

Populist political communication in Poland

political actors – media – citizens

Agnieszka Stępińska
Artur Lipiński
Dorota Piontek
Agnieszka Hess

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Logos Verlag Berlin GmbH
Georg-Knorr-Str. 4, Geb"äude 10
D-12681 Berlin - Germany

Tel.: +49 (0)30 / 42 85 10 90

Fax: +49 (0)30 / 42 85 10 92

<https://www.logos-verlag.de>

Introduction

This book is the final product of the research project *Populist political communication: political messages, media coverage and audience feedback* funded by the National Science Center, Poland (grant no. 2015/18/M/HS5/00080) in 2016-2020. The design of the studies conducted in this project followed the structure and concepts developed by the COST Action IS 1308 *Populist Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics*. Between 2014 and 2018, this scientific network brought together researchers from 31 European countries to investigate populist political communication and its impact on democratic political life across Europe (for more details please see Aalberg et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019). Within the framework of this COST Action three collaborative and internationally comparative empirical studies were conducted, focusing on three main participants of the process of political communication, that is, political actors, media, and citizens.

Authors of this book participated in all the stages of designing and conducting these studies as members of three Working Groups of the COST Action. Findings of comparative international studies were reported in the volume *Communicating Populism. Comparing Actor Perceptions, Media Coverage, and Effects on Citizens in Europe*, edited by Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese (Routledge, 2019), and in numerous other publications, including book chapters and articles. The book *Communicating Populism* was actually the second edited book that participants of the COST Action IS 1308 published together. The international collaboration under the COST Action “umbrella” started with a book on *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (Aalberg et al., 2017), containing a presentation of the conceptual framework of the international research and a literature review from 26 European countries.

The COST Action project addressed three problems: (1) defining populist political actors and recognizing determinants of their communication success; (2) establishing the role of the media in the promotion of populist politics; and (3) understanding how citizens engage with populist political communication. Such a multi-dimensional approach utilizes communication and media theories and those from other social science disciplines to make sense of the production, dissemination, reception, and impact of populist political messages.

In particular, participants of the COST Action conducted collaborative and internationally comparative empirical studies on: (1) politicians’ and journalists’ perceptions of populism; (2) media coverage of populism; and (3) effects of populist messages on citizens. The studies were based on comparative interview studies with

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journalists and politicians, a large-scale comparative content analysis, and a comparative cross-country experiment using nationally representative online surveys (Reinemann et al., 2019, p. 9). The Polish team participated in all three main parts of this complex research project.

The purpose of studying perceptions of populism was inspired by Blumer's (1986) symbolic interactionism (Salgado and Stanyer, 2019, p. 17). According to this concept, actions towards things are heavily influenced by the meanings of these things to the actors, and meanings are constructed and modified through interpretive processes (Blumer, 1986). With the qualitative approach and method (in-depth interview), researchers collaborating in COST Action IS 1308 Working Group 1 were able to collect rich and complex data on how politicians and journalists make sense of populism, its causes and consequences, and the role of the media in the dissemination of populist messages (for more details about the design of the study see Salgado and Stanyer, 2019).

The initial assumption was that populism and populist political actors are generally perceived as negative by both politicians and the media. The latter frequently present populism and populist politicians as a threat to democracy and pluralism. Another research objective was to identify these differences in the context of similar phenomena, such as racism, nationalism, civil involvement, as well as the left- or right-wing provenance of these phenomena. It was also of interest to the researchers to analyze what assumptions, associations and prejudices are most common, and whether there are any observable models of populism in Europe.

Findings of this study showed that journalists were aware of populism and its consequences. However there was no single definition that was shared by journalists across countries, or even across media organizations (Stanyer et al., 2019). Also, there was a visible variation on perception among journalists, depending on populist parties' positions in the political scene. The negative sense was mostly seen in countries where populists were in government. Also, one could notice a difference in perception of populism depending on its type: while right-wing populism was rather negatively perceived, the left-wing was rather positively perceived; see Stanyer et al., 2019, p. 48).

Politicians across Europe (including Poland) shared a broad spectrum of definitions of populism with journalists (from ideology to communication style and strategy), as well as a sense that immigration and economic crisis are issues that are the most related to populist approaches to politics (Salgado et al., 2019, p. 65). They also shared journalists' views on the important role of the media (both traditional and social media) in spreading populist messages and facilitating an environment of over-simplified and restored political debate (Salgado et al., 2019, p. 68).

Following the assumption that media are an important part of the equation of populist political communication, the second goal of the international team of scholars

was to understand how important the mass media really are in widening the appeal of populist political actors, and how media logic affects populist communication strategies and tactics. In order to answer these questions, participants of the COST Action IS 1308 Working Group 2 designed a codebook and conducted a content analysis of news items on immigration and in all commentaries published in a period of study (for more details about the design of the study see Blassnig et al., 2019, pp. 75-83 and Chapter 4 in this volume). In particular, we looked for the presence of dimensions of populism in news coverage, relationships between the dimensions of populist communication, as well as speakers and targets of populist political communication across media outlets in 12 European countries (including Poland). We also examined effects of contextual factors (such as journalistic culture, editorial mission, news logic, and article style) and situational factors (such as the refugee crisis in 2015) on the representation of populist message elements in media coverage (see Maurer et al., 2019; Esser et al., 2019).

The findings of the international comparative studies showed that Poland was one of the countries with a prevalent presence of populist key messages in the news media. In Poland, as in all other countries under study, anti-elitist populism was most frequently covered by the media (see Blassnig et al., 2019). The comparative studies also revealed that newspaper coverage of populist messages is more dependent on the political field structure and the shape of journalistic culture than on universal newspaper types (Maurer et al., 2019). Finally, with the findings of the study conducted from a temporal perspective (with two waves of data collection, in 2016 and 2017), we were led to the conclusion that immigration as a “populist issue” may trigger the presence of populism in news and commentaries in some countries, while in others we rather observed a “politics-driven” presence of populist messages in the media (negative attitudes to the political elites). Furthermore, the study on situational factors supported observations on the impact of intra-media factors on the presence of populism in the news (Esser et al., 2019).

Moreover, today new possible patterns of political engagement for citizens are emerging. Therefore, there was a need for a thorough exploration of public responses to populist messages. Current approaches have focused almost exclusively on election campaigns and the impact of the media on support for populist actors. Still, there was little exploration of the way citizens interact with populist messages and actors in everyday life, and where this takes place, yet citizen engagement with populist political actors and discourses is a crucial part of understanding populism (Hameleers et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019).

The participants of the COST Action IS 1308 Working Group 3 overviewed important individual and contextual factors that determine the audience’s resistance or tractability to populist communication; the mechanisms by which populist communication affects receivers’ and citizens’ cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral responses to populist political communication; as well as long-term politi-

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cal consequences of exposure to populist communication (Hameleers et al., 2019a; for more details about the design of the study see Hameleers et al., 2019b and Chapter 8 in this volume). In particular, the research team examined the impact of populist message elements on blame attribution and stereotyping (Corbu et al., 2019), and the impact of populist messages on populist attitudes and voting intentions (Andreadis et al., 2019).

While comparative analyses allow us to recognize the prevalent features of populism across national contexts, a single-country study provides an opportunity for in-depth analysis of a particular political, economic, social, and cultural context for populism. Therefore, following the theoretical and methodological framework of the COST Action IS 1308, we decided to identify specific Polish aspects of populist political communication. Our study was inspired by the COST Action project and was conducted in order to meet the formal requirements and methodological framework developed by members of the three Working Groups for the previously described international comparative analyses.

However, we introduced several extra elements to the study for the Polish case. Along with conducting interviews with politicians, we collected and analyzed content of political actors' messages disseminated through official statements (manifestos) and through traditional and social media. Second, we extended the period of study by collecting research material from three years: 2015-2017 in order to capture populist political communication during the election period (2015) and non-election period (2016-2017). Third, we extended the list of media outlets under study and the types of news items under study by collecting all types of news on any topic from the print press and television. Finally, we traced specific indicators of Polish populism in the statements made by politicians or any other speakers covered by the media.

Specifically, our study addresses the following research questions.

RQ1 *Are there unique communication strategies and tactics used by the Polish populist parties?*

In this study we aim to recognize communication strategies and tactics used by Polish right-wing political parties and their leaders. Specifically, we examine to what extent the Polish right-wing parties and their leaders use the populist style of communication (that is, a straightforward and simplistic language containing a central binary between an “us” and a “them” as well as being marked by ethnocentric and xenophobic language).

RQ2 *Are there unique political issues raised by Polish right-wing populist parties?*

It is worth mentioning that attributes assigned to right- and left-wing parties in contemporary Poland were, as in many other post-communist countries, defined in a transformation period. Since then, parties with communist origins and heritage are described as “left-wing”, while all political parties that were established in opposition to former communist parties describe themselves as right-wing. Due to the predominant position of the right-wing parties on the Polish political scene, in this project we aim to study communication strategies used by these parties to define “the people”, “the elite”, and “the others”, and how they were articulated with other discursive themes specific to national political culture, for example anti-communism or references to Christian values.

RQ3 *How does populist political communication resonate with Polish media?*

The populist style of political communication seems to fit the logic by which journalistic media select and present news. We aim to find valid ways (a) to measure the frequency and intensity with which journalistic media give a forum to populist statements; (b) to identify the situational and thematic contexts in which populist styles of communication resonate with the media; and (c) to determine the way in which media evaluate and frame populist statements made by political actors.

RQ4 *What are the reasons for differences between individual media outlets in Poland?*

It is likely that the resonance of populist actors and communications will differ across countries, media, and individual outlets (Maurer et al., 2019). Therefore, a core issue will be the explanation of those differences in terms of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors. On the macro-level, the presence of populist statements may be affected by the fragmentation/diversity or intensity of competition in political party and media systems. In addition, the strength of populist parties and the situation of the country regarding typical populist issues may play a role (e.g. immigration, economy). On the meso-level, the institutional background may play a role, i.e. whether journalistic media are commercial or public service, online or offline, tabloid or quality, politically balanced or clearly partisan. And on the micro-level, journalists’ professional norms may be a factor. The aim here is to consider the characteristics of the Polish media system and Polish journalistic culture as determinants of the resonance of populist actors and communications with the media.

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RQ5 *What are Polish journalists' opinions and attitudes toward populist actors?*

Alongside with studying how often journalists cover populist statements in the news media, this project aims to provide a better understanding of Polish journalists' opinions and attitudes toward populist statements made by other types of speakers (sources of populist statement covered by the news media).

RQ6 *What are the social factors conducive to Poles' susceptibility to populist messages?*

RQ7 *What are the social factors affecting stereotyping of "the others" and populist attitudes and voting intentions?*

Finally, we examine several social-level features such as the economic situation of the country, the migration context, the general level of confidence in institutions, and the election results of the populist parties as factors potentially affecting individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and future behavior.

Due to the interdisciplinary character of the study we employed methods from political and social sciences, as well as from media studies. We used the historical method to study the genesis of Polish populism and relations between populist communication strategies used by Polish political actors, the media, and society. While studying relations between the political system and media system we used system analysis. We also employed a comparative approach in our research project.

A core part of the study is a media content analysis. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative content analysis collects data about media content such as topics or issues, volume of mentions, and frequency of "messages" determined by keywords. Meanwhile qualitative content analysis examines the relationship between the text and its likely audience meaning, recognizing that media texts are polysemic – i.e. open to multiple different meanings to different readers – and tries to determine the likely meaning of texts to audiences. It pays attention to audience, media, and contextual factors – not simply the text. Accordingly, qualitative content analysis relies heavily on researcher "readings" and interpretation of media texts. The qualitative approach to political actors' communication was supplemented using selected tools and frameworks developed by critical discourse studies. In addition to the media content analysis, we conducted in-depth interviews with Polish journalists.

In this book, entitled *Populist political communication in Poland: political actors – media – citizens*, we present findings of the studies conducted in Poland by a team of researchers representing two universities: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Since there is no need to duplicate the content of previous COST Actions IS 1308 publications, in this book we will

mostly focus on aspects that we added to the general (international) design of the study, as well as on particularities we observed while conducting the comparative studies.

The structure of the book reflects the structure of the project. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical background of the study on populist political communication and a review of previous studies on populism and media in Poland. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 constitute Part I of the book, devoted to selected Polish political actors and their use of populist discourse in official party statements (manifestos) and in messages disseminated through social media (Facebook).

Part II reflects on the role of the media in populist political communication. Specifically, we present the media coverage of populist messages across types of Polish media (Chapter 4), and by time period (election and non-election – Chapter 6). Additionally, we identify the main speakers in populist political communication covered by the news media (Chapter 5).

Part III of the book is dedicated to factors fostering populist sentiments among Polish citizens (Chapter 7), and to a presentation of findings of the experiment on social factors that determine the audience's resistance or persuadability to populist communication (Chapter 8).

This publication combines several aspects of research on populism. On the one hand, it is a continuation of theoretical and interpretative discussions present in both Polish and foreign literature. The correlation between Polish and foreign research is important, as it allows for comparison of the results obtained in different research contexts, as well as for further theoretical discussion on the methods of researching and describing the discussed phenomena.

On the other hand, it attempts to capture a specificity of Polish populist political communication. We are aware that the book does not provide a complete description of populist political communication in Poland. Nevertheless, we do hope that it opens up new fields of research, continuing the current lively scientific discussion on populist political communication in Poland and abroad.