems from an essentially anti-pluralist demand, showing how these exclusionary forms of nationalism were the only ones compatible with it (fig. 3).

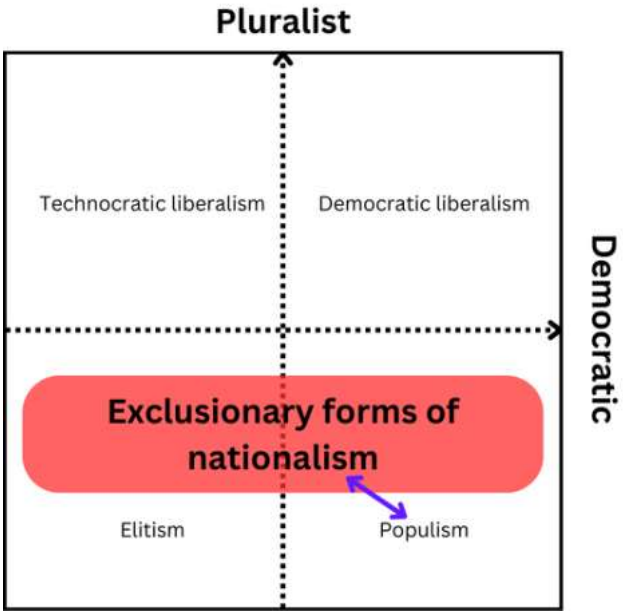



*Figure 3: Exclusionary nationalism overlaps with populism in its opposition to pluralism*

The possibility of anti-pluralism being contingent, however, remains to be tested. If anti-pluralism was a byproduct rather than a necessary consequence of the emerging demand for representation, there would be room for democratic pluralist political enterprises, which may reconcile the need for representation with the pluralist foundations of an open society (Galston, 2017). In this sense, a renewed civic form of nationalism is compatible with this reconciliation in the nationalist realm. To be sure, civic forms of nationalism are not necessarily pluralist either, as "the patriotic consensus can become so overbearing that the right to differ may be over-run" (Ignatieff, 1999). By subscribing to a set of values, however, individuals can reconcile their right to shape their own lives with their need to belong to a community (Ignatieff, 1995), effectively breaking resistance to pluralism. As explained, this theoretical proposition relies on the idea that the existing portions of political supply adhering to democratic pluralism may so far fail to meet representational demands because of a third independent dimension. The next section explores the extent to which communitarianism may constitute this third dimension, discussing the opportunity of its inclusion into the thin core of populism.

## Communitarianism as the Third Dimension of Populism

Communitarianism can be defined as a theoretical position characterized by the “belief that the self or person is constituted through the community, in the sense that individuals are shaped by the communities to which they belong”. (Heywood, 2015, p. 30). It’s opposed to normative individualism, which prioritizes “the individual over any social group or collective body” (Heywood, 2015, p. 98). Currently, as ideational approaches to populism highlight, unrepresented political demands are most successfully met by democratic anti-pluralism. The present paper proposes to test both the supply side and the demand side

on the dimension of communitarianism, suggesting that the success of populism may be linked to its capacity to meet communitarianism rather than anti-pluralism.

Once again, a look at the case of nationalism allows for an overview of how communitarianism may enhance conceptual clarity and help to test the potential contingency of anti-pluralist political enterprises. Defined as democratic and anti-pluralist, the thin core of populism is perfectly capable to integrate with both right-wing and left-wing politics. The recent rise of populism on the nationalist radical right, therefore, suggests the presence of elements in nationalism that alternative enterprises couldn't offer. A preliminary answer is that nationalism can supply the demand of "those who are insecure, who sense they are losing status, and who seek standing by identifying with the group" (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). In other words, nationalist politics gains traction because it is intrinsically communitarian, as literature on nationalism generally suggests. For instance, Gellner's definition is based on the premise that the nation (rather than the individual) is the referent object of the key normative claim of nationalism (Gellner, 1983). Similarly, in Anderson's approach (2016) nationalism can be understood as a symbolic bond that presupposes subordination to community, in the sense that sovereignty lies within the nation rather than its individual members. Even in Billing's notion of banal nationalism (1995), people's sense of self is shaped by banal cues that remind them of the nation in everyday life. While this descriptive approach does not imply a strictly normative definition, it is consistent with a communitarian understanding of nationalism as it emphasizes a structural dynamic shaping individual identity. It is proposed here that this communitarian ethos should be included as a core element of populism as well, thus establishing a link outside of the classic dimensions of pluralism and democracy. In this sense, a possible way of introducing nationalism into the framework is to consider the ideological tension between individualism and communitarianism, conceptualizing populism on three dimensions of ideological polarization. As discussed, nationalist-oriented ideologies would always score high on communitarianism, but only in their anti-pluralist and democratic version would they be able to embed with populism. Pluralist versions, like some forms of civic nationalism, would supply the communitarian demand while preserving pluralism (tab. 1).

| Polarization dimension | Civic nationalism | Ethnic Nationalism |
|---|---|---|
| Democracy ↔ Anti-democracy | malleable | malleable |
| Pluralism ↔ Anti-pluralism | Can be pluralist | Anti-pluralist |
| Individualism ↔ Communitarianism | Communitarian | Communitarian |

*Table 1: Civic and ethnic nationalism on three dimensions of polarization*

The addition of an individualism-communitarianism (I-C) dimension offers the opportunity to measure the thin core of populism as the aggregation of communitarian, democratic, and anti-pluralist views (fig. 4), with two main advantages resulting from it.

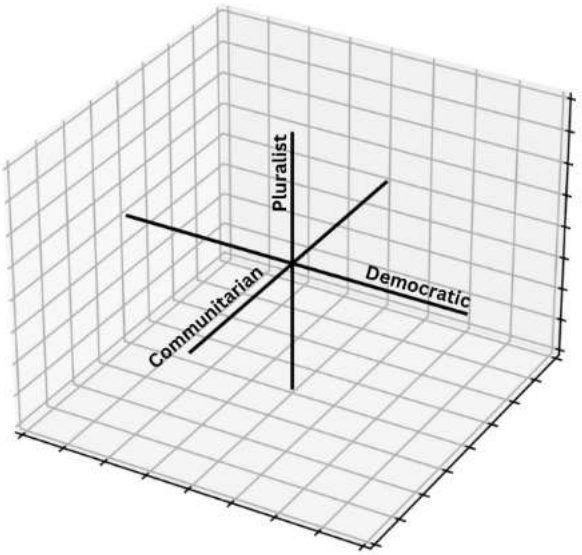



*Figure 4: The three-dimensional space resulting from the addition of an I-C dimension*

First, this addition makes it possible to link the populist supply to three different demands, including the communitarian one. Second, it offers a conceptual space in which the overlap of nationalism and populism on the communitarian side of the framework is coherent with the significant rise of right-wing populist forces (tab. 2). The adoption of this logic would allow researchers and practitioners alike to test the extent to which the success of populism stems from anti-pluralistic demand as opposed to a shortage of any other form of democratic communitarianism on the supply side of politics.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has introduced a three-dimensional framework based on democracy, pluralism, and communitarianism to refine the ideational boundaries between populism, elitism, and civic nationalism. By supplementing the dominant bidimensional approach with a third axis, it offers a more nuanced topology of ideological space that captures tensions between individualist and communitarian orientations. The resulting conceptual space offers a tool for comparative research on populism, defining its core ideological structure as anti-pluralist, democratic, and communitarian. This formulation preserves the insights of ideational definitions while better accounting for populism's recent affinity with nationalist, exclusionary movements. It also clarifies why populism diverges from both technocratic liberalism (which is individualist and pluralist but anti-democratic) and elitism (which is both anti-democratic and anti-pluralist, but ambiguous on the communitarian dimension).

The examination of nationalism within this space offers a crucial insight into the way in which civic

nationalism may reconcile the communitarian demand with pluralism. To be sure, civic nationalism can emerge as a democratic and pluralist alternative that preserves a communitarian ethos without collapsing into illiberalism.2 Where populism instrumentalizes "the people" to homogenize diversity, civic nationalism institutionalizes pluralism as a normative commitment embedded in shared civic culture. This places it as a potential normative counterpoint to populism—capable of addressing communitarian demands without undermining liberal democracy3. Whether anti-pluralism is necessary or contingent to the current political demand remains to be tested empirically. For this purpose, surveys best suit research on the demand side, while quantitative approaches to framing analysis are more likely to provide insights into ideological supply by politicians.

The three-dimensional framework facilitates better differentiation among competing ideologies (tab. 2). Undemocratic (or technocratic) liberalism, for instance, represents the perfect polarization vis-à-vis populism, as it proposes an anti-democratic, pluralist, and individualist worldview. Elitism makes a step closer to populism in the adoption of anti-pluralism, while retaining opposition to democracy and ambiguity towards communitarianism. Unsurprisingly, ethnic nationalism displays the greatest compatibility with populism's thin core, despite retaining the potential for both democratic and anti-democratic outcomes. While irrelevant in relation to ethnonationalism, the abandonment of democracy would mark a shift away from populism and towards an undemocratic version of anti-pluralist communitarianism, of which fascism constitutes a prime example. The reconciliation with pluralism, conversely, would pave the way for more inclusive forms of communitarianism such as civic nationalism.

| Ideology | Democracy | Pluralism | Communitarianism |
|---|---|---|---|
| Populism | ✅ | ❌ | ✅ |
| Elitism | ❌ | ❌ | ❓ |
| Technocratic liberalism | ❌ | ✅ | ❌ |
| Democratic liberalism | ✅ | ✅ | ❌ |
| Civic nationalism | ❓ | ✅ | ✅ |
| Ethnic nationalism | ❓ | ❌ | ✅ |
| Fascism | ❌ | ❌ | ✅ |

*Table 2: How the core of competing ideologies relates to the three core dimensions of populism*

Finally, the conceptual framework proposed by this paper provides a useful tool for clearer normative

inquiry as well. While liberal democracies struggle to reconcile the individualist logic of rights with the communitarian desire for cohesion, a revival of civic nationalism may emerge as a viable solution, but its boundaries and risks deserve careful scrutiny. Liberal democracy "stands or falls with the recognition and protection of pluralism" (Galston, 2017). In this sense, understanding the extent to which the success of the populist offer stems from meeting an anti-pluralist demand remains crucial.

## References

Anderson, B. R. O. (2016). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* / Benedict Anderson. (Revised ed.). Verso.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, *33*(2), 122–139.

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. SAGE publications Ltd.

Bobbio, N. (2005). *Liberalism and democracy* (Vol. 4). Verso.

Breton, R. (1988). From ethnic to civic nationalism: English Canada and Quebec. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *11*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1988.9993590

De Cleen, B., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism. *Javnost - The Public*, *24*(4), 301–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083

Freeden, M. (1998). Is nationalism a distinct ideology? *Political Studies*, *46*(4), 748–765.

Freeden, M. (2017). After the Brexit referendum: Revisiting populism as an ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *22*(1), 1–11.

Galston, W. A. (2002). *Liberal pluralism: The implications of value pluralism for political theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Galston, W. A. (2017). *Anti-pluralism: The populist threat to liberal democracy*. Yale University Press.

Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Goertz, G. (2020). *Social science concepts and measurement: New and completely revised edition*. Princeton University Press.

Hawkins, K. A. (2009). Is Chávez Populist?: Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective. *Comparative Political Studies*, *42*(8), 1040–1067. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009331721

Heywood, A. (2015). *Key concepts in politics and international relations*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2018). Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the

transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *25*(1), 109–135.

Ignatieff, M. (1995). *Blood and belonging: Journeys into the new nationalism*. Macmillan.

Ignatieff, M. (1999). Nationalism and toleration. In S. Mendus (Ed.), *The Politics of Toleration* (pp. 77–106). Edinburgh University Press; JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw8b.10

Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P. A., Espejo, P. O., & Ostiguy, P. (2017). *The Oxford handbook of populism*. Oxford University Press.

Kefford, G., Moffitt, B., & Werner, A. (2022). Populist attitudes: Bringing together ideational and communicative approaches. *Political Studies*, *70*(4), 1006–1027.

Kriesi, H. (2020). Populism. In *The SAGE Handbook of Political Science* (pp. 1524–1539). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Mazzoleni, O. (2024). Specifying populism. In *Still the Age of Populism?* (pp. 17–31). Routledge.

Moffitt, B. (2016). The performative turn in the comparative study of populism. *Political Studies*, *41*(1), 3–23.

Moya, H. N. (2021). The negotiated nation: Evaluation of nation building in the post-apartheid South Africa. https://hdl.handle.net/10566/12823

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C. (2017). *An ideational approach* (Vol. 27). Oxford University Press Oxford.

Mudde, C. (2021). Populism in Europe: An illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019). *Government and Opposition*, *56*(4), 577–597.

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press. https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293784

Newth, G. (2023). Rethinking 'nativism': Beyond the ideational approach. *Identities*, *30*(2), 161–180.

Olivas Osuna, J. J. (2021). From chasing populists to deconstructing populism: A new multidimensional approach to understanding and comparing populism. *European Journal of Political Research*, *60*(4), 829–853. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12428

Palonen, E. (2020). Ten theses on populism and democracy. In *The populist manifesto* (pp. 55–69). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *13*(1), 95–110.

Van Kessel, S. (2014). The populist cat-dog: Applying the concept of populism to contemporary European party systems. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *19*(1), 99–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2013.869457

Vulović, M., & Palonen, E. (2023). Nationalism, populism or peopleism? Clarifying the distinction through a two-dimensional lens. *Nations and Nationalism*, *29*(2), 546–561. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12920

Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, *34*(1), 1–22. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/422412

# Epistemic Populism and the Quest for Common Ground: Navigating Hegemony in Polarised Democracies

by Jyot Shikhar Singh[7]

## Abstract

The intent behind this paper is to advance the concept of epistemic populism to analyse and characterise contemporary populist politics as a struggle not only overpower and representation, but also over the foundations of knowledge and epistemic authority in liberal democracies. Moving beyond conventional approaches to populism, the article situates epistemic populism within the discourse-theoretical tradition of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, conceptualising it as a hegemonic project that reconfigures who is authorised to speak as a knower and what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Epistemic populism is characterised as a discursive logic that moralises epistemic authority by opposing an allegedly corrupt elite to an authentic people imagined as the true bearers of knowledge. Although it operates within the general framework of post-truth politics, epistemic populism differs from it in systematically rearticulating truth regimes rather than simply rejecting knowledge or facts. The study uses the United States during Donald Trump's first term as its empirical case study, examining how terms such as alternative facts, deep state, and fake news served as epistemic assertions that disrupted long-standing knowledge institutions. Comparative insights from Hungary under Viktor Orban are used to illustrate how epistemic populism may also become institutionalised, transforming episodic discursive disruption into systemic epistemic closure.

The argument presented is that these cases represent different modalities along a continuum of epistemic populism, ranging from performative and decentralised to hegemonic and state-embedded forms. The article is concluded with a fundamental paradox: epistemic populism often creates new forms of epistemic domination grounded in authenticity and/or affect, even as it reveals the exclusions ingrained in liberal epistemologies. It further argues that epistemic populism is a symptom of democracy's unresolved epistemological tensions and urges a rethinking of democratic legitimacy that allows for epistemic plurality without giving in to populist or technocratic closure.

**Keywords**: Epistemic Populism, Laclau and Mouffe, Discourse Theory, Hegemony, Post-Truth Politics,

[7] O.P. Jindal Global University

## Introduction

Liberal democracies have found themselves in a precarious situation. In addition to the rising political polarisation and democratic regression, the fundamental premises that underpin legitimacy, knowledge, and truth within liberal democracies are being questioned. Primarily analysed for its majoritarian tendencies and anti-elitist rhetoric, populist politics has entered a new stage in which the debate is not just about who controls but also over what knowledge is and who has the right to speak as a knower. Part of what makes the concept of populism so analytically potent is its capacity to integrate a range of social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena under a single discursive framework. Depending on different scholars, populism can be understood as either a threat to democratic institutions (Rummens, 2017; Weyland, 2024; Kaltwasser, 2025) or as a force that could restore democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Webb, 2021; Kaltwasser, 2025). Despite these differing understandings, there is a consensus that populism is an essential framework to examine the widening socio-political divides that characterise contemporary politics (Urbinati, 2019). In this paper, the emergence of what can be called epistemic populism, i.e., a form of populist expression that enacts a conflict over the fundamental assumptions of knowledge that support democratic life, as part of this larger populist trend, will be highlighted. Epistemic populism is based on Müller's (2025) epistemic account of populism, which looks at how populist movements prioritise experiential, commonsense knowledge over institutional expertise to challenge established epistemic authorities and create alternative regimes of knowledge. This idea emphasises how important knowledge conflicts are to populist politics and how they affect democratic life.

The advent of epistemic populism parallels alongside the rise of post-truth politics. While post-truth politics denotes a broader communicative environment characterised by the declining authority of facts, and the increasing primacy of affective and identity-driven appeals (McIntyre, 2018; Waisbord, 2018), epistemic populism constitutes a more specific discursive logic within this environment. Epistemic populism does not merely reject expert knowledge or factual accuracy; rather, it reframes the very question of who is entitled to produce legitimate knowledge. Its main distinction is the moralisation of epistemic authority: elites and institutions are represented as dishonest creators of manipulation, whereas “the people” are presented as the genuine bearers of truth. In juxtaposition, post-truth politics might incorporate anti-elitist or conspiratorial language without necessarily building such a moralised binary of epistemic legitimacy. In other words, not all post-truth rhetoric is epistemic populism; however, all epistemic populism operates within the framework of post-truth politics.

At its core, populism claims to represent “the people” against a “corrupt elite”. Most studies on this populist dichotomy have focused on the movement's tendency to emphasise experiential knowledge, folk wisdom, and common sense, often in stark contrast to elite expertise (Stanley, 2008; Müller, 2016; Waisbord, 2018; Meyer, 2023; Peresman et al., 2025). This raises a pertinent question: is populism intrinsically anti-

intellectual, prioritising quotable information with emotional resonance over official expert opinion? Although the answer is debatable, it is evident that populist appeal today functions along an epistemic binary: “the people” vs “the elite,” truth versus lies, authenticity versus fabrication, and “our” knowledge versus their propaganda (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). This epistemic hostility is at the heart of epistemic populism. While the performative turn has illuminated the affective enactment of populist claims, it should not be conflated with discourse theory. Performativity emphasises how political meanings are enacted, whereas discourse theory – especially in the Laclauian tradition examines the structural logics through which meaning is constituted. Accordingly, this paper does not locate discourse-theoretical populism inside the performative turn. Rather, it presents epistemic populism as a unique discourse-theoretical dimension that deals with how populist actors create conflicting regimes of truth and epistemic authority.

This paper situates its intervention within the discourse-theoretical tradition of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose conceptualisation of hegemony, antagonism, and articulation provides crucial traction to understand the alteration of truth in populist discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is not just political domination but also the established appearance of consensus that is normalised by excluding alternatives (Mouffe, 2005). Epistemic populism challenges the liberal consensus by exposing the exclusions on which it is built such as the neglect of marginalised communities, the dismissal of alternative ways of knowing, and growing distrust in institutional expertise (Müller, 2025) In this sense, populist speech functions as a political act of epistemic articulation as well as a communication tactic, putting fresh topics, experiences, and truth claims front and centre against the backdrop of prevailing narratives.

The research questions this paper addresses are therefore not only descriptive- how does epistemic populism function- but also normative and conceptual: what does it reveal about the conditions of knowledge, legitimacy, and inclusion in polarised democracies? To ground this analysis, the article centres primarily on the United States under Trump's first regime, where phrases such as ‘alternative facts’, ‘deep state’, and ‘fake news’ helped cultivate a hyper-mediated and emotionally charged epistemic community (Grinberg et al., 2019). While the U.S. serves as the main case study, insights from Hungary, particularly Orbán’s systematic efforts to consolidate epistemic control, are drawn upon as illustrative parallels (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Enyedi, 2016). These examples reinforce the argument that contemporary populist actors do not merely reject liberal knowledge structures; they reconfigure epistemic authority in ways that generate affective solidarity and political mobilisation.

## The Epistemological Politics of Populism

Epistemic populism is distinct from other forms of discursive articulation because it challenges not only power but also the epistemic standards that define authority, such as what constitutes truth, who is allowed to say it, and whose knowledge is politically legible. The discourse and hegemony theory of Laclau and Mouffe is crucial in this situation. According to Laclau (2005), discourse is more than just a

means of communicating ideas; it is the social realm itself, where meaning is created by the articulation of contingent signifiers. The concept of hegemony, defined as a temporary closure of meaning that renders certain interpretations and claims temporarily dominant, is fundamental to this framework (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Therefore, what is referred to as 'consensus' in liberal democracies is not a neutral agreement based on facts and norms, but a form of hegemonic control that actively shuts out alternative ways of knowing (Calhoun, 1995). Epistemic populism operates precisely at this point of contention, by seeking to unfix dominant truth regimes and to rearticulate marginalised knowledges as politically valid. Mouffe's (1999) expansion of discourse theory into the framework of agonistic pluralism[8] furthers this analysis by arguing that political life is inherently conflictual, and that attempts to erase antagonism in favour of rational consensus often suppress legitimate difference. The ideal of reasoned debate, which is dominated by experts, scientific rationality, and institutionalised forms of proof, is seen from this perspective as both technocratic and hegemonic. It is predicated on a universal rationality that marginalises subaltern, emotive, and experienced knowledge (Spivak, 1988). From a Laclauian perspective, epistemic populism should not be understood as a substantive belief that 'ordinary people possess valuable knowledge'. Rather, it refers to a unique discursive operation whereby 'the people' are constituted as the dominant locus of truth through a process of equivalential articulation. The subject-position of "the people" is discursively endowed with epistemic validity, while expert institutions and technocratic authorities are positioned as the fundamental "Other" in this formation, making knowledge a site of political antagonism (Saurette & Gunster, 2011). Ergo, epistemic populism acts not as an ideational claim about who knows more, but as a hegemonic project that organises fights over epistemic authority, generating 'the people' as the bearer of truth and delegitimising rival epistemic centres.

This type of political epistemology constructs the "ordinary citizen" as a more genuine epistemic agent by rejecting elite expertise in favour of folk wisdom and intuitive judgment. Slogans such as "we have had enough of experts" exemplify this epistemic inversion, and such trends have been frequently seen in contemporary populist discourse, especially in public debates surrounding Brexit and the Trump presidency in the United States (Moffitt, 2016). Oliver and Rahn (2016), Cramer (2016), Hawkins (2010), van der Linden et al. (2021), and Wodak (2015) all record this recurrent populist tendency to counter expert knowledge with real-world, everyday experience, arguing that the latter offers more morally sound, grounded insights than the ostensibly dispassionate rationalism of elite actors.

Primig (2025) expands on this reasoning when the author talks about the function of counter-knowledge in political mobilisation. He contends that alternative epistemic communities, which often oppose prevailing truths and official narratives, are frequently created by social movements. In this way, counter-

[8] Chantal Mouffe created the normative democratic theory of agonistic pluralism, which opposes the liberal goal of reaching a consensus through reasoned discussion. For Mouffe, attempts to eradicate hostility in favour of consensus frequently stifle valid disagreements and silence dissident opinions because political life is fundamentally characterised by conflict and contestation. Democracy, according to her vision, should strive to turn hostility into agonism, which is to characterise a confrontation between rivals who respect one another's right to contest, rather than to eradicate conflict (Jones, 2014).

knowledge serves as politically situated knowledge that challenges the establishment's epistemic authority and facilitates the creation of new collective identities, rather than just being misinformation (Icaza & Vázquez, 2013). Counter-knowledge's challenges to established authority and its contestation with fresh sources of legitimacy become a tactical tool for populist politicians (Eslen-Ziya, 2022). What makes epistemic populism and counter-knowledge strong for populist mobilisation is not merely that they oppose a knowledge elite. Instead, they function by redefining the hostile landscape surrounding epistemic power, according to Laclau. In this context, "the elite" serves as a floating signifier that, depending on the hegemonic project, can be filled with political, technical, or epistemic actors. Depicting alternative centres of epistemic authority, whether specialists, institutions, or technocratic bodies as the antagonistic Other, epistemic populism consequently contributes to the building of "the people" as the dominant locus of truth. In this conception, the influence of epistemic populism lies not in its substantive critique of a knowing elite, but in its capacity to redefine the frontier of antagonism in epistemic terms, so widening the hegemonic fight over who can legitimately proclaim truth (Waisbord, 2018). Thus, it reconfigures not only who gets to rule, but also who gets to *know*, and how that knowing becomes socially and politically credible.

In Foucauldian terms (Foucault in Weir, L., 2008), this regime is not neutral but shaped by power, and epistemic populism exposes and contests that power. When populist actors reject climate science, pandemic data, or mainstream journalism, they are not simply anti-science or disinformed. Rather, they are engaged in the construction of an alternative truth regime (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022). This construction hinges on three interrelated discursive acts: first, redefining the knower, i.e., who is authorised to produce and disseminate knowledge. Second, reconstituting the truth, not as a universally verifiable proposition, but as an affectively resonant narrative that aligns with collective identity. Third, imagining the people but not as a demographic or procedural category, but as an epistemic subject capable of discerning truth based on shared experience, suspicion of elites, and emotional coherence (Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

This epistemic contestation gains further traction in a world marked by rising ontological insecurity, as described by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), who characterises contemporary society as defined by enduring instability, where change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. According to Bauman, this results from obsessive modernisation, globalisation, and deregulation, creating a gulf between national politics and power and causing a generalised sense of unease and anxiety (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008). Voters are drawn to narratives that promise stability and clarity because of this ontological uneasiness. According to Sawicka (2024), narratives act as cognitive-affective mechanisms that help humans to 'give meaning' to their experiences and explain ambiguity. This reorganisation of epistemic certainty generates emotional reassurance and motivates political action, particularly in moments of crisis when existing knowledge structures appear unreliable or contested. Epistemic populism is a political epistemology, as opposed to conspiracy theories or simple irrationality. It is an adversarial, but internally coherent, system that challenges the hegemonic liberal order by highlighting the things that technocratic epistemologies ignore. Therefore, epistemic populism is simultaneously disruptive and productive, fostering solidarity and alternative knowledge frameworks while contesting

prevailing claims to reality (Müller, 2025).

## Trump and the Epistemic Turn in Populism

To understand the Trumpian logic of epistemic populism (specifically in his first term), one must first analyse the strategic redeployment of signifiers such as “fake news,” “deep state,” and “alternative facts.” These are not merely slogans but epistemic claims that reconstitute what is valid knowledge and who is authorised to produce it. Epistemic claims are assertions concerning the nature, source, and legitimacy of knowledge itself, particularly regarding who is regarded as a credible knower and what constitutes valid proof or truth, as well as facts or opinions. In contrast to ordinary claims, epistemic claims entail meta-level disputes over authority and knowledge frameworks, influencing social and political power dynamics and generating collective beliefs. Trump's delegitimisation of major media organisations, e.g., CNN, The Washington Post, and The New York Times, was a complete rejection of journalism as an area of epistemic authority rather than a critique of biased journalism (Waisbord, 2018). Trump's declaration that *“what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening”* (BBC News, 2018) challenged not just media narratives but the process by which social reality is created and disseminated (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022). Jason Stanley’s (2015) analysis of propaganda in democratic societies can be productively read through a Laclauian lens. While Stanley highlights how propaganda reshapes the criteria by which knowledge claims are judged, a discourse-theoretical reading interprets this process as a broader hegemonic restructuring of the epistemic terrain. Propaganda does more than circulate untruths; within populist projects, it actively unsettles established truth regimes and reconfigures the equivalential links that define who is recognised as a legitimate epistemic authority.

Trump’s attacks on mainstream media outlets – including CNN, The Washington Post, and The New York Times – exemplify this dynamic, as these institutions were discursively repositioned as antagonistic actors within a newly articulated epistemic order. In Laclauian terms, this move is not a critique of biased journalism but a strategic redrawing of the frontier of antagonism so that established knowledge institutions become positioned as the constitutive ‘Other’. Trump’s use of the label ‘fake news’ detached the term from any concrete referent and turned it into an empty but powerful discursive marker. As a result, it could be filled with whatever meaning his political project required, enabling the consolidation of an epistemic community in which pro-Trump outlets and voices came to be seen as the only trustworthy sources of truth. In this light, Stanley’s observations align with a Laclauian understanding that propaganda alters how truth is perceived because it is embedded in a broader hegemonic contest over defining reality itself. Through such struggles, populist leaders can reshape the criteria of credibility and reorganise the structures that determine who is authorised to speak as a knower.

Trump greatly intensified and popularised this epistemic style, even though appeals to “common sense” over expert knowledge have long existed in American political discourse from the elevation of characters like “Joe the Plumber” to Colbert's satirical concept of “truthiness” and earlier criticisms of technocratic elites. Under his direction, "common sense" was elevated as a superior epistemic authority rather than

only being contrasted with expertise, so uprooting scientists, journalists, and academics from their customary positions of legitimacy (Moffitt, 2016). As Trump himself asserted, "*I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else's brain can ever tell me*" (Zhang, 2019), framing instinct and intuition as more truthful than institutional knowledge. A core feature of epistemic populism is the shift in who counts as a legitimate knower, from individuals with formal expertise to those claiming intuitive or experiential insight. This shift upends established hierarchies of credibility and reshapes the boundaries of who can legitimately speak in the public sphere. Rather than simply rejecting intellectualism, it represents a deliberate reconfiguration of epistemic authority, reallocating legitimacy based on emotional resonance and identity-based alignment (Speed & Mannion, 2017).

The way Trump frames "the people" as an epistemic subject, i.e., an actor that may determine truth through shared suspicion and emotional resonance rather than through proof or deliberation, is important to consider. Under the signifier "the real Americans," Trump's populism connects various grievances into a chain of equivalence, in accordance with Laclau's (2005) logic of equivalence[9]. Liberal elites are portrayed in this narrative as manipulators of reality who deprive the populace of its epistemic agency. Such a move constitutes what Zienkowski (2017) describes as an "epistemic rearticulation," wherein political subjects are empowered through the performative act of knowing differently. Emotional epistemics play a major role in the discursive production of hostility between the elites who lie and the knowing populace. Trump's news conferences, tweets, and rallies were displays of epistemic loyalty rather than places where information was shared. Epistemic loyalty involves aligning oneself with a particular epistemic authority not based on factual accuracy but through symbolic identification and antagonistic boundary-drawing. In this context, accepting Trump's claims became a marker of belonging to 'the people' as constructed within his populist discourse. Believing in Trump meant feeling the truth, rejecting the monopoly on knowledge held by the liberal establishment, and affirming one's identity through affective commitment. This transition from deliberative to emotional epistemology is not unreasonable; rather, it is a re-evaluation of the processes by which political truths are created, confirmed, and internalised (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

This epistemic contestation was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Trump's statements frequently contradicted the scientific consensus. His reluctance to wear masks, statements that the infection would "miraculously disappear," and advocacy of hydroxychloroquine were intentional acts of epistemic disobedience (Rutledge, 2020). Trump positioned himself and his supporters as epistemic outsiders opposing technocratic rule by disparaging the Centres for Disease Control (CDC), criticising Dr Anthony Fauci, and weakening public health guidelines (Graham et al., 2020). The epistemic fight was paralleled by the climactic catastrophe. In addition to policies, Trump's denial of climate science as a "Chinese hoax," withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, and support for fossil fuels were epistemic

[9] As per Laclau (2005), the logic of equivalence is the process by which disparate social grievances are expressed collectively as having a shared antagonistic relationship (for example, against "the elite"), creating a cohesive collective identity. By uniting demands through a common opposition, these dynamic blurs the lines between them and creates "the people" as a single political entity.

signals- statements about who gets to define environmental reality (De la Cruz Arboleda, 2018). Instead of merely rejecting scientific facts, Trump created an alternative notion of truth in which energy independence, economic nationalism, and real American jobs replaced climate science as the dominant paradigm (Guliyev, 2020).

The epistemic populist logic reached its apex in the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. The performative enactment of reality is best illustrated by allegations of electoral fraud, the delegitimisation of mail-in ballots, and the insistence that Trump had won “by a lot” despite contradicting empirical data (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Goethals, 2022). Instead of being the subject of an investigation, the “Stop the Steal” movement was a discursive ritual that enabled its adherents to reject institutional results, thereby validating their epistemic claims vis-à-vis belonging (Moffitt, 2016; Luke, 2021). Political discourses alter reality by making some interpretations understandable while excluding others, as Glynos and Howarth (2007) remind us. In this instance, the claim's emotive coherence and resonance with an existing epistemic identity were more important than the electoral facts. When Trump was re-elected president in January 2025, his epistemic populism grew due to his strategic appeals to supporters who favoured alternative reality regimes. For instance, he frequently disregarded established epistemic authority by labelling important Covid-19 evidence “fake science” and rejecting independent election monitoring groups as “biased” (Hart et al., 2021).

## Mapping Epistemic Populism in Trump and Orbán

The populist leader in both Hungary and the United States reinterprets truth as a measure of moral-political alignment with “the people,” rather than as something that needs to be verified or deliberated. Expertise is delegitimised not because it is rejected in and of itself, but rather because it is perceived as culturally strange, politically tainted, and epistemically exclusive (Collins & Evans, 2002). Truth tends to be the result of socio-political regimes of validation (Foucault in Joseph, 2004). In both situations, populist rhetoric challenges the institutional filters that determine which facts are accepted and which are rejected. The authentic people are elevated above technocratic reason or cosmopolitan abstraction, and are the unique epistemic subject produced by both regimes. This reconfiguration is not just rhetorical; it operates by establishing hostile epistemic boundaries that separate honest speech from deceptive jargon, affective clarity from institutional fog, and legitimate knowers from imposters (Waisbord, 2018).

However, the two scenarios differ significantly in the modality of epistemic reordering. The simplest way to describe Trump's populism is as disruptive and performative (Venizelos, 2022). He used real-time discursive spectacle[10] to enact an emotive politics via his attacks on the media, science, and bureaucracy.

[10] Press conferences, televised rallies, social media live-streams, or immediate public statements are examples of live or instantaneous performances that are characterised as “real-time discursive spectacles.” These events allow political leaders to dramatise stories, conflicts, or confrontations to sway public opinion, elicit strong feelings, and topple established authorities as events take place. The immediacy and broad public participation of these performances give them power.

His approach is grounded in contradiction and discursive overload, rather than systemic replacement. Thus, Trump's epistemic populism is episodic, thrives on crisis and instability, and is ingrained in a decentralised media ecosystem that exacerbates fragmentation (Sunstein, 2018). In contrast, Orban's epistemic populism is systemic and institutionalised. The government replaces liberal epistemic institutions rather than just criticising them. The eviction of CEU, the banning of gender studies, and the centralisation of media under state-aligned foundations constitute a slow and deliberate sedimentation of epistemic hegemony. Orbán's strategy aims for epistemic closure, i.e., excluding dissenting knowledges through legislation, education, and policy (Kim, 2023). Orbán replaces the liberal episteme with an illiberal one, while Trump upends the liberal one.

This comparison encourages theoretical improvement. First, this implies that epistemic populism should be understood not as a single, fixed mode but as a developmental continuum that ranges from episodic to systemic expressions. When the epistemic barrier is mentioned but not yet incorporated into state structures, such as in campaign rhetoric or symbolic attacks on expert institutions, episodic forms emerge. On the other hand, systemic forms arise when these discursive movements solidify into long-lasting institutional arrangements, policies, and practices that restructure knowledge production and dissemination. Conceptualising epistemic populism along this continuum makes it obvious that episodic performances might, under conditions, evolve into more entrenched and institutionalised configurations, rather than remaining as separate phenomena.

Discursive dissonance, high affect, and volatility characterise Trump; coherence, institutional support, and epistemic closure characterise Orban. Second, the analysis complicates any reading of epistemic populism as mere misinformation or irrationality. Both instances involve the intentional, strategic, and emotionally resonant production of epistemic antagonism, which reinterprets who can speak, who can be heard, and what constitutes knowledge. But if epistemic populism destabilises exclusionary liberal truth regimes, does it simultaneously open democratic possibilities? Or does it merely reverse the vector of exclusion, creating new closures under the guise of authenticity and belonging? Are we witnessing the emergence of a global epistemic conjuncture in which knowledge itself becomes the primary site of political struggle, or are these cases outliers conditioned by specific national legacies?

Epistemic populism requires a theorisation not merely as a deviation from democratic norms but as a symptom of democracy's epistemological contradictions[11]. It arises specifically because liberal truth regimes have not taken into consideration the structural, emotional, and experiential exclusions that are part of their own claims to neutrality. Populist disarticulation of liberal epistemic authority is a counter-hegemonic tactic that highlights the weakness of prevailing knowledge systems rather than an irrational rupture (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). Herein lies the paradox: while epistemic populism challenges the exclusionary nature of liberal truth systems, it often ends up creating new, rigid ways of defining what

[11] See Landemore (2012) & Estlund & Landemore (2018) for readers interested in a more thorough examination of the epistemological paradoxes of democracy, particularly the conflict between the aspirations of communal reason and inevitable disputes over who has the authority to know, express, and certify truth.

counts as truth. The epistemically “authentic” individuals whose emotive or intuitive knowledge is valued above institutional expertise replace liberalism's epistemic subject, the logical, detached thinker (Enli, 2024). Therefore, epistemic populism performs both critique and closure simultaneously: it frequently restores a monologic understanding of reality based on authenticity, belonging, or national identity while criticising the technocratic foreclosure of epistemic variety.

Laclau’s (2005) theory of hegemony sees politics as a space where meanings are built through shifting alliances and struggles. What counts as truth is shaped by ongoing social conflicts, not something that exists outside of politics. This realisation is mobilised by epistemic populism in the United States and Hungary, which attacks the hegemonic closure of liberal epistemology and exposes it as a contingent construction that has historically excluded much of the population from epistemic participation (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). According to Mouffe, however, populism's political logic is fundamentally hostile (Mouffe in González Scandizzi, 2025). It presents a despised Other against “the people,” who are a unified moral subject. In epistemic terms, this means that epistemic borders are established, specifying not only who can speak but also what knowledge is deemed politically acceptable (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This is accomplished through Trumpian populism, which utilises spectacle and affect to create an “authentic” populace that is aware through instinct, rage, and loyalty. Orbanism uses cultural traditionalism, institutional control, and legislation to accomplish the same goal. In all instances, epistemic populism opposes the liberal elite by substituting a different epistemic regime based on distinct affective investments, modes of knowing, and structures of credibility rather than by completely rejecting knowledge (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

This leads to a fundamental paradox: while populist actors frame their epistemic project as an effort to democratise truth by relocating epistemic authority to ‘the people’, the outcome frequently involves new forms of exclusion and concentrated epistemic control. Populist calls for epistemic justice risk turning into calls for epistemic dominance. Populism is excluded in the name of authenticity, just as liberalism is excluded in the name of universality. The epistemically pure replace the epistemic elite. This substitution preserves the dual logic of legitimacy vs illegitimacy while reversing the direction of epistemic exclusion; it does not eliminate epistemic inequality.

However, to dismiss epistemic populism entirely as reactionary is to ignore the structural failings that made it viable. This is similar to long-standing claims about populism in general: systemic failures (political or institutional) that leave sizable portions of society feeling ignored or unrepresented by current authorities are what give rise to populist mobilisation. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) refers to the systematic erasure of non-dominant knowledge systems, whether they are indigenous, affective, working-class, or gendered, as “epistemicide”, and it has long plagued liberal epistemologies. Deep disparities in who is seen, heard, and validated as a knower have frequently been concealed by the liberal democratic promise of inclusive discussion (Schwartzberg, 2015). Despite its risks, epistemic populism serves a diagnostic purpose by exposing the exclusions that plague liberal consensus, the emotional undertones that lie beneath scientific logic, and the political investments that underlie claims of neutrality. It demands that one rethinks not only *what one knows*, but *how one knows*, *who decides*, and *in whose name* knowledge is mobilised. Therefore, the task is to conceptualise democratic resilience in ways that

embrace epistemic plurality without devolving into relativism. One way forward is provided by Mouffe's (2000) concept of agonistic democracy, which is a framework in which disagreement is not repressed but rather organised, where epistemic conflict is made apparent and subject to contestation, and where conflicting truth claims can coexist without degenerating into hostile confrontation. This necessitates creating discursive norms and institutional spaces that can accommodate disagreement without reverting to liberal or populist epistemic supremacy. The concept of rational deliberation would have to be drastically rethought to realise such a vision.

This opens space for further exploration. What would a truly epistemically plural democracy look like? It would operate as a polyphonic arena of contestation, where certain knowledges are not prioritised beforehand but are instead put to the test through group involvement, rather than depending on a single source of epistemic authority (de Sousa Santos, 2007). It would acknowledge that affect is a necessary component of truth rather than its adversary. It would aim to create common ground via mutual adjustment, friction, and translation rather than by reaching a consensus. Such a model is a crucial response to the epistemic gaps exposed by populist rhetoric. Democracy is at risk when calls for fairness in knowledge become demands for only one kind of truth, when the idea of being right replaces openness to different views, and disagreement is demonised as treason.

## Conclusions

The emergence of epistemic populism signifies a deeper ontological rupture in the way truth, authority, and legitimacy are negotiated in contemporary democracies, rather than just a discursive shift in political discourse. This paper has highlighted that the struggle for information is fundamental to populist politics, not a side issue. In both the United States and Hungary, populist leaders have reconfigured the terrain of epistemic authority: Trump through disruptive spectacle and affective improvisation, Orbán through institutional engineering and ideologically curated truth regimes. These instances demonstrate two distinct but complementary forms of epistemic populism: a systemic and hegemonic kind and an episodic and decentralised one. However, both follow the same logic: liberal epistemic authority is disarticulated, and knowledge is rearticulated around feeling, identity, and hostility.

This paper has questioned the shortcomings of popular ideational, stylistic, and performative approaches to populism studies by emphasising epistemic populism as a unique formation. Instead, it has promoted a discourse-theoretical viewpoint grounded in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony, which views knowledge as a politically created and historically contingent sphere rather than an impartial area of discovery. Accordingly, epistemic populism is a counter-hegemonic struggle over who can know, what constitutes knowledge, and which epistemic assertions are accepted in the public domain. It is not only a rejection of reason or an acceptance of irrationality. However, there is a paradox here. While epistemic populism exposes the flaws and exclusions of liberal epistemologies, it frequently substitutes new forms of epistemic closure under the pretence of affective coherence and authenticity. The pluralist ideal runs the risk of being overshadowed by a monologic politics of identity and truth, and the epistemically

authentic subject replaces the liberal deliberative citizen. Epistemic populism must be criticised for its exclusionary particularism if liberalism is criticised for its erroneous universality.

This dual critique points toward a more urgent task: reimagining democratic epistemology in ways that neither suppress pluralism nor valorise populist closure. To prevent epistemic warfare from breaking out, it advocates for a politics of agonistic debate in which various knowledge claims can challenge, coexist, and confront one another. The issue is to develop a democratic culture that honours epistemic humility, encourages critical emotion, and broadens the scope of who is permitted to know instead of reestablishing a false consensus.

## References

Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2013). *Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe: Democratic Capacities and the Transition to Media Democracy*. Central European University Press. https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/5524166

Bánkuti, M., Halmai, G., & Scheppele, K. L. (2012). Hungary's illiberal turn: Disabling the constitution. *Journal of Democracy, 23*(3), 138–146. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0054

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23818779

Bauman, Z., & Haugaard, M. (2008). Liquid modernity and power: A dialogue with Zygmunt Bauman. *Journal of Power, 1*(2), 111–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/17540290802227536

BBC News. (2018, July 25). Donald Trump: 'What you're seeing and what...' [Video]. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-44959340

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001

Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2002). The third wave of science studies: Studies of expertise and experience. *Social Studies of Science, 32*(2), 235–296. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312702032002003

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press. https://press.uchicago.edu/dam/ucp/books/pdf/course_intro/978-0-226-34911-4_course_intro.pdf

De Cleen, B., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and articulations: A discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism. *Javnost – The Public, 24*(4), 301–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083

De la Cruz Arboleda, C. A. (2018). Climate change in the era of post-truth. *Ecology Law Quarterly, 45*(2), 419–426. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26568800

de Sousa Santos, B. (2007). Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 30*(1), 45–89. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241677

Enli, G. (2024). Populism as “truth”: How mediated authenticity strengthens the populist message. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 30*(1), 83–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231221802 (Original work published 2025)

Enyedi, Z. (2016). Populist polarization and party system institutionalization: The role of political institutions in Western and Eastern Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism, 63*(3), 183–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1142341

Eslen-Ziya, H. (2022). Knowledge, counter-knowledge, pseudo-science in populism. In H. Eslen–Ziya & A. Giorgi (Eds.), *Populism and science in Europe*. (Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97535-7_2

Estlund, D., & Landemore, H. (2018). The epistemic value of democratic deliberation. In A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, & M. E. Warren (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy* (pp. 248–). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198747369.001.0001

Galanopoulos, A., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2022). Populism, anti-populism and post-truth. In M. Oswald (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of populism.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80803-7_25

Glynos, J., & Howarth, D. (2007). *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Logics-of-Critical-Explanation-in-Social-and-Political-Theory/Glynos-Howarth/p/book/9780415462129

Goethals, G. R. (2021). The 2020 election and its aftermath: Love, lies, and ensorceling leadership. *Leadership, 17*(2), 240–250. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715021994352

González Scandizzi, J. (2025). The agonistic path towards populism: Mouffe, the left and its democratic crossroads. *Contemporary Political Theory, 24*, 206–225. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-024-00713-0

Graham, A., Cullen, F. T., Pickett, J. T., Jonson, C. L., Haner, M., & Sloan, M. M. (2020). Faith in Trump, moral foundations, and social distancing defiance during the coronavirus pandemic. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World, 6*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120956815

Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., Scheffer, M., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. *Science, 363*(6425), 374–378. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706

Guliyev, F. (2020). Trump’s “America first” energy policy, contingency and the geopolitics of energy

dominance. *Energy Research & Social Science*. Advance online publication. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7118641/

Hart, P. S., Chinn, S., & Soroka, S. (2021). Politicization and polarization in COVID-19 news coverage. *Science Communication, 42*(5), 679–697. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470211030139

Hawkins, K. A. (2010). *Venezuela's Chavismo and populism in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511730245

Icaza, R., & Vázquez, R. (2013). Social struggles as epistemic struggles. *Development and Change, 44*(3), 683–704. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12039

Jones, M. (2014). Chantal Mouffe's agonistic project: Passions and participation. *Parallax, 20*(2), 14–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.896546

Joseph, J. (2004). Foucault and reality. *Capital & Class, 28*(1), 143–165. https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680408200108

Kim, S. (2023). 'Illiberal democracy' after post-democracy: Revisiting the case of Hungary. *The Political Quarterly, 94*, 437–444. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13255

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason.* Verso. https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/On-Populist-Reason-by-Ernesto-Laclau.pdf

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics.* Verso.

Landemore, H. (2012). Democratic reason: The mechanisms of collective intelligence in politics. In H. Landemore & J. Elster (Eds.), *Collective wisdom: Principles and mechanisms* (pp. 251–289). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511846427

Luke, T. W. (2021). Democracy under threat after 2020 national elections in the USA: 'Stop the steal' or 'give more to the grifter-in-chief?' *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 55*(5), 551–557. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1889327

McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth.* MIT Press. https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262535045/post-truth/

Meyer, J. M. (2023). Power and truth in science-related populism: Rethinking the role of knowledge and expertise in climate politics. *Political Studies, 72*(3), 845–861. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231160370

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press. https://www.sup.org/books/politics/global-rise-populism

Moffitt, B., & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political Studies, 62*(2), 381–397. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12032

Mouffe, C. (1999). *The democratic paradox*. Verso.

https://monoskop.org/images/4/41/Mouffe_Chantal_The_Democratic_Paradox_2000.pdf

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/On-the-Political/Mouffe/p/book/9780415305211

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C. R. Kaltwasser. (2025). Populism and democracy: The road ahead. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 58*(1), 99–109. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096524000475

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780190234874.001.0001

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2018). Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda. *Comparative Political Studies, 51*(13), 1667–1693. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018789490

Müller, J. F. (2025). An epistemic account of populism. *Episteme, 22*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2023.39

Oliver, J. E., & Rahn, W. M. (2016). Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 election. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 667*(1), 189–206. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216662639
*(Original work published 2016)*

Ostiguy, P. (2017). Populism: A socio-cultural approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 73–97). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.3

Peresman, A., Larsen, L. T., Mazepus, H., & Petersen, M. B. (2025). Do populists listen to expertise? A five-country study of authority, arguments, and expert sources. *Political Studies, 0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217251323402

Primig, F. (2025). The epistemic crisis and the rise of the far right: Toward a conceptualization of counter-knowledge orders in digital knowledge society. *Publizistik, 70*, 23–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-025-00887-6

Rummens, S. (2017). Populism as a threat to liberal democracy. In C. Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 554–571). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.27

Rutledge, P. E. (2020). Trump, COVID-19, and the war on expertise. *American Review of Public Administration, 50*(6–7), 505–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074020941683

Santos, B. d. S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315634876

Saurette, P., & Gunster, S. (2011). Ears wide shut: Epistemological populism, argutainment and Canadian conservative talk radio. *Canadian Journal of Political Science, 44*(1), 195–218. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423910000977

Sawicka, M. (2024). Investigating collective emotional structures: Theoretical and analytical implications of the 'deep story' concept. *Cultural Sociology, 18*(2), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755241231014

Schwartzberg, M. (2015). Epistemic democracy and its challenges. *Annual Review of Political Science, 18*, 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-110113-121908

Speed, E., & Mannion, R. (2017). The rise of post-truth populism in pluralist liberal democracies: Challenges for health policy. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management, 6*(5), 249–251. https://doi.org/10.15171/ijhpm.2017.19

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies, 13*(1), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289

Stanley, J. (2015). *How propaganda works*. Oxford University Press. https://philpapers.org/rec/STAHPW-4

Urbinati, N. (2019). Political theory of populism. *Annual Review of Political Science, 22*, 111–127. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-070753

van der Linden, S., Panagopoulos, C., Azevedo, F., & Jost, J. T. (2021). The paranoid style in American politics revisited: An ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking. *Political Psychology, 42*, 23–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12681

Venizelos, G. (2022). Donald Trump in power: Discourse, performativity, identification. *Critical Sociology, 49*(4–5), 647–667. https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205221118223 *(Original work published 2023)*

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). *Emotions, media and politics*. Polity Press. https://www.wiley.com/en-es/Emotions%2C+Media+and+Politics-p-9780745661049

Waisbord, S. (2018a). The elective affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics. *Communication Research and Practice, 4*(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2018.1428928

Waisbord, S. (2018b). Truth is what happens to news: On journalism, fake news, and post-truth. *Journalism Studies, 19*(13), 1866–1878. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1492881

Webb, S. (2021). Populism: A threat to democracy? Or a verification of it? *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics, 157*, 401–

423. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/292520/1/schm.137.4.401.pdf

Weir, L. (2008). The concept of truth regime. *Canadian Journal of Sociology, 33*(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/canajsocicahican.33.2.367

Weyland, K. (2024). The populist threat to democracy. In *Democracy's resilience to populism's threat* (pp. 1–29). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432504

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073

Ylä-Anttila, T. (2018). Populist knowledge: 'Post-truth' repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, 5*(4), 356–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1414620

Zhang, S. (2019, January 6). Trump's most trusted adviser is his own gut. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/trump-follows-his-gut/580084/

Zienkowski, J. (2017). *Articulations of self and politics in activist discourse: A discourse analysis of critical subjectivities in minority debates*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40703-6

# Populist Narratives in Film and TV: A Conceptual Framework

by Dom Holdaway[12]

## Abstract

This paper argues that certain film and television narratives can contribute to cultures of populism. In the first section, following an opening example, the paper presents two research projects that have this object of study. It subsequently presents a theoretical framework supporting this analysis, drawing from studies in populism, media studies and affect, and proposes the concept of the "populist narrative" in order to foreground the role of storytelling. In the analytical part, the paper expands on a handful of examples from contemporary Italian film and TV that deal with the theme of corruption, in particular through the recurrent motif of the "unlikely candidate". The discussion section justifies the need to move beyond the text itself, highlighting the necessity for a mixed methodology to do so in future research.

**Keywords**: Populist Narratives, Political Cinema, Political Series, Affect, Unlikely Candidate

## Introduction

At the end of Joker, the 2019 superhero biopic that narrates an origin story of Batman's infamous foe as a dark, psychological thriller, the protagonist comes to be depicted as an anti-heroic symbol of resistance. Played by Joaquin Phoenix to great critical acclaim, Arthur Fleck, alias the Joker, lives through severe mistreatment and a series of disappointments which are exacerbated by his class position and mental health, with no institutional support available from the state or from the wealthy. Descending into a kind of delirium, he commits a series of homicides of privileged elites (bankers and a TV personality) who mistreat him. The actions become a rallying call and a form of resistance that galvanizes a certain sector of marginalized, under-privileged folks against this social elite, and Joker's clown attire soon becomes a uniform of this group. This process is fully realized in the closing sequence of the film, when, during a riot, one "clown" murders Bruce Wayne's extremely wealthy parents – initiating the Batman's own origin story – and Joker is liberated from a police vehicle and elevated as leader.

There are evident parallels between this narrative and the populist movements that have profoundly shaped much liberal democratic politics in the Western world in recent years: both narrate a people that

[12] University of Urbino Carlo Bo

is shaped by a shared identity and an anti-elite politics, under a symbolic leader (of course, with much a more explicitly violent dramatic effect in the film than in real life). This parallel was noted in the reception of the film (in the press, e.g., Boot, 2019, Lawson, 2019, and in academic work, e.g., Sreepada & Dominguez Partida, 2022; Doidge & Rosenfeldt, 2021).

As much of this criticism illustrates, however, the populist allegory of Joker is contradictory and complicated by the incoherent, violent ideology promoted by Arthur Fleck. For instance, it is unclear to what extent we are invited by the film to support this anti-hero. The stark representation of his poverty, suffering and humiliation certainly inspires empathy and engagement; this is impeded, however, by the excesses of his violence. As Guillaume Mouleux has observed, the final sequence of the film is contradictory since, on the one hand, Joker is placed on the "alter" of a police car and "venerated", representing "the triumph of evil (or, at least, of its ability to fascinate the masses)" and "the cult of personality" (2019, par. 24). Yet, on the other, the same veneration is inconsistent, "given the egalitarian symbol of the identical mask" since the scene shows a "collective subjugation" (2019, par. 24). In other words, the clown symbolism reduces and unites a people at the same level, and yet Joker himself stands out as a distinct monocrat: are the people truly equal to the leader?

Of course, we can agree or disagree with these arguments, we can push for certain interpretations of the film as more or less credible or literal political metaphors. Mouleux's egalitarian mask vs individual leader argument, for instance, is perhaps not so convincing in the face of real-world experiences that do both, i.e., unifying the masses while preserving or even reinforcing the individual-centric cult of the leader, as per the "MAGA" red cap. Or, in the Italian context (to which I return in the bulk of this essay), the premise of equality that embodied the Five Stars Movements digital platform, that nonetheless gained prominence thanks to the specifically personal blog of its founder Beppe Grillo, beppegrillo.it (cf. Tipaldo & Pisciotta, 2014). One might nevertheless argue that precisely this contradictory relationship between singularity and mass reflects the nature of these same populist movements, hence the film comes even closer to representing them authentically.

Rather than disputing the coherence of these possible interpretations of *Joker* as a contemporary political metaphor, let it suffice, for now, to step back and recognize the importance that a populist allegory can be found in this kind of entertainment product. I would argue that this is significant *per se*, even before considering the nuances that lie in the specificities of its representation. As this example shows, fictional screen narratives have the capacity to offer frameworks of interpretation and spaces for debate about contemporary politics, far beyond the arenas in which we might habitually seek these out. The case used to introduce this paper is made particularly important due to its extreme visibility, as a Hollywood product (produced and distributed by Warner Bros., *Joker* made over $1bn at the box office).[1] Of course, the intricacies of how populism is represented in film and TV will vary according to the scope of the production, the conjecture of its release and consumption, and its geographic/linguistic specificity. In the remainder of this paper, my examples will be taken from the Italian context, and therefore account for these specificities accordingly.

Taking its cue from this example, the objective of this paper is to reflect on the possible intersections

between audiovisual products, their cultures, and populist politics. With this in mind, the following discussion is predominantly conceptual and does not contain empirical data. In the first part, I outline how and why audiovisual narratives can be studied in relation to contemporary thinking on populism. Subsequently, in place of a fully-fledged, applied analysis and results, I offer a handful of exemplary Italian films and series, which reveal a handful of populist narratives.

The content of this paper results from two research projects. The first is the NETIAS CAT[2] project "Screening European Populisms (2008-2020): Audiovisual Fiction, Social Media, and Political Affect", which ran from 2022-2024. Its aim was to study these intersections, between fictional audiovisual cultures and populist politics. The team consisted of five scholars working in communication, film, TV and media and digital humanities – and two stakeholders in youth participation and media literacy.[3] This moreover gave rise to a second Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) project, supported by the Italian Ministry of Research and Universities (MUR) with National Recovery and Resilience Plan funding from the EU, entitled "Circulating Populist Sentiments in 21st Century Film and TV Fiction in Italy".[4] The two projects have in common the theoretical framework that I outline in the following section. They differ as the latter project is specifically dedicated to the Italian case – hence my choice to focus on this country for this paper – and it attempts to be more inclusive in relation to the intersections of populism and screen media. I acknowledge and am grateful for the support from both the MUR and the NETIAS; I also recognize that, though the words are mine, the thinking presented in the following is the culmination of many dialogues and conversations between the participants of these projects.

## Theoretical Framework

As a conceptual working paper, here I do not work with specific empirical data. Rather, in what follows, my method is shaped by theoretical reflection and its application to a set of case studies. I situate populism, the media context and the potential role of fictional film and TV narratives in relation to thinking in cultural, political and media studies. In the next section, I illustrate this thinking in relation to a handful of contemporary Italian films and series. The examples are selected as they have specific narrative functions, dealing with corruption, and I limit myself to recent products (post 2010). However, these examples are illustrative and do not claim to be comprehensive.

It is notoriously difficult to offer a specific definition of populism that captures all the nuances of very many historically and geographically specific phenomena. Influential scholarship has interpreted populism as "thin-centered" and assimilable to other ideologies, defining it as a set of ideas that structure political action around a moral opposition between the people and the elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Other attempts to pin down this flexibility categorize populism as an impulse (Kazin, 2017), or a type of performance and "style" to be applied variously (Moffitt, 2017). In perhaps its most influential conceptualization, Laclau (2005) conceptualizes populism as a discursive strategy, a logic that articulates political action through empty signifiers that link social demands in chains of equivalence. While they vary

in terms of theoretical traditions and of the metaphors used to grasp populism's nuances – performance, impulse, discursive strategy – what unites this work is the centrality of the people and the way this notion is mobilized.

This paper, like the projects outlined above, recognizes this potential fluidity of definition and application, but builds on their commonality. As such, the definition of populism used here is a mode of political articulation and practice that is reliant on narrative (I return to this nuance shortly).

This perspective finds confirmation in the extremely successful and influential "neo-populist" movements of recent decades (Mudde, 2004). Various political groups have come to threaten liberal democracies (Pappas, 2019; Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020) by exploiting a wave of successive "crises": the financial collapse of 2008, migration, Brexit, Covid-19, the invasion of Ukraine, etc. (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The populist worldview hegemonizes these events by applying simplified narrative interpretations of them. Exemplary features of such narratives include the rhetorical construction and idealization of an ethnically defined "people" as custodians of sovereignty; their habitual relationship to a charismatic leader, with interactions that go beyond traditional forms of mediation; a social binary between the "people" and a corrupt elite or external enemy; contempt for traditional political processes and attempts to infringe its systems (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Judis, 2016).

This process is evidently profoundly reliant on the forging of positive and negative affective bonds. Between political commentary and social movement studies, scholars have focused specifically on the roles that negative and positive emotions have in shaping political action. On the one hand, anger is shaped around the perception that a frustrating event is certain, externally caused, and unfair – this has been studied in political science through appraisal theories (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). Fear, too, can be applied as a narrative mechanism to "read" the outsider (Wodak, 2015). On the other, positive affect can influence movement formation, bringing people together and providing them with a common sense of identity (e.g., Goodwin, et al., 2001; Hoggett, 2015). The interpellation (and pseudo-participation) of "the people" relies on narrative processes and affect production, rather than a stable ideological framework.

Furthermore, this performative narrative is mobilized by the media, something that has only been accelerated within the context of what Hepp and Couldry (2016; see also Hepp, 2020) have called "mediatization", where the media come to shape all elements of social reality. The concrete iteration of this is in the context of populism is apparent in the ways digital (including social) and traditional media function as a tool and a vehicle for politicians and political movements (Mazzoleni, 2008, Krämer, 2014). In the digital age of convergence, political narratives are subsumed into a complex flow of all the media – including fictional media, to which I return below.

Read collectively, this theoretical work leads to an interesting constellation of understanding, whereby populism can be understood as a discursive mode of political articulation that is reliant on a form of storytelling. Populism is dependent therefore on what we might call "populist narratives". Rather than simply providing yet another term to describe how populists give form to political action, however, the use of the word "narrative" here seeks to emphasize how the logic that articulates political action necessitates a storytelling function (narrative), and a platform (the media). To offer a working definition, then, the

"populist narrative" is the rhetorical account or worldview that are used by populists to mobilize political activity, that is boosted to the context of mediatization.

Of course, any political movement uses narrative to offer visions of change. To understand what is specific about populism, let us refer briefly to Paul Saurette's suggestion that populism can be understood as "an archetypal political narrative". As such, it is

> immediately recognizable and emotionally powerful to many audiences in our current political context. That is not simply because the specific populist version of this story has been told so many times before over the last decade. More importantly, it is because the populist narrative itself follows deeper, older archetypal cultural narratives that have structured many of the basic stories in Western culture, religion and philosophy, over hundreds and thousands of years. From this perspective, populist discourse is not simply a specific set of arguments or principles or ideological beliefs or values that frame our "thinking" or seek to intellectually convince us. Rather, populist discourse is an emotional story that tries to move us emotionally (Saurette, 2019, p. 17)

For Saurette, this reasoning makes it easier to understand why populism has gained such momentum in recent decades. Though this reading might risk simplifying a socially complex phenomenon, what is certainly useful and relevant in Saurette's account is the identification of key narrative tropes: the lead protagonists (the people), one or more antagonists (e.g., the elite), and an "emotionally charged clash between good and evil" (2019, p. 17).5 To put this in even simpler terms, we might suggest that what is specific to the populist narrative is its foundation of the people as a subject, while the storytelling by politicians then fills in any further details about the specifics of that subject (they are defined, for instance, ethnically; to whom they relate or are contrasted).

Working in terms of narrative is evidently compatible, moreover, with the "cultural approach" to populism proposed by Juha Herkman, which understands the political phenomenon as "an affective identification and signification process in which a political identity is constructed through the use of various ideologically or morally laden cultural symbols and markers of the people and their alleged enemies" (2022, p. 8). Herkman's definition of populism follows a similar reasoning as that outlined above, including an emphasis on processes of identification. These, I would argue, are implicit in the creation and characterization of subjecthood in the populist narrative. Herkman moreover places a very productive emphasis on the "cultural processes of significations" within populism (2022, p. 35), therefore not only foregrounding how its politics is fundamentally connected to identitarian issues, but how these, in turn, are forged and reforged by the cultures that surround us.

Taking inspiration from Herkman's work, we can posit an additional hypothesis, that cultural products could function as one (of many) points of influence within this process. While the contributions of the informational and social media texts to populism have (understandably) been important objects of scholarly interest, the wider role of fictional culture has been surprisingly less studied, with only a handful of exceptions (Coladonato & Sangiovanni, 2019; Schober, 2019; Pagello, 2020; Sorolla-Romero, 2021). This is particularly surprising as current social changes – those presented by populist movements as "threats to tradition" – are essentially shifts in cultural values, exploited and articulated into "culture wars"

(e.g., Furedi, 2018), which are mobilized by culture, the media and the arts. Thus, as Moran and Littler (2020) convincingly argue, culture can inform and mobilize for populist narratives, a means to anchor and give it meaning, and hence cultural studies as a discipline is an extremely valuable resource to interrogate this phenomenon.

Though any fictional cultural form could have relevance in this regard, there is value in studying film and seriality for three reasons. The first is tied to the enormous political importance of analogue and digital screen media: as the legacy of the most important "galaxy" of the 1900s (Casetti, 2015) and the core of the contemporary entertainment industry. Second, film and serial narratives have a vital formal characteristic, considering the ease of their truth claims and their ability to incite emotions (cf. Singh, 2014). The third reason is the theoretical legacy of film and television studies, which has been particularly attentive to media-industrial contexts, to aesthetics, and to reception, refining a variety of theoretical and methodological tools capable of analyzing politics from production and distribution to representation and reception. Cinema and TV/web series have a vast potential to carry, contest or influence political messages and meanings, and this is facilitated by their significant economic and cultural weight, while film & TV studies have honed the tools to study this. This is applicable in the context of populism where, as we have noted, narrative is especially imperative to mobilizing the people around cultural values.

To shift to a much more practical frame, then, this paper – and the projects mentioned above – move from this reasoning to an analysis of contemporary fictional film and TV products, within the European and specifically Italian contexts. The macro research questions that the projects seek to ask are: (1) what kinds of historical and contemporary infrastructures – such as media networks or production companies – enable the circulation of populist narratives on screen? (2) How do film and television series represent populist politics, via themes, people or political movements? (3) What do political actors and audiences do, concretely, with audiovisual media content relating to populism? And, finally, (4) to what extent are fictional screen media and politics more broadly aligned within broader populist discourses?

To address these questions, the projects mentioned above have been working with case studies of production companies and networks, films/series and their audiences, as well as the uses of audiovisual references in political communication. In addition, the projects have traced the historical infrastructures of populism in film and TV (industrial dynamics, circulation, representation). In this way, the research is both textual, i.e., looking at representational agendas, but also contextual, as we want to investigate the reception and impact of these texts with audiences – in particular using digital media studies of social networks. In the following section, I will expand on a handful of representational examples that, however, connect also to the notion of studying a wider discourse.

## Analysis and Results

In order to illustrate this thinking more concretely, in this section I examine how populist narratives, as defined in the previous section, can emerge within film and serial products. In the following section I reflect on how this thinking can be expanded beyond the text, to its context. To do this, I examine in

particular one recurrent figure, that of the average person who becomes a political leader (the "unlikely candidate"). For reasons of space, and in line with the second ongoing research project mentioned above, here I limit myself to the Italian context.

One of the foremost elements of populist narratives in the Italian political sphere during the 2010s and 2020s has been anti-corruption. It should be noted, this is clearly tied to a larger anti-elite/anti-establishment, "drain the swamp" sentiment that has fed into many populist movements across the continent and beyond. One evident example of screen content that has captured this feeling, between national and global levels, is the Spanish TV/web series *Casa del papel* (Aléx Pina, 2017-2021) – also influencing grassroots activism in the symbolism of the Salvador Dalì mask (Pagello, 2020).

In Italy, an anti-corruption impulse informed the Lega party's anti-Rome rhetoric and was fundamental to the Five-Star Movement's striking growth, peaking in coalition leadership in the late 2010s/early 2020s (cf. Conti & Memoli, 2015; Ceccarini & Bourdignon, 2016). The theme of corruption also appears within a range of fictional film and TV productions. On the side of dramatic representation, a handful of examples are the glossy Sky Italia series 1992, and subsequent seasons 1993 and 1994 (2015-2019), and the films Loro (Paolo Sorrentino, 2018), all of which tell the story of Silvio Berlusconi and the political backdrop of his governments. Films like Suburra (Stefano Sollima, 2015) and Gomorra (Matteo Garrone, 2008) offer more specific, action-based representations of corrupt power and the mafia, leading to "spin off" series. On the side of comedy, films like Whatsoeverly (Giulio Manfredonia, 2010), Viva l'Italia (Massimiliano Bruno, 2012), Quo vado? (Gennaro Nunziante, 2016), It's the Law (Ficarra & Picone, 2017) and Natale a cinque stelle (Marco Risi, 2020) focus on the political class or on politics at a smaller, more regional or personal levels, making real or possible corruption a constant point of reference and object of ridicule.

Across all of these products, we see narratives of corrupt activities: satirical or critical representations of self-interested businessmen and politicians, often involved in illegal activities or extra-marital affairs; disregard for normal people or honest politicians; mistreated groups of marginalized subjects, especially migrants; shady agreements between politicians and the mafia or the church. These texts contribute to a wider narration of corruption that has a cultural weight in Italy, inserted within that flux of media products mentioned above and contributing to the frameworks we use to understand the phenomenon. While this does not necessarily equate to a populist narrative per se, it is easy to hypothesize how this tendency could inform more general frames of political activity.

One motif that leads us to a more explicit populist narrative can be identified within what Valerio Coladonato (2022) has called the "unlikely candidate", referring to an "average man" who – by corrupt design or by mistake – becomes a politician, often even a leader6. Already strikingly common as a motif, the figure is made more complex by the range of registers in his representation – at times dramatic, at others ironic – as well as the way it evokes real politicians that shifted from other fields to politics: Silvio Berlusconi the singer, businessman and football club owner; Giuseppe Conte the legal academic; Beppe Grillo the actor and comedian; even the banker and later technocrat leader Mario Draghi.

A handful of examples of this include: Pietro Bosco in 1992, who becomes a Lega Nord deputy after saving another politician in a fist fight; Giuseppe Garibaldi in Welcome Mr President! (Milani, 2013),

elected to the highest station in Italian politics as a joke, due to the eponymous Risorgimento hero; Giovanni Ernani, parachuted in to replace the his identical twin and left-wing party leader, fled in the face of decreasing support, in Long Live Freedom (Andò, 2013); businessman Cetto La Qualunque who, in Whatsoeverly, decides to run as Mayor in his town to avoid prison; Franco Rispoli, an ex-businessman turned politician, now prime minister with a fabricated CV, who is more interested in sleeping with a centre-left politician than in any specific political agenda. It is helpful to dedicate a little more attention to the first two examples of these, to make more explicit the generic codes used to narrate this figure.

The three seasons of *1992*, *1993* and *1994* series map the shift in the character of Pietro Bosco from a "normal guy" – an army veteran who fought in the gulf war, a rugby player and a drinker – to a honed politician and a part of the system. This is a slow process, with the nuance that the greater length of a serial narrative enables. Indeed, as Dana Renga has illustrated (2019, pp. 175-177), Bosco is a "complex man". At times he has a coherent, admirable moral code, helping the most marginalized, like his friend from days in the army, or denouncing the corruption of old politics. At others, though, his behaviour is terrible: he is intolerant and violent; at one point he assaults and almost fatally injures his girlfriend, after having discovered that she had an abortion. This complexity ties fundamentally to his representation as an improbable candidate, precisely because the series emphasizes, ironically, the dynamics used to "construct" this kind of personality – reducing his character to a public persona.

Bosco's movement into politics takes place by chance, when he rescues a (fictional) Northern League deputy, Gianni Bortolotti, from an attack by a group of Albanian men. This action positions Boschi as a righteous and generous Italian – with an evident ethnic dimension – an identity immediately used by the party to launch the candidate. In the first season, his "rough around the edges" character proves incompatible with this manipulation. Despite the party's attempts to control him, his nature continues to emerge (for instance, in a sequence when he improvises a speech), and this ultimately proves desirable for the electorate. It is interesting to note, therefore, the way 1992 contrasts the "manufacturing" of the everyday candidate as something negative, while Bosco's genuineness is more positively represented. In this way, the series puts forth a positive notion of politics by "the people". And though the series does not present Bosco as a uniquely positive or heroic figure, his attempts at politics do appear to be genuine, despite, perhaps because of, his lack of experience.

Not only does the series foreground how the unlikely candidate is literally fabricated, it also maps its deconstruction through inexorable corruption. This is depicted through the relationships that Bosco has with two different father figures: Bortolotti, the Northern League deputy, and Gaetano Nobile, an older deputy of the Christian Democrat party. Bortolotti teaches Bosco the party line, helps him find his feet and supports the character, also as a friend. Nobile, on the other hand, teaches Bosco the art of politicking, of offering and calling in favours. These kinds of agreements initially create difficulty for Bosco, when he is forced to go against his own moral code (he is obliged to vote approving an agreement with a Mafia-led company for army supplies). He learns how to play and quickly becomes astute, though: not only does he carry out his own agreements and manipulations, but he even betrays both father figures for personal interest: to advance his girlfriend's television career, to protect his own position, and to try to help an army ex-colleague who has post-traumatic stress.

Overall, then, the image of the unlikely candidate is subjected to often contradicting nuances. On the one hand, the series does appear to present Bosco in a positive light, creating a kind of anti-hero, precisely because of his insistence on remaining true, where possible, to his moral. The image of Bosco is also driven by emotion, namely anger, for the injustice of Italian society at the time that has abandoned him despite his service. This representation is troubled, however, by the connection to the party's problematic ideology and his excesses of violence. It is made more complex still by the ease with which he learns betrayal and manipulation, even of his closest allies, for self-protection. The image remains pessimistic and bleak, then, in the way it creates a genealogy of corruption that leads from the Christian Democrat, Nobile, to the Lega Nord, in Bosco. Any appreciation or sharing of the anger that had characterized the character's drive at the beginning of the series therefore easily mutates into a broader sense of resigned disillusionment for the unchanging nature of politics.

We can see a more positive model of an "unlikely candidate" in the character Garibaldi in Welcome, Mr President. As mentioned, he becomes president of the Italian Republic precisely because he shares the same name as the Risorgimento hero. Though initially parachuted in as a kind of joke, Garibaldi survives longer than his corrupt adversaries would hope, driven to do right by the people. The clash between this drive and his desire to help his friends and family, and a romantic relationship with his assistant, eventually lead Garibaldi to resign, precisely because he realizes this behavior is another form of corruption. He does this through a televised speech that presents the moral core of the film. With a serious tone, he declares:

> Should anyone else resign? Maybe you! You, when you point the finger and say "politicians are thieves!". But then you dodge taxes, double park, or get paid off the books in order to save some cash. You: you aren't a politician but you'd like to be, so that you can help your family, and snag something for yourself too. You, when you who manage to get a CAT scan quicker than everyone else, because you are friends with the doctor...

Garibaldi continues with a few more examples of this kind, before concluding, "It's always 'someone else' who is dishonest. But who really is that 'someone else'?" The grammar of the film here adds to the power of the sequence: Garibaldi speaks into the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and charging his speech with a kind of anger and disillusionment. This sentiment is echoed and emphasized as we see the effect of his words on the people watching the speech.

Unlike the previous example, *Welcome Mr President* is a comedy that decries the state of corrupt politics. Garibaldi's adversaries are an unnamed trio of politicians from right, the centre and left-wing parties, working on behalf of a core of four nameless "powers that be" (played, ironically, by directors Lina Wertmüller and Pupi Avati and by critics Steve Della Casa and Gianni Rondolino). They are depicted in satirical, absurdist tones. Thanks to the resignation sequence, however, the film's message evolves into a (slightly) more profound point about the nature of corruption and shared responsibility.

## Discussion

Despite different formats and registers, the representations of unlikely candidates in *1992* and *Welcome Mr President* share a few striking characteristics: a bleak perspective on the state of corrupt power, behind the walls of government buildings; the insistence that corruption happens even to unlikely candidates with the best intentions, for seemingly innocent reasons, i.e., the desire to help their loved ones. These products also share the same affective tones, that shift between anger and disappointed resignation.

Drawing on unlikely candidates in *Welcome Mr President* and a handful of other films, Coladonato has argued that this motif transcends mere representation, revealing a deeper notion of Italian politics:

> In our country in particular, the unlikely candidate embodies the endemic incompleteness of the relationship between the citizen and republican institutions: it reflects a general orientation that unites a broad mistrust in the political system with the subjective perception of a lack of competence and interest in participating in public life (Coladonato, 2022, p. 58, my translation).

Hence, more than just a satirical criticism, the unlikely candidate snapshots a "feeling" among the Italian population, a disillusionment and an exhaustion with the political class. It moreover encapsulates a wider disconnect between the people and public life. The shift from a mere representation in films and series to a wider cultural discourse is only further attested, as mentioned, by recurrent narrative motifs and affective charges used to depict this figure across different genres (drama, comedy, satire) and with more or less positive models (Bosco or Garibaldi).

The phenomenon outlined in relation to the two fictional audiovisual texts studied with a little more detail here also has the potential to be extrapolated, to grasp in much more detail how this figure functions reflects the current conjuncture, filters and reflects a political feeling, and potential contributes to voter behavior. In other words, to understand whether the populist narrative depicted here also translates to a populist narrative that truly shapes political action. This brings me back to the projects that were outlined in the introduction to this paper, which have, over the past few years, been attempting to do precisely this.

To interpret the unlikely candidate and the populist narrative more widely, therefore, within broader cultural discourses on corruption and the perceived need for alternative politics poses a methodological necessity to go beyond the text itself. To do so, the research projects outlined at the beginning of this essay have been working in four intersected directions:

i. Examining the wider historic infrastructures and production contexts of content that contains populist narratives. In particular, the projects have begun to study the production companies that make high-quality, glossy content with political themes, such as Groenlandia, producer of *The First King: Birth of an Empire* (Rovere, 2019), or The Apartment, which made *Mussolini – Son of the Century* (Wright, 2025). It has also included work on film and TV production by politicians, such as the works of Èliseo Entertainment, under the leadership of Luca Barbareschi.[7]

ii. The reception of the films and TV series. Our reception studies of populist narratives in films and series seek to understand whether and how their political themes translate to audiences and broader political discussions. These analyses have been focusing in particular on social media (following, for example, Valera-Ordaz, 2017), especially YouTube (comments under clips and videos) and Letterboxd (reviews), relating to specific films in a sample of populist-themed products, or moving from specific themes that also intersect with populist interests (in particular, migration).

iii. The uses of film and television as points of reference within wider political discourses. This is a necessary area of study that seeks to complement the text-based approach so as to understand how film and media cultures circulate more broadly within political discourse. Faced with the difficulty of tracing this particularly slippery object of study, our team has been working on speeches or appearances by populist leaders that reference film culture (for instance, Salvini dressing as James Bond at the Venice Film Festival, cf. Bragadini, 2020).

This is, in short, the direction that the research of the two projects cited in opening have taken. Though we focus on specific case studies, each one adopts a necessarily open perspective. Looking at the bigger picture requires mixed-method analyses: of context, content and uses and of the narratives position within a wider discourse. In this way, our aim is to understand more fully the concrete role that fictional screen content can play in promoting or challenging populism itself, or fertilizing the terrains that allow it to grow, through the adoption, enhancing or challenging of what I have defined here as populist narratives.

## References

Boot, M. (2019, October 6). *Joker* Nails the Nihilism and Opportunism of Populist Firebrands. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/06/joker-nails-nihilism-opportunism-populist-firebrands/

Bragadini, B. (2020, September 5). Venezia red carpet: là dove c'erano i lustrini, ora c'è Salvini. *Rolling Stone Italia*. https://www.rollingstone.it/cinema-tv/film/venezia-red-carpet-la-dove-cerano-i-lustrini-ora-ce-salvini/530191/

Casetti, F. (2015). *The Lumière galaxy: Seven key words for the cinema to come*. Columbia University Press.

Ceccarini, L., & Bordignon, F. (2016). The five stars continue to shine: the consolidation of Grillo's 'movement party' in Italy. *Contemporary Italian Politics, 8*(2), 131–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2016.1202667

Clarke, J., & Newman, J. (2017). "People in this country have had enough of experts": Brexit and the paradoxes of populism. *Critical Policy Studies, 11*(1), 101–

116. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2017.1282376

Conti, N., & Memoli, V. (2015). The Emergence of a new party in the Italian party system: Rise and fortunes of the Five Star Movement. *West European Politics, 38*(3), 516–534. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.996377

Coladonato, V., & Sangiovanni, A. (2019). Cinema e populismo. Modelli e immaginari di una categoria politica. *Cinema e Storia, 8*(1), 7–24.

Coladonato, V. (2021). Il candidato improbabile. Rappresentanza e disintermediazione nella commedia italiana contemporanea. *Quaderni del CSCI, 17*, 57–63.

Couldry, N. & Hepp, A. (2016). *The Mediated Construction of Reality: Society, Culture, Mediatization*. Polity Press.

Doidge, S. & Rosenfeldt, A. (2021). Send in the clowns. *Joker*, vigilante films, and populist revolt. In S. Redman (Ed.), *Breaking Down Joker: Violence, Loneliness, Tragedy* (pp. 65–77). Routledge.

Furedi, F. (2018). *Populism and the European Culture Wars. The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU*. Routledge.

Goodwin, J., Jasper, J.M., & Polletta, F. (Eds.). (2001). *Passionate politics: Emotions and social movements*. University of Chicago Press.

Hepp, A. (2020). *Deep mediatization: Key ideas in media and cultural studies*. Taylor and Francis.

Herkman, J. (2022). *A cultural approach to populism*. Routledge.

Hoggett, P. (2015). *Politics, identity, and emotion*. Routledge.

Judis, J.B. (2016). *The populist explosion: How the great recession transformed American and European politics*. Perseus Book.

Kaltwasser, C.R. & Van Hauwaert, S.M. (2020). The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America. *European Political Science Review, 12*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000262

Kazin, M. (2017). *The populist persuasion: An American history*. Basic Books.

Krämer, B. (2014). Media populism: A conceptual clarification and some theses on its effects. *Communication Theory, 24*(1), 42–60. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12029

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Lawson, R. (2019, August 31). *Joker* review: Joaquin Phoenix towers in a deeply troubling origin story. *Vanity Fair.* https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/08/joker-review-joaquin-phoenix.

Lerner, J.S. & Keltner, D. (2001). Fear, anger and risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(1), 146–159. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.81.1.146

Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the media. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy* (pp. 49–64). Palgrave Macmillan.

Moffitt, B. (2017). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.

Moran, M. & Littler, J. (2020). Cultural populism in new populist times. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23*(6), 857–873. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420960477

Mouleux, G. (2019). The politics of circularity in todd phillips's *Joker* (2019). *TransAtlantica, 2*, https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.14784

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudde C. & Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Pagello, F. (2020). Images of the European crisis: Populism and contemporary crime TV series. *European Review, 29*(5), 574–587. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720001167

Pappas, T.S. (2019). *Populism and liberal democracy. A comparative and theoretical analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Renga, D. (2019). *Watching sympathetic perpetrators on Italian television: Gomorrah and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Saurette, P. (2019). Populism as good storytelling. *The Monitor, 26*(2), 16–17.

Scherer, T. (2025, February 5). Imagine a president. *MORES Blog.* https://mores-horizon.eu/blog/imagine-a-president

Scherer, T., Beichelt, T., & Illger, D. (2025). Inventing an alternative: Populist imaginations of political leaders in audiovisual culture. *MORES Working Paper Series, 2*. https://openarchive.tk.mta.hu/647/

Schober, A. (Ed.). (2019). *Popularisation and populism in the visual arts: Attraction images*. Routledge.

Singh, G. (2014). *Feeling film: Affect and authenticity in popular cinema*. Routledge.

Sorolla-Romero, T. (2021). Iconographies of the present. Political populism, economic instability and migratory crisis in Years and Years, *Communication and Society, 34*(2), 281–296. https://doi.org/10.15581/003.34.2.281-296

Sreepada, N., & Dominguez Partida, G. (2022). Exploring affect, identity, and Populism in and around Todd Phillips' *Joker*, *Revista panamericana de comunicación, 4*(2), 177–193. https://doi.org/10.21555/rpc.v4i2.2713

Stavrakakis, Y., Katsambekis, G, Kioupkiolis, A., Nikisianis N., & Siomos, T. (2018). Populism, anti-populism and crisis. *Contemporary Political Theory, 17*, 4-27. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0142-y

Tipaldo, G., & Pisciotta, M. (2014). C'eravamo tanto amati? La travagliata costruzione dell'identità del Movimento 5 Stelle nelle parole della base attiva sul blog beppegrillo.it. *Comunicazione politica, 2014*(2), 263–286. https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.3270/77381

Valera-Ordaz, L. (2017). Comparing the democratic value of Facebook discussions across the profiles of Spanish political candidates during the 2011 general election. *Revista Internacional de Sociología, 75*(1), e052. http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/ris.2017.75.1.15.119

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: analyzing right-wing popular discourse*. SAGE.

# Tradition as Self-Expression: Values in the *Shistdesiatnytstvo* & the Silent Revolution in Ukraine

by Sierra Salazar

## Abstract

This article examines the Ukrainian *shistdesiatnytstvo* (Sixtiers Movement) through the lens of Ronald Inglehart's Silent Revolution (1977), assessing whether it can be understood as Ukraine's Silent Revolution. Drawing on archival sources, memoirs, *samvydav* (uncensored and self-published materials, also known as *samizdat)*, and interviews, the analysis applies the four value systems—traditional, secular-rational, survival, and self-expression—outlined in the World Values Survey to the *shistdesiatnyky* (Sixtiers). Findings reveal that while self-expression and secular-rational values were central, traditional values also functioned as forms of resistance and self-expression. The movement's emphasis on truth, humanist individualism, democracy, and Ukrainian language and culture constituted a significant cultural shift in Soviet Ukraine, albeit limited and constrained by subsequent state censorship and repression. This paper argues that the *shistdesiatnytstvo* embodied a synthesis of both self-expression and traditional values that challenged Soviet homogenization and secularization. The study highlights both the applicability and limitations of these value frameworks in the Soviet context, suggesting the need for revised theoretical approaches to account for to the use of 'national' in 'national pride' and other traditions as tools of self-expression under secular totalitarian rule.

**Keywords**: Self-expression Values, Traditional Values, Shistdesiatnytstvo, Soviet Union, Soviet Ukraine, Sixtiers Movement, Ukraine, World Values Survey, Value Systems

## Introduction

The *shistdesiatnytstvo*, or the Sixtiers Movement, was a phenomenon across the Soviet Union with unique particularities across internal geographical boundaries. This movement has been highly contested by scholars for whether it should be defined by its social, artistic, cultural, or even national underpinnings (Zaplotynska 2003). Many of its members are often looped into a broader phenomenon labeled as the "dissident movement," although recent foundational work on the Sixtiers themselves (*shistdesiatnyky )* has challenged this, critiquing the use of the term dissident altogether, as the Sixtiers were by and large not against the Soviet system, but rather were trying to mold it from within (Bellezza 2019). In recent years, the *shistdesiatnytstvo* has even been hailed as Ukraine's Silent Revolution,

although noted as being on a much lesser scale than in Ronald Inglehart's classic work *The Silent Revolution* (Inglehart 1977; Hrytsak 2024).

Using public opinion survey data from Western industrialized societies, Inglehart defined the *Silent Revolution* as a societal-wide shift from material values and physical security to values in quality of life, and moreover, self-expression among a more politically skilled populace. In his research regarding this mass cultural change in Western publics, Inglehart observed the shift towards "self-expression values."[1]

In the Soviet Union, roughly around the same time as this Silent Revolution, intellectuals began to—as this paper argues—push for similar values on a much lesser scale than the societal shifts outlined by Inglehart. This phenomenon, the *shistdesiatnytstvo*, draws on much discord from scholars from various disciplines on what aspect must be emphasized. However, there is a consensus among scholars that the phenomenon emerged following the limited liberalization that began after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, but most predominantly after Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the Stalinist cult of personality at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 (Zaplotynska 2003). These reforms that loosened censorship, drained the gulags, and allowed (minimal) room for challenges to and slight deviations from socialist realism (after the termination of the Zhdanov Doctrine, making socialist realism state policy). As a result, calls for an end to the artificiality of socialist realism began to spread across the official Soviet organizations for writers and artists, such as in the Writers' Union and Artists' Union, and authors instead pushed for sincerity, authenticity, and truthfulness in literature and the art. This was included in the wider calls for accountability regarding the persecution of these intellectuals, typically based on claims of "bourgeois nationalism" in the case of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) (Bellezza 2019). In the wake of these rising challenges to the previous state-sanctioned socialist realism rose a collection of individuals in the Ukrainian SSR, typically born in the 1930s and 1940s, who had been raised entirely under the Stalinist education system, hailed most often from rural regions across the republic, moved to the cities for higher education (Kharkiv, Kyiv, Odesa, etc.), and in those cities, faced alienation for speaking Ukrainian (there are, of course, critical exceptions, e.g. Alla Horska).

This analysis defines the *shistdesiatnytstvo* in align with the work of Simone Bellezza, who underscored the cultural and artistic definition of the *shistdesiatnytstvo*. This cultural and artistic emphasis that is placed here in the definition of the *shistdesiatnytstvo* does not necessarily entail that its participants were masters in their craft either, as many were amateurish artists or chorists who participated in university-based events as students, as seen with the chorists of the *Zhayvoronok* choir (Riznykiv 2005; Salazar 2025), or Nadiia Svitlychna who learned how to create mosaics under the tutleage of Alla Horska (Svitlychna 2006). According to Bellezza, only some time after the movement's founding and state repression across the 1960s did it become politicized. Even then, it cannot be said that the *shistdesiatnyky* held a coherent ideology, but rather maintained similar values, such as humanist individualism, academic and artistic freedom, truth, and overall held democratic principles (Bellezza 2019). They emphasized human agency and the importance of the individual within (not despite) the collective (Salazar 2025). As this article will display, many of their core values can also be described as self-expression and, simultaneously, traditional—if we are to use the words to describe the value systems

outlined in the World Values Survey (WVS). How true is the claim that the *shistdesiatnytstvo* was Ukraine's Silent Revolution then, and how do the post-materialist, self-expression values outlined by Ronald Inglehart apply in the Soviet context?

In this unique context, what is typically viewed as 'traditional' (e.g. nuclear family, nationality, motherhood, religiosity) becomes self-expression under a government where these aspects of one's life are targeted. As discussed below, this article challenges the coding scheme of "national pride" in the WVS and suggests that a more theoretical lens must be applied to the usage of nation, nationalism, national, nationality, etc. Although further research is required, a further assessment of what is 'traditional' or 'secular-rational' may also require reconsideration in the post-Soviet and post-socialist contexts.

## Theoretical Framework

*Modernization Theory*

The cultural and social change the *shistdesiatnytstvo* were seeking to achieve was not all that different from Western publics at the time, which has been labeled by scholars as the "Silent Revolution," named after Ronald Inglehart's 1977 study on value changes in Western publics. In Inglehart's later study with Christian Welzel, they developed the theory of cultural change—a more nuanced understanding of modernization theory—with a mass set of data demonstrating that "socioeconomic modernization, a cultural shift towards rising emphasis on self-expression values, and democratization" are among the most critical components to human development and "the broadening of human choice" (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). This theory notes that industrialization brings "rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization," yet emphasize 'the knowledge society' as key to the set of sociocultural changes that self-expression values emerge from: individual autonomy, self-expression, and free choice. They define this as a "new type of humanistic society that is increasingly people-centered" (Inglehart & Welzel 2005, 1).

*Nationalism*

Here, I will define nationalism as a malleable, thin-centered ideology that seeks the congruence of the political and national unit (Gellner 1983; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). Nationhood is a political claim to people's loyalty (Freeden 1998; Brubaker 2004). Moreover, the term 'nation' itself is a category of the *practice* of nationalism, and this *category of practice* must be distinguished from a *category of analysis* (Brubaker 1997). This goes to say that nations themselves are not entities of analytical categories, nor are they—or nationhood—a demographic fact, but rather, a political claim (Brubaker 2004). Both the nation and nationhood do not describe a world independent of the practice of nationalism, and thus, nations do not exist outside of it. By defining 'the nation' and nationhood as such, and by seeing it through the practice of nationalism, one can further begin to delve into the values behind this loose ideology and political claim of loyalty in accordance with the given context (Brubaker 2004). This term is

all too often overused as interchangeably with the state (e.g. United 'Nations') or, if using the adjective 'nationalist,' to define specific right-wing movements. While this may be applicable in certain circumstances (e.g. the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), it is not inherently so and must be further problematized in research. Terms from the practice of nationalism are almost taken for granted in daily speech yet need to be recognized and addressed in analyses that include them.

## Data and Methods

A massive amount of material has been collected and coded for this research, including KGB files, memoirs, interviews, letters, journals, speeches, newsletters and *samvydav* material (uncensored, self-published documents often known as *samizdat)*. These come primarily from three women who were the case studies of the larger thesis project, being: Nadiia Svitlychna, Alla Horska, and Nina Strokata. However, for this section of the project, the archival material (typically in the form of interviews, letters, and memoirs) from the following individuals were included in the coding process: Sviatoslav Karavansky, Ivan Svitlychny, Ivan Dziuba, Mykhailyna Kotsiubynska, Liudmyla Semykina, Raisa Moroz, Leonida Svitlychna, Vira Vovk, Ivan Hel, Vadym Smohytel, Oleksa Riznykov, Oleksa Prytyka, Halyna Zubchenko, Halyna Mohylyntska, and Les Taniuk. This mass array of widely varying material types is to offset choices of inclusion/exclusion that may arise in anthologies, source collections, and particularly in memoirs where one's memoir may be affected by later opinions developed after the historical time studied here.

Archival materials consulted for this research were scanned by archivists and researchers present at the site in Ukraine only when it was safe to do so, as the archives could not be physically consulted due to research restrictions and ethical considerations due to Russia's war against Ukraine. The archives consulted for this research were the archives from the Museum of the Sixtiers and the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Services of Ukraine. This study also includes materials from the shistdesiatnytstvo that were located geographically in different urban centers, including Kyiv, Odesa, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Lviv. In addition to these materials, a semi-structured interview was conducted on May 3, 2025, with Myroslav Marynovych (a Ukrainian dissident closely associated with the *shistdesiatnyky* and a member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group). Nelli Kornienko, a *shistdesiatnytsia*, provided her interviews from the 2024 "Alla Horska. Boryviter" exhibition in Kyiv. A semi-structured interview was conducted with Myroslav Marynovych on May 3, 2025. All participants have given their consent to the use of the information provided, and with it, the disclosure of their names.

The materials collected were examined through a qualitative thematic analysis. For this analysis, a codebook was created from Inglehart and Welzel's survey data in *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (2005), where they outlined four value systems (traditional, self-expression, secular-rational, survival) which were the overarching themes of this analysis. The codebook was comprised of values under each theme (value system), which were then applied to the material. This was done simultaenously alongside a wider thesis research project that

analyzed women *shistdesiatnyky* and their resistance strategies to Soviet repression from 1956-1976 (See: Salazar 2025).

This study utilizes the later work of Inglehart and Welzel for main two reasons, being 1) the at-hand ability to codify and apply the clearly defined value systems based on individuals' values, and 2) the creation of these overarching value systems based on human beliefs across the globe (which included Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries during their surveys across the 1990s). The WVS, which their work is based on, began in 1981, and is a combined effort beyond these two scholars, which included a much larger network of social scientists globally (Inglehart et al. 2014). Although the framework of value systems used here was formulated outside of the Soviet Union, applying it in this case may allow analysts to specifically name its drawbacks and pave a path towards a value systems framework more applicable to the individual experience in the Soviet Union—albeit without the mass quantitative datasets provided in WVS.

The four value systems outlined by Inglehart and Welzel are defined as follows:

*Traditional values* on a whole emphasize the opposite of secular-rational values, such as importance and belief in religion in an individual's life, traditional family roles (parents' must do their best for their children at the expense of their own well-being, one must always respect their parents), divorce/abortion/suicide is never justifiable, a woman earning more than her husband is almost certain to cause problems, the importance of family in one's life, traditional child-rearing (e.g. it's more important for children to learn obedience and religious faith than independence and determination), among others. There was a total of 30 different survival values as codes in this text.

*Self-expression values* emphasize the quality of life and self-expression. Some of these codes are, for example: democracy is the best form of government, respondent gives priority to self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security; one can be trusting with others, homosexuality is justifiable, a woman can be fulfilled through other means than motherhood and children, one has and would sign a petition, etcetera. There was a total of 36 different self-expression values as codes in this text.

*Secular-rational values* underline the exact opposite of traditional values. This includes codes such as abortion/divorce is justifiable, one does not have a strong sense of national pride, one favors less respect for authorities, God is not very important in one's life, a parents' duty is to also protect their own wellbeing alongside children's needs, and it is more important for a child to learn independence and determination than obedience and religion. There was a total of 30 different secular-rational values as codes in this text.

*Survival values* emphasize physical and economic security, and intolerance to LGBTQ+, people with criminal records, heavy drinkers, foreigners, and people with AIDS. Several of these codes are: one gives priority to economic and physical security over self-expression and quality of life, a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled, friends are not very important, homosexuality is never justifiable, one rejects people with criminal records as neighbors, one has to be very careful about trusting others, etcetera. There was a total of 36 different survival values as codes in this text.

In their work, Welzel and Inglehart place the four value systems on two dimensions, with either side as the opposite of the other (self-expression v. survival values, secular-rational v. traditional) (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). All the survey data and questionnaire used by the WVS from the different waves of surveys can be accessed online (Inglehart et al. 2014), and the value systems used for creating these codes can be found in Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's work *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* (2005).

## Analysis and Results

Across all literature on the *shistdesiatnytstvo*, the values of truth, individualism, and democracy are consistently referred to as being central to the movement (Bellezza 2019; Kasianov 1995; Mokryk 2023). This aligns closely with the results of the analysis in which self-expression and secular-rational were the most frequent. However, it would appear from the analysis that the relationship between self-expression and traditional values contains the most insights, and how traditional values supplemented self-expression values as specific traditions and values from the 'traditional' value system according to the WVS was, in fact, a form of self-expression and resistance to the Soviet system which imposed secularization and certain family roles in its state ideology.

Traditional values that were frequent in the dataset were: family is very important in one's life; one has a strong sense of national pride, and work is very important in life. Some of the codes with the least frequency or remained uncoded were seldom or never discusses politics, divorce is never justifiable, and a woman earning more than her husband is almost certain to cause problems.

From these traditional values found in the dataset regarding the importance of family is the unique family and heterosexual partner dynamics and structures of the *shistdesiatnytstvo*, which deserve a separate study in and of itself. According to my interview with Myroslav Marynovych, partner dynamics extremely varied: sometimes it was a shared position as 'leader' in the family, sometimes it leaned more in favor of the woman where they were supported by their partner (Alla Horska and Viktor Zaretsky), or in other cases it was more traditional in family structure with more emphasis on the man in leadership, such as Yevhen and Valeriia Svertsiuk. Atena Pashko deliberately worked to make her own name so that she would not be known by others not just as 'the wife of Viacheslav Chornovil' but as her own person for her own activities, separate from being his spouse. This is a unique aspect to the *shistdesiatnytstvo* in Soviet Ukraine and later dissidence that needs to be elaborated further, alongside any queer experiences and partner dynamics in the *shistdesiatnytstvo* (e.g. Sergei Parajanov) which are almost nonexistent in current research, save for the work of Alex Averbuch and Stefano Pisu, who have conducted research on Sergei Parajanov—an Armenian-Georgian film director and screenwriter closely intertwined with the *shistdesiatnyky ,* creating Ukrainian films such as "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" (Averbuch 2024; Pisu 2021).

It should also be noted that divorce was immensely supported among the *shistdesiatnyky*, especially for women who were in relationships that were detrimental to their well-being (e.g. Liudmyla Semykina) or

otherwise not the right partner (e.g. Nadiia Svitlychna with Oleksandr Serhiienko and Danylo Shumuk). Women were supported by their families to overcome the typical double burden of the Soviet women (traditional domestic/child-rearing responsibilities with full-time forced work to avoid 'parasitism' which was a legal offense) to allow for their personal or career/artistic growth, such as Nadiia Svitlychna, a single mother (with her firstborn, Yarema) and Alla Horska. Conversely, divorce was not a socially accepted act in Soviet Ukrainian society, and the accused from the *shistdesiatnytstvo* and other individuals tried in the 1970s, for example, would be publicly ousted by the Soviet press for their divorces or separations as if it were a scandal against them (Zabuzhko 2002).

The "sense of national pride" that had been coded under 'traditional values' was found in the celebration of traditional folk songs, new designs or wearing national dress (*vyshyvankas*), and was especially found during times of imprisonment after the arrests in 1965-1966 and 1971-1972. For example, Nadiia Svitlychna and other carolers would deliberately sing traditional carols outside of the KGB pre-trial prison on 33 Volodymyrska Street, where the KGB headquarters were in Kyiv. This was particularly found in the material among women during imprisonment, who used traditions, womanhood, and being Ukrainian as a form of resistance alongside retaining human agency (Salazar 2025). To note, these aspects of the individual were deliberately targeted by the camp authorities as well (refusing to let women shave or see themselves in mirrors whereas men could), leading to women finding innovative methods of maintaining their national belonging and womanhood. This meant embroidering in prisons (including their uniforms, bookmarks, and camp curtains after protesting for needles and succeeding), finding ways to shave when the prison or camp authorities did not allow them to, or academic-based activities like studying Ukrainian history, having Ukrainian poetry competitions, or other translation competitions with literature (Svitlychna 2006; Kis 2021; Salazar 2025).

The most frequent codes among all the secular-rational codes were as follows (starting from most frequent): one favors less respect for authorities, a parents' duty is to also protect their own well-being alongside children's needs, and one often discusses politics. To note, while divorce was common among those analyzed, it was not a frequent point of discussion in the data and thus the 'divorce is justifiable' code had a minimal frequency.

Among self-expression values—and across the entire dataset—the code "friends are very important in life" was exceedingly higher than others. Other values from the text were: respondent gives priority to self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security, democracy is the best form of government, both men and women are equally good political leaders, a child can grow up happily without both a father and a mother in their home, and respondent has and would sign a petition. The emphasis on the importance of friends in one's life is unsurprising for the shistdesiatnyky, given that the core body of research on the topic (across the Soviet Union) has been centered around the concept of kompaniia, coined by Liudmyla Alexeyeva and established by Juliane Fürst (Fürst 2006, Alexeyeva 1990), and used in the context of the Ukrainian shistdesiatnyky extensively by Simone Bellezza (Bellezza 2019). Kompaniia refers to "an 'experimental space' that reorganized the relationship between the public and private spheres," where "these people all engaged in intellectual activity and rejected the notion of privacy in an attempt to create a 'forum for the private citizens to engage in public life' as an alternative to the all-

encompassing Soviet state" (Bellezza 2019, xviii; Fürst 2006).

The idea that both women and men could be equally good leaders is apparent in the respect for the leadership first and foremost of Alla Horska, and other women such as Liudmyla Semykina, Atena Pashko, Mykhailyna Kotsiubnyska, Olena Antoniv, Nina Strokata, and Nadiia Svitlychna. Alla Horska and Liudmyla Semykina were both central in lending their homes to create the mini-public-spheres (or micro-publics) that were fundamental to the shistdesiatnyky (Svitlychna 1998). This may seem unsurprising, although traditional gender practices and hierarchies remained prevalent in the Soviet Union in spite of its numerous proclamations of women's liberation—leading to phenomena like the 'double burden' (Hochschild & Machung 2012). In this sense, the shistdesiatnyky walked the line between the continued traditional practices in private life and its alternative by approaching traditional or secular models through the lens of human agency and individual choice. It was not, in their view, a duty that every woman should become a mother and is otherwise unfulfilled without it, but rather that a woman should be able to choose whether she wishes to have the role of a mother central to her life and the right to choose and display the private, intimate aspects of motherhood. This may explain why, for example, maternity in the shistdesiatnytstvo was depicted by Alla Horska in her artworks by emphasizing motherhood and a mother's role in a child's life in her self-portraits with her own son, clinging to her chest rather than standing with a party leader (which was typical of socialist realism) (Bellezza 2024).

In all, the *shistdesiatnyky* pushed for a republic-wide reassessment towards the arts and culture—one that would allow for the proliferation of Ukrainian traditions like caroling, folk songs, celebrations of Ukrainian poets (such as national poets Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, or their late friend Vasyl Symonenko, etc.), and for truth, democracy, and humanist individualism overall (Salazar 2025; Bellezza 2019). As academics, they valued the space in which one could share different ideas or critique them openly in academic debate, without any form of censorship or repression. They had publicly spoken of and disseminated self-expression values within the framework of Soviet legality, promoted de-Russification (especially in education), and sought equal rights for 'all nations and nationalities.' As their work increasingly became politicized and focused on human rights as Soviet repression increased (with the first mass wave of arrests in late 1965, and the second around late 1971 to early 1972), the lack of leadership, insufficient ideological consensus, and heightened repression splintered the mass network of friends to various different paths. This included several who later became human rights activists including those who joined the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, even if they had been imprisoned or in exile during the foundation of the organization in 1976 (e.g. Nina Strokata).

## Discussion & Conclusion

Can we then say that the *shistdesiatnytstvo* was Ukraine's "Silent Revolution"? Inglehart's work on the intergenerational change of rising political skills and a shifting emphasis on postmaterialist values was specifically meant to define Western publics (as clearly stated in the book's title). Afterall, his later work with Welzel underlines that "trust, an emphasis on subjective well-being, civic activism, and self-

expression" emerge specifically in the context of postindustrial societies with "high levels of existential security and individual autonomy" (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). This latter description of society is largely incoherent with post-war Soviet Union, although the limited liberalization may have been enough of a gap of individual autonomy for these values (trust, emphasis on subjective well-being, civic activism, and self-expression) to be grasped by the artists, scientists, and intellectuals that made up the *shistdesiatnytstvo*—before it was hastily shut down by state authorities. The *shistdesiatnyky* attempted to disseminate similar values as those outlined as being crucial to the Silent Revolution, had considerable political skills, and all received higher education.

To an extent, yes—with specific nuances. Afterall, the *shistdesiatnytstvo* was a massive cultural shift from the generations prior, and held and promoted postmaterialist, self-expression values. As seen in the coding process, there is a clear overlap of some traditional values with self-expression and secular-rational values. What seems to arise from this then is that the traditions in which the *shistdesiatnyky* celebrated (or traditional values they held) were not against self-expression values, but rather supplemented it, due to the fact that this was a form of self-expression for them in a system which strove for secularization and the gradual erosion of nationalism embedded in the state's ideological doctrine. Values that may otherwise be defined as traditional were not to be imposed but rather a choice that one could make in their own right without the all-encompassing state being involved in their private lives and value systems.

In addition, their sense of nationalism—belonging within a Ukrainian nation—was not the nationalism typically associated with the word when individuals are labeled as nationalists (that being, far-right organizations). They were profoundly aware of national consciousness as a concept itself and considered the events of the 1960s to be an awakening of their 'civic consciousness' (Svitlychna 2006). For example, Nadiia Svitlychna writes the following in her memoir,

> Of course, I felt a certain abnormality in my national status (what Ukrainian in Kyiv didn't?), but raised in the Soviet propaganda system and deprived of access to even basic knowledge of my people's real history, I saw that status as, if not satisfactory, then inevitable in the course of human development (Svitlychna 2006, 98).

All of this may come as unsurprising when using a value systems framework created in 1981 when quantitative data (or almost any data at all) was inaccesible for these social scientists to use. Regardless of its obvious drawbacks, the framework reveals a clear incompatibility with the individual value systems that were forged under state socialism, and specifically, the norms propagated by the Soviet state. In a way, traditional values in what was then defined as the West were in many ways held alongside self-expression values. When considering the Soviet context, and perhaps also the post-Soviet context, it may be therefore necessary to account for the unique and longstanding experience of forcible secularization and persecution of nationalities for individuals in these communities, which had a clear impact on their value systems.

However, a cornerstone of this paper goes beyond accounting for the specificities of the Soviet (or post-Soviet) context itself but serves as a wider criticism of the use of the terms typically used in the practice

of nationalism. These terms are all too often taken for granted and must be more critically approached by analysts. Although it is typical to find the usage of “nation” as an interchangable use for the “state,” this must be approached with caution. What “national pride” may mean for Ukrainians and, say, United States citizens, is very different—and may in fact be confused with patriotism. If one is to speak of nationalism (in accordance with the definition as outlined above), then it must be clearly distinguished. As nationalism, and therefore the “nation,” is quite a malleable ideology seeking the congruence of the national and the political units, the phrase “national pride” unlocks a mass array of values and beliefs that certainly lack shared characteristics across different manifestations of nationalism. For example, in the case of the *shistdesiatnytstvo*, a large majority appear to have a more civic understanding of the nationality, where one can choose to learn Ukrainian and take on Ukrainian traditions if they so wish to explore it—like Alla Horska and numerous other *shistdesiatnyky* (Svitlychna 2006; Zaretsky 1996).

By 1965-1966, the wave of arrests and first mass repression of the intellectuals pushed the *shistdesiatnyky* away from cultural and more towards a politicized stance—which demanded more organized resistance and saw the proliferation of the *samvydav* network and other solidarity networks in order to stand by their values forged together in private apartments/studios (Liudmyla Semykina’s studio, Alla Horska and Viktor Zaretsky’s apartment and studio, Ivan and Leonida’s apartment, etc.), the *Zhayvoronok* choir, or through the various Clubs of Creative Youth across the Soviet republic (Prolisok, Suchasnyk, etc.). Even earlier, after the discovery of the Bykivnia gravesite by Alla Horska, Les Taniuk, and Vasyl Symonenko in 1963 and the subsequent closure of the Club of Creative Youth *Suchasnyk* in 1964, they were already facing increasing repression (albeit not as significantly as in 1965 and 1972) and censorship from Soviet authorities which pushed them towards politicization and the solidification of their values against a system in which their values increasingly could not exist without repression.

Despite their relatively limited impact across the population of the Ukrainian SSR, the values disseminated into a self-organized, non-state information sphere with uncensored materials went far behind their attempts at making their own public sphere in private homes—into the hands of the broader *samvydav* networks and their later work as politicians behind nation-building policies whilst remaining stalwart to these values forged in the 1960s. The sheer impact of the values spread in the *samvydav* of the *shistdesiatnytstvo* across the populace of Soviet Ukraine goes beyond the scope of this article but may serve as an avenue of future research.

As seen from the analysis, the values of the *shistdesiatnytstvo* suggests an intriguing dynamic in which traditions—and, moreover, some traditional values—were a form of self-expression and resistance for the *shistdesiatnytstvo*. Rather than contradicting self-expression, these traditional elements were upheld by it, particularly through values like the importance of family and national pride. Since the Soviet Union was seeking both the erasure of nationalism and the nuclear family via its gradual replacement through internationalism for the former and the state for the latter, these traditional values became included in the self-expression values (emphasizing individual freedom, subjective well-being, ability to express oneself, etc.) of the *shistdesiatnyky.*

Considering the limitations of this article, this analysis only then begins to scratch the surface of the unique dynamics of the *shistdesiatnytstvo* and the self-expression values that they spread while developing Ukrainian arts, culture, and language. The *shistdesiatnytstvo* embodied a unique synthesis of secular-rational, self-expression values, and traditional values which became tools of resistance against increasing Soviet repression (Salazar 2025). These values coexisted not as contradictions but as expressions of a 'civic consciousness' in defiance to state-imposed homogenization and secularization. This particular experience may be a starting point for further research where the current value systems outlined in the WVS can be utilized to unveil specificities to contexts like the *shistdesiatnytstvo* in the Soviet Union, where the WVS value systems may be inadequate in addressing, or where traditions themselves can be seen as self-expression.

## References

Alekseeva, L. M., & Goldberg, P. (1990). *The thaw generation: Coming of age in the post-Stalin era* (1. ed). Little, Brown.

Averbuch, A. (2024, February 29). *Purging Queerness in Soviet Ukraine: The Prosecution of Sergei Parajanov*. https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/events/purging-queerness-soviet-ukraine-prosecution-sergei-parajanov

Bellezza, S. A. (2019). *The shore of expectations: A cultural study of the Shistdesiatnyky*. Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press.

Brubaker, R. (2004). In the Name of the Nation: Reflections on Nationalism and Patriotism. *Citizenship Studies, 8*(2), 115-127.

Brubaker, R. (1996). *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* / Rogers Brubaker. Cambridge University Press.

Fürst, J. (2006). Friends in Private, Friends in Public: The Phenomenon of the *Kompaniia* Among Soviet Youth in the 1950s and 1960s. In: Siegelbaum, L.H. (eds) *Borders of Socialism*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-8454-8_12

Freeden, M. (1998). Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology? *Political Studies, 46*(7), 744-763.

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The second Shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Penguin Publishing Group.

Horska, A. O., Veselovska, H. I., Herman, L., Hrozovska, O., Zaretska, O., Klochko, D., Mokryk, R. R., & Semenik, O. (with Ukraïnskyi Dim). (2024). *Alla Horska* (A. O. Jackovska, Ed.). Dukat artfundatsiia.

Hrytsak, Y. (2024). The third Ukraine: A case of civic nationalism. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *50*(4), 674–687. https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537241238050

Ignatieff, M. (1995). *Blood and belonging: Journeys into the new nationalism*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: All Rounds Country Pooled Datafile Version: https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge University Press.

Kis, O., & Wolanskyj, L. (2020). *Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2d8qwvp

Lóránd, Z., Hîncu, A., Mihajlović Trbovc, J., & Stańczak-Wiślicz, K. (Eds.). (2024). *Texts and contexts from the history of feminism and women's rights: East Central Europe, second half of the twentieth century*. CEU Press, Central European University Press.

Ohneva, L. R. (Ed.). (2015). *Alla Hors'ka: Dusha ukraïns'koho shistdesiatnytsva*. Smoloskyp.

Ohneva, L. (Ed.). (2009). *Ta, shcho svityla vsim.* Donetsk: Nord Komp'yuter.

Pisu, S. (2021). New Perspectives on the Parajanov Affair. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, *62*(2/3), 443–472.

Riznykiv, O. (Ed.). (2005). Donka Odesy. Nina Strokata v dokumentakh i spohadakh: Bran Misteriia. Druk.

Rusnachenko, A. (1997). [Review of the book *Nezhodni: Ukrainska Intelihentsiia 1960-80-kh rokiv,* by Heorhii Kasianov]. *Journal of Ukrainian Studies, 22*(1-2). https://cius-archives.ca/items/show/1001Jour

Salazar, S. (2025). Women's everyday resistance in Ukraine's *shistdesiatnytstvo*: Nadiia Svitlychna, Alla Horska, and Nina Strokata, 1956-1976. University of Helsinki.

Sinchenko, O. D., Stus, D. V., & Finberg, L. K. (Eds.) (2021). *Ukrainian Dissidents: An Anthology of Texts*. ibidem-Verlag.

Strokata, N. (1980). *Ukrainiain women in the Soviet Union: Documented Persecution* [1975-1980]. Smoloskyp.

Svitlyhcna, N. (2006). Tvory: Avtobiohrafiia͡. Spohady. Statti. Interv'yu. Lysty. (O. I. Nezhyvyi, Ed.). Znannya.

Svitlychna, N. (1998, September 23). *Nadiia Oleksiivna Svitlychna. Rozmova* [Interview]. Rozmova. https://rozmova.wordpress.com/2020/04/18/nadiya-svitlychna/

Svitlychna, L., & Svitlychna, N. (Eds.). (1998). *Dobrookyi: Spohady pro Ivana Svitlychnoho*. Vydvo ‘Chas’.

Svitlychny, I., & Svitlychna, N. (2008). *Z zhyvuchoho plemeni Don Kikhotiv* (M. Kotsiubynska & O. I. Nezhyvyi, Eds.). Hramota.

Zaretskyi, O., & Marychevskyi, M. (Eds.). (1996). *Alla Horska: Chervona tin’ kalyny*. Kyiv: Spalakh.

Zaplotynska, O.
(2003). Ukraïnske *shistdesiatnytstvo*: Vyznachennia definitsiï ta istoriohrafiia problemy. *Ukraïns’kyi Istorychnyi Zbirnyk*, *5*, 448–458.

# Populism, Persona and Performance: Queer Understandings of Left-Wing Populist Discourses and Audience-Informed Reciprocal Performance Online

by Chris Burden[13]

---

## Abstract

Understandings of populism have become encumbered by a terminological anarchy, and a reliance upon normatively applied definitions. Such developments have rendered research into populism insensitive to the political, media, and cultural settings in which contemporary populists operate. This paper will seek to provide new insights into populism, specifically into populist discourses as they manifest in the digital public sphere, while also elaborating queered insights into populist discourses as part of an audience-informed reciprocal performance online.

Such a digital public sphere in which populists assemble online exists linked to, but discrete from, the physical realm. It is governed by its own rules, norms, and iterations of a social contract in operation between participants online, creating new structures of authority and exchange. This paper will seek to explore how politics, social media, and culture interact in order to generate discourses online, maintained by concepts of mutual responsibility and consent. Gradually, concepts of populism, persona, and performance emergence.

Through a six-month digital ethnography, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews across Britain, France, and Germany, this paper coproduces novel and impactful insights into populism. The phased process of the research produces narrative order for the assessment of contemporary politics and communication, allowing for queered insights into the dynamics and mechanisms of populism online within Western Europe. Queered social constructionist approaches democratise the process of knowledge generation and offer understandings of populism new lenses to focus on the competing structures of power and conflicting realities live within the online arena.

Through a reflexive thematic analysis of the generated data, the process produces a rich and impact insight into populism as not an ideology, strategy or style, but instead as a complicated, organic, and

---

[13] Aston University

consistently evolving system of communications, involving both author and audience in a reciprocal arrangement. Both the politician and their public become vital interlocutors, as they begin to produce new norms and expectations which bind their communications in response to changing discourses. Terminological chaos, as elaborated by previous research, become practical chaos, as individuals seek to engage within the communicative game to emerge triumphant. Populism, personas, and performance interact, and the cycle of communication persists. This, it is argued, should be of prime academic concern.

**Keywords**: Populism, Queer Theory, Interviews, Digital, Western Europe

---

## Introduction

Populism is a complicated conception, exhibiting a complex relationship with political and academic discourses. Despite decades of scholarship, there remain myriad approaches to perceiving and understanding populism, with as many different viewpoints argued as there are researchers. The lack of emergence of any totally shared definition (Mudde, 2019), and indeed the terminological chaos that thus reigns (Mudde, 2007) entrenches discursive challenges. However, it also provides opportunities. This working-paper proposes that there is no need to totally reconceptualise perceptions of populism, but that instead the horizons of research ought to be widened to consult alternate points of view from outside of the traditional canon and elevate more discursive conceptions of populism.

To do this, this paper presents the opportunity of 'queering' research. Through an open-mesh approach, where all possibilities and viewpoints are considered where necessary, the paper weaves an organic narrative piece from the threads of active discourse, generating novel insights into populism as a reciprocal, audience-informed performance, promoting a discussion of queered understandings of the discursive political space.

Queering requires specific design to realise its potential. Utilising a phased investigation, the project deploys a covert digital ethnography via Twitter to observe the naturalistic communications of Western European leftist politicians, followed by qualitative coding of the collected data. This approach is supplemented by semi-structured interviews with a number of the previously observed population, thus accessing the 'backstage' and the knowledge that had informed their choices and subsequent performances. This process, alongside a willingness to deploy queered social constructionist approaches, allows for the generation of fine-grain novel insights not possible under other paradigms of thought or frameworks of inquisition. Here, a naturalistic image of the politician online, from the perspective of a consumer, can be constructed, before this is deliberately placed in apposition with the performance of the politician in interview. Tautologically, this forces an assumed 'context collapse', in which the multiple simultaneous presentations of the self must be either recognised or rationalised by the individuals. The queered approach is designed specifically to be capable of disaggregating these presentations, viewing them as equally valid, despite seeming incongruity. Thus, the physical and digital manifestations of the politicians are laid bare, and the process behind character creation and character performance can be analysed.

While expanding research into populism is an intention of this research, at the forefront of its aim is the demonstration of the utility of queered approaches into political sciences beyond the study of sexuality. In queering research, new techniques and viewpoints become plausible, allowing for the comprehension of distinct and contradictory information as rationalizable, alongside the intentional deconstruction of assumed binaries. While naturally queer theory is founded in discussions of sexuality and gender (Foucault, 1978), it is uniquely positioned to amplify critiques of the pervasive nature of power (Butler, 1994), and the interactions between identity and performance (Namaste, 1994), vital topics for holistic comprehensions of populism. This 'queering' is overdue in political disciplines, as without considering these reflexive approaches and interpretations, research will remain unable to fully explore the internal nuanced content of contemporary politics (Weber, 2014). Queering discourses provides specific utility when transgressing boundaries and exploring the liminal space where borders interact, making it ideal for developing balanced discussions of populism, presenting the concept of the populist as not absolute, but as a negotiable, created form of identity able to be performed and altered.

Considering this, this paper is structured as a narrative whole. It first establishes queer theory as an appropriate approach, before exploring the ramifications this philosophy has on the methodological approach. The data collected and analysed is then presented, exploring precisely why this novel approach matters for constructing of holistic understandings of populism.

Through the discussion, it becomes clear that the creation of a populist persona, performed within the digital discursive arena, is intentional and embodied, yet fundamentally unwilling. The process coalesces around the joint necessities of the online platform itself, and the nature of the audience assembled upon it. The creation of characters does not necessarily pay heed to the previous character, instead existing alongside it simultaneously. Through consistent observation, alteration, and presentation, fundamentally queer phenomena occur, as the participants transition from enthusiastic opponents to populism, to reluctantly acknowledging their participation, to enthusiastically exploring their role in promoting an alternative populism to the discursive marketplace.

Everything, even the experiences of the individuals, became negotiable, as the queer approach entered its own. Eventually, this generated queer understandings of populist discourses as a performative style, and of audience-informed performances online.

## Theory, Methods and Data

Before exploring the methods and data, it is important to consider the underpinning theories which guided the selection of approaches. To contextualise this research, it plants its flag most firmly alongside those viewing populism as a presentational style, rather than fixed ideology or objectivist or normative categorisation. As such, it considers Aiolfi's (2022) contributions, wherein populism is presented as a form of presentational transgressive style within political discourses, premised upon violations of norms. This form of exploration espouses an aesthetic vision for populism, which Aiolfi later explored through three distinct elements of performance: "(1) *performances of identity,* (2) *performances of transgression and* (3)

performances *of crisis*" (Aiolfi, 2025, p.61), congruent with this queered proposal. This paper does not dispute these assertions, but combines them with the queered paradigm, through which the concept of performance becomes abstracted to its maximal extent.

If populism is indeed a performance, then by this virtue it must be in some way intentional, and cognisant that it is being observed by an audience. Declaring populism as intentional is evidently not novel but is a vital conceptual stepping stone in establishing what populism means within the digital context. The performance of identity becomes crucial in the queering of its conceptions. The language here shares fundamental tenets with the assertions of Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990). Considering the role of audience in the formation of the performer, the natural gravitation towards Goffman is clear. His contributions on the presentation of the self in everyday life can be adapted to comprehend the digital stage under consideration by this research. Core to these performative contributions are the barriers between the front- and back-stage, the latter being where actors script and rehearse their desired performance (Ritzer, 2011). The backstage space gains enormous power within digital arenas, as it becomes an unlimitedly resourced space for research to occur, wherein the actor gains extreme benefits from the imbalance of power between them and their audience. Informed by near infinite metadata, taking the form of Likes, Retweets and Quote Tweets, the actor may develop and maintain myriad selves, which to the consumer appear immediate, regardless of the amount of time they are preplanned or rehearsed. This imbalance is aided as the actor is unbound by physical limitations, bestowing them the ability to adapt their content in fast-paced environments using live feedback, contributing to an effective character creation environment (Maseda, 2017). This, on a fundamental level, aids the populist approach. In a system where politicians are seeking to boost individual positions, perform desirable traits, and increase their name recognition (Kobayashi and Ichifuji, 2015), attempts to boost this presentation are wrought through the performance of authenticity and relatability (Seeliger and Braslavsky, 2022). The platform removes the editorialised press from the media cycle (Ernst et al, 2018), allowing for a circumvention of their influence to directly address, and indeed through audience-informed performance, reflect that audience (Krämer, 2017) in a quasi-parasocial arrangement. Conceptually, for a populist actor seeking to demonstrate their membership of a proposed 'people', as opposed to an external elite, social media provides the appropriate forum to engender this relationship.

When these opportunities offered by the digital field are combined with Butler's (1990) views of gender as a selective performance of traits over time, there exists a space for a conceptualisation of populism to exist which is cognisant of the work which comes before it, but congruent with the queer ambition of the research. Queer theory fundamentally rejects writ knowledge and normativity (Rooke, 2009), instead using whatever approach necessary to develop coherence narratives which explore nuanced details (Brim and Ghaziani, 2016), rather than generating fixed but surface-level categorisations (Love, 2013).

Thus, it becomes possible to conceptualise the populist similarly. They are not a totally fixed, definable, and deferable concept, but a set of tenets formed by dissonances and resonances, and lapses and excesses (Sedgwick, 1993), exhibited through the performance of selective traits, over a period of time. The populist is thus not a thing, but a set of things which constitutes and maintains itself through discursive practices. This populist is flexible, able to encompass significantly more individuals and parties

than might be understood by the PopuList (Roodujin et al, 2023), empowered by individual agency and the digital playing field. This is an important step, and while it does not discount the vital work within the assembly of the PopuList, it recognises that such categorisations reinforce normative binary concepts, wherein academic effort is expended upon the division of parties between either side of a cleft. This working-paper recognises that work as a commencement point, but seeks to explore how individuals act within these party structures, recognising that actors within definitively populist parties may perform in a populist manner, and *vice versa*. In placing primacy on individual actorship, the queered approach helps to stave off potential contradictions and conflicts which may arise from such an understanding of the world and treat each instance on a case-by-case basis.

With these conceptions of the populist and the nature of their performance considered, appropriate methods for study become clearer. The politicians must somehow be observed to simulate the experience of an audience, and then these observations must somehow be explored in a way which rationalises them with the intentions of the performer. In phasing the research in this manner, a slowly constructed reflection of the politician can be completed, informing effective inquisition. As this paper focusses on specifically online manifestations of populism, a covert digital ethnography, supplemented by semi-structured interviewees with the observed politicians presented a naturally congruent approach. This was combined with a reflexive thematic analysis as envisaged by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Conceptually, the digital ethnography is a relatively modern method (Murthy, 2008), although fundamentally remaps traditional ethnographies over digital infrastructures (Kozinets, 2002). For this research, it meant observing the politicians on Twitter, fulfilling the role of a 'lurker' (Ferguson, 2017), wherein the politicians were observed without me interacting. In essence, this creates as naturalistic (Strudwick, 2021) an environment as possible, allowing the politicians to perform their characters as they would for the general audience, uninfluenced by academic observation.

Twitter was the chosen medium to observe as the platform has become ubiquitous within political discourses (Stier et al, 2018), upon which populist strategies have become reinvigorated (Zúñiga et al, 2020), with particular exacerbation occurring following the Musk takeover (Munk, 2024). There was a specific focus on left-wing populists within this research, as while there has been significant interest in left-wing populists in Southern Europe and Latin America (Londoño et al, 2022), there is a comparative deficit in this inquisition within Western Europe, with greater focus placed upon the political right (Canovan, 1984). Within the wider project that this paper is situated, it is proposed that left-wing populism 'escapes under the radar' for search of a better term, due to its mainstream format exhibiting typical anti-elite, and worker-focussed rhetorics exhibiting the typical populist split between irrationalisable groups. Here, a clearer, text-based populism, engendered by the platform, was thus assumed to be present and detectable.

In line with these criteria, 90 Twitter-active politicians were observed for six months, with 30 being drawn from each of Britain, France, and Germany, from as plausibly similar metropolitan geographies as possible. Consciously, this research drew politicians from local, regional, and national tiers of government, allowing for a holistic as possible view to be constructed, representing the broadest ecosystem of political

communications.

During the observation, notes were taken on my interpretation of their performance, and a datascrape of the Tweets was maintained. Over the ethnography, some 16008 Tweets were consumed, and a deep awareness of their digital characters was constructed.

After the conclusion of the ethnographic phase, each of the 90 politicians was invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, lasting an hour, taking place online or physically in their chosen language. 18 politicians chose to take part, constituted of 7 from the United Kingdom, 5 from France, and 6 from Germany. These interviews yielded 767 minutes of usable data, achieving a data saturation satisfactory for the consideration of the subject.

Interviewing is seen as vital to the project for two reasons. Firstly, it is the only method through which my perception of their performance can be compared to their internal thinking and intentionality behind that performance. Secondly, it provides the opportunity to assess what the politicians actually understand populism to mean. If a social constructionist approach is to be understood, then any knowledge generated is never impartial, and can never be totally removed from its host contexts (Seamon and Gill, 2016). Thus, it is recognised that definitions and understandings of populism derived through academic approaches are fundamentally influenced by that context, and the understandings of populism held by politicians are similarly sustained by their political setting. Through asking politicians to specifically explore and challenge that understanding of populism, a mutually-shared comprehension of the topic can be built, against which the subsequent responses can be calibrated. Without this step, as it is believed has happened in previous research, the discussants may hold irrationalisable views on the phenomenon, leading to incomplete, or not fully contextualised, reflections on populism. Through a specifically oriented interview schedule, consensus can be reasonably established, and more impactful data generated.

To ensure that the maximum impact was derived from the interviews, the approach was not fixed, but premised upon a flexible schedule, ensuring that while comparable data was gathered, it was able to account for the deviations of the participants, and accommodate the topics they held to be important in their presentation (Qu and Dumay, 2011). The questions in the schedule commenced with surface-level enquiry, such as asking for descriptions of populism, before becoming more complex, asking the participants to assess their communicative contexts. These questions, as conversation progressed, turned towards introspection, asking the participants to assess the content of their own practices within their digital discourse.

These data underwent a form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The coding was approached inductively, allowing the data and the researcher to reveal insight into the phenomenon. This analytical was integral to the queer approach, in that it recognised the integration of the researcher themselves within the data, and the consequences and benefits of that involvement. As the researcher, I form the conduit between observation, interview, transcription, translation, and coding, and the choices made within those processes. Thus, for it to be mitigated, it must be acknowledged. The reflexive analytical approach not only acknowledges authorial involvement, but celebrates the

consistency of that involvement, and the honesty bestowed through that recognition.

In taking the theoretical approaches above, combined with the outlined methodology, significant and impactful data were generated, elaborated and discussed below.

## Analysis and Results

The data analysis, predominantly drawing from interview extracts, revealed interesting dynamics of digital populist discourses. These would, under any other paradigm of investigation, be seen as inconsistent stories, full of contradictions, standing as irrationalisable with other elements of the findings. However, within queered inquisition, there is scope for witnessing these simultaneous yet different presentations as being totally rationalizable concepts, constituting a continuum of performance, formed from desired traits being performed at different points as the conversation demanded.

Understanding the results, in order to lay foundations for the discussion of the impact and relevance for the discipline can only be found through an intentional and cautious disaggregation of the myriad concepts the actors sought to discuss simultaneously. Asking the participants about populism was, initially, a difficult task, eliciting emotionally-driven reactions. It was only through trust-building and robust discussion that more specific information could be elaborated. In doing so, discrete phases of their discussions of populism could be elucidated, travelling from exemplification, to definition, to recognition, to reconceptualisation. Almost ironically, it appeared that in their process of recognition, the participants were travelling through the stages of grief: from denial, to bargaining, to acceptance.

The earliest discussions embodied that denial through a process of exemplification. This was not based in any specific understanding of populism or ideology, per se, but an attachment of the word to specific, locally-bounded oppositions they held to be perpetrators. It was explained that populism “is the politics of Marine Le Pen” (FR04), and that “the AfD is very much a populist party” (DE05). British examples similarly drew on anglosphere examples to illustrate the concept “Well, it's usually right wing. It's Trump and Boris, isn't it?” (GB08). While these responses were fundamentally accurate, in that they named individuals broadly understood to exhibit populist traits, the participants had avoided the substantive question, which had asked them to explain what populism itself means. This was, perhaps, predictable, effectively confirming prior research that ‘populism’ as a term is deployed as an insult aimed at political opponents (Esser et al., 2017). Even within this initial response, there was an implicit result worthy of specific inquisition, as the participants evidently held populism to hold negative connotations, and using the word formed a strategic choice in the delegitimisation of their opponents.

Asked to expand on why these opponents were populist revealed significant insight into the specifics of their behaviour, ranging from accusations of a “dog-whistle approach” (GB06), to deliberately “feeding the extremes, and making people that don’t believe the extremes believe them” (GB07). For the French participants, the elements of populism were to be found within an expansion of the windows of political opportunity, exemplified through right-wing practices: “The right is aligning with the far-right because really

the French-right is becoming absolutely more extreme" (FR09), led by "someone who is a demagogue, someone who flatters the people, who claims to be close to the people, but who does so for reasons that are often exclusive" (FR08). These answers reaffirmed that populism was, to them, evidently negative, containing moral components congruent with previous contributors' proposals that populism stands at odds with the pillars of the liberal order (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012).

The participants recognised that these were quite wide-raging concepts, and when asked to find the common threads between them, began to explore quite traditional proposals, bringing almost identical conceptions to the ideational understanding of populism:

> The opposition of France against Europe, of France against the world, of the elite, or rather of the international liberal elite that no longer defends the interests of the people, supposedly (FR04).

> It's all they're the foreigners and we're the French. But it doesn't matter whether the French are very rich or very poor, that makes no difference (FR17).

> So, there is really a lot of populism, which is … sounding like a lot of hate and division between the people and nothing I would in any way prefer (DE20).

> You know, exploiting community division and racism and whatnot for their other aims (GB13).

This should not necessarily be viewed as evidence that the politicians' views subscribe to, or even understand, the academic discourses of ideational definitions or otherwise. Indeed, the queered approach, and the reliance upon social constructionism to build understanding, required the politicians to discuss further. Taking their responses on face value, more questions became plausible. Thus far they had described and discussed populism as they held it to be, and that such a populism was evidently the preserve and *modus operandi* of their opponents. This begged the question, if the notion of their opponents' behaviour was so clear, how then would they define their own participation in digital discourses.

Universally, the politicians paused. They commenced, slowly, to explore their own performance, and some peculiarities they had not considered prior. The opposition of groups was fundamental to their entire ideology. A process of bargaining commenced. They were forced to confront that, while they had earlier derogated division, they had equally contributed to this, yet their contribution was somehow not a hallmark of populism, but a division of society on much more justified grounds. The conversations proceeded, however in a much slower and conscious tone. For the first time within the conversation, introspection rapidly:

> Lots of people would argue that I'm a populist in a sense that I, you know, I am a big character in politics, and I really, really lean into that (GB18).

> And I do wonder sometimes if I'm a bit populist in my approach, because I tend to lean into very inclusive language. So, I often use 'we' and talk about 'us' and 'our' without really saying who I mean, because there is just a constituency of people that I kind of have in my head

> when I'm talking (GB13).

While short of embracing agency, it revealed that the politicians had begun to realise that despite their distaste, by their own earlier elucidated definition, their online presence was seemingly populist. From character work, to dividing populations into irreconcilable groups, they had engaged in the material actions they had previously decried as posing a threat to democracy. This was however, explained and abated in their minds, as being the nature of the digital platform. This was not a performative choice, but a performative prerogative.

When asked to explore the influence of Twitter in formulating their performance through platform pressures, the responses coalesced: "Yes… it forces populism... You have to shorten things" (DE09). Twitter was not seen to permit polite discourse, but promoted and required combative discourse and performative message management as "everybody is using everybody trying to generate a buzz… the idea is to get people talking about you, to get as many views as possible… that's what matters… in the end, you don't have to be right. If you're seen by 1,000 people, that has less impact than if you're half-right, but seen by 1,000,000 people" (FR08).

This populism thus became a complex construction. It was unwilling but intentional and disliked but necessary, occupying a nuanced space within the minds of the interviewees. Crucially, populism also absorbed new queered aspects, in that it was earlier seen as something purely external, but now was confronted as an internal, intentional performed reality. Instead of seeking to rewrite the history of the conversation, however, they renegotiated their personal explorations of populism, so that this could sit simultaneously alongside the earlier explored definition.

Drawing distinctions became an important facet for the discussion as they continued bargaining. FR17 explained that "it is not populist in the sense that you hear in newspapers… I'm a populist in the sense that we are listening to the people". Of course, there was little acknowledgement that their opposition might likely make the same claim, but there was instead a doubling down:

> Sure, if we take the proper meaning of the word populist, which is listening to and being on the side of the people, we are. But if you take it in the sense that journalists use it, i.e. demagoguery to give it a name, I don't think we're populist. (FR17)

There had been a curious shift at this part of the discussion, in that they recognised they were presenting, ironically, a form of proper, virtuous populism, compared with the purportedly dangerous populism used by other groups. When queried directly, the concept crystallised, and a line of distinction was firmly drawn between not whether something was populist or not, but what the intentionality behind it was:

> For me, it makes a difference, whether populism is directed on scandal, inequality, poverty, preparation of war and such things. Or if it is used to focus on minorities and deny their rights and so on. (DE24)

> I would say that [we] sometimes use populism. But where I say that… this has nothing to do with lying, as the AfD might do in their populism. But yes, I wouldn't deny that for now… I believe that

> every party uses populism partly for its own ends, because it is simply a method of addressing people that has not been forbidden or frowned upon until recently. (DE05)

It became clear that a form of acceptance had taken hold. Two distinct, yet simultaneously deployed, processes occurred within the conversations, typified by the two excerpts above. There was a revision and neutralisation of the word populism, and a reframing of the distinction of moral importance onto traditional left-right axes. Not only this, populism itself was reframed from being at odds with the pillars of democracy and instead presented as being a reflective performance within the bounds of the conversation, forming a natural extension of nuanced social realities. From the latest iteration of their testimonies, this time featuring themselves as populists, populism was no longer an external process, but a resultative status of their performance, that formed a "political phenomenon that is recurrent in society" (FR21) that only "today is more of a negative concept" that "historically, is not necessarily negative" (FR08).

The emergence of competing concepts of populism rendered it, in the eyes of the participants, a subjective concept, able to be interpreted however they willed:

> I don't mind the word populism, not as it's used in the media, but as I see it. There is such a thing as populism where you listening to what the people have to say… that is, for me, a rather good thing. Populism as it's portrayed in the media, which is all demagoguery… that's not the definition of populism. (FR17)

Thus, it was not the populism itself containing components of morality, but the intentions behind its interactions with the media and political systems which bestowed it a particular nature. Populism transcended ideological constraints becoming an adaptable performative tool through which political communications could be engaged, forming an essential part of the contemporary communications environment. DE05 expressed that "In principle, I also think a lot of populism is useful, because you can use it to generate attention in order to make voters think about something". GB13 went further, unexpectedly discussing the assumptions of this research. Without being prompted, a crucial statement was made: "I also think there's a type of populism that is trying to establish popular consent around a movement, or ideas, or party. Um, and often, that is just a presentational style" (GB13).

Without having any grounding in such academic understandings, there had been a slow, but determined reframing of populism away from definitions, and into a performative form of presentational style, adopted by the individuals under their own agency, informed by the practical realities of the state, the pressures of the digital medium, and manner in which they wanted to reflect and be perceived by their audience. Throughout the interviews, the politicians reassessed the nature of populism, eventually concluding that the concept they had previously maligned ought to be simultaneously embraced. Partially as they had no choice, but partially because it was both easy and perceptibly useful. Thus, in comparison to their original responses, there was a new assessment to be considered, based on a new, totally supplementary set of standards.

It is worthy of note that the results above demonstrate a populism that is fundamentally reflexive and in

flux. Conceptions that were presented confidently at the outset struggled to survive the pace of the interview and indeed were repeatedly adjusted or supplemented within the space of relatively short conversations. Such a finding of inconsistency does not invalidate the data but instead guides the way the information must be processed. Crucially, the participants did not change the definition, per se, they only changed how it might be applied to themselves, bestowing a queered status to that very definition. They still maintained that the original meanings may apply to the right, but that their later iteration was reserved for themselves, and that the two may exist simultaneously, equally validly, yet be in conflict. This poses implications for understandings of the state of discourse.

## Discussion

It is important to rationalise the discussions that emerged during the interviews and understand how these diverse stories contributed to a wider narrative whole, told from the perspectives of those engaged in the digital communicative arena. The data generated from this approach provide tangible and impactful contributions and were only able to be wrought through the application of an open-minded broadly-focussed queered approach to inquisition. From the above presentation, utilising direct quotation from the participants, a few starting points became clear. Prior to the interviews, they had no totally complete notion of what populism actually meant; they had only insights of what it had come to represent in their social experience. This recollection of experience rendered each conversation unique and grounded solely in the subjectivity of the interviewee. These interviews, it became clear, were the first attempt they had ever made to codify their opinions of populism beyond emotionally-charged instinctive insult or empty signifier, and the process of seeking to crystallise a definition was due only to the active questioning.

The first noteworthy finding stems from the building of their understanding of populism as a term. Evidently, it is a word they knew, and had encountered in various settings, although any discussion of this was divorced from the understanding held by academics. The chronology of the research, and the gradual evolvement of the discussion was an intrinsic process, building a mutual consensus of what the questions actually meant, before the answers were given. The discovered necessity to have co-construct mutual bases poses implications for prior research which has utilised interviews wherein mutually understanding had not been clearly established, thus the interviewer's questioning on populism, and the subsequent interviewees' responses, were responding solely to their socially-constructed understandings, relative to only their own experiences. It is not to say that the performative understandings of populism derived within this research are totally novel, but that these simply would not have been understandable and utilisable without having equalised the field. Prior scholarship is not flawed or meritless, far from it, but this research wishes to point out that it may have been premised upon analyses of discussions between two participants with potentially irrationalisable views of populism, falsely assuming they had a shared understanding of each other's contributions.

Similarly, other forms of inquisition may have taken the politicians' initial contributions at their word and progressed different lines of questioning. It was only through actively asking after expansions that the

findings of this research were plausible. The reflexivity thus permitted the gradual formation of the distinct interview phases, allowing them to be compared in the queered fashion. These were, across the individuals, nations and parties, more aligned than anticipated, with all participants engaging in a remarkably and unexpectedly similar manner. Firstly, populism was externalised and denigrated, most reflecting prior findings on the use of the term as an exonymic insult, division of the people and elites, and at tension with the pillars of liberal democracy. Secondly, populism became defined, as the act of precising populism entered the research into a phase of introspection, where it became a form of presentational or discursive style, able to exist alongside other approaches under certain conditions of acceptability, even if it remained reactionary. Finally, there was acceptance, where the term populism became effectively embraced, and recognised as reflective of the will of a public, who had assembled to see some form of populist performance, which was permissible contingent upon it pursuing a (self-perceived) moral rectitude. This revealed an intentional populism utilised by the participants, seen as being permissible and authentic, and elaborated through the selective performance of a series of perceived beneficial traits over time.

Exploring these phases through robust discursive practices had begun to effectively explore the core propositions of the wider research. When recounting their performances, similarities with Butler's (1990) selectivity of traits over time became clearer. Gradually, characters emerged, intentionally exhibiting populist traits, contributing to the transgressive identity of the populist. In a specifically digital manifestation, these selected performances over time were no longer imbued with the ability to seamlessly morph into one another and instead remained engraved in permanent testimony on the Twitter Feed, revealing myriad simultaneous selves, evidencing assessment of changing audience needs (Maseda, 2017). Furthermore, there was not just inconsistency between the preserved characters, but how these characters differed with their physical performance as politicians, private citizens, and the characters they portrayed in interview. Desired traits gradually amalgamated, cognisant of setting, and were maintained despite their seeming inconsistencies. This was not seen as a problem, but instead as the state-of-play for politicians.

Believing, performing, and maintaining these characters was not problematic, but instead culturally convenient and politically expedient. Populist politics became both presentational style and performance, not a fixed manner of acting in the world. They created identities and transgressed boundaries surprisingly uniformly between cases, and somewhat more surprisingly, seemingly discussed this frankly. DE10 quipped "Pardon? Honesty in politics? What's that?". Of all the discussions, the flash of humanity within this sentence was one of the most insightful extracts. Indeed, others expanded the same concept further, where dishonesty was 'justified', per se, "because being honest is not the thing expected from politicians" (DE24). Effectively, the politicians confirmed elements of the inquisition. They were aware of the dishonesty of performing populist identities, but that this presentation was informed and implicitly consented to by their audiences who would have not reasonably held expectations for them to be 'honest', especially within the digital realm.

This research's data were generated during a wider PhD study, and the analysis and discussion above are only a partial, working representation of the findings. Within the project, complex notions of populism

are understood alongside misinformation and notions of truthfulness in public life. The queered approach is used to offer new insight into populism, expanding the broad layers of theoretical discussion, contributing to wider academic discussions. In exploring populism thus, it is hoped that queer theory considers further exploring broader political concepts, and that the political sciences equally become more amenable the value of queer theory beyond gender and sexuality. The purpose of this article was not to prove or disprove a concept, but to demonstrate the value that an open-minded reflexive approach can offer populist studies, disaggregating a complex word from its terminological chaos. Through this discussion, it is hoped that queer theory is shown to have a deserving place in discussions of politics, especially the conflict and contradiction-filled discourse of the populist style.

## Conclusion

Concluding this working-paper, populism remains, unsurprisingly perhaps, a complicated topic. Political discourses take place in a complicated arena, and the generation, performance, and maintenance of identities reflect that complexity. This, however, need not necessarily present an issue, but instead be viewed as presenting opportunities. Therein lies the value of queering insights into populism and the construction of populist identity. Previous findings need not be held as true, prior categorisations become negotiable, and no positions can be totally mutually exclusive. As Puar (2005) offered, queer times require even queerer methods, and within the digital discursive arena, these are queer times indeed.

This is not to imply that there is not enormous utility found in prior scholarship. Such contributions advanced the discourse shedding enormous light on the field. However, it is the opinion of this paper that in seeking to apply generalised definitions, previous academic approaches have been unable to fully access and understand the internal nuances and backstage ruminations contained within populist discourses, inadvertently erasing the agency of the individual. It is not that they failed to do so, but that this nuance was not in their interests or scope. This queered approach instead seeks to instead highlight that in this historical omission, there exists abundant, underresearched content for consideration, offering novel, supplementary standards to facilitate broader inquisition.

This research observed and interviewed left-wing politicians across three countries, exploring their specifically digital manifestation of populism. Such a digital sphere, in which these politicians willingly assembled online, exists linked to, but discrete from, their systems and identities within the corporeal realm. This sphere, governed by its own rules, norms, and interpretations of the social contract held between participants online, exhibited a renegotiation of the relationship between governor and governed, and in turn, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, as a complex game of push-and-pull emerged. Eventually, their populism was presented not just as necessity, but a form of modal performance within the Twitter/X setting. Between the cases, a surprising alignment of thought was presented. While idiosyncratic and esoteric performances had emerged, the process and justification for such performances remained stable. They were conscious adaptions, made in response to the perceived pressures of the platform, and the needs of the audience assembled thereon as an abstraction of the

public. While this research solely focussed on Twitter, a platform well-established as fostering populist discourses (Zúñiga et al, 2020), it stands to reason that future research may engage these queered approaches to explore their diverse presentations on other digital media.

In the queered approach of this working-paper, and in the responses of the participants, several traditional boundaries were crossed, and transgressions performed. The politicians were simultaneously performer and audience, authentic and artificial, and intimate and scripted, all at once. Through queered perspectives, it was possible to consider all these characters, otherwise plausibly mutually-exclusive, as distinct but simultaneous manifestations of the self, engaged in a discourse-driven audience-informed performance online. In some senses, they achieved their stated aim for authenticity before all else, but it was the meaning of that authenticity which had needed to be clarified.

These were not politicians who were authentic. No. They were instead, as the audience would perceive them, authentic politicians. They behaved not as they wanted, but as expected, enacting a populist persona as an audience-informed reciprocal performance online.

## References

Aiolfi, T. (2022) Populism as a Transgressive Style. *Global Studies Quarterly, 2*(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac006

Aiolfi, T. (2025) *The Populist Style: Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far Right*. Edinburgh University Press.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. SAGE Publications Inc.

Brim, M. and Ghaziani, A. (2016) Introduction: Queer Methods. *Women's Studies Quarterly*. *44*(3/4), 14-27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44474060

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1994) Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism". In S. Seidman. (Ed.), *New Perspectives on Social Theory* (pp 153-170). Cambridge University Press.

Canovan, M. (1984) 'People', Politicians and Populism. *Government and Opposition*. 19(3), 312-327. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.1984.tb01048.x

Ernst, N., Esser, F., Blassnig, S. and Engesser, S. (2018) Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 24(2), 165-188. https://doi.org/10.1177/194016121881943

Esser, F., Stepinska, A. and Hopmann, D. N. (2017) Populism and the Media: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Stromback, and C. de Vreese. (Eds.) *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. (pp. 365-380). Routledge.

Ferguson, R. (2017) Offline 'Stranger' and Online Lurker: Methods for an Ethnography of Illicit Transactions on the Darknet. *Qualitative Research*, *17*(6), 683-698. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117718894

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction.* Pantheon Books.

Fuss, D. (1991) *Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday.

Kobayashi, T. and Ichifuji, Y. (2015) Tweets that Matter: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment in Japan. *Political Communication*. 32(4), 574-593. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.986696

Kozinets, R. V. (2002) The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *39*(1), 61-72. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935

Krämer, B. (2017) Populist Online Practices: The Function of the Internet in Right-Wing Populism. *Information, Communication and Society*. 20(9), 1293-1309. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328520

Londoño, E., Turkewitz, J, and Milhorance, F. (2022, January 04) Leftists are Ascendant in Latin America as Key Elections Loom. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/americas/leftists-elections-latin-america.html

Love, H. (2013) Close Reading and Thin Description. *Public culture*. *25*(3), 401-434. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2144688

Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. (2019) *The Far Right Today*. Polity Press.

Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser, R. (2012) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy.* Cambridge University Press.

Munk, T. (2024) *Far-Right Extremism Online: Beyond the Fringe*. Routledge.

Murthy, D. (2008) Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research. *Sociology, 42*(5), 837-855. https://doi.org/10.1177/003803850809456

Namaste, K. (1994) The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality. *Sociological Theory*, *12*(2), 220-231. https://doi.org/10.2307/201866

Maseda, R. V. (2019) *Deciphering Goffman: The Structure of his Sociological Theory Revisited*. Routledge.

Puar, J. K. (2005) Queer Times, Queer Assemblages. *Social Text*, *23*(3/4), 121-139. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-23-3-4_84-85-121

Qu, S. and Dumay, J. (2011) The Qualitative Research Interview. *Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management, 8*(3), 238-264. https://doi.org/10.1108/11766091111162070

Ritzer, G. (2011) *Sociological Theory* (8th ed.). *McGraw Hill.*

Rooke, A. (2009) Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality, and Performativity in Ethnography. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. *13*(2), 149-160. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160802695338

Rooduijn, M., Pirro, A. L. P., Halikiopouloi, D., Froio, C., van Kessel, S., de Lange, S. L., Mudde, C. and Taggart, P. (2023) *The PopuList 3.0: An Overview of Populist, Far-Left and Far-Right Parties in Europe*. www.popu-list.org

Seamon, D. and Gill, H. K. (2016) Qualitative Approaches to Environment-Behaviour: Understanding Environment and Place Experiences, Meanings, and Actions. In R. Gifford (Ed.) *Research Methods for Environmental Psychology*. (pp. 115-135). Wiley Blackwell.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1993) *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.

Seeliger, M. and Braslavsky, P. V. (2022) Reflections on the Contemporary Public Sphere: An Interview with Judith Butler. Theory, *Culture and Society*. 39(4), 67-74. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211066260

Stier, S., Bleier, A., Lietz, H. and Stroh, M. (2018) Election Campaigning on Social Media: Politicians, Audiences, and the Mediation of Political Communication on Facebook and Twitter. *Political Communications*. 35(1), 50-74. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1801.08825

Strudwick, R. M. (2021) *The Ethnographic Radiographer*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Weber, C. (2014) Queer International Relations: From Queer to Queer IR. *International Studies Review*. *16*(4), 596-601. https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12160

Zúñiga, H. G., Michalska, K. K., and Römmele, A. (2020) Populism in the era of Twitter: How Social Media Contextualised New Insights into an Old Phenomenon. *New Media and Society*. 22(4), 585-594. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893978

# Populism and the Media as a Love-hate Relationship? Analysis of Elections Coverage in the Czech Republic

by Jan Křovák[14]

## Abstract

This study explores the ambivalent and often paradoxical relationship between populist political actors and the news media. While both actors seek public attention—suggesting a symbiotic dynamic—journalists frequently portray populists as threats to democratic norms. Through quantitative content analysis, this working paper investigates media portrayals of Czech populist leaders Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura across three parliamentary election campaigns (2013, 2017, 2021). The analysis focuses on two major online news outlets: *Aktuálně.cz* and *iDnes.cz*. Although populism remains a salient media topic, the findings indicate that populist leaders gain consistent media visibility primarily when occupying executive office. Moreover, direct labeling of actors as "populist" is infrequent; instead, media coverage tends to emphasize discursive styles and behavioral patterns associated with populism, rather than employing the term explicitly. This might point to the blurring of the border between populism and mainstream politics in the journalists' perspective.

**Keywords**: Populism, Media, Andrej Babiš, Tomio Okamura, iDnes.cz, Aktuálně.cz

## Introduction

The relationship between populism and the media is both strategically interdependent and ideologically fraught. Populist actors depend heavily on the media for visibility and legitimacy, while media organizations benefit from the sensationalism, conflict, and emotional narratives that populist communication provides. Scholars have characterized this relationship as ambivalent—simultaneously collaborative and confrontational. Mazzoleni (2008, p. 50) calls it a "supply-demand" dynamic: populists and journalists alike seek public attention through disruption of routine politics. However, the media also claim the role of democracy's guardians, meant to resist the very destabilization that populists might bring (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, p. 234).

[14] Charles University

This article examines how this paradoxical relationship is reflected in Czech media coverage of two prominent populist figures—Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura—over three parliamentary elections (in 2013, 2017, 2021). The focus is on two national online media outlets, *iDnes.cz* and *Aktuálně.cz*, chosen for their different ownership structures and editorial leanings. While both were owned by billionaires during the period under review, *iDnes.cz* was owned through Mafra by Andrej Babiš himself, either directly or via a trust fund. Aktuálně.cz, by contrast, belonged to the Economia publishing house, owned by coal magnate Zdeněk Bakala (Štětka, 2010; Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015) was historically very critical towards Babiš. This contrast provides a unique opportunity to explore how populist messages are shaped by, and received within, different media ecosystems.

Populism is a contested concept, approached from several scholarly angles. The “thin ideology” approach, especially influential in comparative research, defines populism as a vision of society divided into two antagonistic groups—“the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”—with politics as the expression of the general will (Mudde, 2017, p. 29). Because it lacks comprehensive ideological substance, this type of populism can attach itself to a variety of “thicker” ideologies. Alternatively, Weyland (2017) advances a strategic perspective, defining populism as a political style in which leaders seek direct, unmediated support from large, disorganized audiences. From a third perspective, Laclau (2005) offers a discursive theory in which populism constructs flexible, antagonistic identities like “the people” and “the elite” through narrative performance (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

There are various ways to categorize populist leaders, depending on which of their key attributes or ideological emphases scholars choose to highlight. For the purposes of this study, I define Andrej Babiš primarily as a technocratic populist, a category I consider most relevant for analyzing his political strategy and appeal. Babiš consistently positioned himself as an anti-establishment outsider who would "run the state like a company," offering a managerial, efficiency-driven alternative to traditional party politics (Buštíková & Guasti, 2020). When addressing Tomio Okamura, I work with Meyer’s (2022) broader typology of populist actors, which distinguishes between cultural populists, socioeconomic populists, and anti-establishment populists based on their dominant ideological focus. While Babiš fits best in the anti-establishment (when he first entered politics) and technocratic categories, I categorize Tomio Okamura as a cultural populist in line with Meyer’s definition—mobilizing against perceived threats to national identity such as immigrants, minorities, or supranational institutions (in Okamura case: Islam, the Roma and other ‘inadaptable’ groups of people and European Union and NATO). By making this distinction, I clarify that this paper adopts Meyer’s and Buštíková and Guasti’s framework for the selected categories and will use these categories as its analytical lens.

Media logic—defined by journalistic norms such as personalization, dramatization, and emotionalization—shapes who gets covered, and how. Politicians who adapt to this logic can amplify their messages, but final control over coverage remains with journalists (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). Populists have proven particularly adept at exploiting media logic. As Mudde (2004) and Mazzoleni (2008) note, populist leaders benefit from the media's appetite for controversy and conflict. Bracciale and Martella (2017, p. 1314) list typical features of populist communication: emotional messages, oversimplified solutions, informal language, negative affect, and folk-style storytelling. These are well-suited to the

commercial imperatives of modern journalism, especially in the online sphere (Esser et al., 2016). Manucci (2017, p. 471) argues that the media are not merely amplifiers of populist messages but are co-producers of them. In some cases, media may exhibit characteristics of populism themselves—prioritizing "the people," disdaining elites, and simplifying complex issues in pursuit of audience share (Krämer, 2014).

The visibility of populists in the media is not just a product of rhetorical strategy, but also of their political status. Babiš, as a populist who held multiple executive positions—including finance minister and later prime minister—benefited from what scholars call an incumbency bonus (Green-Pedersen et al., 2017). This term describes the media's tendency to prioritize those in power due to their ability to make decisions and influence public life. Such actors inherently carry news value, which results in more frequent and often more neutral or positive coverage—regardless of their political stance. Babiš's dual role as a political leader and media owner further amplified this dynamic.

Even as populists benefit from media coverage, they often attack media institutions as corrupt extensions of elite power. This double strategy allows populists to enjoy media visibility while undermining its legitimacy (Haller & Holt, 2018). Babiš has often limited his communication to friendly outlets (Dolejší, 2025), while Okamura has publicly accused journalists of being biased activists, employing tactics aimed at delegitimizing critical coverage (Kučerová, 2025). Both deploy classic populist themes—distrust in institutions, disdain for intellectual elites, and criticism of media "manipulation"—to appeal to their bases. The author calls this dynamic a love-hate relationship.

Populist actors, like all political competitors, are highly attuned to election cycles and polling data. As Donsbach (1997) notes, media outlets tend to focus on parties and candidates performing well in pre-election polls and with coalition potential. This dynamic is particularly relevant for Andrej Babiš and ANO 2011, which consistently ranked in the top two ahead of the 2013, 2017, and 2021 parliamentary elections (see Hloušek & Kopeček, 2017). Unlike Tomio Okamura, whose parties remained on the fringe with limited coalition prospects, ANO twice joined governing coalitions and was central to post-election negotiations. Babiš was even named the most trusted politician in 2014 (Ibid.). These factors enhanced his media appeal.

Bernhard and Kriesi (2021, p. 233) further show that populist candidates are more likely to engage in negative campaigning than non-populist rivals, especially during pre-election periods. Even controlling for individual and contextual factors, populists exhibit a stronger tendency to attack opponents—an effect similar to that seen among incumbents, though in reverse. This inclination not only supports electoral strategy but also increases media exposure, as confrontational rhetoric attracts disproportionate coverage.

Scandals—particularly those involving incumbents—are a well-documented driver of media attention. While not unique to populist leaders, they are a central element in media reporting on Andrej Babiš. His political style and conduct, frequently criticized by opponents and journalists, were epitomized by his defiant statement, "I will never step down, never. Let everyone remember that," following media reports about the alleged kidnapping of his son, a key witness in the Stork Nest case (Novinky.cz, 2018). This

controversy[15] involving alleged misuse of EU subsidies and still under legal review as of July 2025, is just one in a series of scandals that brought Babiš sustained media attention. In 2013, it was his suspected ties to the communist-era State Security (StB); in 2017, the Stork Nest affair and the "lithium scandal"[16]; and in 2021, his involvement in the Pandora Papers. Although not exclusive to populist figures, scandals have ensured Babiš's consistent media visibility and are indispensable to understanding coverage of him (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019).

The Czech political environment between 2013 and 2021 was fertile ground for populist discourse. Both Babiš and Okamura entered electoral politics in 2013 with newly founded movements that bore their personal stamp. That year's elections were shaped by a major corruption scandal, which brought down the government of Petr Nečas from the Civic Democratic Party, i.e. public trust in mainstream parties was low at the time (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2019).

Babiš, already a billionaire businessman and media mogul, launched the ANO 2011 movement with an anti-corruption message and significant media backing—some of it under his control. He financed the campaign himself and used labels such as "Czech Palermo" to denounce political elites (a clear anti-establishment discourse). Okamura, previously elected senator, led the *Dawn of Direct Democracy* movement with an emphasis on anti-elitism and direct democratic mechanisms (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023; Maškarinec & Bláha, 2014).

Both parties entered the Chamber of Deputies in 2013. ANO received 18.65% of votes, and Okamura's movement 6.88%. Babiš became finance minister under Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD), while Okamura went into opposition. During this period, *iDnes.cz* and other Mafra media were criticized for favorable coverage of ANO and negative framing of coalition partners (Jirák & Köpplová, 2020). Babiš's executive position gave him additional media value under the incumbency bonus logic, ensuring more consistent coverage. Simultaneously, his participation in the government rendered him more susceptible to accusations of unfulfilled promises, while his anti-establishment rhetoric inevitably lost credibility, given that he had himself become part of the establishment.

In 2017, both leaders campaigned amid new geopolitical challenges, particularly the refugee crisis and

[15] Babiš faces an accusation of obtaining €2 million in EU subsidies designated for small businesses illegally by concealing his ownership of a farm and a convention centre called "Storks Nest" (Čapí hnízdo in Czech). He was acquitted by the court in January 2023 and again in February 2024 (Křovák, 2024). The Stork's Nest was an important topic in the media in the 2025 elections again because The High Court in Prague has again returned the case to the municipal court. The judge bound the lower court with her verdict, in which she stated that she found evidence of two criminal offences: subsidy fraud and damage to the EU's financial interests (Starostová, 2025). Andrej Babiš Jr. is a key witness in the process.

[16] It was connected to lithium mining at Cínovec, Czech Republic. The memorandum with the private Australian mining company European Metals Holdings Ltd. was signed by the then Minister of Industry from the ČSSD Jiří Havlíček. Shortly before the elections, Andrej Babiš began accusing his coalition partner, the ČSSD, of wanting to "rob the citizens of CZK 2 000 billion by transferring mining from the state to a private company. After the elections, the memorandum was cancelled by the Minister of Industry in resignation, Tomáš Hüner from ANO 2011 (Černý, 2018).

rising Euroscepticism. Okamura's newly founded *Freedom and Direct democracy* movement (SPD) embraced a more culturally exclusionary rhetoric. Babiš, already a central figure in government, focused his campaign on continuity and managerial competence, although he faced multiple scandals. Despite campaign finance restrictions, ANO won 29.64% of the vote and formed a government supported by the Social Democrats and Communists (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). Okamura's SPD improved to 10.64%. By the end of this term, Babiš faced frequent media criticism for unfulfilled promises and populist conduct–exemplified, for instance, by his decision to grant senior citizens a 5,000 CZK allowance shortly before the 2020 regional elections, officially justified as compensation for increased COVID-19-related expenses (Honzejk, 2020). Moreover, his anti-establishment rhetoric had lost credibility, as he had been part of the political establishment for two consecutive terms.

By 2021, Babiš was running for re-election in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and he faced widespread criticism for crisis mismanagement, high inflation, and the deteriorating health of the public sector. Two broad opposition coalitions—SPOLU and PirSTAN[17]—formed with the explicit aim of defeating him. Babiš used the campaign to attack Pirates and later SPOLU, accusing them of pro-Brussels and pro-immigration agendas (Křovák & Charvát, 2022). Despite these efforts, SPOLU narrowly won the election. ANO came second with 27.2% and formed a government with PirSTAN while Okamura's SPD held steady.

This article investigates how Czech online media portrayed populist leaders across three election cycles. It asks how populism as such, political status, media ownership, and news values intersect in shaping visibility and tone. This study builds on the interplay between populism, media logic, and political status in shaping media coverage of populist actors. Andrej Babiš's rise as a dominant figure granted him an incumbency bonus, increasing his media salience while undermining his anti-establishment rhetoric and prompting critique of "unfulfilled promises." Tomio Okamura, by contrast, remained in opposition with no coalition potential but embodied a more consistent, media-legible form of cultural populism. Both leaders illustrate different ways populist actors navigate—and are shaped by—media dynamics. For Babiš, recurring scandals—though not inherently populist—became central to media narratives, reinforcing portrayals of him as a threat to democratic norms and echoing broader concerns about the destabilizing potential of populist leadership. Key populist attributes include anti-establishment rhetoric, broken promises to "the people," managerial simplifications, and delegitimizing opponents through negative campaigning. These elements interact with incumbency, media ownership, and scandal coverage to shape visibility and tone. The following methods section outlines the hypotheses and testing approach.

## Methodology

This study aims to analyze how two key populist figures in Czech politics—Andrej Babiš and Tomio

[17] SPOLU means TOGETHER in Czech and it was formed by ODS, KDU-ČSL and TOP 09. PirSTAN is an abbreviation of two parties who ran together: the Pirates and Mayors and Independents (STAN).

Okamura—were portrayed in the online media landscape during three parliamentary elections in 2013, 2017, and 2021. Each time period examined spans the final two weeks before election day, capturing a moment of heightened media and political attention. The central method employed is quantitative content analysis (QCA), selected for its capacity to systematically assess patterns in media coverage and draw empirically grounded comparisons across time, actors, and outlets.

The primary research goal addresses the interaction between media logic and political populism: How do media outlets cover populist political leaders, and to what extent is this coverage shaped by the leaders' political status, rhetorical strategies, and institutional and political context?

*Case and Media Selection*

This research focuses on two Czech news websites—iDnes.cz and Aktuálně.cz—that represent contrasting ownership and editorial models. While iDnes.cz was owned throughout the research period by the Mafra publishing house, part of the Agrofert conglomerate controlled by Andrej Babiš (either directly or via a trust fund), Aktuálně.cz belongs to the Economia group, owned by entrepreneur Zdeněk Bakala. Both outlets operated as leading nationwide online platforms during the study period, offering sufficient article volume and public influence to warrant focused investigation. Their differing political alignments—one broadly favorable to Babiš and the other more critical—enhance the comparative value of the analysis (Švehla, 2017; Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015).The articles were retrieved using the Anopress media database.

The final sample includes all articles mentioning either Babiš or Okamura in the specified timeframes. The unit of analysis is the individual news article (N), and the sample is cross-compared by time, media outlet, and political actor.

*Hypotheses*

The research tests the following hypotheses, which were derived from the theoretical framework discussed in the introduction.

**H1: Andrej Babiš was the subject of more articles overall, and in each election period, than Tomio Okamura.**

This hypothesis stems from Babiš's executive positions—first as Minister of Finance and later as Prime Minister—which confer both practical political influence and enhanced news value, often referred to as an "incumbency bonus" (Green-Pedersen et al., 2017). His policymaking capacity decisions likely resulted in broader media coverage.

**H2: The number of articles about Tomio Okamura declined over time, whereas the number about Andrej Babiš either stagnated or increased.**

This expectation is informed by the divergent trajectories of the two leaders. While Okamura remained in

the opposition, Babiš transitioned from outsider to incumbent. The logic of media interest aligns with proximity to executive power and evolving relevance in the political landscape (Donsbach, 1997).

**H3: The overall tone of coverage was more negative toward Andrej Babiš than toward Tomio Okamura.**

This hypothesis reflects the heightened scrutiny typically faced by incumbents. As Prime Minister, Babiš became a target of criticism related to policy failures, scandals, and unmet campaign promises—factors that likely contributed to more adversarial media coverage (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019).

**H4: Media coverage of Andrej Babiš primarily focused on general populist attributes—such as anti-establishment rhetoric, unfulfilled promises, and framing as a threat to democracy—alongside frequent references to political scandals.**

As a technocratic populist who held executive office, Babiš became a central figure in political and media discourse, with coverage often highlighting his use of populist communication strategies or unfulfilled promises and associating him with recurring scandals—elements that align with media logic (Mazzoleni, 2008).

*Method*

Quantitative content analysis was selected as the primary research method for its ability to identify and measure observable patterns in communication across large datasets. As Berelson (1952, p. 18) defined it, QCA is “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” It enables researchers to operationalize concepts like visibility, tone, and rhetorical labeling into reproducible categories.

QCA is particularly well-suited for the study of media-populism interaction, where the aim is to assess both frequency and framing within journalistic texts. Brunnerová and Charvát (2020) emphasize its value in political communication research, while Krippendorff (2018) highlights its ability to detect patterns that may not be evident through anecdotal or interpretive approaches. Furthermore, Deacon et al. (2010) argue that QCA is useful when dealing with ideologically charged content—like populism—where precise definitions must be anchored in manifest textual features.

The research employed a predominantly binary coding scheme (see Attachment 1 for the coding book). Each article was assessed for the presence (=1) or absence (=0) of selected values. Basic metadata captured included the appearance of each actor’s name (Babiš, Okamura) in the headline, lead paragraph, or body. The articles were also coded for tone—categorized as negative or neutral—based on whether the subject was criticized without counterbalance or denied space to respond.

The frequency of explicit references to “populism” and associated terms (anti-establishment rhetoric, empty promises, spreading lies and disinformation or threat to democracy) was also recorded. In 2021, a category focused on whether the media linked the actors with the covid-19 pandemic.

Additional thematic categories were tracked, including scandal narratives and references to media ownership – Mafra (for Babiš), anti-Islam and anti-EU discourse (for Okamura). These dimensions allow for richer interpretation of how individual populist profiles intersect with media coverage strategies. A subset of the sample was double-coded by an independent researcher to assess inter-coder reliability, mitigating subjectivity and enhancing methodological rigor.

To contextualize the prominence of Babiš and Okamura, their article counts were compared with those of other major party leaders (and biggest opponents to Babiš's ANO) from the same periods, based on pre-election polling: Bohuslav Sobotka (Czech Social Democratic Party) in 2013, Lubomír Zaorálek (ČSSD) and Petr Fiala (ODS) in 2017, and Petr Fiala again in 2021.

*Methodological Limitations*

The QCA approach does entail challenges, particularly related to interpretation during coding—an issue common to most media framing studies (Engesser et al., 2017). While measures were taken to ensure reliability, some degree of coder judgment remains inevitable. Another limitation involves external validity: media coverage is highly sensitive to contextual events. For example, the 2021 campaign was heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dalmus et al., 2017). Moreover, the short two-week election window may limit longitudinal conclusions.

Finally, the focus on online news media excludes other formats such as television and radio, which may have differing editorial dynamics. However, given the centrality of online platforms in the Czech information ecosystem, and the clarity provided by electoral periods, the study's findings offer valuable insights into media-populist interactions in a democratic EU member state.

## Analysis

This section evaluates the findings of the quantitative content analysis in relation to the four hypotheses outlined in the methodology section. The analysis covers three Czech parliamentary election periods (2013, 2017, 2021) and draws from the content of two online media outlets, Aktuálně.cz and iDnes.cz, focusing on coverage of Andrej Babiš (AB) and Tomio Okamura (TO).

*H1: Volume of Coverage*

Hypothesis 1 (H1) posited that more articles would be published about Andrej Babiš than about Tomio Okamura overall and during each election cycle. This hypothesis is fully confirmed by the data (see Figure 1). Across all election periods and both media outlets, Babiš appeared in significantly more articles than Okamura. For example, in 2021, iDnes.cz published 147 articles about Babiš, compared to only 63 about Okamura. On Aktuálně.cz, the gap was even wider: 100 articles for Babiš versus 17 for Okamura.

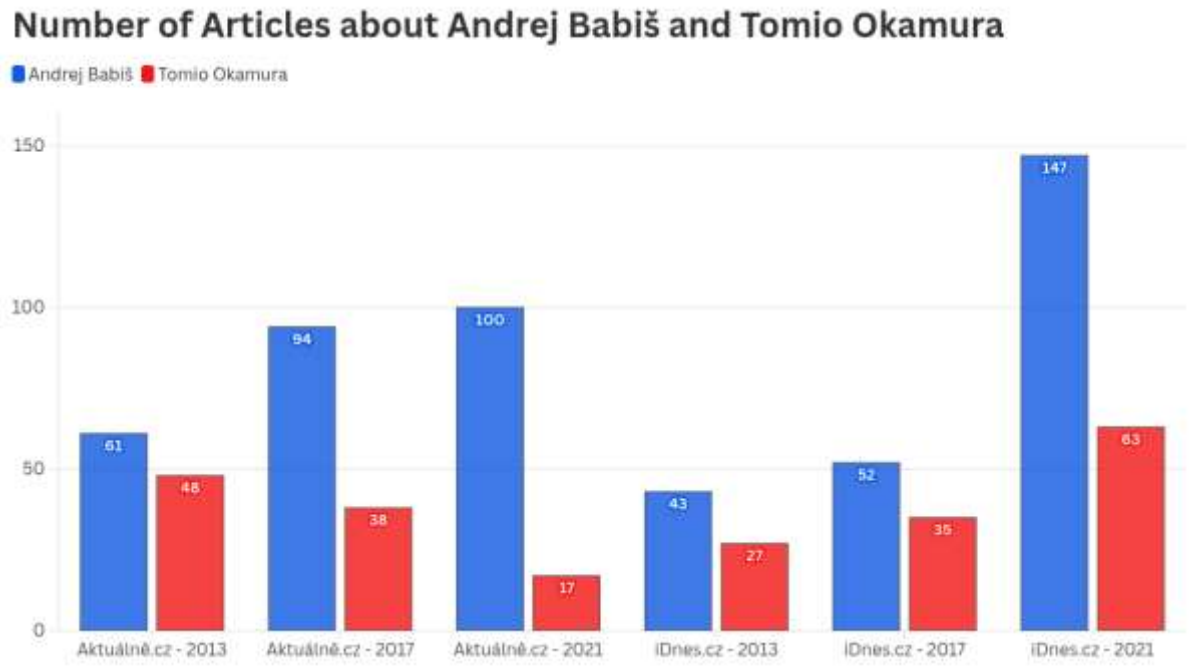



*Figure 1: Number of articles about Babiš and Okamura. Source: Author's own work.*

This asymmetry stems from both structural and contextual factors. Babiš's executive roles—as Finance Minister and later Prime Minister—aligned with media logic that privileges incumbency and policymaking visibility (Green-Pedersen et al., 2017). His centrality in government meant he fulfilled key news values such as relevance, authority, and impact. In addition, each election cycle was marked by major scandals involving Babiš—StB ties in 2013, the Stork's Nest and lithium affairs in 2017, and the Pandora Papers in 2021—which amplified his media visibility (Figures 6 and 8). These factors elevated Babiš's coverage above that of his competitors, including other high-polling party leaders (see Table 1).

| Number of articles | 2013 Aktuálně.cz | 2013 iDnes.cz | 2017 Aktuálně.cz | 2017 iDnes.cz | 2021 Aktuálně.cz | 2021 iDnes.cz |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bohuslav Sobotka | 42 | 41 | X | X | X | X |
| Lubomír Zaorálek | X | X | 38 | 45 | X | X |
| Petr Fiala | X | X | 11 | 12 | 13 | 45 |

*Table 1: Number of articles about different actors.Source: Author's own work.*

Another indicator of media salience is the position of first mention—whether in the headline, lead, or body.

This reflects an actor's perceived relevance and prominence in public discourse. In 2021, Babiš's name appeared in the headlines of 63 *Aktuálně.cz* articles and 54 on *iDnes.cz*, compared to just 7 and 5, respectively, for Okamura. Across all three election cycles, Babiš was mentioned in the headline or lead in over 60% of articles in several cases, especially on *Aktuálně.cz*. This pattern aligns with the concept of an "incumbency bonus" in media attention (Green-Pedersen et al., 2017), reinforcing his image as a central political figure.

In contrast, Okamura's media salience was consistently lower. His name typically appeared later in articles, reflecting his position as an opposition figure without executive power. In 2021, he was first mentioned in the body of 56 articles on *iDnes.cz*, and only 5 times in headlines. Although he remained a vocal and ideologically distinctive actor, media coverage treated him as secondary. The declining number of headline placements despite SPD's continued parliamentary presence suggests a routinization of his role—supporting the hypothesis that media interest in Okamura was persistently lower than in Babiš.

*H2: Trajectories of Coverage over Time*

Hypothesis 2 (H2) predicted that the number of articles about Tomio Okamura would decrease over time, while coverage of Andrej Babiš would remain stable or increase. This hypothesis is partially confirmed.

Coverage of Babiš increased steadily in both media outlets. At Aktuálně.cz, the number of articles rose from 61 in 2013 to 94 in 2017 and finally to 100 in 2021. *iDnes.cz* exhibited a sharper increase, from 43 in 2013 to 147 in 2021 (see Figure 1). This growth corresponds with his continued prominence and the media attention surrounding his multiple scandals and role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Okamura, however, the trend diverged by outlet. *Aktuálně.cz* showed a declining interest, dropping from 48 articles in 2013 to 17 in 2021 (see Figure 1). This supports the notion of media fatigue or routinization, as his narrative remained ideologically consistent over time. However, *iDnes.cz* tells a different story, with Okamura's mentions rising from 27 in 2013 to 63 in 2021, suggesting increased relevance, perhaps due to his alignment with certain anti-EU or anti-establishment themes (see Figure 8).

Thus, H2 is only partially confirmed: Babiš's visibility increased across the board, while Okamura's visibility decreased only in one outlet, remaining steady or even increasing in the other.

*H3 & H4: Comparative Negativity, Framing Patterns, and Scandalization of Babiš and Okamura*

Hypotheses 3 and 4 address interconnected but distinct aspects of media negativity toward Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura. To avoid redundancy and enhance clarity, this section examines them jointly—first assessing the comparative intensity of negative coverage (H3), then analyzing the mechanisms and framing that shaped this negativity (H4). This dual focus captures not only how much negativity each politician received, but also why its nature and framing diverged.

Across all three election cycles and both media outlets, Babiš consistently received a higher volume of negative coverage. On *Aktuálně.cz*, negativity toward him hovered around 40% across the period, while *iDnes.cz* showed an even starker trend: Babiš began with almost 49% negative coverage in 2013 and remained above 28% thereafter (Figures 4–5). By contrast, Okamura's negative coverage was lower overall and declined over time—particularly on *iDnes.cz*, where it fell below 16% by 2021. Although *Aktuálně.cz* briefly registered a spike in negativity toward Okamura in 2017, this remained an isolated case rather than a sustained pattern (Figures 4, 5, and 6).

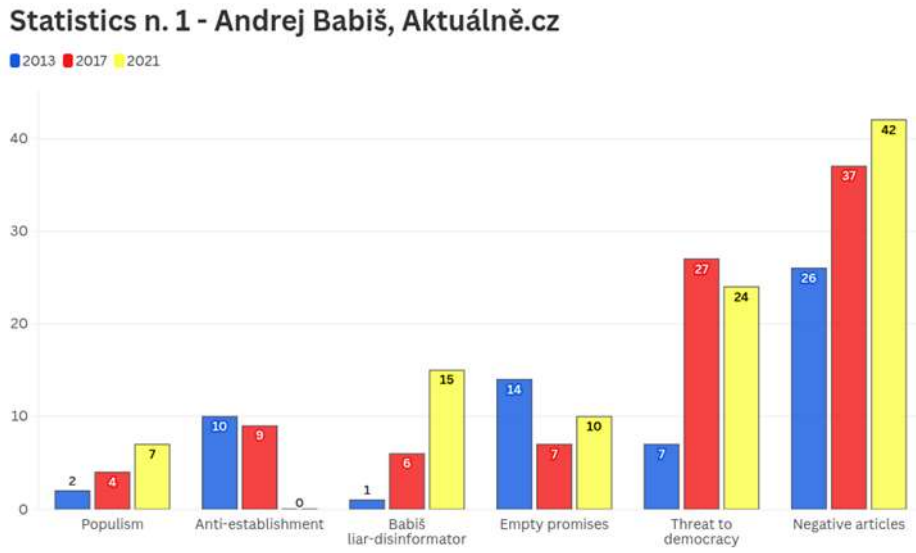



*Figure 2: Populism-related topics and negativity in articles about Andrej Babiš in Aktuálně.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

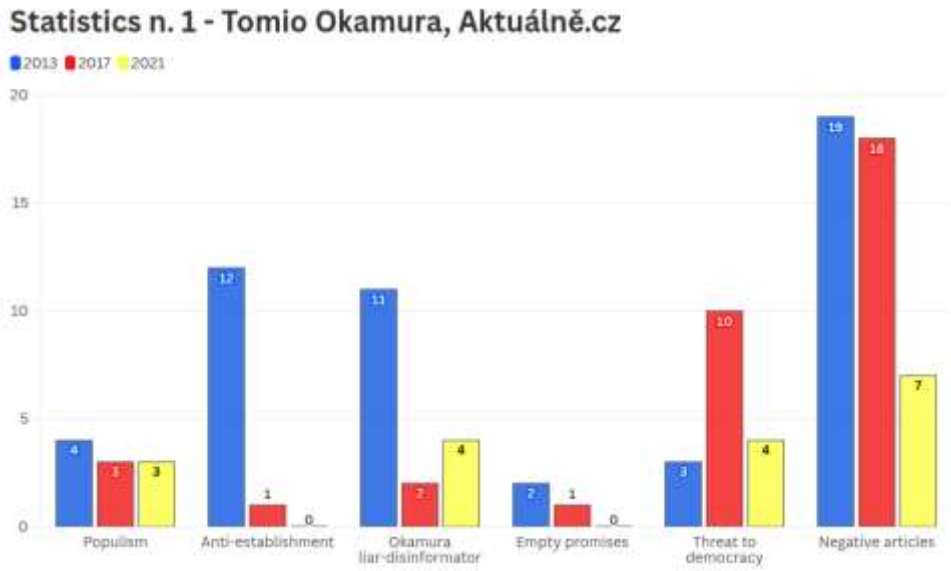



*Figure 3: Populism-related topics and negativity in articles about Tomio Okamura in Aktuálně.cz.Source: Author's own work.*

However, volume alone does not explain the dynamics of media treatment. The framing and thematic structure of negativity revealed important qualitative differences. Babiš was portrayed through a complex and evolving set of negative frames, shaped by his executive role and ongoing scandals. His image consistently combined populist labeling, critiques of governance, and scandal exposure. Early coverage on *Aktuálně.cz* in 2013 emphasized his alleged collaboration with the StB and vague promises. By 2017, new frames emerged—such as labeling Babiš a "threat to democracy" and associating him with multiple high-profile scandals. In 2021, criticism expanded further to include themes like disinformation and pandemic mismanagement, reflecting both his evolving political role and the shifting media agenda (Figures 6 and 8).

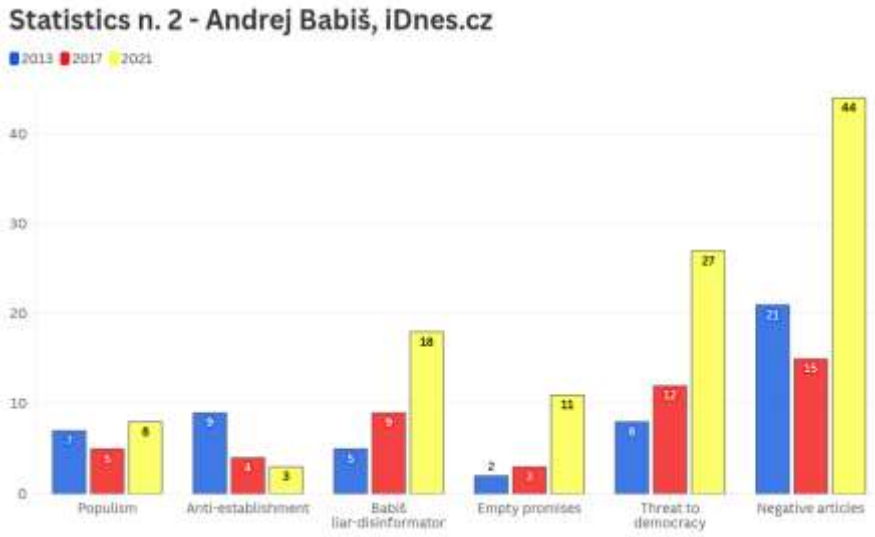



*Figure 4: Populism-related topics and negativity in articles about Andrej Babiš in iDnes.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

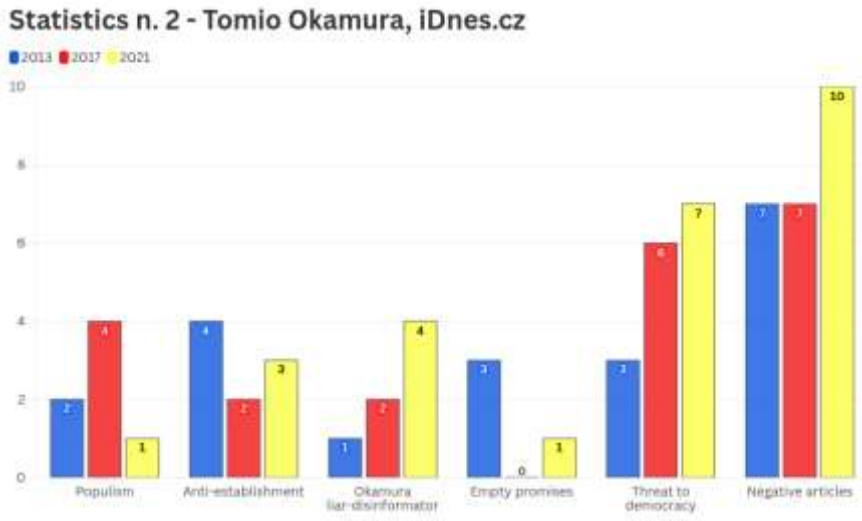



*Figure 5: Populism-related topics and negativity in articles about Tomio Okamura in iDnes.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

Okamura's framing, by contrast, remained ideologically bounded. His early negative portrayal on *Aktuálně.cz* focused on anti-establishment rhetoric and allegations of dishonesty (Figure 7). Over time, his media image shifted toward issue-specific critiques, notably his anti-Islam and anti-EU positions. These themes peaked in 2017 and 2021, particularly on *iDnes.cz* (Figures 7 and 9). Unlike Babiš, Okamura was rarely featured in opinion pieces, especially on *iDnes.cz*, whereas Babiš was the subject of consistently critical commentary on *Aktuálně.cz*, where negative opinion articles about him comprised more than 75% of all commentary across the elections.

The most striking contrast lies in the treatment of scandals. For Babiš, scandal coverage was a dominant and persistent feature. Each election brought a different scandal to the forefront—StB allegations in 2013, the lithium and Stork's Nest cases in 2017, and the Pandora Papers in 2021. These episodes received extensive attention in both outlets and consistently shaped the broader negative narrative, often outweighing policy-focused criticism, including his COVID-19 crisis management (Figures 6 and 8). This suggests that Babiš's negativity was heavily scandal-driven and intensified by his dual status as both a populist and a powerful executive figure.

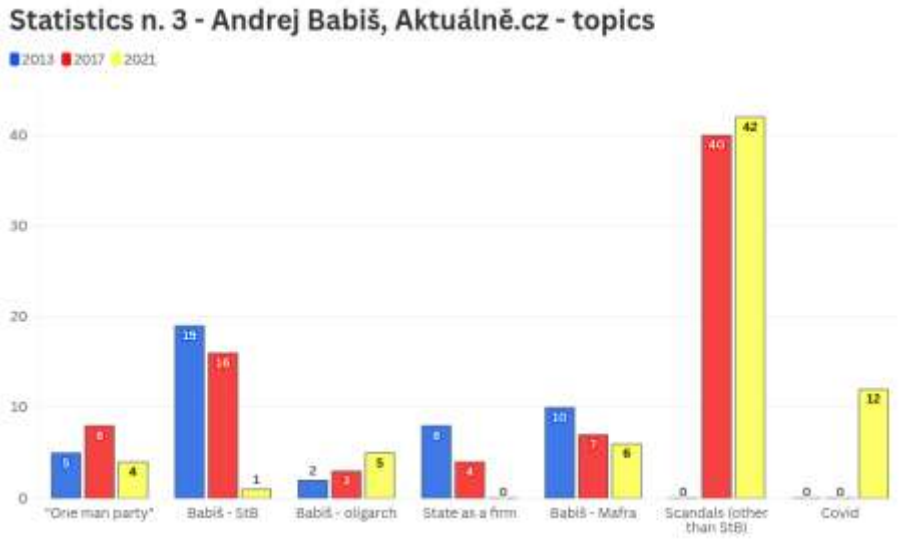



*Figure 6: Other topics related to Andrej Babiš in Aktuálně.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

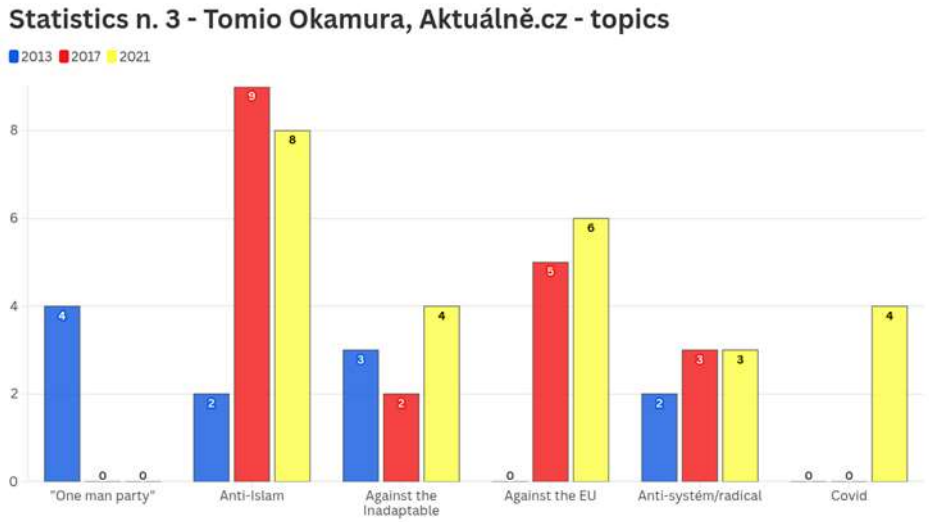



*Figure 7: Other topics related to Tomio Okamura in Aktuálně.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

In contrast, Okamura was rarely associated with personal scandals or executive controversies. His negative coverage stemmed largely from ideological extremism or controversial rhetoric, rather than misconduct or threats to democratic norms. The decreasing attention he received on iDnes.cz by 2021 reflects his relative marginality within the scandal-centered media logic that dominated Babiš's portrayal.

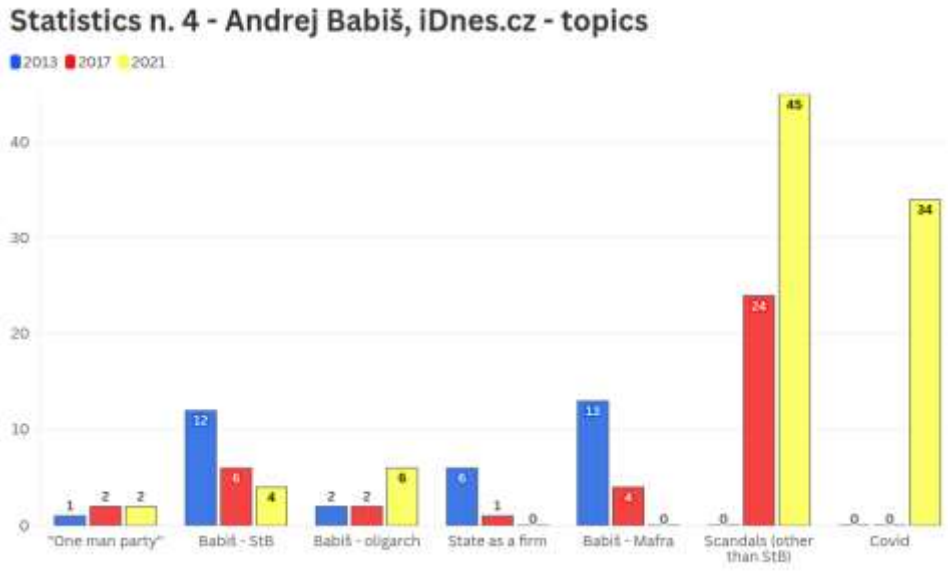



*Figure 8: Other topics related to Andrej Babiš in iDnes.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

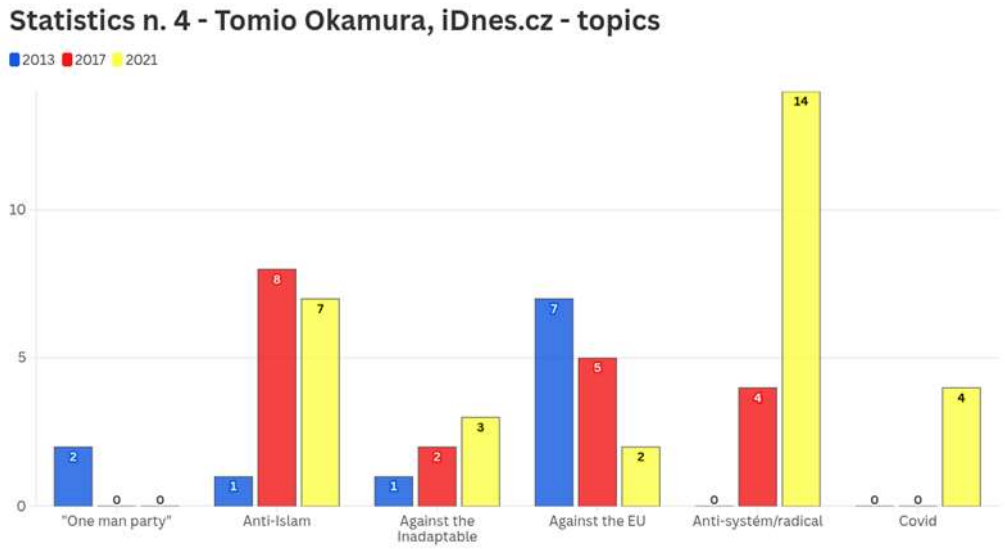



*Figure 9: Other topics related to Tomio Okamura in iDnes.cz. Source: Author's own work.*

In sum, the analysis of negativity (H3) and its thematic underpinnings (H4) reveals two distinct media trajectories. Babiš was subject to higher and more complex forms of negative scrutiny, combining populist framing, democratic concerns, executive critique, and scandalization. Okamura's negativity, while present, was more narrowly defined and ideologically constrained. These findings, supported by Figures 4–9, validate both hypotheses and underscore the differentiated media logics applied to each figure.

*Use of the term populism*

Interestingly, both actors were rarely labeled directly as populists. The explicit use of the term was rare in most cases, especially when the number of articles was high. For example, iDnes.cz labeled Babiš as a populist in 16.27% of cases in 2013, but this dropped significantly to 5.44% in 2021, when his total article count rose sharply (see Figure 2). Similarly, while Aktuálně.cz labeled TO as a populist in 17.64% of 2021 articles, this figure is based on a small sample (17 articles), suggesting that percentage-based salience does not scale linearly.

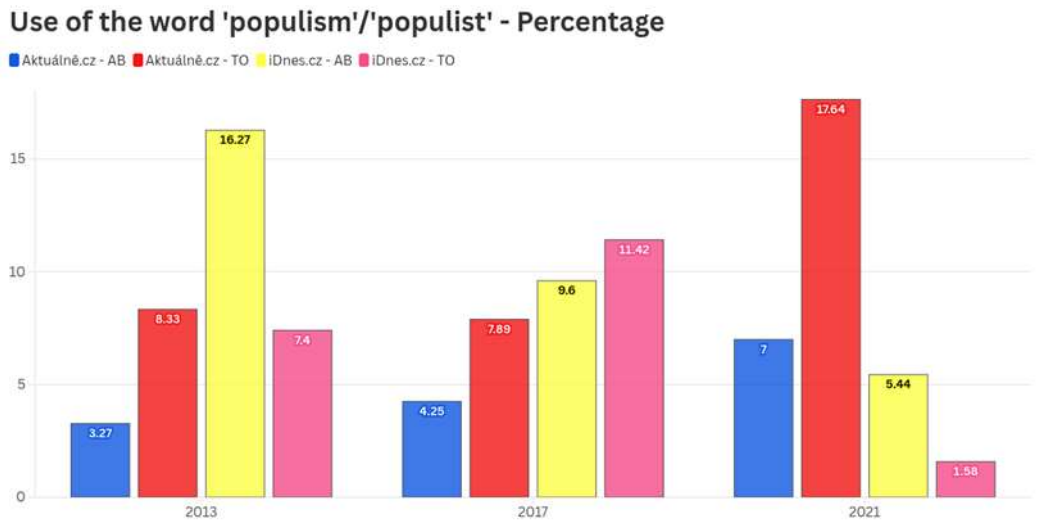



*Figure 10: Direct use of the word "populism" or "populist". Source: Author's own work.*

Headlines further underscore the rarity of the populist label; across all three elections and both media outlets, it appeared in only six headlines, reinforcing the general hesitance of Czech media to employ ideological labeling even when the scholarly consensus is clear (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019, Kubát & Hartliński, 2019). Instead, the media focused on other frames—scandal for Babiš, ideology or radicalism for Okamura—when describing these figures.

## Conclusion

This working paper has explored how two key figures in Czech politics—Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura—were portrayed in the online media over the course of three parliamentary election campaigns. Through a systematic analysis of articles published by Aktuálně.cz and iDnes.cz in 2013, 2017 and 2021, it has contributed to the understanding of how populist actors are mediated, framed, and normalized in the Czech public sphere. The normative implications of this normalization appear rather neutral: Babiš, having been a long-standing presence, is increasingly viewed by journalists as part of the political mainstream (early data confirm this, see below), while other actors—such as Prime Minister Petr Fiala—are labeled populist for making ungrounded promises, like pledging German-level wages for Czech people without economic feasibility (Dostál & Kristen, 2024). This suggests that the boundary between populism and the mainstream may be blurring, indicating that populism could already be an inherent element of contemporary politics and the extent to which the media portray a political actor as threatening depends primarily on the degree and depth of that actor's populism—though further research is needed to fully assess this shift.

From a broader perspective, the research shows that Babiš was consistently more visible, more prominent, and more frequently framed in negative terms than Okamura. This was not only due to his

executive role after 2014, but also because of his repeated involvement in scandals, which often placed him at the center of the news agenda and strengthened the “danger to democracy” label. While visibility can be a form of media capital, it often came at the cost of critical scrutiny—his association with scandals and the Mafra Publishing house were all extensively covered in both outlets. Especially in Aktuálně.cz, the coverage was heavily oriented toward framing Babiš as a threat to democratic norms.

Tomio Okamura was portrayed less frequently and with more variation depending on the outlet. His media representation was shaped more clearly by ideological content—particularly his views on Islam, the European Union, and migration—rather than personal scandals or governance. While this still led to negative portrayals, especially in Aktuálně.cz, the tone of coverage was often less personal and less accusatory than in the case of Babiš. Interestingly, over time, the frequency of explicitly populist labels decreased, and neither Babiš nor Okamura were regularly referred to as populists in the headlines or framing language of the articles. This supports the argument made by, for example, Krämer (2014) that media often participate in the “banalization” of populism, covering its actors as part of the political mainstream without reflecting critically on its discursive strategies or democratic implications.

One of the more significant findings of this paper is that both figures have undergone a process of normalization in Czech media. Even though Babiš was often criticized, especially in Aktuálně.cz, the tone and structure of the articles followed a routine format of coverage rather than a special discursive treatment. Similarly, Okamura's positions – especially regarding the EU and migration – were increasingly covered as part of the ideological landscape rather than as extremist outliers. This is consistent with recent scholarly concerns about the “mainstreaming” of populism (Moffitt, 2020), in which populist actors are no longer treated as challengers to the democratic consensus, but rather as regular participants within it. The number of articles published about both actors in comparison to other “non-populist” actors together with the negativity in the articles provides a possible confirmation of what the author calls a love-hate relationship.

In terms of academic impact, this working paper contributes a detailed empirical case to the growing literature on media and populism in Central and Eastern Europe. While many studies have focused on Western European or Latin American contexts, the Czech case demonstrates how media systems with a high degree of commercialization, partial political capture, and weak journalistic autonomy may cover populism in different and at times contradictory ways (see Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). By comparing two ideologically different outlets across three electoral cycles, the study also shows how editorial lines and ownership structures intersect with the logics of political visibility and labeling.

These findings also raise a number of questions for future research connected to media effects on public perception and behavior. News media play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of political actors and issues through processes such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing. By selecting which topics and frames dominate coverage, media influence not only what people think about, but also how they think about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of populism, this means that media portrayals may reinforce or challenge populist narratives, affecting citizens’ attitudes toward democratic institutions and potentially influencing electoral choices. Future research could therefore ask how audiences interpret

these portrayals? Do media framings of populism translate into public perception and voting behavior, or do they merely reflect already polarized political opinions? How do journalists themselves perceive the role they play in constructing or resisting populist discourse?

In this respect, it is worth noting that the author is currently conducting research into Czech journalists' perceptions of populism, with findings from a pilot study published in the non-peer-reviewed European Journalism Observatory (Křovák, 2025). The results suggest that Czech journalists no longer see Babiš or Okamura as anti-system actors but rather as stable parts of the political mainstream—further supporting the idea of a completed normalization process in the Czech Republic. Early findings from the final–and broader–study still being in process in July 2025 confirm the pilot study's findings.

Because this study was limited to online text-based journalism and two news platforms, future work could expand the empirical scope to television, social media, or tabloids. Likewise, a more qualitative approach—focusing on discourse, metaphors, and narrative structures—could shed light on the subtler ways in which populism is mediated and legitimized. The possibilities are many, and this paper serves as a foundation for further, more complex inquiries.

## References

Anopress.cz. (2024). *Media monitoring tool*. Anopress IT, a.s. https://www.anopress.cz/

Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.

Bernhard, L., & Kriesi, H. (2021). Populism in election times: A comparative analysis of 11 countries in Western Europe. In D. Hutter, M. Braun, & L. Bernhard (Eds.), *Varieties of populism in Europe in times of crises* (pp. 48–68). Routledge.

Bracciale, R., & Martella, A. (2017). Define the populist political communication style: The case of Italian political leaders on Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(9), 1310–1329. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328522

Brunnerová, O., & Charvát, J. (2020). Online political communication research methods. *Politics in Central Europe*, *16*(2), 433–454. https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0019

Buštíková, L., & Guasti, P. (2019). The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism. *East European Politics and Societies*, *33*(2), 302–330. https://doi.org/10.1177/088832541879172

Černý, A. (2018, April 19). Zrušení memoranda nezastavilo australské plány na těžbu lithia na Cínovci. Akcie se ale propadly o pětinu. *Seznam Zprávy*. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zruseni-memoranda-nezastavilo-australske-plany-na-tezbu-lithia-na-cinovci-akcie-se-ale-propadly-o-petinu-43319

Charvát, J., Charvátová, D., & Niklesová, E. (2022). Populism as a communication strategy: A case

study of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party and Tomio Okamura. *Communication Today*, *13*(2), 106–120.

Chovanec, J. (2020). Performing populist style in context. *Jezik, književnost, kontext*, 31–44.

Dalmus, C., Hänggli, R., & Bernhard, L. (2017). The charm of salient issues? Parties' strategic behavior in press releases. In R. Hänggli & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *How political actors use the media: A functional analysis of the media's role in politics* (pp. 187–205). Palgrave Macmillan.

Deacon, D., Pickering, M., Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (2021). *Researching communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.

Debiec, K. (2021). The Bohemianisation of the media: The acquisition of the Czech media sector by local billionaires. *OSW Commentary*, (378). https://aei.pitt.edu/103810/1/Commentary_378.pdf

Dobek-Ostrowska, B. (2019). How the media systems work in Central and Eastern Europe. In B. Dobek-Ostrowska & M. Łódzki (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 259–278).

Dolejší, V. (2025, May 24). Babišova taktika: Baví se jen s médii, kde jsou na něj hodní. *Seznam Zprávy*. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-babisova-taktika-bavi-se-jen-s-medii-kde-jsou-na-nej-hodni-272115

Dostál, V., & Kristen, V. (2024, November 19). Fiala předvedl čirý populismus. Možná ale skutečně věří, že tady mohou být mzdy jako v Německu. *Info.cz.* https://www.info.cz/podcasty/ceska-jizda/fiala-predvedl-ciry-populismus-mozna-ale-skutecne-veri-ze-tady-mohou-byt-mzdy-jako-v-nemecku

Donsbach, W. (1997). Media thrust in the German Bundestag election, 1994: News values and professional norms in political communication. *Political Communication*, *14*(2), 149–170.

Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(8), 1109–1126. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1207697

Esser, F., Stępińska, A., & Hopmann, D. N. (2016). Populism and the media: Cross-national findings and perspectives. In T. Aalberg et al. (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 365–380). Routledge.

Green-Pedersen, C., Mortensen, P. B., & Thesen, G. (2017). News tone and the government in the news: When and why do government actors appear in the news? In R. Hänggli & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *How political actors use the media* (pp. 207–223). Palgrave Macmillan.

Guasti, P., & Buštíková, L. (2020). Varieties of technocratic populism around the world [Thematic Issue]. *Politics and Governance*, *8*(4), 468–602.

Haller, A., & Holt, K. (2019). Paradoxical populism: How PEGIDA relates to mainstream and alternative media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(12), 1665-1680.

Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2023). Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic. In B. Merkel et al. (Eds.), *The impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on right-wing populism in Europe* (pp. 91–101).

Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2022). The populist vs anti-populist divide in the time of pandemic: The 2021 Czech national election and its consequences for European politics. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *60*(S1), 76–87.

Hloušek, V., & Kopeček, L. (2017). Different ways of institutionalising entrepreneurial parties: Czech public affairs party and ANO. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, (2), 92-115.

Hloušek, V., & Kopeček, L. (2019). How to run an efficient political machine: The billionaire Andrej Babiš and his political-business project. *Politics in Central Europe*, *15*(1), 35–54.

Honzejk, P. (2020, August 24). My vám prachy, vy nám hlasy. Rouškovné pro důchodce je nejbezostyšnější úplatek voličům v historii Česka. *Hospodářské noviny*. https://domaci.hn.cz/c1-66806210-my-vam-prachy-vy-nam-hlasy-rouskovne-pro-duchodce-je-nejbezostysnejsi-uplatek-volicum-v-historii-ceska

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.

Jirák, J., & Köpplová, B. (2020). Advantages and problems of a liberal democratic media model. Media and politics in the Czech Republic. In *Czech democracy in crisis* (pp. 157-178). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Kotisova, J., & Waschková Císařová, L. (2023). “I know which devil I write for”: Two types of autonomy among Czech journalists remaining in and leaving the prime minister's newspapers. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *28*(1), 238–256.

Krämer, B. (2014). Media populism: A conceptual clarification and some theses on its effects. *Communication Theory*, *24*(1), 42–60.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.

Křovák, J. (2025, May 31). How Czech journalists perceive populism: Between the mainstream and a threat to democracy. *European Journalism Observatory*. https://cz.ejo-online.eu/7792/top-prispevky/jak-cesti-novinari-vnimaji-populismus-mezi-mainstreamem-a-hrozbou-pro-demokracii

Křovák, J., & Charvát, J. (2022). Populismus v politické komunikaci populistických a nepopulistických aktérů: Případová studie českých sněmovních voleb 2021. *CIVILIA*, *13*(1), 13–37.

Kučerová, B. (2025, May 24). Proč dělá Okamura z médií třídní nepřátele? Ukazuje tím, že stojí mimo systém. *Seznam Zprávy*. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/volby-do-poslanecke-snemovny-proc-dela-okamura-z-medii-tridni-nepratele-ukazuje-tim-ze-stoji-mimo-system-274499

Kubát, M., & Hartliński, M. (2019). Party leaders in the Czech populist parties and movements. *Polish*

*Political Science Review*, *7*(1), 107–119.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Manucci, L. (2017). Populism and the media. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 467–492). Oxford University Press.

Maškarinec, P., & Bláha, P. (2014). For whom the bell tolls: Grievance theory and the rise of new political parties in the 2010 and 2013 Czech parliamentary elections. *Sociológia*, *46*(6), 603–625.

Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the media. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy* (pp. 49–64). Palgrave Macmillan.

McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.

Meyer, B. (2022, June 13). A playbook against populism? Populist leadership in decline in 2021. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*. https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/playbook-against-populism-populist-leadership-decline-2021

Moffitt, B. (2020). *Populism*. Polity Press.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563.

Mudde, C. (2017). An ideational approach. In *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Vol. 27, pp. 27–47). Oxford University Press.

Novinky.cz. (2018, November 16). Babiš: I will never step down, never. Let everyone remember that. *Novinky.cz*. https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-babis-nikdy-neodstoupim-nikdy-nech-si-to-vsichni-zapamatuji-40255934

Starostová, M. (2025, June 23). The acquittal of Babiš and Nagyová is not valid. The High Court again overturned the verdict in the Čapí hnízdo case. *iROZHLAS.cz*. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/online-vrchni-soud-se-vraci-ke-kauze-capi-hnizdo-rozsudek-pravdepodobne-padne_2506230830_ms

Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. (2017). Political public relations and mediatization: The strategies of news management. In R. Hänggli & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *How political actors use the media* (pp. 63–83). Palgrave Macmillan.

Štětka, V. (2010). Between a rock and a hard place? Market concentration, local ownership and media autonomy in the Czech Republic. *International Journal of Communication*, *4*, 865–885.

Švehla, M. (2017, December 10). ANO, bude pozitivně. *Respekt*. https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2017/6/ano-bude-pozitivne

Tumber, H., & Waisbord, S. (2019). Media and scandal. In *The Routledge companion to media and*

*scandal* (pp. 10–21). Routledge.

Waschková Císařová, L., & Metyková, M. (2015). Better the devil you don't know: Post-revolutionary journalism and media ownership in the Czech Republic. *Medijske Studije*, *6*(11), 6–17.

Weyland, K. (2017). A political-strategic approach. In *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 48–72). Oxford University Press.

## Attachment 1: Coding book

| Category | Code |
|---|---|
| **1 Analyzed Media** | **1** Aktuálně.cz |
| | **2** iDnes.cz |
| **2 Type of article** | **1** News |
| | **2** Opinion article |
| | **3** Interview |
| **3 Position of first appearance in the text** | **1** Headline |
| | **2** Lead Paragraph |
| | **3** Body of article |
| **4 Is Andrej Babiš mentioned in the article?** | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **5 Is Tomio Okamura mentioned in the article?** | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **6 Is the term populism/populist present in the article?** | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **7 Connection with lying or disinformation** - the presence of the | **0 NO** |

| Category | Code |
|---|---|
| signifiers like “lie”, “liar”, “untruth”, “misinformation”, ‘disinformation’ | |
| | **1 YES** |
| **8 Connection with the danger to democracy -** the presence of signifiers such as “danger”, “threat” in conjunction with terms such as ‘democracy’, “freedom” | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **9 Connection with empty rhetoric** – signifiers like “empty promises”, “unfulfilled or broken promises”, “cheating the voters” | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **10 (only for 2021 elections) Connection with the covid-19 pandemic** – signifiers like “covid”, “coronavirus”, “vaccines”, “disease”, “quarantine” and so on | |
| **11 Is the article negative/neutral towards Babiš?** – This category focuses on the overall tone of the text (in the sense of the previous categories), but also on whether the actor in question (Babiš or Okamura) was given space to express himself in the article. | **0 Negative** |
| | **1 Neutral** |

## Attachment 2: Specific Categories for Andrej Babiš

| | |
|---|---|
| **Connection with StB –** The article mentions Babiš’s connection with the communist Secret Service) | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **One man party** – The article focuses on that | **0 NO** |

| | |
|---|---|
| ANO 2011 movement is centered around Andrej Babiš as a charismatic leader who decides everything. | |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Running the state like a company** - The article deals with the fact that Andrej Babiš has publicly announced his managerial approach to politics. | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Connection with Mafra** – The article mentions that Andrej Babiš is the owner of Mafra (either directly or through trust funds). | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Connection with other Scandals** – The article mentions Andrej Babiš in connection with other scandals than his connection with StB – Stork's nest, Pandora Papers and so on) | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |

## Attachment 3: Specific Categories for Tomio Okamura

| | |
|---|---|
| **EU as the enemy –** The article focuses on Tomio Okamura's anti-EU narrative. | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Islam as the enemy** – The article focuses on Tomio Okamura's anti-Islam narrative. | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Inadaptable population groups (e.g. Roma) as the enemy** – The article focuses on Tomio Okamura's attack against Roma and other groups he labels as "inadaptable". | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |
| **Labelling Okamura's movements as antisystemic/radical.** | **0 NO** |
| | **1 YES** |

# Emotions, Belonging and Transnational News Consumption: Latin American Migrants and Affective Citizenship in Spain

by Raquel Tarullo[18]

## Abstract

This article explores the emotional dimensions of transnational news consumption among Latin American migrants residing in Spain. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, findings reveal that news consumption is deeply intertwined with emotions such as sadness, nostalgia, anger, and hope. While negative feelings are prevalent, these do not necessarily lead to disengagement. Instead, migrants continue to seek information to stay connected with their families, monitor national developments, and nurture the possibility of return. At the same time, distrust in traditional media and perceptions of political polarisation prompt many to adopt alternative information practices. The study highlights how emotional and symbolic attachments to the country of origin shape everyday media practices, challenging instrumental or rationalist models of news consumption. Ultimately, the act of staying informed emerges as a form of affective and political citizenship—one that enables migrants to maintain belonging, articulate memory, and exercise agency from a transnational standpoint. Keywords: assertive, agrarian, paternalist, ethno-religious, secular

**Keywords**: Transnational Media Practices, Migrant Emotions, News Consumption, Affective Citizenship, Latin American Diaspora

## Global Migration Dynamics: Approaches from Communication Studies

This work, currently in its early stages and presented at the HEPP 2025 Conference, brings together two areas of research that have rarely been examined in conjunction: the information consumption routines of Latin American migrants in Spain, and the role of emotions in shaping such behaviours. To share the preliminary findings of this ongoing study—part of the project Civic Dimension of the Latin American Diaspora in Spain (CIGE2023/48), funded by the Generalitat Valenciana (Spain)—this manuscript is structured as follows: it first outlines various academic approaches to the study of migration; it then

[18] University of Valencia

reviews literature on the role of emotions in information consumption; thirdly, it describes the methodology used to integrate these two strands of inquiry. The results are subsequently presented, followed by some preliminary reflections on the study.

Throughout history, people have moved across the world in search of better living conditions, shaping a far-reaching migratory phenomenon with significant repercussions for societies on a global scale. These movements have had diverse impacts on countries of origin, transit and destination (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). However, as noted by the IOM, the effects of migration are not evenly distributed across world regions. Economic conditions, geographic characteristics, and demographic structures all play a key role in shaping differentiated migration patterns (IOM, 2024). The report highlights that in recent years, there has been a significant increase in migration flows towards the Global North, particularly concentrated in countries such as the United States and several European nations (IOM, 2024).

Research on migration phenomena has gained importance across various disciplines, contributing to the development of a distinctly interdisciplinary approach (Retis, 2019). Within communication studies, this interest has given rise to several lines of inquiry, among which two dominant strands can be identified. The first focuses on the role of the media in reproducing narratives that reinforce stigma, prejudice and hostile attitudes towards migrants, often linked to disinformation and xenophobic discourse (Magallón-Rosa, 2021).

The second strand adopts a perspective more attuned to the cultural, symbolic, and media-related dimensions of mobility, analysing the relationship between communication, diaspora and transnational belonging (Marroquín Parducci, 2019; Retis, 2019; Tarullo & Treré, 2025). In contrast to media framings that often strip migrants of their individuality and agency (Martín-Barbero, 2008), transnational migration studies have highlighted migrants' capacity for action and their protagonism in the construction of new forms of citizenship in host societies (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). This perspective centres on active migrant subjects whose political agency is articulated through everyday practices and embodied experiences of politics (Flores-Márquez, 2019), often charged with significant affective and emotional dimensions (Dahlgren, 2018).

In the Spanish case, a previous study has explored how migrants seek out information to address practical matters in daily life, such as accessing services or securing employment; at the same time, information behaviours related to public debates or topics of collective interest have been shown to connect with broader aspirations for social, civic, and political integration in host societies (Tarullo & Treré, 2025).

Examining Latin American migration in Spain through a communication lens is crucial for at least three reasons. First, Spain is, after the United States, one of the principal destinations for Latin American populations, making it a privileged site for observing transnational information flows and mediations. Second, although the literature has documented how media narratives and platform dynamics frame migrants and shape public opinion and policy agendas, shifting the focus to migrants' own information behaviours enables a better understanding of how they organise affective responses—both engagement

and avoidance—to those frames.

Although there are many studies that explore the relationship between emotions and news consumption (as elaborated in the next section), there is still limited attention to how emotions and attachments influence civic orientations and citizenship practices among migrants in general—and in the Spanish context in particular. Here the informational layer is pivotal: everyday news consumption—across Spanish and Latin American outlets and digital platforms—functions as an "affective infrastructure" that organises interpretive frames, prioritises concerns, and calibrates dispositions towards public participation (Tarullo & Treré, 2025). Addressing this gap enables us to link media use to civic feeling and transnational agency, clarifying how migrants make sense of, compare, and respond to political orders across countries of origin and host societies.

In other words, the guiding questions of this ongoing research revolve around the following: What emotions do migrants experience when exposed to news? Which types of news trigger particular emotional responses? To what extent does news about public affairs in the country of origin elicit emotional reactions—and what kinds of emotions are these?

## The Role of Emotions in News Consumption

In recent decades – within the broader affective turn – research on news consumption has centred the role of emotion in audience engagement. This line of inquiry has been further enriched by the rise of social media—platforms built upon emotional architectures (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) that structure and amplify news use—and, in parallel, by the interplay between platforms, consumption, emotions, and audiences that gives rise to what Papacharissi terms "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015).

Far from being a purely cognitive process, exposure to news elicits a range of affective responses that influence both the interpretation of events and the behaviours that follow, whether in the personal or public sphere. Empirical studies have shown that emotions play a central role in how individuals process information, shape their perceptions of specific issues, and make political decisions. This line of inquiry has gained prominence in contexts marked by polarisation, disinformation, and a crisis of trust in the media—contexts in which emotions not only mediate the informational experience but also intensify, distort, or transform it into a driver of action.

Within this framework, there have indeed been studies of audiences' news consumption more broadly, in which the principal variable under analysis is the geographical context. For instance, the experimental study by Chew and Lo (2024) provides empirical evidence on the differential effects that informational content can have on the emotional state of audiences in Singapore. By exposing participants to news with varying emotional tones, the authors found that negatively framed content tends to intensify emotions such as anger and reduce levels of happiness. In contrast, positively framed news appeared to mitigate feelings of loneliness and concern. These findings underscore the affective dimension of news consumption and highlight the importance of considering the emotional implications of media content,

both individually and societally.

Complementing this perspective, Wagner and Boczkowski's (2019) qualitative study examines emotional experiences tied to news consumption about then-President Donald Trump during the early months of his first term. Based on 71 semi-structured interviews conducted in cities such as Chicago, Miami, and Philadelphia, the authors identified a strong presence of negative emotions—particularly anger, frustration, and overwhelm – in respondents' media experiences. These affective responses not only reflected the subjective impact of news content but also translated into political actions, including increased participation and shifts in news consumption routines. The study notes that many individuals adopted distancing and avoidance strategies in response to emotional overload, including reducing media exposure or steering clear of certain topics.

On the relationship between emotional load and news avoidance, the study by Skovsgaard and Andersen (2019) offers a conceptual framework that differentiates between intentional and unintentional news avoidance. Intentional avoidance refers to deliberate decisions to disengage from the news due to information overload, emotional fatigue, or distrust in the media. Unintentional avoidance, on the other hand, arises from structural barriers or lack of access. This theoretical perspective emphasises how negative emotions such as anxiety or hopelessness can drive active news avoidance as a form of emotional self-regulation.

In the same vein, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019) documents a global increase in news avoidance. In particular, 32% of respondents across 38 countries reported frequently avoiding the news—a 3% rise from the previous year. The most cited reasons included the perception that news negatively affects their mood (58%) and a sense of helplessness in the face of reported events (40%). These findings highlight how negative emotions can lead individuals to limit news exposure as an emotional coping strategy. Additionally, information overload and media distrust were also found to be contributing factors, particularly among younger individuals and those with lower educational levels.

At this stage of the study, we have found no research that examines the affective dimension of news consumption among the Latin American migrant community in Spain. This absence may be read as further evidence of the fundamental tension identified by Lacomba Vázquez and Moraes Mena (2020) between the migrant as an "object" of public policy and academic enquiry, and their potential as a political "subject."

## Migration, Emotions, and the News

This view of the migrant as a political object rather than a political subject is likewise present in another strand of research that focuses on the emotions elicited by consuming news coverage in which migrants are the protagonists. In this scenery, some studies have begun to systematically explore the role of emotions in the reception and processing of migration-related news, recognising that media frames do

not simply transmit facts, but also trigger affective responses that shape public attitudes and perceptions. Within this line of inquiry, research has aimed to identify how emotionally charged journalistic content—especially negative—can influence the formation of unfavourable public opinions about migrants. For example, the experimental study conducted by Manzoni, Murard, Quercia, and Tonini (2024) in Italy provides empirical evidence of how emotionally loaded news shapes political attitudes towards immigration. Participants were exposed to different types of news – including sensationalist crime reports involving migrants, objective statistical data, and combinations of both. The authors found that highly negative narratives triggered intense emotional responses, such as fear or indignation, which reinforced restrictive views on immigration. Significantly, even when statistical information was included to counterbalance potential misperceptions, the emotional impact of negative news persisted, influencing opinions and increasing support for anti-immigration policies.

The analysis by Theorin (2021), published in the edited volume Media and Public Attitudes toward Migration in Europe, examines the role of media framing in shaping emotional and perceptual responses to migration. Adopting a comparative approach, the study demonstrates that negative news frames – those associating migration with threats, criminality, or crisis – tend to activate emotions such as fear and anger in audiences, thereby influencing attitudes towards migrants and increasing support for more restrictive migration policies. This link between emotional framing and political orientation underscores the extent to which emotions mediate not only news interpretation but also the formation of public opinion.

## Methodology

This ongoing study examines how migrants' encounters with news shape affect-laden orientations to public life. Specifically, it asks: what emotions do migrants experience when exposed to news; which kinds of news (e.g., issue domains or formats) tend to trigger particular emotional responses; and to what extent does coverage of public affairs in the country of origin elicit emotional reactions.

For exploratory purposes, a digital survey was designed and administered with the aim of gathering preliminary data on the news consumption habits of Latin American migrants residing in Spain. The questionnaire, anonymous and self-administered, was disseminated between November 2024 and February 2025 via digital platforms frequently used by migrant populations, such as Instagram and Facebook pages and profiles aimed at Latin American communities, as well as closed WhatsApp and Telegram groups organised by nationality, city of residence, or shared interests.

The resulting sample (n=170) is non-probabilistic and therefore non-representative, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Although nationality is a relevant variable for this study, its analysis has not yet been undertaken at this stage. The same applies to gender. Both will be central as the research progresses. The questionnaire included questions regarding the channels used for accessing news (traditional media, social networks, instant messaging, etc.), preferred content types (current affairs, information about bureaucratic procedures, events in the country of origin or residence, etc.), and geographical areas of primary informational interest (Spain, Latin America, or the international context).

To address the specificity of emotional, practical, and evaluative dimensions in transnational news consumption, the survey included a battery of statements about motivations, barriers, and feelings associated with following news from the country of origin while living in Spain. Respondents were prompted with: “While living in Spain and regarding your news consumption related to your country of origin, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?”, alongside a technical suggestion to improve mobile readability.

The statements covered affective (nostalgia, sadness, anger), attitudinal (interest, distrust, perception of polarisation), and motivational aspects (family ties, desire to return, hope for improvement), such as: “I prefer to live in Spain without knowing what happens in my country of origin”, “It makes me sad to know what is happening in my country of origin”, or “I keep informed because I would like to return in the future.” Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. Additionally, to deepen understanding of the affective and symbolic significance participants attribute to transnational news in their migratory experience, respondents were offered an open-ended space to share reflections on this section if they wished.

## Preliminary Findings

The data collected reveal that news consumption about the country of origin among Latin American migrants in Spain is strongly influenced by emotional factors. The majority report negative emotions when engaging with news: 65.2% state that it saddens them to learn what is happening in their country of origin, and 57.9% report feeling anger. Nostalgia is also a common emotional response, experienced by more than 51.7% of respondents. However, these emotional reactions do not necessarily lead to disengagement from news: only 11.8% say they prefer to live in Spain without knowing what is happening in their country. This suggests that, despite emotional discomfort, there is a prevailing willingness to remain connected to the context of origin—even when doing so involves navigating intense emotions.

These emotions are clearly expressed in participants’ testimonies, such as that of an Argentinian respondent who stated: “Lately, I feel quite embarrassed by the news involving Javier Milei. Even though I don’t share them myself, they are sent to me by my Spanish friends.” This sense of discomfort speaks not only to the content of the news but also to how it circulates and is perceived in the host country—Spain, in this case. Likewise, several testimonies from Venezuelan participants reveal how sadness and indignation serve as a catalyst for sharing news on social media as a way of denouncing and raising awareness of the critical situation in their home country. One respondent commented in the open section of the survey: “The news that gets shared aims to show the reality in Venezuela and the world... People have no idea what it’s really like there.”

| **Living in Spain and regarding your news consumption related to your country of origin, could you please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements?** | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Desagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I prefer to live in Spain without knowing what is happening in my country of origin. | 4,5 | 7,3 | 18 | 30,3 | 39,9 |
| I feel nostalgic when I read news from my country of origin. | 18 | 33,7 | 21,3 | 15,7 | 11,2 |
| It makes me sad to know what is happening in my country of origin. | 28,1 | 37,1 | 17,4 | 10,1 | 7,3 |
| I get angry when I read news about my country of origin. | 24,2 | 33,7 | 21,9 | 14,6 | 5,6 |
| I do not have time to keep up with news from my country of origin. | 2,2 | 6,7 | 18,5 | 25,8 | 46,6 |
| I am not interested in knowing what is happening in my country of origin. | 1,7 | 5,6 | 9,6 | 24,2 | 59 |
| I do not trust journalism in my country of origin. | 11,2 | 14,6 | 32 | 18,5 | 23,6 |
| The media in my country of origin are very polarised. | 26,4 | 35,4 | 21,3 | 10,1 | 6,7 |
| I keep informed because I have family in my country of origin. | 38,2 | 30,3 | 17,4 | 10,7 | 3,4 |
| I keep informed to see if the situation in my country of origin improves. | 30,9 | 40,4 | 15,7 | 7,3 | 5,6 |
| I keep informed because I would like to return to my country of origin in the future | 19,1 | 15,2 | 23,6 | 30,8 | 21,3 |

*Table 1: Emotions in news consumption. Source: Own elaboration*

On the other hand, certain practical and attitudinal barriers to consuming news from the country of origin also emerge. A total of 8.9% of respondents stated that they did not have time to stay informed, and 7.3% expressed a lack of interest in knowing what was happening there. These responses may be interpreted as distancing strategies, possibly linked to adaptation processes in the host country or emotional self-regulation mechanisms in response to affective overload. Furthermore, 61.8% believe that the media in their home country are highly polarised, and 25.8% report not trusting journalism from their country of origin. These findings point to a widespread discrediting of traditional news sources and, consequently, a potential shift towards alternative channels or personal networks. In this context, several participants stated that in light of this distrust, they chose to become information disseminators themselves, particularly through social media. One Venezuelan respondent, a trained journalist, put it as follows: “Since the 28 July elections in Venezuela, I haven’t stopped sharing news about it on my Instagram stories... what matters most to me is that people don’t lose faith.” This act of sharing information not only challenges the crisis of media credibility but also constitutes a form of agency and political participation from afar.

Similarly, other responses denounce the structural consequences of authoritarian regimes: “Dictatorial governments force their population to emigrate” or “I want the political criminals who looted the country to pay for their crimes.”

Despite these tensions, the motivation to remain informed persists among many migrants and is grounded in affective and future-oriented reasons. Some 68.5% of respondents report keeping informed because they have family in their country of origin; 71.3% do so to monitor whether the situation is improving; and 34.3% state that they consume news because they hope to return in the future.

In this regard, the qualitative responses reinforce the idea that access to information is not merely a rational act, but a practice deeply tied to care and longing. Statements such as “The everyday life in the city where my family and friends live” or “I want to know what’s happening because I’m planning to go back to my country in the coming months” illustrate how the act of staying informed can serve an affective and anticipatory function: maintaining the connection with loved ones, preparing for a potential return, or following national developments with hopeful attention. In this way, accessing information about the country of origin not only connects migrants to the past, but also shapes future decisions and reaffirms a sense of belonging. Thus, staying informed is not solely a practical necessity but part of an everyday exercise of emotional and political citizenship that allows migrants to sustain their belonging, imagine possible futures, and enact agency from a position of displacement.

## Discussion and Reflections

This analysis has demonstrated that the transnational news consumption practices of Latin American migrants in Spain are profoundly shaped by emotional, affective, and political dimensions. Far from constituting a neutral or merely functional activity, the act of staying informed about one’s country of origin emerges as a deeply charged process—intertwining individual and collective memory, affective attachment, political subjectivity, and future-oriented aspirations.

As recent studies have highlighted (Chew & Lo, 2024; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2021), emotions play a crucial role in shaping how audiences interact with news content: they can operate both as obstacles—leading to avoidance or withdrawal—and as catalysts, encouraging engagement and even forms of mobilisation. In line with this, the data from this study reveal that sadness, nostalgia, and anger are prevalent emotional responses when migrants access news from their home countries. However, rather than prompting disengagement, these emotions often coexist with a strong drive to remain connected—motivated by a desire to sustain familial ties, to monitor national developments with hope for improvement, and to preserve a sense of belonging and affective citizenship from afar (Isin & Ruppert, 2020; Tarullo & Treré, 2025). The emotional investment in news consumption is further complicated by a widespread mistrust of traditional media and a perceived climate of informational polarisation. These perceptions, which reflect broader patterns of crisis in the credibility of news institutions (Theorin, 2021), help explain why many migrants turn to alternative communicative practices, including becoming content creators and curators on social media platforms. In doing so, they challenge passive models of media reception and

engage in what has been conceptualised as communicative acts of citizenship (Stavinoha, 2019; Tarullo & Treré, 2025). Through these practices, migrants not only maintain a link with their countries of origin but also participate in shaping the narratives and imaginaries that circulate within diasporic and host contexts.

Importantly, the motivations for seeking information extend beyond the present. Many respondents view news consumption as a way of preparing for a potential return, or as a strategy for maintaining emotional proximity to people and places they have left behind. In this sense, transnational news practices can be seen as anticipatory and projective—anchored not only in memory, but also in imagination and hope. The act of staying informed becomes a mechanism for nurturing relational ties, for managing uncertainty, and for articulating visions of possible futures.

This study underscores the need to adopt a more situated and human-centred understanding of transnational media engagement in migratory contexts. Emotions are not peripheral to these processes; they are central organising forces that shape how information is accessed, interpreted, and acted upon. Recognising this allows scholars and practitioners to better appreciate the multifaceted role that media play in migrants' everyday lives—not only as sources of knowledge, but as arenas where belonging, identity, and agency are negotiated in deeply affective and political ways.

## References

Chew, J. Y. Z., & Lo, C. (2024). Emotional effects of news consumption: An experimental study of positive and negative news exposure \[Preprint]. School of Social and Health Sciences, James Cook University Singapore. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/q5ekx

Dahlgren, P. (2018). La participación en línea en la esfera pública: Las ambigüedades del afecto. In *Mediaciones de la Comunicación*, 13 (1), 25–47. https://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2018.13.1.2824

Flores-Márquez, D. (2019). En mi corazón caben dos países: Activismo digital transnacional y subjetividad política en migrantes mexicanos \[Two countries fit within my heart: Transnational digital activism and political subjectivity in Mexican migrants]. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2019i0.7260

Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (2024, October 1). Estadística continua de población (ECP) 1 de octubre de 2024. Datos provisionales. https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/es/ECP3T24.htm

Isin, E., & Ruppert, E. (2020). *Being digital citizens*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Lacomba Vázquez, J., & Moraes Mena, N. (2020). La activación de la inmigración: Capacidades y agencia de los migrantes. *Migraciones*, (48), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.14422/mig.i48y2020.00

Magallón-Rosa, R. (2021). La agenda que queda fuera de los medios: Desinformación y «factchecking» sobre (in)migración. *Migraciones*. Publicación del Instituto Universitario de

Estudios sobre Migraciones, (52), 59–87. https://doi.org/10.14422/mig.i52.y2021.003

Manzoni, E., Murard, E., Quercia, S., & Tonini, S. (2024). News, emotions, and policy views on immigration (IZA Discussion Paper No. 17017). Institute of Labor Economics (IZA). https://docs.iza.org/dp17017.pdf

Marroquín Parducci, A. M. (2019). Comunicación y migración: Pedagogías lingüísticas y resistencias de la narrativa sobre la migración internacional. Chasqui. *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*, (141), 161–176. https://revistachasqui.org/index.php/chasqui/article/view/4079

Martín-Barbero, J. (2008). Pistas para entre-ver medios y mediaciones. *Signo y Pensamiento*, 24(41), 15–25. https://revistas.javeriana.edu.co/index.php/signoypensamiento/article/view/2778

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-qzg6-ge29

Organización Internacional para las Migraciones. (2024). Informe sobre las migraciones en el mundo. (https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/?lang=ES)

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.001.0001

Retis, J. (2019). Homogenizing heterogeneity in transnational contexts: Latin American diasporas and the media in the global north. In J. Retis & R. Tsagarousianou (Eds.), *The handbook of diasporas, media, and culture* (pp. 115–136). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119236771.ch8

Skovsgaard, M., & Andersen, K. (2019). Conceptualizing news avoidance: Towards a shared understanding of different causes and potential solutions. *Journalism Studies*, 21(4), 459–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1686410

Stavinoha, L. (2019). Communicative acts of citizenship: Contesting Europe's border in and through the media. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 19. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10428

Tarullo, R., & Treré, E. (2025). Prácticas informativas y ciudadanía de la migración latina en España: Una perspectiva transnacional. *Cuadernos.Info*, (61), 72–93. https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.61.87110

Theorin, N. (2021). How news frames affect immigration attitudes: Perceptions and emotions as underpinning mechanisms? In J. Strömbäck, C. E. Meltzer, J.-M. Eberl, C. Schemer, & H. G. Boomgaarden (Eds.*), Media and public attitudes toward migration in Europe: A comparative approach* (pp. 190–208). Routledge.

Wagner, M. C., & Boczkowski, P. J. (2021). Angry, frustrated, and overwhelmed: The emotional experience of consuming news about President Trump. *Journalism*, 22(7), 1577–1593. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919878545

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2018). The emotional architecture of social media. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self and platforms, stories, connections* (pp. 77–93). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315193434-6

Funding: This article is part of the research projet Dimensión cívica de la diáspora latinoamericana en España (CIGE2023/48), funded by the Department of Education, Culture, Universities and Employment of the Generalitat Valenciana, Spain (Lead researcher: Raquel Tarullo)

# The Politics of Pacification During Russia's Partial Mobilisation

by Olga Vlasova[19]

## Abstract

This article examines the Kremlin's politics of pacification during the most anxiety-inducing period of the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: the announcement of partial mobilisation in September 2022. Even after the mobilisation was announced, the Kremlin continued to pursue its depoliticisation approach by deploying a triad of measures: informational control, propaganda, and economic reassurance.

The analysis draws on 2,300 articles from major Russian media outlets (RIA Novosti, TASS, Interfax, and leading newspapers), as well as official documents and presidential and ministerial speeches. Through qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, this article demonstrates that pacification strategies became even more prominent in Russia after the announcement of mobilisation. This suggests that, somewhat unexpectedly, state propaganda continued to rely on strategies of demobilisation and depoliticisation during the mobilisation period. This approach is unusual for a society experiencing wartime conditions and a de facto mass mobilisation in some regions. This analysis contributes to the study of authoritarian governance by showing how regimes may adapt depoliticisation strategies under conditions of war to maintain domestic stability and control.

**Keywords**: Russian Propaganda, Depoliticisation, Politics of Pacification, Emotional Governance, Russia's War in Ukraine

## Introduction

Russian propaganda has attracted significant academic attention since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The literature highlights how propaganda has accelerated repression (McCarthy, Rice, & Lokhmutov, 2023) and intensified the use of violent public language (Dollbaum & Kim, 2024), a pattern typical of states at war (Lachapelle, 2020).

However, my observations from the first year of the war indicate that Russian society largely continued

[19] Kings College London

with its everyday routines, at times without seriously engaging with the realities of the conflict. These observations prompted me to examine the propaganda strategies and political and social manipulations employed by the Kremlin (Whitfield, 2022) from various perspectives, in order to understand how it managed public sentiment and pacified society during wartime.

In my previous articles (Vlasova, 2024, 2025), I introduced the concept of the politics of pacification, which refers to an approach wherein the Kremlin actively seeks to pacify a previously depoliticised society (Erpyleva, 2024; Gudkov, 2013) following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through this strategy, the regime refrained from fully ideologically mobilising the population and instead sought to "pacify" society by shielding everyday life from the impact of the war, echoing the Soviet-era dynamics described by Yurchak (2013).

For almost 20 years, the Kremlin implemented a strategy of political depoliticisation towards Russian society (Shlapentokh & Woods, 2007; Howard, 2003). By systematically neutralising the political, the Kremlin not only consolidated power but also transformed democracy into a hollowed-out form, devoid of substantive contestation (Hjermann, 2023). However, the war in Ukraine posed a significant challenge to this stance. War, by its very nature, is a political event that could prompt society to reflect on it, potentially resulting in a rally-round-the-flag effect (Baum, 2002) or, as in the case under examination, in growing anxiety that might threaten the previously stable, depoliticised consensus.

There is a clear distinction between depoliticisation and pacification strategies. Depoliticisation refers to the long-term strategy the Kremlin pursued for nearly two decades, systematically neutralising political life and discouraging active engagement with politics (Erpyleva, 2024; Gudkov, 2013). Pacification, by contrast, refers to the set of measures adopted during wartime to calm anxieties in a society that has already been depoliticised (Vlasova, 2024). Whereas depoliticisation aimed at emptying the political sphere of contestation, pacification seeks to preserve this depoliticised condition under the extraordinary stress of war.

The Kremlin's pacification strategy was intended to avoid politicising society and to preserve its detachment from politics, even during wartime. While the partial mobilisation directly heightened societal anxiety and presumably required societal mobilisation, the media narrative consistently portrayed the conflict in distant terms, thereby minimising its perceived threat to the everyday lives of most citizens. Although the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus is indeed highly developed and able to construct its own version of reality, the announcement of partial mobilisation revealed moments where this control was strained. Chaotic draft procedures in the national republics, protests in the North Caucasus, and the outmigration of draft-age men in September 2022 briefly challenged the official claim that mobilisation was partial and would not affect those without military experience. These disruptions compelled the Kremlin to blame local officials, publicly acknowledge mistakes, and expand its pacification strategies. For the Kremlin, this meant that previously employed depoliticisation strategies were no longer sufficient under the new wartime conditions, and new pacification mechanisms had to be introduced more broadly, along with targeting strategies for different social milieus using specifically tailored narratives (Litvinenko, 2022).

The overall characteristics of the politics of pacification during the war can be summarised through three main pillars: propaganda, economic measures and informational control. Under the politics of pacification (Vlasova, 2024), the deployment of propaganda systematically sought to minimise perceptions of the war's effect on citizens' daily routines, while concurrently constructing narratives of military success. The intensification of economic measures during the war's first year was strategically employed to project an image of economic resilience, despite sanctions, to manage and potentially mitigate public dissatisfaction with economic hardship and external pressures. Additionally, informational control strategies, particularly following the announcement of partial mobilisation, were implemented to proactively manage public fears and societal anxiety. The introduction of legislation on the "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces further institutionalised information control, serving as a critical mechanism to prevent the dissemination of officially suppressed narratives.

This article aims to analyse the discursive political strategies used to calm society during and in relation to the partial mobilisation. It seeks to explore the discourse and governmental strategies of the Kremlin deployed after the announcement of mobilisation in Russia, in order to uncover the manipulation techniques used to govern social emotions rather than to mobilise society. I am interested in how the Kremlin used language focused on everyday stability, security, and "normalcy" rather than overt ideological mobilisation. While appeals to stability can still be seen as ideological and recall late socialist discourses from the 1970s and 1980s in Eastern Europe (Yurchak, 2013), what stands out is the choice to avoid explicitly mobilising or nationalistic rhetoric. Instead, a depoliticised, domestic register is favoured. Defining the main aspects of this affective-domestic language used simultaneously with the mobilisation announcement is the primary goal of this article.

## Data and Methodology

I acknowledge that Russian propaganda has a multilayered structure and is disseminated through various channels and platforms, including social media, bloggers, and influencers. However, for the purposes of this article, I examine the core sources of the Russian propaganda apparatus to capture its main narratives, which subsequently serve as signals for a wider network of influencers and broader society.

To uncover specific governmental pacification strategies during the partial mobilisation, I collected data from prominent Russian media outlets, official documents, and speeches covering the latter half of the first year of the war (from 24 August to 24 November 2022). The data sources included content from the top three most cited Russian information agencies (Medialogiya, 2025) - RIA Novosti, TASS, and Interfax - which serve as pillars of the Russian media landscape and offer a broad perspective on the official narrative. Additionally, influential newspapers such as Moskovsky Komsomolets, Kommersant, and the official Rossiyskaya Gazeta contributed nuanced perspectives to the study. Government documents, official communications, and speeches were sourced from the websites of the President of the Russian Federation (kremlin.ru) and the Ministry of Defence (stat.mil.ru), selected for their central role in disseminating official information about the war in Ukraine.

The SCAN Interfax Monitoring System was used to extract relevant articles and messages from the listed sources based on predetermined keywords, including “war”, “special military operation”, “special operation”, “SMO”, “mobilisation”, “military personnel”, and “Armed Forces”. In total, 10,000 articles were extracted and ranked by relevance. The top 2,300 most relevant articles were then selected for further qualitative content and critical discourse analysis.

Firstly, qualitative content analysis was used to organise and code the large dataset (Robins & Eisen, 2017). Using NVivo software, the material was coded (Hjermann, 2023) according to predetermined themes (e.g., mobilisation, economic measures and benefits, silencing strategies and delegitimisation/marginalisation strategies) as well as emergent categories that emerged during close reading (e.g., scapegoating, voluntarism, “normalcy” narratives). This stage allowed me to reduce the volume of data and identify recurring patterns across sources.

Secondly, building on this systematic coding, I employed Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework (Fairclough, 2013) to interpret the results. This framework conceptualises discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice. In this study, the textual dimension was addressed through close attention to framing terms, silences, and recurrent tropes such as “partial mobilisation” or “everything is going according to a plan.” The discursive practice dimension guided the analysis of how narratives were reproduced and circulated, for example, through the repetition of deferred promises or the scapegoating of local officials. Finally, the social practice dimension enabled me to connect these discursive patterns to the broader politics of pacification, illustrating how propaganda, economic reassurance, and informational control functioned to maintain depoliticisation and govern societal emotions during times of mobilisation.

This dual approach enabled me to demonstrate not only what narratives were most salient in Kremlin propaganda during mobilisation, but also how these narratives operated as part of wider authoritarian practices of emotional governance and depoliticisation.

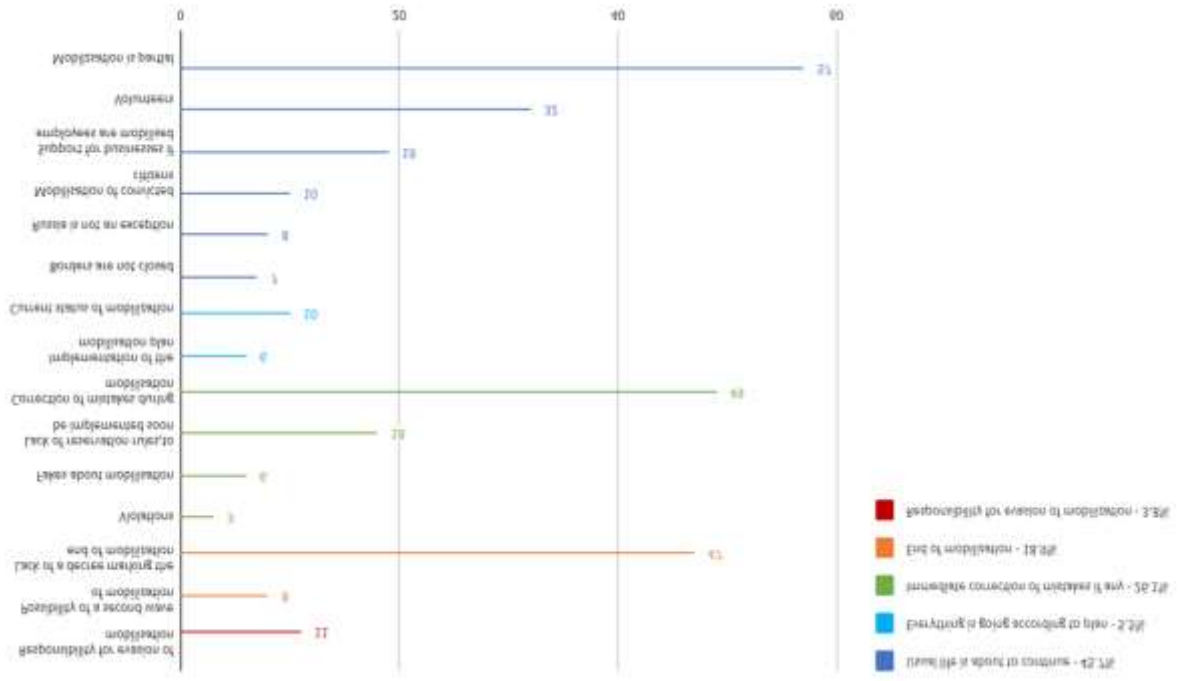
## Results

The analysis below focuses on three main pillars of the politics of pacification: propaganda, economic measures, and informational control, which were implemented during times of partial mobilisation.

### *Propaganda*

The analysis of propaganda strategies reveals a paradoxical situation in which mobilisation was presented as both real and distant, urgent and avoidable: something that happened to “others,” not to “you.” In this sense, propaganda served not only as disinformation (Turchenko, Horiacheva, Dzhus, & Shevchenko, 2021) but also as a mechanism of emotional governance, managing fear and anxiety and reinforcing the idea that the state remained in control. This reliance on demobilisation and depoliticisation

strategies is somewhat unexpected, given that mobilisation periods in wartime contexts are usually associated with intensified ideological appeals, patriotic unity, and the mobilisation of public sentiment. The Kremlin, however, deliberately avoided these typical wartime frames, instead sustaining the illusion of stability and distance from the conflict. The paradox becomes even sharper when regional variation is taken into account: in Moscow and other major cities, propaganda narratives stressed continuity and normalcy, while in national republics and peripheral regions, mobilisation often took on a mass character, forcing the regime to compensate discursively through assurances of voluntarism, partiality, and selective enforcement (Dmitriev & Sarkisyan, 2022).



*Graph 1: Analysis of Mobilisation Discourse in Russian Media*

Graph 1 shows that different strategies were used to calm different segments of society: for those who remained completely depoliticised even after the war began, narratives emphasising the continuity of everyday life were employed (blue lines), while for those who had previously been depoliticised but began to engage with the situation—and thus with politics—narratives focusing on the immediate correction of any mistakes were introduced (green lines).

Blue lines of the graph show that more than 50% of the news about the mobilisation emphasised the narrative that everyday life was continuing as usual and that everything was going according to plan. Borders remained open, passports were being issued, people were going abroad for holidays, and no trips were being cancelled. Mobilisation itself—and the mobilisation plan—was unfolding in parallel with normal life: reports on the implementation of the mobilisation plan, high salaries for those mobilised, numerous benefits, preliminary results, and regional successes in mobilisation coexisted with domestic narratives of prosperity and continuity. This communication strategy aims to maintain a semblance of

normalcy and stability, reinforcing the notion that the government is effectively managing the situation without compromising domestic tranquillity.

Even military mobilisation itself is portrayed as a norm for contemporary society, with claims that Russia is not an exception — that mobilisation occurs in other countries as well. For example, it is argued that in Ukraine mobilisation is mass-scale, whereas in Russia it is only partial.

Overall, it was the partial nature of the mobilisation that became one of the main emphases of the propaganda. It repeatedly stressed the selective nature of mobilisation, targeting citizens in the reserve, particularly those with military credentials or relevant experience (Putin, 2022). Defence Minister Shoigu reiterated that university students and conscripts currently serving would not be mobilised. With a mobilisation potential of 25 million people, this partial mobilisation was said to affect only around 1% or 1.1% of the total pool. Propaganda emphasised that alternative service would continue even after the announcement of partial mobilisation, and that the majority of the eligible population would receive a legal deferment from military service. Even where deferment rules were initially lacking for some categories, public discussions began promptly - once again reinforcing the message that the mobilisation was limited in scope and would not affect most people personally.

While the majority of these proposed deferments were never implemented, they nonetheless appeared in propaganda narratives during the mobilisation period. A wide range of groups were reportedly considered for deferments: members of Parliament and the Presidential Administration, Doctors of Science and Candidates of Science (PhDs or equivalents), part-time university students, relatives of the deceased, athletes, students of private universities, fathers of three children, and proposals to raise the age of children qualifying a parent for deferment.

Another interesting narrative that also reiterated the partial nature of the mobilisation concerned young men who had previously been conscripted for mandatory military service. From the very beginning, propaganda emphasized that those who had been conscripted earlier (young men after school or directly after university) would not be involved in the Special Military Operation, even after the announcement of partial mobilisation. This narrative—like many others—highlighted the "voluntary" nature of the partial mobilisation, although in practice, especially in some regions, mobilisation had a mass character and little to do with personal choice. Those already conscripted for mandatory service had no option to refuse unless officially exempted. That is why the claim that they would not be deployed to the Special Military Operation was made in the very same speech that announced the mobilisation itself.

The narratives that emphasized the voluntary nature of mobilisation included stories about large numbers of men and women who had chosen to enlist voluntarily, as well as numerous volunteers among MPs at various levels and members of the ruling party United Russia. The “voluntary” nature of mobilisation was reinforced by statements claiming there would be no legal consequences for evading it. These included assurances that there would be no criminal liability for taking such action. Such messaging served to reassure the broader population, especially those concerned about the possibility of mobilisation, that they would likely not be affected. There were no reported cases of forced mobilisation in Moscow or other major cities. Even those who received summons letters and were invited to enlist could simply choose

not to appear. In this way, they avoided mobilisation without any repercussions. The absence of coercion in urban centres was not just a practical reality. It was also part of a broader messaging strategy: it reinforced the image that mobilisation was selective, voluntary, and would not disrupt the everyday lives of most citizens in large cities.

By contrast, in the national republics and especially in small towns and villages, mobilisation often took on a mass character (Ilyushina, 2022). These rural and peripheral areas effectively became the resource base for "partial mobilisation," while government strategies focused on pacifying the population of major cities in the European part of the country. Only 3% of articles during the analysed period discussed responsibilities for evading mobilisation, with most of them also mentioning the absence of criminal consequences for such evasion.

Another interesting narrative, which was quite widely spread, concerned the mobilisation of convicted individuals. This was a newly invented and rather contradictory topic, but for ordinary citizens, the mobilisation of volunteers and convicted individuals meant a reduced risk of mobilisation for themselves or their loved ones. Although the mobilisation of convicted individuals is quite controversial, it was framed as something that does not directly affect you—so you could still avoid the war even during mobilisation. The government will deal with their problems without disrupting your ordinary, stable life.

A special pacifying strategy was introduced to calm those who began to worry more about what was happening and perhaps about their own future with the announcement of the partial mobilisation. All the green lines on Graph 1 relate to these strategies. The main focus here is on acknowledging potential mistakes that could occur during mobilisation and correcting those mistakes, including scapegoating a specific commissaire militaire in one of the regions. The news also attempted to address various rumours about mobilisation, reassuring the population that these were all false propaganda spread by Kyiv or its affiliates.

The most alarming news about the mobilisation actually came after the announcement of its end in the capital regions (Moscow and the Moscow region). We found that 18% of articles addressed the topic of the end of mobilisation and the possibility of a second wave. These articles focused more on the future than on the current situation but still contributed to the percentage of worrying articles. They discussed the absence of a decree confirming the end and the conditions for a potential second wave, alongside articles reassuring readers that there would be no such wave.

Thus, the Kremlin's propaganda strategy during the mobilisation period did not aim to rally society around the war, foster national unity, or encourage mass participation in the war effort, as might be expected in wartime. Instead, it was carefully structured to reassure the population, preserve an illusion of normality, and thereby prevent unrest and maintain passivity. The emphasis on voluntarism, partial mobilisation, legal deferments, and the mobilisation of marginalised groups, such as convicted individuals, served to construct a narrative that the war would not disrupt everyday life—at least not for the majority of citizens, particularly in large cities.

Taken together, these narratives show how propaganda during the mobilisation period worked less to mobilise collective will than to diffuse tension and sustain passivity. By constantly shifting attention—from

assurances of everyday continuity, to promises of corrections, to stories of voluntarism—official messaging sought to contain fear and maintain the impression of state competence. This discursive flexibility allowed the Kremlin to present mobilisation as exceptional yet non-disruptive, thereby insulating the majority of the population from direct engagement with the war. At the same time, the uneven application of mobilisation across regions underscored the selective nature of this strategy: while peripheral areas bore the brunt of conscription, urban centres were shielded through narratives of stability. Propaganda thus operated as a form of emotional governance, reinforcing the broader politics of pacification by managing anxieties and preventing politicisation in the very moment when it might otherwise have surged.

*Economic Measures*

Another major component of the politics of pacification is economic policy. These mechanisms have been used to reassure people in stability of their everyday life during the war or even to tell them that their life will become better than before. Generally, economic measures to pacify the population during the war included expanding social welfare programs, providing comprehensive support to servicemen and their families and financial market interventions to manage inflation. However, during the period of partial mobilisation, these mechanisms expanded further, aiming to reduce social anxiety, prevent unrest, and reinforce the illusion of state competence and care. These measures were not only intended to materially assist the mobilised population and their families, but also to symbolically demonstrate that military service would be rewarded and that the state would shield citizens from the economic consequences of war. The economic dimension of pacification during mobilisation can be broadly divided into two spheres: state support for servicemen and their families, and societal demonstrations of solidarity with the armed forces.

At the state level, an extensive package of benefits, guarantees, and compensations was offered to both volunteers and those mobilised under the partial mobilisation decree. These measures ranged from substantial financial remuneration and debt relief schemes to housing assistance, job protection, and medical coverage. Families were also targeted through social support measures, preferential access to education for children, and legal protections. Such a comprehensive set of measures functioned as both material compensation and emotional reassurance. The message was clear: the state would take care of “its own,” and even under wartime conditions, everyday life for the majority would remain protected from disruption.

At the societal level, widespread symbolic support campaigns reinforced the message that those who served would be looked after, not only by the state but by society at large. These included: public performances, concerts, and exhibitions by artists dedicated to soldiers and the wounded; volunteer drives and charitable aid sent to the frontlines; public awards and commemorative efforts aimed at recognising the sacrifices of servicemen. These campaigns created a visible and emotionally resonant narrative of national unity and care, while also functioning as a soft pressure mechanism, encouraging compliance and discouraging dissent.

In sum, the Kremlin's economic strategy during mobilisation did not aim at mobilising the whole society for war but rather at insulating society from the realities of war. This economic containment of mobilisation served the broader strategy of emotional governance: to soothe public anxiety, prevent politicisation, and maintain societal passivity. Material provisions were important, but their symbolic function was just as significant. By offering substantial financial remuneration the state signalled that military service would not disrupt everyday life but would instead be rewarded and safeguarded. In fact, financial benefits became one of the main motivations for those who decided to enlist voluntarily. These benefits also conveyed the message that the government remained competent, benevolent, and firmly in control of the situation.

Equally important was how these measures worked to contain potential unrest. Promises of support to soldiers' families, guarantees of employment security, and preferential access to education projected stability into the domestic sphere, reassuring households that the consequences of mobilisation would be softened. This helped transform mobilisation from a potential source of anxiety and resistance into something framed as even beneficial. In this way, economic policy became part of the wider politics of pacification: rather than mobilising society around sacrifice and collective struggle, the Kremlin used financial and social benefits to demobilise emotions and reduce political engagement among those mobilised and their families.

*Informational Control*

The third key pillar of the politics of pacification was informational control. It was not limited to overt censorship, but also operated through discursive strategies, media framing, and legal threats, creating an environment in which war realities were hidden and emotional responses were rendered illegitimate.

Perhaps the most striking element of this strategy was silencing. For example, there was near-total silencing of the scale of casualties. Official media offered almost no detail. Only ten reports about Russian losses appeared in the analysed corpus, and just one article mentioned prisoners of war. The following important issues were also completely silenced:

- The lack of proper training before dispatching troops to the front.
- The indefinite nature of military contracts (which in practice became irrevocable until the end of the war).
- Conditions of those captured or missing in action.
- Reports of legal violations, including the denial of demobilisation rights or abuse by commanding officers (just a single news item touched upon these themes).

Instead, media narratives were saturated with information on military education, retraining programmes, and post-war benefits, creating a false sense of institutional care and long-term planning.

Silencing was also institutionalised through law. New wartime legislation criminalised the dissemination

of any “false information” about the Russian army, with penalties of up to 15 years in prison. In practice, this allowed the state to suppress accurate reporting on Russian losses and abuses, block alternative information about war crimes or mobilisation failures and intimidate journalists, researchers, and ordinary citizens into self-censorship.

This legislative infrastructure created a monopoly on truth, whereby the state could construct and enforce its preferred version of reality without challenge. Silencing functioned as both a strategy of control and emotional pacification. By means of silencing, the state shielded its citizens from moral and psychological engagement with the war and any alternative information about the ongoing crisis.

Protesters, dissenters, and even those expressing concern were not only silenced through the absence of coverage but also subjected to discursive marginalisation. This involved reframing criticism of the war or mobilisation in delegitimising terms. Public opposition was systematically cast in two ways:

- As the result of manipulation by foreign actors (“naive youth misled by Western propaganda”) (Yablokov, 2018).
- As a betrayal of the national cause, implying disloyalty or treason.

This moral framing worked to isolate dissenters socially and ideologically. It also silenced potential sympathisers by associating anti-war sentiment with social deviance or external sabotage.

Taken together, these practices demonstrate that informational control during mobilisation was not simply about withholding facts but about actively constructing an emotional environment in which anxiety and dissent were delegitimised. Silencing of losses and abuses, combined with legislation that criminalised alternative narratives, ensured that the war could not easily become a site of public reflection or politicisation. At the same time, the selective amplification of “safe” themes, such as military education and benefits, created a parallel discourse of stability and competence. This discursive engineering produced not only informational gaps but also emotional reassurance, convincing citizens that the state was in charge and that there was no space for legitimate doubt.

## Discussion

The analysis presented here suggests that Russia’s wartime mobilisation strategy did not rely on intensifying ideological commitment or rallying around the concept of war. Instead, the Kremlin opted for a strategy of societal pacification. Mobilisation was not framed as a patriotic duty or a national awakening. It was presented, at least discursively, as a bureaucratic exception: a task to be delegated, technically managed, and emotionally softened.

This is somewhat counterintuitive. One might expect that, in the face of war and growing military demands, a state would seek to unite and awaken society through more explicit ideological appeals. Such an approach was common in both democratic and authoritarian wartime contexts, from the Soviet Union’s mobilisation during the Second World War to the U.S. rally-round-the-flag effect after 9/11 (Baum, 2002).

What makes the Russian case distinctive is precisely that, unlike governments dependent on popular mobilisation, the Kremlin has historically prioritised complacency and depoliticisation. The fact that even during mobilisation it avoided overt ideological appeals underlines the consistency of this strategy and highlights the unusual form of pacification pursued in wartime.

These findings complicate existing assumptions in the literature on authoritarian wartime governance, which often links heightened conflict with stronger societal mobilisation. In Russia's case, the government did not pursue patriotic or nationalistic mobilisation per se, through appeals to sacrifice, unity, or national destiny, but instead employed strategies of emotional governance designed to reduce anxiety and preserve societal passivity amid the war. Such emotional framing appears designed less to inspire action than to soothe - to reassure citizens that the war remains distant and under control.

That said, there are clear contradictions in this approach. Mobilisation necessarily disrupts routines and introduces new forms of uncertainty and fear. The attempt to both mobilise and demobilise public emotion is inherently unstable. Over time, the tensions between visibility and denial, participation and passivity, may become harder to manage. It is possible that the Kremlin will turn to other forms of emotional governance in the future.

This study has focused primarily on official discourse, which is only one part of the picture. How these narratives were received, resisted, or reinterpreted by different groups across Russian society remains an open and important question. Further research could explore how these strategies played out in different regions, among the families of conscripts, or on digital platforms and social media. It would also be valuable to examine whether the state's messaging evolved in response to shifting battlefield conditions or growing public fatigue. In sum, the Kremlin's approach to mobilisation reflects a political logic concerned not with awakening collective passion but with maintaining the appearance of stability. In this sense, Russia's mobilisation may tell us more about the everyday mechanics of authoritarian resilience than about wartime unity.

## References

Baum, M. A. (2002). The constituent foundations of the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon. *International Studies Quarterly*, 46(2), 263-298.

Cui J., Tong Q. How does the Chinese Government conduct emotional governance over COVID-19? Content analysis of video blogs //*Chinese Journal of Communication*. – 2023. – Т. 16. – №. 2. – С. 150-167.

Dmitriev, D., & Sarkisyan, D. (2022, September 21). Наверное, вы и так понимаете, что мобилизация в РФ вовсе не частичная: Кого точно призовут и как легально не пойти на войну [Probably you already understand that mobilization in the Russian Federation is far from partial: Who exactly will be drafted and how to legally avoid going to war]. *Meduza*. https://meduza.io/cards/navernoe-vy-i-tak-ponimaete-chto-mobilizatsiya-v-rf-vovse-ne-

chastichnaya-kogo-tochno-prizovut-i-kak-legalno-ne-poyti-na-voynu

Dollbaum, J. M., & Kim, S. (2024). Going jingo: a classification of the wartime positions of Russia's "systemic opposition" parties. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 40(3), 222-241.

Erpyleva, S. (2024). Protest Event, Political Culture, and Biography: Post-protest Local Activism in Russia. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 12(2), 212-238.

Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.

Gudkov, L. (2013). Russian cynicism: symptom of a stagnant society. *Open Democracy*, 22.

Hjermann, A. R. (2023). Depoliticising democracy through discourse: Reading Russia's descent into autocracy and war with Jacques Rancière's political theory. *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*, 31(2), 49-76.

Howard, M. M. (2003). *The weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Ilyushina, M. (2022, September 23). Anger flares as Russia mobilization hits minority regions and protesters. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/23/russia-mobilization-minorities-ukraine-war/

Lachapelle, J. (2020). No easy way out: The effect of military coups on state repression. *The Journal of Politics*, 82(4), 1354-1372.

Litvinenko, A. (2022). Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine. *Global Media Journal-German Edition*, 12(2).

McCarthy, L. A., Rice, D., & Lokhmutov, A. (2023). Four Months of" Discrediting the Military": Repressive Law in Wartime Russia. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 31(2), 125-160.

Medialogiya. (2025, April). Федеральные СМИ: апрель 2025 [Federal media: April 2025]. https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/13952/#gazeti

Putin, V. (2022, September 21). Address by the President of the Russian Federation [Speech]. Kremlin.ru. Retrieved from http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390

Robins, C. S., & Eisen, K. (2017). Strategies for the effective use of NVivo in a large-scale study: Qualitative analysis and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(10), 768-778.

Shlapentokh, V., & Woods, J. (2007). *Contemporary Russia as a feudal society: a new perspective on the post-Soviet era*. Springer.

Turchenko, Y., Horiacheva, K., Dzhus, O., & Shevchenko, T. (2021). Disinformation as a threat to the quality of contemporary information. In International Conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION (Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 225-228).

Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). Discourse as interaction in society. *Discourse as social interaction*, 2(1), 1-37.

Vlasova, O. (2024). War's Shadow: Exploring Multifaceted Strategies in the Politics of Fear. Challenges to National Defence in Contemporary Geopolitical Situation, 1(1).

Vlasova, O. (2024). The Politics of Pacification: Analyzing the Kremlin's Approaches to Managing Public Sentiment in Times of War. *HOW TO DETER*, 49.

Vlasova, O. (2025). From Pacification to the Manipulation of Hope: Russian Propaganda's Strategic Turn after the Trump-Putin Call. In International Conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION (Vol. 31, No. 1).

Whitfield, G. (2022). On the concept of political manipulation. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 21(4), 783–807.

Yablokov, I. (2018). *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet world*. John Wiley & Sons.

Yurchak, A. (2013). *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation*

# The Short-term Power of Narrative on Populist Developments: The Tremendous Rise and Apparent Decline of Vetëvendosje in the Kosovo Party System

by Avdi Smajljaj[20]

## Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between emotions and populism in the case of Kosovo. It argues that crises alone, in the absence of a populist narrative, are not sufficient to generate and widely spread anger among the population. The political party *Vetëvendosje* instrumentalized a multiplicity of political, economic, and social crises, first to construct a demonizing narrative against establishment political parties, and then to come to power. Within a principal–agent framework, angry voters rebelled against establishment parties and voted massively for *Vetëvendosje*. However, after completing a full mandate in government, *Vetëvendosje* failed to deliver on its promises and meet voters' expectations. As a result, the crises that *Vetëvendosje* instrumentalized to come to power still persisted. Consequently, there has been a noticeable shift in the dominant political emotions, from anger to anxiety, as key drivers of voting behavior. This shift is most clearly reflected in the electoral data from the following local and national elections.

**Keywords**: Populism, Kosovo, *Vetëvendosje*, Anger, Anxiety

## Introduction

The electoral success of the political party *Vetëvendosje*, measured in terms of vote share, has challenged even established theories of party systems. In the 2021 elections (Table 1), it secured more than 50 percent of the votes within a multiparty context, under a proportional electoral system with a single nationwide electoral district. *Vetëvendosje* succeeded in discrediting and defeating traditional establishment parties. Such an unprecedented rise is difficult to explain outside the framework of populism theories. Most studies on populism associate its growing appeal with economic and other crises,

[20] Epoka University

including corruption and poor governance (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2024).

A comparable development took place in Kosovo. However, crises alone do not automatically generate significant populist political forces. In fact, it is the narrative about the crises that makes the crucial difference in the development of populism. The narratives supplied by populist actors generate societal demand for the emergence of dominant populist politics (Karakas & Mitra, 2017). The importance of narrative in politics has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli & Shepherd, 2022; Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015). Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli, and Shepherd (2022) identify three distinct yet overlapping ways in which narrative is used and understood. First, narrative as a tool refers to deliberate techniques or devices intended to achieve specific political objectives—an approach that is particularly relevant to this case study. Second, narrative as evidence highlights how narratives function as data, while also raising ethical and methodological questions about the classification of evidence. Finally, narrative as a method conceptualizes narrative as a way of knowledge production, including autoethnography and fiction writing, within the study of politics and international relations.

This paper focuses on Kosovo as a case study, as it currently represents a clear instance of populism. It argues that Kosovo has experienced a multiplicity of crises, including endemic corruption, ineffective governance, state capture, nepotism, clientelism, organized crime, and an incomplete and overextended transition, among other factors. These crises were framed through a populist narrative and instrumentalized as tools to achieve specific political objectives. This narrative served as a key driver in mobilizing anger as a dominant emotion shaping voting behavior in the 2021 elections, which produced unprecedented electoral results. The political party *Vetëvendosje* used these crises to construct a demonizing narrative against rival establishment parties that had governed the country for two decades following liberation and subsequent independence. By attributing responsibility for the multitude and severity of these crises to the establishment parties, *Vetëvendosje* successfully activated societal anger, directing blame toward the establishment parties, portraying them as guilty. This led to the unprecedented outcome of the 2021 elections and the subsequent formation of a populist, anti-establishment government.

In the meantime, during its four-year term in government, the populist party in power failed to fulfill its electoral promises or meet voters' expectations, even at a minimal level. The government's underperformance was evident both internally and internationally. Underperformance at the international level is particularly significant, given that Kosovo still requires recognition from several states. However, during the full mandate in office, no meaningful progress was made in this direction. Furthermore, while in power, the government devoted most of its political energy to issues in the northern part of Kosovo. Four municipalities in northern Kosovo are predominantly inhabited by the Serbian community and have long challenged Kosovo's sovereignty in this area. Progress toward their integration into Kosovo's institutions through dialogue remained slow. Moreover, NATO-led KFOR forces are stationed in the region and are responsible for security. As such, policies directed toward the north are fundamentally linked to inter-ethnic relations. When *Vetëvendosje* came to power, it adopted a sovereignist approach aimed at extending state authority in northern Kosovo. It undertook actions involving police forces without prior consultation with the United States or the European Union, engaging in security-related moves with

regional repercussions. These actions negatively affected Kosovo–EU and Kosovo–US relations, which are widely regarded as vital for Kosovo. In addition, they resulted in EU-imposed sanctions and widespread international condemnation, including from states that had previously supported Kosovo's statehood. At the societal level, however, these moves were widely supported, as inter-ethnic relations remain tense and *Vetëvendosje* instrumentalized these dynamics within an ethno-nationalist framework.

The failure to deliver as a governing party, coupled with these actions, was reflected considerably in the 2025 elections, in which *Vetëvendosje* was no longer able to secure the absolute majority it had achieved in previous elections. During the 2025 electoral campaign, the government presented its actions in northern Kosovo as its primary success story. Nevertheless, a significant degree of societal dissatisfaction with the new government became evident. This dissatisfaction pushed disillusioned and disappointed voters to shift from the anger that had shaped voting behavior in the 2021 elections towards anxiety as the dominant emotional driver of electoral behavior in 2025. Anxiety as an emotion tends to intensify in the context of persistent crises, particularly when no credible hope is perceived and no specific "demon" can be clearly identified as responsible. Feeling betrayed by anger-driven voting choices, voters either returned to traditional parties or withdrew from electoral participation altogether.

The paper is structured around a sequential development of populism: the emergence of crises, the construction of a narrative, the intensification of anger, the prevalence of populist attitudes and behavior, and the eventual rise of anxiety as an emotion stemming from disappointment and insecurity.

The crises that constitute the breeding ground for populism include systemic, political, economic, and social dimensions. These range from a prolonged and incomplete democratic transformation to weak state institutions captured by establishment parties, widespread corruption, nepotism, clientelism, favoritism, legitimacy crisis, and the inability to extend effective state governance across the entire territory, among other factors.

The second stage of development concerns the narrative of crises presented to a dissatisfied public. In this context, the paper draws on Laclau's (2005) discourse analysis perspective of the concept of populism, within which populist narratives function as mobilizing forces. However, when examining the consequences of populism and populist governance, Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2013) conceptualization of populism as a thin-centered and inherently illiberal ideology applies. The data used to analyze the populist narrative are drawn from the rhetoric of the supply side, focusing on slogans and political speeches that constitute the meaning-making power of populist discourse from the pre-2021 electoral period through the 2025 elections.

The subsequent stage concerns the populist narrative that *Vetëvendosje* constructed and used to gain power by framing the multiplicity of crises. This narrative amplified anger among voters and became a central emotional driver of political behavior. Its effects were most clearly reflected in electorally unprecedented results within a multiparty system operating under proportional representation. At the societal level, the concept of anger draws on theories from social psychology (Brader & Marcus, 2013), which suggest that when a clear actor can be blamed for a crisis, anger, rather than fear, is more likely to emerge and develop.

Finally, the analysis turns to the consolidation of populist attitudes during a full governing mandate led by a populist party. The lack of results during this period of populist governance generated widespread disappointment and contributed to the emergence of fear and anxiety as dominant political emotions, particularly in the context of persistent crises and the absence of credible alternatives.

## Data and Methods

The research method used in this paper is tailored to methodologies used in the study of political narratives, the meaning-making power of political speeches, and their impact on political attitudes and behavior. Narrative analysis is particularly useful to this study, as narrative functions as a primary driver of populist success and populist politics in our case study.

The analysis is based on secondary data drawn from political speeches, with a particular focus on campaign slogans used within the populist narrative of the party. These slogans provided voters with a coherent worldview of the past, present, and future of politics, as well as of political rivals more broadly. The slogans were collected from media sources and reflect those that dominated the relevant electoral campaigns.

Finally, the paper adopts a single-case study approach, which allows for an in-depth analysis of populist developments within the selected case.

## Analysis/Results

*The Crises*

Kosovo was liberated after the 1998–1999 war. However, its democratization trajectory began earlier, in the early 1990s, as part of the broader wave of democratization and liberalization across Eastern Europe. In addition, Kosovo underwent the processes of independence and state formation, resulting in multiple, simultaneous transitions, along with political, economic, and social developments, which further complicated the situation. Although Kosovo declared independence in 2008, it remains in a prolonged phase of democratic transition. Even after three decades, prospects for democratic consolidation, especially at the cultural and behavioral levels, remain uncertain, especially amid wider global trends of democratic backsliding.

Following the war in 1999, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) took charge of administering and governing Kosovo (Caplan, 2012). UNMIK was established under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and exercised extensive authority, including legislative, executive, and judicial powers (Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Its governance structure was organized into four pillars, covering all major dimensions of governance. This institutional arrangement is important to highlight in relation to questions of responsibility for the crises that followed.

The populist narrative intentionally offers a narrower interpretation of responsibility by selectively identifying those deemed accountable for these crises. In particular, blame is directed exclusively toward establishment political parties. Over time, UNMIK supported the gradual creation of national and local-level institutions, progressively transferring authority to them. Within several years, substantial powers were devolved to domestic authorities, albeit under limited international supervision, including in the period following Kosovo's declaration of independence (Bargués-Pedreny, 2016).

Within this multifaceted context, major historical achievements, such as freedom and statehood, were accompanied by significant failures. Numerous governance failures contributed to the emergence and persistence of crises. Overall levels of corruption remained high (Transparency International, 2014), while the process of institutional consolidation proved difficult for the new state. Kosovo's institutions became vulnerable to state capture, a phenomenon often attributed to the behavior of political parties (Coelho, 2018). These dynamics were further reinforced by widespread nepotism, clientelism, and favoritism, which became entrenched practices and contributed to perceptions of state failure (Nicasia & Cemaliye, 2021). In addition to these structural problems, successive governments led by political parties consistently underperformed.

Thus, the broad trajectory of post-war developments over two decades after the war points towards persistent crises and the failure of governments and political parties to deliver. These shortcomings were subsequently exploited and instrumentalized by the then-opposition party, *Vetëvendosje*. It skillfully leveraged these failures to demonize former governing parties, construct a populist political setting, and ultimately come to power.

*The Narrative*

Drawing on the conceptualization of narrative as a tool, a deliberate technique or device used to achieve specific political objectives (Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli & Shepherd, 2022), *Vetëvendosje* employed narrative strategically to advance its political goals. Initially, the party used the narrative to demonize political opponents and facilitate its rise to power, after which it sought to consolidate that power and transform politics in line with its political objectives.

Referring to the broader developments following the 1999 war up to 2020, a period encompassing two decades of governance by establishment parties, *Vetëvendosje* constructed a narrative portraying this entire period as one of comprehensive destruction. This overgeneralized populist narrative proved instrumental in enabling the party's electoral breakthrough. At its core, the narrative aimed to delegitimize the establishment parties.

A central element of this discourse is temporal framing. *Vetëvendosje* consistently depicts the twenty-year period of governance by establishment parties as "the old regime" (Kurti, 2020). This framing is coupled with promises of radical change, presented as the creation of a new political order, referred to as "the Third Republic" (Kurti, 2018), invoking revolutionary symbolism reminiscent of the French Revolution. Within this temporal framework, all establishment parties are homogenized and collectively portrayed as

responsible for Kosovo's failures.

Within this timeframe, the narrative further elaborates on the alleged characteristics of governance during these two decades. A recurring claim advanced by *Vetëvendosje* is that "everything in Kosovo has been destroyed in twenty years of governing" (Murati, 2014). This assertion functions as a foundational maxim of the party's narrative and represents one of the most frequently repeated phrases in its political discourse. It serves as a flexible narrative framework capable of legitimizing a wide range of accusations. In the public imagination, establishment parties are thus depicted as actors who not only misgoverned but also destroyed the country and its future prospects. Such framing provides a powerful mechanism for discrediting and delegitimizing political rivals, helping to pave the way for *Vetëvendosje*'s electoral victory.

All political failures and governance deficiencies associated with the twenty-year period are attributed to the former governing parties. Corruption and state capture, in particular, are central components of this narrative and are explicitly linked to the "old regime" (Kurti, 2020). Claims that the old regime was corrupt and had captured the state further reinforce the broader assertion that the country had been systematically destroyed over two decades. This repetition strengthened the narrative's credibility and enhanced its resonance with the masses.

The narrative also incorporated punitive promises, notably the pledge that "thieves", a term used to describe politicians associated with the old regime, would be imprisoned. This sentiment was frequently articulated through the slogan "The day has come: thieves to prison" (Kurti, 2019). Such language intensified the moral polarization central to populist discourse.

In addition, *Vetëvendosje* integrated national issues into its narrative, particularly those related to the dialogue with Serbia and the settlement proposal for the Land Swap agreement, aired by the former President of Kosovo, and former leader of PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo). Agreements emerging from the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, notably the 2013 agreement (Kurti, 2024), as well as the Land Swaps proposal advanced by former political leaders, were framed as acts of national treason. Political parties that supported or proposed such initiatives were labeled as traitors.

As such, among others, *Vetëvendosje* created a demonizing narrative for the establishment parties, discrediting them and contributing to their historical loss in the 2021 elections.

| | Votes | Percentage | Seats |
|---|---|---|---|
| **2010** | 88652 | 12.69 | 14 |
| **2014** | 99397 | 13.59 | 16 |
| **2017** | 200135 | 27.49 | 32 |
| **2019** | 221001 | 25.49 | 29 |
| **2021** | 438335 | 50.28 | 58 |
| **2025** | 396787 | 42.30 | 48 |

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve (https://kqz-ks.org/)

*Table 1: Votes for Vetëvendosje from 2010 to the last elections*

*The Anger*

Such a narrative was expected to generate a mass popular reaction. It amplified the already low levels of trust that citizens exhibited toward politicians and political parties. At the same time, dissatisfaction with political, economic, and social developments at both the national and local levels had been steadily increasing (UNDP, 2019). While many of the problems highlighted were grounded in reality, the narrative exaggerated and overgeneralized these challenges, further intensifying public unhappiness and dissatisfaction with political parties.

Studies in political psychology demonstrate that when political dissatisfaction arises from crises and governance failures, and when a clear actor can be identified as responsible, anger is likely to emerge and develop (Brader & Marcus, 2013). The development of anger can be explained through a principal–agent framework. Society, as the principal, had repeatedly entrusted establishment parties, as agents, with governing authority for roughly two decades, from 2000 until the 2021 elections. Over time, these agents failed to meet the expectations of the principal, thereby violating an implicit social contract.

However, as discussed earlier in the section on crises, this period also witnessed important historical achievements, including liberation and state creation. On the other side, there were considerable shortcomings, such as corruption, state capture, nepotism, and clientelism. What ultimately mobilized society and voters, however, was the exaggerated narrative constructed by *Vetëvendosje*. This narrative demonized establishment parties, ignoring their considerable achievements, and framed them as exclusively guilty and responsible for the multiplicity and severity of crises.

By doing so, the narrative offered voters a clear target for blame, allowing the "wrath" of the principal to be directed toward the agent, namely, the politicians associated with the so-called old regime. Establishment parties were portrayed as having "destroyed" the country during twenty years of governance. This anger was ultimately expressed through electoral outcomes: traditional establishment parties suffered dramatic losses (Table 1), while *Vetëvendosje* achieved an unprecedented absolute majority within a multiparty system operating under proportional representation and a single nationwide electoral district. In this sense, *Vetëvendosje*'s narrative functioned as a cognitive and emotional guide for voters, structuring the expression of anger through the ballot box. By clearly defining who was to be blamed (the old regime), the narrative transformed diffuse dissatisfaction into targeted political anger.

*The Populist Attitude*

The populist narrative created by *Vetëvendosje* mobilized emotional voting in Kosovo, with anger accumulating towards establishment parties. Drawing on Laclau's theory, under normal conditions, social demands take the form of rational, contextually situated requests, implicitly assuming the legitimacy of governing institutions and their capacity to address them. However, when a plurality of such demands remains unmet, they may coalesce into a unified opposition to power that challenges institutional authority. In this process, one demand can acquire an excessive yet vague meaning, functioning as a universal symbol of representation, which Laclau calls an empty signifier. This mechanism generates a precarious but totalizing political identity, allowing the social logic of institutional governance to give way to a political logic centered on indeterminacy and radical change.

According to Laclau, processes of social change occur through the articulation of equivalence and difference, whereby multiple unmet demands are linked together to form a collective political subject. This articulation also entails the construction of internal frontiers and the identification of an institutionalized "other" against which the collective defines itself (Laclau 2005, p. 117). In these terms, *Vetëvendosje* succeeded in mobilizing citizens who had previously become disenchanted with political parties and politics more broadly, largely because their demands had been consistently ignored by successive governments.

By demonizing establishment parties, identifying clear culprits for political failures and crises, and fostering anger as an emotion, *Vetëvendosje* transformed voting behavior into emotionally driven participation. Mass electoral support was achieved primarily through anger, marking a significant departure from earlier voting patterns that had been heavily based on clientelism. Anger thus played a decisive role in *Vetëvendosje*'s unprecedented success in the 2021 elections and contributed to increased voter turnout.

At the same time, the narrative generated hope in a distinctly populist manner. *Vetëvendosje* portrayed itself as an outsider, untainted by the "old regime," thereby insulating itself from blame for past failures and crises. This positioning enabled the party to organize support around the promise that "with us, there is hope" and to frame the narrative as a referendum against the old regime. Central populist themes included combating corruption, nepotism, state capture, and clientelism. In this respect, *Vetëvendosje*

relied on a form of valence populism (Zulianello & Larsen, 2024), characterized by a focus on widely shared concerns, such as transparency, integrity, and democratic governance, rather than a clearly articulated position along the left–right ideological spectrum.

This non-ideological, catch-all populist approach proved particularly effective in mobilizing mass support. Rather than advancing a coherent ideological program, *Vetëvendosje* drew on its narrative framework to present itself as the savior of the nation. Their appeal for regime change and to build the "Third Republic" was perceived by the voters as a change that would be different from the old regime, which was portrayed as dark. The party thus promised not only to end the crises but also to resolve the problems attributed to establishment parties.

However, outcomes commonly associated with populist governance also became true here. Populist actors typically perform effectively while in opposition, mobilizing voters through critique and contestation. Once in power, however, inherent contradictions tend to surface and deepen. Having won office under the promise of liberating the state from capture, the governing populist party instead began to colonize state institutions and public companies (Müller, 2016). They did not fight nepotism and clientelism. On the contrary, they increased it further, justifying it by claims that party members and supporters had been discriminated against under the old regime and had therefore been denied equal opportunities. In this way, a distinct form of populist nepotism, clientelism, and state capture emerged. Moreover, the government sought to challenge the rule of law and the proper functioning of institutions in ways that threatened core principles of liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Such actions were justified by the assertion that institutions remained under the control of the old regime and were therefore untrustworthy. All the governing boards of public companies at the national level became heavily populated by party members, loyalists, and relatives of party officials (Kallxo.com, 11.01.2023). In addition, many key positions within ministries were left for years under the control of acting officials appointed by the party, despite this practice being inconsistent with the law (CorrWatch, 2024).

*Anxiety*

As a populist party in government, *Vetëvendosje* failed to satisfy the emotions and expectations of the voters who supported it in 2021. While it gained electoral support through anger mobilized by its narrative, it proved unable to deliver on its promises once in office. The crises that had initially provoked voter anger, like corruption, clientelism, nepotism, and state capture, persisted. This persistence generated renewed dissatisfaction, but unlike in 2021, voters did not know who to blame.

In such contexts of prolonged crisis and insecurity, studies suggest that anger may give way to anxiety (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Anxiety emerges when individuals perceive no credible alternatives and little hope for change. Voters respond by withdrawing rather than confronting, seeking to escape from the crises. This shift is reflected in declining voter turnout (46%) as well as in increased emigration, as citizens choose to leave rather than remain engaged in a political system perceived as unresponsive. These developments correlate closely with declining hope and growing disappointment following the populist narrative that had previously promised radical change.

The enthusiasm evident in the 2021 elections has largely dissipated. *Vetëvendosje* and its supporters have increasingly adopted a defensive posture in response to criticism regarding unmet promises, which is a marked contrast to the offensive and confrontational approach that enabled the party to secure over 50% of the votes in 2021. Popular support has gradually eroded, with remaining backing largely concentrated among party militants and individuals who directly benefit from clientelist practices associated with the current government, despite the party's earlier condemnation of such practices while in opposition.

This trend toward anxiety is likely to persist, given the government's failure to deliver on its promises and the absence of credible political alternatives. Many citizens appear increasingly disillusioned, perceiving little hope for meaningful solutions from either the left or the right to the everyday political problems they face.

The populist government tried to conceal its failure by focusing on the issue of Kosovo's northern part, driven by ethnonationalist and sovereignist attitudes. While this strategy may have helped save a number of votes compared to 2021, it appears primarily to have delayed, rather than prevented, the further development of anxiety among voters, as numerous social, economic, and governance issues that initially motivated electoral support remain largely unaddressed.

## Conclusion

*Vetëvendosje* represents a case of a populist party that mobilized voters and attained power through a populist narrative centered on Kosovo's multiple crises. By deploying this narrative, the party demonized and delegitimized establishment parties, amplifying widespread voter dissatisfaction. In doing so, it fostered anger as the primary driver of voting behavior and political attitudes. However, once in government, *Vetëvendosje* failed to respond effectively to this anger and did not meet voters' expectations in terms of governance and policy delivery. As a result, a new wave of dissatisfaction emerged, increasingly taking the form of anxiety.

This anxiety represents a distinct emotional response to persistent crises, rooted in disappointment not only with establishment parties but also with the populist alternative itself. Unlike in 2021, voters now lack a clear actor to blame and perceive no political party as a credible source of hope. The issues that citizens identify as their primary concerns remain largely unchanged from the period preceding the 2021 elections. Poverty, unemployment, healthcare, corruption, nepotism, justice, and related challenges continue to rank among the top priorities for citizens, as confirmed by a poll conducted by UNDP and USAID (Public Pulse, Brief XXVI, 2024).

Thus, the political party *Vetëvendosje*, which secured overwhelming electoral support in 2021 on the promise of addressing these concerns, failed to fulfill its promises. At the same time, traditional parties that lost the elections in 2021 have not undergone sufficient reform to restore public trust. This is

particularly evident in municipalities where they continue to govern at the local level, as many of the political vices for which they were criticized during the 2021 campaign remain present in their governing practices. This persistence highlights the challenges these parties face in regaining the legitimacy they lost.

In such a context, citizens no longer identify a specific “demon” to blame, as they did in 2021. Instead, political parties are becoming increasingly indistinguishable from one another. Consequently, anxiety has emerged as the prevailing political attitude among citizens.

## References

Albertson, B., & Gadarian, S. K. (2015). *Anxious politics: Democratic citizenship in a threatening world*. Cambridge University Press.

Arslantaş, Ş., & Arslantaş, D. (2024). Populism and crisis: Evidence from the periphery of Europe. *Mediterranean Politics*, 29(3), 285-306.

Barthwal-Datta, M., Krystalli, R., & Shepherd, L. J. (2022). Narrative in Politics and the Politics of Narrative. In *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory* (pp. 465-478). Routledge.

Brader, T., & Marcus, G. E. (2013). EMOTION AND POLITICAL. *The Oxford handbook of political psychology*, 165.

Bargués-Pedreny, P. (2016). From promoting to de-emphasizing ‘ethnicity’: Rethinking the endless supervision of Kosovo. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 10(2), 222-240.

Caplan, R. (Ed.). (2012). *Exit strategies and state building*. Oxford University Press.

Coelho, J. (2018). Seizing the state under international administration: the case study of state capture and corruption in Kosovo. *Southeastern Europe*, 42(1), 107-130.

CorrWatch 2024. REAGIM PUBLIK – Për mbajtjen në mënyrë të paligjshme të pozitave drejtuese me Ushtrues Detyre. https://corrwatch.org/2024/09/27/reagim-publik-per-mbajtjen-ne-menyre-te-paligjshme-te-pozitave-drejtuese-me-ushtrues-detyrereagim-publik/

Kallxo.com 11.01.2023. “Të vërtetat” e LVV-së për emërimet politike nëpër bordet e ndërmarrjeve publike. https://kallxo.com/krypometer/te-vertetat-e-lvv-se-per-emerimet-politike-neper-bordet-e-ndermarrjeve-publike/

Karakas, L. D., & Mitra, D. 2017. Inequality, redistribution, and the rise of outsider candidates. Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Lemay-Hébert, N. (2009). State-building from the outside-in: UNMIK and its paradox. *Journal of Public*

*and International Affairs*.

Livholts, M., & Tamboukou, M. (2015). *Discourse and narrative methods: Theoretical departures, analytical strategies and situated writings*.

Kurti, A. (2018, July 07). Albin Kurti kujton 2 Korrikun, kërkon 'Republikë të Tretë'. Kallxo.com. https://kallxo.com/shkurt/albin-kurti-kujton-2-korrikun-kerkon-republike-te-trete/

Kurti, A. (2020, March 13). Për rrëzimin e qeverisë u bë bashkë i gjithë regjimi i vjetër. RTK. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB0jerWdeUE&ab_channel=RTK

Kurti, A. (2020, June 12). Sfida jonë e radhës, çlirimi i Kosovës nga korrupsioni dhe kapësit e shtetit. Kallxo.com. https://kallxo.com/lajm/albin-kurti-sfida-jone-e-radhes-clirimi-i-kosoves-nga-korrupsioni-dhe-kapesit-e-shtetit/

Kurti, A. (2024, April 19). Marrëveshja e 2013-s shkel Kushtetutën e po shkelet nga Serbia. KOHA.net. https://www.koha.net/arberi/kurti-marreveshja-e-2013-s-shkel-kushtetuten-e-po-shkelet-nga-serbia

Kurti, A. (2019, September 25). Erdhi dita, hajnat në burg - Lajmet e fundit. *Zëri*. https://zeri.info/zgjedhjet-2019/290600/kurti-erdhi-dita-hajnat-ne-burg/

Murati, H. (2024, November 11). Kosova është shkatërruar për 20 vite. *Gazeta Express*. https://www.gazetaexpress.com/kosova-eshte-shkaterruar-per-20-vite-perplasen-hoti-dhe-murati-ne-kuvend1/

Müller, J.-W. 2016. *What is Populism?*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mudde, C., and C. R. Kaltwasser, ed. (2013). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nicasia, P. Cemaliye, B. (2021). International and local efforts to fight corruption in Kosovo need a common long-term strategy that boosts local ownership. https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Kosovo/Kosovo-the-lost-battle-against-corruption-209245

Public Pulse Brief XXVI. May 2024. UNDP and USAID. file:///C:/Users/W11/Downloads/public_pulse_eng_final_29071.pdf

Transparency International 2014. KOSOVO*: OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION. https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/Kosovo_Overview_of_political_corruption_2014.pdf

UNDP. (2019, August 7). Public Pulse. https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/public-pulse

Zulianello, M., & Larsen, E. G. (2024). Blurred positions: The ideological ambiguity of valence populist parties. *Party Politics*, 30(1), 190-199.

# Islamism and Nationalism in 212 Rally Jakarta: A Populist Convergence in Indonesia

by Yosua Praditya[21]

## Abstract

The 212 rally signifies that populist groups have gained popularity in Indonesia. This rally, as the largest demonstration in Indonesian history, has shown that religious and nationalist figures can unite when they share a political enemy. Populists effectively crafted a narrative that evoked strong emotions congruent with religious and nationalistic beliefs among the 212 audience. This paper uses a thematic examination of speeches through discourse and frame analyses on how populists reinforce ummah-based and nationalism political identities to channel the expression of dissent regarding social injustice in Jakarta during the term of Governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama. The research findings have revealed that conservatives and nationalist groups in Indonesia go hand in hand when facing a common political enemy and when in opposition.

**Keywords**: Religion, Nationalism, Populism, 212 Protest

## Introduction

The protest on 2 December 2016 in Jakarta, referred to as the 212 Defend Islam Rally, was the largest demonstration ever in Indonesia. The police stated that 500,000 people participated in the 212 rally, while the opposition claimed that seven million attended the demonstration (BBC Indonesia, 2016). Protests began on 4 November 2016 against Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, or 'Ahok' – the first Ethnic Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, who was accused of denigrating the holy verse of Koran, Surah Al-Maidah verse 51, in front of the residents of Jakarta's Thousand Islands on September 27, 2016 (Kompas, 2016c). Ahok said the Koranic verse 51 was a 'tool to deceive the public', and went viral in a video entitled 'Blasphemy Against Religion?'

This protest action refutes the empirical findings from previous research, which claimed that it was difficult for Islamic groups in Indonesia to unite (Van Bruinessen, 1999; Eliraz, 2013; Fachruddin, 2006). All Muslims except the officials of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) united in a demonstration against Ahok. This rally was indicative of a remarkable phenomenon, as evidenced by the presence of Muslim individuals from

[21] University of Freiburg

outside Jakarta, like those who marched from Ciamis, travelling a distance of 230 kilometres to Jakarta to attend the 212 rally (Detik, 2016b). Not only religious groups saw Ahok as an enemy of Islam; nationalists also accused him of being a threat to the 'pribumi' (locals). The 212 rally showed that nationalists and religious groups could unite against a common enemy after two major events in the past, namely the independence movement in 1945 and the communist resistance of the PKI in 1965/66 (Wildan, 2016; Fealy & McGregor, 2010). Ahok is also widely perceived as a representative of Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) political power, having previously served as Jokowi's deputy governor in Jakarta from 2012 to 2014. The opposition frequently portrays the two as ‘antek aseng’ (China’s henchmen) due to China’s massive investment at the beginning of Jokowi’s term (Anwar, 2019; Kusno, 2019).

The 212 rally and its subsequent reunions from 2017 to 2019, halted due to the COVID-19 outbreak, are inseparable from the nationalist and Islamic populists' narratives. They succeeded in amplifying marginalised groups’ anger about both religion and pribumi. This anger, which manifested before Ahok was accused of desecrating a verse of the Koran, stemmed from the masses’ profound disappointment at Ahok's appointment as Governor of Jakarta, given that he comes from a minority group. Several previous studies have shown problems between locals and Indo-Chinese populations due to economic disparities that have existed since the days of Dutch colonialism (Chalmers & Hadiz, 2005; Setijadi, 2019). A work by Christian Chua entitled ‘Chinese Big Business in Indonesia: The State Capital’, also noted that most oligarchs in Indonesia are Indo-Chinese and the national economy is heavily influenced by non-native businesses (Chua, 2008). Consequently, it is not surprising that during Ahok’s term, discourses such as ‘Pribumi Bangkit dan Bergerak’ (Indigenous People Rise Up and Take Action), ‘Gerakan Belanja di Toko Pribumi’ (Shopping at Indigenous Stores Movement), ‘Kita Bangga Pribumi’ (We Are Proud of Our Indigenous Heritage) , and numerous others proliferated throughout Jakarta. A substantial body of research has been conducted examining the 212 protest, with numerous studies highlighting the unity of Islamic groups in Indonesia in their opposition to Ahok (Hadiz, 2018; Fanany & Fanany, 2020; Nuryanti, 2021). However, few studies show the strong connection between religious and nationalist groups in the 212 rally. To fill the gap, this study analyses the relationship between religious and nationalist groups when confronted with the elite. From here, two questions are constructed: first, how did religious and nationalist groups unite in the 212 protest? Second, to what extent did nationalist and Islamic populists harness elements of religion and nationalism to topple Ahok as their opponent?

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The mass 212 rallies to topple Ahok represent the struggle from the ummah (the whole community of Muslims) and nationalists. Margaret Canovan’s definition of populism describes it as an appeal to the people against the established structure of power. Populists are viewed not as a system but rather as the people who revolt in the name of the people to oppose power holders and also elite values (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Another definition states that populism is not an ideology in essence but rather a strategic promotion to generate the construction of public will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 17). Therefore, populists tend to make a dichotomy to achieve their political goal rather than trying to reduce the complex

political dynamics. Realising that they can leverage large rallies, populists prefer to cleave between the corrupted elites and the righteous people to facilitate the overthrow of their political adversaries. To achieve this, narratives such as 'the pure people', 'the underdog', 'the corrupted elites' and 'the establishment' are created to polarise society (Mudde, 2004). Polarisation itself emerges when mass mobilisation is driven by the demand that must be met. Another scholar, Benjamin Arditi, adds that populism is inherent with the popular demand, which is the embryo of populism itself, and it is from this demand that one can begin to constitute the people who will confront the 'status quo'. When those in power are unable to fulfil the popular demands of the right, anger arises, which then becomes the entry point for populists, as Laclau stated (Arditi 2010, p. 489). Laclau argues that populist discourse represents existing anger and revives it in the public sphere to initiate mass movements. Discourse, defined as structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, constitutes social reality (Laclau, 2005, p. 13). In 212 protests, 'defending Islam', 'Muslim vs Kafir' and 'locals vs foreigner stooges' are some of the elements of discourse.

Laclau's theory of populism is applied to answer the research questions. The concept of 'empty signifier' matters to politics because it can represent various groups in the signifying process (Laclau, 2005, p. 69). To put it another way, populists are able to employ words within consciousness that are vague but powerful and can project the meanings of various groups. The vagueness, which is not a shortcoming but rather a constitutive feature of populist rhetoric, plays a crucial role in constructing a collective political identity, like 'the people'. Given that society is composed entirely of different identities, within the framework of difference, vagueness itself can cover a variety of backgrounds and demands. Rhetoric such as the people, justice, rights and freedom constitutes open-ended slogans that finally allow for emotional unity to oppose the power bloc in order to confront the status quo. In the case of the 212 movement, the narrative of 'to defend Islam' has an ambiguous meaning, since Ahok has never threatened Muslims, verbally or non-verbally, during his tenure as governor of Jakarta. Another of Laclau's concepts, the 'chain of equivalence', explains how the construction of various demands of the people crystallised (Laclau, 2005, p. 93). This assists the work of analysing how populists connect various demands without contradicting each other. The 'chain' itself exists to condense all the others and to link the logical difference to the nominal one (Laclau, 2005, p. 100). In other words, the heterogeneous elements are kept equally together by name of singularity.

This article employs the discourse and critical frame analyses model to provide an analysis of nationalist and religious forces in the 212 movement. Firstly, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) will facilitate an examination of the manner in which language influences power and perpetuates ideological beliefs (Fairclough 2013, p. 10). Secondly, a frame analysis approach will facilitate an investigation into how social movements display their identity and purpose (Benford & Snow 2000, p. 613). The employment of both approaches facilitates an investigation into how narratives and framing were constructed by nationalist and religious figures to topple Ahok. The CDA approach also facilitates the analysis of the narrative employed by Islamic populists who utilise quotations from the Koran to describe how they should be governed by non-Muslim leaders. This approach assists in developing an objective view of the dynamics between the discourse nationalist-Islamic populist figures on how they constructed power

struggles through narratives, and more importantly, how it convinces them that protests are urgent and morally justified.

Subsequent to this, the frame analysis approach shows how right populist figures perform motivational frames (Caiani & Della Porta, 2011) to provoke rage and fear in the people. Before the analysis, the research objects were categorised into two groups: figures who frame the 212 rally as a religious struggle and figures who frame the protest as a local struggle. This can be seen in the table below:

| **Religious Populists** | **Position & Affiliation** | **Political Orientation** |
|---|---|---|
| Rizieq Shihab | Founder and leader of FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) | Far Right |
| Bachtiar Nasir | Leader of the National Movement to Safeguard the Fatwas of the Indonesian Ulema Council | Conservative Islamism |
| Mardani Ali Sera | Senior politician of PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) | Right wing (Islamism) |
| **Nationalist Populists** | **Position & Affiliation** | **Political Orientation** |
| Amien Rais | Reformist figure and senior politician of PAN (National Mandate Party) | Centre right (religious nationalism) |
| Fadli Zon | Vice Chairman of Gerindra (Great Indonesia Movement Party) | Right wing (nationalism) |

*Table 1: Religious and Nationalist Figures During the 212 Movement*

The table above shows the figures selected for this work, although there were other participants who participated in the 212 rally. The names listed above were given priority due to their significant presence and rhetoric both on the field and on social media. The data were obtained from previous research, in local media, on Twitter accounts (X) and in videos published, around 20, by reputable Indonesian media channels on YouTube. In addition, approximately 6,170 posts from these figures' X accounts were collected during the 212 movement, including its reunions, from December 2016 to December 2019. However, Rizieq Shihab's X account cannot be traced, since it has been suspended since January 2017, and Amien Rais's X account was also excluded because he only created an account in 2020.

## Discussion & Results

*Various demands linked in the 212 movement*

The conservatives' and nationalists' demands are different during the 212 rallies. To analyse how Indonesian right-wing populists are able to link the various demands, without precluding religious conservative and nationalist groups, is necessary before analysing to what extent religion and nationalism allied in bringing down Ahok. Laclau's concept chain equivalent was used to analyse the heterogeneous elements kept equally as singularity (Laclau, 2005). The singularity itself is the process of unification of the group with the name of the leader who is populist. In the case of 212, various demands stemmed from the religious populists who emphasised the significance of defending Muslims and saving the dignity of Islam. Meanwhile, from the nationalists' side, they echoed the pride of locals (pribumi) and protected the locals from Indo-Chinese oligarchs. Conservative groups demanded that Ahok must be jailed after he was deemed to have denigrated verses of the Koran. The demand for legal action to detain Ahok arose from Muslims of every social class, as they firmly requested that the law must be enforced justly. The detention was deemed as an equivalent consequence for what Ahok did, which was considered hurtful to Muslims. The legal action against Ahok is also to represent the established structure of power in the name of the believers (ummah) (Hadiz, 2018; Nuryanti, 2021), which has a strong appeal for many Indonesians. This is why the presence of Muslim populists was very critical, not only to mobilise the masses but also to make sure the demand was urgent, as it came from the Muslims and required immediate action. The demand to put Ahok in jail, which the court finally did with a sentence of two years on 9 May, 2017 (Detik, 2017), is perceived as morally right because it is in accordance with the wishes of the majority.

The man on the front line demanding that Ahok must be jailed was Rizieq Shihab, one of the most radical Islamic populists, who always portrayed Ahok as an adversary of Islam. Rizieq, the leader of the FPI from its inception in 1998 until 2022 when he was replaced by his son-in-law, was labelled a conservative cleric and, several times, offered the concept of 'Indonesia Bersyariah' (a state ruled by Syariah Law) as a solution for social injustice in Indonesia (Tempo, 2018). Rizieq has been identified as one of the primary drivers behind this mobilisation of Muslim communities. A notable aspect of Rizieq's rhetorical approach is his utilisation of moral justification as a fundamental entry point with his audience. Narratives like 'Bela Islam!' (defend Islam!) and 'Martabat Muslim' (the dignity of Islam) have often echoed in Rizieq's rhetoric. Rizieq interpreted the 212 rallies as form of jihad (a struggle against the enemies of Islam) as encouragement to fight against infidels like Ahok becoming the governor of Jakarta again, so putting Ahok in jail was the absolute demand that had to be met. This struggle backed up with another conservative populists like Bachtiar Natsir who successfully employed the narrative that fighting the infidels is obligatory for Muslims. He convinced the rally participants that their participation is correct as pious Muslims. One of his strongest rhetorics stated: 'There is no movement except (with the permission of) God [.....] We all prostrate and bow before Allah, and this is a sign of the revival of Islam on Earth, starting from Indonesia'. Bachtiar convinced his audience that defending Islam by participating in street demonstrations was God's will. Bachtiar also confirmed that putting Ahok in jail was the Muslim demand as a result of his insulting the Koran.

Meanwhile, the nationalists, even they also condemned the Koran blasphemy, were more vocal in demanding that national assets no longer be controlled by foreign interests. Rhetoric emphasising that national assets are of great importance and must remain entirely under national control is often invoked by Gerindra Party figures as a sharp criticism of the elite. Fadli Zon, a senior figure of Gerindra Party who often participates in street protests, accused Ahok of accommodating the interests of China and the oligarchy through the Jakarta Bay reclamation project instead of empowering local fishermen. Fadli claimed that the reclamation project, which was planned to cost roughly US$12 billion to build 17 artificial islands (The Jakarta Post, 2016), not only harms the biota in the bay and local fishermen near the area but potentially would create a gap between the rich and the poor in Jakarta. This is because the reclamation project would be the 'new metropolitan area' and 'luxury accommodations' that would never be enjoyed by the locals. To end this project, Fadli agree to oust Ahok as governor of Jakarta through the 212 rallies. Another nationalist, Amien Rais, a 1998 reform figure, accused Ahok of having the mentality of an 'antek pemodal' (financiers' henchman) because of his granting of the Jakarta Bay reclamation project that indeed had been prepared for China's interest. Amien gave an example that Beijing's ships would eventually be able to freely enter Jakarta Bay and dock there, which would turn the Chinese influx into droves to colonise Indonesia economically (Kumparan, 2017). Furthermore, Amien added several of China's massive investments in Indonesia, from projects such as $15-20 billion nickel smelting plants across multiple provinces in Sulawesi, Halmahera, and Papua (2014 – 2024) (Mining, 2025) and a $7.3 billion high-speed rail line Jakarta to Bandung (AP News, 2023), which is believed to provide no economic benefit to the locals. China's massive projects such as these unfortunately created feelings hatred towards Indo-Chinese because, coincidentally, the majority of oligarchs in Indonesia are of Chinese descent, with shocking data stating that each of the 40 richest people in Indonesia has assets almost 600,000 times greater than the average per capita income (Kompas, 2018). To close this social gap, Amien demanded that Ahok must step down as governor of Jakarta because he has close ties with several Indo-Chinese oligarchs. One of them is Aguan, an ethnic Chinese business tycoon who owns the property developer of Agung Sedayu Group, which has operated the 1,300-hectare Jakarta Bay reclamation (Kompas, 2016b). Ahok even bluntly admitted his close relationship with Aguan, both in formal and informal meetings, such as family gatherings, lunches, and even swimming together (Detik, 2016a; Kompas, 2016a). This sparked outrage among nationalists, particularly Amien, who condemned Ahok's closeness with oligarchs amidst the large number of locals who are still poor.

*Religion and Nationalism Allied Against a Shared Political Enemy*

Historically, the unification of Islamism and nationalism is a complex issue, since these elements are difficult to fuse (Kuru, 2024). Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that the 212 demonstration united Islam and nationalism. The prevailing factor that precipitates the unification of religion and nationalism is the presence of a shared adversary. Religious-right populists successfully provoked the people to unite Islam and nationalism in their desire for a homogeneous society under new leadership. Anger towards Ahok, related to both the issue of blasphemy and socio-economic inequality between ethnic Chinese and residents in Jakarta, has become a turning point for unity between Islam

and nationalism to protect the people. This aligns with Laclau's thought on chain of equivalence, which right-Islamic populists managed to link between different social demands ignored by the elites (Laclau, 2005). The two distinct demands are to defend Islam and to protect locals from economic resentment linked to massive Chinese and Indonesian investment during Jokowi's administration. Hence, it was not difficult for elements of religion and nationalism to mingle during the rallies, as can be seen in the photograph below:


*Picture 1: Religious and nationalist populists share a vehicle during the rallies against Ahok. Source: www.tribunnews.com*

The researchers' analysis yielded findings, including the observation that Rizieq did not mind to the red and white flag for their part in the 212 action. This can be seen in several of Rizieq's speeches, which were also enlivened by the red and white flag. Furthermore, Rizieq, Amien, and Fadli were observed in the same car on several occasions during the Ahok demonstration (Tribun, 2016). This vehicle was known as the 'mobil komando' (command car), given its status as the primary mode of transportation for senior officials. It was observed that Rizieq continued to wear a white robe, a colour that represents Islam, while Amien and Fadli each often wore a 'peci hitam' (black cap), which was closely associated with the appearance of the first President Soekarno. The white robe symbolised religion, while the black cap represented the 'pribumi' (people's) resistance to the colonisers during that period of Indonesian independence. During the rally, the visual of a white robe and a black cap demonstrated the convergence of Islamic clerics and nationalists who oppose Ahok and his elite circle. Firstly, this imagery offered hope for Muslims and indigenous communities to rise again. This hope is also articulated through the narrative that Muslims aspire to have a leader who is also a Muslim. Secondly, it offered hope that 'pribumi' indigenous populations can benefit from the country's economic wealth and resources, which are alleged to have been accumulated by foreign entities. The alliance of conservatives and nationalists was also supported by a statement from Mardani Ali Sera, a senior figure of the PKS Party, that the 212 rally is a

part of strengthening relationships (silahturahmi) among Muslims and building national unity.

In another recorded demonstration, Amien also made the following statement: ‘We are one community. We must not allow them to divide us against each other’. The phrase "divide against each other" reminds the audience of the term ‘divide et impera’, previously used during the Dutch colonialisation to divide Indonesian tribes (Gouda, 2013). Amien's rhetoric sought to portray Ahok's supporters as dismantling the cohesion of the Muslim community. Amien’s presence at the rally signifies the convergence of nationalism and religion. To demonstrate how robust its convergence is, the research results are presented in the following table to facilitate a more nuanced analysis of the discourse.

| **Groups** | **Discourse** | **Sub - Discourse** | **Framing Approach** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Islamic Populists | Us vs Them Dichotomy | - Muslim vs Kafir<br>- Pious vs blasphemer | The infidels will colonise Muslims. |
| | Call To Action | - Call of Jihad<br>- Muslims must unite | Fighting against injustice is a religious commandment. |
| | Moral Justification | - Defend Islam<br>- The Dignity of Islam | |
| Nationalist Populists | Us vs Them Dichotomy | - Locals vs ‘*aseng’* (foreigner stooges)<br>- *‘merah-putih’* (Indonesian flag) vs colonialism | The government is a foreign stooge. |
| | Emotional Appeal | - *‘pribumi’* (indigenous) pride as a motivation | Save the country from oligarchs. |

*Table 2: Summary of Thematic Discourse and Frame Analyses*

The table above, through discourse and frame analyses, shows that both religious and nationalist narratives successfully portray Ahok as a common enemy. The narratives tend to be simple but successfully accommodate the demands of the 212 protesters. This aligns with the notion that the embryo of populism is 'popular demand', from which populists will begin to form the 'people' confronting the status quo (Arditi 2004). At the 212 demonstration, populists presented the ‘tuntutan rakyat’ (people’s demand) to topple Ahok. Discourse, defined as structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, constitutes social reality (Laclau, 2005). In the 212 protests, ‘defending Islam’, ‘Muslim vs Kafir’ and ‘locals vs foreigner stooges’ are examples of elements of discourse. The positions of both nationalist and religious populists, who create such discourse, are part of how democracy functions. Populists, rather than seeing democracy as public participation to ensure that government power comes from the will of

the people, often perceive democracy as majority rule. They provide an attractive alternative to the complexities of democracy by choosing unequivocally for unmitigated majority rule (Mudde, 2007), and this is what makes right-wing populists successful today. In the case of the 212 protests, right-wing populist groups, consisting of nationalists and religious conservatives, practically interpreted democracy in Indonesia as Muslim majority rule. Previous research has also highlighted a long and divisive debate about whether Islam and democracy are compatible (Roy, 1994; An-Naim, 2008), including in Indonesia (Hefner, 2011; Hadiz, 2019). From the perspective of moderate groups, there is concern that hardliners will hijack democracy through the 212 protests. These groups even suspect that the protests are vulnerable to infiltration by jihadists who still dream of establishing an Islamic state and continue to push their Islamist agenda through political and social channels (Time, 2016). Meanwhile, the protesters perceived the 212 rally as a way to voice their opinions as Muslims, supported by a statement from Anies Baswedan – Ahok's opponent in the upcoming election – that the 212 rally was a sign that democracy in Indonesia had matured (Aktual, 2016). Their discourse became a strategy to decrease Ahok's electability in 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Their efforts were successful and led to Anies Baswedan, a favourite choice among Muslim voters, being elected the new governor in 2017. The mass rallies not only successfully represented the ummah but also pragmatic politics, which increased Baswedan's votes, reflecting the community's desire for a Muslim governor.

## Conclusion

The 212 protest was a meeting point for religious and nationalist conservative groups. Firstly, it is posited that the unification of these two groups can be attributed to the populists' success in framing a common enemy. This success was, of course, due to populist narratives that elevated both religion and nationalism. The populists' utilisation of emotional appeal and moral justification served as a foundational entry point, convincing the audience that the 212 protest aligned with religious principles and was imperative to safeguard the interests of the nation. Secondly, the alliance of conservative and nationalist groups was suitable when placed in opposition, as they both could achieve the popular demand – to protect Islam and the locals. Thirdly, while Islam populists managed to unite all segments of society in the same spirit to defend their religion, the nationalists amplified resentment due to welfare disparities. Finally, the Islamic movement is only temporary in nature (Nuryanti 2021, p. 172), since Islamic populism cannot permanently dominate social and political life. Therefore, further research on the relation between Islamic and right populism must be continued, especially since Prabowo, an old friend of Islamic conservatives from 2014 - 2019, was elected President of Indonesia in 2024.

## References

Aktual (2016): Anies: Aksi 212 adalah Tanda Demokrasi di Indonesia Sudah Matang, 12/3/2016. Available online at https://aktual.com/anies-aksi-212-adalah-tanda-demokrasi-indonesia-sudah-

matang/

An-Naim, A. A. (2008): *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*. Harvard University Press.

Anwar, Dewa Fortuna (2019): Indonesia-China Relations: Coming Full Circle? *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2019.1 (2019): 145-161.

AP News (2023): Indonesia Says China Has Pledged $21B in New Investment to Strengthen Ties, 9/2/2023. Available online at https://apnews.com/article/indonesia-china-new-investment-li-qiang-fade1b4c3e0aaf7ad8eca49a723807ff

Arditi, B. (2004): Populism as a spectre of democracy: a response to Canovan. *Political Studies*, 52(1), 135-143.

Arditi, B. (2010): Review Essay: Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's on Populist Reason. In *Constellations* 17(3), 488-497.

BBC Indonesia (2016): Tujuh juta atau 500.000? Ketika media sosial berdebat soal jumlah peserta aksi 212 di Monas, 12/5/2016. Available online at https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/trensosial-38204802

Benford, R.D.; Snow, D.A. (2000): Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(2000), 611-639.

Caiani, M.; Della Porta, D. (2011): The elitist populism of the extreme right: A frame analysis of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany. *Acta Politica*, 46, 180-202.

Canovan, M. (1999): Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. In *Political Studies* 47(1), 2-16.

Chalmers, I; Hadiz, V.R. (2005): Pribumi-Chinese relations. *In The Politics of Economic Development in Indonesia* (pp. 204-222). Routledge.

Chua, Christian (2008): *Chinese big business in Indonesia: The state of capital*. Routledge.

Detik (2016a): Di Pengadilan, Ahok Cerita Kedekatannya dengan Aguan dan Ariesman Widjaja, 9/5/2016. Available online at https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3291052/di-pengadilan-ahok-cerita-kedekatannya-dengan-aguan-dan-ariesman-widjaja

Detik (2016b): Ikut Aksi Damai 2 Desember, Massa GNPF Ciamis Jalan Kaki ke Jakarta Baca artikel detiknews, "Ikut Aksi Damai 2 Desember, Massa GNPF Ciamis Jalan Kaki ke Jakarta" selengkapnya https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3357094/ikut-aksi-damai-2-desember-massa-gnpf-ciamis-jalan-kaki-ke-jakarta. Ikut Aksi Damai 2 Desember, Massa GNPF Ciamis Jalan Kaki ke Jakarta Baca artikel detiknews, "Ikut Aksi Damai 2 Desember, Massa GNPF Ciamis Jalan Kaki ke Jakarta" selengkapnya https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3357094/ikut-aksi-damai-2-desember-massa-gnpf-ciamis-jalan-kaki-ke-jakarta., 11/28/2016. Available online at https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3357094/ikut-aksi-damai-2-desember-massa-gnpf-ciamis-jalan-

kaki-ke-jakarta

Detik (2017): Ahok Divonis 2 Tahun Penjara, 5/9/2017. Available online at https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3496185/ahok-divonis-2-tahun-penjara

Eliraz, Giora (2013): *Islam in indonesia: Modernism, radicalism and the Middle East dimension*. Liverpool University Press.

Fachruddin, Fuad (2006): Agama dan pendidikan demokrasi: pengalaman Muhammadiyah dan Nahdlatul Ulama.: Pustaka Alvabet.

Fairclough, N. (2013): *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*.

Fanany, I; Fanany, R (2020): Religion and populism: the Aksi 212 movement in Indonesia. In *Populism, democracy and community development* (pp. 245-258). Policy Press.

Fealy, G.; McGregor, K. (2010): Nahdlatul Ulama and the killings of 1965-66: Religion, politics, and remembrance.

Gouda, F. (2013): The gendered rhetoric of colonialism and anti-colonialism in twentieth-century Indonesia. *Indonesia*, (55), 1-22.

Hadiz, V.R. (2018): Imagine all the people? Mobilising Islamic populism for right-wing politics in Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48(4), 566-583.

Hadiz, V.R. (2019): The 'floating' ummah in the fall of 'Ahok' in Indonesia.

Hefner, R.W. (2011): *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.

Kompas (2016a): Ahok Akui Dekat dan Sering Bertemu Aguan, Bos Agung Sedayu, 4/4/2016. Available online at https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2016/04/12/07005641/Ahok.Akui.Dekat.dan.Sering.Bertemu.Aguan.Bos.Agung.Sedayu

Kompas (2016b): Agung Sedayu Dapat Jatah Reklamasi 1331 Hektar di Teluk Jakarta, 4/9/2016. Available online at https://properti.kompas.com/read/2016/04/09/133305121/Agung.Sedayu.Dapat.Jatah.Reklamasi.1.331.Hektar.di.Teluk.Jakarta#.

Kompas (2016c): Kaleidoskop 2016: "Timeline" Penetapan Ahok sebagai Terdakwa Penodaan Agama, 12/14/2016. Available online at https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2016/12/14/07030021/kaleidoskop.2016.timeline.penetapan.ahok.sebagai.terdakwa.penodaan.agama

Kompas (2018): Mengikis Oligarki Ekonomi, 3/1/2018. Available online at https://www.kompas.id/baca/opini/2018/03/01/mengikis-oligarki-ekonomi

Kumparan (2017): Amien Rais Soal Reklamasi: Para Cukong Punya Sebutan untuk Indonesia, 11/30/2017. Available online at https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/amien-rais-soal-reklamasi-para-cukong-punya-sebutan-untuk-indonesia

Kuru, A.T. (2024): Islamism and nationalism: how did old enemies become new allies?. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, 1-12.

Kusno, Ali (2019): Pembentukan Citra Negatif Calon Presiden Joko Widodo Jelang Pemilihan Presiden 2019 LOA: *Jurnal Ketatabahasaan dan Kesusastraan* 14.2 (2019).

Laclau, Ernesto (2005): *On populist reason*. London, New York: Verso.

Mining (2025): Chinese Firms Control Around 75% of Indonesian Nickel Capacity, Report Finds, 2/5/2025. Available online at https://www.mining.com/web/chinese-firms-control-around-75-of-indonesian-nickel-capacity-report-finds/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Mudde, C. (2004): The populist zeitgeist. *Government and opposition* 39(4), 541-563.

Mudde, C. (2007): *Populist Radical Right Prties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Vol. 22).

Mudde, C.; Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017): *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Nuryanti, S. (2021): Populism in Indonesia: Learning from the 212 movement in response to the blasphemy case against Ahok in Jakarta. *Populism in Asian democracies*.

Roy, O. (1994): *The Failure of Political Islam*: Harvard University Press.

Setijadi, C. (2019): 11 Anti-Chinese sentiment and the 'return'of the pribumi discourse. *Contentious belonging: The place of minorities in Indonesia*, 194-213.

Tempo (2018): Rizieq Shihab Serukan NKRI Bersyariah, Gus Sholah: Tidak Ada Itu, 12/18/2018. Available online at https://www.tempo.co/politik/rizieq-shihab-serukan-nkri-bersyariah-gus-sholah-tidak-ada-itu-787546

*The Jakarta Post* (2016): Environmental Analysis Documents Flawed in Reclamation Project, Experts Warn This article was published in thejakartapost.com with the title "". Click to read: https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/04/09/environmental-analysis-documents-flawed-in-reclamation-project-experts-warn.html. Download The Jakarta Post app for easier and faster news access: Android: http://bit.ly/tjp-android iOS: http://bit.ly/tjp-ios, 4/9/2016. Available online at https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/04/09/environmental-analysis-documents-flawed-in-reclamation-project-experts-warn.html

*Time* (2016): The Blasphemy Trial of Jakarta's Governor Puts Indonesian Secularism in a Shockingly Poor Light, 12/12/2016. Available online at https://time.com/4598716/ahok-trial-governor-jakarta-indonesia-blasphemy-islam/

Tribun (2016): Demo Kasus Ahok, Amien Rais, Fadli Zon, Fahri Hamzah, Rizieq Shihab Pilih Tumpangi

Satu Mobil, 2016. Available online at https://makassar.tribunnews.com/2016/11/04/demo-kasus-ahok-amien-rais-fadli-zon-fahri-hamzah-rizieq-shihab-pilih-tumpangi-satu-mobil

Van Bruinessen, Martin (1999): Global and local in Indonesian Islam. *Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37.2 (1999): 158-175.

Wildan, M. (2016): Islamism and Democratization in the Post 411 and 212 Rallies of Indonesia. (*Thinking Asean*, 2-4.).

# The Role of Emotion-driven Narratives and Rhetoric of Unreason in Reinforcing Polarization: The Case of Polish Debates on Drug Policy

by Maria Plucinska[22]

## Abstract

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion about growing polarization, which affects many European countries, including Poland, the focus of this paper. This phenomenon is often analysed in the context of significant and controversial issues, such as human rights and the Smolensk catastrophe. However, polarization impacts not only these issues but also less publicized topics, influencing the solutions chosen by politicians in these areas. In my doctoral dissertation, I analysed narratives in parliamentary discourse on drug policy in Poland. In this paper, I would like to present findings related to emotion-driven narratives as well as to Peter Ibarra's and John Kitsuse's rhetoric of unreason, exploring how these techniques contribute to the intensification of political polarization within the context of Polish parliamentary debates.

**Keywords**: Drug Policy, Parliamentary Discourse, Narrative Analysis, Emotion-driven Narratives, Rhetoric of Unreason

## Introduction

There is increasing talk about growing polarization, both globally and in Poland (Horonziak 2022), which is the focus of this article. This is most evident in highly publicized topics such as abortion, immigration, or the Smolensk catastrophe[23]. However, growing polarization can also be observed in other areas, including the drug policy analyzed in this article.

To begin with, it is worth introducing readers to the realities of the Polish political scene and the divisions

[22] Lodz University of Technology

[23] The catastrophe occurred in 2010. A plane carrying high-ranking state officials, including the presidential couple, crashed while en route to Smolensk for ceremonies commemorating the Katyn massacre. The Law and Justice party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, the brother of the late president, and the media supporting the party, began promoting a theory that the crash was an assassination. They blamed both Vladimir Putin and their main political rival in Poland, Civic Platform, particularly then-Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

that contribute to the phenomenon of polarization. Currently, the two largest Polish political parties are Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). They have alternated in power since 2005, sometimes forming coalitions with smaller parties, and sometimes holding a majority on their own. In 2005, both parties had similar platforms, and there was even talk of a coalition between them. However, after the elections, a conflict arose between the leaders of the two parties, Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk, and the coalition never materialized. The hostility between them and their parties continues to divide the Polish political scene to this day.

Over time, the programs of both parties began to diverge: Civic Platform started adopting left-wing demands (while still remaining a centrist party), and Law and Justice solidified its position on the right side of the political spectrum. In terms of drug policy views, both parties supported stricter regulations in 2005. Over time, however, Civic Platform has liberalized its stance on this issue as well, and today, the majority of its MPs support easing the regulations.

As mentioned, the conflict between these two parties has persisted for 20 years and remains the main axis of polarization in Polish politics. Both parties also capitalize on this division, and their campaigns are often aimed at discrediting the other side. Their rhetoric emphasizes that they are the only force capable of stopping the other, warning that if voters do not support them, their opponents, portrayed as enemies, will come to power. However, the most recent presidential election in May 2025 revealed the weakening influence of both parties. Although their candidates received the highest number of votes and advanced to the second voting, their lead over other contenders was no longer overwhelming. Among the youngest voters, aged 18 to 29, they lost to other candidates. If only this age group had voted, neither of the two main party candidates would have advanced to the second voting (Strzelińska 2025).

According to exit poll data, the candidate from the far-right Konfederacja won among the youngest voters, while the runner-up was the representative of Poland's most left-wing party — Partia Razem. This suggests that young voters have rejected the illusory division between the two ideologically similar parties and have become more radical, voting for candidates from the most ideologically distant ends of the political spectrum.

The described shift also indicates a change in the nature of polarization in Poland. Łukasz Wielgosz (2020) outlines three possible approaches to political polarization: unidimensional, where the positions of two parties are extreme and all their members align with their party's stance; two-dimensional, characterized by both political radicalization and the disappearance of the political center; and multidimensional. The definition of the latter was proposed, among others, by Emilia Palonen (as cited in Wielgosz 2020):

> Polarization is a political tool, constructed to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. It is a situation in which two groups build and reinforce themselves by establishing a dividing line between each other. This political boundary creates a point of identification and confrontation within the political system. Polarization is reproduced across all political and social contexts with an intensity that distinguishes it from ordinary two-party politics.

Wielgosz attributes different forms of polarization to different regions: unidimensional to Western Europe, two-dimensional to the United States, and multidimensional to Central and Eastern European countries. Until the 2025 elections, this classification seemed applicable to Poland, where polarization could be interpreted through the lens of multidimensional approach, typical for our region. However, it is possible that this is going to change and polarization is starting to take on a unidimensional character, at least among the youngest voters. This trend requires close observation, not only at the macro level of electoral behavior and ideological shifts, but also in relation to specific social issues, as this broader shift in polarization patterns may also be reflected in policy debates such as those surrounding drug legislation, where rhetorical choices and party positions reveal deeper ideological dynamics.

In terms of drug policy, both Konfederacja and Partia Razem share similar views, advocating for the liberalization of existing laws. For Partia Razem, this position aligns with the broader stance of other left-wing parties, both current ones such as Nowa Lewica and those that existed in the past. Konfederacja, however, deviates from the traditional pattern: parties with similar ideological profiles have historically supported stricter regulations. Aside from this exception, a general trend can be observed: left-wing views tend to support a permissive approach to drug policy, whereas right-wing parties typically favor restrictive forms of prohibition.

## Data and Methods

The analyzed material contained Polish parliamentary debates on drug policy from the years 1995-2017. The analysis included all parliamentary sessions and speeches directly related to the Anti-Drug Laws, without any sampling or selection; the only inclusion criterion was whether the session concerned the legislation in question. Discussions focused on two Anti-Drug Laws: former from 1997 and currently in force from 2005 and the amendments to both of them. The materials come from sessions of both chambers of Parliament as well as the Sejm Health Committee. What is worth noting is that the analyzed debates have become increasingly shorter over time. While in the 1990s we could observe long and constructive discussions on drug legislation, in 2017 these debates were much shorter, often aimed at attacking political opponents rather than being based on substantive arguments.

The analysis was conducted using the narrative method inspired by Michael Jones and Mark McBeth (2010) approach. Firstly, the structure of the narrative was reconstructed, particularly elements such as context, plot, characters, and morals. Secondly, narratives were categorized by their motifs, for example, those that emphasized the good of children and teenagers, those concentrated on people who are addicted, or those that focused on drug-related crimes. Finally, narratives were connected to wider ideological and philosophical worldviews. In the third stage of the analysis, a variety of analytical categories were employed to help identify axiological meanings. Among them was the distinction between emotion-driven narratives and fact-driven narratives, a framework proposed by Julie Stewart (2012) and in the Polish context by Andrzej Piotrowski (2010). Another important framework used was the typology of rhetorical strategies developed by Peter Ibarra and John Kitsuse (1993). According to

Ibarra and Kitsuse, there are different rhetorical strategies. The first one is the rhetoric of loss and it is used when an important value is perceived as threatened or devalued, aiming to mobilize people to defend that value. An example provided by the authors is opposition to abortion, which may be seen as protecting the value of human life. This rhetoric often invokes higher powers that are expected to judge human actions in the future. The rhetoric of entitlement also defends values, but in this case, it focuses on the rights and interests of the individual. It emphasizes values such as freedom, equality, tolerance, and democracy. The rhetoric of danger, on the other hand, refers to real threats to health, safety, and life, and typically employs scientific language rather than emotional appeals or a "siege mentality." Another form, the rhetoric of unreason, appeals to logic and rationality. Those who use it assume that a reasonable, well-informed person would behave in a certain way in a given situation. Any deviation from the preferred behaviour is explained by naivety, lack of knowledge, or susceptibility to manipulation. Finally, the rhetoric of disaster explains problematic situations as the result of multiple contributing factors. In this article, I focus primarily on the rhetoric of unreason.

Emotion-driven narratives focus on inducing emotional reactions in the audience. Usually, these narratives center on negative emotions. Andrzej Piotrowski (2010) identifies several rhetorics based on emotions, such as fear, guilt, and shame. The rhetoric of fear aims to evoke anxiety; the rhetoric of guilt appeals to the conscience and assumes that the audience has internalized certain values; while the rhetoric of shame refers to tact - to what is considered socially appropriate, rather than inherently wrong. However, emotion-driven narratives are not limited to negative emotions. Based on the analyzed materials, one of the most frequently invoked positive emotions during parliamentary debates was compassion. It is also noticeable that parliamentarians who supported prohibition more often constructed their narratives around fear, whereas those advocating for harm reduction policies tended to appeal to compassion.

The accumulation of emotion-driven narratives leads to a shift in the nature of parliamentary debates. Rather than being an exchange of arguments that could allow for the consideration of different perspectives and creating compromise, debates increasingly take on a moral character. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1996) observed, positions on moral issues often become arbitrary and irrational decisions, though they are presented as impersonal and rational. Since such positions are also axiologically absolute, they leave little room for compromise, which may further deepen polarization. Similarly, the rhetoric of unreason is a form of diminishing the views of opponents by suggesting that everyone who disagrees with the speaker's views has either bad intentions or a lack of knowledge/common sense. Therefore, in narratives that contain this rhetoric, there is an implication that there is only one correct way of thinking, which leads to difficulties in finding compromise or common ground and ultimately to deepening polarization. This rhetoric was widely used in speeches by both sides of the debate.

## Analysis/Results

During the analysis, which was qualitative in nature, it became evident that the majority of narratives

presented by politicians were emotion-driven. In contrast to debates in countries such as the United Kingdom, the Polish parliamentary discussions lacked voices that referred strictly to factual evidence. One of the most prevalent rhetorical strategies was the rhetoric of unreason, which appeared on both sides of the political divide. While other rhetorics tended to be associated with specific positions (for example, the rhetoric of loss was typical of prohibition supporters, and the rhetoric of entitlement was used by advocates of legal liberalization) the rhetoric of unreason was used universally and clearly dominated over other rhetorical strategies proposed by Ibarra and Kitsuse.

It is not possible within the scope of this article to present all the statements made during the debates. Therefore, I focus on emotion-driven narratives and the rhetoric of unreason, selecting examples that are especially exaggerated and emotionally charged. These cases were chosen because they most clearly expose the mechanisms and effects of this type of rhetoric, rather than for their representativeness.

Example 1:

A statement by Professor Monika Płatek from the Faculty of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw, delivered during a session of the Sejm Health Committee on February 24, 2011:

> Well, the point is that if I were a not entirely honest General Prosecutor, I would support keeping this law. If I were the head of the police and unable to solve serious problems, I would also support keeping it. These regulations allow the police, courts, and prosecutors to achieve excellent results and statistics. But they do not allow young people who get involved with drugs to find therapeutic solutions or to understand that they are not bad people, perhaps they are simply making poor choices. They could gain knowledge about what is dangerous and what is not, and why.
>
> Ladies and gentlemen, if we truly care about protecting young people from the negative effects of drugs, we must take a hard look at the current legal solutions. These laws will not give us better crime detection statistics for the police, courts, or prosecutors. What they will give us is a reduction in the number of people unnecessarily sent to prison. They will help reduce the problem of overcrowded correctional facilities. But then the police and prosecutors will have to deal with crimes that may be more difficult, but which actually threaten public order.

The statement given by Monika Płatek was thematically classified under the category of “illegal drug trade and production” and serves as an example of a permissive narrative, that is, one advocating for the liberalization of existing drug laws.

In her remarks, Professor Płatek addresses the impact of legal regulations on police work. She observes that the provision criminalizing possession of drugs for personal use is beneficial for police statistics, but may lead to abuse and a focus on less significant offenses, ultimately resulting in harmful consequences for society. Through the frequent arrests of users of psychoactive substances, the police can present impressive statistics suggesting they are effectively addressing the drug problem. At the same time, they fail to dedicate resources to dismantling criminal groups involved in drug trafficking. As

a result, the drug problem does not diminish, since members of drug mafias remain at large and continue their operations, while a large number of individuals, many of whom should not be incarcerated, end up in prison.

In her statement, the speaker appeals to emotions, particularly compassion for young people who use drugs and who, instead of receiving help or education, are subjected to harsh punishment. Another emotion that this narrative may evoke is indignation at the injustice and superficiality of the current drug enforcement system. The statement also contains elements of the rhetoric of unreason. As Płatek argues, it is logical that the police should focus on serious crimes that are real threats to society, rather than on recreational users. Therefore, if someone does not support the liberalization of the law - which would make the police's job more effective, they must either have bad intentions or lack understanding of the issue. According to the speaker, such bad intentions are attributed to the prosecution and police, as honest institutions would not defend such restrictive measures.

In her statement, the speaker appeals to emotions, particularly compassion for young people who use drugs and who, instead of receiving help, support, or education, are subjected to harsh and often disproportionate punishment. The narrative frames these individuals not as offenders, but as vulnerable members of society who are failed by the system. This emotional appeal is designed to evoke a sense of empathy and moral concern in the audience, encouraging a more humane and understanding approach to drug policy. Another emotion that this narrative may evoke is indignation - a strong sense of moral outrage directed at the perceived injustice, rigidity, and superficiality of the current drug enforcement system. The speaker suggests that the system treats all drug-related cases with the same severity, regardless of context, and fails to distinguish between serious criminal activity and recreational use. This lack of nuance is portrayed as both ineffective and ethically problematic. The statement also contains elements of the rhetoric of unreason. As Płatek argues, it is logical and reasonable to expect that law enforcement should prioritize serious crimes, those that pose real and tangible threats to public safety, rather than focusing resources on individuals who use drugs recreationally. This argument is presented as self-evident, leaving little room for alternative interpretations. Therefore, if someone does not support the liberalization of the law, which, according to this logic, would allow the police to operate more efficiently and focus on genuine threats, they are portrayed as either lacking a proper understanding of the issue or acting out of questionable motives. According to the speaker, such bad intentions are attributed to institutions like the prosecution and the police. These bodies are depicted as defending restrictive measures not because they are effective or just, but because of institutional inertia, ideological bias, or other hidden agendas. The implication is that truly honest and rational institutions would not support such punitive approaches, thereby reinforcing a moral dichotomy between those who advocate for reform and those who resist it.

Example 2:

A statement by MP Tadeusz Cymański from the Law and Justice party, delivered on July 6, 2005:

> The fight against drug addiction is not a struggle, a debate, an effort, or an activity - it is a front line, it is a battle for life, and in many cases, quite literally, a fight to the death, especially when

> it comes to the drug mafia. And just like on the front line, we must speak clearly and decisively. There is no room for deliberation or reflection on the front line. That is why my question is very specific: What is the position of the Ministry? What is its view on the matter raised by MP Piotrowska? The greatest tragedy is happening in schools. It plays out more in the press and media than in real life, because Poles view problems in a healthy and concrete way. What is the Ministry's and the government's stance on the police's right to take decisive action when it comes to searches, entering schools, inspections with dogs, and especially checks for drug possession? Statements claiming that this violates dignity and freedom are, ladies and gentlemen, completely out of touch. It's like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, or The Cranes Are Flying - that kind of thing.

The statement was thematically classified under the category "defense of values" and serves as an example of a paternalistic narrative - that is, one advocating for a prohibitionist drug policy.

Cymański's speech is marked by war rhetoric, which is evident in expressions such as "this is a front, this is a fight for life and death" and "on the front line there is no room for deliberation or reflection." These phrases evoke a sense of urgency and conflict, framing the issue of drug use not as a social or health-related challenge, but as a battlefield situation requiring immediate and uncompromising action. The speaker constructs a dramatic narrative in which hesitation or dialogue is portrayed as weakness, and decisive confrontation is the only acceptable response. Moreover, the speaker presents a Manichean worldview, dividing reality into clear categories of good and evil, right and wrong. In this dichotomy, the collective "we", understood as the Polish nation, is depicted as being under existential threat. The enemy is not only drugs themselves, but also those who question the dominant punitive approach. This framing reinforces a sense of communal identity and shared struggle, positioning the audience as part of a moral crusade. For this reason, the statement can also be interpreted as an example of political newspeak (cf. Jakubowska-Branicka 2017), where emotionally charged and ideologically loaded language serves to simplify complex issues and suppress dissent.

Cymański's statement exemplifies the rhetoric of unreason. He asserts that the only appropriate response to the drug problem is to take decisive, uncompromising action, while other approaches, such as those emphasizing human rights, dignity, or individual freedom are dismissed as irrational or absurd. This is made explicit in his remark: "Statements claiming that this violates dignity and freedom are, ladies and gentlemen, completely out of touch." Here, the speaker not only rejects alternative viewpoints but delegitimizes them entirely, suggesting that they are disconnected from reality and therefore unworthy of serious consideration.

The narrator also appeals to emotions, particularly fear and a sense of communal solidarity. These emotional triggers are intended to mobilize the audience, encouraging them to support the "fight" against drugs as a patriotic and moral duty. The use of fear: of societal collapse, moral decay, or loss of national integrity is central to the persuasive strategy employed in the speech.

In this final remark, Cymański expresses the view that national security and collective well-being take precedence over individual rights, including dignity and freedom. The implication is that any defense of

personal liberties in the context of drug policy is not only misguided but potentially harmful to the nation. This framing reinforces the binary logic of the speech and exemplifies how emotionally charged and ideologically rigid narratives can contribute to polarization and the marginalization of alternative perspectives.

Example 3:

A statement by MP Andrzej Gąsienica-Makowski from the Nonpartisan Bloc for Support of Reforms (BBWR), delivered on September 28, 1995:

> In our view, today's Poland is engaged in a more or less visible struggle. This rivalry is spreading across more and more areas of life. We are a large consumer market with a strategic location, but also an entrepreneurial nation and therefore a threat to others. The battle for economic influence is evident. In the moral sphere, there is a constant attack on the family. Abortion, divorce on demand, secularization of life, and attacks on the Church are slogans promoted by left-wing groups. We are flooded with pornographic magazines, films, video tapes, and so on. Old addictions such as alcoholism and nicotine addiction are spreading at an alarming rate. More and more young people are turning to intoxicating substances - drugs. These addictions are also fueling the spread of AIDS, vandalism, Satanism, vulgarity, and pathological subcultures. Young people are also becoming more susceptible to the influence of various religious sects offering them false happiness. As we can see, the life and health of the nation are at risk - its moral, economic, and biological existence. Radical but thoughtful short-term and long-term actions must be taken in various areas, both legislative and economic.

This statement was also thematically classified under the category "defense of values," although in this case the emphasis is placed not on security, but on national values. It is an example of a paternalistic narrative as well.

In his speech, Gąsienica-Makowski appeals to emotions, especially fear and a sense of national unity. He evokes fear by referencing numerous threats that, in his view, endanger the Polish people and the integrity of the nation. At the same time, he calls for solidarity, presenting unity as a necessary condition for survival and effective resistance. This emotional framing is intended to mobilize the audience, encouraging them to take action in defense of shared values and national identity.

As in the previous example, this statement can be interpreted as an instance of political newspeak. The speaker simplifies complex social and political issues into a binary narrative of good versus evil, constructing a Manichean worldview. Within this framework, a collective "we", the Polish nation, is positioned against a range of perceived enemies. These include abortion, Satanism, the political left, drugs, and an unspecified external threat, likely associated with foreign influence or global forces. By grouping such diverse phenomena together, the speaker creates a sense of overwhelming danger and moral urgency. Gąsienica-Makowski, similary to Cymański, uses war rhetoric, portraying the nation as being under siege and in need of defense. He argues that Poland is engaged in a struggle for survival, and that the enemy is omnipresent. This is made explicit in his statement that "a struggle for our survival

is underway, and the enemy is everywhere." Such language reinforces the idea that there is no room for hesitation or compromise - only decisive action and unwavering loyalty to the national cause.

It is worth noting the accumulation of lofty but vague expressions throughout the speech. Phrases such as "the fight for Poland", "a consumer market with strategic location", "an attack on the family", "secularization of life", and "the nation's existence in the moral, economic, and biological spheres" serve to amplify the emotional tone of the message. However, these expressions are imprecise and abstract, which makes it difficult to engage in a substantive discussion of the actual issue at hand, namely, drug use and drug policy. Instead of addressing the complexities of the problem, the speaker relies on grandiose language that obscures specific policy questions and reinforces ideological positions.

## Discussion

According to many scholars, political polarization leads to the impoverishment of public debate. As Sonia Horonziak (2022) argues, this results from three communication mechanisms: avoiding confrontation with political opponents, addressing only one's own political base and voters, and, when confrontation does occur, treating the political opponent as someone of lower moral standing. These mechanisms negatively affect the search for solutions in the realm of public policy, such as drug policy, because meaningful debate becomes impossible. Politicians adopt their party's point of view and are not open to dialogue or alternative perspectives, which could be valuable in addressing social problems.

Both emotion-driven narratives and the rhetoric of unreason were strongly present, and we can argue that they played an important role in enforcing polarization or at least weakening public debate. Over time, debates became less substantive, more focused on attacking political opponents, and shorter. We can also observe that this phenomenon is present not only in politicians' statements but also in experts' ones, so statements of individuals from whom society expects objectivity and a fact-based approach.

This leads to a situation in which respect for political opponents becomes devalued. As a result, they are no longer perceived as equal participants in public debate - individuals with different but legitimate perspectives representing other social groups, but rather as inferior. This inferiority may be framed in moral terms, if bad intentions are assumed, or in intellectual terms, if differing views are attributed to ignorance or naivety. An example of the former can be found in Monika Płatek's statement: "If I were a not entirely honest General Prosecutor, I would support keeping this law" which implies that defending the current legislation is not just misguided, but morally suspect. In contrast, intellectual inferiority is suggested in Tadeusz Cymański's remark: "Statements claiming that this violates dignity and freedom are, ladies and gentlemen, completely out of touch. It's like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, or The Cranes Are Flying - that kind of thing" Here, opposing views are not only dismissed, but ridiculed as absurd and disconnected from reality. The long-term lowering of the status of other participants in the debate leads to their dehumanization and to perceiving them as enemies. Ultimately, this makes compromise impossible - after all, one does not negotiate with an enemy, one seeks to defeat them. Opposing views are rejected *a priori*, without any consideration of their validity, simply because they

were expressed by the opposing side.

All of this may contribute to increasing polarization in parliamentary debates and to situations in which speakers' microphones are turned off and no debate is allowed. This, in turn, can intensify the political atmosphere and fuel growing polarization and radicalization across society. This trend is evident both in debates on drug policy and in election results, where voters are increasingly abandoning relatively centrist options and shifting toward the extremes of the Polish political spectrum. To better understand this trend, future research may be valuable in exploring the connection between political polarization and the rhetorical and stylistic devices used in parliamentary debates.

## Conclusions

The article aimed to highlight the use of emotional-based narratives and the rhetoric of unreason in parliamentary discourse, as well as the relationship between these rhetorical strategies and the growing political polarization. The text is based on research conducted through narrative analysis of parliamentary debates in the Polish parliament. The analysis shows that these are ones of the most commonly used forms of expression in Polish parliamentary debate. This may contribute to polarization, as both strategies tend to close off openness to alternative perspectives. In the case of the rhetoric of unreason, this occurs through questioning the intentions or mental capacities of those who disagree with the presented position. In the case of emotionally driven narratives, it happens through framing the world in moral terms which, as Alistair MacIntyre noted, are not open to rational debate.

It is important to emphasize that the analysis focused on one topic - drug policy. Future research could explore other parliamentary debates on a wider range of issues, not only social but also economic or related to security. This would allow for a comparison to determine whether emotional-based narratives and the rhetoric of unreason also dominate in other debates, or whether different rhetorical strategies prevail.

## References

Horonziak S. (2022). Teoria demokracji a polaryzacja czy spolaryzowane społeczeństwo może być demokratyczne? *Politeja* 2(77): 205-229. https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.19.2022.77.09

Ibarra P, J. Kitsuse (1993) Vernacular Constituents of Moral Discourse: An Interactionist Proposal for the Study of Social Problems [in:] *Constructionist Controversies. Issues in Social Problems Theory* [eds:] G. Miller, J. Holstein. Londyn: Routledge.

Jakubowska-Branicka I. (2017) Mentalność demokratyczna a dogmatyzm. Przemiany postaw społeczeństwa polskiego w procesie demokratyzacji. *Zoon Politikon* 8: 9–32. Doi: 10.4467/2543408xzop.17.001.9260

Jones, Michael, Mark McBeth (2010) A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong? *The Policy Studies Journal* 38(2): 329-353. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00364.x

MacIntyre A. (1996). *Dziedzictwo cnoty. Studium z teorii moralności.* Translated by A. Chmielewski. Warszawa: WN PWN.

Piotrowski A. (2010) Tożsamość zbiorowa jako temat dyskursu polityki (analiza przypadku) [in:] *Rytualny chaos. Studium dyskursu publicznego* [eds:] M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Smith B., J. Monforte. (2020) Stories, New Materialism And Pluralism: Understanding, Practicing And Pushing The Boundaries Of Narrative Analysis. *Methods in Psychology* 2/2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2020.100016

Stewart J. (2012) Fiction Over Facts: How Competing Narrative Forms Explain Policy In A New Immigration Destination. *Sociological Forum* 27: 591-616. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01337.x

Strzelińska K. (2025) *Wybory prezydenckie 2025. Do urn poszła większa część młodych niż seniorów. To oni zdecydują kto wygra w drugiej turze?* https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9803442,na-wybory-prezydenckie-poszla-wieksza-czesc-mlodych-niz-seniorow-to-o.html

Wielgosz Ł. (2020) Trzy ujęcia polaryzacji politycznej. *System Polityczny* 28: 32-52. https://doi.org/10.19195/1643-0328.28.3

## Research materials

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy2.nsf/0/C6974670A7CB4B4EC1258959004A27E5/$file/061.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy2.nsf/0/696266ED34E8BE35C1258959004A2814/$file/103.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy3.nsf/0/8E89A53978719A04C125895F00501D0E/$file/037.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy3.nsf/0/DAC5901266E379B8C125895F00501D50/$file/085-1.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy3.nsf/0/F3AA553D0D7F35ABC125895F00501D54/$file/087.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Stenogramy3.nsf/0/BCA74983480BA671C125895F00501D57/$file/089.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter.nsf/0/EFBD031F818625EAC1257037000B7240/$file/107-bksiazka.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter.nsf/0/FC648637D03590A0C125703C00404B99/$file/107-dksiazka.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter.nsf/0/E9ED1795972B56F2C12570500048E4EB/$file/108-dksiazka.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter6.nsf/0/C48579C2CC611500C125773D007BA570/$file/68_a_ksiazka.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter6.nsf/0/78503D24C6BC43D9C1257863007C6089/$file/89_a_ksiazka.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter6.nsf/0/1468D512E15E93A8C12578650050470D/$file/89_c_ksiazka.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/zapisy8.nsf/0/6169188C881E1A55C125805F004AF123/%24File/0117208.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/zapisy8.nsf/0/32A6C1783D4E3161C12580D00050DBB2/%24File/0151708.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter8.nsf/0/BC4BFA719EA06FB0C1258146001225ED/%24File/44_a_ksiazka_bis.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter8.nsf/0/0EB6BE2913E8F362C1258147005EF8F7/%24File/44_c_ksiazka_bis.pdf

https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/zapisy8.nsf/0/03DB872C1DF1A78AC125815C0047959F/%24File/0210208.pdf

https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter8.nsf/0/37DFF97BDB4109BFC1258164003DDE19/%24File/45_b_ksiazka_bis.pdf

# The Rise of Anti-French Sentiment in the Sahel: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Polarization in the Speeches of the Junta Leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso

by Kouamé Aboubakar Kouakou[24]

## Abstract

Anti-French feelings have been growing in some Sahelian countries in recent years. Between 2021 and 2022 the Sahel region, especially countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have been the epicentre of unprecedented anti-French protests. Since the militaries seized power in these countries by overthrowing democratic governments, there have been significant changes in the leaders' discourses about France's role in the Sahel. This change is characterized by polarized and divisive political narratives which amplify anti-French sentiments in the Sahel. This qualitative study delves into the dynamics of polarization in the discourses of Malian interim President Assimi Goïta and President Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso. In other words, this analysis explores polarization strategies used by both leaders to demonise France's policy in Africa. Drawing on Van Dijk's (2006) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this study reveals the occurrence of four main tactics of ideological-based polarization in Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traore's discourses which are: lexicalization, actor description, self-national glorification and Victimization. It is also found that lexicalisation and actor description strategies are frequently employed by Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traore to present 'Themselves' as good and 'Others' as bad.

**Keywords**: Critical Discourse, Democratic, France, Polarization, Anti-French Sentiment

## Introduction

The rise of military leaders to power in Mali and Burkina Faso has been a profund turning point in the political landscape of these Sahelian states. The ascension of the military junta in power in Mali and Burkina Faso has significantly deteriorated the special ties between France and its former colonies in the Sahel. The hostility toward France and the surge of anti-French sentiments in sub-Saharan countries

[24] University Alassane Ouattara (Côte D'Ivoire)

like Mali and Burkina Faso have attracted many scholars' attention. Pigeaud and Sylla (2024) point out that the criticisms directed to France in most French-speaking countries stem from France's support to despotic regimes, its military interventions and its maintenance of monetary supervision through the CFA. The struggle against imperialism, neo-colonialism and the quest of sovereignty have propelled Captain Ibrahim Traore and General Assimi Goïta in the fore front of the political scene in their countries. Both leaders position themselves as Pan-Africanist who are opposed to France's interference in its former colonies' internal affairs.

Adopting a more radical stance against French presence in the Sahelian Countries, the new leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso constantly use France as the scapegoat for the socio-political and economic problems in their countries. In the same perspective, Morten and Viljar (2025) point out that the failures of France offered the junta a rich repertoire to draw on for its own legitimacy. Indeed, to consolidate their power and win people's support, the new leaders frequently harness anti-French sentiments observable throughout frequent criticisms, accusations and polarized discourses directed towards France. Polarization is defined by Van Dijk (2006, p. 80) as a strategy of dichotomizing parties into: in-group with positive peculiarities and out-group with negative peculiarities. According to Van Dijk (2006), as an ideology, ideological polarization means the division of society along ideological lines, where individuals and groups hold strongly contrasting political beliefs and values.

This study follows a qualitative approach in analyzing Presidents Goïta and Traore's speeches. Van Dijk's (2006) framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), especially his Ideology Square theory is used to unveil the discursive devices of polarization embedded in Burkina Faso and Mali interim Presidents' speeches. The main objective of this investigation is to show how they use polarization strategies to enhance anti-French sentiments in the Sahel. It also sheds light on the similarities and differences regarding polarization features in Goïta and Ibrahim Traore's speeches. To reach the aim of this paper, this study answers the following questions: What linguistic patterns are used to signal polarization in representing France and events in the Sahel? What are the similarities and differences regarding polarization features in Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traore's speeches about France? From this perspective, it integrates micro-level text analysis in accordance with Van Dijk's (2006) discursive devices of ideological polarization.

## Anti-French-sentiments: Historical and Contemporary Context

The anti-French sentiments and the hostilities toward France in the Sahelian regions, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso have been the subject of analysis of many scholars. After the colonial times came to an end and most of the colonies gained their independence, the vestiges of colonialism remains and France maintains special relations with its former colonies" (Korkmaz, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, the special relationship known as 'Françafrique' is considered as one of the main causes of African disenchantment with France's policies. For Akrimi (2023, p. 2), what is considered an "anti-French sentiment" in the "global North seems to echo another concept many consider outdated: the

Françafrique is France's neocolonial ties with its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa on economic, monetary, diplomatic, and military levels". According to Akrimi, the growing anti-French sentiments or feelings is the result of African disenchantment with the Françafrique and its actors.

The surge of anti-French sentiment is related to France's colonial legacy in the Sahel. Some African see the presence of France in Africa as an extension of colonial dominance. Akrimi (2023) points out that anti-French feelings are not mere rhetoric; they reflect a growing frustration with both symbolic and tangible aspects of French influence, from colonial legacies to present-day policies, trade relations, and military presence. Guiffard's (2023) analysis reveals many examples of deeply rooted anti-French sentiment in West Africa. He suggests that from the October 2022 attacks on the French Embassy and the French Institute in Burkina Faso to regular demonstrations in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the ransacking of French-owned businesses in Dakar (Senegal) and countless invectives spouted at French politicians shed light on anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. In addition, Burkina Faso's order on December 3, 2022 to suspend the broadcast of France's RFI radio in the country illustrates the rejection of France's presence in the Sahel.

As far as the new factors of anti-French sentiments in Mali and Burkina Faso are concerned, one can cite: political instability, socio-political issues and insecurity in the Sahel. Besides, political instability, the rise of nationalism and the ascension of militaries in power in Burkina Faso and Mali are key factors that lead Sahelian people to take a dim view of French presence in the Sahel. Indeed, the ascension of military officers Ibrahim Traore and Assimi Goïta in power represents a profound turning point in French presence in the Sahel. Captain Ibrahim Traore and General Assimi Goïta are two young military officers who rose rapidly through the ranks to become respectively Burkina Faso and Mali's interim presidents overthrowing democratic regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali.

## Theoretical Background of Polarization and Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Ybiskay (2022), the concept of polarization can be traced back to Satori's seminal work on polarization. "Polarisation occurs when we have ideological distance (in contra-distinction to ideological proximity) because political groups see themselves as mutually exclusive or incapable to join forces" (Sartori (1976, p. 135). Polarized discourses tend to categorise people. Hamed (2020) maintains that as an ideology, polarization means that individuals who adopt a polarized ideology never tolerate the 'Others'. He adds that the Others in this sense can be seen as any persons belonging to a different group.

Van Dijk's (2006) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework offers an insight into the way ideological polarization is expressed in political discourse. This approach provides a holistic insight by exploring the interplay between discourse and social structure. In fact, his model allows to shed light on the way the concept of 'we' are good and 'they' are bad is sustained in political discourse. To analyse ideological polarization in junta leaders' speeches, Van Dijk's approach to CDA is the one which is of the interest of this study. For Van Dijk, discourse is an essential means through which social realities are constructed

and contested. CDA analytical framework allows to delve into the way societal norms and values are reproduced by people through discourse. Van Dijk's (2006) model draws attention to the interplay between text, context of interaction and cognition. Van Dijk puts an emphasis on context in discourse studies, arguing for a thorough study of social, historical context and cultural factors that shape the production of text and talk. This model adopts a socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. Indeed, Van Dijk sees discourse as social practice. This implies "a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

Van Dijk's CDA permits to examine the ideological resources in discourse, especially in political communication. As Van Dijk (2006) explains "politics is one of the social domains whose practices are virtually exclusively discursive, political cognition is by definition ideologically based and political ideologies are largely reproduced by discourse" (p. 728). According to Hamed (2020), Van Dijk's model of CDA focuses on ideologically-based discourse that follows the general instructions of emphasizing 'positive things about Us' while stating 'negative things about Them'. This refers to the polarized structure of ideologies which are underpinning political discourses. Van Dijk (2006) has suggested two main semantic macro-strategies for detecting ideological polarization in discourse which are: positive self-presentation and negative other presentation.

In politics if ideologies are polarized, "discourse is likely to exhibit different forms of polarization as well" (Saedeen and Albzour, 2022, p. 35). Van Dijk's approach is a systematic method which offers different devices for detecting polarization in discourse. In this study, Van Dijk's (2006) model of CDA, especially his Ideological Square is selected as the main analytical framework. The Ideological Square is a discourse analysis concept which describes how ideological polarized groups emphasize positive things of in-group (us) and negative things of out-group (them), while minimizing negative aspects of 'us' and positive aspects of 'them'. The Ideological Square comprises four key concepts as follows: Emphasize Our Good Things, Emphasize Their Bad Things, De-Emphasize Our Bad things, De-emphasize Their good things (Van Dijk, 2006, p.734). The Ideological Square represents the macro-strategy of analysing positive self-representation and negative other-representation in discourses. Besides, this study applied the sub-strategies of ideological polarization suggested by Van Dijk (2006):

Actor description: Akbar and Abbas (2019), explain that actor description is an ideological discursive device which is concerned with the way people are described in discourse. Actor description strategy represents the core of the ideological polarization of US vs THEM in racist, discriminatory and political discourses according to Van Dijk (2011). He asserts that the way actors are described in discourses also depends on our ideologies. Typically, we tend to describe in-group members in a neutral or positive way and out-group members in a negative way.

Comparison: is a discursive strategy which is employed by comparing in-group people from out-group people. This comparison sheds light on the positive side of the in-group and the negative side of the out-group. In addition, Generalization is an ideological device. According to V. Dijk (2006), "instead of providing concrete stories, speakers may also make generalizations, in racist discourse typically used

to formulate prejudices about generalized negative characteristics of immigrants" (p.736). National self-glorification is a discursive strategy which implies various forms of positive references to or praise for one's own country, its principles, history, and traditions (V. Dijk, 2006). Victimization is employed ideologically in political narratives to show others' negative acts. This device is employed to highlight the evil nature of others. Evidentiality is another ideological polarization device suggested by Van Dijk (2006). He claims that evidentiality is employed to give concrete examples, often in the form of a vignette or short story, illustrating or making more plausible a general point defended. Table 1 below sums up the devices for detecting polarization in discourses.

| **Discursive Devices of Ideological Polarization** | **Explanation** |
|---|---|
| Categorization/Polarization of groups | Using discourse units as imperialists, colonialists, traitors etc. |
| Topicalization | Topicalizing (bringing in the topic position) Our goodness/Their badness. |
| Actor description | Our description (positive) against Theirs (negative). |
| Detailing Our goodness/Their badness | Using illustrations to serve that purpose. |
| Contrasting/Comparing | Us versus Them, We versus They, Our versus Their |
| Modality degrees | Necessity/probability to represent Our world and Their world |
| Evidentiality | Presenting evidence |
| National self-glorification | Praising Our country |
| Generalizations | Generalizing Their negative features/effects. |
| Victimization | Using this strategy to show Their evil nature versus Our Innocent/suffering citizens. |

*Table 1: Discursive devices of Ideological polarization adapted from Van Dijk (2006)*

*Data and Methodology*

The corpus of this study consists of the transcripts of three speeches delivered by Ibrahim Traore, the president of Burkina Faso and Assimi Goïta, the President of Mali. The selection of the corpus depends upon its richness in the utterances meant to help solve the study problem. In accordance with the research objective which is to examine how politicians express ideological polarization, three speeches made by the interim presidents of Mali and Burkina Faso are purposely selected in order to reach the gist of this study. The selected speeches are delivered during international summits (Africa-Russia summits in 2023 and 2024). These speeches are made amid heightened tensions between Mali, Burkina Faso and France, the ex-coloniser. Against this backdrop, presidents Goïta and Traore's summit speeches are selected to explore ideological polarization. Ibrahim Traore and Assimi Goïta emerge as the new voice of Pan-Africanism movement. As Gnaka (2025) explains, Captain Ibrahim Traore and Assimi Goïta are the torch bearers of the global Pan-African movement. The two leaders represent a new wave of Pan-African leaders who advocate total sovereignty of African states. Table 2 below displays key information about the sample data and the rationale for selecting the three speeches.

| **Title of the speeches** | **Dates of delivery** | **Justification of the Choice of the Corpus** |
|---|---|---|
| President Traore's Africa-Russia Summit Speech[25] | July 28, 2023 | Ibrahim Traoré, the interim president of Burkina Faso delivered this speech during the Russia-Africa Summit in 2023. In fact, this speech by President Traore is delivered a few months after the end of defence agreements with France and withdrawal of French soldiers from the Sahel. This speech is purposefully selected to investigate how the speaker expresses ideological polarization in discourse. |
| Assimi Goïta's Africa-Russia Summit Speech[26] | July 28, 2023 | Assimi Goïta's Africa-Russia Summit Speech is also made in a context diplomatic tension with France. France's formerly strong ties with Mali, an ex-French colony have deteriorated |

[25] https://www.memri.org/reports/interim-president-burkina-faso-traore-speaking-russia-africa-summit-russia-part-family

[26] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71842

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | since Assimi Goita seized power in a military coup. Under interim President General Assimi Goita, the regime has distanced itself from France, ending defense agreements with French and seeking support from Russia. Against this backdrop, this speech is selected to substantiate the objective of the study. |
| Captain Traore's speech during the first ordinary summit of Sahelian States Alliance [27] | July 6, 2024 | Captain Traore made this speech in Niamey (Niger) during the first ordinary summit of heads of states and governments of the newly created Alliance of Sahel Sates which involves Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This speech outlines the goals of their alliance and challenges the three countries are confronted with. |

*Table 2: The Corpus of the Study*

## Analysis and Discussion

Political discourse is ideological controlled. This implies that ideologies have control on whatever is uttered by political leaders. Indeed, ideologies influence politicians' attitudes towards different issues. Thus, the polarization we see in society derives from people's opposed ideologies. The contention of this research paper is that polarization is manifested in the speeches of the new leaders in the Sahel. To explore this polarization in junta leaders' speeches, this study adopts Van Dijk's (2006) CDA analytical framework. In fact, Van Dijk has put forward a set of discursive strategies which allows to shed light on polarization in interpersonal communications.

## Polarization Strategies in Presidents Goïta and Traore's Speeches

Victimization is apparent in Traore and Goïta's speeches. The analysis shows that the interim president of Mali, Goïta and Captain Traore, the president of Burkina Faso commonly employ victimization as way

[27] https://www.presidencedufaso.bf/discours-de-s-e-le-capitaine-ibrahim-traore-au-1er-sommet-de-laes/

to depict the dire legacy of colonisation and Françafrique. As a matter of fact, they present the Sahel as a victim of neocolonialism and imperialist practices. The two leaders see the socio-political crisis in Burkina Faso and Mali as an attempt to impose 'slavery' on their people. The example (1) shows how the Sahelian leaders use stories to create a mentality of victimhood.

(1) As for Burkina Faso, for the past eight years we have been fighting the most barbaric and cruel form of colonialism and imperialism, which are forcing a modern form of slavery on us (I. Traore, 2023).

(2) Numerous African countries, especially Mali, are suffering from the unprecedented pressure from several countries that are all but ready to introduce sanctions against us for our partnership with Russia, for our sovereign choice (A. Goïta, 2023).

Data analysed in (1) and (2) reveal that Goïta and Traore depict their homelands as a victim of a new form of colonialism. They use nominations like 'colonialism', 'imperialism' and the expression 'a form of slavery' to fuel polarization and legitimate their coup d'état. This polarising narrative is pervasive in Assimi Goita and Ibrahim Traore's speeches made during Russia-Africa summit.

(3) Our forefathers were deported to save Europe, and this happened against their will. But when they came back and tried to assert their basic rights, they faced cruel repression (I. Traore, 2023).

In discourse, evidentiality is an ideological strategy that involves using proofs (historical/ present proofs) to accentuate one's opinions and credibility. In data (3), evidentiality is employed by Traore to echo African people's grievances. To ingrain an anti-France feeling in people's mind, Traore and Goïta employ the tactics of evidentiality to make palatable narratives. As a matter of fact, in example (3), Traore recalls the injustice endured by African soldiers who fought for France during the World War 2. In (3), President Ibrahim Traore is denouncing the killing of West African soldiers by French army in 1944 in Thiaroye (Senegal). By recalling this painful past, the speaker intends to show how France has been unfair to Africa, especially its soldiers. The recurrence of such evidentials as well as historical antecedents, do not only exacerbate anti-France sentiments in West Africa, there is also the tendency that the polarising nature of such statements might negatively influence Sahelian people.

The examples (1), (2) and (3) tell a lot about the extent to which the relation between France and its former colonies is deteriorated. As a matter of fact, since Traore and Goïta seized power in military coups, the discourse about France's presence in the Sahel has changed. As seen in (2) and (3) France and some European countries' actions in the Sahel region are associated with imperialism. Furthermore, in data (3), Traore put a focus on the way France has been unjust to African soldiers who fought alongside French armed forces during the World War II.

The analysis also reveals the use of actor description in Burkina Faso and Mali's transitional presidents Traore and Goïta's speeches. They resort to the tactics of actor description to fuel anti-French sentiment through a polarizing description of others. This discursive strategy employed by the political leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso represents the core of the ideological polarization between opposed groups (us vs them). Data analysed in (4) and (5) suggest the occurrence actor description Sahelian leaders'

speeches. Indexical markers such as ‘us’ ‘our’ and ‘they’, ‘their’, referring to the out-group or Western countries reinforces the polarization between the Sahelians and the French people.

(4) Numerous African countries especially Mali, are suffering from the unprecedented pressure from several countries that are all but ready to introduce sanctions against us for our partnership with Russia, for our sovereign choice (Assimi Goïta, 2023)

(5) They are always ready to betray their brothers to satisfy the master. They have betrayed us since independence, and others continue to this day to betray us for the benefit of their master (Ibrahim Traore, 2024).

The military officers in power in Mali and Burkina Faso draw on popular grievances to maintain their legitimacy. The two leaders also construct a sense of victimhood as a strategy for legitimizing the rejection of France’s presence in the Sahel. In data (5), Burkina Faso’s president criticises some African leaders who continue to work for the benefit of ‘their master’. President Traore believes that his country is victim of betrayal in their fight against terrorism. Therefore, they have demanded the end of France’s military operation in the Sahel. By contrast, Russia is positively presented as a good partner and a friend. While, France and its allies are negatively described as “master”. Indeed, actor description is frequently employed by Ibrahim Traore to attack France and its allies in Africa. In examples (6), (7) and (8), the negative acts of ‘Other’ are stressed by the speaker to instigate anti-French sentiment. This negative description of the ‘Other’ is ideologically driven and aims to tarnish the image of France and ‘certain countries’. Traore uses the specific case of Niger’s uranium exploited by a French company (Orano) ‘over 40 years’ to forge a bond of victimhood between the junta and the Sahelian people.

(6) These imperialists have only one cliché in mind. Africa is the continent of slaves; that's how they see Africa (Ibrahim Traore, 2024).

(7) If we are as poor as they say, why don't they want to leave when the time comes for us to take responsibility and ask this master to leave places? (Ibrahim Traore, 2024).

(8) In the case of Niger, for over 40 years, certain countries have been mining uranium to produce energy at home. From Ottawa to Paris, the streets are lit up; but in Niger, we are served darkness (Ibrahim Traore, 2024).

In the aforementioned examples, polarization is driven by the stark contrast between ‘we’ and ‘they’. Furthermore, the use of the deixis ‘they’ by Traore marks the negative portrayal of ‘certain countries’ seen as the plunderers of Africa. He uses this deixis to fuel polarization, underline differences between us versus them and reinforce ingroup and out-group mentality. The consistent use of the deixis ‘we’ or ‘us’ reflects the speaker’s positive stand on his leadership. Besides, Traore frequently employs the deixis ‘we’ to emphasise shared struggles and grievances, creating a victimhood mentality. Traore and Goïta’s polarized discourses contribute to the rising of anti-French sentiments in the Sahel. Traore and Goïta’s self-advantage narration of socio-political events and France’s role in Africa can increase hostilities towards France in the Sahel.

Going through Assimi Goïta’s and Ibrahim Traore’s speeches, one was expecting to see positive

evaluations of their homelands. There are many reasons for using self-glorification in political messages. It is found that Traore and Goïta employ self-glorification discursive strategy to enhance the image of Africa. In (9) Burkina Faso's interim president put a focus on Africa's resources. In fact, he praises the continent by highlighting the 'huge mineral resources' in Africa.

(9) I cannot understand why Africa, with its huge mineral resources, water and sun, is the poorest continent where hunger abounds, and why we have to ask for help (Traore, 2023).

(10) In this struggle, our courageous people decided to take up arms against terrorism. We were surprised to learn that imperialists refer to them as armed groups or militarized groups (Traore, 2023).

The above text source reflects the speaker's positive stand on Africa and his people who are presented as 'courageous people'. National self-glorification is a discursive strategy used to enhance the positive self-image and at the same time to emphasize the negative other-presentation. Malian and Burkinabè interim presidents make use of national self-glorification to shed positive light on their countries.

Another polarization strategy found in interim presidents Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traore's speeches is categorization. Fowler (1991) describes categorization a "linguistic objectification of allocation of a definite place" (p. 58). Categorisation can be seen as a powerful ideological tool which is strategically employed by the two leaders to direct their people's interpretation to a certain direction which, in turn, leads to polarization or hatred towards France or western countries.

In (11), president Traore implicitly refers to two categories of African leaders. This is apparent through the positive presentation of 'We' versus the negative presentation of 'They'. This binary presentation in example (11) favours the in-group and derogates the outgroup. According to Kuo and Nakamura (2005), the 'We' group is depicted favourably while 'They' group is unfavourably presented.

(11) They approached us and asked us to join the ranks and become part of the elite that is supposed to lead Africa, because they have an elite that is trained and molded to follow their logic, which is ingrained in their chain. We refused to join their ranks. And from that moment on, hostilities began. They sent several mercenaries, trainers, and agents to our areas in the Sahel to carry out barbaric and cowardly attacks against our people, in the hope of inciting them to revolt. In addition to these attacks on the ground, there was a war of communication, manipulation, and disinformation. (Traore, 2024).

Polarization is seen through the way Traore categorizes foreign countries in the excerpt above. For instance, Traore accuses France of carrying 'a war of communication' and 'manipulation' in the Sahel. On this ground, Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24 have been banned in Mali and Burkina Faso by the military regimes. By contrast, Russia is positively presented by the interim presidents. In examples (12) and (13), Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traore's presentation of in-group versus out-group reflects ideological polarization. In the examples (12) and (13), the polarization between the 'individuals' who help the 'master' to plunder Africa and the 'friends' of Africa is mentioned in both leaders' speeches.

(12) These individuals still continue, against all odds, to help the master plunder Africa (Traore, 2024).

(13) The Malian people sincerely appreciate the support of the Russian Federation because we are finally seeing in these serious, difficult times who our true friends are (A. Goïta, 2023).

Categorization or grouping is never neutral as it always carries ideological meaning. Categorisation is widely use in both leaders' speeches with the aim of establishing certain ideological-based stereotypes of 'Us' and 'Them'. For Eissa (2015, p. 51), "categorization is a kind of grouping of entities into larger categories". In the excerpts (14) and (15), one can see that a European country like Russia is treated as Mali and Burkina Faso's friend. While, other European countries are very often described as imperialists. In fact, as a response to corruption, insecurity and ever-growing terrorism in their countries, Captain Traore and General Assimi ousted elected civilian leaders and put an end to the defense agreements or cooperation with France. France's departure thus marks the intensification of military cooperation between Russia and the Sahelian States such Mali and Burkina Faso. Russia is portrayed as a friend in the context of security and military support in the Sahel. The use of lexical and phrasal expressions such 'Vladimir Putin, a great friend of Mali' and 'Russia is part of the family' intends to positively present Russia and instil in the minds of local populations that Russia is in the Sahel to help defeat terrorism.

(14) I would like to convey fraternal greetings to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, a great friend of Mali, and to sincerely thank you on behalf of the people (A. Goïta, 2023)

(15) Russia is part of the family for Africa, because we have the same history. Russia has suffered many losses to liberate Europe and the rest of the world from Nazism during the Second World War (Traore, 2023).

Categorisation is a form of ideological polarization which is employed by the new leaders in the Sahel to ingrain in people's mind two categories of European in Africa: the friends of Africa (in-group) versus the neo-colonialists (out-group). Following their ideology, Russia is presented as the friend of Africa. In doing so, Traore and Goïta emphasize the positive actions of Russia in the Sahel. Contrarily, France and other European nations are portrayed as neo-colonialists or imperialists. According to Van Dijk (2006), categorization creates in-group and out-group. In this study, it is found that out-group members are described as enemies and their actions are negatively valued.

## Conclusion

The analysis shows the portrayal of categories in terms of Us and Them. All the descriptions given about France and European countries emphasize their negative representation and consequently reinforce the ideological polarization of 'US' versus 'THEM'. The findings obtained from analyzing the selected data lead to the conclusion that Captain Ibrahim Traore, the interim president of the republic of Burkina Faso and Assimi Goïta, the president of Mali have the tendency to negatively present western countries, particularly France as a neo-colonialist country. Negative other presentation is achieved in Traore and Goïta's speeches by using the following discursive devices: categorization, actor description,

victimization and national self-glorification. As far as their discursive styles are concerned, the two leaders use different polarization strategies to represent the enemies of the Sahel. It is found that Goïta emphasizes positive ingroup (Us) presentation through the use of national self-glorification and categorization. While, Traore emphasizes negative presentation of out-group (others). He constantly depicts western countries, particularly France as neo-colonialist country. President Traore resorts to diverse ideological discursive means such as categorization, national self-glorification, actor description and victimization to influence people's perception about France and to enhance anti-French sentiments in the Sahel.

This study concludes that the ideological polarization strategies employed by Traore and Goita can instigate anti-French sentiments, hate speech, division and violence by creating Us vs Them mentality in Mali and Burkina Faso. The binary opposition fuelled by polarizing rhetoric and divisive narratives can undermine social cohesion, diplomatic relations and joint counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel.

## References

Akbar, N. F. & Abbas, N. (2019). Negative other-representation in American political speeches. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(2), 113-127.

Akrimi, Y. (2023, July 2024). The françafrique: Unveiling anti-french sentiments and France's complex role in Africa. Brussels International Center. https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/francafrique-unveiling-anti-french-sentiments-and-frances-complex-role-africa

Hamed, D. (2020). Ideologically-based polarisation and racism in discourse. *Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1-13.

Eissa, M. (2015). Polarized discourse in the Egyptian news: Critical discourse analysis perspective. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 15(1), 1411-3031.

Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (pp. 258-284), London: Sage.

Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. London: Routledge.

Guiffard, J. (January, 2023). Anti-french sentiment in west Africa: A reflection of the authoritarian confrontation with the "collective west". https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/anti-french-sentiment-west-africa-reflection-authoritarian-confrontation-collective-west

Gnaka, L. (June 2024). Pan africanism in the sahel region. https://towardfreedom.org/story/archives/africa-archives/pan-africanism-in-the-sahel-region/

Kuo, S. H. & Nakamura, M. (2005). Translation or transformation? A case study of language and ideology in the Taiwanese press. *Discourse & Society*, 16(3), 393-417.

Korkmaz, T. (2019). 'La françafrique': The special relationship between France and its former colonies

in Africa". INSAMER, https://en.insamer.com/la-francafrique-the-special-relationship-between-france-and-its-former-colonies-in-africa_2307.html

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd. http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf

Morten, B. & Viljar, H. (2025). Winning hearts and power: How Mali's military regime gained popular support, https://theconversation.com/winning-hearts-and-power-how-malis-military-regime-gained-popular-support

Pigeaud, F. & Samba, N. (2024). The revolt against françafrique: What is behind the "anti-french" Sentiment? https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3003-1895.

Saedeen, M. & Albzour, N. (2022). Donald Trump's denial speeches of the 2020 united states presidential election's results: A critical discourse analysis perspective, *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 13(1), 32-40.

Sartori, G. (1976). *Parties and party systems: A framework for analysis* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2011). Discourse and ideology. In T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. London: Sage.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Politics, ideology, and discourse, in K Brown(ed.). *The Encyclopedia*.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies*.

Ybiskay, G. (2022). Political polarisation and the extension of government: a revisited concept, *Social Identities*, 28(2), 252-266.

# The Politics of Belonging: Gendered Identity and Populist Exclusion in France, Germany and Italy

by Vincenzo Gannuscio & Silvia Modena[28]

## Abstract

This paper examines the discursive construction of collective belonging and exclusion in contemporary European populist discourse, focusing on the strategic role of gendered identity. Drawing on a trilingual corpus of political speeches and written texts in German, French, and Italian, the study explores how populist actors mobilise emotional appeals – particularly fear, anger, and resentment – towards perceived external groups. Gender emerges as a central rhetorical resource through which political speakers position themselves ideologically, reinforce in-group cohesion, and demarcate symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them."

The analysis is grounded in corpus-based discourse linguistics and draws on data from the Political Language Repository (Po.La.R.), an AI-enhanced multilingual corpus of non-institutional political communication. Findings show that right-wing populist movements such as the Alternative für Deutschland frame gender equality and inclusive language as ideological threats linked to moral decline. In the French context, gender is articulated through processes of self- and hetero-designation, as illustrated by the rhetoric of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. Comparative references to Italian discourse further highlight how identity labels function as populist tools of belonging.

Overall, the study argues that gender is central to populist identity politics and exclusionary worldviews in Europe.

**Keywords**: Populist Discourse, Gendered Identity, Politics of Belonging, Discursive Exclusion, Emotional Appeals, Multilingual Corpus Linguistics, Political Positioning

## Positioning, Emotion, and Gender

In recent years, growing scholarly attention has been devoted to the ways in which political actors construct and negotiate collective identities through discourse. This paper contributes to this line of research by presenting a corpus-based analysis of populist identity construction in political speech.

[28] University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Drawing on a trilingual corpus consisting of both oral and written political discourse in German, French, and Italian, the study aims to explore and demonstrate, through concrete examples, how emotional appeals, particularly those invoking fear, anger, and resentment towards perceived external groups, are mobilised in relation to gender. In this context, gender emerges as a discursive resource strategically instrumentalised to foster a sense of collective belonging and to reinforce a specific worldview. The aim of this study is to shed light on the framing of gender-related issues in the discursive construction of populist identity, and to offer insight into the rhetorical strategies employed by populist parties in contemporary Europe, with particular attention to the representations of women and the perceptions associated with them.

The ways in which individuals position themselves and others within society are continuously negotiated through linguistic interaction. Language is not merely a vehicle for communication, but a central resource in the construction of social reality, shaping identities, relationships, and collective worldviews. Through discourse, speakers engage in acts of alignment and evaluation that locate them within particular ideological and affective frameworks. In this sense, stancetaking and positioning represent dynamic, interactive processes through which social meaning is continuously produced and contested (cf. Völker & Spiess, 2023, p. 251; Dang-Anh, 2023, p. 20).

Drawing on the concept of stancetaking, positioning can be understood as the evaluative adoption of a standpoint in contrast to others and is therefore always an ideological act (Spitzmüller, 2023). Such positionings may be explicitly addressed and, where relevant, discussed, or they may be implicitly conveyed through linguistic practices. These processes contribute to the ongoing negotiation and reproduction of social structures and hierarchies, shaping our understanding of identity and social belonging.

Political positioning, likewise, constitutes a discursive practice through which individuals articulate their beliefs, values, and political attitudes – or are represented by others. Importantly, political positioning occurs not only in explicitly political contexts where such statements are expected, but also implicitly “in the smallest communicative ramifications of everyday life” (Dang-Anh, 2023, p. 25). This practice encompasses a range of communicative strategies realised through lexical choice, rhetorical figures, metaphorical framing, and narrative structures. To uncover the political positioning potential of individual utterances, including their relational dimensions, it is essential to analyse not only the linguistic resources employed in specific situations but also their embedding within broader contextual, discursive, and intertextual frameworks (ibid., p. 14f.). Moreover, political positioning includes embodied, non-verbal actions, which, however, are rarely considered in linguistic studies of political discourse (Pritzlaff-Scheele, 2023).

In this study, gender is understood as a discursive tool through which political actors position themselves and others within a broader ideological landscape. Drawing on the aforementioned theories of stancetaking and positioning, gender is likewise not treated as a fixed social category but as a relational and performative construct that acquires meaning through discourse. By examining how gendered references and evaluations are strategically employed in populist communication, the analysis seeks to

reveal how speakers use language to align themselves with particular moral, cultural, or national values and to demarcate symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them.” Thus, the study approaches gender not merely as a topic within populist discourse, but as a semiotic resource that enables the construction, reinforcement, and emotional intensification of populist identities. The corpus-based methodology allows for the systematic identification of these patterns across German, French, and Italian contexts.

## The Corpus: Po.La.R.

Currently under development, the Political Language Repository (Po.La.R.) corpus builds upon the Po.Pol.I. research project (Populism, Politics, Identity), funded by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy) (cf. Modena, Palladino & Gannuscio, 2025). The focus lies primarily on non-institutional political communication in four European languages: German, French, Spanish, and Italian. The corpus encompasses both spoken and written texts, with particular attention to political discourse produced outside formal settings, such as rallies, campaign events, and party meetings. These less scripted environments provide fertile ground for examining populist rhetoric, affective strategies, and the discursive construction of identity.

While written texts are collected through traditional online sources, the spoken component is transcribed using Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) systems, including OpenAI Whisper (cf. Radford, Kim, Xu, Brockman, McLeavey & Sutskever, 2023) and tools developed by the Bayerisches Archiv für Sprachsignale (BAS) (cf. Kisler, Reichel & Schiel, 2017). The performance of these technologies in the orthographic transcription of political speeches was tested in a pilot study by Christoph Draxler (2023) and has already been successfully applied in politolinguistic research on German and Italian (cf. Palladino, 2024; Palladino, 2025a). These tools have proven effective and are particularly valuable for enabling the production of orthographic, time-aligned transcriptions.

In a subsequent phase of the project, the research team intends to delve into an aspect that remains relatively underexplored in the study of political oral discourse, by focusing on the multimodal dimensions of communication (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala, 2017). Specifically, the transcribed data will be annotated with prosodic and paraverbal features, such as intonation, rhythm, and emphasis (Palladino, 2025b), as well as gestural elements (Goldin-Meadow, 1999; McNeill, 1996; McNeill, Cassell & McCullough, 1994). These additional layers of annotation will enable the research team to examine the interaction between performative features and rhetorical or lexical strategies in political speech, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the embodied nature of political communication.

To complement the spoken data, the corpus also comprises written political texts, thus facilitating diamesic comparison between spoken and written registers. This integrated approach permits the analysis of how political actors adapt their discourse strategies across different communicative modes and contexts. All materials are processed and made available in multiple interoperable formats (e.g. TXT, annotJSON, TextGrid), ensuring compatibility with a wide range of linguistic and phonetic analysis tools. The use of standardised transcription and annotation protocols guarantees consistency and

comparability across languages and text types.

The following sections present a corpus-driven analysis based on the German, French and Italian Po.La.R. dataset, focusing on the gendered dimensions of populist discourse – in particular, on how the figure of the woman is strategically mobilised to signify alignment with a narrow and exclusionary notion of identity, as articulated in populist rhetoric. Due to space constraints, the analysis will primarily concentrate on data from German sources, specifically the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and from French sources, namely the parties Parti Socialiste, Rassemblement national and Reconquête. While similar discursive patterns can also be observed in the Italian subcorpus, examples from Italian political discourse will be referred to selectively and will not be explored in a dedicated analytical section.

## The Alternative für Deutschland and the Gender Ideology

As previously stated in §1, gender is instrumentally employed as a discursive tool to construct a clearly defined sense of collective identity and to promote a specific worldview. In the German subcorpus, the focus lies on materials produced by the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). In this case, it is particularly easy to identify speeches and written documents in which party representatives attack gender equality, portraying it as a meaningless ideological construct that is, either implicitly or explicitly, associated with the so-called “old” established political class. Through this rhetorical strategy, the party performs a clear act of stancetaking, evaluating gender equality negatively and positioning itself in explicit opposition to the mainstream political establishment. Such stancetaking not only signals ideological distance but also reinforces in-group alignment among supporters, contributing to the construction of a shared populist identity. The topic is addressed programmatically, as explicitly articulated in several foundational documents and in the preambles of various electoral programmes.

> (1) In our country, however, a political class has emerged whose primary interest lies in its power, status, and material well-being. This class jeopardizes the social and cultural future of our people, the strength of our economy, and thus our prosperity, by prioritizing multiculturalism, diversity, globalization, and alleged gender equality above all else. It holds the levers of state power, political education, and the informational and media influence over the population. (AfD, 2021, p. 12)

In example (1), taken from the 2021 election programme, it is stated that the party opposes the hegemonic ruling class which, in AfD’s view, jeopardises the social and cultural future of the German people, the national economy, and ultimately the country’s prosperity by promoting multiculturalism, diversity, globalisation and, notably, what they refer to as vermeintliche Gendergerechtigkeit (alleged gender equality). The disparaging tone conveyed by the term vermeintlich (alleged) is a recurring rhetorical device in the party’s communication, and it is not difficult to find further examples in which party members attack the concept of gender equality, portraying it as an absurd, ideologically driven

invention ascribed to the political establishment, from which the party deliberately dissociates itself.

> (2) Values [...] that the fools back there also want to embody and implement: for example gender mainstreaming, for example 53 genders, for example the sick white self-hatred. (HÖC_2021_001)

> (3) Bans have come to dominate this sick way of thinking. And we really need to put a stop to it. We really need to stop this everyday madness of alarmism and frightening of gender and corona ideologies.(CHR_2021_002)

These two examples clearly show how gender-related topics are frequently portrayed as a matter of stupidity or madness. Endorsing such ideologies automatically positions individuals as members of an antagonistic group, in opposition to the party which, as is typical for populist movements, claims to represent the “true people” (cf. Gannuscio 2019). For instance, in example (2), Björn Höcke sarcastically refers to the Knallköpfe (fools) from Antifa who protested him during the electoral event from which the transcript is taken. He associates their values with concepts such as ‘Gender Mainstreaming’, ‘the recognition of 53 genders’, and additionally links them to what he considers a typically white disposition towards self-hatred – what he explicitly labels weißer Selbsthass, (white self-loathing) which he describes as krank (sick). A similar argument appears in example (3), where Tino Chrupalla does not hesitate to characterise gender-related discourse as a pathological mode of thinking. He links gender and COVID, referring to both as instances of panic- and fearmongering.

A recurring feature across the occurrences found in the corpus is that, in all public statements by the AfD, it is virtually impossible to identify explicit positions regarding those who have gained rights and freedoms through gender-related policies. This rhetorical strategy reflects what Gerd Antos (2008) describes as techniques of highlighting and hiding: while certain issues – such as the alleged threats posed by gender politics – are deliberately brought to the fore and problematised, other dimensions, such as the concrete benefits and emancipatory achievements of gender-related policies, are systematically omitted or downplayed. At the same time, these achievements are not merely silenced but are often discursively reframed as sources of danger or moral decline, thereby transforming the emancipatory dimension of gender equality into a rhetorical object of contestation. In doing so, attention is directed towards constructed dangers and away from perspectives that might affirm the positive social value of such developments, reinforcing a polarised narrative that opposes social change to traditional moral order.

Although representatives of the party operating at the national and more institutional level openly criticise gender policies, they generally refrain from explicitly targeting women, homosexuals, or same-sex families. This restraint may be due to the personal circumstances of the party’s leading candidate, Alice Weidel, who is a lesbian woman in a same-sex relationship and a parent. Consequently, unlike parties such as the Italian Lega (cf. example 4), which consistently advocate for the ‘traditional’ family model composed of a father and a mother and oppose expressions such as ‘Parent 1 and Parent 2’, the AfD adopts a more cautious discursive strategy in this area.

> (4) As a parent, actually as a dad, I never want to see again on school enrolment forms those absurdities of Parent 1 and Parent 2. Every child has a mom and a dad, and children are adopted if there are a mom and a dad. End of Story! Stop! (SAL_2017_001)

Alice Weidel herself (cf. example 5), notwithstanding her personal background, does not refrain from publicly criticising gender studies, which she describes as instruments for creating so-called 'queer-red cadres'. She has asserted that, should the AfD come to power, all gender studies programmes would be shut down and academics working in this field removed from universities. According to Weidel, universities must once again comply strictly with the educational directives established by the state.

> (5) In North Rhine-Westphalia, professors are up in arms because Mr Wüst wants to turn the universities into queer-red cadre forges. Shall I tell you what we will do when we are at the rudder? We will close all gender studies programmes and kick these professors out! Our children, our youth, the young people must learn something proper at universities and schools again. The state has an educational mandate, and it must not neglect it! (WEI_2025_002)

To identify more explicit positions on women, it is necessary to focus on statements made by regional or local party representatives. Analysing the communication of provincial sections or lesser-known figures often reveals clearer expressions of the party's ideological stance. These actors, likely less versed in rhetorical concealment strategies (cf. Forster 2017; Habscheid 2008), tend to articulate their views more directly. For instance, in focusing on the text of the following Instagram-post published by the Saxony regional section, the feminist is juxtaposed with the 'traditional' woman.


*Figure 1: Modern Liberated Woman vs. Traditional Woman*
*(https://www.picuki.com/media/2956019234148314014 - last seen 24.10.2022)*

> Modern "liberated" feminists: tons of make-up because of their low self-esteem; frequently changing relationships; works minimum wage because no one needs her gender degree; poor

> lifestyle, neglected; broken hair from too much colouring; already her third abortion at 22 and proud of it.
>
> The traditional woman: healthy ego with natural skin and hair, loves her family and her homeland, slim figure through sport and healthy eating, loves her family, is proud to live for her children, supports her husband in love, considers education and raising of children as her first duty.

So-called 'modern liberated' feminists are portrayed as neglected women, with hair damaged by repeated dyeing, heavy makeup worn due to low self-esteem, unstable romantic relationships, and a history of multiple abortions by early adulthood. They are depicted as holding useless degrees in Gender Studies and working low-paid jobs. In contrast, the 'traditional' woman is presented as healthy, with natural skin and hair, and a slim figure achieved through sport and balanced nutrition. She is shown as devoted to her family and homeland, lovingly supportive of her husband, and proud to dedicate herself to raising children and educating them – duties framed as her natural vocation.

This depiction is further reflected in example (6), taken from a YouTube interview in which Maximilian Krah speaks with two young men. In the interview, he asserts that Germany must rid itself of 'hideous eunuchs' who, according to him, are leading the country astray. He claims that Germany needs 'real men', whom he identifies as right-wing, and 'real women', explicitly rejecting individuals with 'blue hair' or 'problematic fringes'.

> (6) We need real people. We don't need these hideous eunuchs who somehow control this country. We need real blokes, real men, proper men, real men are right-winged. We also need proper women. Not blue hair, problematic fringes. Real women. That's the key to success. (KRA_2025_001)

As previously noted, it is not easy to find statements that so explicitly convey a misogynistic worldview as those discussed above. However, one element that clearly emerges across all levels of the party's communication is a persistent critique of inclusive language. Several party documents (cf. example 7), for instance, disparagingly refer to it as "Gender-Gaga" (gender-nonsense), asserting that Germans should preserve what they call 'natural language', rather than adopting the so-called 'Gender-Newspeak' promoted by the Left-Green political spectrum.

> (7) Natural language instead of gender nonsense: Left-wing green social educators want to impose their nonsensical gender newspeak on us. The AfD opposes this and wants to ban written gendering, as is the case in France. End the distortion of the German language! […] Consequently, we firmly reject the displacement of the generic masculine and the introduction of so-called gender writing. (AfD, 2022, p. 33)

Nevertheless, the AfD's androcentric worldview reveals itself as deeply embedded and may be detected even in documents that, at first glance, appear unrelated to gender-specific issues. To conclude this brief overview, we examine a passage from the booklet Leitkultur, Identität, Patriotismus (AfD, 2018), a publication through which the AfD seeks to define its position within the broader debate on what

constitutes German national identity and cultural belonging.

> (8) Illustrative examples are: The Bauhaus, Benedict XVI ("We are Pope!"), German Idealism, our poets and thinkers (such as Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Fontane), the graduate engineer, the Deutsche Mark, the protestant parsonage, the Bundesliga, Gemütlichkeit, Grimm's Fairy Tales, the Hanseatic League, our composers (such as Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Wagner), Martin Luther and the Reformation, love of order, the beer purity law, the allotment garden, the VW Beetle and Trabant, the "economic miracle", Winnetou, Wurst (Thuringian bratwurst, Bavarian white sausage, etc.). (AfD, 2018, p. 30)

The selected excerpt offers an example of the party's androcentric perspective and demonstrates how this underpins broader ideological narratives. In addressing the question of what constitutes German "Leitkultur", the authors acknowledge that cultural identity cannot be conclusively defined, described, or fixed. Nevertheless, they proceed to outline a list – an established rhetorical strategy. Without examining the list in detail, it is worth noting that the alphabetically ordered compilation, clearly aimed at order-loving individuals, offers valuable insight into the AfD's cultural worldview. Even though the list is explicitly described as merely illustrative, it unmistakably reflects a chauvinistic cultural model, in which not a single woman is included.

## The Gender Question in French Political Discourse: Self and Hetero-designations

Unlike the German context, the gender question in the French political subcorpus must be analysed by distinguishing between self-designations and hetero-designations. Self-designation and hetero-designation are discursive processes of mise en discours identitaire. Several studies (cf. Richard, Faurè, 2015; Le Bart 2000; Gattiglia, Modena & Vicari 2024) have used them to describe processes of self-attribution of certain political silhouettes rather than labelling processes carried out by the press, social media or politicians themselves.

This section will focus on the political speeches of three French leaders: Ségolène Royal (Parti Socialiste - PS), Marine Le Pen (Front national and Rassemblement national - FN/RN) and Eric Zemmour (Reconquête). Ségolène Royal wanted to become the first woman to serve as President of France in 2007. She tried to campaign on family and socially-oriented issues rather than on economic or foreign policy issues. Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen (founder of the National Front in 1972), has revived the discourse of the French far right, starting with the name change of the party, now renamed the Rassemblement National (2018). She ran for the French presidency in 2012, 2017 and 2022, focusing her campaign on immigration and sovereignty. Finally, Eric Zemmour, polemicist, radio commentator, author of political essays and novels, ran for President in 2022 as leader of the Reconquête party. Zemmour is well known for his controversial views on immigration and Islam in France. He strongly supports the idea of the 'great replacement', a conspiracy theory that the native population of France is being replaced by non-European people.

A brief reference will also be made to the political discourse of Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia) to offer a comparative perspective between France and Italy. With regard to Ségolène Royal, it is important to note that her speech does not fall into the category of populist discourse but, as she was the first female Presidential candidate to pass the first round, we start from her statement:

> (9) "**I'm a woman, I'm a mother**, and I accept that in my *relationship* with power". (ROY_2007_001)

This statement (9), included in Ségolène Royal's speech of Dijon (7 March 2007) on the policy she wishes to pursue in favour of women, is a good starting point for addressing the gender issue in the French political landscape. We point out that until 2007, women were confined to the role of extras – testimonial candidates, activists, wives. The 2007 presidential campaign, which saw Ségolène Royal carry the Socialist Party's candidacy against Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round of the election, seems to have been implicitly irrigated, in both political and media discourse, by the crucial implicit question: does a woman politician refer to a political figure grammatically marked by gender, or to a political figure whose defining trait is femininity? So, there is a duality in the profiles of female politicians portrayed in the weekly press: either they are presented through their typically 'feminine' qualities, emphasising gentleness, sensitivity, listening skills, sincerity, etc.; or they are portrayed as fighters, go-getters, having adopted rather 'masculine' characteristics to gain acceptance in politics.

The other model found in the weekly press is that of the female politician who has internalised the 'masculine' rules of power to find her own place in the public sphere. There is, in fact, a certain negative view of women who do not 'fit' into their role, who prefer to break the rules in order to carve out a place for themselves in politics. This is the case with Marine Le Pen, who is often compared to her father and 'masculinised' in several portraits.

The programmatic document par excellence of the French presidential electoral landscape is the profession de foi. For her 2022 presidential candidacy, Marine Le Pen exploits all the specificities of this political document, which represents, as M. Bonhomme puts it, a micro-genre of transversal political discourse, a self-promotional discourse and a communicative dispositive centred on the ethos of the candidate (2016) . During the 2022 presidential election, Marine Le Pen included the gender identity triad in her political discourse for the first time:

> (10) **As a mother**, I refuse to leave my children a country abandoned to insecurity, precariousness and fatality.
>
> **As a woman**, I refuse to see the freedoms and rights that we thought we had won rolled back.
>
> **As a French woman**, I refuse to give up and I want to bring my compatriots the change they are calling for.
>
> (11) **I am a mother**, and like you, I want our children to grow up in a safe and prosperous country – one that offers everyone decent work, opportunities for success, and the assurance of being protected from life's hardships.

> **I am a woman**, and like you, I want to preserve our freedoms, our rights, and our ways of life, which are now under threat even though we once believed them to be secure.
>
> **I am French woman**, and like you, I can no longer tolerate the contempt of our leaders: I want France to move forward, for the people to finally be heard, and to take back power.

The question of gender identity is not just part of the slogan of the candidate (Femme d'Etat – Stateswoman). In the examples (10) and (11), the triple self-designation implemented by the candidate to highlight her three qualities should enhance her political ethos: mother, woman and French. Coulomb-Gully (2022) analysed the sexism in the French public discourse, and she evokes the "masculine-feminine girl": Marine Le Pen uses a double gendered identity such as a pioneer in this gendered relationship to politics. In other words, the feminine stereotypes of gentleness and compassion, hitherto specific to the private world of the family and the home, are mobilised by Marine Le Pen from a patriotic perspective, as is her French nationality.

The search for enunciative proximity with the female interlocutor (comme vous – like you, nos – our) is associated with a precise argumentative structure: maternity is associated with protection and security (l'insécurité, la précarité, la fatalité – insecurity, precarity, fatalism), femininity is linked to freedom and rights (des libertés et droits – freedom and rights) while French nationality is grafted onto the will of the people (apporter à mes compatriotes le changement qu'ils appellant – to bring to my fellow citizens the change they are calling for). This argumentative structure is present in the profession de foi of the first round (10) but is repeated more extensively in the profession de foi of the second round (11) against Emmanuel Macron. Let's add one last comment on the candidate's politically gendered discourse through a look at the media treatment of the candidate on this issue: the media's portrayal of this argumentative turn of the candidate has been denominated by eloquent labels such as 'a woman like any other' , 'a mother of a family' , 'Le Pen a feminist' .

On the eve of 8 March 2022, Marine Le Pen even published a 'letter to French women' to affirm her 'sensitivity to women's issues'. This strategy, which began in 2012 and was reinforced in 2017, has already had an impact on the female electorate, with an increase in the number of women voting for Marine Le Pen. However, her statements are often at odds with her programme, which confines the issue of gender to the presence of foreigners on national territory.

After having explained the self-assigned designations of Royal and Le Pen we now pass to the political discourse of Éric Zemmour. The title of Le premier sexe (The First Sex), published in 2006, immediately evokes Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex). The back cover simply draws attention to the fact that:

> (12) What does the ideal man look like? He waxes. He buys beauty products. He wears jewellery. He dreams of eternal love. He's a firm believer in feminine values. He prefers compromise to authority and favours dialogue and tolerance rather than fighting. The ideal man is a real woman. He's given up. The weight between his legs has become too heavy. Some feminists have seized on this power vacuum, convinced that equality is sameness. Today, the younger generations

> have integrated this confusion. Their sons dream only of couples and long-term feminisation. Above all, they don't want to be what they are: boys. Anything masculine is a dirty word. A curse. But the revolt is growing. Men have an identity to reclaim. A new place to conquer. So that they can never again say to their children: 'You'll be a woman, my son".

Zemmour's work is often directed against 'feminist doxa', such as the 'pink hierarchs', the 'homosexual lobby' and the destruction of the 'French family'. In this book, published in 2006, Eric Zemmour praises patriarchy and male domination. Zemmour considers himself, as a man, to be a victim of 'feminist totalitarianism'. The first series of actions described by the candidate as a list for creating the ideal man merely retraces female stereotypes (beauty products, jewellery, love, dialogue) through an argument based on definition: the tone is assertive, the statements short and slogan-like ('The ideal man is a real woman'). It should also be noted that analogical reasoning helps the speaker convey aggressive remarks towards unsuccessful men: the metonymy that allows Zemmour to embody masculinity by referring to the weight of testicles.

But if we want to explore the gendered Identity and Populist Exclusion linked to Zemmour's discourse, we must analyse the 'Meeting des Femmes'. On 8 March, International Women's Rights Day, Éric Zemmour organised this event in the in eastern Paris (Vincennes):

> (13) Because as well as being magnificent women, you are French women. You embody the French identity. This very special identity, which is admired by so many women and men around the world. Because you know, ladies, that you are the heirs to a magnificent history, the custodians of a very special identity, which has inspired the admiration of the whole world! Women and men of all nationalities admire you when they visit our country, when they meet French women. The whole world says that French women are different. Free. Magnificent. Indomitable. Joan of Arc is French. Marie-France Garaud is French. Catherine Deneuve is French. Marion Maréchal is French. Women who are unique, strong, like all of you here tonight. (ZEM_2022_012)

Among the essential features of the new national-populism, Taguieff (2012) distinguishes many characteristics that can be applied to quite a few European political parties. One of these characteristics is the appeal to the so-called authentic, healthy, simple, honest and orderly people, which allows a certain discrimination of individuals based on ethnicity and/or culture. This harmony, regularity, solidity and uniformity are highlighted in the example (13). With regard to a monument, a museum, a square, Zemmour evokes the feminine universe through a rhetoric of uprightness and rectitude ('unique, strong, upright'). In Zemmour's political discourse, the female universe of heroines is polarised: he accepts Joan of Arc but rejects Marianne, emphasises Marie-France Garaud (Rassemblement pour la République - RPR) against Ségolène Royal (PS), extols Marine Le Pen's young niece Marion Maréchal Le Pen, but avoids naming her aunt. As analysed by Longhi (2022), the categorisations made by Zemmour in his discourse on women are intended to mobilise a specific discursive memory: the women on his list are not legitimate as women, they are dichotomous in relation to other women who are absent from his discourse. As in a mirror game, the women mentioned by Zemmour lose their role as admired

and renowned women in order to remove legitimacy from others (feminists, progressives, abortionists, etc.). The issue of gender thus becomes a discursive lever that empties the discourse of any weight of legitimacy for women in the political pantheon. In other words, the women called upon by the Reconquête spokesperson are women from a certain France, both past and present, linked by a normative idea of identity purity.

During the 'Meeting des Femmes', after painting the proud silhouette of French women, Zemmour took up the provocative tone of his essay Le premier sexe:

> (14) I'll give you an example that would really surprise our neo-feminist friends: at home, I do the dishes, I sort the rubbish, and I love doing my shopping! Very interesting, isn't it? Well, no! It's not interesting! The truth is, we don't care, no-one does, and it's surely not up to the state to decide whether I'm right or wrong to do the washing up for my partner. It's a question of our private lives, quite simply! (ZEM_2022_012)

In the example (14), the neologism 'neo-feminists' simply shatters the centuries-old history of the feminist movement and reduces it to a question of 'private life'. Zemmour thus poses as a victim in the face of what he calls in his essay 'feminist totalitarianism'. As quoted by Guaresi (2023, p. 7), "while the adjective 'feminist' is a semantically transparent and positive term on the left, the noun has a more complex usage on the far right. Most often, it is used by candidates, not as auto-designations, but to refer to and stigmatise activists in the women's movement".

The hetero-assigned designations of Zemmour's discourse clash with the Italian example of the President of the Council of Ministers in Italy, Giorgia Meloni. On the issue of gender discourse, it is pointed out that in the first official communications of the new government, Giorgia Meloni is referred to as il (singular masculine definite article) President and not as the la (singular feminine definite article) President of the Council of Ministers, which has been interpreted as her preference to be referred to in masculine terms.

During the demonstration in Piazza San Giovanni on 19 October 2019 she said:

> (15) It is the game of ideological conformity, they have to take away all that we are because when we no longer have an identity and no roots we will be devoid of awareness, unable to defend our rights. It is their game, they want us to be parent 1 parent 2, lgbt gender and citizen x, codes. But we are not codes, we are people and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian. (MEL_2019_001)

The leader of Fratelli d'Italia tends to present herself through five discursive labels (example 15) and her party as the only one standing firm amidst so many fickle parties. We draw attention to the fact that the argumentative structure of Meloni's gender identity discourse relies on a particularly revealing textual organisation: according to Paveau (2006), speakers construct typologies on a variety of subjects that enable them to classify and categorise objects in the world. Like the list used to analyse the German AfD discourse, a typology takes the form of an enumerative list of items belonging to the same category.

## Conclusions

This comparative analysis of gender discourse within populist political speech across German, French, and (to a lesser extent) Italian contexts reveals how gender identity is rhetorically instrumentalised to construct political legitimacy, ideological alignment, and national belonging. Through close examination of self-designations and hetero-designations, the study has shown that gender is not merely a descriptive category, but a discursive resource strategically mobilised to shape collective identity and reinforce exclusionary worldviews.

In the German subcorpus, particularly within the AfD, gender is depicted as a threat – framed through derogatory language and often associated with ideological decay or moral decline. Here, the rejection of Gendergerechtigkeit and inclusive language is part of a broader narrative opposing progressive social change and advocating a return to a rigid, hierarchical national identity.

In contrast, the French cases show more nuanced uses of gender. Ségolène Royal embraces a personal and relational ethos based on motherhood and femininity, while Marine Le Pen reclaims those same traits in the service of a nationalist, anti-establishment narrative. The 2007 presidential election was marked by change. For the first time, a woman was in a position to be elected. And it is precisely from a gender perspective that we have chosen to begin our analysis, as Ségolène Royal's candidacy played a major role in focusing the debate on this issue. This fact is felt all the more strongly given that women have been ostracised from French political life with a consistency that never ceases to amaze.

Marine Le Pen is embarking on a kind of 'normalisation' of Le Pen's discourse. During the 2022 presidential election, she is promoting a triple gender identity, one of which – French – echoes her father's Front National discourse (Les Français d'Abord! – The French First!).

Eric Zemmour, for his part, articulates a reactionary masculinity that positions feminism and gender equality as corrosive forces threatening male identity and traditional values. Especially in Zemmour's discourse, the practice of hetero-designating women allows us to take into account processes of female ideologization, as if there could be a distinction between good women and bad women from a political, identity or sexual point of view.

Finally, Giorgia Meloni's discourse stands out for its deliberate and systematic use of identity labels – 'I am a woman, a mother, an Italian, a Christian' – as a form of populist typology. Her rhetorical strategy reinforces a culturally anchored sense of belonging while resisting the perceived imposition of an ideological conformity ('pensiero unico).

Overall, this study demonstrates that gendered discourse in populist rhetoric is deeply embedded in broader ideological frameworks. It serves not only to define who belongs, but also to delineate who must be excluded. The textual and argumentative structures employed reveal how gender, far from being a marginal issue, is central to the discursive construction of populist political identity in contemporary Europe.

## References

AFD (2022): Nordrhein-Westfalen, Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 18. Landtag des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, März 2022. In: AfD-NRW-Website, URL: https://afd.nrw/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AfD-NRW-Wahlprogramm-Landtagswahl-NRW-2022.pdf

AfD (2021): Deutschland aber normal. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag. In: AfD-Website, URL: https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf

AFD (2018): Leitkultur, Identität, Patriotismus. Ein Positionspapier der AfD-Fraktion im Thüringer Landtag als Beitrag zur Debatte um die deutsche Leitkultur. In AfD-THL-Website, URL: https://afd-thl.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Leitkultur-Identität-Patriotismus.pdf

Antos, Gerd (2008): „Wo Licht ist, ist auch Schatten!" „Kommunikatives Ausblenden" oder: Zur Dialektik von Highlighting und Hiding. In: Pappert, Steffen / Schröter, Melani / Fix, Ulla (eds.): *Verschlüsseln, Verbergen, Verdecken in öffentlicher und institutioneller Kommunikation*. Berlin, pp. 133-146.

Bateman, John A. / Wildfeuer, Janina / Hiippala, Tuomo (2017): *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis – A Problem-Oriented Introduction*. Berlin/Boston.

Bonhomme, Marc (2016): Les professions de foi à l'occasion des élections présidentielles françaises, In: *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 112/2016, URL: http://mots.revues.org/22417

Coulomb-Gully, Marlène (2022): Sexisme sur la voix publique. *Femmes, éloquence et politique*, Editions de l'Aube, Avignon.

Dang-Anh, Mark (2023): Politische Positionierung. Sprachliche und soziale Praktiken der Relationalitätskonstitution. In: Dang-Anh, Mark (ed.): *Politisches Positionieren. Sprachliche und soziale Praktiken*. Heidelberg, pp. 7–38.

Draxler, Cristoph (2023): Analysis of transcriptions using Octra – a pilot study. In: Draxler, Christoph (ed.): *Elektronische Sprachsignalverarbeitung 2023*, TUDpress, Dresden, pp. 17–23.

Forster, Iris (2017): Kaschieren und verschleiern. In: Niehr, Thomas / Kilian, Jörg / Wengeler, Martin (eds.): Handbuch Sprache und Politik. Bremen, pp. 794-810.

Gannuscio, Vincenzo (2019): Wir sind das (echte) Volk. Sprachliche Ausgrenzungsstrategien der rechtspopulistischen Propaganda der AfD und der Lega Nord. In: Schiewe, Jürgen / Niehr, Thomas / Moraldo, Sandro M. (ed.), *Sprach(kritik)kompetenz als Mittel demokratischer Willensbildung. Sprachliche In- und Exklusionsstrategien als gesellschaftliche Herausforderung*. Bremen, pp. 43-61.

Gattiglia, N., Modena, S. and Vicari, S. (2024): Discours populistes et sur le populisme: entre auto- et hétéro-désignations. In: *Espaces Linguistiques*, (7). https://www.unilim.fr/espaces-

linguistiques/708

Goldin-Meadow, Susan (1999): The Role of Gesture in Communication and Thinking. In: *Trends in Cognitive Science*, vol. 2, 11. pp. 419–429.

Magali Guaresi, (2023): Les mots « féminisme » et « féministe » dans la campagne présidentielle de 2022 : un triomphe lexical ou une lutte sémantique ? In: *Corpus*, vol. 24, pp. 1-13.

Habscheid, Stephan (2008): Einheit als Fassade. Zur sprachlichen Inszenierung „kollektiver Identität“ in Organisationen. In: Pappert, Steffen / Schröter, Melani / Fix, Ulla (eds.): *Verschlüsseln, Verbergen, Verdecken in öffentlicher und institutioneller Kommunikation*. Berlin, pp. 255-271.

Le Bart Christian, (2000): Nommer les hommes politiques : identités prescrites, stratégiques, polémiques. In: *Mots, n°63, juillet 2000. Noms propres, sous la direction de Jean-Paul Honoré*, Marie-Anne Paveau et Gabriel Périès. pp. 127-133.

Longhi Julier (2022): Quelques ressorts discursifs et argumentatifs de la discrimination envers les femmes par le « savoir ». Éric Zemmour, les mots pour construire la haine. In: *Corela* [En ligne], HS-36.

Kisler, Thomas / Reichel, Uwe / Schiel, Florian (2017): Multilingual processing of speech via web services. In: *Computer Speech & Language*, Vol. 45, pp. 326–347.

McNeill, David (1996): *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought*. Chicago.

McNeill, David / Cassell, Justine / McCullough, Karl-Erik (1994): Communicative effects of speech-mismatched gestures. In: *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 27, pp. 223–237.

Modena, Silvia / Palladino, Marcella / Gannuscio, Vincenzo (2025): A Multilingual Corpus of German, French and Italian Political Discourse: Goals and Methodological Challenges. In: Grawunder, Sven (ed.): *Elektronische Sprachsignalverarbeitung 2025*, Dresden, pp. 125–129.

Palladino, Marcella (2025a): Politolinguistics Through Spoken Language Processing: A Methodological Framework for German and Italian Political Speeches. In: Grawunder, Sven (ed.): *Elektronische Sprachsignalverarbeitung 2025*, TUDpress, Dresden, pp. 204–211.

Palladino, Marcella (2025b): Prosody and Gender in Politolinguistics: Comparative Analysis of German and Italian Political Speeches Using Spoken Language Processing, unpubl. Dissertation, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia.

Palladino, Marcella (2024): Webbasierte Tools für die Transkription und Analyse von Reden. Hilfreiche Instrumentarien für die (Polito)Linguistik. In: *Lingue e Linguaggi*, pp. 413–437.

Paveau, Marie-Anne (2006): *Les Prédiscours. Sens, mémoire, cognition*, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris.

Pritzlaff-Scheele, Tanja (2023): Praktiken als normative politische Positionierungen. In: Dang-Anh, Mark (ed.): *Politisches Positionieren. Sprachliche und soziale Praktiken*. Heidelberg, pp. 123–

138.

Radford, Alec / Kim, Jong Wook / Xu, Tao / Brockman, Greg / Mcleavey, Christine / Sutskever, Ilya (2023): Robust speech recognition via large-scale weak supervision. In: Proceedings of the 40th International Conference on Machine Learning, PMLR 202, pp. 28492 – 28518.

Richard, Arnaud / Fauré, Laurent (2015): La nomination identitaire: De l'inapproprié aux réappropriations. In: *Langue française*, 188, pp. 77-89.

Spitzmüller, Jürgen (2023): Metapragmatische Positionierung. Reflexive Verortung zwischen Interaktion und Ideologie. In: Dang-Anh, Mark (ed.): *Politisches Positionieren. Sprachliche und soziale Praktiken*. Heidelberg, pp. 39–66.

Taguieff, Pierre-André (2012): *Le Nouveau National-Populisme*, Paris.

Völker, Hanna / Spiess, Constanze (2023): ›Wir reden über die wie über Ungeziefer‹ – sprachliche Positionierungspraktiken im Migrationsdiskurs. In: Dang-Anh, Mark (ed.): *Politisches Positionieren. Sprachliche und soziale Praktiken*. Heidelberg, pp. 247–268.

Zemmour, Éric (2009): *Le Premier Sexe*, Paris.

*Po.La.R. corpus examples*

CHR_2021_002: AfD in Sachsen und Dresden - Die Dokumentation. (2021, September 20). Tino Chrupalla in Friedrichshafen: Wir müssen unsere eigenen Fachkräfte halten! [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujhccyknJr4

HÖC_2021_001: Für Heimatliebe & Gerechtigkeit. (2021; September 14). Großartige Rede von Björn Höcke auf der Pegida-Veranstaltung in Dresden am 13.09.20221 | BTW 21 [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V54JQxT2ydg

KRA_2025_001: AfD Kreisverband Goslar. (2025, January 25). Kamingespräche volle Länge Maximilian Krah AfD Kreisverband Goslar [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKlfYQME4AY

MEL_2019_001: Pupia News. (2019, October 19). Roma - #OrgoglioItaliano: l'intervento di Giorgia Meloni (19.10.19) [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPgkWze3bIk

ROY_2007_001: AntoniGaudi7. (2007, March 8). Ségolène Royal à Dijon, le 7 mars 2007 [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HekACp5Er68

SAL_2017_001: La7 Attualità. (2017, March 28). Otto e mezzo - Europa, populisti in frenata (Puntata 25/03/2017) [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jC8S4GnTZU

WEI_2025_002: phoenix. (2025, January 11). AfD-Parteitag: Alice Weidel zur Nominierung als Kanzlerkandidatin [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soVCAtU4iNY

ZEM_2022_012: LDC News International Agency. (2022, March 9). Journée de la Femma : Les femmes avec Zemmour. Vincennes/France - 8 Mars 2022 [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awq95JvpW8c

# HEPP Working Paper Series

Permanent URL for the collection: http://hdl.handle.net/10138/337955

## Previous Volumes of the Collection

E. Palonen, A. Alekseev, & S. Horváth (Eds.), *The 2024 European elections through short videos: Navigating social contracts and grievances in the era of algorithmic politics* (pp. 4-23). (HEPP Working Paper Series; Vol. 4, No. 1). University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/625277

Carrilho, K., Horsmanheimo, L., & Linnamäki, K. (Eds). (2024). Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation: HEPP4 Conference Proceedings. *The HEPPsinki Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation*, 3(1). University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/578882

Kazlauskaitė, R., Palonen, E., & Horsmanheimo, L. (Eds). (2023). Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation: HEPP3 Conference Proceedings. *The HEPPsinki Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation,* 2(1). University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/564988

Horsmanheimo, L., & Sibinescu, L.-E. (Eds.) (2021). Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation: HEPP2 Conference Proceedings. *The HEPPsinki Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation,* 1(1). University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/337956

Research Council of Finland
European Commission
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
Trans-Atlantic Platform
Social Sciences and Humanities
CO3 PLEDGE