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Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe

Working Paper

Citizens' Reactions to Populism in Europe

How do target groups respond to the populist challenge?

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ABSTRACT

In this working paper, we explore the reactions of target groups to populist discourse through focus groups in five European countries and perform a quantitative analysis of Facebook data in eight European countries. We demonstrate the ways in which populist discourse and policies affect target groups including migrants, ethnic or religious minorities, academics, and LGBTIQ+ groups.

Focus groups revealed that organized religion is an agent of populist movements. The Catholic Church in Poland and the Greek Orthodox Church legitimize and disseminate populist discourses. We also find that vulnerable groups complain about mainstreaming of hate language in their countries. The rise of populist movements and these movements' eagerness to express controversial opinion on issues including immigration, homosexuality and political liberalism caused certain groups examined in this paper to appropriate these opinions and voice them in everyday life. Vulnerable groups, in an attempt to counterpoise the populist challenge in their countries, have developed four main strategies: i) creating echo chambers, ii) self-censorship, iii) migration, and iv) active resistance. Echo chambers enable members of vulnerable groups to avoid what they deem unnecessary and potentially unpleasant encounters with supporters of populist movements. It provides them with a comfort zone where they can express opinion more freely. Self-censorship, similar to echo chambers, helps target groups to stay under the radar of populist movements and their supporters. Those defending migration state that the process in their countries is irreversible and migrating to another country is the only way out. Finally, some participants argued that rather than conceding defeat, they actively resist through civil society organizations, street protests, and openly display their identity to fight off populism.

Analysis of Facebook data revealed information about the ways in which populist parties and leaders communicate on social media and how the public perceives their communication. Populists use an anti-elitist language more frequently than mainstream political actors. Turkey and Hungary are exception to the rule, because in both countries populist governments have been in office for a long time. Second, populist actors in all countries but Poland and Turkey talk about immigration more. In Germany, France and the UK, populist actors frequently discuss EU-related issues. We also found that populists in Germany, France, Italy and the UK talk more about 'democracy and legitimacy' than mainstream parties do whilst populists talk about these issues less than mainstream parties do in Greece, Hungary and Turkey.

Analysis also suggests that populist actors' Facebook posts obtain more reactions, shares, and comments than mainstream political actors'. Anti-elitist language in social media posts produces more reactions, shares, and comments. Posts with references to religious minorities trigger fewer reactions from the users while posts making references to ethnic minorities, including immigrants or asylum seekers, as well as country-specific minorities like Roma in Hungary or Kurds in Turkey, trigger more reactions, and these posts are shared more. Finally, we find that posts referring to 'immigration' trigger more reactions and shares and produce more discussion than other issues.

In the final section of this working paper, we conclude with a short discussion on policy options.

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Introduction

In this working paper we focus on under-studied dimensions of populism at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, putting European citizens' responses and reactions to populist policies at its core. In particular, we investigate how citizens are affected by and how they react to populist discourse as well as policies implemented by populist actors. In this context, we combine two different types of research design. First, we study reactions of several vulnerable groups that are targeted by populism in several countries in Europe; these groups include but are not limited to Roma citizens, LGBTIQ+, gender rights activists, and immigrants. In particular, we explore the ways in which these underrepresented groups in eight different countries (Turkey, Greece, Hungary, UK, France, Poland, Italy and Germany) are affected by and react to populist movements and discourse in their countries. Second, we look at the reaction of Facebook users to populist communication in these eight countries; to draw general conclusions about the impact that the language and the topics emphasized by populists have on the broader public of social media users. In pursuing these goals, we rely on two data sources: focus groups in five countries and social media (Facebook) data in eight countries. Focus groups allows us to study the effects of populism and the populist discourse at the micro-level while studying citizens' reactions to populist posts reveals the macro trends. Accordingly, this study enables us to have a comprehensive picture providing crucial information about citizens' reactions to populism at various levels.

In what follows, we first provide a theoretical framework and define our research questions. Then we summarize our methodology. That section is followed by findings of focus groups and the quantitative analysis of Facebook data. The last section concludes with a discussion of some implications of our findings for countering populist rhetoric.

Theoretical framework and research question

Previous research suggests that populist movements exploit people's need for security to generate support within the society (Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Kinnvall 2019). Populist movements deliberately frame a situation as an existential threat in order to legitimize their style of governance (Muller, 2017). These movements frequently promote a particular reading of what they deem a threat as to define who is the 'friend' and who is the 'foe' in society (Foucault, 1980). Accordingly, populist movements agitate the people by using perceived or imagined threats and anxieties that the people experience against their lifestyles, traditions, and culture (Kinnvall, 2019). This populist strategy augments citizens' negative image of their country and the challenges they face (Homolar and Scholz, 2019), eventually causing the people to consolidate their support for populist movements.

A defining characteristic of populism is its tendency to define an '*other'*. As Muller (2017) and Mudde (2017) argue, populist movements define a 'people', who is virtuous, and the '*other',* who is excluded from the definition of the people by populist movements on the grounds that unlike the 'authentic' and 'virtuous' people, the *other* is immoral, alien, and inauthentic. Populist movements use the *other* and the actions of the *other* in their articulation of existential threats against the people. For example, after losing major support in the June 2015 general elections, the populist AKP government in Turkey had benefited from the

Kurdish question[1] as an instrument to build security perceptions. This populist strategy enabled the AKP to consolidate conservative-nationalist votes (Sahin, 2021), eventually winning the party the November 2015 general elections.

While previous research has focused on the demand and supply sides of populism (Guiso, 2017, 2020; Mols and Jetten, 2020; Sahin, forthcoming), our knowledge on the reactions and strategies of 'the *other'* (vulnerable groups) in the face of populist discourse and policies is quite limited. This situation represents a major gap in the literature, as exploring this dimension would help us devise methods in our efforts to protect and empower vulnerable groups against populist movements and populist discourse. Through focus groups and a quantitative analysis of Facebook posts, we aim to provide information about how various groups targeted by populism in Europe respond to the populist challenge. In this respect, we benefit from two major data collection methods: focus groups and social media data.

Methodology

Focus Groups: We conducted 12 focus groups in five different countries. Table 1 shows the location of the focus groups, the name of the target groups, and the number of focus group per location. Research teams conducted two focus groups in each country. The exception to this rule is Turkey where we conducted four focus groups. In choosing target groups, our priority was to select groups that were particularly targeted by populist movements in each country. Hence, rather than doing focus groups with pre-determined groups, we asked each team to pick two groups that are targeted by populist movement(s) in their countries. Accordingly, our selection of groups presents variety in terms of their identity.

Table 1: Location of target groups and number of focus groups

Country	Group 1	Group 2
Turkey	Gender Rights Activists (2 focus groups)	White Turks[2] (2 focus groups)
Greece	LGBTIQ+ (1 focus group)	Immigrants (1 focus group)
Hungary	Roma citizens (1 focus group)	Academics (1 focus group)
UK	Remainers (1 focus group)	Immigrants (1 focus group)
Poland	LGBTIQ+ (1 focus group)	Women (1 focus group)

We asked the teams to include between six and 10 people in each focus group. Table 2 below shows that the number of participants in the focus groups varied between six and nine. In total, 86 people were included in the focus groups.

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[1] Kurdish question refers to the conflictual relations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish minority in Turkey. Though the most recent wave of clashes between the state security forces and the PKK, pro-Kurdish armed guerilla movement, started in 1984, the roots of the issue rest on the early Republican era, when the state's centralization policies alienated the Kurdish minority.

[2] We define White Turks as upper or upper middle class secular Turks who do not vote for the Islamist populist AKP government in Turkey. For more information on White Turks, see Demiralp (2012).

Table 2: Name of target groups

	Target Group Name	Group Size
Turkey	Gender Rights Activists Group 1	9
	Gender Rights Activists Group 2	6
	White Turks Group 1	8
	White Turks Group 2	9
UK	Remainers[3]	6
	Immigrants	8
Hungary	Academics	6
	Roma Citizens	6
Poland	LGBTIQ+	9
	Feminists	7
Greece	Immigrants	6
	LGBTIQ+	6

In choosing our sample, we benefited from two methods:

1. Recruitment through stakeholders such as NGOs or community organizations
2. If the number of participants recruited through these strategies were low, we used snowball sampling to increase the number of participants.

Our initial plan was to conduct focus groups face-to-face. However, by the early March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic became a major threat to public health, making domestic and international travel as well as large indoor and even outdoor gatherings not only risky but at times impossible. Thus, research teams conducted focus groups online through secure platforms such as Microsoft Teams. All participants signed consent forms before interviews and meetings were recorded with the permission of participants. The recordings were then transcribed by the members of research teams and were analyzed to determine recurring themes and patterns.

Social media data: The aim of this part of the study was to investigate the impact of populist communication online by looking at the activity of official Facebook pages of the main parties and politicians in France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Turkey, and UK, from August 2019 to October 2020. We focused on Facebook for two reasons. First, Facebook is the most widely used social network site in Europe. According to Statcounter, in 2020 it covered about 80% of the market share among the social media sites.[4] Furthermore, anecdotal evidence in European countries such as Italy suggests that mainstream media frequently use the statements made on Facebook by the official pages of politicians to understand politicians' positions over several issues. Second, social media such as Facebook or Twitter are important channels for communication used by populist parties and leaders (Schaub and Morisi, 2020; Wells et al., 2016; Sahin et al., forthcoming). Given our focus on statements by official pages of parties and politicians, and the widespread public usage of Facebook, we conclude that this exercise is a good proxy for studying the impact of online populist communication *tout court*.

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[3] We define Remainers as UK nationals who voted 'No' in the 2016 Brexit referendum.
[4] See https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/europe/2020

Our data for this analysis consists of all the Facebook posts sent by the selected public pages in the period considered. To select these public pages, we started from the political parties: we included all populist parties that obtained at least 5% of votes at the European Parliament (EP) elections in 2019.[5] There are a few exceptions to this rule. First, we included two parties that fell below the 5% threshold but were nevertheless considered important: UKIP in the UK and Konfederacia in Poland. Second, we excluded KKE in Greece because neither the party nor its leaders have an official Facebook account. After the selection of political parties, we collected data for three types of accounts: (1) the official page of the party, (2) the party leaders, and (3) the party media stars.[6] Based on these criteria, we downloaded data from 114 public pages, obtaining at the end a database with the size of about 129,000 Facebook posts. The data were obtained using the platform CrowdTangle. Details about the dependent variables are further discussed below, for other information on the quantitative text analysis of the posts see Appendix 1.

Findings

Focus groups

Strategies and responses against the populist challenge:
Focus groups revealed that vulnerable groups targeted by populist movements in various countries have developed four important strategies or responses to deal with populist discourses and policies. We also found that these strategies are not mutually exclusive, meaning that individuals might use one or more of these strategies simultaneously. These strategies are as follows:

a) Echo chambers: Target group participants in different countries argued that they abstain from interaction with people who do not share the same views with them. This trend is observable both on social media and in general. For example, a participant who voted Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum stated that on social media, he unfollowed people who voted Leave. He suggested that this is because he became both closer with Remain voters and less motivated to interact with Leave voters in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Participants in Turkey also expressed similar feelings. A Turkish participant explained that he only makes friends with similar-minded people who oppose the Islamist-populist AKP government. Hence, echo chambers are a popular strategy because it allows members of target groups to avoid conflict and express their opinions more freely.

b) Self-censorship: A second strategy used by participants is self-censorship, which is prevalent especially in countries where populist authoritarian governments are in office (i.e. Hungary, Turkey) but also in other countries such as the UK. For instance, academics targeted by the populist FIDESZ government expressed that the government's public animosity and discourse towards liberal social scientists causes

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[5] Please note that Turkey did not participate in the 2019 EP elections. Hence, to select parties in Turkey, we used the results of the national elections in 2018.

[6] With "media stars" we refer to all the important figures in the public debate, related to the parties selected, who were not holding an official position as party leader in the period of observation. An example is Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, who was not leader of the Labour party in the period of observation, but is a publicly well-known figure, with a large number of followers on social media.

many academics to be more careful when choosing their research topics. In Hungary, academics who are active in gender studies became extremely careful in choosing topics for their research. This is because FIDESZ has become publicly aggressive towards LGBTI+ movements as well as feminist movements, as it suggests that the norms associated with feminists and LGBTI+ movements are against 'Hungarian national values'. Similar hesitations to express views freely in public were also common in Turkey. White Turks suggested that they tend to keep their views to themselves in the public sphere including social media because they are afraid of being targeted by the government or its supporters.

c) <u>Migration</u>: A third strategy used by vulnerable groups across different countries is resorting to migration. In fact, this strategy was a commonly uttered by all groups in five countries. For instance, a Hungarian academic mentioned that one fellow colleague has not only left the profession but also the country after FIDESZ repeatedly targeted liberal academics. A woman participant in Poland also explained that the present political climate in the country makes migration an attractive option not only for her but also other women who does not want to accept the state policies regarding women (i.e. near-total ban on abortion).

d) <u>Active resistance</u>: The previous three strategies defined above are defensive mechanisms mostly geared towards trying to stay under the radar of populist discourse and aggressive policies (in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, where populists are in office). However, there is also another strategy repeatedly mentioned by different participants in each country. This strategy is activism as a form of resistance.

LGBTI+ groups, which are targeted by right-wing populist movements, have responded the populist challenge in Europe through civil society organizations or by taking to the streets to protest. In Greece, LGBTI+ communities became more assertive of their identity after the violent murder of Zak Kostopoulos, a well-known activist within the community, by two shop owners. In response, LGBTI+ communities in Greece adopted collective response strategies (i.e. street protests) to face the populist and homophobic challenge in their country. Similarly, in Turkey where homophobia is prevalent both at the societal and the state levels, an LGBTI+ individual argued that they do not consider their vulnerable position as a pretext to retreat into LGBTI+ safe havens. Instead, they reclaim their identity as a form of resistance in their daily lives.

The role of religion in populist discourse

Our focus groups demonstrate that <u>religion</u> has become an important mechanism/instrument that populist movements use both to legitimize discourse (and policies). Furthermore, institutionalized religion (the Church in Greece and Poland) has become an important aide of populist movements in producing discourse and legitimizing policies. Indeed, our analysis also reveals that the Orthodox Church in Greece and the Catholic Church in Poland are two important bodies legitimating populist anti-LGBTIQ+ discourse as well as anti-abortion discourse (in the Polish case). Our research also shows that the Orthodox Church in Greece has been instrumental in the '*othering*' of refugees and immigrants by defining these groups as elements that contradict with the Greek culture and the Orthodox Christian belief system.

Mainstreaming the hate language:

One important and equally concerning finding of our research is the fact that the populist wave in Europe has not only resulted in the use of discriminatory language against certain vulnerable groups by populist actors. Our research demonstrates that in all countries participants complain about normalization of hate language in the public sphere. For instance, Remain voters in the UK argued that they have witnessed was an increasingly open use of hate language targeting immigrants and refugees in the country. Another participant in Greece suggested that with the rise of ultra-nationalist Golden Dawn in 2012, right-wing populist discourse has been normalized in Greece. A female participant said that mainstreaming of the hate language by populist movements made her face different forms of 'micro-aggression' on a daily basis.

This finding is important, as prevalence of this language in the public sphere has forced mainstream political parties in Europe to express opinion on certain issues such as migration more clearly mostly due to electoral concerns. This is because the increasing prevalence of populist influence in the public sphere forced mainstream parties align their views to those of populist parties in order to protect their electoral base. In this respect, one can suggest that the strong anti-immigration discourse of pro-Brexit campaigners pushed the Conservative Party in the UK to take a harsher stance vis-à-vis immigration in the post-Brexit UK. This is because anti-immigrant discourse of pro-Brexit campaigners made conservative voters more sensitive about immigration issues. Thereafter, conservative voters have become more vocal and even hawkish about immigration, causing the Conservative Party to bandwagon as the party has become afraid that otherwise they would lose voters to populist political parties such as UKIP or, more recently, the Brexit Party.

Social media data results

Features of populist political communication on Facebook

The quantitative analysis aims at capturing the characteristics of political parties' communication on Facebook while also comparing populist and mainstream parties'. In order to measure populist communication, we focus on two aspects, both reflected in the text of the post. The first aspect that we observe is the *prevalence of populist language* in the text. We do so by employing a dictionary approach. A "dictionary" (or "lexicon") is a collection of words reflecting a set of specific traits or dispositions. By counting the number of such words included in a document, it is possible to measure the prevalence of such traits/dispositions in the text. In our case, the number of "populist words" found in the text of the post is an indicator of the degree of populist language employed in this particular post.

To assess what words are to be regarded as "populist", we use the dictionary proposed and validated by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011). This is a widely used dictionary measuring one specific aspect of populism in political texts: the degree of anti-elitism. According to the authors, *anti-elitism* is easier to measure than the second facet of populism, namely *people-centrism* (see Mudde 2004) as the latter is generally expressed using pronouns such as "we", "us" and so on, which have a very low discriminant power (i.e., they are used in every kind of political communication, not only populist). The dictionary by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), on the other hand, includes terms such as 'the elite', 'undemocratic', 'corrupt', which are used by populists to refer to the elites in negative terms. Figure 1 shows the average share of populist words per message among mainstream and populist parties in the countries analyzed.

Figure 1: Use of populist language by political parties (mainstream vs. populist)
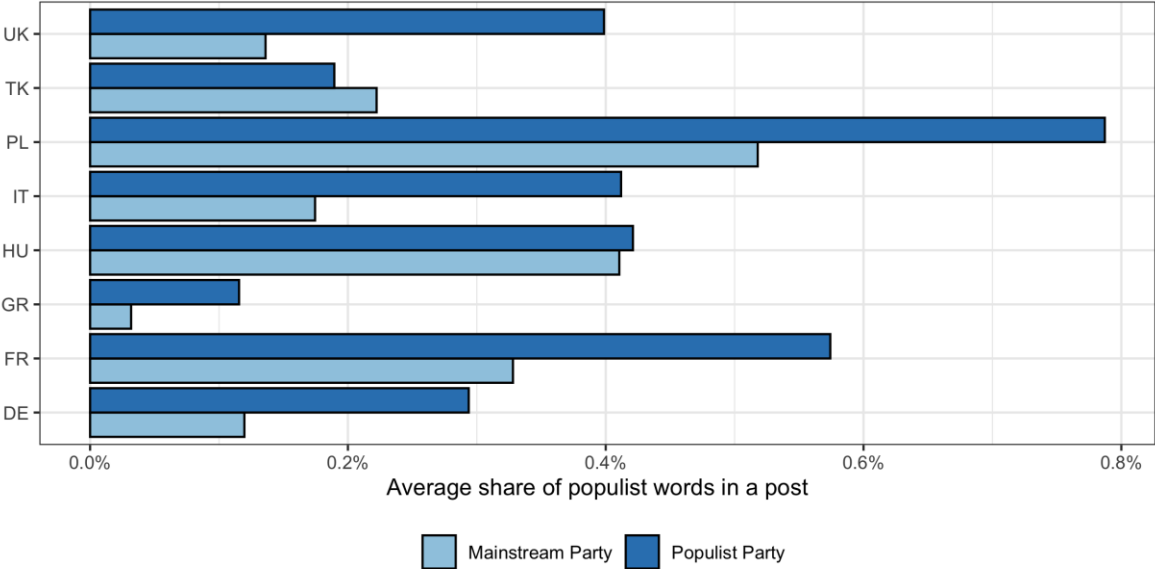

In general, the frequency of words classified as populist in our dictionary is very low in all countries. As the figure shows, Polish populist parties are those who tend to use more of the populist terms in the dictionary. However, even in this case those terms make less than 0.8% of the total words used in their average post (i.e., our dictionary tends to pick up very uncommon words). This is more a feature than a bug: if the dictionary included too-common words, its discriminant power in identifying genuinely populist language would be low. Indeed, Figure 1 shows that, on average, populist parties use populist language (defined by anti-elitist language) more frequently in all countries, with the exception of Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Hungary. This is probably because, in both countries, populist parties have been in office for more than a decade, hence their chances of using anti-elitist language are slimmer by this mere fact.

A second aspect of populist communication that we study is the references to specific *issues* or *excluded social groups* in the text of the post. We do so by running a topic model on the entire corpus of posts in each country, and classifying each post based on the probability that it belongs to one or more political issues, or that it mentions one or more of the excluded social groups, defined by us prior to the data collection. See Appendix 1 for a more detailed discussion about the technique and the list of political issues and excluded groups.

Figure 2: Prevalence of issues among political parties (mainstream vs. populist)

Figure 2 compares populist and mainstream parties in different countries with respect to the frequency of their references to different issues as well as the frequency of their references to

Average share of issue-related words in a post

Mainstream Party   Populist Party
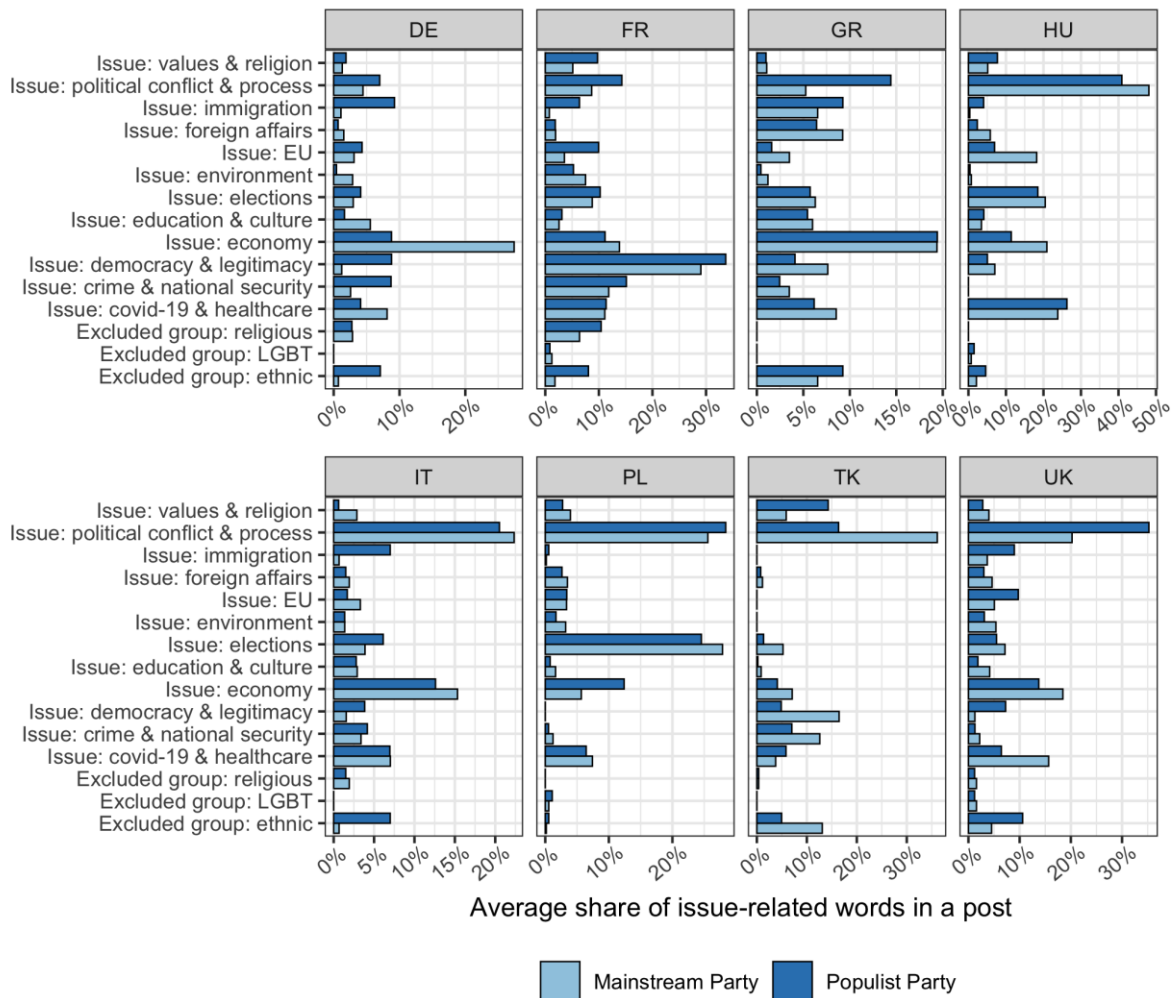
the target groups (e.g., religious minorities, ethnic minorities, LGBTI+). The figure shows the average share of words related to each of the issues identified by post. To give an example, words related to the topic "political conflict & process" comprise about 20% of the total content of the posts in Italy on average. This means that the topic is very prevalent, as it is in all countries except for Germany, France and, to a lesser extent, Greece. In other words, political parties and leaders are very likely to use Facebook to promote themselves and their events and to talk about each other. The analysis shows that there is considerable variation across countries, both in terms of the variety of issues and differences between mainstream and populist parties. Nevertheless, some patterns have emerged. First, populist parties are more likely to talk about immigration in all countries but Poland and Turkey. In Germany, France and the UK, populists are also more likely to talk about EU-related issues. Another important issue often referred by populist parties is 'democracy and legitimacy'. Populists talk more frequently about 'democracy and legitimacy' than mainstream parties in Germany, France, Italy and the UK, whilst they talk less about these issues than mainstream parties in Greece, Hungary and Turkey. This latter finding is not surprising as in Hungary and Turkey populist authoritarian political parties are still in office whilst in Greece, the populist SYRIZA was in power until July 2019. In Poland, where another populist party is in government (PiS), this issue is not relevant in party communication. An issue about which populists refer to *less* than mainstream parties is the economy; Poland and Greece are exceptions to this rule.

Finally, looking at the targeted social groups, the only noteworthy element is the general tendency among populist parties to talk more about ethnic groups, the exception being Turkey.

The impact of populist communication on Facebook users

To assess the impact of different aspects of populist communication on Facebook users, we studied, for each post, three indicators of user engagement (our dependent variables): 1) number of *reactions* (including "likes", "love", "wow", "haha", "sad" and "angry" reactions) as a proxy of the interest drawn by the post, 2) number of *shares* as an indicator of its diffusion, and iii) number of *comments* as an indicator of the post's ability to trigger debate.

The number of *reactions* reflects the degree of interest for the post. The higher this number, the more a post drew Facebook users' attention to the point to prompt an active reaction among them. We do not distinguish among reaction types for the purpose of keeping this indicator as close as possible to an indicator of general interest, regardless of the specific emotion that it could have triggered, as reflected by different reaction types. The number of *shares* is an indicator of the diffusion of the post on the social network. At the individual level, the choice to share a post might be interpreted as an act undertaken with the intention of either informing one's contacts about something, or signaling one's own attitudes towards the subject of the post, whether sincerely or ironically. In any case, at the aggregate level, a higher number of shares to a post indicates that the post is spread more in the network. Finally, the number of *comments* reflects the extent to which a post could trigger a discussion among Facebook users. All these three indicators are empirically interrelated. The more the shares to a post, the wider its spread and therefore higher the chances to trigger a reaction or a comment. Similarly, posts that receive more likes, comments or shares are more likely to be picked by Facebook algorithm and shown to other users, further spreading in the network. Nevertheless, in principle, they reflect different aspects of the level of *engagement* that a post can produce.

We investigate how these two characteristics of Facebook posts that we presented above (namely, the prevalence of populist language and the probability that each post belongs to the issues or mentions the target groups listed in Figure 2) are related to these three indicators of citizens' engagement with posts. We do so by fitting three multilevel linear regressions, with posts nested in page and week/year units.[7]

To provide a more comprehensive picture, we discuss the main results for the pooled models, where data from all countries are considered together and modeled simultaneously. For the sake of discussion, we only report coefficient plots (see Appendix 2 for the table with full results). Figure 3 below displays the coefficients of the variables of interest for the three dependent variables. The horizontal error bars surrounding the points represent 90% confidence intervals. When they do not cross the vertical dotted line, it means that the coefficients are statistically significant, and their effect is worth discussing.

The first important finding is the positive effect of the number of populist words on all three dependent variables, meaning that a higher prevalence of anti-elitist tone in the post produces more reactions, shares, and comments. Hence, the use of populist language pays off in terms of attracting more reactions for parties and politicians on Facebook.

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[7] From the three dependent variables we remove the 1% highest and 1% lowest values, to avoid the chance that outlier observations drive the results. All the models have been fit using the package "lme4" in R.

Looking at the probability of the post referring to three target groups considered here, a few effects are worth noting. First, posts making more references to religious minorities (such as Muslims or Jews) generally trigger fewer reactions among the users of the social network site. On the other hand, Facebook posts that make references to ethnic minorities, such as immigrants or asylum seekers, as well as country-specific minorities like Roma or Kurds, trigger more reactions, and these posts are shared more. Therefore, references to excluded social groups (targeted by populist actors) do not have a significant effect on the engagement level of that particular post, unless the referred target group is an ethnic minority.

Figure 3: Coefficient plot of relevant post characteristics on number of reactions, shares, and comments
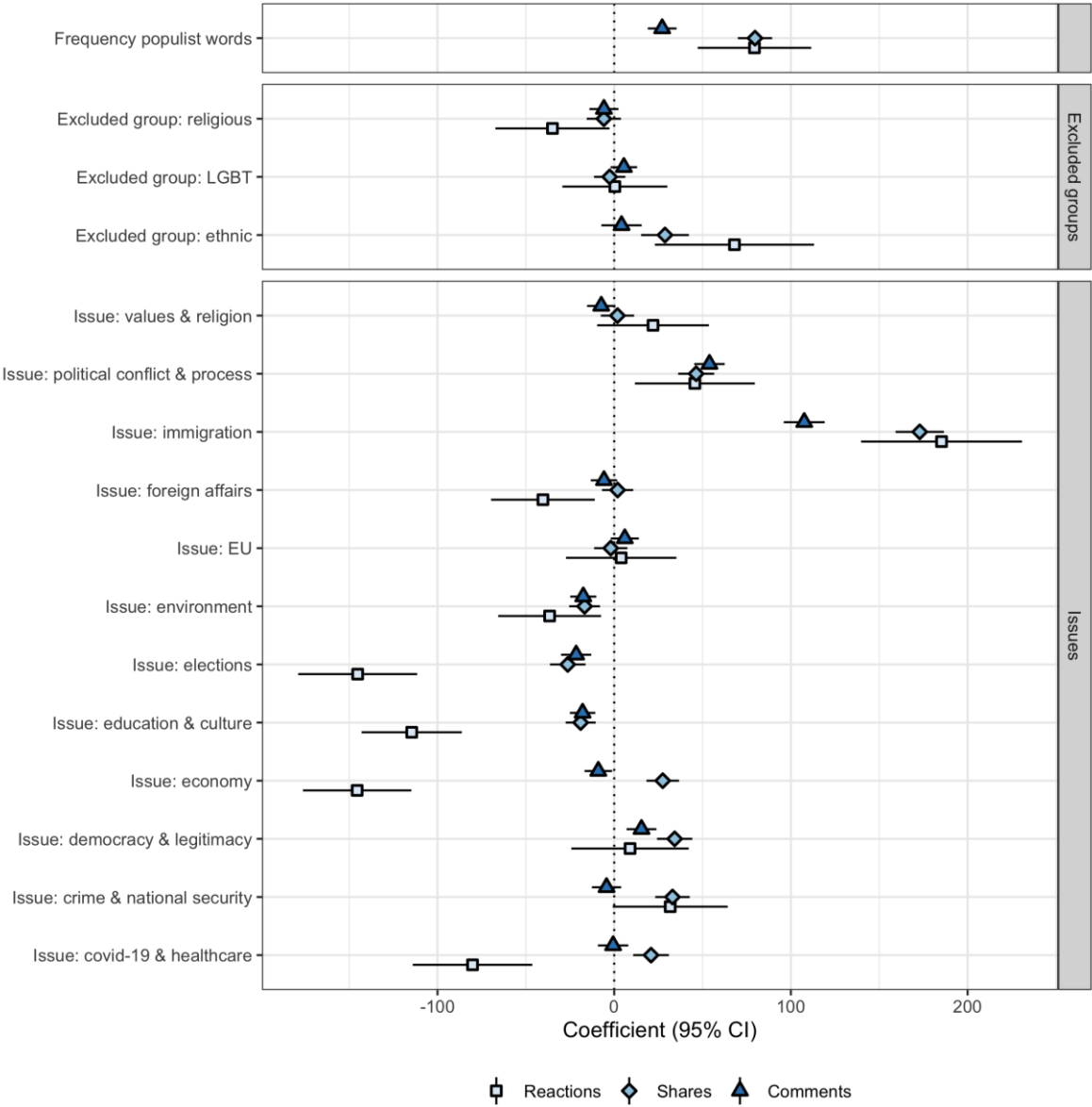
We find evidence to confirm this pattern in our analysis of issues. First of all, posts that refer to "immigration" trigger more reactions and shares and produce more discussion. This is the strongest effect found for the variables measuring characteristics of the post. Accordingly, immigration is an issue attracting major interest on Facebook, whether it is expressed through references to targeted social groups or through references to the issue in abstract.

Other significant effects deserving attention are as follows. 'Political conflict and process' is an issue producing considerable engagement on Facebook. This issue captures all the topics in which there are names of politicians or references to political scandals, self-promotion, and attacks. In other words, this is a topic reflecting politicians talking about politics. 'Covid-19 & healthcare' issue produces fewer numbers of reactions, but more shares. Hence, Facebook users are more likely to share on their profile a post about the pandemic, probably to pass the information it contains to their contact list, but overall they express less interest for this issue. A similar pattern is observed with respect to the issue of 'economy'. The presence of 'democracy & legitimacy' issues or 'crime & national security' issues in a post triggers more shares, and also more comments for the latter, but these issues' presence have no significant effect on the number of reactions to this post. Finally, the following issues trigger significantly less reactions, shares and comments: 'environment', 'elections', 'education & culture', and 'foreign affairs'.

Figure 4: Coefficient plot of relevant page characteristics on number of reactions, shares and comments
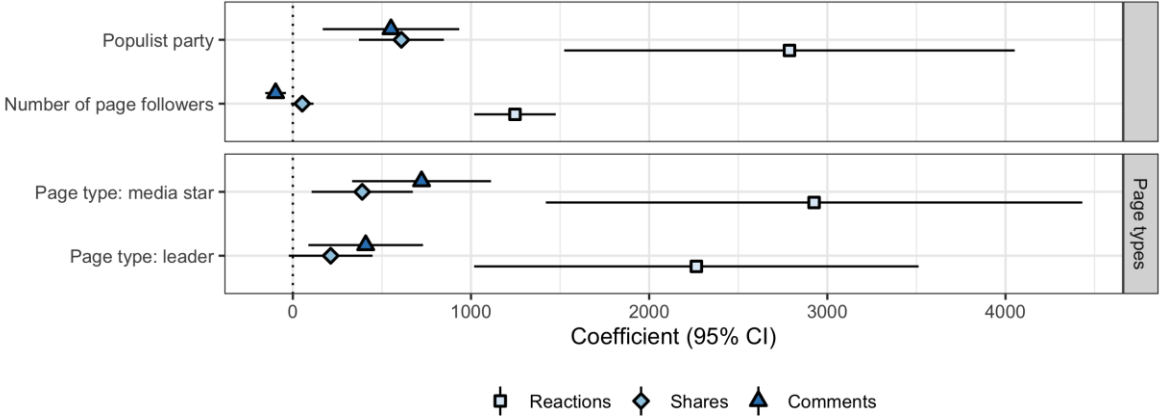

Figure 4 displays the effect of characteristics of the page making the post (whether the party or politician is classified as populist, the number of followers, and the page type) on the three dependent variables. The most important finding here is that pages of populist parties, in general, obtain more reactions, shares, and comments to their posts than mainstream parties. Here the size of the effect is considerable. Populist parties and politicians' Facebook posts trigger about 500 more shares and comments, and almost 3,000 more reactions, than their non-populist rivals on average. This means that populist parties and politicians are more successful on Facebook and are winning the race for audience attention on Facebook.

Conclusions

In this working paper, we explored the reactions and responses of groups targeted by populist parties and politicians. Focus groups with target groups and a collection of about one year of Facebook posts by parties, leaders and political media stars, bear important implications.

Our findings provide a roadmap for policymakers to assist vulnerable groups and to tackle populist discourse and policies. Three strategies used by target groups to counterbalance the populist challenge (echo-chambers, self-censorship, and migration) are defensive strategies, which harm diversity and freedom of expression in Europe and we find these unsustainable in the long-term. Forms of active resistance that are embraced especially by marginalized gender groups such as LGBTI+ and feminists promise more potential in eradicating the negative effects of populist discourse and policies. Empowering people's marginalized identities

through civil society organizations, street protests and increased visibility can both offer alternative discourses to populism and encourage other groups targeted by populist movements to actively resist attacks on their identity. A particular policy could be supporting civil society organizations that may help to increase the visibility as well as the discourses of marginalized groups. However, in the absence of more comprehensive measures that could decrease the influence of populist discourse on public opinion, these steps may prove insufficient.

We therefore suggest policymakers to pay more attention to social media as a potential venue to counterpoise the negative effects of populism. Our research demonstrates that populist actors are far more successful than mainstream political actors in using social media and disseminating their message. However, leaving the realm of the social media to the mercy of populist actors might have devastating consequences on the nature of democratic politics (i.e. Trump presidency). Accordingly, policymakers should prioritize developing innovative ways to use social media as a primary instrument to fight off the negative effects of populist discourse on target groups. One particular way is forcing all social media platforms to incorporate checks against hate language especially when used by politicians. Another mechanism could be making truth-checking mechanisms compulsory for news sources shared on social media. These steps would diminish the playground of populist actors on social media.

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Appendix 1: Detailed Quantitative Text Analysis Methodology

In order to measure populist communication, we focus on two aspects, both reflected in the text of the post. The first aspect that we observe is the *prevalence of populist language* in the text. We do so by employing a *dictionary* approach, in the same vein to what is elsewhere called "sentiment analysis". The logic is simple: a dictionary is a collection of words reflecting a set of specific traits or disposition. In classic sentiment analysis, dictionaries including collections of "positive" and "negative" words are applied to a corpus of texts to measure how people evaluate a target, such as a product. In our case, the number of "populist words" found in the text of the post is an indicator of the degree of populist language employed in this particular post.

To assess what words are to be regarded as "populist", we use the dictionary proposed and validated by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011). This is a widely-used dictionary measuring one specific aspect of populism in political texts: the degree of anti-elitism. According to the authors, *anti-elitism* is easier to measure than the second facet of populism, namely *people-centrism* (see Mudde 2004) as the latter is generally expressed using pronouns such as "we", "us" and so on, which have a very low discriminant power (i.e., they are used in every kind of political communication, not only populist). The dictionary by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), on the other hand, includes terms such as 'the elite', 'undemocratic', 'corrupt', which are used by populists to refer to the elites in negative terms. The original dictionary by Rooduijn and Pauwels is available in four languages only (Dutch, English, German and Italian), and it was translated into other languages by Poletti (2013). We took from there the translation to French, Greek, Hungarian and Polish, and asked the DEMOS country experts to check the word lists in their own language to attempt a validation. Finally, Osman Sahin from the DEMOS team curated the translation of the dictionary into Turkish.[8]

A second aspect of populist communication that we are interested in regards the references to specific *issues* or *excluded social groups* in the text of the post. We observe that using a different technique. We first ran a *topic model* on the entire corpus of posts in each country. Topic models are methods to statistically find clusters of words that co-occur frequently in the same documents. The basic logic of this technique is that topics are characterized by a specific language, or more precisely, by a specific choice of words. For instance, when a politician talks about the economy, s/he will likely use a specific collection of nouns, verbs and adjectives, such as "job", "growth", "incentive", and so on. A topic model will find the groups of words that are most likely to appear together, and will assign them to the same topics. Then, the technique will assign to every document a probability to be about each of the topics extracted. Topic models are a very powerful tool for unsupervised classification of documents, used in many different applications.

There are two characteristics of topic models that make the use of this technique challenging. First, the *number of topics* present in a collection of documents has to be set *a priori*. In other words, if the researcher decides that the collection of documents includes 10 topics, the model will find 10 clusters of words, regardless whether the true number of topics discussed in the collection is more or less than 10. This makes finding the "best", or "most correct", number of topics a very important task to ensure the validity of the method. To do so, we used a combination of different techniques. We started by fitting a set of topic models with different

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[8] The dictionary proposed by Rooduijn and Pauwels includes a set of "core words", that are included in all languages and of "context-specific" words that can be added by country experts as relevant in their specific country. In our case, the Demos country experts were asked also to add context-specific words in case they had any.

numbers of topics ranging from 10 to 250, and checked three different measures of model fit. This produced some best-fitting values, which correspond in each country to the dashed vertical lines in Figure A1. Secondly, we used the method proposed by Lee and Mimno (2014) implemented in the R package "stm" (see Roberts et al., 2019) to find the best number of topics. To do so we fit a structural topic model (see Roberts et al., 2014) including the party label and week of the post as predictors to increase the precision of the estimated topic, and leaving the number of topics to be guessed by the algorithm. This produced the values corresponding to the solid vertical lines in Figure A1.

Figure A1: Finding the best number of topics – results from "ldatuning" (dashed vertical lines) and "stm" (solid vertical lines).
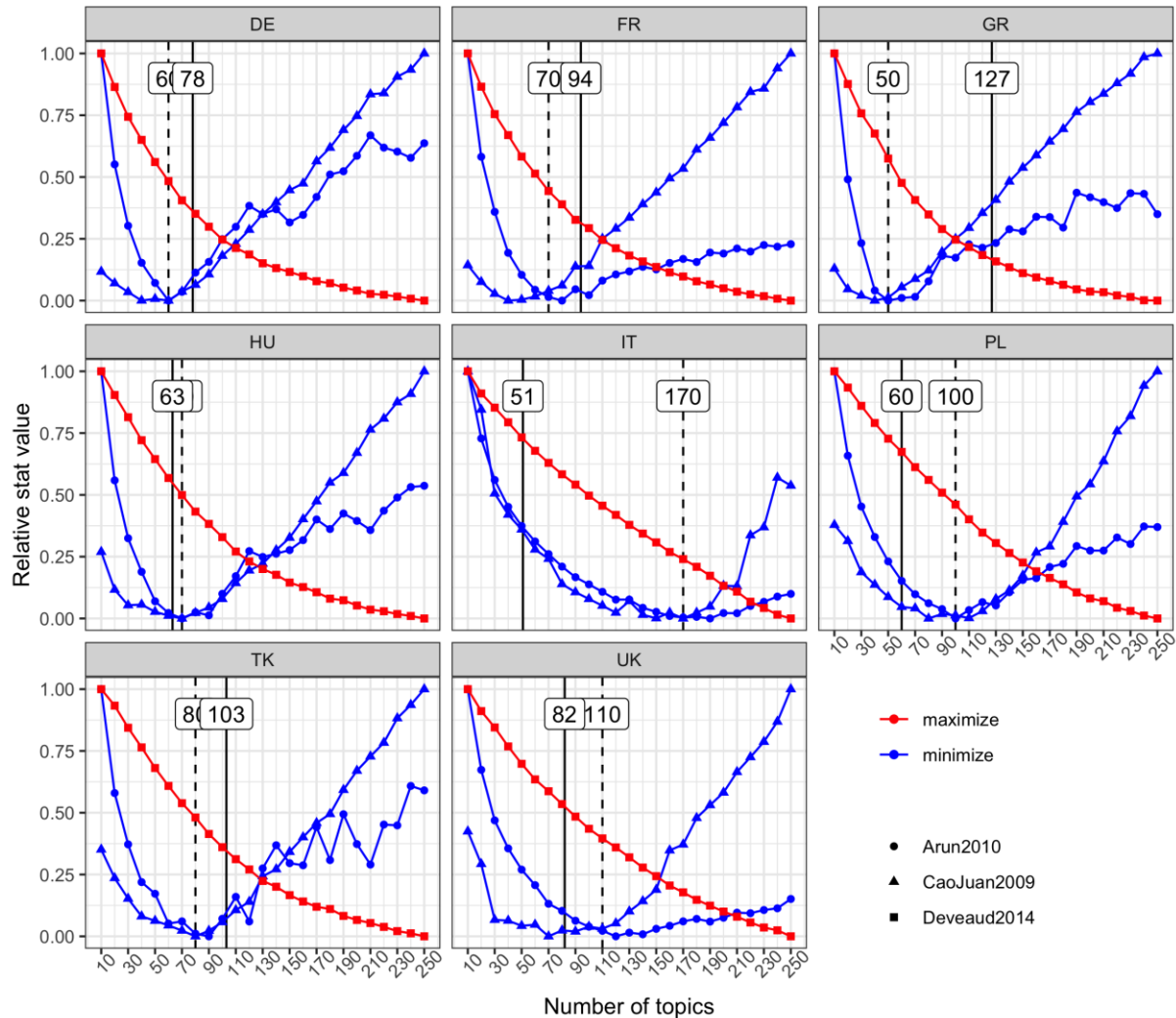
We then compared the two identified solutions by checking two indicators of topic quality, the *semantic coherence* (an indicator of the extent to which words belonging to the same topic appear together in the same document) and *exclusivity* (the extent to which the words appearing with greater probability in one topic are less likely to appear in other topics). The results are plotted in Figure A2.

Figure A2: Semantic coherence and exclusivity by different numbers of topics. The topics in G1 are those obtained using the metrics from "ldatuning", those in G2 have been obtained using "stm" and setting K=0, and those in G3 have been obtained using as number of topics a value in between the two.
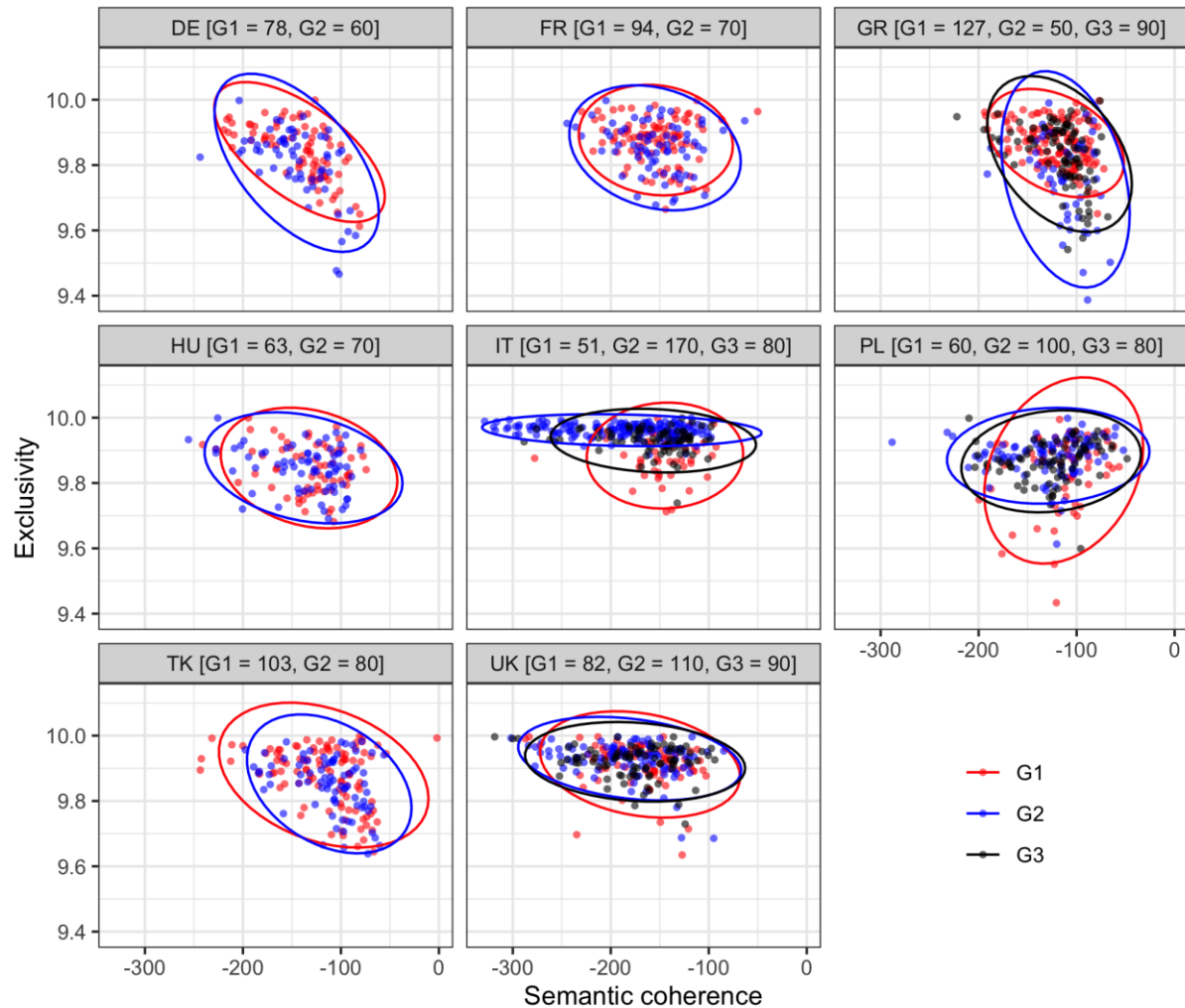
As the figure shows, in some cases, looking at semantic coherence and exclusivity led to an obvious choice. In other cases, a third round was necessary. Eventually, we found a solution in each country, which was regarded as acceptable by the country experts. The number of topics extracted in each country was the following:

DE	FR	GR	HU	IT	PL	TR	UK
78	94	90	63	51	80	80	82

The second problem with topic models is that they only find clusters of words, but they say nothing about the content of the topic. This has to be done manually. Hence, in each country and for each topic, we extracted a list of 30 words with the highest probability to be in the topic, and sent these lists to the country experts. Based on the lists of words, we asked the experts to guess the content of the topics, with respect to two things: (1) the political *issue* the topic refers to, and (2) whether the topic makes reference to one or more *excluded social groups*. We provided the following issue list to the country experts:

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- Economic issues

- Immigration

- Covid-19 & healthcare

- EU

- Foreign affairs

- Environment

- Crime & national security

- Education & culture

- Societal values & religion

- Political conflict & process

- Elections

- Democracy & legitimacy

- Country-specific issue [specify]

With respect to the excluded social groups, we asked the experts to indicate whether the topic makes reference to "*foreigners or ethnic minorities*" (including immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, excluding foreign governments or institutions), "*religious minorities*", "*LGBT-related communities*", or other "*country-specific excluded groups*".

Appendix 2: Analysis regression table

Table 1: Pooled multilevel models (all continuous variables are standardized)

	Likes	Shares	Comments
Intercept	231.47	647.67***	2.17
	(767.43)	(146.89)	(204.29)
Number of populist words	79.38***	79.68***	27.15***
	(16.39)	(4.95)	(4.17)
Populist party	2787.46***	609.12***	550.86**
	(645.10)	(121.67)	(195.48)
Message length	43.98*	36.77***	28.26***
	(18.09)	(5.42)	(4.61)
Number of page followers (100s)	1246.78***	52.81	-96.84**
	(116.78)	(32.32)	(29.65)
Issues			
Economy	-145.48***	27.47***	-8.99*
	(15.66)	(4.70)	(3.98)
Immigration	185.26***	172.92***	107.54***
	(23.24)	(6.99)	(5.91)
Covid-19/Health	-80.18***	20.85***	-0.62
	(17.26)	(5.15)	(4.39)
EU	3.95	-1.95	5.98
	(15.94)	(4.79)	(4.06)
Foreign Affairs	-40.34**	1.92	-5.79
	(14.98)	(4.50)	(3.81)
Environment	-36.56*	-16.76***	-17.52***
	(14.85)	(4.45)	(3.77)
Crime/Security	31.70	32.99***	-4.34
	(16.61)	(4.98)	(4.23)
Education/Culture	-114.60***	-18.98***	-17.89***
	(14.47)	(4.33)	(3.67)
Values/Religion	21.98	1.84	-7.32
	(16.13)	(4.81)	(4.09)
Politics	45.66**	46.38***	53.91***
	(17.32)	(5.20)	(4.41)
Elections	-145.18***	-26.29***	-21.53***
	(17.18)	(5.14)	(4.36)
Democracy	8.97	34.22***	15.44***
	(16.95)	(5.09)	(4.31)
Excluded social groups			
Ethnic	68.05**	28.74***	4.15
	(22.99)	(6.89)	(5.83)
Religious	-34.94*	-5.86	-5.82

Table 1: Pooled multilevel models (all continuous variables are standardized)

	Likes	**Shares**	**Comments**
	(16.48)	(4.93)	(4.20)
Gender	0.36	-2.55	5.47
	(15.15)	(4.52)	(3.82)
Post type (base = Status)			
Photo	233.36**	-497.09***	-37.38
	(78.98)	(23.62)	(20.10)
Link	-1000.23***	-640.69***	-171.97***
	(86.40)	(25.87)	(21.98)
Video	-165.81*	-236.73***	54.88**
	(81.06)	(24.26)	(20.65)
Page type (base = Party)			
Leader	2264.87***	212.33	408.91*
	(636.45)	(119.90)	(164.14)
Media Star	2925.63***	389.38**	722.43***
	(768.14)	(144.94)	(198.88)
Country (base = DE)			
FR	230.34	-44.12	-13.56
	(954.42)	(180.24)	(246.44)
GR	123.14	-454.01*	-293.11
	(1222.62)	(230.61)	(316.99)
HU	393.34	-178.83	-314.16
	(1009.50)	(189.82)	(261.23)
IT	3176.14**	483.94*	1090.48***
	(1070.53)	(201.51)	(276.86)
PL	-600.27	-422.11*	-386.78
	(1068.81)	(200.74)	(276.56)
TK	3777.75***	-8.90	322.73
	(1125.84)	(215.49)	(287.77)
UK	1380.51	120.72	306.22
	(999.72)	(188.60)	(258.89)
AIC	2484117.87	2187007.86	2149470.59
BIC	2484458.71	2187348.77	2149821.29
Log Likelihood	-1242023.94	-1093468.93	-1074699.29
N obs	125286	125536	125727
N year/week	114	114	114
N page	77	77	77
Var Intercept (year/week)	8741419.04	305192.52	583249.63
Var Intercept (page)	436668.74	14556.15	29097.15
Var Residual	23799627.18	2147175.01	1549234.63

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05