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THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA-INFORMATION SOURCES "LIKED" BY THE POPULIST POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND ITALY ON FACEBOOK: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comparative overview of the way the Facebook (FB) "Like" button was used by the selected populist leaders in four Central-Eastern European countries and Italy for a more permanent designation of their favourite public pages. In particular, research attention was focused on identifying the "alternative" media as potentially the main or a major source of linked and "liked" (both literally and figuratively) media and information sources on FB. If present, this should prove the existence of the ideological affinity between the "alternative" politics as presented by the populist leaders and parties and the "alternative" media. However, only some limited evidence in support for such connections in the five case studies was found. In contrast, although the original sample was carefully and logically selected based on cultural-historical-geographical proximity and presence of populist leaders (the most similar cases), the results suggest rather diverse results. The populist leaders under the analysis do not seem to have direct and more permanent affinity toward the "alternative" media sources. Even more in some cases (Matovič, Babiš) they seem to prefer the quality liberal mainstream media, while in other cases (Kaczynski, Morawiecki and Salvini) they prefer the ideologically close media, or show no more permanent preference for any media – Orbán and Kollár (who did not use this tool for more permanent designation of the "liked" media). These diverse findings suggest more questions than answers.

Keywords: populism ▪ political communication ▪ Facebook ▪ "Like" button ▪ Babiš ▪ Matovič ▪ Kaczynski ▪ Kollár ▪ Morawiecki ▪ Orbán ▪ Salvini ▪ network analysis

1.   INTRODUCTION

Although research on various aspects of populist communication on social media is broad and diverse (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017; Školkay and Marincea,

2021), there are still niche but important areas of research that remain uncovered. Specifically, in this study, we present a qualitative comparative overview of how selected populist leaders in four Central-Eastern European countries and Italy chose to designate their Facebook (FB) affiliations more permanently by "liking" other FB public pages, which remained displayed on their FB profiles as a symbolic acknowledgement (although not easily visible to others without making an additional effort). Due to space limitations and the existing abundance of research on the topic, we do not extensively discuss the relationship between social network sites and populism (for this, refer to Školkay, 2021a), nor do we delve into the conceptualization of populism (see Piccolino and Soare, 2021; Hunger and Paxton, 2021; Školkay, 2021b). The focus of this study is instead on the qualitative comparative analysis of the use of a specific niche but important digital tool and its subsequent analytical implications. While the social aspects of this FB tool were first explored in a study by Eranti and Lonkila in 2015, no previous analysis has specifically examined the political aspect of the "Like" button, particularly in relation to alternative media and from a comparative perspective.

Traditionally, comparative analysis has emphasized "the explanation of differences, and the explanation of similarities" (Azarian, 2011, p. 2). Tilly (1984, p. 82) distinguishes four types of comparative analysis: individualizing, universalizing, variation-finding, and encompassing. In this study, we employed the variation-finding comparison, which seeks to "establish a principle of variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon by examining systematic differences between instances" (Tilly, 1984, p. 82). The study includes findings from four in-depth case studies (Rétfalvi, 2022; Winiarska-Brodowska, Piontek, Dzwonczyk & Jabłońska, 2022; Školkay, Laczko, Havlíček & Žúborová, 2022; Školkay & Daniš, 2022), as well as a theoretical-methodological background study (Školkay & Marincea, 2022) and a working paper (Marincea, 2021). Within the countries under investigation, the following populist politicians' Facebook (FB) pages were selected by the cited authors: Viktor Orbán and Fidesz (The Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Union) for Hungary, Andrej Babiš and ANO (The Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) for Czech Republic, Igor Matovič and OĽaNO (The Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) for Slovakia, Mateusz Morawiecki and Jaroslaw Kaczyński for Poland (The Law and Justice party), and Matteo Salvini for Italy (The Lega). Additionally, Boris Kollár, the leader of the right-wing populist We Are a Family Party and the Speaker of the Parliament, was included for Slovakia. These populist leaders were selected based on their key roles in executive and/or party (e.g., Jaroslaw Kaczynski) and/or parliamentary (e.g., Boris Kollár) politics in 2020. Their populist dimension was tracked using the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset, which includes key indicators such as Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism, and anti-elitism. According to the POPPA dataset, all the selected parties exhibited high levels of populism.

The four countries of Central-Eastern Europe were initially selected as members

of the Visegrad Group (V4). The V4 was traditionally perceived more as an ad hoc regional lobby group rather than a political concept. The 2018 EU Coalition Explorer confirmed that the V4 countries consider each other as default partners. However, a 2021 survey among V4 experts revealed the existence of two axes: Czech and Slovak respondents named each other as their country's closest ally, while Polish and Hungarian respondents identified mutual closeness (Janebová & Végh, 2021). There is a nearly three-decade-long tradition of conducting comparative research focused on the V4, including studies on populism (e.g., Kim, 2021). Italy was included alongside the V4 countries due to similarities in media system characteristics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), levels of political independence and market pluralism (Brogi et al., 2020), the presence and type of populist discourse (Bennett et al., 2020), and the political rise of populists to power (Pietrobon, 2018). Like the V4 populist leaders with whom Salvini has expressed interest in collaborating (e.g., Kollár, Orbán), he has gained political power by adopting a strong anti-refugee agenda.

The original research for the selected papers was based on the premise that the personal selection of more permanently "liked" pages (contrasting with more ad hoc "Likes" used in daily communication threads) should theoretically reflect personal, political, and ideological affinity towards specific individuals, institutions (especially media sources), and particularly "alternative media" by the populist leaders under scrutiny. In general, comparing these findings contributes to the development of a theory on the relationship between populism and the usage of social media by political leaders.

The original methodology employed by the cited authors (see Školkay & Marincea, 2022) was straightforward. It involved visually identifying the public pages that were more permanently "liked" by the selected populist leaders, as displayed on their Facebook (FB) official or personal pages. This identification process was conducted using a specific digital tool. The authors conducted this analysis in April-May 2020 for most cases, and in September 2020 for the Morawiecki and Fidesz case, following initial explorations. Among the permanently "liked" pages, only those related to media or broadly understood public communication sources (of any type, including black humor pages) were selected. The methodological approach adopted by the cited authors aligns with one of the two distinct approaches to social network analysis, known as the egocentric (or personal) network approach. This approach focuses on a central node (in this case, the populist leaders) and the relationships surrounding that node. This approach was reflected in the papers' emphasis on the assumed affinity between the populist leaders and parties towards alternative media on FB. It also reflects the primary level of connections on FB, where permanently "liking" a page serves as a more unambiguous and public expression of personal sympathy towards a source, as opposed to ad hoc "liking," which may be more random in nature.

The structure of the comparative paper differs from traditional research papers on social media. The key methodological focus is not solely on social media research but on comparative research based on case studies. As a result, there is no

extensive discussion on methodology provided in the paper itself. However, the original theoretical study (Školkay & Marincea, 2022) includes details on the methodology employed in each individual case study. Additionally, a discussion on the pros and cons of the comparative research approach or the research methodology used in individual chapters has been included in the paper.

In contrast to what is expected from the standard structure of the research part of the study, we expanded the part on the alternative media for the reasons explained further. Thus, the structure of the paper is as follows: firstly, we further outline the significance and conditions of comparative research, grounded in specific examples. Secondly, we briefly discuss political communication and populism in the V4 countries and Italy. The focus is on a general broader context since this background information has no particular explanatory relevance, as we document further. In general, as will be shown below, there is a common trend in the increased use of social media. This actually puts higher scientific value on our research. Thirdly, we discuss the issue of alternative media. This concept is often considered to be self-evident and normatively seen negatively, although the reality is far more complex. Fourthly, we discuss the FB "Like" Button. This provides descriptive information that is useful for those not familiar with this tool. It also serves as interesting information for the future since it was a constantly evolving tool—no longer in use under its original name "Like" (but as "Follows") since January 2021. This highlights, in retrospect, the historical importance of the initial exploratory research by the five cited papers.

What follows is the key part of this paper: comparing findings from the case studies. As an extension to the previous key section, the interaction of alternative media and populists is discussed. This assumed (and expected deeper) interaction was of our special research interest. We found some secondary but interesting findings which we also mention.

The authors' contribution that extends the results presented in the case studies is, therefore, not only in comparing the individual case studies' results but also in challenging the existing assumptions of alternative media as simply "junk news." Moreover, the challenges of the initial case selection and the rather divergent results seem to contribute to a better understanding of the need to be cautious about overstating the role of social media in the political communication of populists.

2.   STUDY

2.1.   The Challenges for the Comparative Research from the Case Selection Perspective

In this part, we discuss the importance of and categories for carrying out comparative research. Challenging theoretical thoughts is supported by examples from the country case studies. We compare the findings of the five cited case studies, which provide "units of analysis" understood as the social media profiles of populist leaders

(with the exception of Morawiecki, who arguably is not a typical populist leader but has been included as a Prime Minister) from the five analyzed countries. The case study method is closely related to the comparative method (Lijphart, 1971). Comparative analysis is central to theory-building and theory-testing in social studies (Peters, Fontaine & Mendez, 2018; Berg-Schlosser, 2001), especially when it is based on an analysis of socio-economic phenomena in relation to their institutional and socio-cultural settings (Hantrais, 1999).

The drawback of the comparative method is that it attempts to generalize based on relatively few empirical cases. Out of the four suggested specific ways in which this methodological difficulty may be resolved, we prefer to focus on comparable cases (as discussed, carefully selected countries, and then specific politicians) and tackle the key variables, specifically the media sources in general and the alternative media in particular.

Admittedly, the investigation of the FB "Likes" gives limited information about the (media) networks and affinities of the populists and their FB pages. It is an initial step in the inquiry but nonetheless an important one because it allows us to see the connections that are formally acknowledged by the populists in different countries and therefore the degree of normalization of, for example, alternative or fake news media, or hyper-partisan and usually right-wing sources. In that sense, this investigation may be more revealing about the populist leaders than just ad hoc "liking" or sharing of day-to-day information sources or opinions.

As put by Gerring (2007, p. 4), a case-based method rests on in-depth knowledge of the key cases, through which general points are elucidated and evaluated. For Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 6), case studies are important for developing a nuanced view of reality. However, it becomes complicated when one decides on the selection of cases. We would like to show this complexity and sometimes contradictions in defining the country selection. As it is known, case selection is of paramount importance in case study research, and even more so in comparative research. Seawright and Gerring (2008) offer seven case selection procedures that focus on typical, diverse, extreme, deviant, influential, most similar, and most different cases. The primary selection by the cited authors reflected most similar cases from the perspective of cultural-historical legacy (the V4 countries). However, as mentioned, the V4 countries, together with Italy, also form typical case studies from the perspective of the importance of populism in current politics. Therefore, the inclusion of Italy is relevant (in particular, it may exclude the variable "post-communism").

Perhaps confusingly, Bogaards (2018, p. 1482) states that "Hungary is a deviant and exemplary case" among the countries that initially moved towards liberal democracy. Thus, alternatively, Hungary can be seen as a deviant case-selection from the perspective of democratization theories. This can be actually said about the Czech Republic as well since it is arguably one of the "least-likely cases" for populism to succeed, due to, for example, its strong middle class (Buštíková, 2018, p. 303). Again, this is a useful theoretical-empirical discussion and finding since using deviant

cases allows identifying the features that are present but may have no effect on the researched subject. It can also point to the ways in which the concepts can be introduced or rearranged (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010).

Moreover, the importance of social media as a relevant source of news shows that these cases are actually rather diverse (Slovakia and Hungary being in one group, Poland and the Czech Republic in another group, and Italy somewhere in the middle) (Eurobarometer, 2017-2019). However, Table 1 shows a different picture. Czechia and Slovakia are actually in the same group with respect to FB usage by an identical part of the population, while Hungary is again a relatively deviant case (having the highest FB usage), with Italy being somewhere in the middle (the data for Poland were incomplete). These contradictions or differences suggest how much it matters whether one selects more general data for comparison (e.g., social media) or makes a further selection from these more general data (e.g., FB).

This theoretical-empirical discussion about case selection and their categorization from a theoretical point of view highlights possible exploratory and interpretative perspectives that can be used in the present and follow-up research. The discussion shows the richness of our sample from the theoretical as well as empirical perspectives. Finally, it also weakens possible counter-arguments as to why this sample was selected and not the other. This sample is rich in its multidimensional analytical features, while at the same time, it is based on solid core characteristics that were used during the initial selection process. We acknowledge that this approach may seem too complex for classical, rather simple, or one-dimensional approaches to case selection. However, it shows methodological challenges that often remain unnoticed. Ultimately, a one-dimensional approach to case selection determines the quality of research results and their interpretation, as we can see in the debate above.

Now, we turn to providing a general overview of political communication and populism in the countries under comparison. This may help us frame or possibly explain our findings. We do not extensively discuss social network sites and political party leaders' communication strategies/behavior. This topic is discussed at length in the country case studies. Therefore, instead of expanding on a micro-perspective, we prefer a macro-perspective. Moreover, we are interested in FB as a connection to legacy or other media. It should be mentioned that we could not cite or refer to every single fact we relied on. This would make this study too long and involve too much cross-referencing. Instead, we prefer a synthetic analysis and, only when necessary, provide additional explanations or references to sources.

2.2.   The Social and Legacy Media and Populism in V4 and Italy

Although television broadcast is still the main provider of news and political information in all analysed countries (Eurobarometer, 2019), the influence of the social media and its usage as a source of news has been on the rise and there are reasons

to believe this process will continue. The general data on the social media usage and trends in the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Social Media Usage in Selected Countries. (January 2020)

Country	Number of Users (in Millions)	Change (April 2019-January 2020, in %)	Penetration (%)	FB Reported Advertising Reach Compared to that of Population aged 13+ (%)	FB Usage (in millions)
Slovakia	2,8	+6.6	51	53	2,5
Poland*	19	+7.8	50	n.a.	17
Hungary	6	+5.9	62	66	5,6
Czechia	5,7	+6.7	53	53	4,9
Italy**	35,8	+6.4	58	59	31

Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/ , *Data for 2018, **Data for 2019

The data is rather similar across these countries in terms of social media usage and penetration trends, with Hungary and Italy slightly leading. This strengthens the validity of our comparative perspective. However, as mentioned above, the relevance of social media as a source of news suggests that there are significant differences. Yet, social media does not serve exclusively as a source of news but also for political socializing or simply discussing politics. Social media increasingly serves as a source of information and opinions, as well as material for analysis.

As already discussed, from a comparative perspective of social media reach, Hungarians can be most extensively reached by Facebook in relative terms, followed by Italy, with Czechia and Slovakia being on equal footing. Be that as it may, surprisingly, as shown in Table 1, these data have no exploratory usefulness for our findings. In other words, the data do not provide any clue as to why a certain populist politician used more permanent "Likes" or why they did not use them on their Facebook pages at all. Neither does the initial period of inclusion of social media in political communication shed more light on this issue. Some countries had an earlier onset of the electoral influence of social media in their national politics than others. For example, the "social media turn" first happened in (or around) 2010 in Czechia and Hungary's general elections. By contrast, in Slovakia, social media is held to have first had an important electoral role as late as the 2016 parliamentary elections.

Yet, the national case studies from Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Slovakia show that, despite the national specificities, there are some important similarities in the social media strategies employed by the populist leaders and parties. One of the main and most obvious common features that unites many of these parties and leaders is "self-mediatization," which implies a personalization of politics built around star leadership that often goes hand in hand with a form of tabloidization. There was a consensus (until social media expansion) that the dominant, usually "charismatic"

leaders, are typical of populist policies and populist parties, although it is unclear what the cause and effect are here (Barber, 2019). Apparently, populism and leadership constitute phenomena that are both complementary and distinctive (Viviani, 2017). More specifically, leadership explains the chameleon-like nature of populism (Soare, 2017). Currently, there are populist leaders that can be better described in academic studies as "provocateurs" or "drunken dinner guests" or as "entertainers" (Nai, Martínez i Coma & Maier, 2019). Clearly, social media, especially FB, played a key role in the success of some populist politicians and parties. This does not mean that there is no populism without FB or other social media. Yet, social media facilitated the rise of a specific type of populist leaders affiliated with certain political parties.

Other strategies by some selected populist actors involved building their own party-affiliated media or creating more or less transparent media relations with different media owners. This has been the case for populist parties and leaders in Italy (Lega and Salvini), in Hungary, as well as in Poland (Perrone, 2019; Lipiński, 2021). Once in power and with a consolidated position, we see some of these populists capturing the media through legislation or different unfriendly and secret takeovers in order to ensure their support or just to destroy critical media voices, like Fidesz and Orbán have done in Hungary. This media capture extended logically, especially in Hungary, to the part of online media. This seems to become a real threat in Poland too, with the public service media (PSM) already turned into a propaganda channel. Moreover, attempts seem to be made to take over large parts of the private media sector in Poland, similarly to what happened in Hungary.

Despite the ongoing digitalization (allowing free access to media content), coupled with the economic pressures, especially during or after periods of financial crises (like the one in 2007-2008), only a minor part of legacy media has become an occasional instrument of the political and economic status quo in Czechia and Slovakia. Moreover, the PSM and the key commercial mainstream media seem to be able to maintain balance. On the other hand, a larger part of the media sector in Czechia and Slovakia was seen as being guided by liberal ideology, while in Hungary, as well as in Poland, the combination of left and liberal attitudes, had been seen as dominant among journalists/media. This was the case before Fidesz or PiS came to power in 2010 and 2015, respectively, and moved the political part of the media spectrum significantly to the right. In Italy, the specifics of the media system are even more pronounced – there is a sort of osmosis between politics and journalism, with journalists entering the field of politics and politicians becoming journalists (Mancini & Matteo, n.d.; Perrone, 2019).

Despite rather different developments or causes, the resulting situation of the media landscapes and political communication spheres often implies that challenger parties or politicians have little access to the mainstream media in Hungary (or, in this particular case, increasingly, the opposition parties), the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, as well as Italy. Therefore, they have to rely on different strategies to access the

public. One of these is to turn to "alternative" media channels like FB pages/groups and independent websites because online media, being newer and less regulated channels, depending on much fewer resources for the production and distribution of information, but also with less access to the public than established media like television, tend to be less captured by the state and political or private actors. One consequence of the perception of captured media has been the rise of "alternative media" in Czechia and Slovakia in particular. As mentioned, the key research question was whether there is any clear link between "alternative media" and populism. However, this answer partially depends on what is meant by "alternative media." Yet, this is a rather controversial and not fully academically explored discussion in most of these countries.

2.3.   The Conceptual Difficulties with the Alternative Media

As for the definitions of "alternative media" in each country, although there are national specificities, some overall commonalities can also be discerned. There are two main, somewhat different sources of conceptualization of alternative media: the scholarly literature and the popular discourse – whether it is how journalists and mass-media organizations themselves talk about alternative media, the general public, politicians, different authorities, or the various initiatives of media monitoring and debunking that have sprung up in the past years. These different conceptualizations might prioritize different aspects of "alternative media" that they deem important (e.g., the accuracy of information over the political/ideological bias). As the cited studies show, the concept of "alternative media" remains very fuzzy within and among countries in theory, as well as in practice. Nonetheless, we can distinguish a few categories that can be extracted from the varying definitions and operationalizations. These are: a) based on substantial features of their content: disinformation, misinformation, and/or malinformation (often called alternative, controversial, or disinformation media by their opponents); arts, literature, community, and school media; alternative politics (e.g., Pirate parties, Green parties, or social movements); b) based on the type of professionalism of their producers: professional media, semi-professional media, amateurish citizen journalism (blogs, video, Twitter news, FB messaging). As the definitions vary, so does the perception of their impact and nature, ranging from mostly negative assessments to sometimes more positive ones.

Obviously, there can be, for example, disinformation media sources with a semi-professional level of production, or professional media with misinformation (e.g., captured PSM). Thus, these conceptualizations allow reflecting on the fluidity or transformations of particular media systems.

It is precisely this conceptual fuzziness that has raised issues not only theoretically but also in practice, leading to a change in terminology. In Czechia and Slovakia, the websites that were listed by one of the fact-checking initiatives complained about

having suffered economic repercussions due to such allegedly questionable classifications. This led some Slovak fact-checkers and disinformation activists to change the terminology to avoid subsequent legal complaints, using "controversial" websites instead of "disinformation" or more specifically "hoax" or "fake news," which is easier to claim and provide proof for. In Czechia, Hájek & Carpentier (2015) suggested abandoning the "dichotomy of alternative and mainstream media" and instead proposed the concept of "alternative mainstream media." In the majority of currently discussed and analyzed cases (however, this does not mean that the majority of alternative sources possess such characteristics), "alternative" or "controversial" media are associated with disinformation, misinformation, unverified information, or "fake news." For example, in Slovakia, controversial websites also include those related to alternative medicine or the far-right party Kotlebovci-LSNS. It may be relevant to observe that there is a relative consensus among scholars that the benchmark for mainstream, quality media tends to be the liberal and PSM media, which can indeed be shown empirically to provide the most accurate content in terms of the information delivered (see, for example, European Media Systems Survey). However, this should not necessarily be seen as an ideologically completely neutral and factually always objective position of analysis, especially when one analyzes the bias of different media outlets.

In Czechia, such "alternative" content was mainly promoted by marginal, non-mainstream media sources, while in Hungary, on the other hand, disinformation came directly from the pro-government media (Lupion, 2019). As the author of the Hungarian case study shows, this was also done by the government authorities themselves, starting in 2010. Similarly, as in the case of Slovakia, where among the top "controversial sources" there is the FB page of a Member of Parliament - Ľuboš Blaha, which can also be a sign of incivility and misinformation (from the populist left) being normalized and legitimized throughout society.

In Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia, "alternative media" are sometimes defined as those that challenge the traditional structures of media production, giving access to media content production to ordinary people, not just media professionals, and to marginal interests and voices that would not otherwise have access to the media. However, in Czechia and Slovakia, alternative media can be seen as "alternative" to the dominant liberal media and discourses. Moreover, the captured PSM in Poland and Hungary try to portray themselves as the "alternative mainstream media," fighting the liberal and liberal-left ideologies and discourses. Italy is another specific media environment, located somewhere between these two groups of countries, with low trust in the mainstream media.

Finally, this leads us to support the idea that there is a more complex relationship between alternative and mainstream media among populist parties (and populist leaders) on FB than simply antagonism and exclusivity (Haller & Holt, 2019). This can be transparently seen in the use of the FB "like" button.

2.4.   The Facebook "Like" Button

There are three essential ways to interact with content on FB: liking (or reacting to a post or page), commenting, and sharing. The most prominent of them is the "Like" button, which was introduced in 2009/2010. In 2016, FB launched a new set of icons indicating emotions in addition to the Like button. As mentioned, "liking" is a way to give positive feedback and connect with others. Users could (until early 2022) like FB pages and can still "react" to posts, status updates, comments, photos, and links posted by their friends or strangers, as well as ads, by clicking the "Like, Love, Ha Ha, Wow, Sad, or Angry" buttons at the bottom of the content. However, a user could also use the "Like" button for more or less permanently "liking" or "following" a certain FB page. This means they could sign up for a specific type of relationship with that page, as put by Alperstein (2019), a parasocial interaction with digital media or imaginary social relationships. Users who have "liked" a FB Page were called Fans/Followers. Liking a certain page is also a form of public endorsement of that page.

   Faucher (2018) believes that social media profiles and their connections can be seen as a form of "virtuosic score." This means that active social media users, whom he calls "virtuosos," are performing a kind of production by furnishing new content and acting as cross-syndicators who distribute the content of others over the network. Egebark and Ekström (2018) argued that one can see this as a specific sub-type of political distributed gatekeeping. While distributed gatekeeping was defined as "story-placement choices made by a large number of readers" (Schiffer, 2007 cited in Walczak, Meina & Olechnicki, 2017), political distributed gatekeeping can be seen as a more permanent selection of individuals, institutions, or resources by a political institution (politician, political party). In particular, liking articles and media on the web could help build online reputations (D'Costa, 2012).

   Blassnig & Wirz (2019) found that both populist messages and populist actors foster the perception of an FB post as populist, but only populist messages are drivers of user reactions. The effect of populist communication on user reactions is moderated by the recipients' populist attitudes. Users with strong populist attitudes share populist messages more often than they share non-populist messages. However, populists seem to be eager to activate anger in their FB communication (Jacobs, Sandberg & Spierings, 2020). In the next section, we turn to the findings obtained in the five case studies.

2.5.   The Comparison of the Case Studies Findings

As mentioned, the following findings are determined by the available materials and their mutual comparability. We compared findings from Rétfalvi (2022), Winiarska-Brodowska, Piontek, Dzwonczyk & Jabłońska (2022), Školkay, Laczko, Havlíček & Žúborová (2022), Školkay & Daniš (2022), Školkay & Marincea (2022), and Marincea (2021). In line with the qualitative comparative method, we used the

heuristic method (variation-finding comparison) – finding and comparing similarities and differences with a focus on their relevance for political communication. The priority was given to finding and explaining the presence or absence of alternative media sources among more permanently linked FB pages. However, some additional findings worth mentioning – if they help us to clarify or contextualize findings - are also stated. These additional findings may be explored in the future.

First, we focus on the general context. There is the Polish exception - Kaczyński (not considering the special case of Morawiecki), and Slovak half-results (one leader – Kollár - is more popular than his party, while another one – Matovič is, or used to be until he became the Prime Minister for a short time - less popular than his movement). In all other cases analyzed, the party leaders were more popular on FB than the party or movement. However, both of these less popular leaders (Matovič, Kaczyński) did not have their official FB pages, just unofficial ones.

The leader in popularity, by far, was Matteo Salvini, with a following of 4.8 million, while his party's FB page "Lega – Salvini Premier" had over 1 million followers. Hungary's Viktor Orbán had over 1 million followers on FB, while Fidesz had over 300,000. Czechia's Andrej Babiš had over 250,000 followers, while his party ANO had only around 100,000 followers. The least spectacular difference between the party leader and party popularity was found in Slovakia, where Matovič led with almost 270,000 followers, while his party OĽaNO had around 230,000 (but there was a huge impact on winning general elections in February 2020). Kollár was followed by almost 150,000, while his party "We are a Family" had almost 120,000 followers. Jarosław Kaczyński was the least popular leader on FB among these populist leaders, with under 20,000 followers or likes. In contrast, PiS had almost 300,000 followers and/or likes. These results show a clear personalization of politics and centralization of power – typical of populists, including at the level of information production and distribution. However, Kaczyński's case shows that this may not need to be supported by active communication on social media. In addition, Matovič's case suggests that winning elections may radically change the number of followers.

The centrist (Babiš and ANO, Matovič and OĽaNO) or right-wing (Salvini and Lega) or socially conservative populists (Orbán and Fidesz, Kollár and We are a Family, Kaczyński and PiS) most often have a leader-driven communication strategy centered around a charismatic, star-like, and even show-like politician who runs the political/electoral process like a "show." However, this show and rhetoric (and often policies) can have either a religious-patriotic/nationalistic nature or, as put by some, a core of "platonic xenophobia" (Kaczyński and PiS), or a patriotic-quasi-religious nature with a strong (but occasional) dose of nativism - xenophobic nationalism – like the case of Orbán and Fidesz. Others may display non-religious characteristics with a strong dose of nativism - xenophobic nationalism (Salvini and Lega) or rather a civic-anti-corruption substance (Matovič and OĽaNO) or a civic-hope-installing substance (Babiš and ANO). At least in the latter two cases, there was actually no direct attack on liberal democracy. In any case, this implies that much of their party structure is evidently hierarchical and highly centralized, sometimes apparently

unidirectional. This tendency can also be observed in their communication on social media, as well as in their tendency to either associate (if at all) only with favorable media outlets and party media or to capture and centralize the media outlets once they are in a position to do so. As mentioned above, in Hungary, for example, we have seen a significant centralization of the media by the government in power, which has entirely transformed the media market into one dominated by pro-government media outlets (at least in the fields of political reporting and investigation). None-theless, as the empirical studies of the V4 countries and Italy show, these preferences towards hierarchical and highly centralized structures (including, as mentioned, leaving empty space for "liking" which is particularly visible in the case of Orbán) are also reflected in the way these populists use social media, particularly FB.

Second, despite the differences among the national contexts and specificities, some further commonalities emerge. The populist leaders in the countries under study are in most cases the producers of information, the main creators of content which they distribute to their networks of followers (which often include other party members, party supporters, and selected media), who often become amplifiers of these mes-sages. They are in a central role, a position of leadership whereby they rarely publicly acknowledge other media sources (and when they do, these tend to be the friendly media or party media – like in the case of Lega and Salvini or PiS and Kaczyński, although there are exceptions discussed further) or even other politicians from their own party (PiS and Kaczyński, OĽaNO and Matovič, etc). The communication follows a rather unidirectional pattern (similar to allocution), not an interactive one, which strengthens the perceived position of authority. This type of communication follows the lines of "self-mediatization."

Third, normatively, even among the "Like" button users, only exceptionally some leaders and parties liked the "alternative" sources usually perceived as having a neg-ative impact on public discourse, such as in the case of the Italian leader Matteo Salvini. Others, like the Slovak populist leader Matovič and the Czech leader Babiš, actually preferred the quality mainstream media (either national or international). In fact, only exceptionally, like in the case of Morawiecki, one could find the "alter-native" media source in a normatively negative sense, while for Babiš, an example of the "alternative mainstream" media source was found. Kollár and Orbán did not provide any guidance in this regard on their FB. However, Kollár made it clear that he is not particularly interested in the "alternative" media. Rather, he was interested in interesting and relevant content. We discuss this issue further in the next paragraph.

Fourthly, a form of "decentralization" apparently resides in the public endorse-ment through the "Likes" of the pages of other politicians from the same party at the national, local, regional, or municipal level. This was typically the case of Salvini, Kaczyński, and Matovič. These public endorsements or lack thereof might reflect hidden dynamics within the party that are played out, strategically or unintention-ally, at the level of social media.

These "Facebook politics" of networking through "likes" bring forth questions

like: Why do populist leaders like only certain party members and not others? Why do they sometimes prefer public linkage with/endorsements of local politicians or local media over the national or international ones and vice-versa? These contradictory tendencies, observed in the Polish and Slovak case studies, launch research questions for possible further empirical study.

2.6.   Results: the Alternative Media and Populists

It has emerged from the majority of analyzed case studies that populist leaders are connected, either directly (at the first level) or at the secondary level, with "soft-news" types of content. This typically includes sports, TV shows, different personalities, humor-related pages (including political humor), and a preference for local/regional media sources. An exception to this was observed in the cases of Matovič, Kaczyński, and Babiš, who showed a preference for national media sources. Populist leaders, such as Viktor Orbán, Andrej Babiš, Matteo Salvini, Boris Kollár, Igor Matovič, and Mateusz Morawiecki, employed self-mediatization strategies, often relying on video messages and allocutions. As mentioned earlier, they produced their own media content rather than relying on external sources. This may partially explain their reluctance to publicly endorse other media channels, especially those categorized as "alternative media." Jarosław Kaczyński was an exception as he mainly liked media outlets strongly engaged in politics with a conservative profile and promoting the values of the Catholic Church. However, the majority of these "liked" media were niche media.

Public endorsement of other (alternative) media channels implies less control over the content and can also generate controversy. It is a less secure transparency policy in the long-term perspective, which is why creating their own content that then becomes viral can be seen as a better strategy. This approach provides more control, especially when there is limited access to mainstream media. Not associating publicly with alternative media can also be a way of avoiding criticism regarding the distribution of "fake news" and maintaining an anti-system, challenger identity by not aligning with mainstream media. There are exceptions, such as Matovič, who didn't mind being associated with a major mainstream liberal media outlet, and Babiš, who liked one alternative news media source, although it was not a typical "fake news and disinformation" source. Kollár initially self-mediatized through commercial media reporting and TV shows before turning to Facebook.

While these populist leaders create their power positions and clear hierarchies, being the central figures who are followed rather than following others, they employ slightly different strategies. Salvini, Babiš, Matovič (partly), Morawiecki, and Kaczyński displayed more closeness to the people through their direct links and endorsements of various social causes, soft news, and popular sources. Orbán and Kollár, on the other hand, showed a more formal style of populism on social media, without direct endorsements of other media or politicians. All V4 political actors

under study, including Italy, created rather centralized, top-down, and in some cases, isolated networks, reflecting their party structures, with themselves placed in the middle, consolidating their charismatic leadership self-branding and their "anti-system" image. This resembles propaganda structures, but further research is needed to determine if the usage of social media by populists stems from such a perspective or from other potential factors, such as lower interest or lower literacy in using social media for political communication.

The comparative case studies show that disinformation can be promoted either directly through FB pages and groups or more frequently through websites that are distributed via FB. These websites often employ tactics to bypass monitoring and may change names frequently, making them difficult to identify (typical for Hungary). While most populist leaders and parties avoid direct and public association with such sources, this does not necessarily mean there is no connection or preference. Avoiding such associations may be a tactical communication option to maintain credibility. Further analysis, including content analysis of the media sources shared on their profiles, is necessary to determine if there are indeed no connections. It should be noted that Kaczyński's FB permanently liked a few ideologically close media outlets but unexpectedly did not capture the "public service" media. For Kollár from Slovakia, the message, not the messenger, mattered. Some populist leaders do not mind endorsing or citing controversial sources if they support their agenda or beliefs, as seen with Kollár from Slovakia or Salvini in Italy. Their willingness to do so reflects the degree of normalization and acceptance of right-wing attitudes and unverified information in society, resulting from increasing distrust in traditional media and politics.

There were also mentioned a few leaders who preferred to associate themselves with liberal media generally perceived as "quality" and/or "mainstream." This was the case for Slovakia's short-lived Prime Minister Igor Matovič, Czechia's Prime Minister Babiš, who endorsed several quality economic business magazines and journals, and Jarosław Kaczyński to some extent. On one hand, a limited or occasional preference for established media sources might indicate a lower degree of populism (as reliable, high-quality resources should lead to more rational and fact-based decision-making). On the other hand, such associations can be employed in political contexts where the respective leaders have not yet consolidated a sufficiently strong power position or where centrist populism is largely frowned upon. Associations with mainstream elite sources can give the impression of legitimacy and credibility, making them a strategic choice, especially in contexts where alternative media are viewed negatively, and where political leaders may want to avoid association with them.

3.   CONCLUSIONS

The key research question was whether there is any clear link between alternative media and populist leaders. Our tentative answer, based on a comparison of

the country case studies, is that there was no clear-cut and prevailing connection. This finding is surprising since it is commonly assumed that populists, representing "alternative politics," would have some affinity for "alternative" media. However, this answer partially depends on the definition of "alternative media," which is a controversial and not fully explored discussion in most analyzed countries. The term "junk news," as used in the Oxford Reuter's Institute study (Narayanan, 2018), is not helpful either. Additionally, while alternative media are often viewed negatively, there can be mainstream PSM that are biased, as seen in Hungary, Poland, and Hungary's captured majority of media.

The finding that the Facebook "like" button was not used strategically in most cases, but rather ad hoc, is also noteworthy. In some cases, such as Viktor Orbán and Boris Kollár, it was not used at all. Analyzing Orbán's "likes" in isolation would be futile since it does not provide useful data for deeper analysis. However, it is valuable to note when something is not used as a tool for political communication or other purposes. This finding is relevant and demonstrates a biased preference for "positive" findings in science. Furthermore, our research findings suggest that the use of the "like" button includes a diverse range of cases. Viktor Orbán and Boris Kollár, as the only exceptions, refrain from liking any other FB pages. Meanwhile, Kaczyński's presence on social media and his "liked" connections were influenced by his negative attitude toward social and legacy media. This unexpected finding supports the use of counterfactual examples and "most different" cases to establish their respective range of external validity. Additionally, there is a need for research on the conceptualization and analysis of the meaning of "alternative" sources and discourses in individual countries. The emerging research on the psychological aspects of "liking" certain pages is also noteworthy. Populist leaders' public endorsements through page "likes" can provide insights into their alliances, values, and interests. This presents opportunities for research in political psychology and political marketing.

It is worth exploring this topic periodically since politicians and parties may not have fully realized the potential of tools available on FB and other social media platforms. Preferences and "likes" of populist leaders and parties can evolve over time, while older preferences fade from public and researcher attention. Furthermore, the shift from "likes" to "followers" on Facebook has different psychological implications. The use of the "follow" button for designating "preferred" international partners can be revealing.

Our research approach also uncovered the controversial or uncritical use of data in social media research. The data we have documented have no explanatory value within the current analytical context, but they are seen as a standard part of such research articles. Regarding limitations, direct answers from political leaders on how they perceive the "alternative" or legacy media can be revealing, as observed in the cases of Kollár and Kaczyński. Another interesting comparative approach is to analyze the "liking" behavior of associated political parties compared to their

leaders. This analysis was considered but could not be included in this study due to space limitations.

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