



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Varieties of Populism and Democratic Efficacy: Findings from a Social Media Analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Among many explanations of the sources of the success of populist parties in the recent two decades, mediated communication stands out as one of the crucial factors. Current media systems create the conducive discursive opportunity structures that encourage political actors to resort to populist framing of their communication. Populist political communication should be considered not only as a symptom but also as a cause of the plethora of problems democracies experience today. Undoubtedly, populist political communication bolsters all the negative aspects of social media dividing the democratic public sphere into insurmountably separated audiences living in their echo chambers. Through its conflict-centred view of politics as a struggle between two opposing camps and irreconcilable identities, its conception of the people as a homogenous entity and espousal of post-truth politics it seriously affects deliberative mechanisms of democratic opinion formation.

Given the paramount importance of the social media for the dissemination of populist messages the DEMOS project focused itself on the comparative studies of communication strategies employed by populist political actors. The first round of analysis was focused on the distribution of populism-related strategies: people centrism, anti-elitism and exclusion of the others and in-depth research how these strategies were articulated together with other topics characteristic of national political cultures. The aim was not only to measure the degree of populism in the messages of populist actors across Europe but also to understand the details of their communication. In order to compare the election and non-election period DEMOS researchers collected Facebook posts published by 28 leaders or parties from 14 days prior to the European Parliamentary Election days in May 2019 in each country, and (2) a non-election period (July 2019).

The corpus was based on Facebook as it is widely considered by the extant literature as a tool that gives populists leaders an advantage over their opponents, providing the opportunity structures that make these platforms compatible with populist communication: direct, unmediated and personal/intimate connection to *the people*, which bypasses traditional gatekeepers, an emotional,

personalised style that focuses on the leader. Moreover, the digital media logics promoting like-minded peer networks allows to create sense of belongingness to the community what is one of the important aims of populist identity politics. Further, as being free from the mediating strategies of mainstream media, they allow for even more antagonistic, negative or “uncivil” discourse including wordplay, sarcasm, criticism, labelling, slurs, personal insults and group insults.

The second round of analysis was driven by the results of the academic literature associating populism with the spread of ‘fake news’ or mis/dis-information sources. Moreover, some of the studies claim populists frequently attack mainstream media to strengthen their credentials as being outside the system. Further, they accuse mainstream media of not selective coverage resulting from alleged political correctness. Accordingly, the DEMOS researchers were interested in whether populists in different national contexts rely more on mainstream, traditional/established media sources, or if they prefer alternative news sources and social media, including citizen journalism. Additionally, DEMOS studied the network of interconnections between the main disseminators of populists’ messages on social media and the degree of reciprocity between them and the populist messages they share. Again, the corpus of the study consisted of Facebook posts of populist leaders and parties in eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Regarding the quantitative part of the populist communication strategies the DEMOS team came to the following conclusions. First, the countries differ in the percentage of posts containing any indicators of populist discourse. Hungary, Turkey and Italy were at the top of the list followed by the UK, Poland and France. Second, timing matters. In the majority of countries posts published by populist actors during the election period were more populist than those published in the non-election periods. Third, while in non-election periods there was a stronger tendency to express negative (critical) attitudes and opinions towards ‘the elite’ and ‘the others’ without any reference to ‘the people’, in the election period populist political actors tended to frequently reference ‘the people’ in their messages. Fourth, while in some countries (Turkey and Spain) people-centrism prevailed, in others, the main focus was on a critical attitude towards the elites (France and the UK). Still, there was a group of countries with a clear tendency towards a dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ (Hungary, Greece, Italy, and Poland).

Although the exclusionary form of populism was less common across the countries under analysis, we still can trace that type of populism in Poland and Turkey during the election period, and in Denmark in non-election periods. It is worth mentioning that all the populist strategies occurred in nine out of fourteen countries in the election period and only in four countries in the non-election periods. Fifth, while addressing ‘the elite’ and ‘the others’ populist political actors employed a discrediting strategy rather than a blaming strategy. In other words, populist politicians paid more attention to the attributes than to the actions of the targeted groups. However, criticism over the performance and its (negative) consequences was more common in posts published in the election period than in non-election periods. Sixth, whereas in the election period much more attention was paid to foreigners, refugees and potential immigrants (the EU policy on migration), in the non-election context the main attention in many countries was focused on immigrants who had already been living in the country (domestication).

The qualitative part of the analysis revealed that “the others” were not particularly salient in the data. However, migrant outsiders were present in nativist populist rhetoric, and it was largely Muslims who were the key non-national others. Moreover, in some countries there were occasional references to anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ communities or selected ideological others. Qualitative analysis revealed some commonalities in respect of the anti-elitism. For example, national political elites (specifically traditional parties, and in some places individual MPs) were mentioned in right-

wing Facebook posts in Czechia (Babiš), Slovakia (OLaNO), Bosnia (Dodik) and Spain (Abascal, Vox). Also, the qualitative research revealed that European elections are still second order elections and national elections taking place in the same period take precedence. To a great extent they set the agenda for European elections as well as the discursive topics and use or non-use of populist repertoires. For example, in Poland the opposition united to turn the European elections into a plebiscite on PiS' time in office. This points, then, to the continued lack of a functioning strong European public sphere in which politicians and citizens act as Europeans. At best, there exists only a weak Europeanisation.

Whilst the sample periods tried to gauge whether differences existed in Facebook usage over time, in nearly all countries surveyed there were other political processes and events occurring that likely influenced the frequency, topic and tone of populist communication. As such, European election campaigns became superseded by national elections. In Lithuania, the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of presidential elections occurred on the same day as the European elections; in Spain coalition talks were still ongoing and coincided with local elections.

However, this is not to say that Europe is not present in populist discourse during the two sample periods. In fact, despite a lot of anti-European rhetoric, Europe is becoming a space for cooperation between right-wing populist, nativist parties. This is borne out in the proposed creation of the European Alliance of People and Nations (EAPN) in the European Parliament, as well as reference to it in the Facebook posts in a number of countries (DK, SK, IT). But, importantly, this new coalescing of right-wing parties is also present in each other's discursive repertoire on Facebook. For example, Boris Kollár's (SK) most 'liked' post was that of an African migrant praising Matteo Salvini.

Regarding the second round of social media analysis, contrary to the expectation, there was no prevailing preference for alternative sources, namely less institutionalised or professionalised media like citizen journalism or digital sources disseminating partisan or fake news content. Although occasionally there were cases when populists shared or liked some not-mainstream publications (e.g. in the case of Kollár in Slovakia, or Le Pen in France), it was rather exceptional. The intimate relationship between populism and alternative media sources which is sometimes raised in the literature and journalistic discourse is in fact lower than one might expect. This confirms the results of the academic research emphasising relatively traditional and hegemonic use of social media. Moreover, as it turned out, populists use the mainstream media to legitimise and spread their agenda. Again, such results find strong support in some strand of the academic literature. Most frequently, however, populists produce their own textual and (audio)visual content or share the content of their party's communication channels.

Moreover, the analysis revealed the existence of echo-chambers which serve to reinforce the opinions and beliefs, and which are created by the populists. There are two mechanisms involved here. First, they share the political content produced by them/their parties. Secondly, they share media sources which are in line with populist's political and ideological agenda. According to the DEMOS study there is a domination of media sources representing a right-wing political stance in six out of the eight countries under study. The only two different cases were those of Greek and French populists whose FB contained radical left content. This, however, does not change the general tendency, namely the salience of the centre-right and radical right media sources and the virtual absence of centre-left media sources.

According to the DEMOS study the main disseminators of populists' social media posts were other political actors: their own party, party leader or colleagues, as well as political 'fan groups' or groups attacking competing political parties or politicians. That provides the evidence of the dense network of reinforcing relations between populist parties and their members and populists from other parties. It also confirms the existence of "political echo-chambers that have very little diversity in the information presented, being hyper-politicised and unidimensional".

As the DEMOS study revealed the dissemination of populist messages can be attributed to Facebook groups. Among the main disseminators of populists' messages are different Facebook groups that seem to be set up by citizens and/or are related to different social movements, but it is unclear who controls them. A more in-depth qualitative analysis would be required to study these groups and the relations between them.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policymakers should treat the challenge of populism not as a unified issue and one overarching EU-approach is not sufficient. Policies aimed at constraining and/or combating populism need to have EU, national, regional and local dimensions.
- Given the specific architecture and affordances of social media technology, policy makers and other social actors (for example, schools) should be aware of how new platforms can quickly become spaces for exclusionary, populist communication that is directed to younger users – e.g. TikTok, Instagram.

The DEMOS Team recommends:

- Promotion of the modern news literacy and critical thinking (through school curricula, teachers' trainings, various community institutions and the media themselves) among the European societies which would strengthen their understanding of the current mechanisms of fake-news promotion, manipulation and hate/exclusionary speech and, consequently, strengthen their capacity to make informed decisions. That would also make citizens resilient to simplified and dichotomised messages from populist politicians.
- Strengthening fact-checking initiatives and platforms at the national and European level. Such organisations would not only detect the misinformation practices at the political level but also would name and shame the exclusionary and inaccurate populist language of many political actors. That would lower the cost for the citizens to find independent information.
- Investing in and supporting independent local journalism initiatives as highly trusted sources of information.
- Mainstream, democratic politicians should make their messages more citizen oriented. This does not mean adopting the populist strategies and creating conducive conditions to a populist agenda but rather taking social fears and anxieties seriously into account. It is also necessary to desist from technocratic legitimisation of policy making and artificial celebrity politics, which can be easily portrayed as out of touch with the people.
- Developing and strengthening institutional solutions that would base the decision-making process on horizontal accountability and citizen's engagement.
- Policy makers at national levels should also work with social media platforms to ensure that they conform to legal requirements regarding e.g. hate speech. In particular, the EU needs to consider a united approach to this as currently there is no bloc-wide approach.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

DEMOS – Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe is a three-year collaborative research project with 15 consortium members across Europe. DEMOS is funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 framework programme. It started in December 2018 with two general objectives:

1. DEMOS aims at better understanding of the populist phenomenon by identifying and filling existing lacunas in the literature. More specifically, the project will study the conditions and contexts of populism with an emphasis on its socio-psychological roots, while concurrently analysing the varieties of populism across Europe – building on the assumption that populism has both generalisable socio-psychological foundations and many context-bound manifestations rooted in history, culture and specific socio-economic conditions. The project will devote attention to ‘populism in action’, that is, exploring the impact and consequences of populist governance and policymaking across several levels – from the individual to the supranational – acknowledging that recently the influence of populism has increased dramatically and gained power in several countries. Last, but not least, the project will shed light on the responses and reactions of social actors to the challenge of populism, identifying coping strategies, good practices, successes and failures, as well as forecast probable scenarios.
2. DEMOS aims at addressing the challenge of populism through the operationalisation of the concept of ‘democratic efficacy’. The project will study the potential of democratic efficacy to counter populism through experiments and action research, devoting special attention to the youth, studying schools and educational measures, and developing educational tools as well as policy recommendations on how to boost civic awareness and reflective engagement through increasing democratic efficacy.

Above we presented some results of the research completed in the first and second years of the project under Work Packages 2 and 6:

- WP2 included five different tasks that jointly aimed to detect and explain varieties of populism in Europe today. First, a critical survey of the conceptualisations of populism and varieties of populism based on the literature (task WP 2.1); second, a comparative expert survey of populist parties in today’s Europe, in order to construct a typology of populist political parties (task WP 2.2); third, a comparative survey of different populist discourses in today’s Europe using the Facebook communication of populist parties and leaders (task WP 2.3); fourth, a comparative expert survey on the institutional contexts (primarily, constitutions) facilitating or constraining the rise of populism (task WP 2.4); and fifth, an analysis of public policies in selected EU countries, triggering the rise of populism (task WP 2.5).
- WP6 included four different tasks designed to study impact of populism on law, democratic institutions, but also its impact on media.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** ‘Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe’ — ‘DEMOS’

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#### FUNDING SCHEME

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#### DURATION

December 2018 – November 2021 (36 months).

#### BUDGET

EU contribution: € 3,037,781.25

#### WEBSITE

<https://demos-h2020.eu/en>

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#### FURTHER MATERIALS

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