Trending topics in the research on populist communication and unresolved problems: The COST Action IS1308 final conference in Madrid (March 19–21, 2018)

On March 19–21, 2018, a scientific conference about populists' political communication was held in Madrid, which brought together scholars from more than 20 European countries who were affiliated with the COST Action IS 1308 "Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics" (2013–2018). While the findings from the working groups of the action will be published in a volume expected to be out in spring 2019, the meeting also staged a panel where scholars could present research about populism which they conducted outside of the Action's working groups. The papers presented in this panel can be summarized under three main headings: a) the press and populist communication; b) effects of populist communication on citizens; c) political elites as communicators of populism. Further on, I summarize selected points discussed by the presenters in their contributions and add some own thoughts related to these questions.

THE PRESS AND POPULIST COMMUNICATION

A group of scholars from the University of Zürich led by Martin Wettstein dealt with the challenges populist communication poses to the press and journalism. It was argued, for instance, that the media might assume either the role of gatekeepers, interpreters or facilitators for "populist messages," understood as statements including populist ideas. Which of these roles is chosen seems to depend on the circumstances of the situation and the type and editorial policy of the media organization at hand. One related aspect that was less addressed in the conference, but seems important nevertheless, is the attitude of journalists toward populism and how this matters for the press-populism relationship. It is important to see that beyond the media as professional organizations with their constraints and policies, journalists as individuals or a group of like-minded professionals also shape the way populism is covered. In other words, journalists' personal cognitions, affects and attitudes toward the multifaceted phenomenon of populism most likely matter for how they deal with it. From previous research into the subjective biases of journalists (Kepplinger, 1989), we know that journalists are voluntarist actors who might support political causes and can be captured by specific interests. Some journalists may perceive themselves even as political advocates for or against something or someone, or claim that their business is inextricable with supporting certain political values, which seem general but are

often understood in a particular way by the vast majority of the journalists (for example that *democracy* as a generally accepted value would be incommensurate with populism, a view that is not shared by everybody). This is consequential insofar as journalists tend to hold similar political attitudes and thus are always in jeopardy to develop a form of groupthink: The stories of the "pack" are identical or similar in diction and perspective and the reporters might behave like a flock of sheep, following a consensus, regardless of whether or not it is backed by an objective look at the facts. Phenomena like groupthink, for example, and professional consensus can thus harm the media's credibility and alienate important parts of the audience who might come to believe there is no fair representation of different points of view in the public sphere. Groupthink or "pack journalism" can spiral out of control when journalists who dissent with a dominant groupthink, for example about populism might fear pressure from editors if they do not support the frames and interpretations used by the "pack" (Matusitz & Breen, 2012).

THE EFFECTS OF POPULIST COMMUNICATION ON THE AUDIENCE

A second complex topic addressed in this panel was related to the effects of populist communication, in either the press or on Facebook, on citizens. What is the nature and importance of such effects is a quite natural question given the success populist parties have achieved in elections across Europe (and beyond). Is the success of these parties attributable to their program because it corresponds best to the preferences of a considerable share of the voters or, rather, is their upswing a result of successful communication? Moreover, upon what kind of political attitudes does populist communication act, how strongly, and on what intervening variables do the effects depend? For instance, one contribution (Bobba et al.) explored gender as an intervening variable in the causal chain from populist content to audience reactions on Facebook, in terms of "likes" for political postings. Findings show the existence of a gender-oriented reaction to populism of the form that male users tend to give populist postings more support than female. In particular, the anti-elite component of populist discourse obtains more likes by male Facebook users. Dominique Wirz and colleagues addressed a much publicly debated question: Do elements of right-wing populist communication in newspapers have an impact on attitudes toward immigration? They presented evidence based on the combination of panel surveys and manual content analysis of newspapers and found that anti-immigrant rhetoric along with other elements of right-wing populism influence citizens' attitudes toward immigrants on top of pre-existing attitudes. A third type of study relied on a multi-country online experiment (Hameleers et al.) to address another side of the effects-related topic in regards to populist communication: effects on political engagement in terms of peoples' willingness to talk about, share, or formally support (by signing a petition) the populist content of a message. It turned out that populist messages stressing anti-elitism had the strongest effect on

engagement, while anti-immigrant messages had the strongest *de*mobilizing effects. An especially important insight from this study is that national structural context conditions, such as the level of unemployment, seem to moderate the impact of populist communication on the audience. Further studies might go in-depth into the differences between countries in terms of effects of populist messages, which might explain, at least to some extent, the stunning success (or total lack of) of populist parties across Europe.

POPULISM IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Last but not least, a third theme addressed the question of how political actors, understood as political communicators who strive to persuade voters, incorporate populist communication into their repertoire of rhetoric. Contributions addressing this aspect focused on political actors' communication via social media platforms, as these platforms provide a medium where politicians can communicate unrestrained by media gatekeepers while reaching a large and diverse audience including people who tune in accidentally. Contributions sought to compare political leaders' communication with regard to populist elements and rank communicators as more or less populist. One comparison focused on the Twitter communication of four politicians — moderate, left- and right-wing — who ran as challengers in the presidential elections of the United States and France (Maurer & Diehl). Another put the spotlight on Facebook postings of more than 80 politicians from the United States, European and Latin American democracies (Zulianiello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli). As a general conclusion, large differences in the extent to which politicians use elements of populist communication as well as in its shades were revealed. Yet, there are also differences between the studies focusing on Facebook and Twitter: While the Twitter study found rather high levels of populism in the communication of all challengers, the Facebook-based study could not confirm the thesis of the existence of a "populist Zeitgeist." Moreover, it found differences between areas, as the spread of elements of populist communication in Latin America is considerably lower in comparison with Western countries. These differences were minor between the tweeting patterns of politicians in France and the United States. I might argue that the major insight of this communicator-centred research is, however, methodological: It concerns the challenge of multi-lingual comparisons of populist communication and how it can be tackled. Both studies show the difficulties inherent in the equivalent measurement of in-vivo political communication, be it on Facebook or Twitter. The greatest of these difficulties is not even the language, but the respective personal parlance and style of the politicians. This poses a huge challenge, especially to automated measurement, that is not yet resolved.

For more information about the COST Action IS1308 please check: www.populistcommunication.eu.

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Context and content of populist political communication: The conference on "Populist political communication" at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland (April 10–11, 2018)

Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (University of Milan) and prof. Agnieszka Stępińska (Adam Mickiewicz University). Photo by: Bartłomiej Secler

From 10 to 11 April 2018, a conference on "Populist political communication" was organized at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The conference was organized by a research team that has been studying Polish populist political communication since 2016 (www.populizm.amu.edu.pl). The main purpose of the conference was to provide an opportunity for Polish scholars not only to present findings of their studies, but also discuss the main methodological challenges relat-ed to designing and conducting studies on popu-list political communication. Furthermore, the participants of that two-day event had a chance to discuss their ideas on further projects with their peers who have been studying the same phenom-enon for years now. Hence, the structure of the conference was rather seminar-like, with brief presentations of the recently con-ducted studies (theoretical background, methods, and findings) followed by long discussions in each session.

Scholars from several Polish universities, including Warsaw universities, University of Silesia, Wrocław University, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Economic University in Kraków, Collegium Da Vinci, and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań were invited to participate in the event. Since they represented different approaches to populism and employed different methods in their studies on this phenomenon, they all provided very interesting and valuable knowledge for each other. In particular, the aim of the conference was to recognize advantages and disadvantages, the potential and shortcomings of particular perspectives used in the studies on populism and populist political communication.

Although most attention was paid to the context and content of the Polish populist political communication, some of the presentations covered foreign countries' experience of populism. The conference started with a lecture given by the keynote speaker — prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni from the University of Milan on "Populist communication in the age of hybrid media," who presented findings of his study on the Italian populist politicians' use of social media. His presentation introduced one of the main themes of the conference, that is, the use of new media in spreading populist messages and gaining support by populist actors.

During the conference several scholars focused on this issue while presenting either quantitative or qualitative analysis of the content of Facebook and Twitter. For example, Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska (Adam Mickiewicz University) studied the use of social media by the Polish populist political actor Paweł Kukiz and his supporters. Their study revealed a high level of interactivity between Kukiz (a high number of messages posted every day) and his followers on Facebook (likes, shares, and comments). A similar study on Kukiz's supporters was discussed by Paweł Matuszewski (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University). In fact, a skillful usage of Facebook and Twitter seemed to be one of the factors that fostered electoral success of two Polish political actors: Paweł Kukiz and his political organization Kukiz'15 as well as Janusz Korwin-Mikke, according to Artur Lipiński's (Adam Mickiewicz University) study. He also distinguished a few more factors, such as: (1) a political and social context (expectations and political preferences), (2) a visibility provided by the traditional media (intensive TV coverage), and (3) content of the messages that corresponded with expectations and political preferences (political discourse).

The factors increasing populist tendencies in Polish society were discussed by Joanna Dzwończyk (Economic University in Kraków) who recognized the main schemes of Polish politicians' populist communication and studied such phenomena as protest populism and identity populism, and by Natalia Stręk (Jagiellonian University in Kraków) who focused on the national aspects of populism. Finally, the contextual factors, such as elections, were considered: Szymon Ossowski (Adam Mickiewicz University) focused on traced elements of populist communication in

the content of electoral messages distributed by the Polish political actors during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The social, cultural, and political background was also discussed during a session on penal populism in Poland. Katarzyna Witkowska-Rozpara (Warsaw University) emphasized the role of the media in creating a social atmosphere fostering populist changes in the law. Michalina Szafrańska (Jagiellonian University) analyzed the role of populist rhetoric in creating a public perception of courts and a reform of the juridical system. Finally, Natalia Daśko (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń) discussed the record of sexual perpetrators as an element of penal populism.

One of the main themes of the conference was the populist discourse in political communication. The discursive perspective on populism was used in several presentations. For example, Agnieszka Walecka-Rynduch (Pedagogical University in Kraków) analyzed populism as a strategy of political communication, Kaja Kiełpińska (Warsaw University) presented linguistic and stylistic aspects of populism in Polish political communication of the 1990s, and Mateusz Bartoszewicz (Wrocław University) and Dariusz Jakubowski (University of Silesia) shared the findings of their quantitative or qualitative analyses of the linguistic mechanisms used in populist political communication. The same approach was used by Bohdan Szklarski (Warsaw University) who provided findings of his comparative analysis of political slogans in the US in the 20th and 21st century.

The content analysis of political messages was one of the methods heavily discussed during the conference. The issue was initiated by the presentation given by Agnieszka Stępińska, who presented methodology and preliminary findings of the Polish study conducted under the framework of the COST Action IS1308 "Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics." The results showed that the most frequent types of populism in the Polish news media are anti-elitist and exclusion populism. However, there are significant differences between the media organizations in regards to the amount of populist strategies in the content that might be explained by a type of a media organization and its political orientation. The role of the media in the populist political communication was also analyzed by Andrzej Ranke (Collegium Da Vinci).

While discussing populist political communication, participants of the conference referred to the definitions of populism. Although the definition of populism and populist is diverse and vague in Polish and foreign literature, the scholars mostly referred to classic elements, such as the existence of two homogenous groups — "the people" and "elites." However, in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of political actors' communication, one must recognize the ideology behind the communication acts. The example of such a study was presented by Piotr Andrzejewski (Polish Academy of Science) who has been conducting research on the radical right in Austria.

Finally, one of the concerns raised by the participants of the conference were the consequences of populism. The discussion on that theme was fueled by a presentation given by Adam Jaskulski (Adam Mickiewicz University) who raised the question about the impact of increasing support for populist political actors on the European Union as an international organization, and European public sphere.

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