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REFLECTIONS ON EMOTIONS, POPULISM AND POLARISATION

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Edited by Kleber Carrilho, Laura
Horsmanheimo and Katinka Linnamäki



**The Working Paper Series on Emotions, Populism
and Polarisation**

**VOL. 3, Issue 1: Reflections on Emotions, Populism
and Polarisation, HEPP4 Conference Proceedings**

Editors:

**Kleber Carrilho, Laura Horsmanheimo, and Katinka
Linnamäki**

HEPPsinki Research Group

University of Helsinki

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HEPP4 Conference Proceedings

Helsinki 2024

FOREWORD

It is an honour for us to publish this collection of working papers from the HEPP4 conference. The fourth conference was an opportunity for us to engage in the ideas of darkness and light, with colleagues travelling to Finland at the period just before the shortest day of the year. We had great conversations and discussions which we even continued in Rovaniemi as part of the official programme. The last leg of the D.Rad Hub on Ethnonationalism in Europe explored the issues emerging from the discussions with the Sámi aboriginal population in the North and the Southernmost areas of Europe, put in connection with the southern hemisphere at the Pyhätunturi resort. This was a huge effort, and I would like to recognise the work of the several people involved in this warm-hearted event, most pertinently Alexander Alekseev and Feeza Vasudeva as the conference chairs.

The keynote of Mercedes Barros brought the perspective from the southernmost part of Latin America and the perspective on Ernesto Laclau's theory to the fore. Her two-week visit was the first in Europe in almost two decades. It enabled new encounters with someone who had been taking part in Laclau's seminars and experienced contemporary Peronism and the rise of Javier Milei in Argentina. This led to several seminars both on feminism, populism, and hegemony, and on the situation in Latin America in the HEPP seminars, and the SKY doctoral programme.

Timely and related to the latter was the keynote by Hande Eslen-Ziya, who has been working on science and populism – and was discussing hate speech and radicalisation of public discourse. The connections to Argentina have become ever more palpable although also in Europe and the Nordic countries this is an issue. These were important for the discussion of violent radicalisation and deradicalisation perspectives, as the scholars also got the chance to reflect on what their responses are.

We like to bring a dialogue into the keynote sessions, and we enjoyed a conversation between Benjamin DeCleen and me, Emilia Palonen with contrasting or perhaps actually compatible perspectives on how to think about populism from the Laclaudian perspective. It was an honour to discuss with Benjamin as this brought to the fore the diverse readings of Laclau's work which is after all one of the pivotal contributions of the HEPP research group.

The many projects of HEPP also were present, the DeRadicalisation in Europe and Beyond session included a tour de force of what the HEPPsters had been working on recently from incels to local urban space. This was also pursued in the Now Time Us Space project of the Kone foundation with a view to the local struggles which Mercedes Barros' visit has enabled us to reflect on beyond Central European space. With Juha Herkman we presented the book project, *Twitter, Populism and the European Public Sphere: EP elections of 2019*, which emerged from two Finnish Research Council Projects. The book came out in April 2024 finally. We also presented the work on Twitter during the pandemic in collaboration with the ENDURE project co-financed by the Finnish Research Council in the Trans-Atlantic Partnerships network of funded consortia to study the pandemic and resilient societies.

Since HEPP was awarded with further funding from February 2024 onwards, the forthcoming Horizon Europe projects were also thematically present, PLEDGE on emotional mechanisms and populism had

a strong presence, with sessions led by Mikko Salmela and Tereza Capelos. The CO3 on the social contract was much discussed on the Lapland legs and connected to the theme of de-radicalisation. These set a continuity of the process from different European Commission horizon programme funded research consortia, as HEPP enabled partners to meet – and connect also with other ongoing horizon projects and otherwise.

While the projects offer long-term support for the research group, and we thank the funders, the most important part of the experience of HEPP conferences is the possibility of scholars irrespective of national, ethnic, or disciplinary backgrounds to engage on the common theme of Emotions, Populism and Polarisation. This is also visible here in the pages of this volume of the HEPP working papers. Thanks to the editors, Kleber Carrilho, Katinka Linnamäki, and Laura Horsmanheimo, and all the authors who have trusted us with publishing and sharing their exciting work. I hope the pieces reach wide audiences and give food for thought also for the next HEPP conference in March 2025.

Emilia Palonen, Leader of the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation

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Introduction¹

Kleber Carrilho, Laura Horsmanheimo & Katinka Linnamäki

The 4th Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism, and Polarisation (HEPP4) was held from December 11th to 13th, 2023, at the University of Helsinki. It was a lively exchange of ideas, researchers, and discussions, attracting scholars from around the world. Participants included scholars from various parts of Europe, as well as from Brazil, Australia, Argentina, India, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United States. This international participation enriched the conference by bringing diverse perspectives and fostering cross-cultural dialogues.

The 3rd volume of the HEPP working paper series compiles insightful papers presented at the HEPP4 conference. These papers come from different regions and perspectives, showcasing the varied stages of development in this field. They provide a thorough overview of the ongoing scholarly discussions about emotions, populism, and polarisation, highlighting the complexities in this area of study.

Populism in Global North and Global South

In Western media, populism is often portrayed as a right-wing phenomenon, primarily associated with the USA and Europe. Key figures of Western populism, such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, are frequently linked to threats against liberal democracy, exclusionary politics, and anti-establishment sentiments. Although academic discussions in the global North since the 2010s have primarily focused on the rise of right-wing populist movements and parties in Europe and the USA, researchers have emphasized the importance of studying and understanding populism in the global South as well. For scholars following the Laclaudian tradition of theorizing populism and politics, it is essential to recognize the long history of left-populist mobilization in the global South. This history is characterized by anti-elitism, broadening social support, and inclusionary politics, which served as the foundation for Laclau's theorization of populism as a form of discursive politicization.

The papers presented in this volume, however, indicate that the long-standing left-populist themes are increasingly overshadowed by, or coexist with, the political success of rhetoric based on exclusionary majoritarianism, often expressed as nationalism and religiosity. These papers raise questions that have not been sufficiently explored in recent decades: what differentiates left- and right-wing populism, are there political movements and parties that still fit neatly into one category, and can we identify a

¹ Cite as: Carrilho, K., Horsmanheimo, L., & Linnamäki, K. (2024). Introduction. In K. Carrilho, L. Horsmanheimo, & K. Linnamäki (Eds.), *Reflections on emotions, populism and polarisation: HEPP3 conference proceedings* (pp. 1-5). University of Helsinki. *The HEPPsinki working papers on emotions, populism and polarisation*, 3(1).

fundamental distinction between populism in the global North and South? The papers collectively illustrate that populist politics is highly context-specific, both geographically and historically, explaining the diverse political discourses categorized as populism, all closely tied to rhetoric and emotions. The authors of this volume effectively integrate their rhetorical and visual analysis of populist discourses and identity formation into the local political, social, and economic contexts, which are invariably linked to broader global structures. Consequently, they provide detailed, time- and location-specific insights into specific populist moments, such as the global pandemic or local and supranational political elections.

Although politics always have local particularities, such as issues related to Indigenous land use or post-Soviet economies, there are universal elements, like addressing people's need for belonging and recognition. In today's world, marked by overlapping crises such as pandemics, wars, and economic shortages, people's lives are increasingly disrupted. This disruption provides opportunities for leaders to promise safety and continuity through discursive means. Emotional rhetoric, empty promises, and fake news can influence people with uncertain futures in both the Global South and North. However, it is not only hegemonic discourses that provide a sense of belonging and recognition. Often, grassroots counter- or anti-hegemonic movements offer similar feelings of community, particularly evident on online forums.

When examining populism research from various continents, it is essential to revisit the definition of the term 'populism.' The diverse studies in this volume demonstrate that populism is more than just a (thin) ideology; it encompasses a range of political strategies for establishing or challenging meanings. The papers presented here reflect the ongoing debate about definitions and applications of populism theory. A broad view of populism theories provides tools to analyze populism in various (geo)political and religious contexts, including Ecuador, Brazil, India, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. The variety of populist theories is complemented by the diverse discursive materials analyzed in these papers. This heterogeneity offers a comprehensive understanding of discourse, covering traditional political speeches, social media research, visual analysis, and multiple analyses of conspiracy theories. Approached from an anti-essentialist perspective, these theories are seen as anti-hegemonic meaning-making processes that break down the binaries often associated with anti-scientific views. To foster a fruitful discussion, we have compiled eleven working papers, which are summarized below.

Emotions, populism, and polarisation in this volume

The first papers examine populist discourses in the Global South, specifically through a qualitative analysis of social media and the 2019 election campaign of Narendra Modi's BJP on Twitter/X in India. The paper argues that during the 2019 election campaign, the Hindutva doctrine, prominent in Modi's rhetoric since 2014, was intensified and framed through recurring themes of perceived threats against the Hindu majority. This allowed the BJP to transform Hindu nationalism into an antagonistic Hindutva discourse, characterized by a religious and exclusionary redefinition of the 'nation.' This discourse contributes to the creation of a collective political identity, the portrayal of threatening 'others,' and the depiction of a charismatic leader as a saviour.

The second paper provides insights into the last two elections in Brazil, in 2018 and 2022, with a detailed overview of the demographic and political fabric of the country. The essay demonstrates the impact of pathemic discourses in the context of digital communication and misinformation. During the analyzed period, the control and censorship of fake and misleading information on online platforms has been an issue for both legislative and political institutions, covering issues from hate speech to mistrust toward the system. Importantly, the essay states that memory can be fed by not only truth, but also unreal scenarios based on misinformation.

The third paper also focuses on Brazil, but instead of election campaigns, it analyzes the relationship between disinformation and populist discourses. It examines public discourses surrounding vaccination during the Covid-19 pandemic, aiming to identify and trace the mechanisms of political polarization on these issues. The paper is notable for its dual dataset and the complementary use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Statistical insights from X/Twitter data are balanced and contextualized by analyzing newspaper articles from the same period. The research identifies a peak in political and social polarization, evident not only at the level of institutions and political elites (nation versus supranational states; the politics of João Doria vs. Bolsonaro) but also among social media users. The paper highlights that social media serves as a fertile ground for constructing counter-hegemonic discourses, even against scientific claims, where insecurity and the related need for ideological cohesion are often leveraged for political mobilization.

The fourth paper delves into the portrayal of Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, through political cartoons, comparing his representation across national and international platforms between January 2018 and December 2020. Moffitt's (2016) conceptual framework is used to examine populist features expressed visually and verbally in these cartoons, categorizing them into ordinariness, extraordinariness, bad manners, and enemy creation. The study juxtaposes these findings with Orbán's self-presentation on social media, revealing a stark contrast between the positive self-branding on platforms like Facebook and the critical, often derogatory depictions in political cartoons. The paper offers a nuanced analysis of how different mediums and cultural contexts can influence the public perception of political figures, contributing significantly to discussions on visual political communication and populism.

The fifth paper discusses the theoretical nuances connecting the concepts of political theology and hauntology within the framework of populism, as conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Carl Schmitt. Volpi engages with Laclau's notion of political hauntology (a term adapted from Derrida's original hauntology) to explore the perpetual presence of absence in the realm of political ontology. The paper elucidates a shared foundational instability that underpins both theorists' views by juxtaposing this with Schmitt's political theology, which interprets the political as fundamentally grounded by the absence rather than the presence of divine or rational order. The analysis reveals how this foundational void not only shapes the political landscape but also continuously challenges it, highlighting the intrinsic spectral nature of political foundations in modernity. This examination contributes to a deeper understanding of populism's philosophical roots, showing how it reflects broader ontological concerns within political theory.

In the sixth paper, a systematic analysis of speeches given by the former leader of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, offers explanations of the use of various narratives for different audiences. The paper shows how extractivist practices are framed in two ways for national and international audiences, without forgetting the impact of domestic and global political trends, circumstances, and protests. The paper visits various theories from populism and political theories to explain the dual rhetorical strategy of the former left-wing leader, creating a base for future research applying the research design in other Latin American countries.

The seventh paper provides a comprehensive analysis of conspiracy theories, identifying them as one of the most disreputable responses to pandemic crises. Utilizing a non-essentialist approach to discourse analysis, the author encourages readers to move beyond simplistic dichotomies such as 'science/antiscience,' 'mainstream/fringe,' and 'elite/people' when examining conspiracy theories. Instead, the paper presents a more structuralist perspective, emphasizing the importance of mapping competing and aligning discursive regimes that reveal complex power relations as crucial contextual factors for understanding conspiracy theories. Consequently, the author situates the emergence, dissemination, and contestation of conspiracy theories within the dynamic process of 'conspiracy theorizing.' In the second part, the paper offers valuable methodological reflections on how to practically research such discursive and power networks.

The eighth paper explores the dynamics of populism in India, focusing on the identity formation and community mobilization that characterize this phenomenon. By analyzing the blend of nationalism, religion, and populism, the work explains how Hindu nationalist movements, particularly under BJP, harness civilizationist populism to galvanize support. This exploration is contextualized within the broader discourse of global populism, highlighting the unique aspects of the Indian experience compared to typical Western models. It employed discourse analysis to dissect leaders' statements, revealing how these movements craft a charged political environment by intertwining religious identity with nationalistic fervor. The paper develops an understanding of populism's role in democratic politics and its impact on India's societal divisions and political strategy.

The ninth paper discusses populism and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within the context of Eastern Europe. By utilizing discourse analysis, Petkova explores how rumors and conspiracy theories are not only prevalent in times of crisis but are also instrumentalized by populist politics to bolster influence and control. This study highlights the dynamics of misinformation spread via the internet, where rumor communities thrive and shape public opinion. The research investigates whether populist leaders are merely echoing pre-existing rumors or actively cultivating new conspiracy theories to exploit societal uncertainties. The paper shows the psychological and sociocultural underpinnings that facilitate the spread of such theories, offering insights into their persistence and the role they play in the political landscape of Eastern Europe during a global health crisis.

The tenth paper studies Italian right-wing populist leaders, demonstrating the emotional engagement of the messages spread on Facebook during election campaigns after 2013. The Italian case, illustrating

high right-wing support over ten years, is topical in post-EP 2024 election Europe since it shows how the leaders have used emotional rhetoric connected to various topics to gain power not only in the local regions their political organizations originate from but also nationwide. According to the analysis, issues connected to migration mobilize voters the most to change their voting habits, but emotional messages, either positive or negative, help right-wing leaders get support regardless of the content.

In the last paper, the role of online news media is analyzed in the Slovakian political environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper provides a theoretical overview of psychological group-forming practices that strengthen in-group loyalty despite the negative messages spread about the group. The analysis shows that less visibility in the media during the crisis, coupled with the adverse sentiment, might increase a politician's support, which is an interesting finding in the attention era of the 2020s.

We hope you find the papers in this volume inspiring, and we look forward to your continued engagement with our social networks, events, and publications.

Beyond Borders: Hindutva, Nationalism, and the Global South's De-Westernized Populism²

Pragya Yadav

Abstract

Populist politics is gaining popularity worldwide including in South Asia. However, the current analysis of this trend mainly focuses on parties and movements without considering the unique characteristics of both the Global North and South. Additionally, while there has been research, on populism in the Global South the attention given to India's far right has been relatively slow. This paper proposes a perspective from the Global South to gain an understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, it explores how mainstream populist political parties and grassroots organizations in India utilize civilizationist populism to mobilize their constituents. Through a thematic examination of speeches using discourse analysis this paper sheds light on how Hindu nationalist movements, in India combine nationalism, populism and religion to establish a charged political environment.

Keywords: populism, religion, Global South, nationalism, discourse analysis, civilizationism

Introduction

Populist politics is gaining popularity worldwide including in South Asia. However, the current analysis of this trend mainly focuses on parties and movements without considering the unique characteristics of both the Global North and South. Additionally, while there has been research, on populism in the Global South the attention given to India's far right has been relatively slow. This paper proposes a perspective from the Global South to gain an understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, it explores how mainstream populist political parties and grassroots organizations in India utilize civilizationist populism to mobilize their constituents. Borrowing heavily from Huntington's (1993) idea of a "clash of civilizations," civilizationism derives from the instrumentalization of religion as a central logic in defining collective identity. Through an examination of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statements using discourse analysis this paper sheds light on how Hindu nationalist movements, in India combine nationalism, populism and religion to establish a charged political environment.

Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, as introduced in 2007, examines the relationship between populism, politics, and democratic systems. In order to achieve this goal, populist leaders and movements employ a shared language that refers to the general population. While they shape the idea

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of "the people," they also concurrently create a contrasting group known as "the others" (Westlind, 1996). Furthermore, there is consistently a prominent existence of an adversarial dynamic between the individuals and those who are perceived to have tarnished the national ethos (Kazin, 1995, pp.12-13). Several authors unanimously assert that the creation of this discourse is accomplished by the use of language, and the portrayal of opposition to the current system is employed to delineate the characteristics of populism (Barr, 2009; Laclau, 1977; Canovan, 1981; Westlind, 1996). Significantly, the populist rhetoric frames this as a conflict of principles and ethics between the marginalised groups and the general population, rather than as a political occurrence (de la Torre, 2000). Additionally, populist leaders actively seek to position themselves as the sole representatives of the people (Westlind, 1996, p. 103). Taggart (2002) concurs that populism is consistently reactionary and spearheaded by political leaders positioning themselves as alternatives to the current establishment. However, he additionally argues that the core elements of populism are highly contextual and contingent upon the political conditions of the specific location where it emerges.

India's case presents a distinctive blend of religion and populism within democratic politics. Populism is often seen as reliant on a "host" ideology and has been primarily understood through European or Latin American examples, making it challenging to apply to regional variations. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, despite being the world's largest party and part of a larger community of Hindu nationalist groups, is seldom studied in the context of the populist radical right due to a focus on European perspectives, India's unique status, the post-9/11 emphasis on religious fundamentalism, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's portrayal as a pro-market reformer distancing himself from Hindu nationalism in public. While their political appeal embodies key aspects of populism, they also diverge significantly from their European and American counterparts in how they define the "people" and "elites," reinterpret their histories, and envision their global roles.

The rise of parties and leaders has posed a challenge, to democracy in the past decade (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Van Kessel, 2015; Pappas, 2019). In India there has been a decline in democratic values since Prime Minister Modi took office. However, India is still considered an electoral democracy particularly when examining populism and its relationship with religion and democracy. Existing research suggests that populism can be seen as an ideology, a framework or a strategy (Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). Further exploration is needed to understand the forms of populism and their impact on democracy. Some argue that Indian political figures can be seen as populists due to their emphasis on people-centric narratives and framing issues as battles between "good people" and "evil elites." Nonetheless comprehending the nature of their populism requires analysis of how they construct a polarized worldview and whether they draw upon shared beliefs and symbols, from their dominant religions to legitimize specific political agendas.

In India's right-wing Hindu movement there is a blending of beliefs, populism and nationalism that gives rise to emotionally charged politics. Different groups and political parties have played a role, in shaping a Hindu identity. While Modi is often portrayed as a leader his complex style of populism has not undergone thorough analysis (Varshney, 2017). Most studies describe Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as nationalists who embrace Hinduism not for reasons but also to establish a nationalist

agenda (Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021). Consequently, Modi's discourse is often reduced to "Hindutva," the doctrine that presents Hindu nationalism as the driver behind his policies.

Background

Populism has been perceived as a political solution, ideology, and form of communication in various regions across the globe. Nevertheless, one might deduce that the sort of populism a country encounters is determined by its setting or political structure. Many studies in the field of populism aim to elucidate the precise concept of "populism" and identify the most effective approach to measure it. These studies can be broadly classified into three groups that interpret populism as (i) a "thin" political ideology that simplifies politics as a clash between the "corrupt elite" and the "righteous people" and aims to establish the will of the people as the dominant force in politics (Mudde, 2004); (ii) a political strategy to gain and mobilise support by appealing to the grievances and emotions of large portions of the population (Roberts, 2015); or (iii) a style of political communication that frames social issues in a manner that enables politicians or parties to present the world as a fundamental conflict between the people and the elites (Canovan, 1999; Kazin, 1995; Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Taggart, 2002; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Despite the extensive and dynamic nature of the current literature, it remains deficient in numerous crucial areas. More precisely, when populism is viewed as an ideology, it is assumed that it is dependent on another ideology to function effectively. This implies that understanding the many forms of populism is not only an analytical requirement but also a political imperative. Significantly, the majority of studies on populism focus on European or Latin American cases, regardless of how populism is defined and measured. This geographical limitation raises important conceptual and methodological concerns about the term's applicability to different regions.

Populism is primarily characterised by two key elements: the empowerment of the general population and a predisposition to categorise and oppose those who are seen as different or adversarial (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969). Political populism, in a similar vein, perpetuates a contentious and deeply ingrained divide between the general populace and the established ruling class or elite. Thus, the populist faction presents itself as closely linked to the general public with the aim of advocating for their interests (Canovan, 1981). According to the populists, the current system has effectively marginalised the people, preventing them from representing their own interests (Canovan, 2002).

Populism relies on nostalgia to create a version of a lost "homeland" or culture that the leader or movement promises to restore. This characteristic makes populism an ideology rooted in looking reflecting a yearning, for past times (Betz & Johnson, 2004, p. 311). This revisionist and romanticized notion of loss of an imagined "age" becomes more pronounced when connected with globalization or multiculturalism (Norris & Inglehart, 2018; Taggart, 2004). Populist leaders thus selectively deploy aspects of history to evoke nostalgia among "the people" challenging the existing order (Yilmaz, 2021).

The populist leader offers a sense of security and the promise of justice, to the people. This is done by tapping into their nostalgia for a glory and creating an image of a unified society where "the Other" is seen as an obstacle to restoring that greatness. Populism can be defined in ways, including as a strategy centered around a leader, an ideology or a discursive process. In the case of Prime Minister Modi's electoral campaign in India's 2019 election, religious elements like Hindutva were used alongside culture, nostalgia and nationalism to shape populist narratives. This paper aims to explore how the BJP utilized Hindutva ideology and populism to gain popularity through its Prime Minister and also discusses the transformation of India into a Hindu nation state in the future due to their focus, on Hindutva.

Before delving into Hindutva populism, it is important to distinguish it from Hindu nationalism. Hindu nationalism asserts that the primary identity of all Indians is their Hindu cultural identity. It rejects the idea of territorial nationalism and argues that religious minorities must embrace Hindu culture in order to be considered "true" Indians. Hence, Hindu populism, being an ideology utilizes Hindu nationalism as the foundation for its populist politics (Jaffrelot, 2007). Although these two concepts are conceptually distinct there is an overlap between them. Hindutva only gained mainstream prominence with the election of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister in 2014. Modi strategically constructed a narrative that accentuated Hindu insecurity by capitalizing on recurring themes of a perceived threat against the Hindu majority. As a result, Hindutva has become synonymous, with nationalism.

The core element of populism is the people, who are constructed through the use of public discourse rooted in political, religious, or mythological doctrines. Scholars have identified other essential aspects of populism, such as the definition of popular characteristics being established through discourse that often draws on elements from established discourses (Westlind, 1996, p. 95). The populist speech may be characterised as a mode of communication in which the speakers perceive regular people as a noble collective that is not limited by social class. They view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic and aim to rally the ordinary people against the elites. This paper examines how the Hindutva doctrine, which encompasses historical, theological, and mythical themes, was used by the BJP and its leadership during the 2019 election campaign to garner support from Indian voters through a populist language.

The extensive discussion on the theoretical frameworks of populism and its adaptable nature suggests that populism is not inherently obscure. However, all the characteristics associated with this political phenomenon are also subject to debate and have been presented differently by various schools of thought. It has been discovered that it serves as a substitute political tool, a shallow ideology, and a kind of political communication in many regions of the globe. Occasionally, these seemingly diverse qualities intersect with each other, for example, populism serves as a means of communication to propagate nationalist and religious ideals. However, the existence and characteristics of populism in a political system are mostly influenced by the style, language, and communication methods employed by political leaders.

Data and methods

This paper seeks to utilise Norman Fairclough's (1992) three-layered model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the 2019 election campaign of the BJP. The analysis will focus on tweets posted by the party's official Twitter accounts and central leadership, as well as selected speeches by BJP's central leader Narendra Modi. To address the research questions posed in the study, a theoretical analysis of populism has been conducted to examine the Hindutva movement as a historical and mythological ideology utilised by the BJP to construct a populist narrative during the 2019 general election. It aims to explore how these patterns differ from his European and American counterparts and understand the characteristics of these speeches as well as the context that prompted the prime minister and the party to deliver them.

This research also depends on the current body of knowledge on the populist rhetoric and the Hindutva movement to fill in the gaps and bring these topics up to date. Did the BJP's development of the Hindutva doctrine demonstrate the characteristics of populist rhetoric, such as the creation of a collective identity, delineation of those outside the group, the presence of a charismatic leader, identification of a foreign adversary, and the pledge to improve the failing system? Does the qualitative study of the tweets posted by the BJP indicate the presence of Hindutva or Hinduist themes throughout the 2019 electoral campaign?

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method that examines power dynamics in society and develops normative viewpoints to critique these dynamics, with the aim of identifying opportunities for social transformation (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 2). It is important to acknowledge that discourse is not only created, but also leads to the portrayal of social systems through a complex process of choosing, controlling, and excluding in a community (Young, 1981; Hook, 2001). The political discourse embraced by the BJP and its leadership exhibits certain characteristics that are influenced by the social system. It possesses the ability to modify the social system by exerting dominance, promoting inclusivity, creating conflict, marginalizing some discursive options, and excluding them from the mainstream.

Discursive texts can be analyzed to see how the connection between power and ideologies influences the way people communicate (Fairclough, 1992). An examination of this dialectical relationship is beneficial for elucidating how the dominant group use specific rhetoric to manipulate and subjugate the subordinate group (Howarth, 2000, p. 4). Although the researchers involved in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) may have subjective biases, it is still the most suitable framework for this study. Other alternative methodologies clearly lack certain necessary aspects to address the outlined research questions. This study immediately draws upon the post-structuralist populism, characterised by evident political antagonism. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) appears to be suitable for this purpose.

The tweets posted by the BJP and its core leadership on Twitter, as well as the speeches delivered by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from April to May 2019, have been chosen as the primary textual material for this study. These texts are regarded as the crucial elements of the electoral campaigns. The gathered speeches and tweets were written in English and Hindi. The Hindi material was translated into

English by the researcher to ensure consistent analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, the data gathered based on the specified criteria was vast, and analysing the entire dataset would have necessitated a significant amount of time and effort. The representative sample of texts has been carefully selected based on specific criteria. These criteria include the requirement that the BJP and its leaders share highly relevant content related to the subject of the thesis during religious festivals or rituals associated with Hindu deities that occur during the election campaign period. To analyze the data, discourse analysis methodologies were employed to gain insights into relevant themes. These methods have proven effective in determining the intentions of leaders. The focus of analysis was not on messages conveyed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party but rather on identifying subtle cultural references and linguistic cues that may provide insights, into his intentions and mindset even if he is not explicitly aware of them.

Political speech involves individuals expressing their opinions promoting ideas and advocating for positions, in both domestic and international affairs. Researchers have demonstrated that speakers skillfully utilize language skills and strategies to build an image of their party in the public eye and create favorable conditions for its future development (Zhang, 2005). The concept of ideology has been examined by philosophers including Napoleon, Marx, Al jammed, Antonio Gramsci and others since it was first introduced by the philosopher Destutt de Tracy. However, in critical discourse analysis, ideology takes on a new meaning. It refers to shared beliefs and values that are taken for granted by groups (Ding & Liao, 2011, p. 101). Critical Discourse Analysis explores the interplay between language, power dynamics and ideology by examining how discourse emerges from and serves structures and power relations (Xin & Gao, 2013). Discourse is considered a form of practice where language reflects power relations, within a given context while also manifesting ideological elements (Tian, 2009, p. 7). It is important to note that discourse fulfills an important function.

Political speech is an aspect of discourse since it involves power and its execution. Therefore, it attracts research attention. This paper adopts the discourse theory as its framework and the objective is to explore the themes that encompass elements, populism and nationalism in conjunction, with the core principles of the Hindutva movement, in his political discourse. The next section will provide specific information on how the BJP re-established its connection with the Hindutva ideology by employing a political strategy that incorporated historical references, symbolism, and direct expression of the Hindutva tie. Furthermore, the BJP's political messages aim to present themselves as a reform movement that seeks to address the problems of India's political system by promoting the Hindutva doctrine.

Results and discussion

The Hindutva movement began as a modest group dedicated to Hindu revivalism, but it has now proven to be a social and cultural reformer as well as a political force, working to implement its credo of "one nation, one culture, and one language" through India's progressive democratic institutions. Hindutva is a complex and diverse ideology that has emerged as a political ideology in India in the past few

centuries. Today, it has transformed into a clone of Hindu nationalism, which directly challenges the fundamental principles on which India was founded, such as a pluralistic social environment and political intellectualism.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has an association, with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a right-wing Hindu organization. Since 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership there have been instances of increased persecution and intolerance towards minority groups. To explore this issue, this paper considered the historical foundations of Hindutva ideology and engaged in theoretical discussions on populism relevant to Indian case. The findings revealed that Hindutva ideology played a role in the BJP's electoral campaign. It helped shape their narrative by constructing a sense of unity among the people while creating divisions with others. The BJP heavily relied on mythological references, symbolism, rituals and promised constitutional reforms aligned with Hindutva principles. They presented themselves as the face of Hindutva doctrine fully committed to its cause. These findings shed light on how ultra right-wing populist discourse is shaping political communication in India as the largest democracy. Unfortunately, this phenomenon can contribute to reduced liberties, undemocratic practices and Hindu chauvinism.

The main findings reflect that the BJP's core ideology, known as Hindutva, is primarily focused on ethnonationalism, rather than theology. This means that the vision of "Hindustan" that the BJP and its wider network aim to establish in India, which they often mention in speeches is more aligned with ethnocracies rather than religious fundamentalist theocracies. Hindutva originally emerged as an ideology and resistance movement against colonialism during the century. As highlighted by Shani (2019) Hindu nationalists effectively transformed Hindu identity into a concept through their discourse on Hindutva by distinguishing between Hinduism as a "religion" and Hindus as a "nation".

The BJP strategically implemented discourse tactics to reaffirm its strong ideological connection with the Hindutva movement, aiming to present the Hindutva doctrine to the public and secure electoral success in the 2019 general elections. The analysis of the chosen texts reveals that the BJP employed election slogans, referenced individuals, displayed images of leaders, and consistently reiterated political demands and reforms that are closely aligned with the Hindutva movement. This was done in order to assert the political significance of the Hindutva doctrine as a discourse.

Here are some connotational explanations of the most popular slogans used by the BJP during the 2019 election campaign, which may have a historical reference to the Hindutva concept. The motto "Bharat Mata ki Jai" translates to "Hail Motherland India". Similarly, "Vande Mataram" or "Bande Mataram" alludes to the ancient anti-Muslim anthem penned by Bankim Chandra, who is recognized as the "creator of Hindu nationalism", "Section 370 and 35A should be Abrogated", "Prime Minister @narendramodi ji who has given justice to women suffering from triple talaq in the history of independent India". The second most significant allusion to the Hindutva movement pertained to the act of honoring the prominent figures who played a crucial role in formulating the Hindutva ideology through their ideological contributions or political endeavors in support of the cause. The documents also contained the historical requests for constitutional modifications in India based on the Hindutva

worldview. The significant emphasis placed on these demands aimed to establish a practical link between the BJP and the Hindutva movement.

In addition to its significant historical associations, the BJP has also embraced the critique of secularism as a concept of nationalism in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a public gathering on May 23, 2019, asserted that no political party has dared to deceive the nation by adopting a facade of secularism. Nevertheless, the leaders of the BJP consistently employed references to "saffron" in their texts to assert the supremacy of Hinduism and the firm grip of the Hindutva ideology. The tweets conveyed implications such as "saffron-ization of India", "saffron wave", "saffron is coming", and "saffron flag" to symbolize the unity of pro-Hindutva forces inside the Sangh Parivar. The textual allusions to Hindu deities, apart from the public announcements on their birth celebrations, were also observed to be employed as metaphorical comparisons between the BJP and the opposition parties, based on their legendary personas. The tweets posted by prominent BJP leaders Amit Shah and Narendra Modi also symbolize the parallel establishment of the Hindutva nation or its citizens. They assert that Shree Ram is not only revered by every Indian but also deeply ingrained in the culture and values of India. There is no one who can prevent us from engaging in the act of worshipping him.

The detailed analysis of Modi's speeches (see table 1) demonstrates that while his political appeal incorporates elements of populism it also diverges significantly from American counterparts, in how he defines "people" and "elites" reevaluates their historical narratives and envisions their global roles. By promoting division and demonizing adversaries of left wing (such, as financial capital) and right-wing populists (such as refugees), Modi focuses on broader historical struggles and global challenges faced by nations. He emphasizes the significance of religion as a force for unity. Through his messages he infuses meaning into the concept of "the people" and calls for unity, by connecting narratives of past victories and future opportunities to lead global socioeconomic progress. As a result, Modi's political discourse highlights an oriented revisionist nationalism and the importance of defined national identity. In his discourse, Indian nationalism is rooted in an understanding that does not embrace pluralism when it comes to Hindu beliefs and philosophies. However, despite this narrative Modi's development policies appear to include all faith groups, including Muslims, Sikhs and other religious minorities on the condition that they contribute to India's progress while recognizing the majority religion's prominence.

No.	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Connecting with Hindutva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Direct mentions of Hindutva ▪ Hindutva-based slogans ▪ Honoring Hindutva-linked personalities ▪ Endorsement of Hindutva movement's demands
2	Construction of Hindutva nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use of Hindu symbols ▪ Historical and mythological references ▪ Question of identity
3	Construction of Antagonistic Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Muslims as explicit others ▪ Accusations of being pro-Muslim, pro-Kashmiri, pro-Pakistan and anti-Hindu ▪ Contextual historical references ▪ Elite which betrayed the Hindutva movement
4	Portrayal of Charismatic Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Historical and mythological references ▪ Top electoral slogans ▪ Charismatic characteristic of Narendra Modi ▪ Modi as popular leader loved by the Indians
5	Politically Reluctant Populism of Hindutva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conservation of Hindu culture ▪ Protection of Hinduism as religion ▪ Promotion of Hindu culture at global level
6	Identifying Foreign Enemy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pakistan harboring terrorism in India ▪ Pakistan behind separatist movement in Jammu and Kashmir ▪ Pakistan as top target of India's diplomatic efforts in the world

Table 1: Summary of thematic discourse analysis

This paper explores how Modi's speeches shed light on types of populism. These include "precarity centered populism" (which combines security-based and religious elements) "developmental nationalist populism" (based on growth centric nationalism) and "redemptive pioneering populism" (aiming to

restore past glory). Populism is often associated with democratic systems and India offers a unique case where religion and populism intertwine with democratic politics in a sophisticated manner. The political landscape, which plays a role, in studying populism exhibits populist elements that are utilized to shape discourse based on the Hindutva doctrine.

While traces of this discourse can be drawn back to 200 years in colonial India, it has gained significant momentum in Indian electoral politics over the past two decades. Political features characterized by engagement, opportunistic policies and rhetorical maneuvers are primarily driven by the quest for electoral support. In Indian context, the Hindutva doctrine plays a role as a populist ideology that constructs peoples' identities, defines others, promises reforms and highlights flaws, within the existing system and identifies foreign adversaries.

Modi's inclination towards anti-pluralism is evident in his creation of a sense of "otherness" within the Indian populace, as he aligns himself with the Hindu majority. This has resulted in a reduced public space for Muslims, who are perceived as inferior to the dominant group (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). He has consistently incorporated Hindu religious gestures and symbols in his speeches and tweets to align himself with the majority of the population, fundamentally reshaping the perception of the people. Under Modi's governance, there has been a rise in incidents of religious intolerance towards Muslims, such as mob-lynching. Additionally, there have been debates surrounding the protection of cows, which hold religious significance in Hinduism. Furthermore, a new law has been introduced to grant citizenship to Hindus and followers of other religions, excluding Muslims.

The Hindutva doctrine has been effectively employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who is seen as a charismatic figure. This political strategy combines elements of Hindu nationalism and religious populism presenting a narrative of a nation, in "crisis" that can only be resolved by a leader. The BJP constructs an identity based on religious practices mobilizing "the people" against both the perceived elite and those, outside their cultural or religious group. By labeling these outsiders as foreign or alien, populist leaders create a sense of anxiety and victimhood among their supporters ultimately targeting them for criticism or attacks. This manufactured sense of crisis, which is largely created leads to a demand, for leadership and organizations. This in turn opens the door for clashes based on ethnicity and religion ultimately weakening democracy (Lesch, 2020).

Under Modi's leadership the BJP has taken a new trajectory. There is an aspect of populism, with both horizontal and vertical dimensions but what stands out is the way a new narrative emphasizing civilization is being constructed by the BJP surpassing their previous focus on Hindutva nationalism. Now loving the country and upholding dharma has become a way of life that has permeated into all aspects of political life through the process of saffronization. Additionally, as discussed by Chacko (2018) under Modi's leadership the BJP has adopted a form of chauvinism that advocates for India to emerge as a global leader in commerce and technology. This novel narrative connects Hindutva pride with an emphasis on development aiming to restore India's lost prominence in the community since the time of "Muslim invaders" in the 16th century.

The division made by the BJP between sections of society which can be referred to as "the people" and "the others " does not solely rely on categorizing individuals based on their affiliation but also considers how readily they engage with national culture and its values. This nativist element, within BJP's populism draws attention to issues that inevitably evoke sentiments. These measures may be portrayed as policy choices made to safeguard the well-being of individuals, but they are essentially strategies aimed at rallying voters to advocate for the revival of the ancient Hindutva civilization that existed prior, to the Muslim invasion. The focal point lies in the notion of a "clash of civilizations" and the perceived superiority of the people and their faith.

Modi and Western populism

Contrary to the situation in industrialized countries, the emergence of right-wing populism in India is not driven by economic factors. The predominant cause can be attributed to the absence of viable options, a divided opposition, effective dissemination of propaganda by the BJP, and the magnetic appeal of Modi's personality. In the United States, if Donald Trump's presidency may be attributed to the complaints experienced by the working class in the last three decades, then in India, it is Narendra Modi who determines which issues the working class should prioritize.

Consider immigration as an illustration. Immigration holds significant prominence as a prevailing electoral topic in both American and European politics. The recent arrival of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa has posed a threat to the employment opportunities of the working class. Many working-class Americans and Europeans are bothered by the fact that their legislative assemblies are increasingly being represented by individuals who do not resemble them. Acts of terrorism perpetrated by Muslim individuals born and raised in Europe and America have additionally instilled heightened dread and paranoia.

The electoral triumph of populist movements amid periods of uncertainty is not a recent phenomenon. Populist left-wing parties exerted significant influence in Latin American elections during the 1960s and experienced a resurgence in the 2000s. Their rise to power was fueled by their opposition to the oligarchic establishment and neoliberal policies. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Indira Gandhi rose to power in South Asia during the 1970s by capitalizing on calls for extensive redistribution of resources. They used this popular demand to consolidate their personal authority and bring state institutions under their control.

The present-day Indian Right-wing populists employ a comparable strategy centered around attacking the established political order. However, their ability to attract supporters who are dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs differs significantly. Left-wing populists based their personal appeal on their ability to advocate for the impoverished and underprivileged. In contrast, reactionary populists acquire authority by appealing to a perception of national superiority that they claim has been lost and must be recovered through their political agendas.

There are significant differences among the many factions of the emerging Right-wing populist movement, and these divisions have significant implications for their ability to rally support from voters and their approach to governance. The Right-wing populists employ either the populism of apprehension or the populism of ambition to appeal to national grandeur. Anxious populists highlight feelings of fear and deprivation. Their sentimental language evokes a time in the past when their country was highly esteemed. However, they contend that the previous state of greatness is now being jeopardized due to the influx of immigrants and refugees, as well as the assertiveness of individuals with religious or ethnic backgrounds that differ from the majority. Orbán and Trump's messages caution against severe repercussions to the political system and society if borders are unrestricted, traditions are not safeguarded, or past hierarchies are not reinstated. Their objective is to restore the nation's greatness by symbolically reverting to a previous era.

In contrast, aspirational populists prioritize a national endeavor aimed at achieving future excellence. According to their perspective, it is essential for the nation to form a unified and harmonious community. The nation's greatness can only be achieved if every individual adheres to the visionary leader's national agenda. The politics of desire is a major aspect of Modi's worldview and programmer. In his view, it is imperative that all Indians join and collaborate to effectively execute the building of a cohesive India, which is the primary objective of his administration.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that Hindutva presently represents a narrative rooted in civilization driving India's "saffron tide." At the core of this populism lies not an affection, for one's country, culture or religion but there exists a sense of yearning for a past era and a populist rhetoric that labels non-Hindus and liberal or secular Hindus as "the Other." This narrative contributes to a perceived crisis where "the true people" are portrayed as victims of standing oppression and dominance by past "invaders" (initially the Muslim Mughals and later the Christian Europeans, particularly the British) thereby raising concerns about ontological security. Unsurprisingly this populism contains both implicit elements of violence. Within this framework cultural pride and an aspiration for a homeland are invoked to attribute all problems—ranging from security to social challenges—onto "the Other."

The saffronization of India originated as a Hindutva initiative and has now evolved into a populist movement associated with Hindutva. It is embodied by the state apparatus and promoted by the organizations aligned with Hindutva ideology. Due to its appeal, it blurs the boundaries between fiction and history while perpetuating the notion of victimhood, among "the people" while vilifying "the Other." The current changes, in state laws, school curriculum and governmental structure along with the rise of vigilantism pose a threat to democracy and the integrity of its political system. The BJP led by Modi aimed to transform India into a Hindu centric state, which marked a departure from the Congress led India's commitment to secularism (even if not always fully practiced). Despite the BJP's efforts in building party infrastructure through services they heavily relied on mobilizing support for electoral

gains. With Narendra Modi, as their leader the party took advantage of this wave to propel themselves forward.

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Brazil: Digital Articulations on Political-Electoral Behavior³

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Abstract

The text, in essay format, proposes a discussion on Brazilian political-electoral behavior, with a focus on the 2018 and 2022 presidential elections. In these elections, two candidates, Lula and Bolsonaro, competed from diametrically opposed positions regarding stability and democracy, with a very narrow margin of about 1% difference between them. Aspects such as the structure and construction of the country, cultural and religious elements, and demographics will support reflections that can be further developed in future texts. The rise of populism is also discussed as a backdrop for one of the campaigns in question.

Keywords: Brazil, populism, elections, pathemic discourse

Introduction

This study, still in its early stages and with the prospect of further in-depth analysis in the next publication, aims to reflect on the main political events that involved the last two elections (2018 and 2022) and constituted the recent political and social scenario in Brazil, leading a significant portion of the population to support anti-democratic actions and mass disinformation. The development will be carried out in essay format, relying on recent data to provide greater clarity on the current historical moment.

In Brazil, composed of 27 federative units, elections take place every two years, alternating between municipal elections and those that define state and federal representatives. In both cases, the elections are for the Legislative and Executive branches (the country is formatted in a tripartite system, but the Judiciary is not elected; in this case, there is a mixed system of public exams and appointments). This essay focuses on the 2018 and 2022 elections, analyzing the impact of pathemic electoral discourses from the perspective of the concept of populism. To this end, the essay is structured to initially present demographic characteristics and the psychographic profile of Brazilian society, which, together with other points raised, help explain the inclination towards a certain voting composition in the elections. The pathemic discourse associated with populist strategies sheds light on the theme and is configured,

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as final reflections for this essay, as decisive elements for the outcome of the presidential elections in Brazil.

Brazilian scenario: A Giant

To have a starting point that allows a better understanding of the country in question and the result of the last two presidential elections, some data will be described to reference the country's dimension and complexity. Elements such as size, demographic aspects of the population, cultural and religious elements can express the complexity of the country and its inhabitants. It is worth noting that this is a nation with significant differences, marked by access to education, basic living conditions, and other factors related to the growing social inequality that explain the great potential for the scenario that emerged in the last two elections.

As mentioned, Brazil can be represented by its great diversity. In territorial terms, it is the 5th largest country in the world, in addition to being a territory with vast areas of vegetation, a priority element in the face of the current climate emergency. This draws the attention of major world leaders and authorities, but it is still poorly understood internally by its population. The idea of being a kind of lung for the world receives controversial interpretations that accumulate and diversify even more in the digital platforms' environment.

In terms of population, the country ranks seventh, with more than 200 million people. The composition of the population is a complex issue due to miscegenation, immigration, and regionalism, in addition to racial and inter-racial aspects present, also resulting from a slaveholding past. It is a multiple country and, at the same time, full of prejudices and differences, with clear social strata.

Since 1988, when the sixth and current Federal Constitution was created after a 21-year dictatorship period, new periods of turbulence have occurred, with two impeachment processes removing two presidents from power. Although two legislative processes took place, their motivations and courses were very different.

After the first post-dictatorship presidential elections, Brazil maintained the tradition of favoring a dominant class, with liberal policies and, some years later, began to implement public policies benefiting less favored classes. This happened in the late 1990s and consolidated in the 2000s, with a dominant welfare character. After a little over thirty years of the Constitution, which was a watershed after the most recent dictatorial period, new authoritarian waves emerged from populist discourses, in line with consistent movements in other parts of the world.

Citizen-voter

Brazil's official population is about 210 million inhabitants – with a marked aging in recent years, with more than 10% of the total over 65 years old – according to the 2022 census. The growth rate is only 0.5%, the lowest since the beginning of the historical series. Most of the Brazilian population lives in

urban areas of the country, with very unequal distribution among the regions and states that make up the territory.

The 2022 Demographic Census results indicate that Brazil has 6 million more women than men. The Brazilian population comprises about 104 million women and 98 million men, corresponding to 51% and 49% of the resident population, respectively. Of the total population, 156 million people can vote (over 75% of the total), distributed among 5570 cities. Of these, 53% are women, and 47% are men. This difference is not evident in female presence in public offices at all levels of power. Throughout history, only one woman has been elected president of the Republic and, in legislative positions, they are the minority, meaning feminist agendas are often sidelined.

Votes are also dispersed among political parties, which currently total 29 (but have exceeded 35 in recent times). The extensive number of political parties reflects a characteristic of governability, the coalition presidentialism: negotiation with numerous parties, even those notably less significant, but which end up having visibility, either due to their local performance or the presence of individuals with greater presence in the popular imagination. Some parties end up absorbing popular names in traditional media or even on digital platforms, who are promoted to a political career even without the minimal training that allows them to understand political processes in a broader way. Brazil has experienced this at times. One of the notable elections in this regard was when a comedian-singer became the most voted federal deputy in the country (2010) – and in subsequent elections, he continued to be elected, even though he was no longer the most popular. His platform was always to ridicule the system, demoralizing the existing structures.

In 2018, the elected president gained space in traditional media, especially in programs that caricatured reality, always with a marginal, aggressive discourse and without platforms or proposals that made sense from a broader, attentive, and critical perspective. However, his talkative profile gained popularity, and, in addition to other seriously important factors, he managed to be elected to the highest office in the country.

Religiosity

Even though Brazil is a secular country, numerous religious manifestations are present in the public sphere, such as religious symbols in public offices, legislative benches self-proclaimed as “of the Bible,” and especially public policies aimed at benefiting religious groups – tax exemptions for temples and religious representatives, incentives for the evangelization of groups linked to the State etc. Another factor is that the Portuguese religious tradition – the result of the peoples who colonized the country, leaving very deep marks on the culture – has always impacted the country, such as the existence of holidays, names of public roads, influence over those in power, from the period when there was a monarchy until the Republic.

However, in recent times, new denominations have gained new followers in geometric progression and acquired growing power. This scenario, in which powerful representatives of Catholic and Protestant

origins proliferate (in Brazil, they are conventionally called evangelicals, almost forgetting that they are offshoots of movements that gave rise to Protestantism/reformation), other expressions are often silenced and even erased, such as the so-called religions of African origin – which are often much more complex than this simplistic view, as they can have several overlaps beyond Afro elements, which mix with several others, realign, mimic, creating highly complex expressions of meanings (Simas, 2021).

The numbers are surprising: of the approximately 210 million Brazilians, 123 million (64.6%) declare themselves Catholic, while 42 million (22%) define themselves as Protestant (traditional, Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostal), accounting for approximately 600 thousand people who declare themselves of Afro-Brazilian religions. In the Census, it is not possible to declare oneself an atheist, but rather “without religion,” a category in which there are about 15 million people.

Therefore, it is clear that the vast majority of Brazilians (about 90%), inhabitants of a secular country, profess some kind of religion, even though many fall into the popular classification of non-practicing. Thus, people are born and grow up attending temples, following rituals, and, above all, assuming a religious culture without questioning. This scenario strongly impacts the construction of public opinion and the promotion of electoral campaigns: temples of prayer, preaching, and explicit campaigns.

In this sense, in 2022, the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro was very aligned with what was conventionally called the conservative discourse, reinforcing fascist values and having his wife – Michelle Bolsonaro – as a strategic interlocutor with important evangelical leaders. The support of Protestant religious groups was clear and explicit, aligning a sense of trust with this candidate and reinforcing an image of a “family man,” who used the fascist slogan “God, Country, and Family.”

The other main candidate and winner of the presidential election, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, was associated with a person distant from the pillars present in conservative and religious discourses. To combat this risk of vote evasion, this candidate also needed to make moves to get closer, publishing a letter addressed to who he called the “evangelical people”. Religion, therefore, strongly impacts the polls, discourses, and public policies of all governors, who automatically feel connected and, to a certain extent, hostage to certain leaders.

Pathemic discourse scenario

In Brazil, the impact of pathemic discourses (Charaudeau, 2020) of political leaders based on digital strategies grows with a view to influencing citizens' voting behavior during electoral campaigns. The reality of this media space that brings together millions of people is complex because there is no regulation of the digital environment. Each platform defines the rules and policies that suit it, something sensitive because its corporate interests are not aligned with the interests of citizens or the country.

Based on a proposal born in the Federal Senate, PL-2630, authored by Senator Alessandro Vieira, an attempt was made to regulate digital platforms so that there would be more parameters allowing the reduction of misinformation and fake news in this environment, something widely used by politicians

and their followers. This misinformation process is often sponsored by ideological currents, creating a parallel universe and leading to political-electoral behaviors dangerous to democracy.

Given the complexity of Brazilian society and its religious and potentially conservative characteristics, pathemic discourses are permanently intertwined with the construction of political-electoral communication, configuring themselves as a deeply rooted and emotionally meaningful element. In this sense, Charaudeau (2010) emphasizes that:

Pathemization can then be treated discursively as a category of effect that opposes other effects such as cognitive, pragmatic, axiological effects, etc. And like any category of effect, it depends on the circumstances in which it arises. (Charaudeau, 2010, p. 39.)

Thus, pathemic discourses end up strengthening the scenario of potential misinformation and leading to increasing risks to institutional stability. In the current context, this risk increases because, according to the global assessment of the World Justice Project on respect for the rule of law, in 2021, 42% of the research sample (59 of the 139 countries analyzed) were below the average level of respect for the rule of law, marking what researchers called the third wave of autocratization in the world, with presence on different continents (Brito et al., 2023).

In Brazil, where there are several studies on the growth of misinformation, the theme has become central in the National Congress – Federal Senate and House of Representatives – in two moments. The first in 2018, when the use of robots and technology to promote misinformation with a focus on defaming people's image and influencing the electoral result was identified (Kaufman, 2019), which culminated in the establishment of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission to investigate cyberattacks that assault democracy, but whose work was suspended in March 2020 (Farias, Damasceno & Juliotti, 2022). The second moment occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, when representatives of the Temporary Covid-19 Commission highlighted the speed and destructive effect of misinformation in combating the virus (Farias, Damasceno & Juliotti, 2022). Negationism gained strength and a certain air of institutionalization, as attacks on Public Health and vaccines came from public sources, such as the Presidency of the Republic and the Ministry of Health, among others.

The association of technology, financial investments, and misinformation increases the risks to the rule of law and institutional stability through the use of products available with emotional content, designed and adapted for the various devices to which the population has increasing access. Three public opinion polls were conducted (by highly renowned and respected institutes: DataFolha, DataSenado, and Ibope) that impacted the behavior of legislators linked to PL 2630 and the actions of big techs during the voting process (April/2023), strongly influencing the authorities' actions and guiding the public agenda, with a high level of emotion generation.

The polls demonstrated citizens' feelings and perceptions regarding the possible regulation of digital platforms, which impacted the proposal's design, being adjusted according to what was declared there. Like laws passed in other countries, the Brazilian proposal also provided for sanctions and fines for companies on social networks and messaging services: from warnings, followed by deadlines for

adopting corrective measures to fines of up to 10% of the economic group's revenue during its period in Brazil. Unlike laws in other countries, Brazilian law is not strict regarding the clear prohibition of disinformative messages, leaving it to the Judiciary to decide on omitted cases. This position generated a strong reaction from the corporations that own digital platforms, which reverberated in the form of actions from lobby groups that acted quickly and strongly with public authorities, leading to the weakening of the proposal and its withdrawal from the agenda under the risk of imminent defeat.

A wave of far-right propaganda, creating moral panic, instituted fear (pathemic action), leading to the dissemination of the term censorship, which began to be widely used, indicating that freedom of expression would be at risk. The use of misinformation became notable, with the dissemination of misinformative issues covering moral and religious aspects, creating a favorable environment in public opinion for rejecting any control over platforms, which, in theory, would self-regulate. The message was disseminated to the public that citizens would have their profiles controlled, censored, and would no longer be able to express their full freedom of thought when, in fact, the regulation was aimed at companies and platforms that manage and profit from digital spaces. The population's negative predisposition towards the Public Power also contributed to this scenario.

Revisited populism

In 2017, populism was the word of the year chosen by the Cambridge Dictionary as political ideas and activities that aim to obtain the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want. That year, the lack of critical thinking on the part of the general population, coupled with cynical and empty discourses from political leaders, became evident. According to Finchelstein (2019, p. 131), "populism is an authoritarian form of democracy that initially emerged as a formulation of fascism in the post-war period. (...) It was after fascism left the world stage that populism became, for the first time, a regime."

If in the previous item, when talking about religiosity, we highlighted Jair Bolsonaro's strategies in the 2022 elections, four years earlier, in 2018, the then-candidate – a politician with vast experience, with three decades of career in the Legislative Power, as a councilor and later as a federal deputy – paradoxically proclaimed himself a leader of a new way of doing politics. The empty discourse of the "new politics," anchored in the recent 3rd wave of autocratization of democratic regimes in different parts of the world, such as Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, used a populist approach and discursive bases historically supported by traditional totalitarian movements – Nazism, fascism, integralism, inspired by the 1st wave of autocratization, which occurred between 1920 and 1940 (Brito et al., 2023, p. 17).

The use of the term populism is not recent in the history of Brazil. As early as the mid-1950s, academic studies used the word to profile charismatic leaders who widely sensitized a mass of workers with evident fragility of class consciousness, amid a crisis of the traditional elite and the attempt to modernize the country. It is a discourse that disarticulates society and discredits institutions, to empower those who speak within a binary logic and with a complex dynamic. This discourse took place in Brazil because "populist regimes first emerged in Latin America, after 1945" (Finchelstein, 2019, p. 131),

marked by regimes of leaders like Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (Finchelstein, 2019, p. 132).

The binarity in the discursive opposition between the people and the elites may be the most striking feature of what is understood by populism. However, two other elements make up this triad, according to Barros and Lago (2022, p. 37): the transgressive character and the ability to transform institutions.

Bolsonaro's populist profile, as shown in Figure 1, was incorporated into a study led by Professor Kirk Hawkins, from Brigham Young University (BYU) in the USA, which includes an international network of about 80 researchers from the Team Populism project, including Brazilian researcher Bruno Castanho Silva.

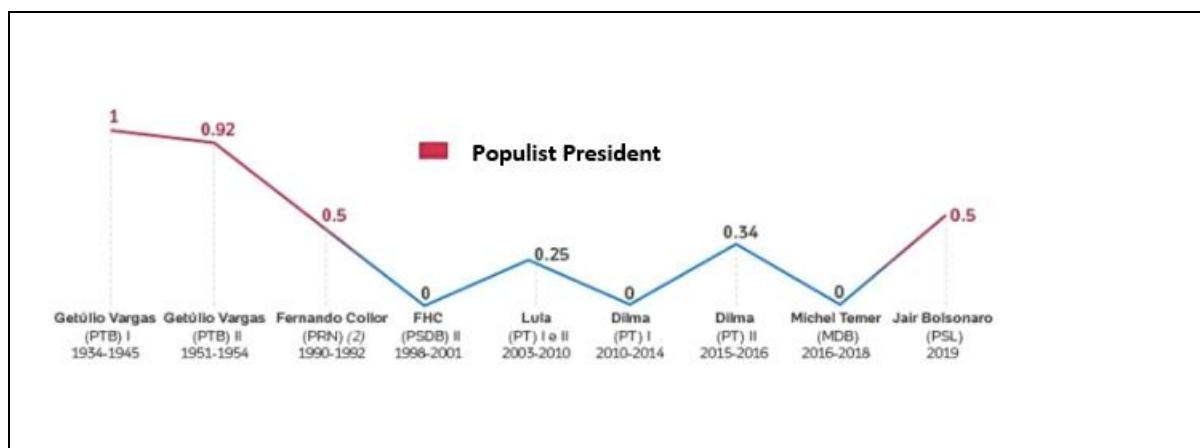


Figure 1: Populist presidents. Source: *Política* (2019)

Bolsonaro's campaign also used a kind of step-by-step guide used by new populist leaders active today, namely the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán. Techniques and teachings popularized by Steve Bannon, former advisor to then-US President Donald Trump, were also observed. Besides these two internationally influential figures, the then-president (2019-2022) built around himself a political support base with foundations of the far right, on one hand, and on the other, politicians who fit a profile linked to relationship based on obtaining economic advantages. It was also during this period that the world went through the worst health crisis in modern history – the pandemic resulting from Covid-19 – and an institutionalized denial process was established.

What was seen in terms of electoral communication and governmental communication in Jair Bolsonaro's administration can be directly associated with what Baquero (2010) attributes as contemporary neopopulism, where

the individualistic and selfish citizen, therefore, renounces politics in its formal dimension, although participates in it. His political behavior, under these circumstances, shows a tendency to accept private fields of negotiation with individuals and not with institutions. This is the case of contemporary neopopulism. (Baquero, 2010, p. 181.)

The national elections that followed this government took place in 2022, when the dispute was largely supported by the dissemination of fake news and a polarization process: on one hand, the discourse formatted by a strategy of instability of the three powers of the then-governor Bolsonaro, and on the other hand, the former president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva – who had already been president of the Republic twice before –, supported by a line of rescuing democratic stability and balance between the powers.

Jair Bolsonaro's re-election attempt in 2022 was also marked by recurrent attempts to discredit the electronic voting process, taking advantage of the public machine itself. The mechanisms of this movement are highlighted by Baquero (2010) by emphasizing that

they mobilize voters from popular lawyers to legally unbalance the elections, organize mass marches against their opponents. They make extensive use of clientelism to reward their followers and use state resources to promote economic development and establish mediations between employers and employees. (Baquero, 2010, p. 85.)

With a narrow margin (Lula won with 50.9%, against 49.1% of valid votes), the proposal aligned with democracy emerged victorious. In absolute numbers, just over 2.1 million votes guaranteed the advantage, marking this as the most divided presidential election in the country's history.

Final considerations: Digital social networks and overexposure

The popularization of the internet has not only allowed greater access to information but also the production of content about the world and each person, creating a massive wave of privacy evasion. In recent years, the internet has provided an overexposure of information that was previously unimaginable, reaching levels of evolution to the point of interfering with people's privacy and intimacy and creating scenarios of apparent confusion between the public and the private, between the real and the imaginary.

The permanence and the possibility of content spreading – beyond what is desired or controlled, and close to intolerance – is so great that the Law has sought rules that provide people with the possibility of being forgotten. The idea of non-memory in contemporary times is almost unimaginable given so many formal repositories, in addition to the obscure ones, even though there may come a time when desire and necessity point towards the search for oblivion.

Memory can also be fed by unreal scenarios based on misinformation. The need for regulation of platforms is great, both in terms of holding them accountable for the content that circulates and in committing to managing hate speech. The concept and use given to freedom of expression end up being corporately packaged, which encourages the idea that everything can and should be said, without filters, without the need to meet legal, cultural, and ethical elements.

The electoral behavior of Brazilian citizens in the last two main elections (2018 and 2022) demonstrated this: polarized discourses and positions, based on emotion and digital behavior, often disconnected from reality and without the due merit of public interest. Bubbles fed hate and digital violence, creating knots around often non-existent issues. One of the main points of misinformation in the 2022 Brazilian elections was related to electronic voting machines, a highly functional and reliable system that has never experienced any fraud.

The disinformation campaign about the fragility of the voting machines grew and affected the sense of security of part of the population, making it necessary to constantly reaffirm trust in the system. Digital articulations with emotional discourses influenced the electoral behavior of citizens, leading to instability that could result in the weakening of the institutional system.

The speeches during these electoral campaigns, which are the subject of this essay, and after the elections, were filled with emotional elements, seeking to evoke emotion and connections with themes that were outside the scope of their platforms. All of this marked and still marks actions and positions, promising continuity and new battles around information and democracy.

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Polarisation and Disinformation in Brazil's COVID-19 Vaccination Onset on X (former Twitter)⁴

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Abstract

In January 2021, Brazil had a critical moment in its battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by the beginning of the vaccination campaign. The country, facing a high number of deaths and transmission, was a battleground for polarised discussions, misinformation, and disinformation surrounding the vaccination effort. Much of this controversy was fuelled by the rhetoric of President Jair Bolsonaro, who advocated for unproven treatments rather than following scientific guidance. There was a significant political disagreement in Brazil concerning vaccines involving ex-President Jair Bolsonaro and previous São Paulo governor João Doria, who supported the first vaccine implemented in the nation, the Chinese CoronaVac. This study delved into the dynamics of polarisation and disinformation on X (former Twitter) and the front pages of two major Brazilian newspapers (Folha de S. Paulo and Estadão) during that pivotal month, coinciding with the first vaccinations on the 17th. Using data from X extracted with MeCodify, the research employed topic modeling and analysis of highly retweeted and commented tweets to understand the interplay between mainstream media events and their reflection in social media discussions. By correlating information collected from newspapers with data extracted from X, our study demonstrates that tensions between the Brazilian government and supranational entities influence social media engagement and usage patterns. The study revealed that X was important for polarisation and disinformation during this phase. Pro-government and opposition groups were sharply divided, each crafting its narrative regarding vaccination, with the pro-government group tending to disseminate misinformation and disinformation, while the opposition group primarily aimed to share scientific information and promote vaccination. Additionally, our findings suggest that the pro-government camp was more effective in controlling the narrative on X, with their tweets gaining greater reach and engagement.

Keywords: pandemic, Brazil, Twitter, far right, polarisation, disinformation

Brazilian health system and political antecedents

Brazil has an important and robust universal healthcare system known as Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS), which includes the National Immunization Programme (PNI) as one of its integral components.

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Launched in September 1973, the PNI aimed to consolidate the various decentralised vaccination initiatives across municipalities into a unified, nationwide effort (Domingues et al., 2020). This concerted approach galvanised vaccination practices throughout the country and positioned Brazil favourably with commendable vaccination coverage.

Despite the initial success of the PNI, Brazil has witnessed a notable decline in vaccination coverage for various diseases since 2016. Notably, the common flu failed to reach the target coverage of 70% in 2023, and more severe diseases like poliomyelitis have experienced similar setbacks (CEDIPI, 2023). This decline can be attributed to an economic crisis, which shrunk Brazil's gross domestic product (GDP) and grew the national unemployment rate to 11.8% on average (CEPAL, 2016). The economic decline aggravated challenges in accessing SUS services in general and, more specifically, hindered the population's access to vaccinations.

Moreover, the economic crisis catalysed a change in the political landscape. The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, a leftist and progressive president affiliated with the Workers' Party (PT), resulted in the ascent of Michel Temer, the vice-president and a centrist conservative figure from the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) to the presidency in 2016 (Beauchamp, 2016). This political shift altered Brazil's economic strategies, setting the stage for a subsequent presidential election in the following year. Jair Bolsonaro (a far-right ultra-conservative politician affiliated with the PSL-Social Liberal Party) was elected in 2018 and ruled Brazil from January 2019 to December 2022. In other words, he was Brazil's president when the pandemic started, killing more than 700,000 people in the country and worsening the population's quality of life in general (Canineu & Muñoz, 2021). Bolsonaro's government constantly undermined the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging people to agglomerate, recommending the use of ineffective drugs against the disease, and playing a significant role in stimulating vaccination hesitation among the population (Canineu & Muñoz, 2021).

This paper situates the discourse surrounding COVID-19 vaccines in Brazil within January 2021, the month marking the beginning of vaccination efforts in the country. The discussions about COVID-19 vaccines are studied in light of the ongoing polarisation of the theme on X (former Twitter). Our analytical framework is based on two primary data repositories: front-page news from prominent Brazilian newspapers, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *Estadão*, and data gathered from X utilising the MeCodify software. This paper is part of ENDURE: Inequalities, Community Resilience, and New Governance Modalities in a Post-Pandemic World. The overarching objective of this initiative is to scrutinise the COVID-19 pandemic through a humanities' lens, specifically delineating the impact of state-led mobilisation and demobilisation on societal inequalities. A dedicated branch within the project investigates the propagation of (dis)information and mobilisation dynamics on social media platforms.

The following sections of this paper present some important findings, starting with a presentation of the methodology employed for data collection. After, we delve into the COVID-19 situation in Brazil throughout January 2021, highlighting key events that took place during the month. Building upon this foundation, our analysis spotlights data extracted from two distinct sources: X's tweets referencing Brazil's Ministry of Health (@minsaude) and the front pages of the newspapers.

Data and method

As we said, this paper analyses both newspapers' first page contents and tweets. The newspaper analysis is key for us to develop a better grasp on the context of what was happening when there were peaks in specific X tweets. We chose Folha de S. Paulo and Estadão because they are major newspapers in Brazil. About X, it is important to understand that according to the Digital 2021 report for Brazil, Twitter (now X) was the country's 6th most used social media platform, utilised by 51.6% of internet users aged 16 to 64 in that year. The top 5 positions were occupied by YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger. Although it is not one of the main tools, it is widely used by opinion leaders, politicians, and journalists. On other networks, screenshots of tweets are often shown as a way to give credibility to these people's content.

The dataset was collected using the MeCodify (Al-Saqaf, 2016) tool. This open-source tool was developed by the Media, Conflict, and Democratization group to measure and keep up with specific hashtags and keywords. The software generates graphics and word clouds and collects tweets and their associated data (such as username, picture, time, and date of the tweets, and if it was retweeted or is an original post). We employed the MeCodify tool to aggregate data from X as an integral component of our research, constituting a pivotal facet of the ENDURE project.

We used topic modeling to gain insights into the discussions during the chosen period and the peak of the Ministry of Health's official X account mentions. We systematically analysed representative tweets for each identified topic during the period. It is essential to understand that topic modeling constitutes an automated layer of interpretation wherein the system clusters information based on word frequency, aiding in identifying discursive structures (Lindgren, 2020). These structures are subsequently scrutinised through detailed qualitative readings of the data.

In developing the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling, which organises words into predetermined numbers of topics, we used 25 topics, following the most representative numbers as pointed out by CaoJuan2009, Griffiths2004, Arun2010 and Deveaud2014, following as a reference the already cited seminal study conducted by Koljonen and Palonen (2021) on Twitter data in Finland at the beginning of the pandemic, which also emphasises that "modelling is not considered a measure of theoretical constructs, but instead a way to provide information about word patterns, which can be usefully employed to guide subsequent interpretation of primary text materials", present in Pääkkönen and Ylikoski (2021). This analytical framework aims to elucidate how discussions happened, the reciprocal influences between them, and the actions of political actors and media news (Annex 1).

The data was collected by the Brazilian and Finnish teams affiliated with the ENDURE project, employing a set of keywords related to masks, lockdowns, and vaccines to extract pertinent information. Notably, the data-gathering process had a critical juncture when Twitter changed ownership, with Elon Musk finalising the acquisition in October 2022 (Conger & Hirsch, 2022). The ensuing alterations to the platform's API posed significant challenges, culminating in the discontinuation of data collection beyond April 2023. Consequently, the dataset is limited, encapsulating a corpus of information derived from several keywords and hashtags related to the pandemic in groups with themes like masks, lockdown,

health authorities, etc. For this paper, we used another software, Tableau, to unite the data gathered and generate new graphics to analyse the peaks in January 2021.

We focused our analysis on the mention of @minsaude, the official account of the Brazilian Ministry of Health. Despite the small number of posts gathered, their peaks show a relation between what was happening in Brazil and the response from the federal government through this ministry. It is interesting to note that, even when content referring to the Ministry's advice or findings was not being disseminated, the citation of the account was widely used by the leaders of the extreme right to create credibility in their content. In addition, while the country was clearly in a very complicated situation due to the pandemic, daily posts were released with news that reported investment figures and equipment purchases, such as ICUs and oxygen cylinders. This information was orchestrated by the leaders linked to Bolsonaro, especially the deputies who supported him.

The topics are shown in the Annex and bring the main subjects during the two years of the dataset. In this paper, the importance of some of them happened to understand the peaks during January of 2021, the month observed, when the onset of the vaccination was an important event, maybe the more important since the beginning of the pandemic.

We also examined information collected from the first pages of newspapers to discern pertinent themes and patterns. Specifically, the search tools embedded within the Folha de S. Paulo and Estadão websites facilitated the systematic retrieval of all first-page editions from January 2021. The retrieved pages were meticulously archived on a dedicated hard drive. The subsequent analysis phase involved a manual selection process wherein researchers discerningly curated the content.

The choice of Folha de S. Paulo and Estadão as the primary newspapers for this analysis stems from their pre-eminence as major publications in Brazil. These newspapers, renowned for their national prominence, were selected not only for their expansive readership but also for their capacity to furnish a contextual backdrop that can be juxtaposed with the data gleaned from the X platform. Folha de S. Paulo is currently the largest newspaper in Brazil in terms of paid subscribers. According to data from IVC (*Instituto Verificador de Comunicação*, which can be translated as Communication Verification Institute), the newspaper ended last year with 797 thousand daily paid subscriptions. Meanwhile, O Estado de São Paulo ranks third, with 249,800 subscriptions.

The overarching aim of integrating these two sources is to elucidate the role of political polarisation within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our approach entails an initial exposition of the collected data's contextual landscape and a comprehensive discussion of the findings. It is imperative to preface our analytical discourse with a nuanced depiction of Brazil's pandemic's contextual milieu during January 2021, providing a foundation for thoroughly examining and interpreting the gathered data.

General context

By January 2021, the impact of COVID-19 in Brazil had reached a grievous milestone, with more than 250,000 deaths and the pandemic's second wave being about to begin. Regrettably, the federal

government of Brazil made little to no effort to contain the pandemic in the country and mitigate its effects. Instead, a harmful narrative emerged, wherein the government actively encouraged resistance to any restrictive measures imposed by state governments or municipalities.

The start of COVID-19 vaccination in Brazil on January 17, 2021, marked a turning point in the nation's response. The Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa) granted emergency use approval for the CoronaVac and Covishield vaccines, developed in collaboration with Sinovac and Butantan Institute and AstraZeneca/Oxford University/Fiocruz, respectively. The vaccination campaign peaked in June 2021, with the administration of 2.2 million vaccine doses, emblematic of the population's commitment to vaccination.

During this period, a political dispute unfolded between former President Jair Bolsonaro and former São Paulo Governor João Doria. Doria strategically leveraged the vaccination initiative to bolster his political standing for the impending 2022 presidential election, amplifying his efforts through press conferences and advertising campaigns emphasising the efficacy of the CoronaVac vaccine. The strategy proved risky, considering that data without statistical significance — such as 100% vaccine efficacy for severe and moderate cases — was widely disseminated, providing ammunition to those seeking to discredit the vaccine.

There was a mishandling of information and misinformation spread by the federal government regarding vaccines, particularly CoronaVac. On January 11, 2021, amid a visit to Manaus — a city grappling with an oxygen crisis and overwhelmed healthcare infrastructure — former Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello cryptically referred to the vaccination commencement as being on "D-Day," at "H-hour" (Maziero et al., 2021).

Further exacerbating the situation, Bolsonaro, in 2020, proclaimed a reluctance to buy a "vaccine from China," laying the groundwork for potential diplomatic tensions with one of Brazil's principal trading partners. A subsequent study published in the journal *Vaccine* in May 2021 underscored that supporters of the former president exhibited a reduced willingness to receive the Chinese CoronaVac vaccine, indicative of the negative impact of misinformation propagated by Bolsonaro (Gramacho & Turgeon, 2021).

To comprehend the intricate Brazilian context, it is imperative to acknowledge that, before the onset of vaccination, a void in information dissemination from the federal government prompted the establishment of a media consortium. This collaborative initiative, comprising traditionally competitive media outlets, emerged as a countermeasure to the government's dearth of data publication. The consortium's primary objective was to collate and disseminate COVID-19 statistics, encompassing mortality rates, case figures, and vaccination statistics. Notably, the consortium ended its activities on January 28, 2023 (Britto, 2023).

Newspapers analysis

Newspapers serve as a historical record of the socio-political context, public health policies, and social dynamics. Furthermore, qualitative data obtained from newspapers can complement and validate quantitative data, such as those collected in our case from X, providing a more comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the context of the initial vaccination efforts in the country.

The examination of newspaper data illustrates the need for a cohesive national vaccination strategy orchestrated by the federal government in Brazil. *Folha de São Paulo* discourse highlighted since the beginning of 2021, the federal government's struggle to cope with the advance of the pandemic after Christmas celebrations with a tight budget, a topic that *Estadão* started to cover from January 7th onwards when the newspaper conveyed that the government's decision to suspended procuring essential vaccination materials, including syringes and needles could endanger the country's vaccination efforts start. Between daily updates regarding the number of victims and the negotiations between federal and subnational states, both newspapers highlight the lack of expertise and the problems with the president and the minister of health management during the crisis. On January 7th, one of *Folha de São Paulo*'s headlines was "Health Ministry disseminates wrong information regarding prevention," while *Estadão* highlighted "The Same Old Bolsonaro (...) It is Imperative for the Good of the Country and Brazilians - that he resigns as soon as possible."

The media's focus on the federal government's management of syringes and needles for vaccination brings to light another crucial aspect of the Bolsonaro Administration's pandemic management—the ongoing conflict with subnational leaders. The Health Ministry's request for syringes meant for states, which appeared on both newspapers' front pages between January 7th and 9th, is a stark reminder of this. The media's pandemic coverage during the month predicted the scenario at the start of the vaccination campaign- insufficient vaccine access and critical shortages of materials.

The federal government's poor crisis management at the subnational level has also made headlines, particularly with the oxygen crises in Manaus, the capital city of Amazonas state in Brazil's northern region. Between January 15th and 20th, the severity of the crisis, manifested in mass grave burials and a critical shortage of oxygen, was intensively covered by both newspapers. The coverage not only highlighted Governor Wilson Lima's inadequate efforts in pandemic containment but also exposed the Bolsonaro Administration's role in the crises that resulted in several people dying due to a lack of oxygen supply. The newspapers' coverage, particularly *Folha de São Paulo*'s, was more extensive, highlighting even some days before- January 13th- that Amazonas governor's statement, "Oxygen arrives and runs out." and exposing on January 19th, the former Health Minister with the headline "Pazuello admits to having been informed about the oxygen situation in Manaus on the 8th."

The chaos in Manaus lost space in the newspaper's first-page headlines due to the initiation of vaccination endeavours on January 17th, emphasising that the inaugural vaccination event and the first inoculated individual were São Paulo's achievements. With similar headlines one day after the beginning of the vaccinations - "After a unanimous decision by Anvisa, vaccination begins in São Paulo" (*Folha de São Paulo*) and "Anvisa approves emergency use of vaccines, SP starts immunisation"

(Estadão), both newspapers evidentiate São Paulo's governor leadership; however, also mention the conflicts that emerge from it. On the same day, Estadão mentions on its first page, "Without a vaccine, Pazuello criticises 'marketing,'" while Folha de São Paulo also mentions conflicts that emerge with other subnational leaders: "Paulista leadership annoys some governors; Pazuello lies and criticises Doria." These conflicts highlight the complex dynamics between the federal government and the subnational leaders in the vaccination process.

For instance, simultaneously with the start of vaccination efforts, a subtle thematic shift transpired in the newspapers, emphasising the political clash between former São Paulo Governor João Doria and then-President Jair Bolsonaro. This clash was significant as it represented a power struggle between the federal and subnational governments over managing the pandemic and the vaccination efforts. Notably, the newspapers, particularly Folha de São Paulo, indicated, by the conclusion of January 2021, that João Doria had gained significantly more popularity than Bolsonaro in the public discourse.

Analysis of the X data

The following exploration delves into the peaks of data derived from X, specifically on January 17th, coinciding with Brazil's official beginning of vaccination efforts. A distinct surge was observed in our X data, notably illustrated in Chart 1. It emanated from a post by Beatriz Kicis Torrents de Sordi, colloquially known as Bia Kicis, a federal congresswoman aligned with far-right conservative ideologies and a fervent supporter of President Bolsonaro. The post had over 7,400 retweets and called for the Brazilian Attorney General's Office to take action against X. In Chart 2, this peak is the green line.

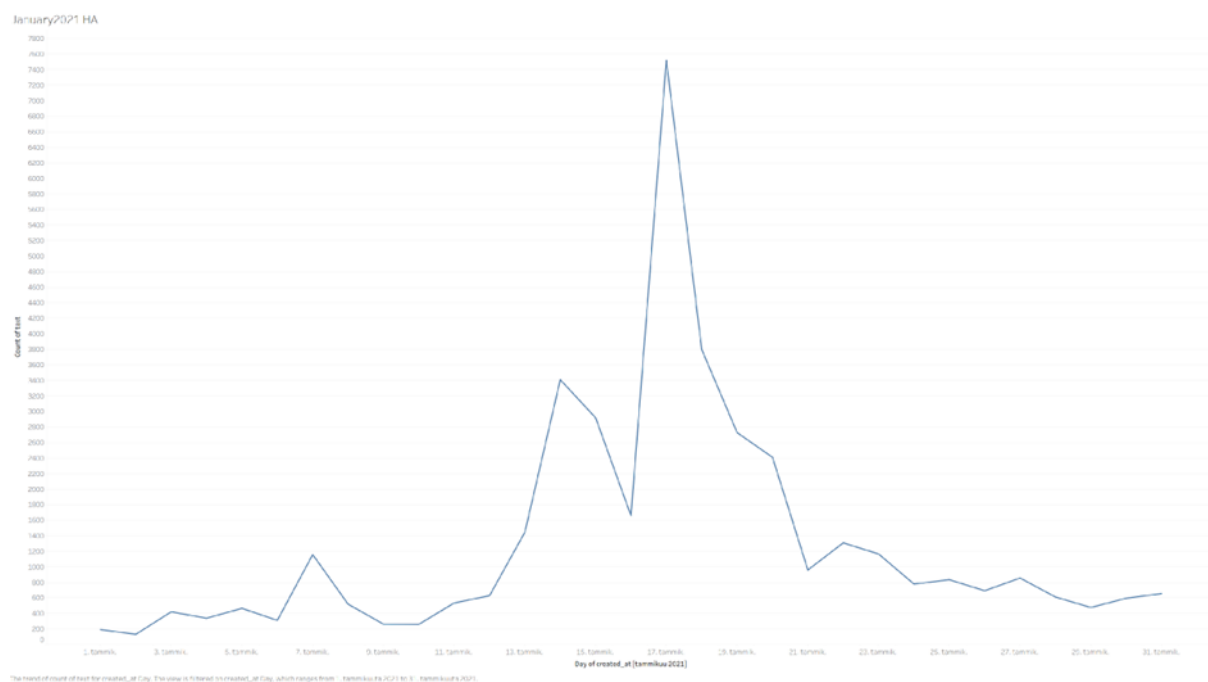


Chart 1: X's analysis (peaks)

At the time, the social media platform was at odds with the Brazilian Health Ministry guidelines concerning COVID-19, particularly endorsing the 'early treatment' protocol, also known as the COVID-19 kit. Smaller peaks connected to this narrative were also discernible on January 13th. These instances underscore the utilisation of social media to promote specific narratives and divert public attention from the initiation of vaccination efforts led by João Doria, a former Bolsonaro supporter.

Simultaneously, on January 17th, a secondary peak, as depicted in Chart 2, with more than 900 posts (pink line) responding to the actions undertaken by Bolsonaro's government in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the tweets in this cluster are distinct, indicative of spontaneous and unorchestrated criticisms and responses to the government's pandemic response, contrasting to the orchestrated peak of Bia Kicis's posts.

A distinct peak observed on January 15th, illustrated in Chart 2 with approximately 1500 posts (purple line), reveals an orchestrated demonstration of the political utilisation of X. In this instance, a concerted effort in retweeting was apparent, with the original tweet celebrating the actions of the Health Ministry in solving the crisis in Manaus. This tweet, similarly, had additional retweets on January 17th.

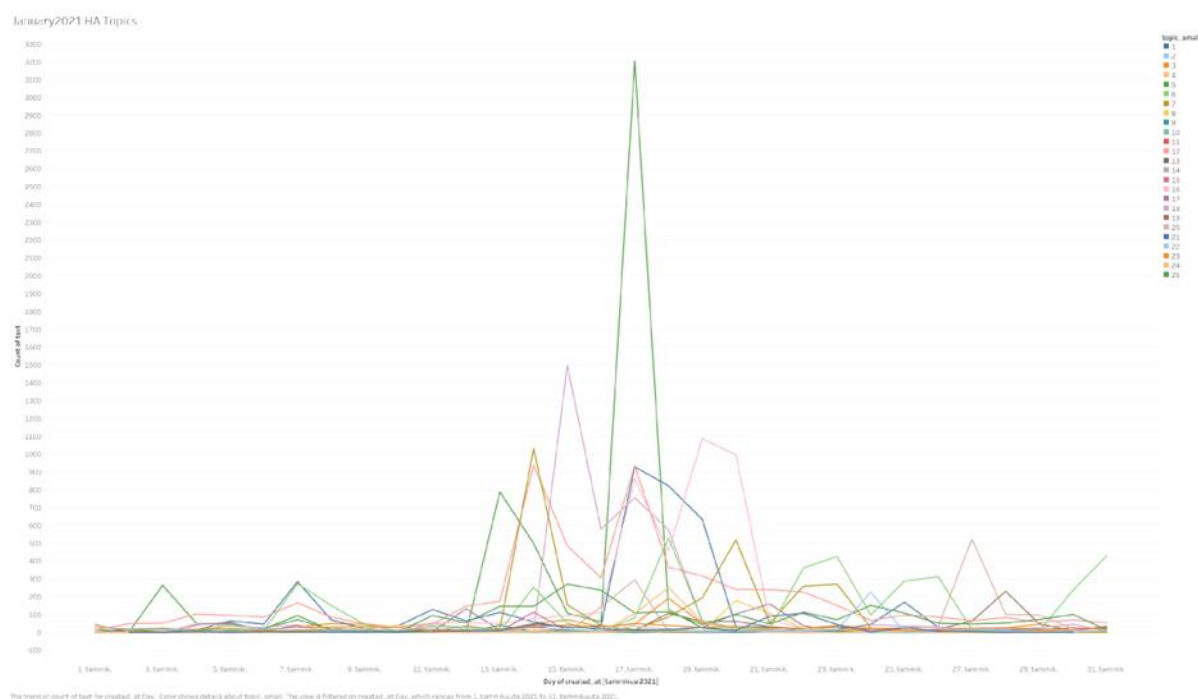


Chart 2: X's analysis (topic modeling $k=25$)

Another peak on January 19th, shown in Chart 2 with around 1100 posts (light-pink line), appears to be orchestrated, given the significant volume of retweets associated with a singular post. The retweeted message erroneously affirms that former Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello had never advocated for early treatment of COVID-19, a claim incongruent with factual information. It is important to note that, on several previous occasions, the Minister of Health and other members of the government, especially the president himself, have defended the use of hydroxychloroquine and other drugs proven to be ineffective against the virus.

A more diminutive peak emerged on January 17th, as depicted in Chart 2, featuring around 700 posts (light-pink line). This peak also hints at an orchestrated retweeting effort centred around a live stream conducted by Pazuello, during which he discussed the national vaccination efforts against COVID-19. Simultaneous tweets with nearly identical text and links to the live stream indicate that the orchestration involved more than just retweets. Other social networks and messaging applications, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, were used to engage and mobilize government supporters. This effort aimed to prevent vaccination news from gaining prominence on social media.

Discussions about vaccination were less prominent than those dominated by political figures and digital influencers associated with Bolsonaro's government. However, these actors played a significant role in retweeting and disseminating information that diverged from the primary focus of combating the pandemic through vaccination.

In São Paulo, the state led by João Doria, the initiation of the vaccination campaign is only evident in some minor peaks, primarily reflecting retweets on this topic. The state health authority tweeted about the first vaccination, but the Ministry did not retweet or give importance to the fact. This suggests significant control over the discourse by the "hate cabinet," a term used to describe the network of strategists close to the president. And, if we observe what happened in the first months of the pandemic when the scientific approach was the standard in the Ministry (that had another Minister), it is possible to understand that the political discourse "kidnapped" the official account of the Ministry.

Efforts to combat the pandemic in other states were similarly overshadowed by the volume of data and messages the president's supporters propagated on social media. This pattern is clear from the analysis of X data. These actions were likely coordinated outside of X, utilising platforms like Telegram or WhatsApp. This hypothesis is supported by the observation that initial retweets of certain tweets occurred mere seconds after their posting, a speed that is unlikely to be organic.

Conclusions

In light of the Brazilian federal government's lack of transparency regarding disseminating COVID-19 pandemic-related information and establishing the media consortium for information dissemination, newspapers serve as critical repositories of socio-political context, public health policies, and societal dynamics during the analysed period. Qualitative insights gleaned from newspapers enrich and validate quantitative data and offer a deeper understanding of the context surrounding the country's early vaccination efforts. This integrated approach emphasises the significance of leveraging diverse sources to comprehensively analyse public health interventions and societal responses.

Our analysis observed that the conflicts between the Nation and the Supranational States personified in the dispute between João Doria and Bolsonaro, which could be grasped from the newspaper's first pages, ended up reflecting on usage patterns and interaction on social media, more specifically on X. Supporters of the government orchestrated concerted efforts to maintain ideological cohesion by disseminating disinformation related to vaccines and scientific matters. Our collection and analysis of

data confirm this hypothesis. Furthermore, our findings suggest that these endeavours exemplify the government's use of social media platforms to construct their narratives, particularly by deploying diversionary tactics to hide its pandemic-related shortcomings.

It is important to stress that our analytical focus is confined to January 2021, a selection corresponding to the beginning of the vaccination efforts, mainly in São Paulo. A comprehensive examination of data about other temporal dimensions will bring opportunities to delve into additional dimensions, such as the diversity of vaccines employed, vaccination coverage rates, and the arguments used by Jair Bolsonaro to negate scientific facts and the efficacy of vaccines. Other future investigations can elucidate these multifaceted implications.

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Annex 1

Topic modeling (LDA): 25 topics – health authority mentions (@minsaude)

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8
por	com	minsaude	mais	saúde	vacina	com	brasil
minsaude	coronavírus	por	milhão	para	dose	ministro	caso
ser	para	morte	todo	profissional	contra	ter	coronavírus
teste	👤	número	dose	minsaude	milhão	pandemia	minsaude
hoje	casa	caso	vacina	covid19	mais	para	estar
dado	máscara	brasil	contra	coronavírus	receber	estar	R
rápido	sem	até	covid	ministério	fiocruz	hoje	B
esse	sair	dado	estado	saiba	astrazeneca	junto	suspeito
jairbolsonaro	como	já	distribuir	combate	lote	nosso	lhmandetta
total	precisar	covid19	distribuir	reforçar	produção	queiroga	haver
mil	por	paciente	fio	sus	brasil	nós	coronavirus
presidente	usar	registrar	segar	ser	novo	agora	confirmar
ter	prevenção	divulgar	este	enfrentamento	oxford	lhmandetta	até
município	minsaude	fonte	distribuição	pandemia	previsão	marcelo	mundo
estado	mão	segundo	enviar	trabalhar	chegar	minsaude	descartar

Topic 9	Topic 10	Topic 11	Topic 12	Topic 13	Topic 14	Topic 15	Topic 16
para	▶	B	não	you	dose	minsaude	que
ação	□	R	ter	seu	milhão	covid19	minsaude
covid19	caso	milhão	covid	saber	mais	mais	por
minsaude	óbito	👤	jairbolsonaro	sintoma	este	ser	ser
federal	atualizar	já	que	coronavírus	vacina	que	poder
governo	situação	dose	pandemia	como	pfizer	para	novo
virus	brasil	brasil	mas	coronavirus	mil	por	cloroquina
combate	confirmar	vacina	só	dever	semana	com	uso
mais	saiba	aplicar	morrer	ministério	entregar	vez	tratamento
bilhão	coronavirus	vacinação	nem	ter	chegar	número	hidroxicloroquina
laboratório	coronavírus	todo	querer	família	último	passar	mostrar
diagnóstico	httpstcofih1trftnx	urgente	esse	saúde	ser	dia	protocolo
ampliar	acompanhamento	covid19	isso	httpstcouym3jlicga	imunizante	cada	risco
enfrentamento	confira	mqueiroga2	ele	forma	covid	testar	precoce
liberar	plataforma	brasileiro	muito	fazer	até	não	vir

Topic 17	Topic 18	Topic 19	Topic 20	Topic 21	Topic 22	Topic 23	Topic 24	Topic 25
minsaude	covid19	com	para	minsaude	minsaude	ser	mais	covid19
sobre	ser	contra	com	covid19	covid19	que	covid19	para
para	estado	ser	leito	sobre	govbr	estar	minsaude	ser
combate	desde	vacinação	paciente	brasil	medicamento	fazer	brasil	tratamento
ser	início	covid19	uti	coronavírus	mineconomia	minsaude	para	médico
coronavírus	mais	ano	novo	confira	insumo	não	todo	com
estar	todo	vacinar	mil	ministro	equipamento	esse	estado	orientação
além	governo	primeiro	covid19	dado	combate	isso	govbr	contra
mctic	vida	dia	atendimento	informação	diário	por	receber	sempre
grande	enviar	peessoa	minsaude	são	oficial	já	teichnelson	cuidado
outro	brasileiro	rio	grave	hoje	teste	"	município	manter
haver	federal	prefeiturario	unidade	aovivo	cerca	"	respirador	sintoma
doença	grande	bom	este	paulo	governo	pra	saiba	procurar
parceria	campanha	segundo	exclusivo	pazuello	até	população	reforço	continuar
informar	distribuição	cidade	autorizar	atualização	enviar	hora	quase	poder

“...Cannot Be Too Picky...!” Populist Features of Viktor Orbán’s Figure in Caricatures⁵

Ágnes Virág

Abstract

This article analyzes populist features in international and national political cartoons depicting the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, published from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020. Qualitative content analysis is applied to describe populism and populist leadership rendered in political cartoons with the help of Moffitt’s (2016) concept and major categories. These populist features are arranged along four decisive categories that are ordinariness, extraordinariness, bad manners, and enemy creation. First, present results are compared to previous studies (Farkas & Bene, 2022) on Orbán’s official Facebook posts; thus, differences in the representation of populist features in positive and negative branding become perceivable. Secondly, the national and the international parts of the corpus are compared, as it is assumed that the understanding of a populist leader differs even in the context of negative branding. In sum, while Facebook posts put forward positive statements on ordinariness (he is one of us) and extraordinariness (he is better than us) and avoid presenting negative characteristics, political cartoons tend to deny positive features and are more likely to demonstrate Orbán’s bad manners and enemy creation. International cartoons tend to magnify the role of the politician (e.g., by comparing him to Hitler), while Hungarian cartoons minimize it (e.g., by emasculating him).

Keywords: political cartoons, Hungary, populist features, positive branding, negative branding

Introduction

In Hungarian political cartoons, Viktor Orbán has been one of the most popular figures since the very beginning of his political career (Argejő, 2003). The few research on his visual appearance to this day inquire into his official profile representing the Prime Minister on social media platforms such as Facebook (Farkas & Bene, 2022) and Instagram (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022) in the context of the concept of populism (Laclau, 2005a; Moffitt, 2016; Panizza, 2005). Further on the study will not consider populism as ideology (Mudde, 2007), as a political logic (Laclau, 2005a), as discourse (Laclau, 2005b), or as strategy (Weyland, 2001), instead, it prioritizes stylistic elements that can be grasped visually and

⁵ Cite as: Virág, Á. (2024). “...Cannot Be Too Picky...!” Populist Features of Viktor Orbán’s Figure in Caricatures. In K. Carrilho, L. Horsmanheimo, & K. Linnamäki (Eds.), *Reflections on emotions, populism and polarisation: HEPP3 conference proceedings* (pp. 44-62). University of Helsinki. *The HEPPsinki working papers on emotions, populism and polarisation*, 3(1).

verbally (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016). According to Moffitt and Tormey's (2014, p. 394) definition, populism is understood as a political style with 'a repertoire of performative features which cuts across different political situations that are used to create political relations.' After examining a number of case studies written about populist leaders, using inductive theories of populism, the authors (2014, pp. 391-394) defined three main elements of the populist style (detailed in Table 1): the evocation of the People, crisis, breakdown, and threat, and finally, 'bad manners'. In their content analysis, Farkas and Bene (2022) applied Moffitt's definition and typology to analyze Orbán's Facebook posts (2018-2020) which were dominated by the category of *people vs the elite*, it was followed by the presentation of the *crisis, collapse, and threat*, while the third category of *bad manners* (rudeness and slang) was completely absent from the Facebook posts. The feasibility of the comparison between the corpus of Facebook posts and political cartoons requires that we use Moffitt's typology.

In order to see the differences between positive and negative branding, another research should be mentioned. In Instagram posts (from 2019), Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022) pointed out that Viktor Orbán is represented as a busy and hard-working politician, who always wears a suit and a tie. He is photographed as a manly man by referring to the *military, engaged in football, and eating red meat*. He appears as a *nationalistic leader* in front of a map of Greater Hungary, and *as an internationally leading right-wing statesman* together with other right-wing politicians important in world politics. According to the authors, Orbán's authenticity was mostly created by conveying consistency and ordinariness suggesting reliability, security, and stability. *Enemy creation*, however, was not present in the posts at all. We assume that, unlike genres criticizing the Prime Minister, these official profiles highlight different qualities because they use the technique of positive branding (i.e., Moufahim, 2022; Pich & Newman, 2021).

Political cartoon as a genre, however, can be discussed in the context of negative branding (i.a., Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991) as it usually wants to criticize one or more politicians and aims to highlight the weaknesses of the mocked ones. Research on political cartoons often focuses on politicians considered populist by political science and/or the media. Among others, Geert Wilders (Forceville & van de Laar, 2019), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Aviv, 2013), Vladimir Putin (Mikhailova, 2015) and Volodymyr Zelensky (Semotiuk, 2023), or Donald Trump (Seredina & Dekhnich, 2022) are represented the most often. Even though these studies examine a single political figure, their goals differ significantly. There are only a few articles on political cartoons (Grdešić, 2017; Herkman, 2019; Vladisavljević & Krstić, 2023) which specifically study the phenomenon of populism or populist features. These authors discuss among common populist characteristics extreme nationalism, nativism linked to fascism and Nazism, in addition, they mention chauvinism, xenophobic or hostile behavior.

Even though the literature on political science and political communication calls Orbán a populist (e.g., Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), Viktor Orbán's visual/multimodal populist features are scarcely studied, with even fewer analyses of his negative branding. The studies classified here scrutinize conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymies linked to Orbán's figure. For instance, the most dominant metaphorical frames including his figure (Virág & Szabó, 2022), his changing metaphorical conceptualization between 1989 and 2019 (Virág, 2023a), his masculine features

compared to Putin's (Virág, 2023b) have been discussed, while another corpus study (Virág, 2024 forthcoming) revealed the joint metaphorical representation of Orbán and the EU/EU subsidies.

The scope of this study covers the populist visual and verbal features linked to Orbán's character in political cartoons, international and national ones. Thereby the research extends the theory and methodology of the already mentioned empirical study (Farkas & Bene, 2022). Beyond all these, this research makes the populist characteristics used in positive branding (Facebook posts) and negative branding (political cartoons) comparable, and furthermore, an international and a Hungarian corpus is also compared. The study aims to answer two major questions:

- 1) What are the similarities and differences regarding populist features in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts and Hungarian political cartoons depicting him, published from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences regarding populist features in international and national political cartoons depicting Viktor Orbán, published from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020?

Due to genre-specific features, it is hypothesized that *Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts contain positive branding* through the expression of ordinariness and extraordinariness while avoiding the expression of bad manners and the frightening emphasis on crises. In contrast, *political cartoons exaggerate populist characteristics* (in a negative or positive direction) to *create negative branding*, thereby discrediting the leader's persona.

Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that *international and national political cartoons diverge as regards Viktor Orbán's image by distributing populist features differently*. In international political cartoons, Viktor Orbán's role is magnified through populist features, while in Hungarian political cartoons, his role is downplayed by the same.

Theoretical background of populism and its visible characteristics

The research itself is embedded in visual political communication; and, at some point, it also works with comparative political characteristics.

Populism is understood here, following Benjamin Moffitt (2016), as a category used by social sciences extended to discursive, rhetorical, and aesthetic aspects. It is considered a political style mediated through symbols, disseminated through the mass media, and performed through verbal and non-verbal modes of communication.

It is performative (a thing that is done, embodied, and enacted), and it can be featured by three major categories (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016), namely, (1) 'the People' vs 'the Elite', (2) bad manners, and (3) the advancing of a narrative of a crisis, a breakdown, or a threat. As for the first category, 'the People vs the Elite' implies two further categories, that is, ordinariness and extraordinariness. According to Moffitt (2016), populism can refer to a movement, a political party, a leader, or even a regime. Moffitt refuses the idea of the leader as an empty signifier, and states, instead, that the leader as an 'overflowing signifier' can refer to at least two different concepts. 'S/he is like me' highlights ordinariness,

while 's/he is better than me' refers to the leader's extraordinariness. What is more, the elite is not necessarily considered as the demonic evil, the cause of all trouble. Hence, 'the People vs the Elite' is such a slippery category in which the populist actor is able to side with the People or the elite. In Moffitt and Tormey's (2014, pp. 392-394) interpretation, populists do not care about their appropriate behavior, they rather like using tabloid or low style including slang, swearing, political incorrectness, and overly demonstrative expressions, they directly go against other stylistic elements such as rigidity, rationality, and technocratic language. Applying the third category, the emphasis on emergency situation (linked to immigration, economic difficulties, or military threat among others) the populists can simplify complicated situations and suggests simple solutions. Populists usually apply more elements of more categories at the same time, the use of a single element of any categories does not make someone a populist.

Besides its performativity, populism is also characterized as relational, that is, built upon the relationship between the leader and the People. In our case, People as such can be shown and depicted directly, but can disappear and become hidden, embodied by the reader. It is claimed that the reader co-playing with the cartoonist can be considered as the People. That differentiation will make sense when two types of the leader's performative expressions toward the People are distinguished. The first is shown in the cartoon directly, and the second keeps the People (namely, the reader) hidden, thus, appearing indirectly.

Moffitt's theory presupposes a gradational approach to populism (namely, there are more and less populist leaders, movements, political parties, etc.). In this research, binary approach was applied which was more favorable in terms of data management, and if a feature was present, it was marked with 'yes', while if missing, with 'no'.

The corpus and methodology

The corpus consists of caricatures, and it is worth saying a few thoughts about this genre that also influence the research. First, Hungarian political cartoons have a special audience (which is politically polarized, mostly belonging to the political left wing with social democratic and liberal attitudes), and it can be stated that there are no political cartoons from the political right (for instance, conservative) side. What is more, there are only 2-3 active political cartoonists who are aged 60 years on the average. Nevertheless, it is claimed that all these political cartoons are capable of summarizing the most important news and hot topics of the Hungarian media. However, it is not claimed that they would be objective or would strive for historical fidelity. Political cartoons, in general, criticize more and more the actors' individual features, especially of those in power, in a humorous, spicy, or stinging way and therefore, they speak quite freely but, at the same time, they are also entertaining (since the reader does not have to take them seriously).

The emphasis on populist characteristics (see Table 1) is common in caricatures, perhaps because these are stereotypical qualities of politicians, and caricatures tend to bring stereotypical traits to the fore. Besides, it is also stated that political cartoons depict populist features of Viktor Orbán by

exaggerating or downplaying these, on the one hand, because they are extreme (visually and verbally), and, on the other, because those became his most stereotypical, well-known, and regularly cited features.

As for political cartoons as a genre, we must note that ambiguity is an important feature in them. What interests us now is that, as opposed to official profiles, political cartoons often use irony based on opposite value judgements. It means that while a cartoon is asserting something (e.g., that the leader is listening to someone from among the people), the cartoonist is trying to get the reader to interpret the scene as the exact opposite (e.g., that the people's voice is not heard at all). This genre-specific feature must be taken into account when we extend the theoretical background and method of analyzing Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts to caricatures in order to be able to compare the characteristics of populist features (in the official and critical media, and in international and national platforms). This is important because, in the case of populist characteristics, it must be indicated during the analysis whether the statement is positive or ironic (e.g., denial).

The corpus of this pilot research included 80 political cartoons from three corpuses:

- international political cartoons (40 items) collected using the keyword 'orban' from a digital database⁶, which has already been used by other researchers in political caricature research (e.g., Godioli and Pedrazzini, 2019).
- national political cartoons from two cartoonists (40 items) retrieved manually using the criterion of the verbal or visual representation of Viktor Orbán:
 - Marabu (20 items selected from the total corpus of 106 items) from the platform *HVG online* where he regularly publishes political cartoons⁷ and
 - Gábor Pápai (20 items selected from the total corpus of 228 items) from the cartoonist's own blog which is updated on a daily basis⁸.

The idea was to have an international and a national corpus of an equal number of data, but the entire research project includes a full analysis of the national corpus. The studied period, that is, January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020, followed the period determined by Farkas and Bene (2022) for comparative reasons, but currently, this is one of the limits of the study, and later the analysis can be extended to the consequent period up till now. Hence, the two periods, that is, the three-year time intervals, would also become comparable and shed light on changes in populist characteristics, too.

As for the methodology, content analysis was carried out using Moffitt's refined typology (2016) based on Farkas and Bene (2022). The codebook accordingly included four major categories, that is, ordinariness, extraordinariness, bad manners, and the enemy. Table 1 shows that not all the categories had equal numbers of subcategories (ordinariness and extraordinariness had the most). More subcategories can be associated with a single political cartoon. At the same time, it is also apparent

⁶ <https://politicalcartoons.com/>

⁷ <https://hvg.hu/cs/Marabu%20F%C3%A9kNy%C3%BAz>

⁸ <https://papaiqabor.wordpress.com/>

that some of the subcategories are marked by P or C, meaning pro and contra. In the case of pro, the statement is positive, while contra refers to the opposing meaning of the statement (irony).

Ordinariness (18 subcat.)	Extraordinariness (15 subcat.)	Bad manners (2 subcat.)	Enemy (10 subcat.)
Physical closeness	Refusal of engaging experts	Slang	Migrants
People's support (P/C)	Representation of celebrities	Political incorrectness	Brussels
People's voice (P/C)	Other populist leaders		György Soros
Performative expr. (P/C/Cin)	Leader's fitness (P/C)		Gergely Karácsony
Performative rituals	Leader's masculinity (P/C)		Covid-19
Countryside	Gratification (P/C)		Elites
Ordinary meals and beverages	Leader's productivity (P/C)		Other enemies
Ordinary activities	Mediatization (P/C)		Media
The leader's family	Wealthy environment		Fence
Animals	Elite		Threat
Sport			
Informal attire			
National symbol			
Religious symbol			

Table 1: Categories with the respective subcategories from the codebook used

We can clarify the difference between P and C through a few simple examples: the joint representation of people and the Prime Minister, and their physical closeness does not necessarily mean intimacy. By contrast, it could also refer to their being distanced conceptually and ideologically. In the same way, the physical presence of people could refer not only to their supporting the Prime Minister but also to their opposing ideas. In some cases, when the people's voice could have been heard (by the reader), it was not heard, or it was directly rejected by the Prime Minister. Performative expressions can be embodied and expressed toward the people (the latter being supportive). Other times, performative expressions can highlight that the Prime Minister acts against the people represented, and finally, performative expressions can also be indirect and reveal the Prime Minister's backstage activities. These performative expressions target the reader itself.

Based on these ambiguous categories, we can state that ordinariness (the major category itself) can be positive, in fact referring to a more intimate relationship between the people and the leader. As opposed to this, ordinariness can also be negatively represented when closeness and intimacy, or its false character is negated.

There is another important addition regarding subcategories. The author wished to make as few changes as possible to the subcategories compared to Farkas and Bene's study (2022). However, it should be noted that neither the subcategory of animals, nor that of sports indicated ordinariness in the corpus of political cartoons. Regarding the subcategory of national symbols, it can be stated that their use was not ideological in international political cartoons (e.g., evoking nationalistic emotions), but it rather aimed to identify the politician.

Results and discussion

Looking at the four major categories (as the Diagram 1 shows), extraordinariness was the most dominant category both in international (190 %) and national (213 %) political cartoons. However, it is an important finding that its denial was predominant in both cases (in IntPCs it was 103 %, while in NPCs 133 %). Therefore, political cartoons questioned the concept, by asserting the exceptionality of Viktor Orbán's character. The second most frequent category was ordinariness (in IntPCs, 169 %, while in NPCs it was 183 %). Just like in the case of extraordinariness, national political cartoons tended to deny the ordinary character of Viktor Orbán as well. Negation appeared in 110 % of national political cartoons (while only 73 % claimed his ordinariness). As for ordinariness, the international corpus was more balanced. The number of political cartoons denying the Prime Minister's ordinary character and those asserting it was approximately equal.

Unlike Farkas and Bene's study on Facebook posts (2022), the other two categories, that is, bad manners and enemy creation, were also present in significant numbers in the corpus. However, it can be observed in Diagram 1 that the two corpuses differed significantly because the national corpus highlighted the Prime Minister's bad manners more (125% vs 56%), while the international corpus preferred to emphasize Viktor Orbán's enemy creation (110% vs 55%).

In what follows, each of the main categories will be examined through one example for each from the national corpus.

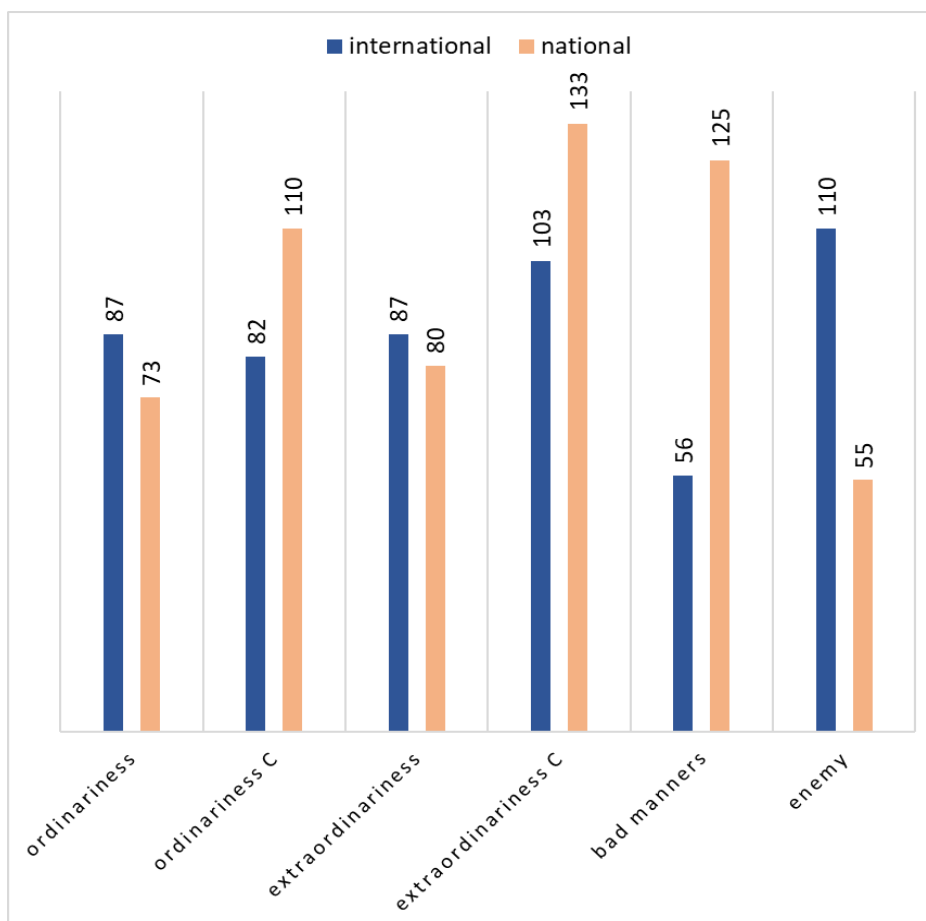


Diagram 1: Major categories in the international and in the national corpuses (%)

Ordinariness

In the case of ordinariness, the most decisive subcategory in the entire corpus was the indirect negation of performative expressions, while national symbols were quite frequently used, too. International political cartoons grasped ordinariness by representing Viktor Orbán in informal attire (15 %) and by negating the people’s voice (8 %).

Hungarian political cartoons also tended to express the denial of people’s voice (18 %), and it is noteworthy that some subcategories were present only in the national corpus. These are ordinary activities (10 %), the leader’s family (3 %), people’s support (3 %), people’s voice (3 %), performative rituals (3 %), and countryside (3 %). Therefore, in terms of ordinariness, the Hungarian corpus presented many more characteristics than the international one. This may also be due to the emphasis on domestic political matters. The denial of the performative expression of Viktor Orbán’s character was stronger than in the international corpus and it also means that Hungarian cartoonists more often revealed the leader’s “true face” by showing up his performative expressions against the people. One of its examples is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 presents Viktor Orbán extending his arms and smiling, his mimicry and posture seeming very positive, with an open, almost a welcoming gesture. What he says ('We do not have any problem with C, that can stay.') is actually positive. He talks about what 'we' can accept, but the reader should interpret it ironically. These verbal and visual performative expressions are creating two enemies, the EU and the CEU (Central European University). It seems that all three people depicted in the cartoon are going to leave, and therefore, Orbán's productivity can also be interpreted as a denial which failed. Overall, despite the positive, friendly and open expression, the political cartoon expresses a strong criticism on the ordinariness, more precisely, on the proximity of the Prime Minister.

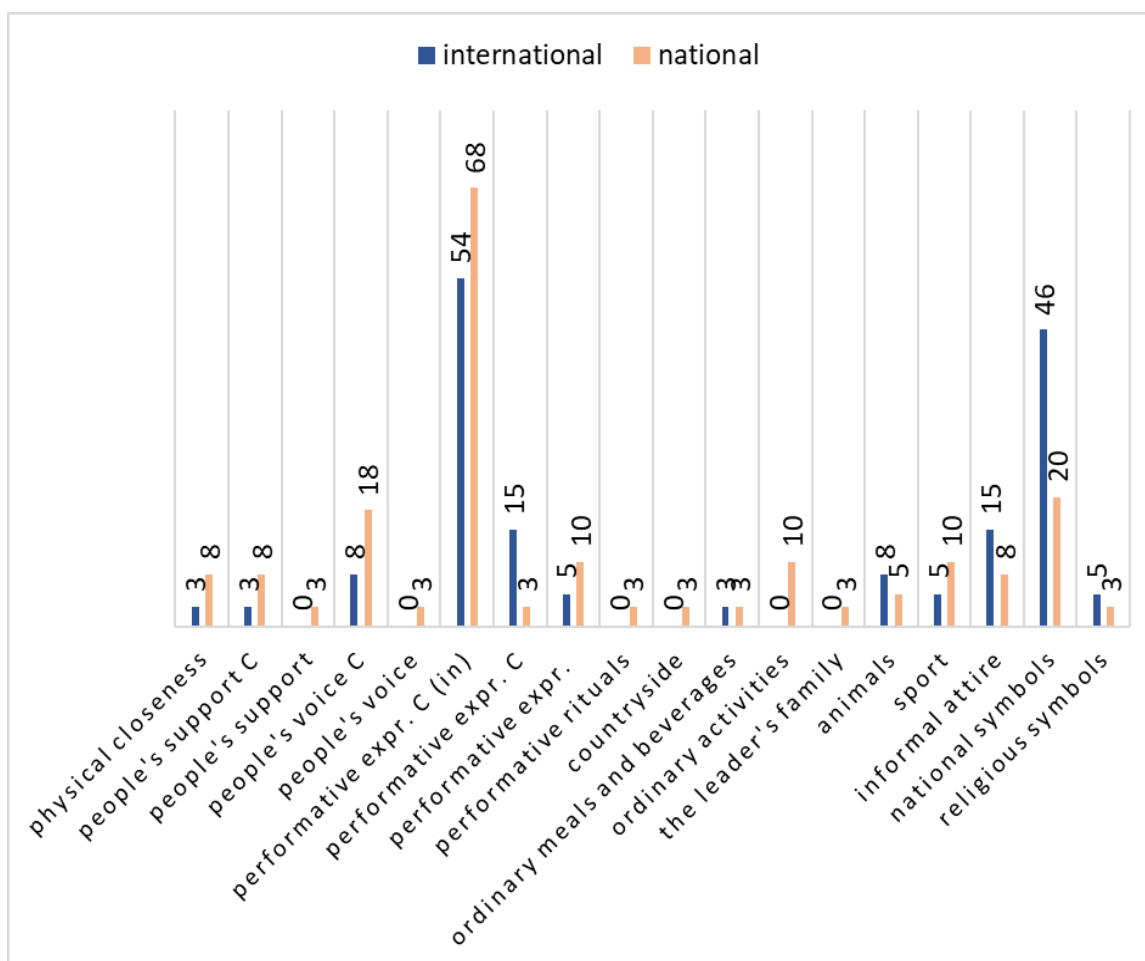


Diagram 2: Comparison of the category of ordinariness (%)



Figure 1: Drawn by Marabu, 5.12.2018. Translation: “We do not have any problem with C, that can stay!”

Figure 1 is characterized by the following subcategories:

- Performative expr. C (in)
- The leader’s productivity C
- Other enemies: EU, CEU.

Extraordinariness

Diagram 3 shows that extraordinariness was mostly presented by denying the leader’s productivity and also through the representation of his masculinity. The international and national corpuses differed significantly. The international corpus mainly presented Viktor Orbán by exaggerating his masculine features, and it was often complemented by placing him among other populist leaders (e.g., Emmanuel Macron, Donald Trump, Theresa May, Matteo Salvini, Jean-Marie Le Pen, among others). In addition to all these, sometimes even his physical fitness was emphasized, which is an absolute nonsense and does not correspond to reality.

Although the Hungarian corpus mostly criticized Orbán’s productivity, his body shape was frequently ridiculed by emasculating his character. His fitness was denied, and he was depicted as a much too fat person, with his masculinity also questioned (for instance, Figure 2 shows him with a micropenis-like tie). Hungarian cartoonists chose the images of celebrities and the elite (advisors and persons close to the Party) instead of populist leaders to depict the leader’s closer company and the rewarding of their co-operation.

Figure 2 is a characteristic example of how Hungarian political cartoons are mocking the leader's fitness, masculinity, and criticize his productivity (according to the political cartoon, he does not take part in solving migration problems, and transfers the responsibility to the people). In this case, his productivity is criticized ironically: the Prime Minister shows a thumbs-up (meaning that something good and joyful is happening, and he is satisfied with the result), while, at the same time, he verbally expresses that no more immigrants can be allowed to enter the country, not even children, because the Hungarians would not believe 'us'. He speaks up and casually blurts out that they kept lying to the people about migration and that is why people do not believe their leaders anymore. The confession of the lies was marked with political incorrectness, all the more so because the thumbs-up also confirmed that actually this was the political goal. In addition to the thumbs-up, he puts one hand in his pocket, which also expresses superiority and self-confidence. Overall, the political cartoon is an expression and critique of the anti-migrant policy (thus, migrants feature among the enemies).

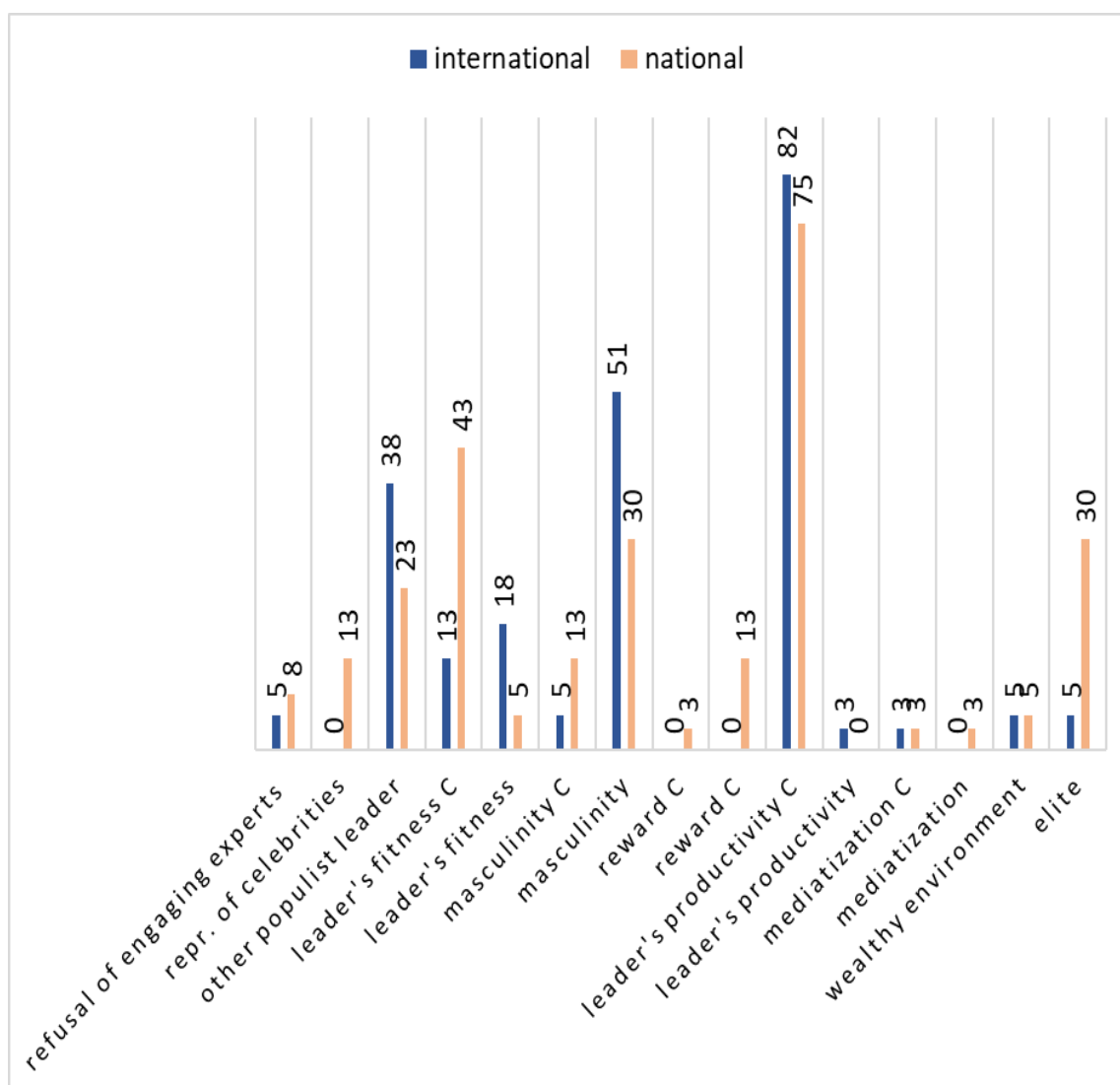


Diagram 3: Comparison of the category of extraordinariness (%)



Figure 2: Drawn by Gábor Pápai, 25.1.2018. Title: 1300. Translation: "People do not want to welcome migrants and they do not want them in their villages. We have already lied so much about migrants that people would not believe that only kids are to come..."

Figure 2 is characterized by the following subcategories:

- People's voice C
- Performative expression C
- Leader's fitness C
- Masculinity C
- Leader's productivity C
- Slang
- Political incorrectness
- Migrant.

Bad manners

The category of bad manners was represented in two forms, by using slang, and also by displaying a politically incorrect behavior. Although bad manners appeared in both corpuses, the national corpus criticized Orbán much more (125 % vs 56 %), primarily referring to political incorrectness, and secondly, to the use of slang.

Looking at Figure 3, it is visible that the cartoonist used sports as a metaphorical frame, where the Parliament is a football pitch, Orbán appears as the goalkeeper of one (or the mere) football team who practically blocks any goal from being scored with his table by making it impossible for the other party (if there is any) to play. Visually, it immediately becomes clear that the player is using a device that is not suitable for the game and uses it in an inappropriate way. He seems to play the game according to different (special) rules. In addition, the red chair and the table highlight his figure, reminds one of a

throne, and, on the other hand, the two hands on the table refer to determination, unshakable strength, and decisiveness. As for the verbal part of the cartoon, Orbán’s character (just like the Hungarian government) uses the term ‘Extraordinary legal order’. According to the Fundamental Law, there is no such concept. There are crisis situations when different legal orders come into force, for example a special legal order. Since the conditions of none of the crisis situations apply, no special legal orders could have been implemented. Anyhow, the introduction of any legal order may limit fundamental rights. ‘Extraordinary’ as a rhetorical term is exaggerated and evokes a crisis situation. As the government has always used this term and kept on prolonging the extraordinary legal order since the Covid, its extraordinary nature became commonplace by now. Under the extraordinary legal order, the Parliament has no decision-making rights, and legislation is completely transferred to the government (laws made in such a situation are valid for 90 days). By saying ‘All extraordinary legal order is extraordinary only at the beginning. As we are used to it, then it is just legal order’, Orbán’s character takes the role of an authoritarian and sole decision-maker, while other members of the Parliament, that is, the opposition parties, become enemies. Due to the elimination of the opponents by illegal means in a multi-party system, the political cartoon was marked with the category of political incorrectness.

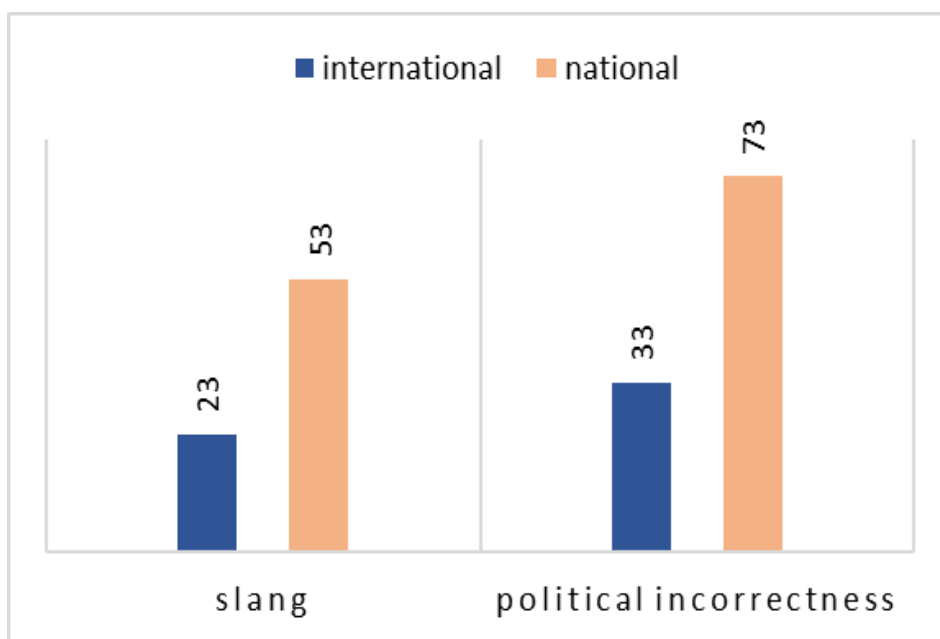


Diagram 4: Comparison of the category of bad manners (%)



Figure 3: Drawn by Marabu, 1.4.2020. Translation: “All extraordinary legal order is extraordinary only at the beginning”, “As we are used to it, then it is just legal order.”

Figure 3 is characterized by the following subcategories:

- Performative expression C (in)
- Sport (football)
- National symbol
- Leader’s productivity C
- Political incorrectness
- Other enemies: opposition parties.

Enemy creation

Our last category investigated in the corpus, namely the creation of enemies occurs much more often in the international corpus (110 % of the corpus referred to some sort of enemies), while 55 % of the Hungarian sample referred to enemies. The international corpus was more diverse in that sense. In Farkas and Bene’s list (2022), these cartoons showed migrants, threat, Covid-19, and the media, then Brussels, György Soros, and the elites, and finally, the fence referring to any sort of enemies thereby creating a dangerous situation, and also the role of a hero, namely the person who is able to overcome the danger. In the subcategory of other enemies, international cartoons referred to the EU, its organization, the European Parliament, or its representatives such as Angela Merkel or Jean-Claude Juncker. Beside the EU, liberals and liberal values were also among the enemies.

The enemy most often referred to in the Hungarian corpus was the EU (in general), but it sometimes also labelled the opposition and the liberal values as an unwanted adversary. Figure 4 accurately recalls the photo (in Figure 5) taken at the Turkic Council in Baku (2019) where Orbán congratulated former

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev for a high-ranking award. Nazarbayev is the honorary President of the Cumans (also known as Kipchak), and Orbán also hinted that “there are Kipchaks in Hungary, many Hungarians have Kipchak blood in their veins”. Thus, in fact, he evoked the historical and genetic kinship which can be extended to the diplomatic relations between Hungary and Kazakhstan. The political cartoon (Figure 4), on the other hand, also reminds us of another kinship, namely the Finnish-Hungarian language kinship: “And they wanted to impose the Finnish fish-smelling democracy on us.” The Finnish-Hungarian kinship metonymically stands for democracy which, according to Orbán’s character, is undesirable (smelling like fish). It is not explained, but Eastern kinship is suspected to refer to a system other than democracy. The enemy itself is not clear, it is merely expressed by the word ‘they’ in the sentence told by Orbán’s character. In the very same period, the EU adopted its conclusions on democracy⁹ and it is quite probable that the juxtaposition of the two kinships (Finnish and Kipchak) contrasts the democratic legal order represented by the EU with the Kazakh political system. The EU warned Kazakhstan and published an open statement because of the actions of the Kazakh leadership against the Democratic Party, the NGOs, and the demonstrators.¹⁰ So we can conclude that when Orbán’s character says ‘they’ forced us, he means the EU.

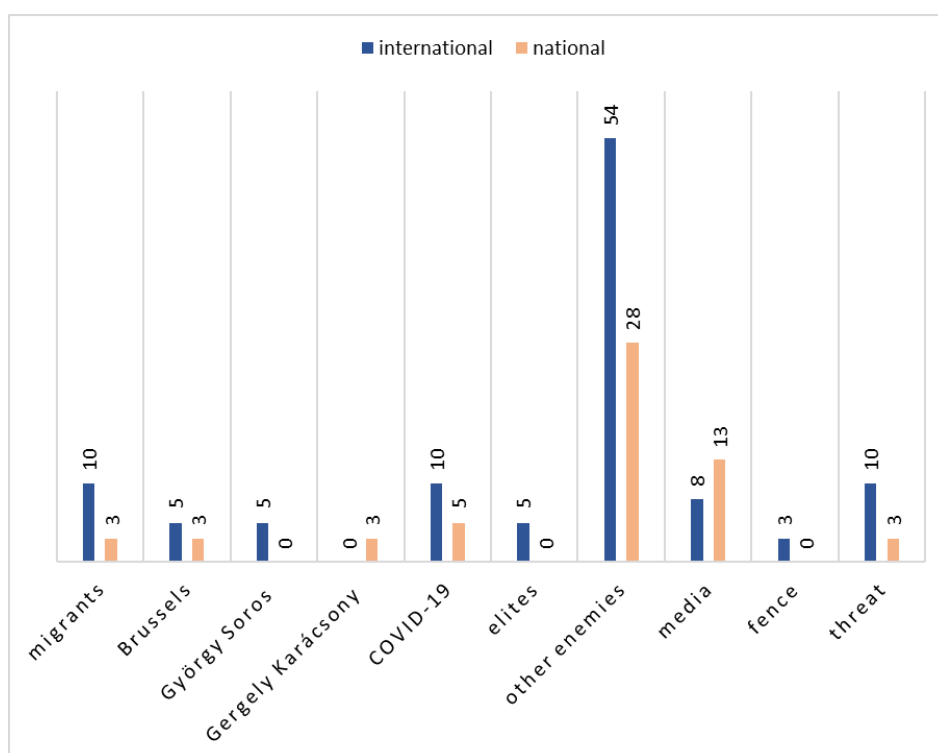


Diagram 5: Comparison of the category of enemy creation (%)

⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/14/democracy-eu-adopts-conclusions/>

¹⁰ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0056_EN.html



Figure 4: Drawn by Marabu, 16.10.2019. Title: Turkic Council 2019. Translation: "And they wanted to impose the Finnish fish-smelling democracy on us", "Uh, bloody Kipchaks. It is outrageous. Disgusting."

Figure 4 is characterized by the following subcategories:

- Performative expression C (in)
- Elite
- Slang
- Other enemies: the EU.



Figure 5: The Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Turkic Council Summit in Baku on October 15, 2019, Photo by Vivien Cher Benkő, MTI

Conclusion

The corpus research compared international and national political cartoons to a corpus of Facebook posts from the period between 2018 and 2020 by analyzing the verbal and visual populist features linked to the persona of Viktor Orbán. Applying Moffitt's refined typology (Farkas & Bene, 2022), it was claimed that political cartoons mostly denied Orbán's extraordinariness and also his ordinariness in the context of negative branding, while strengthening his bad manners and his idea on enemy creation. Within the category of extraordinariness, Orbán's productivity and masculinity were questioned, while within the category of ordinariness, his performative expressions turned out to be false (e.g., a greeting gesture expressed just the opposite, that is, farewell).

Comparing the international and the national corpuses, they differed in the quantity of negations, as national political cartoons were more negative regarding both ordinariness and exceptionality. The performative character of populism was significant in both corpuses. The two corpuses also differed in their focuses on the last two categories. While the international corpus placed more emphasis on enemy creation, political cartoons from the Hungarian corpus rather questioned whether there is any enemy at all. Perhaps also because of the linguistic possibilities, the Hungarian corpus confirmed that the Prime Minister uses slang and is politically incorrect.

The research demonstrated that several populist features can be attributed to one and the same politician (this time Viktor Orbán), appearing in different ways and in diverse modes. These characteristics can interact with and reinforce each other. For instance, in Figure 2, Orbán's extraordinariness was negated, and his bad manners presented. All these rather cast a shadow on his figure. Other times, populist features appearing in political cartoons can contradict each other. Typically, it is the case when the negative feature discredits the positive statement. For instance, in Figure 1, where the welcoming gesture of ordinariness is counteracted (or more precisely, turned into absurdity, a farce) by introducing enemy creation (the enemy being the EU and the CEU). The inclusion of populist qualities, both colluding and opposing ones, follows from the genre of the political cartoon, which often poses an intellectual riddle to the reader. In contrast to positive branding, which suggests, affirms, and asserts mostly in a metonymic way, negative branding applies the strategies of questioning and denial.

In addition to the joint presence of populist characteristics, it has also become noticeable that certain patterns keep reoccurring regarding Orbán's figure. If we accept that political cartoons reflect the hot topics of the media, then, based on different patterns of the national and international corpus, we can assume that the national and the international perceptions of Orbán differ significantly in terms of populist characteristics (for similar results, see Domínguez & Mateu, 2013). However, it would also be necessary to examine the hot topics of the media to substantiate the merits of this assumption. This issue is open for further research. Similarly, we could gain an international outlook if it were possible to compare caricaturist figures of several politicians considered to be populists. This would be a particularly exciting research project in the context of an international collaboration.

Other limitations mentioned can be resolved by analyzing the entire Hungarian corpus (including 334 political cartoons). It might be worth balancing the entire corpus because one of the cartoonists has

twice as many drawings in the corpus which has a significant distorting effect. The other question is whether populist characteristics associated with Orbán's figure have changed over the years. To answer this question, it would be necessary to compile and examine a corpus which, in terms of its characteristics (e.g., source, quantity, and time period) can be compared to the present corpus. In the next period, the research will focus on these last two questions.

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Political Theology and Political Hauntology: About the Logic of Populism in Laclau through Schmitt¹¹

Alessandro Volpi

Abstract

The aim of the work is to explore the logic of the populist phenomenon by analysing the analogies between Ernesto Laclau's political hauntology (as O. Marchart defined it using the Derridean concept) and the Political Theology as theorized by Carl Schmitt. Since there is not a direct influence of the German jurist on the Argentinian political theorist my paper doesn't take the form of a historical and philological analysis, but instead the one of a theoretical comparison. I will read on the "double movement" in Laclau's theory between the deconstruction of the social totality and the moment of political institution in light of the Schmittian Political, as a moment of ungrounding decision. In both Laclau's and Schmitt's reconstructions of the relation between ontology/metaphysics and politics can be found the idea of the "presence of an absence" (of God or of the social foundation) which haunts the secularized modernity.

Keywords: political theology, populism, political hauntology, Carl Schmitt, Ernesto Laclau, the Political, post-foundationalism

Introduction

As recognized in the field of populist studies, Ernesto Laclau's work represents the most important attempt at an authentic philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon of populism. The reason is that it starts from an ontological point of view, not from the empirical cases, and not only to understand the populist phenomenon but also to show what populism as logic can tell us about the Political as such. The Political, in its general sense, is not reducible to populism, but populism – in Laclau's words – "is the royal road to understand something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (Laclau, 2005, p. 67). If we assume that, then the theoretical framework through which we think populism is the same as the one we use for the Political in a general sense. This can be clearly seen in Laclau if we consider that, even though some theoretical innovations that we find in *On populist reason*, the fundamental categories of his reading of populism have been forged as early as *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but especially in the works of the 90's (Most of them are published in Laclau, 1996 and 1990), which in my opinion are the most important. Given this, then, when we think within Laclau's

¹¹ Cite as: Volpi, A. (2024). Political Theology and Political Hauntology: About the Logic of Populism in Laclau through Schmitt. In K. Carrilho, L. Horsmanheimo, & K. Linnamäki (Eds.), *Reflections on emotions, populism and polarisation: HEPP3 conference proceedings* (pp. 63-69). University of Helsinki. *The HEPPsinki working papers on emotions, populism and polarisation*, 3(1).

theoretical “anti-system”, we can overlap the concepts of the Political and populism, to think of a common political ontology, or, as we will see, a political hauntology.¹²

In my paper I will try to show one aspect of this fundamental logic of the Political/populism, an aspect that I believe is necessary to understand Laclau’s political philosophy and to place it within the modern philosophical-political-legal tradition. In particular, I agree with Antonio Rivera García, when he writes that just like Schmitt, also Laclau (and Mouffe likewise) follow the “decisionistic line” of modernity as opposed to the normative one (Rivera García, 2015, p. 33). The hypothesis I propose in this paper is that Schmitt’s modern political theology and Laclau’s political hauntology share the same basic theoretical framework. In both cases we are faced with a double movement where the grounding is given as a presence of an absence, and the lack of foundation grounds the political and the social. In this sense, the spectrality of the hauntological foundation – whose post-structuralist and Heideggerian matrix is often highlighted –, can also be read as the spectrality of the divinity that haunts the secularized modernity. This also explains the reason why I talk about a “political hauntology” in Laclau. Even though this idea originally stems from Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1994), I use it through Marchart’s reading of the ontology dilemma in post-foundationalism. As he writes, “it is only in the sense of hauntology, that is to say, as an ontology lacking its very object (being-as-ground), that the term ontology may still be employed.” (Marchart, 2007, p. 163.)

The “double movement” of Laclau’s political hauntology explained through Derrida, Heidegger and Marchart

First of all, we must understand in which sense we can speak of a double movement in post-foundationalism. If in foundationalism, or essentialism, to quote Laclau, we are dealing with a “structural totality”, or a “founding totality” that is presumed to be an “underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order”, post-foundationalism questions this idea of an external foundation. (Laclau, 1983, p. 22) The Political is “freestanding” (Bech Dyrbeg 2004, p. 242) and in turn “acquires the status of an ontology of the social” (Laclau, p. 96). Yet the lack of foundation doesn’t imply that “anything goes” in an anti-foundationalist and post-modernist sense (Marchart 2007, p. 2). On the contrary, if we think in a post-foundationalist way, quoting Laclau, we can say that “the impossibility of a universal ground does not eliminate its need: it just transforms the ground into an empty place which can be partially filled in a variety of ways (the strategies of this filling is what politics is about)” (Laclau 1996a, p. 59). This is how we can define this post-foundationalist double movement, which draws on Derrida’s logic of deconstruction to overcome it. Firstly, following Derrida, we can say that every structure is dislocated, there is a “rupture” (Derrida, 1978, p. 278) after which we can no longer think the determination in a foundational sense; there is a proliferation of differences, and the field of signification is indeterminately extended. There is a condition of radical deconstruction of any order of meaning, and consequently of

¹² Laclau says in *On Populist Reason*: “Does this mean that the political became synonymous with populism? Yes, in the sense in which I conceive this last notion” (Laclau 2005, p. 154).

social order. With regard to the social and legal structure, we are in a condition of radical undecidability (Derrida, p. 1992).

This first moment, for Laclau, is just a starting point. The need to provide, a supplementary grounding to the discursive structure through acts of hegemonic decision and contingent practices, brings us to a second theoretical movement. In an important article titled *The Impossibility of Society*, Laclau claims that “the second movement therefore consists in the attempt to affect this ultimately impossible fixation. The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order” (Laclau 1983, p. 22). However, once this has been established, this foundation cannot be conceived as a presence, i.e., in a substantialist sense: we must think a grounding where it is the ungrounded act of decision that grounds the structure. In this sense, it is just a specter of this metaphysical substantial foundation that we find in the philosophical tradition, from Plato to the XVIII century Idealism.

Oliver Marchart (2007) reads this double movement in post-foundationalism, and in Laclau, through the Heideggerian notion of ontological difference and his critique of western metaphysical tradition. According to the German philosopher, the grounding is the abyss as foundation, the *Ab-grund* (Heidegger, 2012).¹³ It is the absence of foundation, or – to say it better – the foundation that withdraws, that works as a foundation. It is the presence of the absence what remains as the abyssal foundation. Laclau himself speaks about this theoretical movement with a language very similar to the Heideggerian one, as a “double movement of selfpositing and withdrawal of the ground.” (Laclau, 1996b, p. 17)

So far, I presented a reading of Laclau's political hauntology that follows his references and Marchart's interpretation of his theory, which is the most relevant regarding this aspect (Marchart, 2007). However, I believe that this reference to Derrida and Heidegger is insufficient to understand the double movement of Laclauian political hauntology. The lack of foundation for Laclau is in fact primarily experienced in the social context as a lack of order (Laclau, 1996, p. 93), as the impossibility of grounding the social order as a structured system. It is the political character of the Being that makes the ontology groundless. It concerns the impossibility of determining a social order by deriving it from some kind of rationalistic legality or normativity. In this sense, I therefore consider necessary to refer to the thought of Carl Schmitt, over and above his very sporadic presence in the work of the Argentinian political theorist.¹⁴

I believe it is possible to make a strictly theoretical comparison that, through Schmitt's paradigm of the Political and political theology, can provide us with a better understanding of the underpinnings of Laclau's theory of the Political and populism.

¹³ Heidegger writes, in *Contributions to Philosophy*, with a very esoteric language that “The abyssal ground [*Ab-grund*] is the originary essential occurrence of the ground [*Grund*]. [...] What is the abyssal ground? What is *its* mode of grounding? The abyssal ground is the staying away of the ground.” (Heidegger, 2012, p. 299)

¹⁴ On contrary, in the work of Chantal Mouffe, who with Laclau wrote the book that is the starting point of their theories, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and who was his partner, from a certain moment Schmitt's presence becomes central. See in this regard Mouffe, 1999 and 2005.

This doesn't mean that in Derrida there is no understanding of the political moment in the deconstructionist double movement. For him too, the undecidability of the structure, while making a decision impossible, commands it to be made. But his deferral of the decision to an eschatological moment and his critique of which he calls – following W. Benjamin (2021) – the “mythical violence” that establishes the order (Derrida 1992, pp. 51-57), makes impossible to think the institution of the social in a hegemonic sense like in Laclau. In this regard the Schmittian political theology as well as his theory of decision may be insightful to understand the development of the theory of the Argentinian political philosopher, which culminate in the theory of populism, where the relation between antagonism and the nexus unity-order is clearly dominant.

The “double movement” of the Laclauian political hauntology explained through the Schmittian political theology

As is well known, for Carl Schmitt the Political (*das Politische*) is a polemological concept that describes the modern condition of contingency, groundlessness and dynamism (Schmitt 1996 and 1985). Carlo Galli's (1996) interpretation of Schmitt shows very well this aspect of his thought, torn between the groundlessness of the Political and the compulsion to establish the political-legal order. According to Schmitt, it is with the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries and the rupture of the unity of the *Res Publica Christiana* (Schmitt, 2006, p. 57), that the link between the transcendent, divine foundation and the political order was broken. The European religious wars, represent, in Schmitt the structural dislocation of the Political order that is displayed in its clearest form in Hobbes' theory of the “state of nature”. For Schmitt, this process of secularization does not give way to the end of all necessity of foundation and to a politics of pure immanence. On the contrary, as in Laclau's and Heidegger's double movement, politics remain haunted by the absence of God's foundation. The Schmittian sovereign is in this sense the one who, with his decision, establishes a legal order that is normatively unfounded (there is no rationalistic foundation) (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 31-32). And, in doing that, the sovereign is a “functional analogue” of God itself. Just as God can change the normal order of things by a miracle, the sovereign decides when and how the state of exception begins and ends and when and how a new order is established. (Schmitt, 1985, p. 5)

To understand this radical groundlessness of the decision of the sovereign, as much as its disconnection with every content or normative justification, we must understand that in the modernity – contrary to the vulgate about Schmitt has said – the sovereign is omnipotent only because is indetermined. There is no decisionism in the sense of a legal or theological authorization to somebody to decide for the others. Schmitt didn't say that “the sovereign decides on the state of exception,” but that “sovereign is he who decides on the estate of exception” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 5). In the first case there would be a person, the sovereign, authorized to decide, by a legalistic principle of normativity (in the sense of a theological, natural or legal order...), and so, clears reasons to take “this decision”. The content of the decision would be determinate by some kind of knowledge. On the contrary, in the second case – which is what Schmitt said – there is a radical indetermination of the moment of the decision: the sovereign becomes

such only because he can take and make effective the decision. In this sense, we are not so far from the idea of the construction of the identity of the decision-maker as the result of the same decision, as we can see in Laclau when he reinterprets Derrida's deconstructionist dialectic between decision and undecidability. Also for Schmitt the identity of the decision-maker, and the content of the decision, are totally indeterminate. In the Schmittian political theology – if we don't get out his reading of the Political in the secularized world – the presence of the absence of God makes the decision both impossible and necessary.

We could say that the basic experience of dislocation and the theoretical effort to overcome it in Schmitt are the same as those of the deconstructionist theory of the Political and populism in Laclau. The idea of the radical groundlessness of the social and of politics, the necessity of an undecidable but necessary decision for the establishment of an order, however precarious and subject to the constant danger of the re-emergence of radical hostility, give a common ground to both their understanding of the Political. There is no case an ultimate grounding of the Political, because it is the Political that is the abysmal and dynamic foundation on which social totalities and legal systems are structured; above all, political unity is in both cases constructed. In both authors, it is from the "infinite [...] of politics" (Galli, 1996, p. 746) that the dynamic dimension of a political ontology is discovered: the latter is an "ontology of *the Political*" (Marchart, 2007, p. 166) and hence a general ontology insofar as the "energetic" (Kervégan, 2016, p. 167) nature of the political potentially informs every sphere of Being.

We thus discover not only in Laclau, but also in Schmitt a hauntology embedded in a double movement that is deconstructive and post-foundational, insofar as also the latter sees the absence of grounding as the origin of the modern world. At the same time, it draws from the Political the energy for the *katechontic* action of the production of juridical and political order. This occurs in a similarly way as in Laclau, where the double movement was given as a dislocation and then construction of political order. In this sense, the Heideggerian ontological difference, with the movement of the giving and withdrawing of Being as foundation - in the Laclauian form of the "political difference" (Marchart, 2007), where the Political as groundless grounds the social - shows its correspondence with the movement of Schmitt's political theology as the permanence of the absent God.

Conclusions

To summarize the conclusions of the paper, we can say with a hyperbole, that Schmitt is a post-foundationalist hauntologist *avant la lettre* and, at the same time, that the structure of Laclauian political hauntology is a post-modern form of political theology. In Laclau's theory of the Political, and especially in the theory of populism developed in *On Populist Reason*, there is a strong insistence on the moment of the *reductio ad unum* of the plurality of the social (Melo J. & Aboy Carlés, 2015, p. 415). But at the same time, as in Schmitt, the impossibility of the end of the Political, with its antagonistic nature, makes impossible a final and permanent suture. We cannot escape from the modern world, we cannot return to a condition that precedes the Derridean "rupture" or the religious wars as original dislocation, and even if we did, we certainly would not find the lost unity, which as such, does not exist. Just as that the

specter of the absent God/grounding haunts modernity and bonds it to political theology, so in the established order the possibility of the rupture of political unity, due to antagonism, remains latent and ready to explode. The idea of full unity that we find in populism (hence the need to remove the externality that undermines it) is nothing but a myth (and Laclau knows it). But we must also be aware that the constitutive plurality that lies at the basis of this unity is not irenic, it is not the harmony of concordance, but it is the possibility of conflict. Conflict that can be progressive, democratic, emancipatory, or destructive, violent, and regressive, but, in both cases, ineliminable.

Laclau and Schmitt teach us that in the dialectic between plurality and unity, the established order remains always haunted by the antagonism that undermines it. At the same time, the effort to establish a precarious hegemonic order is the task of the political actors, and it's precisely from the antagonistic energy of the Political that the hegemonic subject can draw his power. Populism is the political phenomenon where this dualism is displayed in its clearest form: in the crisis of consensualist representations of democracy (Mouffe, 2005), as a formalistic-procedural system, it shows the fundamental logic of the Political as such. In the reemergence of the decisionist logic in contemporary populism we discover again the inextinguishability of the need for antagonism and exclusion to establish a precarious order.

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The Nature of Environmental Preservation in Rafael Correa Speeches: Left-Wing Narratives, Populist Framing and Extractivism¹⁵

Nevio Moreschi

Abstract

Previous works of discourse analysis have highlighted the environmentalist-anthropocentric frame employed by Rafael Correa in his speeches *vis a vis* the ecologist ones, characterising the discourse of two of his primary social opponents (Environmental and Indigenous groups). The present work expands the existing literature in two ways: through 1) the addition of populist and left-wing frames to interpret Correa's justifications of extractivist policies and 2) by observing issue (environmental preservation) saliency variations according to the audience addressed by the former president, and the year in which the speech was given, rather than assuming a static narrative. A systematic analysis of more than 600 speeches by Rafael Correa allowed for the visualisation of these justificatory patterns, which have been later contextualised in the light of the existing theoretical literature and explained through process tracing.

Keywords: discourse analysis, frame analysis, extractivism, populism, Rafael Correa

Introduction

Rafael Correa, the former leader of Ecuador, has often been categorised as one of the most radical leaders among those elected during the so-called Latin American pink tide. Like Evo Morales in Bolivia and Chavez in Venezuela, Correa was elected on a very ambitious platform that promised an extreme transformation of the country's economy and political system. In the political realm, partitocracy and liberal institutions were supposed to leave the place to people's direct participation and the enfranchisement of previously discriminated social groups (Ellner, 2012). Similarly, in the economic sphere, the recognition of an unfair economic system between the West and the Global South and the environmental damage caused by their economies' over-reliance on extractivist practices¹⁶, led to attempts at developing a post-extractivist economy and fostering a process of regional integration based

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¹⁶ Using Acosta's (2013) definition, extractivism refers here to those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), primarily for export purposes. Acosta's work succinctly illustrates the problematic nature of the practice from a anti-neo-liberal perspective, one perspective shared by the leader under study.

on “Bolivarian” fraternity instead of neoliberal economic principles. However, by the ebb of the tide in the late 2010s, their accomplishment remained limited in the political and economic fields.

This gap between initial aspirations and final results might be why so many scholars chose those years as their research subjects. This choice remained popular even when the region began normalising by turning its back to left-wing candidates. The present work can be ultimately grouped among said research, looking back at those extractivist policies enacted by Correa or, more specifically, at the political environment that arose from them, all under the lenses of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is hardly an innovative approach in the study of Rafael Correa's tenure in power (2007–2017). Some social scientists have already approached the issues from this angle, including environmentalism and extractivism (Lalander & Merimaa, 2018; van Teijlingen & Hogenboom, 2018). Alongside frame analytical works, Correa's speeches have also been studied in the context of Agenda Setting (Aguirre, 2020) to observe the saliency of particular issues throughout his three terms in power. However, these works have been lacking in providing a systematic analysis of speeches over time, or they have not assessed the influence of external inputs in the evolution of content discourse.

Environmental policies had a significant impact on the years of Correa's presidency, given that his main opposition was, for a long time, primarily constituted by environmental and indigenous groups. Thus, it is crucial to provide a content analysis of the environmental-political discourse that considers the missing elements mentioned above. Following this logic, the first research question is developed: RQ1a) What political happenings influenced the adoption of a negative rather than positive portrayal of environmental preservation in Rafael Correa's speeches during his presidency?

Moreover, the literature on discourse analysis, and precisely that of political discourse, tells us about another key factor that has often been overlooked in previous studies: the importance of audience and arena in the adoption of certain meta discourse and frames over alternative ones. Thus, RQ 1a can be further refined: RQ1b) Is there any indication that the portrayal of environmental preservation in a negative rather than positive light by Rafael Correa depended on the audience he was addressing?

Simultaneously, the intention was also to observe when environmental preservation was presented as positive but downplayed in favour of other policies or whether Correa justified extractivist policies. These justifications and narratives were later traced back to different interpretative frames to answer the following research question: RQ2) Can other frames, aside from the ecologist-anthropocentric one, be found to have been adopted by Correa in his justification of extractivist policies?

In the first half of the paper, the issue's saliency variation will be observed, stressing its dependence on which audience the actor was addressing (foreign vs. domestic), thus answering research questions 1a and 1b. Second, in the work's latter half, populist and left-wing frames to interpret Correa's justifications of extractivism are added in order to answer research question 2.

Literature review

As the introduction mentions, the scholarly work on the Pink Tide's nature and legacy is still in full swing. Bruhn (2024), for instance, just published a comparative work on mobilisation and repression under Latin American left-wing presidents between 2005 and the late 2010s. Virtually all the main aspects of politics have already been covered by similar works. In the book *Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide* edited by Friedman (2019), the legislation passed by progressive governments in the region around the issues of women's bodily autonomy, recognition of same-sex partnerships, and curbing gender discrimination was heavily scrutinised. Or again, Ellner (2021) covered in his *Latin American Extractivism: Dependency, Resource Nationalism, and Resistance in Broad Perspective* the structure of economic production which sustained the generous social policies that allowed for an overall reduction of inequalities in most Latin American societies in those years.

Despite these works covering different aspects of politics, they all share a picture of Radical Pink Tide leaders, those who are usually grouped within the "bad left" group¹⁷, steadily abandoning their more progressive and anti-systemic stances instead of performing a normalisation process.

Within this broader literature, discourse analysis as a methodological tool to gain insight into the phenomenon of the Pink Tide has gained considerable ground, especially concerning those polities governed by leaders such as Morales, Chavez, and Ecuador. Yet, most of these works have conducted their analysis by observing the leaders' discourse in a vacuum or considering the actors' view as static. For instance, Angel and Lopez-Londono (2019), while attempting to contextualise pink tide's presidential speeches within the political culture of the time, still end up grouping the presidents' discourse around neo-liberalism according only to the content of the actors' inauguration speeches and few other speeches given to the UN assembly, both very specific settings. Similarly, Bessen's (2024) quantitative work, which found a correlation between populist discourse and acceptance of executive aggrandisement in Ecuador, fails to consider the impact of such discourse's frequency on the outcome. Moreover, for his regional analysis, each president's degree of populism was operationalised by coding a few speeches per term.

The lack of a broad enough body of evidence to infer universal considerations on a leader's discursive style is a weakness also shared by those works that have as subject the narrative surrounding environmentalism and extractivism by Ecuadorian political actors, the subject of the present paper. The work by Laland and Merimaa (2019), whose high-quality research on the identification of the ontological frame adopted by both Correa and Environmental Groups around the issue of extractivism and

¹⁷ Castañeda was the one inaugurating the popular, although evilly morally charged denomination of "good left" and "bad left" in the context of the Pink Tide. The left-wing governments accepting free market and liberal democratic Institutions were said to be the "good left" (Uruguay, Chile, Brazil) and those instead rejecting them the "bad left" (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador).

developmental policies, falls into this category as well by downplaying the agency of such actors to change their frames over time or according to circumstances (Aslandis, 2016).¹⁸

To find works that have included both an attempt to systematise the rhetorical arguments and frames employed by a pink tide actor diachronically and dynamically while also linking their variance to external factors, one has to move outside the field of environmental politics.

A more systematic approach is the one exhibited, for instance, by Aguirre (2021), who attempts to expand the literature on agenda-setting by presenting the case of Ecuador and Rafael Correa. Aguirre did so by analysing the frequency of policy issues (security, environmental preservation, immigration, etc.) emerging from the presidential speeches over time to show how agenda-setting is inevitably going to change since it is linked to the political environment and susceptible to external inputs (Dowding, Hindmoor, Iles & John, 2010). Yet, except for the role that the earthquake of 2016 might have played in raising climate issues, Aguirre fails to provide a link between the frequency of other topics and the external variables. More comprehensive works from this point of view are those by Sagarazu (2019), who was able to trace a link between oil prices and foreign policy rhetoric (although it was observed in the discursive rhetoric of a different radical left-wing leader, Chavez), and Pugh (2017) which observed the interplay between the mobilisation of human rights groups and Rafael Correa's discourse and policies surrounding the issue of universal citizenship. What resulted from his analysis is that the appeal to humanitarian principles, such as the "universal citizenship" concept, while increasing the president's prestige in the region, left him exposed and accountable to the request of humanitarian NGOs. The wider the gap between rhetoric and policies implemented, the more mobilisation potential the societal opposition to the President enjoyed (Pugh, 2017), a finding that will be of high interest in the later sections of this paper. The methodological approaches of these last two works are exactly the ones upon which this work is built. More details about how this translates into practice will now be provided.

Data and methods

To find an answer to the two Research Questions, 643 speeches by Rafael Correa were retrieved through the Wayback Machine from the Ecuadorian Presidency WebSite. The speeches were then divided by year and month. Each speech was treated as an observation and was coded in a way reflecting the circumstances in which the speech was given ("Red-Ribbon" if it was given when a new public infrastructure was inaugurated, "Political Nomination" if given for the nomination of a new minister, "Academic" if given by Correa in a university, etc.).

If Environmental preservation was presented as a purely positive endeavour within the speech, then a variable *Positive Mentions* is coded one; If that happened in two passages within the same speech,

¹⁸ The authors themselves explain that the aim of their work "is not to systematically and meticulously examine the environmental discourses of all involved actors, but instead to refer to illustrative examples".

then it would be coded two, and so on.¹⁹ If such passages were followed by contrasting conjunction or conjunctive adverbs, like “but”, “yet”, or “however”, thus downplaying the importance of environmental preservation, or if extractivism or the use of oil or mining were defended, the passages would be coded under the variable *Source of Contention* instead of *Positive Mentions*.

Correa always used to justify such extractivist policies. If a speech contains a justification/narrative that could be traced back to either a left-wing or populist frame, then either the variable *Left-wing* or *Populism* would be coded one. The relevant variable will be coded two if two of these justifications exist within the same speech, etc. Later sections will define what is meant by the “Left-wing” or “Populist” frame.

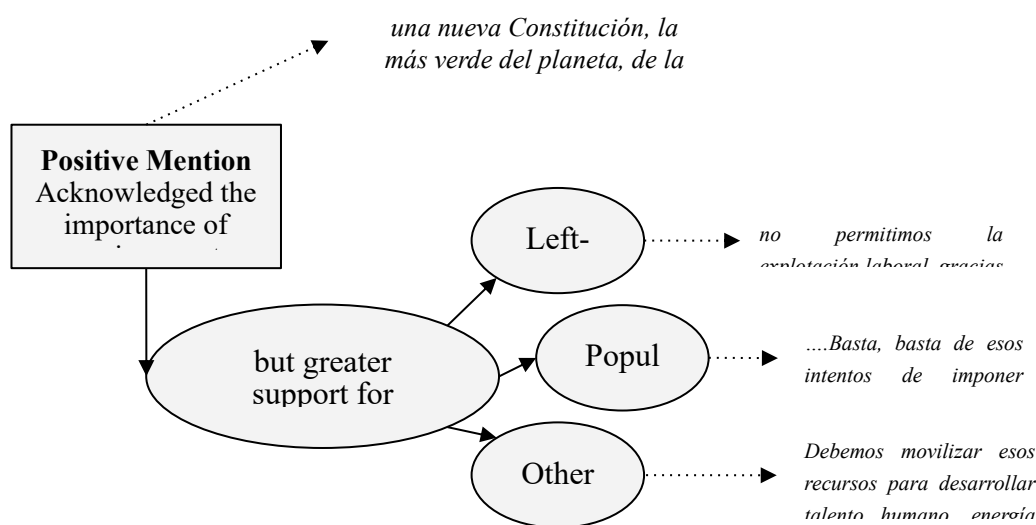


Figure 1: Process of variable identification in Correa's speeches

Once the coding is concluded, the results are displayed diachronically. Their interpretation is attempted through process tracing. Process tracing is deemed the most fitting tool as a technique primarily used to study causal mechanisms within the framework of a single case study research (Beach & Pederson, 2019). According to Beach and Pederson's differentiations of process tracing techniques (2013), the present work can be considered an explaining-outcome process-tracing insofar as it looks into “case-specific causal mechanisms that produced the outcome in question” (the cause behind Correa's choice to use one frame rather than another is not assumed to be valid for another President in a different country). However, competing theories already developed by the existing literature will also be tested.

¹⁹ An example of a positive passage “una nueva Constitución, la más verde del planeta, de la historia de la humanidad, otro motivo para sentirnos orgullosos. (trans. A new constitution, the greenest on the planet and the history of humanity, another thing we [Ecuadorians] should be proud of).”

Issue saliency: Analysis and results

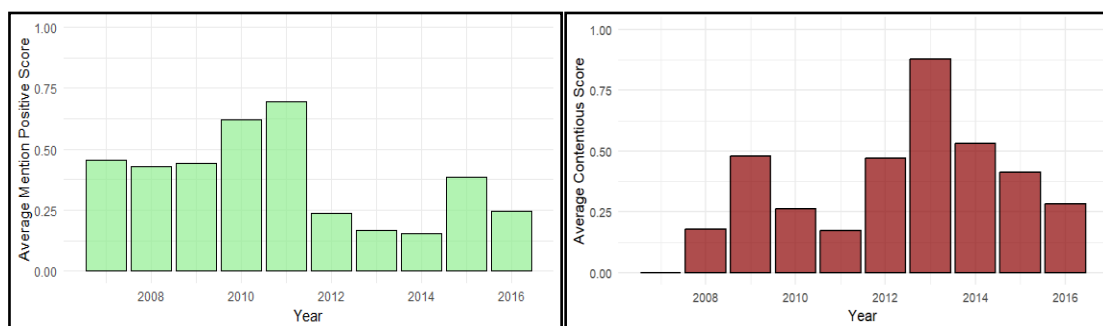


Figure 2: Yearly average - Positive mentions and contention

Figure 2 presents the average yearly number of positive mentions per speech (left) and the average number of sources of contention (right) during Correa's ten years in power. The literature on agenda setting would suggest that as a left-wing president, Correa should frequently mention environmental-related subjects since this is a topic where the left is usually more trusted and performs better than conservatives (Aguirre, 2020). From Figure 2, this would seem to be the case, with an average of one and a half positive mentions every two speeches. However, this argument alone cannot explain why this ratio of positive mentions dropped so starkly after 2011 or why extractivism became more intensively justified in 2009 and even more so in 2013.

The agenda-setting literature would suggest that this is probably the result of a shock in the political environment, which has increased the saliency of other issues at the expense of Environmentalism (Aguirre, 2020). We could equally expect that if Correa continued to appeal to environmental principles and portray environmental preservation in a purely positive light, while it would have benefitted him in terms of prestige and legitimacy, it would have also given an extra tool to the environmental and indigenous groups in their mobilisation's effort to arrest extractivist policies. This latter outcome was, after all, what Correa experienced with human rights groups when his Visa policies stopped matching his praise for the concept of universal citizenship (Pugh, 2017).

Process tracing

Considering these theoretical indications, we should start looking for political events to explain the decrease in positive mentions, perhaps something that could have left Correa open to the attack of environmentalist groups if such environmentalist rhetoric had continued.

All the major events linked to environmental preservation and extractivism were considered through process tracing. The first political event that would match this description is the Mining Law, discussed in the National Assembly in the last months of 2008 and thoroughly opposed in the streets by environmental NGOs and indigenous groups at the beginning of 2009. That piece of legislation marked the divorce between those social groups, which previously supported both the bid for the presidency and the Constitutional Project of Correa in 2007 and 2008 (Denvir, 2009; Basabe-Serrano, 2013). This

open conflict between the government and the societal opposition would explain the need to justify the proposed extractivist policies captured by Figure 2 (right) for 2008 and 2009. Still, it fails to explain why positive mentions continued throughout the entire first term of the President. To shed more light on those patterns and find a more comprehensive interpretation, we observe the frequency of positive mentions and justifications and how they change according to the audience addressed.

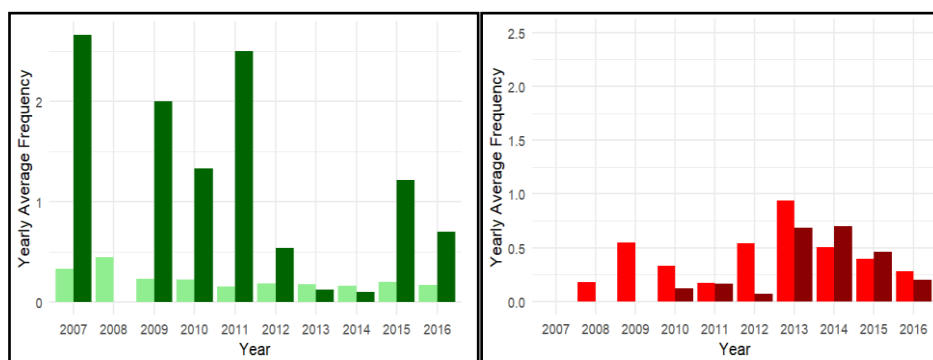


Figure 3: Yearly average - National vs. international audience

Possible theoretical explanation

Figure 3 is the result of this operation. Speeches that were addressing a non-strictly domestic audience (speeches coded as “Bi-lateral”, “International Forum”, and certain ones belonging to the “academic” category) were separated from those addressing Ecuadorian citizens. Then, the yearly average number of positive mentions and source of contention was calculated for both groups.

Indeed, we can identify a decline in positive mentions among domestic speeches (represented in light green) after 2008, in line with the hypothesis of the previous section. What masked those drops in positive mentions was their still high frequency in speeches made on an international or foreign stage (dark green), paralleled by a lack of justifications for extractivist policies in non-domestic speeches (dark red) until 2013.

Some general theories of discourse analysis and environmentalism are introduced to see if they can explain the divergence in speech contents between audiences. One plausible explanation for this behaviour can be linked to the “greening” of international society. Falkner (2012) argued for the emergence of environmental responsibility as a primary institution in the international community, alongside sovereignty, international law, and human rights. Consequently, the more positive and frequent mention of environmental-related topics when addressing an international audience can be straightforwardly explained by the normative “constraints” inherent in the context where Correa often found himself speaking to a foreign audience (UN and other related organisations). As a counterargument, Pugh (2017) illustrated how Correa had no problem criticising other primary institutions, with the Ecuadorian president defining human rights as a tool for US imperialism on the world stage.

Looking at works that have investigated more specifically the issues of discourse framing and two-level politics, one of the posited assumptions behind the theoretical framework developed by Villa and Sundaram (2022) is that signifiers at the domestic level are more likely to be contested because of the features of national political actors and institutions. An actor could appeal to concepts such as “environmentalism”, “fight against climate change”, and “*buen vivir*” in its international rhetoric without defining them (and would actually be incentivised to do so by the hegemonic norms). However, given the higher likelihood of these narratives being contested or appropriated by antagonistic forces in the national arena, the same actor would be incentivised to provide specific frames of reference and narratives alongside these “abstract” values.

The paradox of politics as a two-level game also lies in the fact that what might be a compelling narrative, built on a frame of understanding shared by the majority of the domestic population, might be ineffective, misinterpreted, or even opposed by a foreign audience (Friedman & Kamps, 2017). The higher average of positive mentions and the lack of pro-extractivist justificatory narratives in those speeches which were given outside Ecuador can then be explained by: 1) the fact that Correa knew that left-wing/populist/anthropocentric narratives might not have been welcomed positively by the international society and could not have swayed it from supporting extractivist policies in its discourse, and 2) the lack of immediate incentives for Correa to adopt contention narratives on the international stage.

While there might be some truth behind both these arguments, they fall short of explaining the change in patterns in 2012–2013, when justifications for extractivist policies increased in frequency and purely positive mentions reduced drastically in the speeches given to an international audience. Moreover, the argument that Correa refrained from using left-wing/populist narratives abroad because of the risk of them being poorly received can be partly refuted by the fact that other leaders aligned with him, Morales and Chavez, did employ highly polarising rhetoric both domestically and on the global stage (Stout, 2006).

Process tracing

A compelling explanation for Correa's distinct approach to environmental discourse on the international stage may be found in the nature of one of the political projects for which Correa is most famous for. In 2007, Correa launched the Yasuni ITT initiative, which entailed halting oil drilling in the Yasuni Natural Park as a commitment to environmental protection. Importantly, Correa also appealed to developed countries, asking them to contribute financially to Ecuador in compensation for the economic losses incurred by discontinuing extractivist activities in the region. During the active period of the Yasuni ITT initiative, Correa effectively sought international economic support. It is logical to infer that, during this time, he needed to present himself as genuinely committed to environmental causes if he wanted this support and political endorsement from the international society (Sovacool & Scarpaci, 2016; Ickler, 2023). If the positive mentions on the international stage are traced back to the need to advertise the Yasuni ITT project, this would explain the general drop in positive mentions post-2011. In 2012, the

administration effectively abandoned the project, beginning exploratory drills, and the following year, the ITT was also formally scrapped (Ickler, 2023).

Framing and justifications - Results and analysis

The goal of this last section is to identify the arguments Correa used to justify extractivist policies during his years as president. Not only that but it will also be looked at how frequently and under which circumstances these justifications can be traced back to a left-wing or populist discourse. For the determination of what constitutes a populist or left-wing frame, the literature on the matter was reviewed. Regarding populism, the literature is characterised by two distinguished streams which developed around Mudde's conception of Populism as an ideological orientation of an actor and Laclau's interpretation of Populism as a logical articulation of societal demands (2005).

In the case of Mudde and his minimal definition, populism refers to a thin ideology adopted by political actors that dichotomise society into two antagonistic groups, which are treated as homogenous (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). Rather than being divided across national, religious, or class lines, society is, according to this conception, divided between the political/cultural/economic elite, regarded as corrupt and unable/unwilling to work in the interest of the second group: the people.

Consequently, according to this ideology, the normative goal of politics becomes the representation of the people's will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Urbinati, 2019). In this framework, populism offers political empowerment to the ordinary citizen (Roberts, 2015). The exploration of the mechanisms through which this empowerment of the people is envisioned goes beyond the construction of minimal definition, with multiple potential responses depending on the specific populist actor under scrutiny. While some populists focus on strengthening accountability within the existing liberal-representative framework of democratic politics (Roberts, 2015), another branch focuses on empowering the people by replacing the old political leadership and fostering more direct communication channels between the citizens and the new political elite through majoritarian and/or plebiscitary forms of politics (Roberts, 2015).

Conversely, Laclau's structuralist approach sees populism as a logic or representation, an articulation of power. In this view, "people" is an empty signifier around which various equivalent demands are unified. Thus, an internal frontier is created between those with demands and those required to listen to them. Interpreted as such, populism can characterise all types of politics and is not linked to any form of government or ideology (Kim, 2022). Rather, it depends on the addressees of demands being interpellated (or at least primarily) as instances of power (Kim, 2022).

The solution adopted to reunite these interpretations was to embrace Aslandis's (2015) proposal and approach the phenomenon of populism as a frame rather than an ideology or power articulation. As Aslandis (ibid.) put it, "thinking of populism as a discursive frame exhibits two advantages: it resonates better with the cognitive aspect of the populist message, and it provides a solid methodological framework for empirical research". With frame, we refer here to schemata of interpretation that "allow

the viewers to locate, perceive, identify, and label complex events in daily life” (Goffman, 1974). In the case of populism, the constituent features of such a discursive frame remain the division into groups of “we” versus “them” and/or “people” versus “the elite” but avoiding the debate whether “us” and “people” are seen as homogeneous or not. This way, the normative dimension associated often with Mudde’s definitions (2012) can be seen as a potential narrative that could emerge from adopting such a frame but not its determined outcome.

Practically speaking, passages that justified extractivism through majoritarian narratives (“the majority of the people have voted for us, and they voted for the usage of our non-renewable natural resources” [paraphrased]) or through the demonisations of political elites (“the old partitocracy was using oil revenues for enriching themselves, I am gonna use them to improve the livelihood of us all” [paraphrased]) were traced back to this frame.

A similar procedure was then done regarding the concept of “left-wing,” interpreted here as a frame.²⁰ Wondering the potential constituent features of a “left-wing frame”, the choice landed on a minimal definition, namely the one proposed by Bobbio (1996). According to Bobbio, a left-wing framing of reality presupposes recognising the existence of societal and natural inequalities in our polities and, second, their representation as something that can and should be addressed. What is the optimal way to tackle these inequalities then varies significantly within left-wing discourses. However, some general trends, which have traditionally been thought to characterise left-wing politics in opposition to centrist or right-wing stances, will be sketched.

Notably, concerning the state’s role, social-democratic actors have generally defended the view of the state as a provider of welfare policies and as a safeguard against the collateral damage inherent in capitalist economies (Keman, 2013). While the reliance on a statist-centric view, positioned as a defence against the adverse impacts of globalisation, has been particularly prominent in countries situated outside what the world-system theory defined as “core” (Wallerstein, 2004), the brief consensus around neo-liberal policies also ended in the West following the 2008 financial crisis. The crisis prompted most left-wing parties to implement or advocate for increased social spending, often adopting a neo-Keynesian approach to spur economic recovery (McManus, 2018).

Adopting a more strictly Marxist tradition, but crucial for the subject at hand is the international dimension of inequality and how left-wing political actors have usually framed it. Shifting the analytical focus from the nation-state to the global level reveals patterns of dependence and inequality (often perceived as dynamics of exploitation) that mirror the dynamics observed within nation-states among various social groups (Wallerstein, 2004).

In the specific context of Ecuador’s left-leaning trajectory during Correa’s presidency, the embrace of the so-called “Socialism in the XXI century” did not culminate in the articulation of a coherent left-wing ideology to guide the government policies (Kennemore & Weeks, 2011; Ellner, 2012), and it could be argued this was never the main intent of Correa. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Correa’s

²⁰ Although in different contexts, one could definitely use this term to refer also to more elaborate and coherent structures of cultural/value resources (ideologies) (Snow & Benford, 2000).

electoral base exhibited a notably inter-class composition compared to other presidents who had adopted the principles of Socialism of the XXI century (Mazzolini, 2021). However, a clear left-leaning frame behind Correa's speeches and policies is identifiable. Notably, in the economic domain, Ecuador diverged from the neo-liberal paradigm that characterised the nation during the 1990s and early 2000s. The state used the revenues from higher taxation on foreign companies and the banking sector to increase social support for increasing social assistance for vulnerable segments of society, stimulate other economic sectors, and enhance the coverage of healthcare and education systems (Weisbrot et al., 2017).

Frame	Characteristics	Narratives
Populist (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Aslanidis, 2015; Urbinati, 2019)	People against the existing social/cultural/economic elite	Majoritarianism/ Plebiscitarianism as Acceptable Form of Democracy Old elite/political parties as corrupt
	State as a positive force to address societal inequalities	State as the actor behind economic development
Left-wing (Bobbio, 1996; Wallerstein, 2004; Keman, 2013)	Inequalities in society can and should be addressed	Welfare policies and workers' rights as a priority for the betterment of society
	Inequalities exist in society between groups and exist globally between states.	Nationalism/Protectionism as Anti-colonialism/ Anti-imperialism

Table 1: Discursive frames and potential narratives

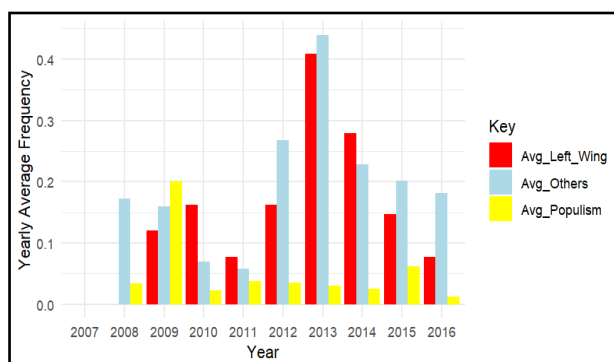


Figure 4: Yearly justifications by type

From Figure 4, it becomes apparent that during the years marked by the initial environmental protests in 2008-2009, which originated around the mining law, Correa's speeches were replete with populist framing against the protesters. For instance, in the period of open confrontation, Correa used populist arguments, stating: "and they must understand that we live in a democracy where we work for the common good and not for the naive extremisms of a few" (01-2009).²¹ Similarly, during other contention periods, such as the indigenous protest of 2012, populist arguments were deployed in the face of open confrontation: "a pseudo-left and social movements that speak for everybody without representing anyone" (03-2012).²²

Intriguingly, populist rhetoric did not emerge prominently in speeches amid or after the protests against the inheritance tax and the elimination of presidential term limits (however, a modest increase is discernible in 2015 when juxtaposed with the period post-2012). Compared to the frequency during the anti-mining protests in 2008, the comparatively lower occurrence could be ascribed to the aforementioned pluralistic nature of the 2015 protests. This complexity made it challenging to effectively frame the unrest as emanating solely from a small or minority faction of the population incapable of representing the broader societal will, and also, as mentioned in the previous sections, the protests as a whole were less centred on issues related to environmentalism.

Left-wing arguments recurred frequently in all of Correa's speeches, even during less intense confrontations with the opposition. This does not mean, however, that he refrained from using them in the early months of 2012 during the Indigenous march or around the time of the mining protests in 2008 (BBC, 2012). For instance, during and after the mining protests, Correa referred positively to the experiences of historical and modern socialist states to justify his policy choices, stating: "preguntémonos si Cuba, país socialista cuya principal exportación es el níquel, ha acabado con sus fuentes de agua. Estas cosas no resisten el menor análisis" (01/2009) or "Is Cuba a neo-liberal country because it has nickel mines? Is China a neo-liberal country? As you see, these are absurd conclusions that can't resist to the most superficial analysis" (02/2009).²³ Similar messages were delivered by Correa during the indigenous march in 2012 and the 2015 protests, accusing, for instance, some social actors of being agents of imperialism: "Some NGOs are not non-governmental organizations, but instead organizations of other governments operating in our territory. They are the vehicle of a type of environmental colonialism that relegate indigenous people as caregivers of the Amazon forests" (07/2015).²⁴

Regarding the last sub-categorization of contention arguments, "Others", it is difficult to trace proper trends given the many different justifications and narratives that were traced back to this dimension. For

²¹ "Y ojalá que entiendan que aquí vivimos una democracia donde velaremos por el bien común, y no por el fundamentalismo infantil de unos cuantos."

²² "Una pseudo izquierda y supuestas organizaciones sociales que hablan por todos sin representar a nadie."

²³ "Cuba es un país neoliberal porque tiene minas de níquel; China es un país neoliberal; como ustedes ven, los absurdos que se esgrimen no resisten el menor análisis."

²⁴ "Varias ONG no son realmente Organizaciones NO Gubernamentales, sino Organizaciones de Otros Gobiernos en nuestro territorio, y el vehículo de la introducción de un tipo de ambientalismo colonial que relega a los pueblos indígenas al papel de cuidadores del bosque amazónico."

instance, under this category, we found those anthropocentric views that were also the subject of the work by Lalander and Merimaa (2018): “We are environmentalists, the first country with a Constitution granting fundamental rights to nature. But we are not naive. We know that much more important than nature is the human being” (04/2015).²⁵

Another recurring argument employed by Correa, falling under the category of “Others,” was to downplay the issues related to an extractivist economy by framing it as necessary for creating an economy that could develop without such practices. This line of reasoning likely aimed to position extractivism as a temporary or transitional phase, emphasising its role as a means to achieve the Buen Vivir. (“What we are arguing for is to use extractivism, while being as much responsible towards nature and society as we can, to advance beyond the need for it” (04/2013)).²⁶ Regarding trends, this latter framing of extractivism appeared only after the failure of Yasuni IIT (although finding a causal link between these two events is quite improbable) and became one of the most recurrent ones. On the other hand, anthropocentric arguments can be observed already in speeches dating back to 2008.

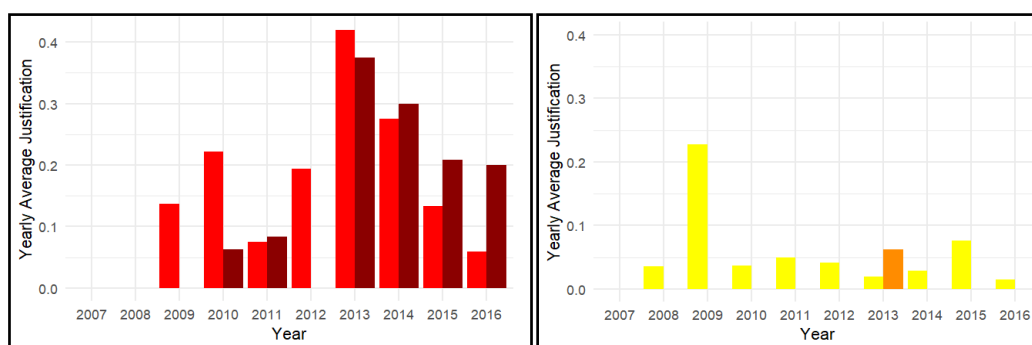


Figure 5: Yearly justifications by audience

Some considerations can be drawn by dividing the justifications by audience. Figure 5 presents in light colours those speeches addressing domestic audiences, while in darker colours, speeches given at foreign/international platforms; in yellow is the frequency of populist justifications, while in red are the left-wing ones. As one can see, populist frames were not employed in international contexts but were reserved only for a domestic audience in periods of open contestations, with the probable intent of delegitimising the opposition. Left-wing justifications were used more regularly throughout the Presidency of Correa but were kept at a low rate internationally until the Yasuni project was finally abandoned.

²⁵ “Nosotros somos ecologistas, el primer país del mundo en concederle derechos a la naturaleza a nivel de la Constitución. Pero no somos infantiles. Entendemos bien que lo más importante de la naturaleza es el ser humano...”

²⁶ “Lo que nosotros decimos es: Usar el extractivismo, con absoluta responsabilidad social y ambiental, pero usar el extractivismo para salir de él.”

Conclusion and considerations for further research

Following the expectation of the literature, Correa's initial years in power were marked by a notable emphasis on commitments to environmental preservation, particularly when addressing international audiences. However, the literature also tells us that the saliency of specific issues in political discourses is also dependent on crises or external events. This purely positive framing of environmentalism persisted until one of these external shocks occurred: the protests surrounding the Mining Law. Following this event, environmental preservation became a topic of contention in speeches directed at the national audience.

In contrast, Correa's discourse aimed at foreign actors presented environmentalism in a strictly positive light for some more years. Rather than being attributed to the normativism within international institutions or challenges in framing extractivism in a way that both foreign and internal supporters could easily understand, process tracing suggests that this was more likely linked to a specific environmental policy. Between 2007 and 2012, when the first exploratory drill in Yasuni Park was approved, Correa sought economic compensation from foreign governments in exchange for his commitment to preserve the Yasuni primordial forest. Advertising the project and stressing environmental preservation as a fundamental goal became imperative for the success of Correa's political gamble.

In terms of the presence of populist and left-wing narratives to justify extractivism, diminish the importance of natural preservation, or criticise environmental organisations, Correa's speeches indeed exhibit such characteristics. Populist appeals to majoritarian principles of politics and the supremacy of the common will over the interests of minorities were used mainly domestically to delegitimise protesters. In contrast, left-wing narratives were not only used during overt clashes with the anti-Correa opposition but also featured in speeches delivered on routine occasions to justify extractive policies. This was particularly evident in domestic settings after the mining law, but an increase in such kind of discourse was also observed internationally after 2013.

Overall, this research highlighted some shortcomings of general theories on political discourse in fully explaining the particular nature of a single-case study, thus serving as a cautionary tale for quantitative large-N type of studies having discourses as their subject. Moreover, the narratives and justification analysis showed how different frames were used in different contexts, thus supporting Aslandis' argument about the political actor's high degree of agency in adopting discursive frames. While this might seem obvious, the literature, even the specific one on Correa's political discourse, has often interpreted actors' frames as static characters of their persona (Lalander & Merimaa, 2018). It is then suggested that a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of speeches be conducted if the intent is to generalise the features considered.

Finally, in light of the literary efforts to assess the nature and legacy of the Pink Tide, it could be worthwhile to conduct a similar study regarding other regional actors such as Evo Morales, Chavez, or Maduro, and not necessarily limit the subject to environmental politics.

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Diving Deep into the Dynamic Networks and Emergent Publics in Vaccine Conspiracy Theories in the COVID-19: (Not Just) Fringe Communities on 4chan, 8chan and Reddit²⁷

Zichen Hu

Abstract

This working paper summaries my current research project on conspiracy theories — one of the most disreputable ways of responding to pandemic crises—in their delegitimisation of scientific truth claims, epistemic authority, and challenge to what counts as ‘literate public’ and ‘global public good’. My research’s topical focus of conspiracy theories is on the vaccination, which has been surrounded by controversies for centuries yet has been claimed by infectious disease experts to have saved more lives than all other biotechnologies combined. In this paper, I highlight the need to go beyond the ‘science/antiscience’, ‘mainstream and fringe’, ‘elite/people’ dichotomies, and propose to focus on the complex power relations by mapping discursive regimes in the process of conspiracy theorising, which involves complex ideological competition, as well as sometimes strategic cooperation, amongst state (or authoritative) and non-state actors, interaction between the ‘fringe’ and the ‘mainstream’, and formation of the new (possibly ephemeral) (counter) public(s).

This new conceptual framework guides me to review possible avenues for conducting research on conspiracy theories in a way that recognises both emerging topics and shifting inter-group relations, featuring the dynamic meaning-making process called ‘conspiracy theorising’ by Zeng et al. (2022). I argue that analysing discursive and social networks benefits further research in **two significant ways**. First, patterns of relations and interactions (structural configurations) help researchers infer platform mechanisms (governance structure, platform imaginary, etc) that afford and characterise the curation and flow of the conspiracy theories and clustering of certain types of actors. Second, analysing identified discursive and actor networks offer a map, or ‘microphysics of power’ (Foucault, 1977), in which the individuals are always in a position where they experience power as well as they exercise this power (Foucault, 1994a, III, p. 180). This is particularly helpful for (1) understanding how people participate in their own subjectification and come to recognise themselves (their identity, belongingness to the forum communities, etc.) in participatory conspiracy theorising efforts; and (2) forming a new way for researchers to think about where they might situate different stakeholders, participants and themselves

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within the identified networks in terms of their respective power position of scientific knowledge production, subjectivity, and etc.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, power relations, discursive regime, knowledge production, network analysis, emergence, critical realism

Introduction

Throughout history, many widely accepted conspiracy theories have conveniently placed the blame for distressing incidents or trends on certain groups. Exacerbated by Covid-19 pandemic and the sheer volume and velocity of informational production, conspiracy theories flourish and constitute uncertainty and anxiety associated with 'risk society' and 'post-truth' paradigms (Georgiou & Titley, 2022, p. 333). Conspiracy theories are important to study because they exacerbate polarised political communication and the crisis of the legitimacy of 'publicness' (i.e., what gathers people together to form a collective formed through public discourses and political expressions, see Li et al., 2022) that scientific establishment has been credited (by authorities) to represent. This paper encapsulates my work in progress on the fractured, fluctuating cross-site associations and discursive regimes of vaccination conspiracy theories, and how issues of public value 'break out' around certain matters of concerns, participants rallied to the cause, and new medium of public action.

Theoretically, I situate scientific practices and institutions as emerging from confrontations and negotiation amongst different stakeholders. Conspiracy theories, as perhaps one of the most radical forms within controversies pertaining to scientific development, is a grand and encompassing explanatory narrative that raises discussion and debate in scientific truth claims and challenges what counts as 'literate' and 'conscientious' public. The rapid institutionalisation of science communication after the Covid-19 pandemic (Bauer & Schiele, 2023) further complicates the situation. I argue that it is important to go beyond the 'science/antiscience', 'elite/people(mass)' dichotomy in explaining the cause of making and believing conspiracy theories, which reduces the phenomenon of conspiracy theories to limited causes or responsible groups. Instead, it might be more constructive to map the 'discursive regimes', by which I refer to Foucault to mean an assemblage embedding specific power relations that encompass both discursive and non-discursive elements. For example, multidirectional power deserves academic attention such as (1) sentiments that foster an orientation to conspiracy believing and theorising, under the condition of an uneven if undeniable recognition of how the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, and (2) top-down propagandist manipulation that interpellates people to its agenda.

Studying conspiracy theories cannot be done without understanding the process of 'conspiracy theorising', which is a process of collective meaning and sense-making in a highly networked media environment. Through upvoting, cross posting, citing, conspiracy theory adherents collectively curate and crowdsource information to prove their claims (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Additionally, the presence of active communities that support conspiracy theories emboldens more 'quiet adherents' to openly

advocate for such theories. This impact becomes significantly greater when well-known and influential public figures or media channels openly support or suggest conspiracy theories. Then, this paper reviews epistemology embedded in network analysis methods and how they can benefit research to dive further deep into qualitative investigations. Specifically, network analysis helps map the fractured, fluctuating cross-site associations, focusing on the evolving alignments and formation of coalitions that aim to establish new epistemic authorities and the way they strategically navigate the affordances of the 'platforms for free speech' for expanding their network and influence. Exploring these network structural configurations helps understand the platforms' affordances of crowdsourcing evidence for making and amplifying conspiracy theories, which create 'path dependencies' (Peters, 2015, p. 33) for political interactions and lend momentum to the emergence of (counter) publics associated with populism, with possible contributions to add nuances to its scope and definition. Therefore, I argue that it is important to interpret networks as 'microphysics of power' (Foucault, 1977) and a roadmap for unpacking the contestability of power shown in the evolving transnational conspiracy theory networks and evolving narratives of the conceived power relations amongst scientific R&D institutions, policy making authorities and the wider public.

Theoretical review

Mapping discursive regimes: intertwined power relations

The meaning of 'conspiracy theory' constantly contracts and expands, let alone explanations to who and why people believe in it. Various academic disciplines operate with vastly different assumptions. **Psychologists and political scientists** are keen to find the *universal* predictors and drivers of conspiracy ideation (e.g., low literacy, psycho-pathological predictors, certain partisan affiliations, etc.). Starting from categorising people holding conspiracist belief as 'agitator' by Lasswell (1986) and 'authoritarian personality' by Adorno et al. (1950), this pathologising way of understanding conspiracy theories climaxed in Richard Hofstadter's (1965) famous concept of the 'paranoid style,' of political thinking by the so-called 'irrational mass'. Such a pathologising paradigm is still perpetuated in psychology research (see Brotherton & Eser, 2015; Freeman & Bentall, 2017). Political scientists, while carefully avoid making outright pathologising conclusions, tend to take populism (see Mede & Schafer, 2020; Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020) as a comprehensive explanation to the popularity of conspiracy theories in the post-2016 era. The attention to populism, as an (unfortunate) zeitgeist of our time, and attempt to associate it with conspiracy theories, are timely and important. However, populism is an extremely heterogeneous political phenomenon and is parasitical to vastly different host ideologies to adapt to different contexts (Mudde & Cristóbal, 2017), and so are other encompassing and expansive explanations. This complexity calls for a further step of theoretical work.

I argue in my research that it is important to first **re-evaluate the normative validity** of the expressed sentiments expressed in conspiracy theories. Accordingly, the **shift towards cultural studies** in researching conspiracy theories that emerged in the 1990s pays closer attention to the contentious politics embedded in conspiracy theories. Within this strand of study, conspiracy theories are regarded

as (1) a desperate attempt to reveal the 'degraded' capitalist system (Jameson, 1991, p. 356); (2) the demand for more information *reminding us that we don't know* (Dean, 2000); (3) the wrong answer to the right question about the loss of social transparency (Horn & Rabinach, 2008); (4) fulfilling a 'coded social critique role' (Miller, 2017); and (5) the symptom that exposes unsolved urgent problems (Bauer, 2015, p. 2). In the context of Covid-19, conspiracy theories are evaluated as a response to failures of persuasive visions of a 'common world and inclusive future' by reducing interpersonal relations to merely epidemiological relationships and 'herd immunity' (Guilhot, 2021). The invalidation of one's feeling displaced in the public sphere due to injustice and powerlessness (Bogart et al., 2021; Dozono, 2021) constitute a significant source of mobilising power of conspiracy theories, and they should be understood as situated in an interaction with broader structural problems, such as a lack of institutional transparency, bureaucracy, complex web of private interests, and political inaction.

Therefore, **scrutinising the context where such contentious politics emerge** is valuable to understand the nurturing and legitimacy logic of conspiracy theories. In the context of conspiracy theories that delegitimise scientific truth claims, which my research focuses on particularly, understanding of scientific knowledge is communicated and formulated **in interaction** between a wide range of groups, who are all stakeholders of scientific knowledge production and applications (e.g., R&D, policy making, etc). These stakeholders' powers are asymmetrical, and their interests often conflict with each other's. This is evident in the competing and irreconcilable accounts on (1) who are eligible to be counted as part of such authoritative 'knowledge production expert community', and (2) contested conceptions of 'ethical', 'moral', and 'truthful' that define the power relations between expert knowledge producers, institutions and the wider public (Kuhn, 1970/1962). For my research, the underpinning power asymmetries in setting the boundary of and producing scientific knowledge is a particular concern, especially after the rapid institutionalisation of science communication exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bauer & Schiele, 2023).

Combining these two points leads to a perspective of intertextuality and discourse, inspired by **critical hermeneutics**. Conspiracy theories are in a dialogue, or anticipation of a dialogue; shaped by prior texts that they are 'responding' to and subsequent texts that they 'anticipate' from their imagined audiences (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). The process of 'conspiracy theorising' (Zeng et al., 2022), therefore, is a social practice that responds to and anticipates responses and participation from their (imagined or real) audiences and therefore fosters communities that gravitate towards forming new (counter) publics. Therefore, **mapping discursive regimes** (inspired by Bauer & Schiele, 2023) is a constructive and promising avenue. Discourse is a field of strategy, a space of struggle and contestation, meaning that it can be used for competing purposes or combined in incompatible ways (Foucault, 1981, 1994b). By 'mapping discursive regime', I mean to investigate conspiracy theories as an assemblage infused with specific **power relations** that encompass both discursive and non-discursive elements, bearing within themselves traces of past practices and discourses (see Potts, 2019, pp. 91-108). **I aim to study the power relations from the following two angles.**

On the one hand, imaginaries of a conspiratorial regime are that corrupt members conceal their exploitation through authoritative knowledge production (Manjikian, 2012; Robertson & Dyrendal,

2018). These trajectories are 'reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence in conception of the moral order of the time' (Steger & James, 2013, p. 23; also see Castoriadis (1987[1975] cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 22). In some cases, this can be recognised as an alternative form of knowledge production, or action against stigmatised knowledge, censorship and persecution, perhaps after years and years of debates and investigations. There are multiple instances that state and corporate wrongdoing when criticisms from earlier progressive groups and whistleblowing were initially labelled as a conspiracy theory, and only acknowledged after court cases and long-term investigations (see Johnson, 2018 and Olszynko-Gryn, 2017 on Thalidomide scandal²⁸; Macy, 2019 and Hoffman & Benner, 2020 on Opioid crisis of Purdue²⁹).

On the other hand, while recognising the resisting power in formulating conspiracy theories, such a tension might in turn 'evolve into new relations of power' (Foucault, 1993, p. 334; see also Jørgensen, 2006, pp. 24-25), for the purpose and function of disinformation (see Anderson, 2021) and the 'pseudo-conspiracies' forged by rulers to strengthen their power and silence their opponents (see Guizot, 1871). Propaganda recycles and circulates conspiracy theories to delegitimise and silence certain groups as not trust-worthy and therefore as being open to being dehumanised and prosecuted. Propaganda disseminates conspiracy theories to reduce the complexity and uncertainty of the time and translate unspecific anxiety into 'focused fears' (Barrett & Lawson, 2001). The 'focused fears' become part of the societal doxa, 'an unstated but common assumption within the society' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 167) and co-opted in propagandist campaigns (Goddard & Nexon, 2016, p. 7; Rythoven, 2018). This is exemplified in many cases where political parties (see Zitelmann, 2010³⁰; Han, 2020³¹; Banaji & Bhat, 2020³²) and partisan/party-affiliated media (see Albuquerque et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022) apply conspiracy theories to delegitimise and even dehumanise political opponents and thereby rally support and coalitions built on the basis of collective 'threat'.

Therefore, taking such complex power relations into consideration, it is difficult to argue if there exists a fixated and static overarching 'power structure', a way in which power is organised or shared, that can explain the ideological and affective appeal of conspiracy theories focusing on a singular cause. It should be also noted that, however, mapping discursive regimes and recognising epistemic democratisation does not mean a 'wholesale cheapening of technoscientific knowledge in the process or to embrace relativism' (Sismondo, 2017). The arguments such that 'it (scientific knowledge) could be otherwise' (e.g., Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013) point to other possible validation guidelines and structures,

²⁸ In Thalidomide scandal (Johnson, 2018), Ian Withers, a private investigator of the scandal, who spent around ten days hawking sample pages to journalists and media contacts, was portrayed as a 'rat' trying to 'cash in on a toddler's suffering' (Olszynko-Gryn, 2017).

²⁹ Another case is about Opioid crisis of Purdue's marketing of the addictive painkiller. Four laboured whistle-blowers in obscurity tried to warn the public about the dangers of OxyContin for over two decades, before anyone listened to them (Macy, 2019; Hoffman & Benner, 2021).

³⁰ The persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany that finds expressions in the long-circulated conspiracy theories of anti-Semitism.

³¹ China's 'US bioweapon plot'-related official discourse that revitalises xenophobic conspiracy theories emergent during China's subjugation to foreign colonialization.

³² The widespread Islamophobic conspiracy theory in India accusing Muslims of spreading the virus propagated by political parties and organisations aligned with right-wing politics, such as Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

rather than saying that 'it could *easily* be otherwise' (Sismondo, 2017, p. 3). To further pin down the power relations from which conspiracy theories emerge, it is then important to gauge their dissemination and amplification process.

Dissemination process: Interaction between the 'fringe' and the 'mainstream'

Explanations to the dissemination of conspiracy theories often fall into three categories of responses, or hypotheses: (1) 'They remain in the fringe (and thus unimportant)'; (2) the 'mainstreaming of the fringe'; and (3) the outright propagandist campaign by the official.

In the first type of arguments, conspiracy theories tend to stay *concentrated* within the communities who already agree with them (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Metaxas & Finn, 2017). However, I argue that this type of arguments does not examine the potential of such conspiracist discourse to be amplified and crystallise into networked counter-public space. Rather, conspiracy theories that originated with far right and alternative health groups and outlets and circulated among fringe networks can receive substantial amplification from celebrities and media outlets (see the case study by Bruns et al., 2021).

In addition, it is also important to extend beyond traditional approaches which position the mainstream media and authority as a relatively passive object or defensive debunker against conspiracy theories (inspired by Brown *et al.*, 2023 on mainstreaming of far right). Both China and US's 'bioweapon-related' conspiracy theories promoted by state actors to reconfigure public discussions about Covid-19 pandemic are examples of state actors' strategically crowdsourcing elements for weaving conspiracist narratives. For example, YouTube conspiracy theorist George Webb reoccurred as a reliable journalistic source ('investigative journalist') in China's official news media to prove US 'suspicious of spreading Covid'³³ (Kintez, 2021; CNNWire, 2020). This also leads to the concerning trend on Chinese social media of an emerging discourse that combines the claims, vocabulary, and style of right-wing populisms and conspiracy theories (e.g., Qanon, great replacement) in Europe and North America with forms of nationalism and racism in Chinese cyberspace (see Zhang, 2023 on China's digital far right). Such transnationally co-curated conspiracist discourses flourish and are constantly remade by adding new elements from local contexts. Therefore, it is important to dissect the process whereby conspiracist discourse incubated or found in the 'fringe' in a particular context are constructed and gain traction and legitimacy within the mainstream political sphere in a parallel context. Operationalising research to unpack this process inevitably requires using computing methods of network analysis, which is to be discussed in section *Analysing discursive and actor networks and infer platform infrastructure*.

³³ George Webb stated in his YouTube videos that 'American athlete Matej Benassi, who participated in the Military World Games held in Wuhan, China in summer 2019, is "patient zero" of Covid-19'.

Formation of the public(s): Emergent new objects, subjects and medium

Conspiracy theories broadly share a singular ideological premise at their core: that *the public* is being manipulated by nefarious powers that – be, whether the government, or the vast right-wing conspiracy, or the liberal media, or any other shadowy ‘they’. Therefore, I hope to contribute to the realm of studying the consequences of conspiracy theories with a focus on the **public** these conspiracy theories aim to foster and lend momentum to, **drawing on political and social theories**.

I hereby refer to the concept of ‘emergent public’ by human geographer and social theorist Clive Barnett (2011). He re-conceptualises publicness as an emergent quality, by which he means that *issues of public value* ‘break out’ around problems, issues, and (mediated communication) processes that are *not easily anticipated*. I postulate that conspiracy theories are of great public value and can be analysed with this analytical framework. I’m particularly inspired by the *emergence* aspect, because it entails an ontological view distinguished from ‘resultant/linear causality’ (Lewes, 1875, p. 369). The emergent perspective is appropriate to analysing the formation of the ‘public’, because ‘public’ is not only a site of discourse and opinion but also ‘arenas for the formation of identities’ through ‘discursive interactions’ (Fraser, 1990, p. 79). This conceptualisation of the public echoes Calhoun’s (1992, p. 35) earlier criticism of Habermas’s view on public (1991) that ‘identities and interests [are] settled within the private world and then brought fully formed into the public sphere’, and encompasses three aspects: emergence of new objects, subjects and medium.

Emergence of new objects means that the concerns over which public debate and decisive action are demanded, and around which communities of affected interest are formed, have multiplied. For example, automated content detection found that as the conversations evolve, seemingly irrelevant conspiracy theories appear to be interconnecting, and may eventually form a single coherent conspiracy theory that encapsulate all elements from the smaller nucleation of conspiracy theories and incubate emerging conspiracy theories (Shahsavari et al, 2020). This can be examined by Discourse Network Analysis, as delineated in *Analysing discursive and actor networks and infer platform infrastructure*.

Emergence of new subjects means that the identities around which collective, participatory agency is mobilised have likewise been contingent. Adherents of one conspiracy theory topic frequently interact with other conspiracy theory subjects. In the digital sphere, these inter-topic engagements can evolve into a networked ‘alliance’ among groups focusing on various conspiracy theories (Mahl *et al.*, 2021). For example, the boundaries between left- and right-leaning conspiracy adherents can be blurry on topics of vaccination (Chia *et al.*, 2021), and there is a case of surprising alliances between eco leftists and far right rallied to the cause of vaccine conspiracy theories (see example in Bennhold, 2022). Similarly, studying UK’s polarised politics and ultra-conservative orientation, Foster and Feldman (2021) reconceptualise radical right as a fluid, amorphous, and heterogeneous set of groups, parties, and narratives whose strategies, appeal, and narratives make them extremely adaptable. Therefore, I suggest that comparing Social Network Analysis across different time periods of a given issue can help

generate deductive discovery of the emergent subjects (participants), to be seen in section *Analysing discursive and actor networks and infer platform infrastructure*.

Emergence of new medium means the reconfiguration of means through which issues emerge as public concerns, through which demands for attention are addressed, and through which action in response to these concerns is enabled. Medium serves as an important *infrastructure* that impacts and allows for the above two dimensions of emergence to take place and constitutes a non-discursive element that serves as part of the mediation opportunity structure, the framework of socially structured means and rules available for a social group to achieve its aims and interests (Cammaerts, 2012).

For example, very recent study reveals that different patterns of conspiracy theorising process and dynamics align with different types of digital communications and are supported by different technical infrastructure and cultures of use (Pilati et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to diagnose the phenomenon with a deeper understanding of such technical infrastructures and cultures of use. My research focuses on the 'dark platform', a term coined by Zeng and Schäfer (2021), meaning digital platforms characterised with *content liberation, exile congregation, and infrastructure ostracisation*. Censored users go and continue their discussions in new less regulated spaces, leading to a spiral of political fragmentation and polarisation and fostering the emergence of a parallel darker ecosystem of content distribution and monetisation. For example, de-platformised Reddit users are switching to 4chan against content moderation (see discussion on Quora³⁴) by the time Reddit migrated the independent server to Amazon Web Services. User migration, in resistance to the 'normie' characters of Reddit, whose style and attitude is argued to be 'too mainstream' and far from the 'cutting edge'. Some banned 4chan users even migrated to 8chan (8kun), making 8chan a more extremised hotspot than 4chan (Larrañaga, 2020; Baele et al., 2020). The technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references of such 'dark platforms' are important for my research to dive into and understand how they guide users to participate in (1) public health related discussions and (2) their own subjectification and come to recognise themselves (their identity, belongingness to the forum communities, etc.) in interactions with each other.

Methodological implications

This section encapsulates the methodological overview, to pave a way for making possible decisions that yield to a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions for conspiracy theories to emerge, shift and prosper.

Starting with epistemologies, unlike positivist tradition underpinning psychology and behavior science, nor constructivism frequently seen in cultural shift of conspiracy theory research, I am working on taking a critical realism perspective. To explain, the ontological assumption of critical realism recognises both 'social structure of persistent patterns of institutionalised relationships and agency (individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions)' in constituting the social world (Bhaskar, 1975, cited in Mukumbang,

³⁴ <https://www.quora.com/Why-are-Normie-Redditors-switching-to-4chan>

2023, p. 94). Critical realism integrates **the following two aspects** organically. The first one is to study changes and shifting relationships in the dynamic processes of 'conspiracy theorising' (Zeng et al., 2022), and such an objective implies to leverage the deductive methods such as Discourse Network Analysis and Social Network Analysis. These analytical methods reveal patterns of relations and interactions at topical and actor levels of vaccine conspiracy theories, and networks translate the interactions they support. Another aspect is the affective, performative, and participatory practice, which calls for attention to how participants in conspiracy theorising negotiate their subjectivity in their respective power positions defined by the intertwined power relations.

Analysing discursive and actor networks and infer platform infrastructure

The process of producing discourse in a verbal interaction between different actors renders discourse a dynamic network phenomenon. Accordingly, the structure and dynamics of debates can be analysed with a combination of content analysis and dynamic network analysis, called **Discourse Network Analysis** (DNA). After annotating conspiracist statements of actors in text sources, networks can be created from these structured data, such as congruence or conflict networks at the topical level and longitudinal versions of these networks (Leifeld, 2017). The resulting network data reveals important properties such as how conspiracy theories can connect to one another and may eventually form a single coherent conspiracy theory, and smaller nucleation of emerge conspiracy theories.

Social network analysis (SNA) is another relevant, yet a bit different approach to studying the emergent subjects/participants of conspiracy theorising, whose capacity to capture, map, and analyse patterns of interaction and relations is particularly useful for advancing the field. Admittedly, the various relationships and types of connections between actors sharing conspiracy theories are too extensive to be completely captured. However, using SNA helps visually articulate the intergroup relations of alignment, overlap or disconnection (see Borgatti et al., 2013; Scott, 2000). First, comparing the generated networks from random graph using ERGMs intuitively allows researchers to predict the probability that a pair of nodes (actors) in a network will have a tie between them. Second, SNA also measures different centralities that help to explain 'who has the power' and who are becoming the elites in making new, or alternative credibility and truth-claims for conspiracy theorising – the collective sense-making and curation process. Third, community detection method allows for the identification of overlapping relationships within the network, revealing both central and interconnected elements. Potentially, SNA helps map the competing ideologies between state and non-state actors in political communication, as well as tension in international relations imbricated in transnational conspiracy theorising.

The identified patterns of relations and interactions (structural configurations) also help researchers infer platform mechanisms (governance structure, platform imaginary, etc) that afford and characterise the curation and flow of the conspiracy theories and clustering of certain types of actors. Bruno Latour (1998) suggested that social connections become more material and thereby more traceable *when flowing through digital infrastructures*. Following Latour's claim of the 'tangibility of the social' (Rogers

& Marres, 2002, p. 342), I posit that the digital networks do not just trace, but also **translate** the interactions that they support as the product of vast sociotechnical systems and offer me a valuable perspective to understand **the conditions of their production** (Munk 2013; Venturini *et al.* 2014), and how communication processes and interactions are organised and mediated by media infrastructures.

Elucidation of individual agency: Network concept of power and subjectivity

While social network analysis and discourse analysis can capture and show patterns of relations of resonance and interactions in conspiracy theorising, there are several problems. The first one is with the algorithmic black box and bias. The most widely applied Louvain clustering algorithm can only produce non-overlapping communities. Second, a recent study (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023) specifies participatory conspiracy culture into believing, doubting, and playing based on ethnography on Reddit's *r/conspiracy* subreddit, which highlights the heterogeneity of motivations to conspiracy theory discourse-producing practices. Another important yet underestimated issue is that when explaining the clustering results of groups affiliated to conspiracist discourses, traditional liberal-conservative scale that much research would take as an assumption might lack validity, because the development of such measures did not explain variation in policy attitudes for minority respondents (see Jefferson, 2020).

However, this is not to deny the validity and contribution of network analysis. Instead, network concept is important in Foucault's epistemology of power and subjectivity, and therefore sustains the critical realist epistemology. In Foucault's network approach to power, 'power is exercised as a network, and in this network, individuals do not only circulate, they are always in a position in which they experience power as well as they exercise this power; [...] they are always their relays' (Foucault, 1994a, III, p. 180). Therefore, subjects 'functions, serves as node in the systemic network' (Foucault, 1994a, II, p. 165). This insight is important to understand how people participate in their own subjectification and come to recognise themselves (their identity, belongingness to the forum communities, etc.) in participatory conspiracy theorising efforts (August 2022 on network concept in social theory).

For these reasons, **inductive elucidations** of individual agency are important to deepen, and integral to the network analysis. Practically, these can be gained from interviewing participants on their self-positioning and sense of (dis)empowerment in expressing or feeling resonated with sceptical voices and engaging with their fellows. This information helps imply the impact of the sociotechnical system where they inhabit on their potential subsequent actions. Participants from science and health research and PR communities can also contribute insights of critical reflections of knowledge production institutions and their role of knowledge producers. Insights from various stakeholder groups help better facilitate a dialogue and bridge transdisciplinary insights and even collaboration to study conspiracy theories.

However, involving participants from different backgrounds (among whom an ideological competition might take place) and researchers' engagement, questions of research ethics and reflexivity follow.

Self-reflexivity: Situating the researcher in the network of power

The network concept of power, sustained in my research, poses a critical question of where researchers situate themselves within the network, in relation to various stakeholders of scientific knowledge production and their research participants. For example, the inevitable touch on and interrogation of power relations in knowledge production might create a tension between researchers, research participants and the wider range of readers from all walks of life. Researchers should therefore think carefully about if they feel any affinity to or have hostile attitudes to any particular group or statements before and during conducting the research. One of the most extreme situations is that researching conspiracist content, especially in 'dark' media like 4chan/pol and 8kun might lead researchers themselves to be 'redpilled' (radicalised). Julia Ebner (2020), for instance, describes her own fear of potential radicalisation when being immersed in the ultra-conservative women group during her ethnographic work (with deception used). Therefore, after conceptualising conspiracy theories as an interactive, iterative, and interpellating process, researchers' own subjectivity should be put with more emphasis than before. In addition, the research output also constitutes a broader discursive regime, which functions not only as a dialogue with other scholars, but also a response to their research participants (Colley & Moore, 2022).

Concluding remarks

This paper encapsulates my work in progress on the fractured, fluctuating cross-site associations and discursive regimes of vaccination conspiracy theories. In such a dynamic process, issues of public value 'break out' around certain matters of concerns, participants rallied to the cause, and new medium of public action. The methodological implication is grounded on critical realist epistemology, which posits the captured discursive and actor networks as a microphysics of power. The network concept is also insightful to understand subjectivity and leads to a deeper elucidation of how people participate in their own subjectification and come to recognise themselves (their identity, belongingness to the forum communities, etc.) in participatorily interacting in and expanding their networks of conspiracy theorising process. Interview as a method is suggested for it allows for researchers to both interact with not only the take by different stakeholders of scientific knowledge production, but also reflect their own subjectivity and academic research process that inevitably constitute the knowledge production process.

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Populism in India: Identity Formation and Community Mobilization³⁵

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Abstract

My paper reflects on the Indian state of West Bengal and its political dynamics since 2011 through the prism of populism. It highlights the politics of the charismatic populist leader and the current Chief Minister of the state, Mamata Banerjee, and her political party, Trinamool Congress. I intend to undertake a study of the transformations in the populist trajectories of her leadership and her party's mobilization from dislodging the erstwhile Communist government in 2011 through a sustained anti-land acquisition movement to being challenged by the meteoric rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state since 2014. I try to analyze the mechanisms through which Mamata Banerjee has rebranded herself from an assertive agrarian populist to a paternalist catch-all ethno-religious yet 'secular' populist to combat the rise of the BJP. The terms 'assertive' and 'paternalist' are domains through which I intend to understand the populist character of Mamata Banerjee's politics. These two terms are important as they have been used by scholars to contextualize various shades of populism in India and create an understanding of populism unique to that of India.

Keywords: assertive, agrarian, paternalist, ethno-religious, secular

Introduction

The populist mode of identification aspires to create a single, homogeneous identity of the 'people' within the ambit of majoritarian politics dividing the political space into two antagonistic camps. The 'people' can be defined only in the presence of the 'antagonistic other.' The identity of the 'other' falls outside the constituent group of 'people' but it is required as a 'threat' to define the identity of the 'people.' The formation of populist identities is created out of lived experiences and emotive claims that cannot be reduced to pure formal logic. It is also not an ideology either because ideologies are shaped by complex ideational constructs that have a conceptual core, a range of principles, and a body of thought. Populism, as such, has no genealogy of that kind because it gets challenged by the very agents who are defined as populists. Populist identification is central to the construction of the populist leader. The processes of identification involve the role of the complex interplay of social and economic identities, and it would be reductionist to argue that populist leadership is confined to the unmediated relationship between the leader and the 'people.' Grassroots popular organizations, social movements, and other

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political actors constitute a significant role in the populist identification of 'people' particularly in electoral democracy. Hence, the relation between the leader and the 'people' is not one where the latter are passive receptors of the former but are actively involved in producing populist messages which the leader has to reinterpret and reconstitute in his/her populist rhetoric. The leader's capability to construct a populist discourse and identify it among 'people' has its constraints in the sense that the 'people' might have varied interpretations of the discourse and the formation of a rhetoric that is homogeneous might not be achieved. Thus, the leader has to manoeuvre between different interpretations of his/her rhetoric without having an explicit stand to it. (Panizza, 2017, pp. 519-526.)

The fundamental difference between Western and Indian populism is the fact that there has been no such thing as a 'populist threat' when it comes to India. Post-independence India, although having adopted the British parliamentary political system, is a country that has diverse community representations and interests. So the populist repertoires were quite imminent in the sense that every community had to be included and mobilized into the political imagination of parties. The difference lies in how communities were imagined and mobilized by different political parties at different times. It can be argued that India was not identical to Western Liberal Democracies in the first place as popular communitarian dynamics always made political parties reach out to communities, groups, and identities in a sectarian form quite often. It can be asserted that it was necessary to ensure inclusive representation. Western Democracies, owing to their past non-diverse social and economic demography, have been liberal status quo for quite a long time. It is this emergent communitarian populist politics as a response to social and economic transformations, which makes populism a looming 'threat' to the Liberal Democratic polity in the West.

The 1980s in India marked the rise of a socio-religious mobilization that aimed at consolidating the majority Hindu community of India politically and culturally. It defined Hindus as the 'people' and the antagonistic 'other' was also defined in socio-cultural terms used to define the English-speaking, Westernized—uprooted—elites who defend secularism at the expense of the 'authentic' Hindu identity of the Indian nation-state. The Congress Party, which had been in government for most of the period post-1947, was placed under the above category. Their alleged 'appeasement' of Muslims, the largest minority religious community in India, has been a central feature of discontent and hostility. This politics of defining Hindus socio-culturally and calling for the establishment of a Hindu nation-state in India is known as 'Hindutva.' Hindutva got its transformative electoral representation in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party formed in 1980 and was quick to formulate and adapt to the mechanisms of populist mobilization in politics. It participated and provided leadership, along with its affiliate Hindutva socio-cultural organizations during the Ram Temple movement in Ayodhya, a north Indian town, revered by Hindus as the birthplace of the Hindu God, Lord Ram. There stood an Islamic Mosque in the area which used to be a Temple dedicated to Lord Ram and as argued by the proponents of Hindutva, the Temple was destroyed by the Muslim Emperor Babur to make way for the mosque. This was a sustained populist campaign to mobilize Hindus across India and it ultimately culminated in Hindutva groups physically dismantling the Mosque in 1992. This resulted in an electoral upsurge for the BJP and the establishment of the narrative of Hindutva as a dominant theme in the Indian political discourse, more

successfully in the states of North and West India as the BJP won elections in states in these two regions. However, it is under the leadership of the incumbent Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, that the BJP underwent a drastic transformation in its populist politics since its national electoral victory in 2014. Hindutva has been combined with Modi's charismatic personal appeal among the masses to reap rich electoral dividends as well as ensure that Hindutva becomes culturally entrenched in the socio-political milieu of India rendering the narrative of secularism espoused by Congress irrelevant. BJP won states or became a formidable entity beyond its traditional strongholds. Before becoming the Prime Minister, he was the Chief Minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat for 13 consecutive years and the BJP in government since 1998. His brand of leadership became a textbook example of populism where he used the political rhetoric of Hindutva as well as Gujarati regional pride to politically define the 'people.' It is important to situate Modi and the BJP within the theoretical ambit of populism to contextualize the subjective nature of Hindutva populism operative in India at present. (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017, pp. 237-43.)

A populism of a different kind emerged in the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh during the 1970s and 1980s in which 'people' were mobilized based on regional language and culture against national political elites and the 'alien' Sanskritic Hindi-speaking culture of North India. It combined the cultivation of rustic home-spun regional identities against corrupt national political elites (used to describe the then ruling Congress Party) and had leadership that was of a charismatic personalized nature claiming special affinity to the people to consolidate broad social coalitions overriding social divisions. The promotion of welfare programs for the poor was also a central feature of their political platforms. As observed by scholars specifically in the state of Tamil Nadu, the emergence of two populist parties of this type of populism as the dominant parties in the state has led to competitive populist political platforms having positive effects on the provision of welfare programs, improved delivery of welfare and social inclusion of communities under the schemes. Mamata Banerjee and her party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) have engaged in a similar pattern of politics in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal since getting elected to state government in 2011 and it acquired a populist character with features particular to the socio-cultural context of West Bengal following the rise of BJP as the principal opposition party in the state since 2019. (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017, pp. 243-47.)

A thematic framework to understand populist mobilization in India was developed by Narendra Subramanian, in his book 'Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization.' He highlights the political culture of populism in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu based upon the social outlook across communities and the patterns of political action that drive its supporters. It describes systematic differences in types of appeal, organizational structures, social bases, supporter attitudes as well as policies by the government. He has used his thematic study of populism to understand Dravidian cultural politics in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

The first type of populism can be termed as assertive populism. It calls for excluded social groups to engage in militant action to enter semi-inclusive public spheres and creates claims to jobs, education, loans, subsidized producer goods, and property, to some extent. Having an aim of reverse discrimination based upon ascriptive criteria, assertive populism tends to mobilize communities based

on ethnicity, territory, or social hierarchy. Communities that have attained some degree of social mobility, are the ones who can compete for the above entitlements and form its support base. There is a strong social presence among organizations of such kind which tap into particular social groups of such kind to enhance their political support base. The populist demands presented by those representative of a popular homogeneous community rather than demands placed by specific interest groups are more in place with the assertive framework. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) subscribes to the assertive form of populism, and it was primarily rooted among intermediate caste groups having little property. A policy that is a central feature of DMK's politics is the provision of quotas for intermediate castes in education and government jobs. DMK has a strong organizational party structure and is internally pluralistic in terms of political action. However, their policies and campaigns have been less attentive to the interests of the socially vulnerable and weak groups. There is also a possibility of an assertive group's ethnic militancy assuming an exclusionary social character affecting the overall social pluralism among communities. (Subramanian, 1999, pp. 73-81.)

The second category is referred to as paternalistic populism. It counts upon the premise that a benevolent party, leader, or state will enforce community norms and these norms act as platforms to provide the poor and the powerless with subsidized wage goods and protection against the repressive elites. It is achieved through systematic subsidies and particular donations which are repeated with the same frequency. The policies are less targeted towards intermediate community groups and more towards the socially weak and vulnerable who have not been able to undergo social mobility in that sense. This populism encourages supporters to have an attitude of gratitude and reverence towards the party, leader, or state rather than engaging in autonomous militant initiatives. It fundamentally appeals to the lower strata and women who are seen as unable to assert their demands independently and compete for the provisions that assertive populism provides. The welfare policies are addressed to the specific needs of these groups. The community groups covered under the provisions of paternalistic populism are larger than those of the assertive category. The direction of patronage toward key support groups results in the welfare schemes acquiring a clientelist character and emphasis on the leader as a donor establishes its paternalistic nature. The party organization of such parties is a weak one and the scope of challenging the leader is very limited. The centrality of the leader and not of the activist is a core component in this type of populism. The Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) in Tamil Nadu was led by first the male cinema star turned politician - MG Ramachandran followed by his protégé, the female cinema star turned politician – J Jayalalitha belongs to this category of populism. It gained its most loyal support from the Dalit communities, those having very little property, and the women of Tamil Nadu. Its most significant welfare scheme was the provision of free lunches for all children in government schools. Although they have resorted to Tamil ethnic political appeals while mobilizing its communities, unlike DMK, the ADMK has refrained from deploying militant means to achieve its populist ends. (Subramanian, 1999, pp. 73-81.)

I have tried to engage in an exploratory descriptive research based upon the available literature and contextualise trajectories of populist politics in the state of West Bengal from 2006 to 2021 and situate it within the broader ambit of populism in India. The aforementioned categories of different populisms

in the Indian context have been applied in the case of West Bengal to make sense of the formation of identities and mobilization of communities under the fold of populist politics that have taken place in the state.

Assertive populism: Agrarian anti land acquisition mobilization

By 2006, the Left Front in West Bengal had become the longest-serving democratically elected Communist government in the world. It derived its prolonged support from a formidable agrarian support base it had consolidated amongst the rural populace cutting across caste and religion through class identity-oriented policies which included land reforms and formation of elected village representative bodies. The eventual stagnation of incomes from agriculture resulted in the government reforming its policy from programmatic socio-economic welfare to a market and capital-oriented industrialization and urbanization. For this, they had to acquire agricultural lands and were able to do so in a couple of places.

However, one village by the name of Singur, and the events that took place around it during 2006-08, drastically altered the politics of the state. To build an automobile factory, the government acquired fertile agricultural land only to be met by protests involving local farmers mobilized by parties and organizations of a level of intensity that the government could not fathom. It unleashed coercive measures to dispossess farmers off their land which eventually resulted in a severe decline of their agricultural support base and a loss in the 2011 state assembly elections. In the years between 2006 and 2011, it is necessary to contextualize the politics of the state within the framework of assertive populism as it acquired an anti-elite character with the farmers constituting the 'pure people' and the government and the industrialists demarcated as the 'elite other.' The aspects of activist leadership and community mobilization are significant issues that defined the nature of anti-elite agrarian populism that emerged during that time.

Mamata Banerjee and her party, Trinamool Congress, became the flag bearers of the agrarian movement that gripped Singur. Mamata, herself displayed traits of activist leadership that acquired an assertive populist character over time. She, throughout the movement, became popularly known as 'Didi', which means the elder sister for the affectionate familial role she played in terms of providing support to the farmers. She provided moral support to the families of the farmers who lost their lives or were injured during the protests by a consistent emotional presence and being part of their grieving. Logistical support was provided by her as well and it involved providing legal assistance to the jailed farmers and covering their expenses as well. Material support in terms of sustaining the movement was also looked after her. She ensured that regular shipments of rice, medicine, and blankets reached the protesting farmers. The provision of various forms of support to the farmers became a constant feature of her leadership. She, herself undertook a 26-day hunger strike in Kolkata, the capital city of the state protesting against police violence and was successfully able to increase the visibility and magnanimity of the protest among a larger mass of people to foster sympathy and support. (Nielsen, 2018, pp. 241-257.)

Mamata Banerjee's symbolic politics paved the way for the question of forced state-sponsored land dispossession from the domain of popular movements to the domain of electoral politics. Land became the epicenter of politics in West Bengal in the build-up to the 2011 state assembly elections. TMC undertook organizational mobilization of the various locally formed protest committees by supporting them and by unifying these local formations under a common agrarian umbrella movement. TMC, along with institutionalizing and organizing, contributed to creating a synergy between various protests and converted the issue of land dispossession into a robust electoral campaign. Mamata Banerjee during this time, carried out her politics under the slogan, 'Maa Maati Manush' which translates to mother, motherland, and mankind respectively. These became potent symbolic aspects of the movement. 'Maa' became synonymous with Bengal and its identity, culture, and history, 'Maati' stood for the farmlands not just economically, but as something around which the lives of people revolve, and 'Manush' represented the essence of humanism in West Bengal, which, Mamata asserted, had been butchered by the 'brutal' and 'repressive' behavior of the Communist government. To construct an emotional interplay of the above three elements, the popular construction of the slogan dealt with the idea of restoring the prestige, glory, and vitality of the Bengali 'people' and 'nation' referred to as 'Sonar Bangla' meaning Golden Bengal, symbolizing a nostalgic embedded fertile agricultural past. When politically imagined, the land becomes a living creature representing a divine mother, present not only physically in the form of the land but also in the hearts and minds of 'people' which would emancipate them from their weaknesses and make them mighty. Thus, the situating of land at the core of Bengali political society was in synchronization with the regeneration of the state as imagined by the TMC – to restore the respect, spiritual veneration, and devotion towards the land which becomes symbolic in terms of restoring the 'lost glory' of the state. Mamata Banerjee and TMC eventually registered a decisive victory in the 2011 state elections marking a consolidation and continuous reproduction of populist politics mainstreamed by her while engaging in the agrarian protests. (Nielsen, 2018, pp. 241-257.)

Assertive populism: Politics of socio-religious Hindutva

With the victory of the BJP in the 2014 national elections and the elevation of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister, it started aggressively pursuing Hindutva as an instrument of populist political mobilization in states across the country marking a drastic increase in its electoral footprint as well as a stronger socio-cultural entrenchment of Hindutva across states. West Bengal was no exception to this political phenomenon. In the 2019 national elections, BJP emerged as the principal opposition party in the state, replacing the Left and Congress parties. Hindutva politics in West Bengal is executed by the BJP and its affiliate organizations under a framework that broadly contains characteristics of assertive populism. The fundamental idea behind Hindutva is the unified political and socio-cultural imagination of the 'people' as the unified Hindu community and the cultural relegation of identities based upon class, caste, or ethnicity to a position secondary to that of the Hindu identity.

In West Bengal, identical to other Indian states, BJP and its affiliate Hindutva organizations have been engaged over a prolonged period to identify and mobilize diverse communities and different regions

with the objective of 'creating' a pan-Hindu identity in West Bengal. The Bajrang Dal works to mobilize young Hindu men and actively participates in Ram Navami processions. It campaigns against Muslims as well as prevents the influence of 'Western Culture' among the minds and lifestyles of Hindu men and women often resorting to violence in the process. The Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram works to Hinduize the Adivasi society to prevent Christian Missionaries from converting them. It does so by entering Adivasi areas where the presence of the state is negligible and looks after their day-to-day needs providing them with education and healthcare in the process. The Bastuhara Sahayatra Samiti works among refugees who fled religious persecution in Bangladesh and sought asylum in the state. It asserts their citizenship rights and creates a campaign of Bangladeshi Muslims being responsible for their plight and thus viewing the Muslims of West Bengal skeptically. The Durga Bahini works among the young Hindu women of West Bengal and performs a function identical to what Bajrang Dal does among males. It is these socio-cultural groups that have engaged in creating narratives and mobilizing different sections of the Hindu community on the lines of Hindutva helping the BJP to yield rich electoral dividends out of it in recent years. There are some narratives and mobilizations that need to be reflected upon to have a subjective understanding of Hindutva in West Bengal under the framework of assertive populism. (Nath, 2022, pp. 69-71.)

Hindutva became a formidable political narrative in North and West Indian states through the idea of Lord Ram being the unifier of Hindu society during the 1990s. The Ram Temple movement in Ayodhya carried out by Hindutva groups was able to construct a popular appeal of political and socio-cultural Hinduness among the masses in North and West India. BJP, at that time, was an organizationally weak force in West Bengal and the erstwhile Leftist government was deeply entrenched in West Bengal's polity and society. A person's identity was reflective of the political party he/she was affiliated with rather than socio-cultural attributes such as religion or caste. So it can be argued that BJP's organizational weakness combined with the dominant political culture of the party as identity became a deterrent to Hindutva politics in West Bengal. However, the ascendancy of TMC as a challenger to the Left's dominance and its usage of socio-cultural idioms to mobilize communities politically shifted the state's political culture from party-based identity to identities based upon affiliation to caste and religion. BJP's victory in the 2014 national elections and its improved performance in the subsequent elections in the state resulted in the party becoming the principal opposition to TMC following the 2019 national election results where BJP performed better than in 2014.

In West Bengal, Female goddesses like Durga and Kali are worshipped much more by Bengali Hindus in comparison to Lord Ram, whose temples are less prominent compared to Durga and Kali. Ram worship was popular among the North Indian Hindi-speaking communities living in the urban industrial areas of West Bengal. From 2015, the Hindutva groups in West Bengal utilized their strengthened grassroots organizations to make Lord Ram popular and advocate for unity among Bengali and Hindi-speaking Hindus through popularising the usage of the slogan 'Joy Shree Ram' meaning victory to Lord Ram as a symbol of Hindu unity. In 2017, the Hindutva groups started organizing rallies which they called 'Shobhajatras' during Ram Navami, a festival celebrating the birth of Lord Ram. Bike processions and processions playing pompous upbeat music dedicated to Lord Ram with young Hindu men grooving

to the beats with swords and tridents in their hands have been carried out every year. These rallies have become the merging point of the Hindus of West Bengal and Hindutva. The rallies have had violent consequences quite a few times resulting in loss of lives and disruption of localized social and economic relations between Hindus and Muslims. Through the Ram Navami processions, the BJP and the other Hindutva groups have been able to create a politics of Hindu assertion and have also been able to create a hostile narrative against the incumbent TMC government of having neglected Hindus and pampered Muslims in West Bengal. TMC in response has organized processions of its own to counter the anti-Hindu narrative against it. However, these processions have not received the same level of enthusiasm as that of the Hindutva groups. (Nath, 2022, pp. 73-79.)

So, it is imminent that through the narrative of Lord Ram and mobilizations during Ram Navami, BJP and the Hindutva groups have effectively constructed the 'people' comprising of the united Hindu community of West Bengal. Populism needs an antagonistic 'other' to define the 'people' and in the case of Hindutva, it is predominantly the Muslim community in India that can be categorized as the 'other.' West Bengal, being a state bordering Bangladesh, which is a Muslim majority Bengali speaking country works as a narrative for Hindutva groups to mobilize the 'people' against the 'others.' Hindutva groups argue that West Bengal was carved out as a homeland for Bengali Hindus during the partition of 1947 by their founding ideologue, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to protect them from being massacred and plundered by Muslims comprising a majority in the eastern part. Their politics revolve around the narrative of fear that West Bengal would become like Bangladesh where Hindus live under the mercy of the Muslim majority population. They assert that it would become the same here because of the increasing Muslim population in the state which according to them, is a result of illegal Muslim immigration to West Bengal. In recent instances of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims in West Bengal, Hindutva groups have placed the blame on Muslims using the narrative of illegal immigration of Muslims from Bangladesh engaging in terrorism and posing a security threat. They use this rhetoric to mobilize Bengali Hindus, in particular by popularizing the narrative that they would be reduced to a minority in their homeland and that they need to support BJP and all the Hindutva groups politically and socio-culturally with the assertion that they would take punitive action by deporting these 'illegal Bangladeshis' once they form the government in West Bengal. (Bhattacharya, 2023.)

Along with categorizing Muslims as 'others,' the present TMC government and Mamata Banerjee are also placed under the same domain. She is termed as 'Mumtaz Begum' by politicians and activists belonging to the Hindutva camp. They argue that her 'secular appeasement' politics towards Muslims have resulted in her turning a blind eye to illegal immigration taking place under her government. So, while defining the 'other,' Mamata Banerjee and TMC and the Muslims are placed under the same category by BJP and Hindutva groups while campaigning among the 'people.' (Ray Chaudhury, 2021, pp. 22-25)

Although aimed at consolidating Hindus, assertive Hindutva populism seeks to reach out to specific sub-communities within the Hindu community by putting forth their demands on their platform of Hindutva. These communities generally have attained some form of socio-political mobility from their

previous status of being inferior in the Hindu social order. In West Bengal, the Matua Dalit community and some communities belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) fall under the mentioned category.

Matua Dalits are a refugee community who have historically faced persecution in the then East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) during the 1960s and have escaped from those areas to settle in West Bengal's southern regions. They belong to a lower social category as per the Hindu social order and have faced difficulties in obtaining citizenship in India, despite being eligible as per the 1955 Indian Citizenship Law. They have been victims of government complacency and have borne the brunt of being harassed by law enforcement officials as they have been looked down upon as 'illegal Bangladeshis.' A Citizenship Law enacted by the BJP-led Indian Government in 2003 threatened their citizenship in India even further as it mandates a pan Indian National Register for Citizens (NRC) which calls for the deportation of all Bangladeshis who have arrived in India post-1971. All the prominent political parties in West Bengal at that time – the Left Front, Congress, and TMC, supported the law. This left the Matua Dalits with no option but to organize and assert their demands for Indian citizenship politically. In 2010, the Matua organizations held a massive rally in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal to ensure that their demands for citizenship received a pan-India outreach. It was attended by representatives of all prominent political parties in the state. During Narendra Modi's tenure since 2014, BJP has enacted laws promising unconditional citizenship to persecuted Matua Dalits and other non-Muslim communities who have been victims of religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. They have also argued in favor of an all-India NRC which seeks to expel 'illegal' Muslim infiltrators staying in India. Thus BJP's Hindutva politics is established through the fact that it attempts to make a distinction between the 'legal' Hindu refugee and the 'illegal' Muslim infiltrator. BJP's campaigns and legislations yielded electoral support from Matuas in the 2019 national as well as the 2021 state elections. (Daniyal, 2017)

Another community whose grievances BJP has tried to incorporate within its Hindutva platform is the Hindu OBC communities of West Bengal. In North Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, the consolidation of Hindu OBC votes in its favor has been a crucial aspect of BJP's electoral victories. It has done so by consolidating the non-dominant OBC communities against the dominant OBC community, the Yadavs who have weighed behind the Socialist Party in the state. However, in West Bengal, this populist 'other' is the Muslim community of West Bengal, which the BJP alleges has been given undue favor by incorporating most of the Muslim communities under the OBC category at the expense of the Hindu OBC community. BJP blames Mamata Banerjee and TMC for this problem and campaigns upon the electoral pledge that upon being voted to power in the state, they would rectify and bring in deprived Hindu OBC communities under the OBC category so that they can avail the benefits of affirmative action in education and government jobs which they have been deprived for so long. (Daniyal 2021.)

Paternalist populism: Political deification, ethno-religious Bengali pride and female centric welfare schemes

The rise of Hindutva as a dominant narrative in West Bengal and its consolidation of various social communities in the Hindu religious fold compelled Mamata Banerjee and TMC to rethink its politics of populist narratives and mobilization of communities. While discussing aspects of her transformative features of populism post the rise of BJP and Hindutva, there needs to be an overview of the populist characteristics uniquely particular to Mamata Banerjee's leadership following TMC's victory in the 2011 state elections and her populist policies as government policies.

The most significant aspect of her transformation was on the grounds of cultural symbolism attributed to her to mobilize political support. She 'became' the living embodiment of the Hindu Goddess Durga to her 'people' marking a drastic shift from the activist 'Didi' attributed to her during the anti-land acquisition agrarian movement. Poster cutouts displaying her as Durga started emerging in TMC's political rallies as well as during the festivities and worship of Goddess Durga itself. It marked a deification of Mamata Banerjee as a maternal leader representing benevolent welfare as well as a sense of moral superiority over her political rivals. When compared to the usage of religion in the Hindutva populist domain, it can be argued that Mamata Banerjee's populism has an ethno-religious character to it focusing on the Bengali cultural identity of religious syncretism as opposed to socially exclusivist Hindutva. It demarcates a distinct departure from the Communist government preceding her as their politics was marked by their disassociation from religion whereas her politics places religion at the epicenter of Bengali political culture. In a nutshell, her populist leadership in the state has been marked by her emotionally laden charismatic personality where popular support is constituted by an attitude of personal reverence towards her by her supporters. She has also made use of her female identity as a symbol of resilience who has navigated and stood out in the male-dominated arena of politics. Her female identity has also been a crucial component in harnessing popular support among women in the state. She has formulated and implemented government schemes that cater particularly to the women of the state across ages and social groups as well as schemes targeting the rural and urban poor along with the lower middle-class sections of the population. This has helped her to retain power in the subsequent state elections post-2011.

This personalized political culture of TMC with its populism centered upon the personality of Mamata Banerjee characterized by her female-centric welfare schemes reproduces the gendered ideal of female leaders as nurturing maternal figures. So, in this context, Mamata Banerjee's populism can be categorized as a paternalist one. However, with the upsurge of Hindutva in the political culture of West Bengal and its sustained engagement with Hindu sub-communities, this paternalist political rhetoric of Mamata Banerjee requires a contextual understanding of its character of narrative and mobilization. The narrative of Bengali ethno-religious pride centered around the celebration of Durga Pujo by pitting it against Hindutva along with the consolidation of popular support among women through female-centric welfare schemes resulting in a cultural reproduction of female populist leadership by Mamata Banerjee are the two aspects of her paternalist populism that need to be situated in her creation of a

populist deterrent against assertive Hindutva populism in West Bengal. (Ray Chaudhury, 2021, pp. 10-21; Sen, 2021, pp. 67-75.)

Durga Pujo under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, turned increasingly 'political' in which she engages in something that can be termed as a 'politics of performance' where she undertakes active participation in the ritual and ceremonial aspects surrounding the Pujo to showcase her rootedness to the Bengali Hindu ethno-religiosity. She also attempts to pose a counter to the anti-Hindu pro-Muslim label ascribed to her by the BJP. In a broader sense, this 'performance' can also be viewed as a type of cultural populism aimed at harnessing ethno-religious Bengali Hindu pride and mobilizing the community against the BJP and its cultural Hindutva by constructing a narrative that the Ram Navami processions carried out by them are of a 'regressive outsider' North Indian culture as opposed to the 'progressive and culturally rooted' festival of Durga Pujo creating a sense of perception among Bengali Hindus that their culture would become endangered if BJP and its cultural Hindutva take over the state. The political deification of Mamata Banerjee, combined with the political patronage provided to the committees organizing Durga Pujo, has been the defining feature of Mamata Banerjee and TMC's politics of Bengali ethno-religiosity. The metaphor of Durga's divine 'sakti' (power) has been ascribed to Mamata Banerjee describing her as a powerful female minister in comparison with the powerful demon slaying Goddess Durga. The demon, in 2011 was the erstwhile Communist government, and in 2021, is the BJP and its Hindutva rhetoric. Large political hoardings were displayed during the Durga Pujo festivities of 2021 depicting Mamata Banerjee as the 'slayer' of the 'evil demon' BJP and its leaders, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, following her dominating victory over BJP in the state elections that year. Political patronage, revolving around the festivities, constitutes a symbiotic relationship between the leader, Mamata Banerjee, and the Pujo committees. The committees receive generous financial funding from the government along with coming under the favorable gaze of the ruling party, TMC. TMC consolidates these patronage networks to engage in a politics of mass communication where these organizing committees, mostly comprising of neighborhood clubs serve as intermediaries between the party and its patrons and the residents of the neighborhood. This patronage, in return, helps in the creation of a narrative of deifying Mamata Banerjee as the chief patron of the state. Local committees use the festivities as a means to showcase their loyalty towards their leader and the pompous displays of Mamata Banerjee's images are reflective of the gratitude towards their leader for her generous patronage. (Sen, 2021, pp. 67-75; Bhattacharya, 2021.)

The women of West Bengal have been a crucial community in ensuring TMC's prolonged political success in the state. In line with paternalist populism, women, especially in rural West Bengal have been mobilized under the discourse of them being a socially and economically vulnerable community who require generous welfare provisions from the government to improve their standard of living and ensure protection from their vulnerability. A defining feature of governance under Mamata Banerjee's leadership has been the creation of a female-centric social safety net which is aimed at providing cash and material incentives to women across ages and socio-economic groups. Some of the schemes include:

- Kanyashree: Cash transfer aimed at preventing the underage marriage of socially and economically marginalized women by covering their educational expenses in school, college, and university.
- Shobuj Shathi: A Scheme providing bicycles free of cost to female students to make their commute easier especially in rural areas.
- Lokkhir Bhandar: A cash transfer scheme providing 500 INR to economically weak women. Considering the social marginalization Dalit and Adivasi women have to carry, they get 1000 INR.
- Swasthya Shathi: A health insurance card issued by the government to the female member of the family who takes care of the household expenses. It can be used to avail healthcare services in hospitals free of charge.

The consistent delivery of these schemes among women has ensured the creation of a formidable vote bank of women in support of TMC. This support is directed towards TMC's leader, Mamata Banerjee who is seen as a benevolent leader who shares a deep concern for women who are socially and economically vulnerable and this has ensured the consolidation of a political community built upon the female identity in support of her and her party centered upon female-centric welfare populism and her sustained electoral popularity suggests that it is consolidated enough to combat any form of assertive identity politics antagonistic to her brand of paternalist welfare politics. (Daniyal, 2021.)

In the build-up to the 2021 state assembly elections, Mamata Banerjee's political campaign was defined by the slogan, 'Bangla Nijer Meyekei Chay' which translates to Bengal wanting its own daughter. It constructed a symbolic emotional appeal to the women voters of the state and also reflected upon a significant shift in her populist rhetoric from the 'activist Didi' to a more 'vulnerable individual in need of protection from her people.' Thus, she constructed a populist narrative centered upon her female identity as a daughter who is an embodiment of the Bengali cultural identity and needs protection by her 'people' from 'outsider' elements represented by BJP and its Hindutva politics. Her campaign was well received by the voters of West Bengal and she and her party got re-elected with a decisive mandate for a third term. (Ray Chaudhury, 2021.)

Conclusion

A common aspect of populism in India lies in the fact that most of the political parties have the term 'people' in their names in vernacular terminologies. They have deployed a 'plebian grammar' through a leader who represents the 'people' and projects themselves against an 'alien degenerate' or an 'exploitative other.' Keeping in mind the varied formations of populist politics in India since 1947, the dominant narratives can be categorized as either pro-poor, ethno-religious or a combination of both. Mamata Banerjee's populist politics underwent a transition from a pro-poor agrarian rhetoric to an ethno-religious Bengali cultural pride combined with pro-poor welfare schemes for socially and economically vulnerable women to combat the emerging ethno-religious Hindutva populism of BJP. The

rhetoric is shaped by the practice of populist 'identification of the people' and situating the populist leader among the 'identified people.' (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017, pp. 247-48.)

Although the Hindutva political organizations display politics identical to that of Right-Wing Populism, it is unable to do so explicitly because of the populist challenges it face from the regional populist parties, especially in East and South India. As an example, the BJP wants to make Hindi the national language of India in the ideological sense but is unable to do so fearing populist reprisals by the non-Hindi speaking states. So, India's ethnic diversity serves as a disadvantage for BJP in its quest for hegemonic Hindutva populism whereas it serves as an advantage for regional populists such as Mamata Banerjee. The concepts of assertive and paternalist populism find a competitive place in the national-regional discourses of Indian politics and it is pragmatically used by every political party. Indian populism, in that regard, is very fluid and not ideologically rigid in the sense of the left-right binary.

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Populism and Conspiracy Theories during the Pandemic of Covid-19: Rethinking Rumor Theories in the Eastern European Context³⁶

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Abstract

This paper studies populism in relation to the social psychological phenomenon of rumors and outlines its mechanisms and transformations in conditions of a global pandemic. For this reason, the method of discourse analysis has been preferred. The Internet has nowadays become a fertile ground for spreading rumors and conspiracy theories. In such a way rumor communities have been created. Rumors and conspiracy theories arise in moments when there is an emergent need for understanding. Having clear, even though wrong, explanations for events and phenomena becomes more important for individuals and societies than sustaining uncertainty in looking for the truth. The results of the study show that it is not clear whether populist politicians base their discourses on already widely spread rumors or by spreading rumors they give rise to conspiracy theories underlining the uncertainty in society and thus achieving their goals to increase their influence on voters. On the basis of the discourse analysis, it is concluded that several factors can contribute to sustaining misconceptions. The first one is the need to reduce anxiety. Second, believing in false facts may also be due to low levels of education and to the lack of access to reliable information. Third, the cultural memories of the past may lay the foundations for present-day populist perceptions. And fourth, existing mental schemata may contribute for people to be predisposed to misconceptions.

Keywords: populism, rumors, conspiracy theories, disinformation, social networks, misperceptions

Introduction: Populism, rumors and Internet

This paper studies the rise of populism during the pandemic of COVID-19 in Eastern Europe and more specifically in Bulgaria. Its main claim is that populism is tightly intermingled with rumors and conspiracy theories during the global pandemic. It also studies the mechanisms of conspiracy theories in order to outline their importance for the discourse of populist politicians in the country.

Populism has already been studied for several decades in the social sciences. As early as in 1977 Candido Mendes (1977) outlined the persistent polarization between populists and antipopulists in

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political life and the need to transcend the populists' tendencies in society. Since then, populism has been studied in relation to political parties and judicial systems. Some scholars nowadays associate populism with economic processes too. On the basis of factual data from different countries Benczes and Szabó (2023) conclude that populism is most often an economically costly endeavour, often expressed in terms of an actual drop in GDP. Thus, there are proofs that populism may not only influence the political, social and cultural life of a country but it can have strong effects on the economy and the wellbeing of individuals. Although populism might have been associated by some authors with expression of humanitarianism (Alexandrakis, 2019), the majority of the scholars relate the populist ideologies to some forms of authoritarianism (Tang, 2016; Walgrave, 2016; Barosso, 2022). Populism has been studied as embedded in both right-wing and left-wing political ideologies (Walgrave, 2016; Otjes & Louwse, 2015). It has also been observed that populism resurfaces in society in times of crises.

Juan Roch (2024) argues that populism has most often been understood as a stable feature that configures solid political identities. On the basis of discourse analysis, the researcher shows that populism is always context-bound and disseminated. This is why Roch defines populism as an interactive and communicative process and claims that a theoretical analysis of the context is crucial for identifying accurately the processes that give rise to the discourse of populism. Melani and Alhasani (2023) study populism in the contextual frame of Eurosceptic movements on the European continent. Populist discourses that favor Euro separatism proliferate both in left-wing and right-wing political ideologies. In studying two cases: the first one from the right-wing political party Fidesz in Hungary, and the second one from the left-wing political party Podemos in Spain, Melani and Alhasani confirm the hypothesis that left-wing populism focuses on socio-economic-purposes, while the right-wing discourse is based on socio-cultural factors. Similarly, other scholars, too, state that the strong Euroscepticism is not only a result of the populist discourses prevalent in UK among conservative politicians but surprisingly becomes an important component of the "neoliberal authoritarianism" (Ward & Ward, 2023). Thus, on the basis of the research done it can be concluded that the mimicry is a typical feature of populism. It can be found in both right wing and left-wing ideologies but despite their different arguments its most important aim is to claim power and control over the population.

This paper states that populist discourses are always context-related and based. In order to achieve power politicians, relate their ideology to present-day acute problems or crises. Moreover, according to the present study, during the pandemic of COVID-19 populism has become tightly intertwined with conspiracy theories and rumors. Allport and Postman (1946) define rumors as specific propositions for belief, passed from person to person without clear standards of evidence being present. Similarly, Rosnow (1991) claims that rumors are unconfirmed hypothesis to explain uncertain situations. While rumors may exist in times of peace and prosperity, they become dominant in conditions of wars, economic, political and social crises. During the epidemic of COVID-19 they become also a basic element of the populist ideologies in Eastern Europe. In this relation Rosnow (1991) argues that rumors are transmitted because people need to explain ambiguous or uncertain events. According to Kapferer (1992) the source of rumor has little importance. What must be explained in the genesis is the

adherence and the mobilization of the groups. The researcher claims, too, that rumors arise when information is scarce. Thus, Kapferer, as well as Rosnow, point out to the importance of ambiguity and the lack of enough or adequate information as main conditions for rumors to arise. On the basis of Kapferer's and Rosnow's theory it can be concluded that rumors and conspiracy theories underlying the high uncertainty in society during the pandemic have been skillfully used by some politicians to gain publicity and to mobilize social groups.

The uncertainty turns out to be one of the main reasons for rumors to be sustained in society for a long time. A rumor may be partly true or totally false. While there may be some reliability and plausibility in rumors, researchers put the accent on the fact that most often the truth in them is distorted or exaggerated. Very rare are rumors that turn out to be 100% true. Thus, in the social sciences rumors are often linked to misperception too. The latter is defined as a belief in evidently or demonstrably wrong facts. Thus, conspiracy theories, as well as rumors, arise in moments when there is an emergent need for understanding. Having clear, even though wrong, explanations for events and phenomena, turns out to be more important for individuals and societies than sustaining uncertainty in looking for the truth.

If after the two World Wars rumors and conspiracy theories have been spread by word of mouth, from person to person, and sometimes even with the help of the official media, after the 90s of the 20th century rumors become inseparable part of the online social networking. This is why Kapferer (1992) as early as in the beginning of the 90s puts the accent on the mobilization of communities by means of rumors. Other scholars, too, claim that the evolution of rumors is from person to person, to rumor chains and finally to rumor communities (Edy & Rasley-Baird, 2016). The Internet and the social networks provide nowadays the possibility for everyone to equally participate in the process of communication and to actively express their opinions or to share the opinions of others. Thus, varieties of social groups can be created, including such that maintain rumors and spread conspiracy theories. In other words, the phenomenon of spreading rumors is nowadays closely linked to the development of technologies. The evolution of technology presupposes the evolution of the process of spreading rumors.

This paper also claims that conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe and especially in Bulgaria have been sustained because of cultural reasons too. The cultural approach to rumors underlines the importance of cultural memories for individuals, societies or politicians. Thus, societies that have been under authoritative regimes are more susceptible to believe in conspiracy theories and may show lack of trust in the official institutions and authorities. Such is the case of the postcommunist countries, and particularly of Bulgaria and Romania, that have the lowest number of vaccinations in the European Union. According to the data of the World Health organization in Bulgaria only about 30% of the population has been vaccinated during the pandemic and in the European Union the country has the highest mortality rate per population for the period 2020-2022.

One important reason for this fact is the belief in conspiracy theories that has been supported by populist politicians and by some political parties, such as *Vazrazhdane*. The latter has been established in 2017 by Kostadin Kostadinov who had previously been a member of another political party with a right-wing ideology – VMRO – but in 2017 resigned from it in order to create a new “patriotic party”. From the very

beginning Kostadinov and his supporters refuse to define themselves as right-wing or left-wing politicians. They embrace elements of both right and left ideologies sometimes controversially blending them and changing quickly their opinions according to the context. During the war in Ukraine, they are known to support Russia and the authoritative regime of Putin. All this is a proof that *Vazrazhdane* is a populist party that aims to base its influence on populist discourses, such as “patriotism”, “nationalism”, “love to the country” and perceived dangers and threats to the country mostly from the West. During the pandemic of Covid-19 the conspiracy theories have become inseparable part of the political discourse of *Vazrazhdane*, as well as of other small non-popular parties. However, *Vazrazhdane* gained more than 10% of the electoral votes on the parliamentary elections in 2023 and it has 37 representatives in the Bulgarian parliament. In the last years *Vazrazhdane* has not just maintained populist discourses but it has actively spread conspiracy theories by the media and especially by the social networks.

In the Eastern European countries there is a high level of distrust in the state and the official institutions. This is due to the collective memories from the times of socialism when propaganda and misinformation had been widely used by the socialist states. This is one of the reasons why such societies are nowadays highly susceptible to rumors and conspiracy theories. This specificity of the social attitudes has been used by the members of the political party *Vazrazhdane*. By spreading conspiracy theories during the pandemic, it has increased its supporters. This fact also underlines the importance of the cultural grounds of the conspiracy theories and rumors.

The other approach to rumors is the social psychological approach. It is based on the studies of Allport, Rosnow and Kapferer but nowadays it also includes case studies and empirical research. This approach is not so much interested in the cultural context or in the cultural specificities of the countries, but it puts the emphasis on the abilities of rumors and conspiracy theories to transform social attitudes and to create worldviews. Thus, Pezzo and Beckstead (2006) investigate rumors related to a particular event: the sudden death of a college student from meningitis in Washington. They find out that rumors affect beliefs more than anxiety in the concrete case. Thus, the researchers claim that rumors may or may not impact the anxiety level, but they affect the individuals' beliefs. Similarly, Bakebillah and others (2021) study the attitudes during the epidemic of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. The results of their research clearly show that 50% of the respondents consider the disease as “a punishment of God”. This means that crisis events, such as deadly diseases or wars, are able to provoke or strengthen religious beliefs and worldviews.

In the research on social networks, S. Islam and others (2021) identified 637 COVID-19 vaccine-related items: 91% are classified as rumors, and 9% are connected to conspiracy theories. Out of the 637 items, only 5% are true, 83% are false, 10% are misleading, and 2% are exaggerated. Thus, the authors conclude that rumors or conspiracy theories can solidify as strong beliefs and social attitudes. Prims (2024), too, discovers that conspiracy belief is quite common. On the basis of some tests the researcher concludes that often people have difficulties to recognize conspiracy theories that they believe as conspiracy theories, a phenomenon defined by the author as a “conspiracy blindness”. Prims also writes that despite the fact that people are typically ignorant of their own conspiracy beliefs, they become

capable of recognizing them when they are given the tools and the motivation to do so. Yet, according to him, even this does not reduce their adherence to the conspiracy beliefs. Thus, the social psychological approach studies the beliefs, the attitudes and the motivation of people to believe or not in different theories.

In combining the cultural and the social psychological approach the phenomenon of spreading rumors and conspiracy theories can be studied in depth as part of the populist discourses. On the one hand rumors can shape attitudes but on the other hand they usually proliferate in particular cultural settings and are often associated with events from the historical past and the cultural memories. Even when a rumor is spread by words of mouth and from person to person this is a social, rather than an individual phenomenon. The online groups based solely on adherence to rumors and conspiracy theories nowadays also prove that spreading rumors is a collective phenomenon and relates to the collective consciousness. Moreover, today the official media are equally engaged in institutional efforts to provide reliable information and to debunk widely spread misconceptions and wrong beliefs.

Events causing high level of anxiety and uncertainty, such as the appearance of deadly viruses and diseases, are more likely to be interpreted by the general audience with circulating rumors and conspiracy theories. In studying the rumors about HIV/AIDS that have been spread among African people, Heller (2015) concludes that although rumors are not collective memories, they are often closely related to them. The author underlines that the genocide rumors have a long history within the African and even the African American public. Thus, rumors have treated HIV as a part of the genocide campaigns against the African people. The Africans believe that HIV is a man-made disease by the white people, by means of which they try to get rid of the African people (Heller, 2015).

In such a way, with these rumors certain cultural memories are enhanced too. Knapp (1944) identifies this type of rumor as a “wedge-driving rumor”. Its aim is to cope with feelings of being threatened by others. Similarly, many citizens of Bulgaria believe that vaccines have been designed to kill people. Based on the political past many Bulgarians suppose that they have been ill-informed or even cheated. Thus, rumors become a means or a tool to manage high level of anxiety and uncertainty. Simultaneously, by underlining some cultural arguments they become more plausible and relevant to the perceiver too. Exactly the perceived threat to the country and to the people has been used by some Bulgarian politicians as a means to attain more popularity and to aggressively oppose the population to the ‘ruling elites’. The following text studies some real cases of populist discourses and discusses the social-psychological effects of sustaining rumors and conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe by political parties and their leaders.

Material and method

The goal of this paper is to study the social psychological phenomenon of rumors and its relation to populist discourses. The tasks of the research are (1) to find out the basic categories of rumors and the main topics in the pandemic of Covid-19 in Bulgaria; (2) to describe the social-psychological

mechanisms that underline the rumors of Covid-19; and (3) to investigate the close relation between collective memories from the socialist past and the present-day conspiracy theories as basic elements of the populist discourses. The discourse analysis has been preferred to other qualitative or quantitative methods. Through the content analysis, the true beliefs and attitudes of people can be discovered. Individuals might not openly express the same beliefs and attitudes if they are explicitly asked by interviewers through questionnaires or in-depth interviews.

Previous research has already suggested that the Internet and the online communities have become the favorable setting for rumors and conspiracy theories. To outline the phenomenon of rumor spreading, this paper analyzes some messages in a closed Facebook group. The group is dedicated to natural healing and well-being. At the time of the study, it consisted of 254 members. The content that is shared is mostly in Bulgarian. Some of the posts are also in the English language. The topics of discussions are various and are not limited to the epidemic or the political parties. What is more interesting is that the posts analyzed here can be directly related to some claims of politicians and supporters of the political party *Vazrazhdane* and have been widely circulated on the social media Facebook. Out of the numerous posts shared in this group 17 posts from 2021 have direct link to Bulgarian politicians' statements made at the same time. The posts have been analyzed together with the commentaries to them.

Most of the posts consist of texts but some include also pictures, images and even videos. In the analysis below both texts and visuals are taken in consideration. These posts have been chosen because they express some widely circulated beliefs that have also been spread by the supporters of *Vazrazhdane*. Although the group itself has nothing to do with the political party, some of the posts are clear references to statements made by the politicians in the media. Thus, it is difficult to say whether populist politicians base their discourses on already widely spread beliefs or their discourses strengthen these beliefs and give rise to conspiracy theories.

Results

The following 17 posts from 2021 in the closed Facebook group have been chosen because they correspond to statements made by politicians at the same time:

1. EU Green Certificates violate human rights.
2. Natural immunity should be preferred to vaccines.
3. Vaccines contain harmful ingredients and have high toxicity.
4. Essential oils can serve as an effective therapy against Covid-19.
5. Authorities instill fear that is more dangerous than the virus.
6. Vaccines change the electromagnetic field of the body.
7. Certain foods and alkalization of the body can keep the virus away.

8. Over 80% of the vaccinated people have severe adverse reactions.
9. At least 10% of the vaccinated people will die within 5 years.
10. Aluminum that is contained in certain foods and in Covid-19 vaccines cause brain damage.
11. Lockdowns are designed to lower the immune system.
12. By eating tomatoes, one can strengthen the immune system against viruses.
13. While in Europe people are suppressed, in other countries they have freedom of choice.
14. In India people are rarely vaccinated, and their vaccines have different ingredients.
15. The antibodies from the disease will last longer than the antibodies from vaccines.
16. Covid-19 is aimed to destroy small businesses.
17. Children should not be allowed to be tested at school.

While a big part of the shared information can be classified as “false”, some of the posted items might be generally true, but in the context of the pandemic of Covid-19 become misleading and false.

Authorities, official institutions and rules

The study outlines two basic groups of information. The first group is dedicated to authorities, official institutions and rules. The content analysis confirms that this information is most often underlined by cultural argumentation too. One of the most popular posts that was widely circulated deals with the EU green COVID certificates and provokes many commentaries and high level of agreement with its author who claims that certificates restrict the rights of individuals. The majority of the commentaries below the post refer to the authoritative rules during socialism and compare the green EU certificates with the green Bulgarian passports in the socialist past, underlining that in reality the two are highly restrictive (figure 1 and figure 2). It is also not coincidental that the political party *Vazrazhdane* together with other smaller parties organized several protests against the green certificates at the time of the commentaries made in the Facebook group.

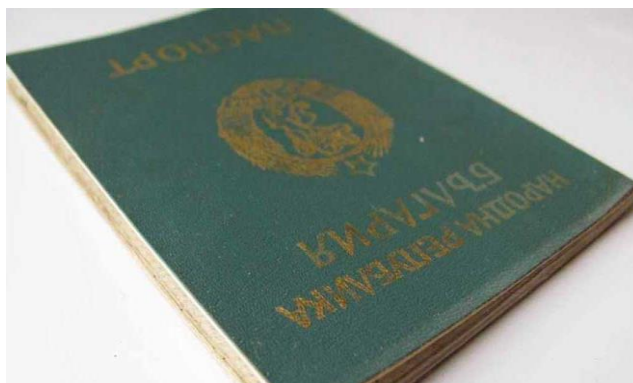


Figure 1: Bulgarian green passport during socialism



Figure 2: The EU green certificate

Other posts are dedicated to the restrictions, lockdowns, and the new rules during the pandemic. It is obvious that they also sustain and circulate conspiracy theories. Such are the posts suggesting that authorities impose lockdowns to intentionally suppress the immune systems of individuals or that lockdowns are designed to destroy small businesses. In all these statements there is a feeling of authoritative threat, as well as perceived malicious intentions of governments and international institutions to suppress the freedom and rights of individuals or to cause them harm.

Conspiracy theories about the vaccines

And the second category of information that includes the most numerous posts deals with the adverse effects, high toxicity and harmful ingredients of the vaccines. During the pandemic of COVID-19 most of the members of the political party *Vazrazhdane* actively spread disinformation about the vaccines. It is true that there are cases of severe side effects of the vaccines and even registered deaths as results of them. But to claim that 80% of the people experience severe adverse reactions after vaccination, is more than exaggerating or distorting the truth. Moreover, while some vaccines may indeed contain aluminum, most of the Covid-19 vaccines do not have the ingredient. So, in relation to the topic of the vaccines some of the statements may be partly true but the facts are either exaggerated or taken from a completely different context. Other posts raise ethical concerns too. Claims that natural immunity can better fight the virus than the vaccines or that particular food, natural oils or homeopathy can be more effective than the vaccines are not only misleading. Belief in such statements may endanger the health, and even life, of people, especially of the ones with diseases or falling into the age group of the elders. Unfortunately, both some medical doctors and political leaders have spread this belief in Bulgaria.

And between the numerous posts during the pandemic some are totally untrue. A post on the Facebook group provides “facts” about India. According to it the Indian people are rarely vaccinated, and their vaccines have totally different ingredients in comparison with the ones of the Western countries. Such information contradicts the data provided by the Indian officials according to whom in the second part of October 2021 1 billion vaccines have already been administered to the Indian population. Moreover, the most used vaccine in the country has been Covishield that is the trade name of the Astra Zeneca vaccine in India and has the same ingredients as the one used in the UK and Europe. This case is a

clear example that misinformation in the form of “facts” can easily be presented, shared, circulated and accepted in the social media, including by some politicians and even by medical doctors.

Another example in this direction is a shared post on Facebook claiming that the body of a person has become highly magnetized after vaccination. The author of the post supports his claim with a picture and a video clip with the person-in-question where he can be seen with spoons and forks glued to his skin. The conclusion of the post is that “vaccines can change the electromagnetic field” of the body and that after vaccination one can become highly magnetized. Similar videos with magnetized people that can glue metal spoons and forks to their skin exist on YouTube and other channels and the proposition is that the video is taken from some channel and is intentionally related to the topic of vaccination. Such fabrications of “facts” raise concerns not because the information is published and shared but because of its context. The discussion under the post proves that the video and the commentaries to it are not perceived as jokes or entertainment. In the opposite, they are considered to be “real facts”.

Interestingly, statements about the harmful ingredients of the vaccines, the change of the electromagnetic field of the body and other adverse effects of the vaccines, including claims about the “better vaccines in other countries, such as India” have been circulated by some members and supporters of the political party *Vazrazhdane* and other small parties, such as the *Peoples’ party*. Thus, in December 2021, after a public protest against the green certificates in the center of Sofia, the protesters had left a huge poster behind them in front of the Parliament. The text on the poster read:

- We declare war to the COVID-19 lie
- We declare war to the obligatory vaccination in Bulgaria
- We declare war to the vaccines killers Astra Zeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, Jonson & Johnson, Jansen and Sputnik.
- We declare war to the vaccine passports / certificates.
- We declare war to the chemtrails ...
- We want death-sentences through hanging for all the politicians – criminals.



Figure 3: The anti-vaccine poster in front of the Bulgarian parliament written by the Peoples’ party (photo by the author)

For a country like Bulgaria, because of the cultural memories from the past, it is not a surprise that many people believe in conspiracy theories and show high suspicion to the state, the official authorities and institutions, as well as to the traditional media. However, it is a surprise that a poster that affirms conspiracy theories and spreads hatred and threats have stayed more than a month in the center of the capital, in front of the Parliament. A well-known TV journalist has called the municipality to ask why the poster had not been removed from the scene. The answer received is that everybody has the freedom to express their opinion and that the municipality cannot remove the poster because this is a freedom of speech.

Discussion

On the basis of the analysis presented above it can be concluded that conspiracy theories have become prevalent not only among some politicians and their supporters but also in the majority of the population of the country during the pandemic of COVID-19. Thus, a very important question comes to the fore: why are misconceptions sustained by people? Why do political leaders and in some cases even medical doctors spread fake facts? Moreover, it is astonishing that in the 21st century some politicians and their supporters actively claim that there is a conspiracy of governments and scientists to implant the wrong knowledge about the COVID-19 and to exterminate a significant part of the population.

The suspicion towards the government and the official media as a heritage from the totalitarian past is an important reason for the post-socialist societies to become nowadays highly susceptible to rumors and conspiracy theories. Such particular cases raise a number of questions: can the expression of hatred, violence and intolerance be allowed in society in the form of freedom of speech? Should the state authorities tolerate rumors and conspiracy theories, especially when they endanger the health of individuals? These questions also prove that in the post-totalitarian countries, such as Bulgaria, there is hardly any balance in society or in the media: from the pressure exercised on journalists and reporters in the traditional press and media when they speak the truth, to the lack of any regulation of the digital media where fake news and conspiracy theories have proliferated and have thus formed the public opinion.

All these issues related to the freedom of speech in the digital epoch bring to the fore some of the ideas of the Spiral of silence theory that was first introduced in 1974 by Noelle-Neumann (1974). It emphasizes on the ability of the electronic media to create public opinion that is shared by the majority, while minority views are suppressed or ignored. According to this theory the individuals who do not share the opinions of the majority are forced to become silent in order to prevent stigmatization and isolation in society. In such a way, Noelle-Neumann states that an illusion of social consensus has been created.

If the Spiral of silence theory seems to be justified in relation to the traditional media, the postmodern processes demonstrate its limited application to the contemporary digital media. Referred to the virtual space of the Internet and the social media this theory shows some shortcomings. The Internet and the

digital media have imposed the individualization of the public communication and, have thus created numerous possibilities for establishing minority identities. In such a way, in the digital environment there is exactly the opposite process - disintegration and fragmentation of the public opinion, a phenomenon, which, in some cases, even leads to the loss of public consensus. Simultaneously, in the virtual space of the new media the representatives of the minority groups have become less silent, and they actively express their worldviews and opinions. While in general this tendency might be a positive process, some misconceptions, false beliefs and incorrect facts or data presented by medical doctors or politicians can be spread too. In such a way the social media can become a fertile ground for populist discourses.

There might be different reasons for people to sustain misconceptions. Firstly, some individuals may adhere consciously or unconsciously to wrong beliefs in order to reduce anxiety. Thus, the conviction that there is no real disease, or that it is not more dangerous than the seasonal flue, may serve as a psychological tool to cope with high levels of stress and uncertainty. Obviously, for these people alleviating stress becomes more important than looking for truths. And secondly, believing in false facts may also be due to low levels of education and to the lack of access to reliable information. Thus, the need to reduce anxiety and the low education may contribute for people to be predisposed to misperceptions.

Both Knapp (1944) and Durandin (1992) study the psychology of lying. On the basis of their research the authors conclude that it is not unusual witnesses to provide wrong testimony with the same self-assurance, as they provide correct and true information. The researchers also claim that what sometimes is perceived as "truth" may reflect more the individual's mental stereotypes than what they in reality have seen. In addition, as it was shown in the study above, perceptions often depend on previous cultural experiences or memories. The latter become the foundation on which mental judgements are made. This is why the citizens of the post-communist countries may show much more sensitivity towards restrictions, lockdowns or green certificates than their Western counterparts. Their experiences of the authoritative regimes in the past have formed their mental concepts through which all the new information is processed. Also, people from the post-communist countries share much higher level of suspicion and distrust in the state and its institutions than individuals in the Western world. In such a way, the social experiences in the past, as well as the individual and collective cultural memories and traumas, may become a fertile ground for the circulation of rumors and conspiracy theories as part of the populist discourses.

Conclusion

The research indicates that rumors and conspiracy theories dominate the populist discourses during the pandemic of COVID-19. Rumors are social psychological phenomenon that is related to the lack of knowledge and adequate information. However, even when the latter are provided, some individuals tend to stick to misconceptions. On the basis of the research done four main factors can be outlined as important in sustaining false beliefs and misconceptions. The first one is the need to reduce

stress. The second factor may relate to low levels of education contributing to low cognitive abilities. The third one is the cultural memories of the past that may lay the foundations for present-day perceptions. And the fourth factor is the phenomenon of mental schemata. These four factors become the reason for some individuals to hold themselves to existing concepts and to resist strongly to contra-information or contra-argumentation. The propensity of people to embrace rumors during crisis events has been skillfully used by some Bulgarian political parties and their leaders as a tool to increase their popularity and to strengthen their influence on voters. However, the results of this behavior have been disastrous for the country and its people, as the lowest percentage of vaccination has led to the highest rate of death mortality per population in the European Union in the period 2020-2022.

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The Discourse Transformation of the Italian Right-wing Populist Parties: From Nationalism to Medium Euroscepticism³⁷

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Abstract

Right-wing populists are considered to use emotions and polarisation in their communications to gain their electoral goals. The paper aims at reflecting whether populists lose their emotional engagement after gaining the power. The methodological framework of the present paper employs a discourse analysis of publications made on Facebook during the last three national-level electoral campaigns in 2013, 2018 and 2022 by Matteo Salvini and Georgia Meloni, the leaders of the Italian right-wing populist parties. To identify the key issues relevant for the Italian society there was conducted an analysis of the electoral programs of the selected populist parties. The results of the study demonstrate that emotional engagement potential of published messages has appeared to become more influential for the populists' audience than the coverage of the particular issues. Also, the results of the content analysis published during electoral campaigns show that the more party is mature the less its leaders use emotions to engage the voters and reach its electoral goals.

Keywords: populism, nationalism, Euroscepticism, Italian political parties, political discourse

Introduction

Populist parties are often perceived as outsiders and an opposition to the mainstream political forces, but the Italian case is different. However, in some countries, e.g., Italy, the role of populist parties has changed dramatically in the recent years. The number of deputies seats in the Italian Parliament hold by populists has grown from 20% in 2013 to almost 70% in 2022, even the present Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni is a leader of the far-right populist party, Fratelli d'Italia (The Brothers of Italy). This fact demonstrates that the role of the populist parties has changed. Now they are competitors to the mainstream parties and even more – in Italy populist parties play a mainstream role.

Italy is an example, where the populist diversity is presented by both left and right populist parties and even mainstream parties leaders use in their communication with voters' populist discourse elements.

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³⁸ I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

According to the most recent national elections results the Italian right populists are more influential, so the aim of this paper is to analyse the discourse of right populist leaders in social media (Facebook) and identify the key factor and issues which affect populist party electoral results.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser claimed populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2017), but this feature doesn’t impose any barriers on populist ideological flexibility and adaptability to the most demanding issues, which means that populist politicians felt freer to adopt any of the exiting ideas to persuade their audience to vote for them. These authors as well as Laclau (2005), van Huawaert and van Kessel (Hauwaert, 2018) or Kübler believe that the countries’ economic fluctuations and sense of angst or unclear view of future arouse negative reaction from citizens towards migration policies and issues of migrant adaptation to local culture, which creates a strong basement for populist rise and the populist polarised discourse based on “we” or “vox populi” to “they”, who are considered as enemies, opposition.

Social media have become a fertile ground for populists’ communication with their audience, horizontality of social media and absence of mediators favour the populists. Usage of social media by populist parties and their leaders has become an object of a huge volume of scholarly reflection. Some scholars focus on defining the key elements of populist usage of social media by the Italian political parties, so they compare accounts run by populists and non-populists parties (Mazzoleni, 2018), other center their attention on particular issues covered by the Italian right and left populists, e.g. illegal immigration problem (Sensales, 2021). Also there are works, which study behaviour of a particular populist party in social media or instruments used by populists to engage the audience (Bobba, 2018; Bracciale, 2021) or compare the Italian populist experience with other European countries (Chernov, 2024). Despite the fact that emotional side of populist communication and engagement with potential voters especially in the social media has also become an object of several papers (Martella, 2022; Gerbuado, 2023; Forciniti, 2024) in recent years, researchers have not tracked the populist emotional interactions with voters during several electoral campaigns in Italy and there is a lack in studies of comparison between established and emerging populist parties. This research paper covers 3 last nation level electoral campaigns in Italy (2013, 2018 and 2022) and analyses experience of 2 leading populist parties (The League headed by Matteo Salvini and The Brothers of Italy run by Georgia Meloni) using emotional publications on Facebook to interact with and engage the Italian voters.

To conduct this research, the author has chosen discourse and content analysis of the populist political leaders speeches (Matteo Salvini from the League and Giorgia Meloni from the Brothers of Italy) published on Facebook during the 3 last electoral campaigns (2013, 2018 and 2022), which allows to study any transformation in communication style, selected topics for discussion and assess level of emotional engagement, which is important for making any forecasts regarding populist political future and their ability to mobilise their voters. After selection of key topics for both parties, which was based on the analysis of electoral programs of selected parties in the selected periods, accounts of politicians were studied, and the results are presented in the analysis sector.

Data and methods

Research questions

The ideological flexibility of the populist parties allows them to adapt their discourse during electoral campaigns to the most acute issues, nevertheless established populist parties have to contend with the preferences of their core audience of voters. Reflections on the features of right-wing populist leaders' communication in the social media raise specific questions that we tried to address in the empirical research of this paper.

RQ1. Is there any connection between usage of emotional discourse and electoral success for right populists?

RQ2. Which factor, emotional discourse or distinctive topics, is more significant for the audience of the Italian right populists?

RQ3. What is the difference in the rhetoric used by leaders of emerging and mature populist party?

According to the existing literature, these research questions have not been covered by the researchers, who usually focus on comparing of social media use by populist and mainstream parties (Mazzoleni 2018; Bracciale 2021), but do not analyse emotions used by the Italian right populist leaders in the paradigm of changing and developing situation. This paper is objected to fill the gap and analyse emotions used to drive the voters' attention and consent during a 9-year period, which covers 3 national elections campaigns in 2013, 2018 and 2022.

Case selection

To answer the research questions, it has been decided to study how themes of public communications and their emotional sentiment affect the result of the populist parties in a 9-year period from the general elections to the Italian Parliament in 2013 to the general elections in 2023. Despite the fact that both left-centred and right-centred populist parties are presented in the Italian Parliament there were decided to focus only on two right-centred populist parties, which are Lega (The League) led by Matteo Salvini and Fratelli d'Italia (The Brothers of Italy) headed by Giorgia Meloni. First is an example of "old" established populist party, while the second one is an example newly made emerging one, but successful populist parties. This was done to eliminate ideological differences of left and right parties and to make study more valid, since there was made an attempt to measure electoral success through the analysis of the parties' discourse and their attempts to engage their audience emotionally.

To identify key factors, which may appeal to the majority of populist voters, the author has checked the country's unemployment rate, GDP growth and annual net migration rate. Also the electoral programmes were studied to identify the key topics of the Italian populist discourse. Economy and country's economic development in future, attitude to migration (especially illegal) and migrant adaptation to local culture, attitude to the traditional values and social policy, support of different

vulnerable groups of society (e.g. women, families with children, students and retired people) and Italy-EU relations were noticed as key topics. Sometimes problems such as economic prosperity gap between the South and North Italian provinces are also included into the populist agenda, but this topic is noticeably rare compared to other four groups of the populist public communication topics.

Election programmes of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia of 2013, 2018 and 2022 electoral campaigns were studied to identify the key messages, which were economic development, state support for families, women, children and socially disadvantaged groups. Then the author studied the official pages of Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni on Facebook and tracked all the mentions of the indicated topics in their posts made during national electoral campaigns in 2013, 2018 and 2022 to monitor the populist self-positioning and estimate their level of radicalism and emotional engagement.

Sample

Facebook was chosen as a social media platform with function to track publications made more than 10 years ago. The second reason to focus on this social media platform was its popularity among the Italian society, so politicians have to use it to communicate with their target audience of supporters and potential voters.

In this conference paper the self-presentation of populist political parties is considered in the paradigm of the concept of information perception in an election campaign through public opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld 1968), who are the political leaders of populist parties.

The publications in social media (Facebook in this case) written by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in the official Facebook accounts in the periods of three national level electoral campaigns (24 December 2012–25 February 2013, 4 January 2018–4 March 2018, 25 July 2022–25 September 2022) have become an empirical base of the content analysis research. Total number of analysed data is 3,240 messages.

Content analysis of the electoral programs (nation level elections in 2013, 2018 and 2022) of the selected parties (Lega and The Brothers of Italy) and the Italy's unemployment rate, GDP growth and annual net migration rate in the selected years allowed to define the most relevant topics: economic, migration, families and Italy and the EU relations. All the 3,240 messages made by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini on Facebook during selected periods were analysed for compliance with the selected topics. Then there were sampled 497 messages from two populist leaders corresponded to the selected topics, representing 15% of the total volume of messages, the remaining messages were devoted to either announcement of meetings with voters, criticism of the personalities of political competitors, holiday greetings and personal information.

After identifying the relevant messages there was chosen the second variable to analyse the populist discourse: a degree of a message's emotional engagement capacity. In this research paper there is no distinguish between positive and negative emotions, both types of emotional spectre are included in the

sample analysis. Emotional spectre consists of the following emotions: fear, irritation, fury, anger, sympathy, compassion, nostalgia, sense of unity.

All the selected messages were tagged by its topic (economic -1, migration -2, families -3, EU-4) and degree of emotional engagement potential (low -1, neutral -2, high -3). Then it was analysed how different topics with different emotional engagement potential are reflected in the populist discourse and how it affects the electoral results of both selected parties.

Also it has appeared that selected methodology does not allow to measure a level of radicalism of the message due to the complexity the research, so it was decided to focus on measuring populist topics and their emotional rate to find relations between these two factors in the populist discourse. The future automatization of messages analysis might help to introduce the third variable of radicalism in this research.

Historical overview on the Italian populism

Populism in Italy has a long-established tradition. This tradition is so long established that some research papers study features of the Italian populism with an eye of the fascist past, especially when it comes to analysis of far-right populists (Ruzza 2009; Traverso 2019). First parties, which could be considered as populists emerged in Italy in the middle of the 90s. Their birth was provoked by significant changes in the global political landscape. After the USSR broken established parties like the Italian Christian Democratic party or the Italian Communist party faced with ideological problems and were involved into the serious corruption cases, so they were reorganised (Tarchi 2002). Their resignation created a room for new parties, so the populist parties captured their market. Among these parties there were several populist and far-right nationalist parties (e.g., Go Italy by Silvio Berlusconi, National Alliance and the Northern League), which laid the ground to the contemporary populist parties in Italy. One of the significant distinctive aspects of these parties was their attitude to the communication style with voters and media, which features have become a subject for research in some papers (Edwards 2005; Esser 2016; Bracciale 2017).

Thus, there is a significant pool of academic research, which focus not only on populism itself, but analyse the peculiarities of the Italian case. At the down of its existence the Italian populism emerged a special communication feature of the political parties targeted mostly on the inhabitants of the country's North regions, like Lombardy. Aspects of rise of regional populism are covered in several works (Piccone 1991; Woods 1995). One of the first populist parties targeted their activity of the North regions in Italy was Lega Nord or the Northern League, which was founded in 1989. At first, they were focused only on voters from the North Italian regions. Lega Nord was a right-centred party, which was launched to accumulate votes from conservative part of citizens, who were displeased by the country economic policy and budgeting policy towards the North and Southern Italian regions, also first Lega Nord supporters were against internal migration from South to North. Among their first key messages was a

claim for independence to the northern Italian provinces and the formation of an independent state of Padania with its capital in Milan.

Despite the fact, when Lega Nord was headed by Umberto Bossy, their communication style was more radical than populist, but still there are some details which help us to identify this party as populist even on its first stage. There were such elements as:

- “we” - “they” polarisation by the geographical factor, where “we” are those Italians, who live in the North provinces, while “they” are Southern Italians. “They” were presented as an evil group, whose only intention to use financially the group of “us”. Lega Nord even use these polarisations in graphics – a wall divides two parts of Italy.
- highly emotional language of the political messages
- negative visualisation and simplification of the “they” or “enemies” group.

The modern League inherited from the original Umberto Bossi’s Northern League its type of leadership and some of the electoral performances (Vampa 2021).

Fratelli d’Italia is less covered in the academic papers, because it was founded only in 2012, but its leaders were members of another radical right political party, which was Alleanza Nazionale (Nation Alliance), which appeared in 1994 and is often described as neo-fascist party (Ruzza 2009). Therefore, the political background of their leaders affected on the communication style and key topics of The Brothers of Italy and their leader Georgia Meloni.

Discourse transformation and radicalism loss

The Northern League’s electoral results since their first national elections in 1992 were not very impressive. They reached almost 9% in 1992 and slightly more than 10% in 1996, but lost their voters in 2001 (3, 9%) and 2013 (4%). An urge for electoral success on the country national level has led the party in case of the Northern League to dilemma: go through the rebranding process or keep their positions only in some provinces.

Therefore, the Northern League’s head and founder Umberto Bossy decided to rebrand the party to benefit their national scale election ambitious. Bossy resigned in 2012, but the reason of this resignation was not only the party’s needs, but a corruption scandal. In 2013 Matteo Salvini became the Federal Secretary of the Northern League. His appointment was synchronised with the party transformation and rebranding and by the following elections in 2018 they had already changed their name to Lega without Nord, which illustrates their intention to get the support from voters from the whole country, not only its North part.

I have analysed the Facebook messages of Salvini in three electoral campaigns: 24 December 2012–25 February 2013, 3 January 2018–4 March 2018, 25 July 2022–25 September 2022. 263 messages, which are around 15% of total number of messages in the indicated periods, were dedicated to the following issues:

- economy and vision of future economic development of Italy
- issues of illegal migration and refugee adaptation problems
- traditional values and social policy of the state, women and children protection, rights and opportunities for disabled people
- Italy and the EU interactions
- issues on the North and South regions development and support.

All the data given in bar charts (Figure 1) is represented in % to the total number of all relevant messages made by Matteo Salvini in the indicated year.

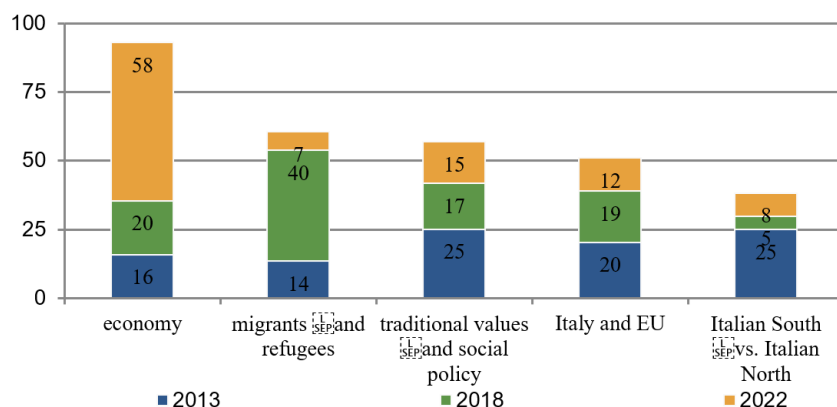


Figure 1: Salvini's messages by topic (%)

In 2013 Matteo Salvini covered almost all the key themes equally. Only economic issues received the least significant coverage, only 14%. But Salvini expressed his party ideas on the economic development of the country which he saw in taxation reforms, intended to provide socially disadvantaged groups with extra financial support from the state and criticised Italy as not enough independent in its economy and external policies from the European Union. He even reflected the attitude of his party supporters towards Italians from the Southern provinces and offered to overview a distribution scheme of taxes between North and South regions.

In 2018, the basis of Salvini's and Lega's positioning is criticism of the Italian and EU migration policy and the problem of integration of migrants, but the number of messages reflecting the party's positions on issues of relations between the northern and southern regions are significantly reduced. Furthermore, economic themes dominated in 2022. These results demonstrate the League's adaptability to external circumstances and transform its discourse.

All the data given in bar charts (Figure 2) is represented in % to the total number of all relevant messages made by Georgia Meloni in the indicated year. The "Brothers of Italy", led by Giorgia Meloni, did not participate in the parliamentary elections in 2013 and was just at its start of its political activities, but economic and social topics served as major points in communication with voters. In the 2018 campaign, the flow of messages in which the theme of criticism of migration policy predominates and the criminogenic tendency of migrants is emphasised. And in 2022, the topics of messages are more

balanced and reflect the party's positions on all key topics, except for the relationship between the south and the north, which indicates loss of its relevance.

However, for a more valid and reliable assessment of positioning all the politicians' messages were tagged regarding their linguistic style and emotionality of these messages, they were rated from 1 to 3, where 1 is the least radical and emotional message, while 3 is highly emotional or radical. It has allowed us to determine the most significant topics for Italian society and preferences in solving current problems.

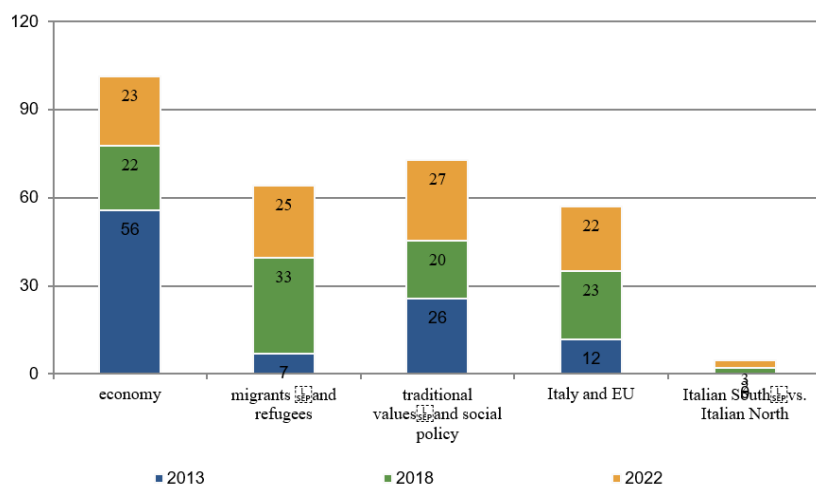


Figure 2: Meloni's messages by topic (%)

The data presented in Figures 3-6 are in % to the total number of messages published by Matteo Salvini or Georgia Meloni in the indicated period (2018 or 2022 electoral campaign) by the indicated topic (economy, migrants, traditional values. Italy and the EU and Italian South vs. the Italian North). The data includes both positive and negative emotions made by the posted messages.

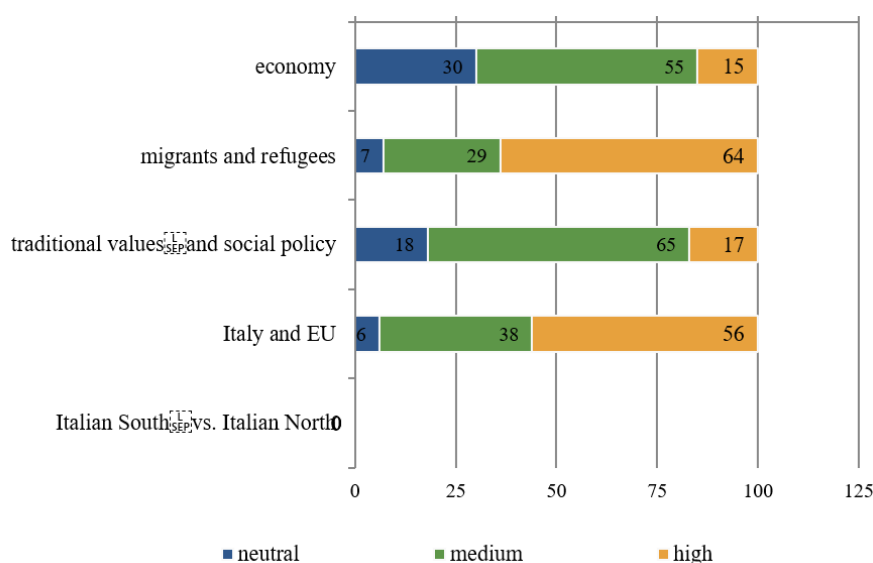


Figure 3: Level of emotional content of messages by Salvini in 2018 (%)

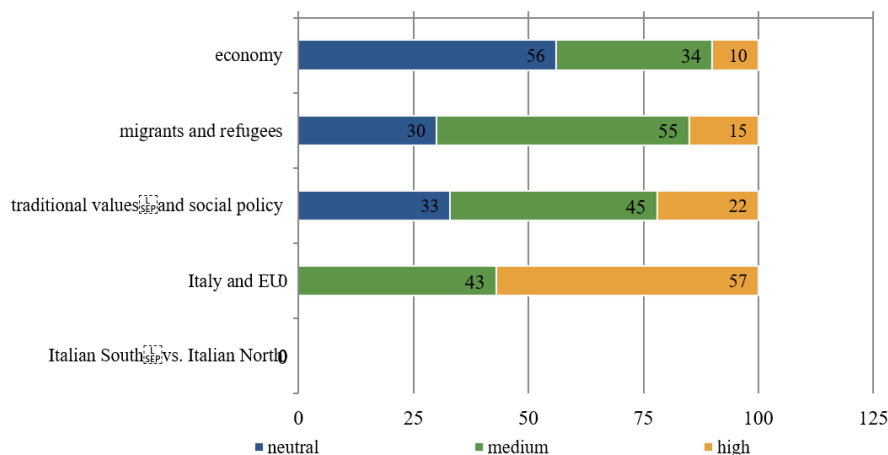


Figure 4: Level of emotional content of messages made by Salvini in 2022 (%)

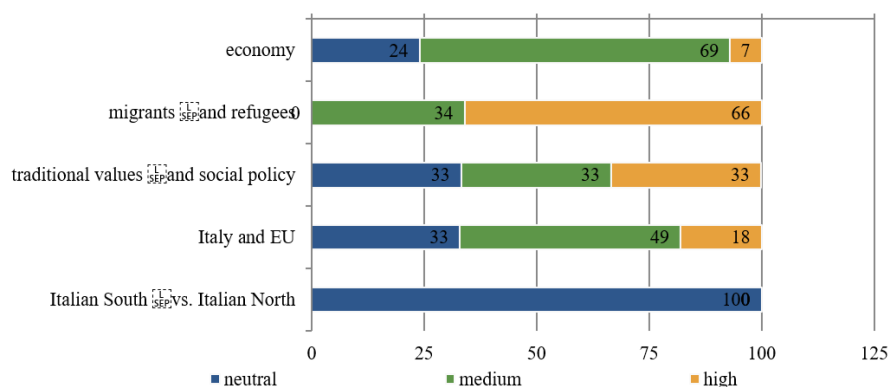


Figure 5: Level of emotional content of messages made by Meloni in 2018 (%)

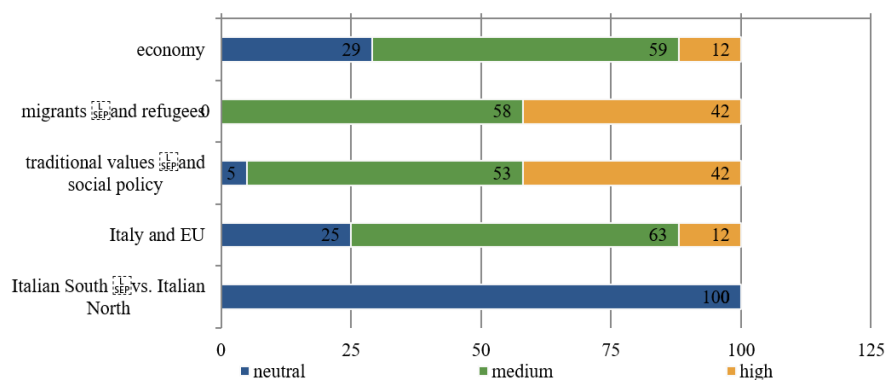


Figure 6: Level of emotional content of messages made by Meloni in 2022 (%)

This means, that high rate of emotional engagement of Georgia Meloni towards relations between Italy and the EU doesn't reflect only criticism, but also support. This fact complicates the research and introduces the need to introduce new variables at the next stage of the research.

As it reflected on the Figure 3, the most radical and emotional messages were published during the 2018 election campaign. Salvini's emotionality and radicalism was especially pronounced on the topic

of illegal immigration and criticism of European integration policies, but in 2022 (Figure 4), he adheres to a calmer style, especially regarding the topic of integration of migrants and social sphere but increases the share of economic topics in its communication.

The Brothers of Italy didn't participate in the parliamentary elections in 2013, so the level of radicalism in Giorgia Meloni's messages is less than in the 2018 and 2022 campaigns. The topic that generates the most radical proposals is illegal immigration, as well as the social sphere. Unlike Salvini, in her campaign Meloni continues to speak out about the role of pan-European politics, but changes her position, moving from expressed criticism to restrained criticism, while adding emotional messages in which Italy is recognised as part of the EU and NATO.

I have calculated an average degree of Salvini's emotional engagement potential and got: 2.1 in 2013, 2.3 in 2018 and 1.8 in 2022, while electoral results of Lega were 4% in 2013, 17% in 2018 and 9% in 2022. An average degree of Meloni's emotional engagement potential: 1.6 in 2013, 2.1 in 2018 and 2022, electoral results of Brothers of Italy were 4% in 2018 and 26% in 2022. Pearson correlation coefficient for topics and electoral result is -0, 38. Pearson correlation coefficient for emotional message level and electoral result is 0, 68.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that emotional engagement potential of messages made by leaders of the right-wing populist party leaders is not the only factor, which affects their electoral results, we see that this factor is still important. The results of the study help us to identify that communication style and emotional engagement is more important for populist parties and their leaders in the interactions with the audience of voters, than topic of their messages. Emotions, both positive and negative, that the audience gets from the populist messages are greater incentive to vote for populist parties, than content of these messages.

However, the Italian right-wing populist have their dominating topics, which seems to be crucial for their audience: illegal migration problem and migrant adaptation. Voters are less sensitive to changes in the party positioning on the issues related to the EU and Italy relations. In the last electoral campaign, there was less euroscepticism from Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. Moreover, Meloni has changed her positions and views on the role of Italy in the EU, in 2022 she emphasised in her messages that Italy is a significant part of the EU and NATO, but still offered her audience to protect the Italian business from competitors.

To a greater extent, populist parties depend more on their communication style, than agenda. It is important for populist parties in Italy to maintain a high level of emotional involvement among voters and express radical positions on key issues.

Another conclusion is that League presented by Matteo Salvini is more mature party than The Brothers of Italy presented by Giorgia Meloni. This party maturity and experience of being elected in the national parliament affects the party emotional engagement. Published messages seem to be less emotional than those made by Georgia Meloni, who had to make more efforts to attract voters including ex-

supporters of the competing parties, but this difference in the emotional level reflects on the electoral results of the parties. Probably in the future Giorgia Meloni and her political party may lose her degree of radicalization and emotional involvement, which will lead to the loss of votes in the future.

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The Role of Social (Political) Identity and Mediated “Reality” in Voter Behaviour (Case Study Slovakia)³⁹

Martina Švecová

Abstract

The study examines why voters in Slovakia's corruption-ridden political landscape continue to support politicians with criminal ties, despite extensive media exposure of their misconduct. Drawing from Lillian Manson's 'Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity', it suggests that emotional bonds and social identities often override rational evaluations, with media representation of political figures playing a pivotal role. The analysis focuses on the representation of Slovak Prime Ministers Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič during the early COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how journalistic practices, intensified by a multiplier effect, shape public perceptions and impact democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: balance analysis, emotions, hostile media effect, media discourse, representation, social identity, self-categorization theory, sentiment analysis

Introduction

The author examines the connection between the representation of politicians by leading online media and voters' tendency to support them despite associations with corruption or scandals. Recent research suggests that the core of this issue lies in social identity, wherein voters feel an affinity towards a political party, perceiving negative portrayals as threats to their group (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Ispas, 2013; Mackie et al., 2000; Mason, 2018). The emotions of justified anger infused into articles through selective paraphrasing and quotations, the elements of discourse, can inadvertently achieve the opposite effect (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), leading to polarization and closing off voters from rational dialogue, despite the media's intent to act as guardians of democracy by highlighting malpractices.

This study investigates the balance and sentiment in online articles, focusing on both theoretical evidence and media discourse analysis. The period of analysis specifically spans from 1 to 31 March 2020, capturing the initial month of the pandemic in Slovakia. Balance explores the relationship between the quantity of politicians' statements used by the media which represents visibility and sentiment discourse analysis which focuses on the overall perception of articles. It investigates the media's

³⁹ Cite as: Švecová, M. (2024). The Role of Social (Political) Identity and Mediated “Reality” in Voter Behaviour (Case Study Slovakia). In K. Carrilho, L. Horsmanheimo, & K. Linnamäki (Eds.), *Reflections on emotions, populism and polarisation: HEPP3 conference proceedings* (pp. 141-158). University of Helsinki. *The HEPPsinki working papers on emotions, populism and polarisation*, 3(1).

representation of visibility and overall perception of politicians' statements, looking for signs of a multiplicative effect where the media amplify the negative portrayals of these politicians.

In Slovakia, exceptional circumstances have emerged: firstly, the murder of a journalist linked to the ruling SMER- Sociálna Demokracia (Direction - Social Democracy, hereafter referred to as Direction) party; secondly, an elite change with Directions' government replaced after 12 years; and thirdly, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, during the initial month of the pandemic, from March 1 to 31, 2020, two prime ministers sequentially communicated the virus's progression at press conferences following the elite change. This study seeks to elucidate the differential media representations of two Slovak prime ministers during this initial phase of the Covid-19. The main research question (RQ) aims to illuminate the media's stance toward these two politicians and investigate whether the irrational behaviour of voters is partly influenced by the actions of journalists. Main RQ: *"What is the representation of the two Slovakian politicians and their statements related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakian mainstream media during the initial outbreak period (1-31 March 2020)?"*

This study builds on existing theories by applying them to a novel context—media representations of Slovakian politicians during a global health crisis, assessing how these representations influence voter behavior through the lens of social identity. By mapping the interplay between media discourse and voter psychology, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of political communication processes and offers insights into strategies for more informed and effective media engagement in political contexts.

The political background

The Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries have undergone a significant socio-political change since the fall of communism. The transformation of society coincided with the development of information and communication technologies, and digitization together with the Internet changed completely the ways how content is consumed, and the size of potential audiences (Jakubowitz & Sükösd, 2008). The transition from a communist to a democratic regime is still underway, despite some ups and downs.

In 2012, early elections were won by Direction with 44.41% of the vote and a single-party government was formed. One of the factors that contributed to their victory was the Gorilla scandal⁴⁰ (Leška, 2013). From that point on, Direction had a decisive say in the parliament as well as in the government. However, subsequent events in Slovakia showed that even Direction could not avoid business' influence and connections to 'mafia spheres' became gradually apparent. The situation escalated with the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina on 21 February 2018.

⁴⁰ Gorilla is the name of the scandal concerned material allegedly leaked from Slovenská informačná služba (Slovak Intelligence Agency, SIS) files that was published online in 2011.

The most apparent impact of the killing of the journalist was that the country's trust in the democratic government led by Direction, and the subsequently formed movement called For a Decent Slovakia became undermined. The movement managed to organize demonstrations in regional cities all over Slovakia in 2018, and Robert Fico resigned under pressure as Prime Minister and was replaced by Peter Pellegrini, his party fellow for the rest of the mandate. Robert Fico has remained the chair of Direction, whereas Peter Pellegrini left the party after the 2020 elections and founded his party called Voice – Social Democracy (Voice). Such a dramatic course of events was ended by the parliamentary elections on 29 February 2020, won by a populist political party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO). The 2020 elections brought about a change after a long period of single-party rule and one-politician dominance. The government was formed by OLaNO, and its leader Igor Matovič became the new Slovak Prime Minister and also a symbol of a change in political elites in Slovakia. However, he was not Prime Minister for long either. After the dynamic government of the Ordinary People and early parliamentary elections in 2023, Direction and Voice won again. One of the priorities of the current government is the modification of the law in an abbreviated legislative procedure, which includes, among other things, the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office, the reduction of penalties for property and economic activity, increasing the threshold of damage caused by criminal activity and the possibility of reconsidering agreements on guilt and punishment that have already been validly concluded, among others (Aktuality.sk, 2024). This intention already caused new waves of demonstrations as well as disagreement by the bodies of the European Union.

The real concern is that if authoritarian elites or undemocratic subjects come to power, a country faces the threat of authoritarian transformation (Haydanka, 2021). In such a case, two political regimes can occur. In the first case, the liberal-democratic opposition prevails, and the country resumes the form of a democratic state. Or, in the second case, authoritarianism gains high social legitimacy and becomes the future model of a political regime (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Social identity perspective

According to Ispas (2013), the social identity perspective, which was initially introduced by Tajfel and Turner, encompasses both social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT). This framework offers a robust method for analysing voter behaviour within the context of media influence. SIT primarily concerns intergroup relations, elucidating how group members' interpretation of intergroup dynamics shapes group relations and strategies employed by members of subordinate groups to address their subordinate status. Tajfel's studies demonstrated that participants displayed favouritism toward their ingroup over outgroup members, shifting from individual-based to group-based interactions (Tajfel, 1974). The key insight from Tajfel's research, relevant to this paper, is that individuals often prioritize the success of their group over maximizing overall benefits, even if it means their group receives fewer benefits. Tajfel highlights that, in such situations, the desire for victory often takes precedence. In contrast, SCT focuses on the consequences of identifying as a group member. SCT explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups at different levels

(personal or social identity) and how the salience of these categories influences their behaviour, emphasizing the shift from seeing oneself as a unique individual to a representative of a particular group. This theory helps explain phenomena such as in-group favouritism and out-group derogation in group contexts (Turner et al., 1979).

The perspective is encapsulated by seven psychological principles that unfold sequentially. Initially, individuals classify themselves into social groups. The relevance of these groups varies by context, influencing their salience, such as during specific media consumption activities. When a group's relevance is psychologically prominent, individuals proceed to compare their group (in-group) against others (out-groups). This comparison can lead to a sense of positive distinctiveness if the in-group is perceived favourably. This process contributes to one's social identity, which in turn impacts self-esteem (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Scheeper's and Derks's position that the preference for the ingroup is an automatic and unconscious cognitive process. Subsequently accenting the inherent prioritization of ingroup-related information they refer to motivated reasoning (2016). Motivated reasoning as described by Lodge and Taber, is the cognitive process through which individuals align their choices with their preferred beliefs rather than objective truths. The brain tends to prioritize information that aligns with one's desired beliefs, making it more accessible than contradictory information. Consequently, it becomes challenging to rectify imaginary or exaggerated conflicts as the human brain tends to resist revising erroneous beliefs about opposing viewpoints. (2013).

The Role of emotions in voter behaviour

Another extension of SIT in the social identity perspective is intergroup emotions theory, which posits that group members can experience emotions on behalf of the group (Mackie et al., 2000). Valentino et al. discovered a positive association between anger and participation, while anxiety exhibited a negative correlation and enthusiasm had a relatively minor impact on participation rates (2011). Similarly, Manson argues that only threat-based arguments had effects on intended activism in her research. On the contrary, the messages enthusiastic or supporting didn't have the same results on the intended activism (2018). Anger is widely acknowledged in social theory as a reaction to injustice, inherently tied to relational aspects (Holmes, 2004) and mediated anger is typically a collective emotion, especially when expressed publicly to address an injustice (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

Emotions in media representation

The psychological principles outlined in these theories are manifested vividly during media consumption, particularly evident during high-stakes events such as political crises. Hartmann and Tanis (2013) researched how groups of respondents perceived manipulated news articles about abortion issues. They divided the participants into two groups: pro-life and pro-choice. After reading the manipulated article that presented both perspectives, the participants deemed the article manipulative, especially those with strong convictions. The results were relevant, especially among the highly

convinced individuals. The authors of the study opened the discussion about the relevance of the integration of hostile media effect into social identity perspective (2013). Hostile media effect illustrates how media representations can exacerbate group polarization, prompting defensive stances among voters—a crucial aspect of the paper investigation into the representation of Slovakian politicians during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Within these circumstances, emotions such as "justified media anger" serve as attempts to shed light on political injustices (e.g., corruption or connections with organized crime groups). However, this is juxtaposed against the social identity of voters who defend their chosen party. Furthermore, negative media coverage of politicians could be counterproductive if it reinforces existing social identities (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Voters who identified with a particular party or ideology were often resistant to negative information about their preferred candidate, which could lead to the maintenance of corrupt or discredited parties in power.

Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová (2018) argue that the re-election of discredited or corrupt parties in Slovakia can be explained in part by the role of social identity in shaping voter preferences. They note that voters in Slovakia often identify with a particular political party or ideology, which can make it difficult for them to switch their allegiance even when confronted with evidence of corruption or wrongdoing (2018). Additionally, motivated reasoning explained in social identity perspective chapter, as explored by Lodge and Taber (2013), further complicates the interaction between voter identity and media consumption. This concept explains the cognitive bias toward favouring information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs, which is crucial for understanding why voters may dismiss negative portrayals of favoured politicians.

Media discourse

Building upon the social identity perspective discussed earlier, chapter on media discourse analysis delves deeper into the mechanisms through which media may shape public perception and influence voter behaviour. The theories presented by Fairclough (1989) and Wodak (2001), who view discourse as a social practice, align closely with the theories of social identity by illustrating how power dynamics and societal structures are reflected and reinforced in media narratives. Accordingly, discourse encompasses social conditions, which can be categorized as the social conditions of production and the social conditions of interpretation. These social conditions are interconnected with three distinct 'levels' of social organization: firstly, the level of the social situation, representing the immediate social context where the discourse unfolds; secondly, the level of the social institution, forming a broader framework within which the discourse operates; and thirdly, the level of society at large, reflecting the broader societal context (Fairclough, 1989). Surface layers of discourse may express specific operations and strategies or govern the ways how communication participants interpret an event (van Dijk, 2006). Journalists, being participants in media discourse, send their readers an intentional and public message hidden in linguistic structures and readers process such a message and take a stance. Finally, social constructionism emphasizes how media discourse is shaped by social and cultural

contexts (van Dijk, 1995). This theory suggests that media messages are not fixed or objective representations of reality but are instead socially constructed and culturally specific. The meanings attributed to media messages are shaped by the cultural and historical contexts in which they are produced and consumed and are constantly evolving as these contexts change.

By integrating these perspectives, it becomes possible to better understand the interplay between media discourse and the construction of political identities.

Research design

As Cotter (2015) recalls the primary approaches to the study of media discourse encompass three broad categories: discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and non-linguistic disciplines. Researchers in media discourse often integrate elements from all three approaches into their work. This study is grounded in non-linguistic discourse as conceptualized within social constructivism, building upon the social identity perspective, and incorporating the hostile media effect as an element of this viewpoint. There is agreement that the hostile media effect is characterized by differing interpretations of media content (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985) that is intended to be neutral, balanced, and fair (Gunther et al., 2001). While it is acknowledged that achieving perfect neutrality or objectivity in news is challenging, these terms are useful in highlighting the essence of what makes this phenomenon intellectually intriguing: the inclination of distinct groups to perceive identical or similar content in markedly different ways (Perloff, 2015). However, for this study, it is very important to note that bias can only be measured in very relative terms as a systematic deviation from the norm or ideal distribution, hence the need to find the boundary of the ideal distribution which in this study forms a kind of imaginary midpoint – a boundary from which deviations can be derived (Bonart et al., 2019). In an attempt to explore comprehensively the issue, this study assesses the coverage of politicians in two media analyses. The first is a balance analysis (assessing visibility, see e.g., van Aelst et al., 2012). The second is a sentiment analysis, showing how the articles were perceived by the readers in the overall context. The study hypothesizes that a combination of unfavourable balance and sentiment towards a politician may produce a multiplier effect, intensifying the perceived negativity of coverage.

In times of crisis, news media are more likely to cooperate voluntarily with officials and authorities, because of patriotism and service to national interests (McQuail, 2013) and will present information about the spread of the virus in terms of the passive role of reception and transmission of information (Christians et al., 2009), rather than reflecting the personal opinions of journalists or editorial staff. Based on this theory, it can be assumed that the news will be less negative towards politicians than under "normal" circumstances. On the other hand, during this period, online news services experienced an unprecedented rise in viewership (adMeter, 2020), and readers searched for available information on various news websites, regardless of their usual preferences which could lead to amplifying the hostile effect in society. Broadening the readership base and the crisis period should consequently maximize accuracy in reporting during the emerging pandemic. Therefore, the beginning of the

pandemic was selected as the research period and the topic was strictly limited to news articles focusing on the spread of the virus, measures and numbers of people infected.

The study period, 1–31 March 2020, coincides with significant political transitions and the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakia. Initially, Peter Pellegrini, representing the Direction party which was in power during the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, served as Prime Minister. Following the National Council elections on 29 February 2020, with results announced on 1 March, and the escalation of coronavirus coverage beginning on 2 March, a pivotal change occurred. A state of emergency was declared on 16 March, and by 21 March, Igor Matovič, representing a shift in political leadership, assumed the role of Prime Minister. This period is divided into two phases for analysis: P1 from 1 to 20 March under Pellegrini and P2 from 21 to 31 March under Matovič. This timing provides a unique opportunity to compare the media representations of these two leaders from different political spectrums under analogous conditions.

The main research question is *"What is the representation of the two Slovakian politicians and their statements related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakian mainstream media during the initial outbreak period (1-31 March 2020)?"*

This approach not only aims to discern how the media's representation of each Prime Minister might influence public perception and voter behavior during a crisis, offering insights into the dynamic interplay between political leadership and media during critical events, but also integrates the perspective of citizens, who are the ultimate recipients of this information. Hacker and van Dijk (2018, pp. 28-29) highlight the necessity of examining deeper than methodological individualism by involving citizens in the political system, thereby recognizing their critical role in shaping, and responding to media narratives. This analysis serves as an interrogation of the media's representation of prime ministers and acknowledges the crucial position of citizens in navigating the information they receive.

The data were obtained from monitora.cz, a service that archives articles from all Czech and Slovak media. Nine news websites were selected with a threshold of approximately 100,000 unique viewers, as per monitora.cz rating from March 2020. The threshold was selected as it represented a benchmark for the most widely read online media outlets within the study's geographical focus. This criterion was established to ensure that the analysed news portals had significant reach and impact. Other online news portals, which fell well below this threshold, were excluded to maintain a focus on sources that command substantial and broad readership, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the media landscape during the research period.

	Medium	Nb. of Unique Users
1	aktuality.sk	844 450
2	cas.sk	612 590
3	honline.sk	372 530
4	dennikn.sk	326 280
5	tvnoviny.sk	234 050
6	dnes24.sk	179 090
7	sme.sk	114 110
8	pravda.sk	111 010
9	webnoviny.sk	99 600

Figure 1: The Unique users overview (Source: Author)

Articles were selected by the following keywords: Covid-19, Sars-CoV-2, coronavirus, Matovič, Pellegrini. Out of the total number of results displayed, the author then manually selected those that were directly related to the predefined topic. A total of $n=615$ articles related to the topic and containing statements of at least one of the politicians were included in the selection.

Balance analysis

This analysis examines the parity of coverage between the two politicians by comparing the volume of paraphrases and quotations in selected articles. It aims to determine if both figures were accorded comparable visibility and to observe shifts in the quantity and sentiment of their representations during the two periods under review.

RQ₁: "Is there a significant difference in the visibility between the two politicians, with visibility defined as the volume of published paraphrases and quotations attributed to each politician?"

The research question is directed toward detecting disparities in the data sets, seeking evidence of any dissimilarities via similarity analyses.

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): No significant difference exists between the visibility of the two politicians.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): A significant difference exists between the visibility of the two politicians.

The subsequent analysis adopts an exploratory approach, focusing on the tendencies observed in media coverage. The intent is to investigate potential visibility polarization, characterized by a disparity in the word count attributed to Matovič compared to Pellegrini, despite the latter's longer tenure during the research period.

H₂: The balance analysis is anticipated to reveal a tendency for media outlets to publish more content from Matovič than Pellegrini.

H₃: Cluster analysis is expected to confirm the aggregation of most websites into a dominant cluster without a significant counterpart.

The data were classified into six examined categories, separately for each politician, referred 'M' to Matovič and 'P' to Pellegrini:

- Word count in article paraphrases and quotations for Matovič (AM) and Pellegrini (AP)
- Word count in headline paraphrases and quotations for Matovič (HM) and Pellegrini (HP)
- Word count in article paraphrases and quotations directly pertaining to coronavirus for Matovič (ACOVDM) and Pellegrini (ACOVDP)
- Word count in paraphrases and quotations on topics other than coronavirus in articles (DM, DP)
- Frequency of name mentions and variations in articles (ANM, ANP)
- Frequency of name mentions and variations in headlines (HNM, HNP).

A coding manual was developed to standardize the word counting process for the balance analysis. It outlined the criteria for counting paraphrases, quotations, mentions of politicians, and detailed which words were to be excluded. Only sentences containing a direct quotation or paraphrase from the politicians were included. According to Zelizer (2009), quotations act as gestures of verbal communication. They facilitate the communication of statements that are problematic, risky, or uncomfortable for the speakers. Journalists rely on quotations to make claims without accountability and, as a result, maximize their communication activity. Adopting of quoting helps journalists shape their presentation of news (2009).

The content analysis was performed by six independent coders, all native Slovak speakers, who manually quantified the word counts in the selected articles.

In assessing linear dependence, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated using IBM SPSS19's Partial Correlation function. A preliminary test on the word count for both politicians (AM and AP) during period P1, relative to the total word count in an article, yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.367 for the one-tailed test, with a p-value less than 0.001 for the two-tailed test, suggesting a statistically significant relationship. However, the linear dependence between the variables with the highest word counts (ΣAP , ΣAM) and the total word count in the articles (ΣA) was not confirmed to be strong.

Media	All Words in article	All Words in Headline	AM	AP	ACOVDM	ACOVDP	DM	DP	ANM	ANP	HM	HP	HNM	HNP
tvnoviny.sk	15739	641	2401	1718	2336	1718	65	0	212	178	41	15	6	7
aktuality.sk	28967	714	2681	2536	2681	2547	0	0	242	289	46	34	12	10
cas.sk	28846	981	3760	4178	3699	4178	50	0	274	343	92	58	20	19
dennikn.sk	43091	758	2145	2744	2033	2716	112	28	214	307	33	72	13	15
dnes24.sk	30088	1188	2937	5459	2916	5439	21	26	287	473	44	95	12	15
hnonline.sk	19376	582	2306	2347	2299	2328	7	19	228	225	50	67	15	10
pravda.sk	29083	319	1619	2050	1575	2050	44	0	160	181	16	17	6	3
sme.sk	65311	927	4443	6322	4108	6325	183	99	400	533	78	45	12	12
webnoviny.sk	23407	647	1695	3701	1607	3612	88	89	163	228	38	39	17	17
Overall	283908	6757	23987	31055	23254	30913	570	261	2180	2757	438	442	113	108

Figure 2: Summary of the data results (Source: Author)

The initial step in measuring balance involved summarizing the data from a total of 615 articles, with an overall word count of 283,908. In categories such as the diversity of words used or headline word counts, cardinal values were low, potentially skewing the statistical analysis. Nevertheless, since the dataset encompasses all articles published during the Covid-19 period, representing a complete population rather than a sample, these values are considered in the analysis. Their significance is particularly noted for hierarchical analysis and for examining the dispersion of the variables.

In the data reduction phase, weighted averages were calculated for each media outlet to account for variations in word count. IBM SPSS's Ratio function facilitated this process, producing a weighted average for each category that represents the midpoint for the group. For period P1, weighted averages for Matovič were subtracted from those of Pellegrini for each website; during P2, the calculation was reversed, reflecting Blumler & Kavanagh's (1999) assertion that politicians tend to receive more media coverage as prime ministers. The relative objectivity threshold for each variable was determined using the following formulas:

$$\bar{p} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p1tot1}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot1} - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n m1tot1}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot1}$$

$$\bar{m} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n m2tot2}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot2} - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p2tot2}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot2}$$

(Note: In these formulas \bar{m} and \bar{p} represent the weighted averages for Pellegrini and Matovič, and tot1 and tot2 refer to the total word counts for each of the periods).

A paired sample test compared the politician variables across both periods, revealing differences that were not statistically significant, thereby failing to reject the null hypothesis of set similarity. Notably, the similarity in headline variables for both Matovič and Pellegrini was striking, suggesting that headlines may serve more to draw readers than to convey editorial viewpoints. This high degree of similarity in headlines may also stem from a smaller dataset.

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	AM - AP	-1413,600	2238,492	707,873	-3014,921	187,721	-1,997	9	,077
Pair 2	ACOVIDM - ACOVIDP	-1531,800	2399,516	758,794	-3248,310	184,710	-2,019	9	,074
Pair 3	DM - DP	61,800	94,417	29,857	-5,742	129,342	2,070	9	,068
Pair 4	ANM - ANP	-115,400	174,322	55,125	-240,102	9,302	-2,093	9	,066
Pair 5	HM - HP	-,800	28,844	9,121	-21,433	19,833	-,088	9	,932
Pair 6	HNM - HNP	1,000	2,749	,869	-,966	2,966	1,150	9	,280

Figure 3: Paired sample test: Balance (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Given the non-significant results of the paired sample test, the analysis progressed to explore the presence of a multiplying effect. Employing agglomerative clustering through the centroid method with Euclidean distance, media samples were categorized by relative balance into three distinct clusters. These clusters were determined after iterative testing and dendrogram interpretation, resulting in a

primary group of similar media (cluster 1), midpoint media leaning towards one pole (cluster 2), and the most deviant media (cluster 3).

Agglomerative clustering was chosen for its methodological robustness and its ability to provide a hierarchical view of the media data. This method starts by treating each data point as a distinct cluster and then progressively merges clusters based on their similarity, which is ideal for identifying natural groupings in the data. By examining how individual media outlets cluster together based on the variables of interest, it is possible to discern patterns that may indicate a multiplying effect in media coverage. Specifically, if media outlets that give more coverage to one politician tend to cluster together distinctly from those that cover the other politician less, it could suggest that the media is amplifying the visibility of one over the other. Agglomerative clustering allows for the exploration of such patterns without pre-specifying the number of clusters, thus providing an unbiased view of how media coverage groups together during the analysis periods.

This method contributes to understanding the potential multiplying effect by revealing whether there's a tendency for media outlets to group together in their coverage patterns, which could indicate a systematic bias or a preference for covering one politician more than another. This clustering can then be analysed to see if it correlates with either the time the politicians were in power (possibly receiving more coverage as prime ministers) or with other factors such as the tone and context of the coverage.

Medium	Clusters P1	Clusters P2
1:aktuality.sk	1	1
2:cas.sk	1	2
3:dennikn.sk	2	2
4:dnes24.sk	3	3
5:hnonline.sk	2	1
6:Relative balance	1	1
7:pravda.sk	2	2
8:sme.sk	1	1
9:tvnoviny.sk	1	3
10:webnoviny.sk	1	1

Figure 4: Clusters balance analysis (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

It is evident that most media remained within their initial clusters. In the first period, five news media were grouped in the relative balance cluster, while four maintained their position in the second period. Notably, at least three media shifted their position, with tvnoviny.cz moving the most significantly. Dnes24.sk, categorized in cluster 3, was distinguished by featuring a higher frequency of Pellegrini's statements. The clustering outcomes indicate that readers were exposed to more statements from Matovič across most media outlets, both in headlines and article content, including mentions of his name. These results lend support to the third hypothesis, suggesting a clustering effect on perceived visibility. However, the findings also imply that the first period exhibited greater balance compared to the second. In essence, when variables are considered in isolation, the effect is not pronounced, but the clustered data reveal shifts that imply a cumulative effect on visibility.

Sentiment analysis

The sentiment analysis aimed to address RQ2: *"Are statements by Peter Pellegrini perceived more negatively compared to those of Igor Matovič?"*

H₀: There is no significant difference in sentiment between the statements of the two politicians.

H₄: There is a significant difference in sentiment between the statements of the two politicians.

H₅: Pellegrini's statements will be perceived more negatively than Matovič's in both articles and headlines.

H₆: Cluster analysis will demonstrate a predominant grouping of media outlets without substantial opposition.

In preparation for the research, a second coding manual dedicated to sentiment analysis was developed. Statements were categorized for analysis as follows:

- Matovič in articles (MA)
- Pellegrini in articles (PA)
- Matovič in headlines (MH)
- Pellegrini in headlines (PH).

The Likert scale was chosen for its gradational nature, ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (5), allowing for a nuanced sentiment assessment (Budak et al., 2016). Following Lutz Hagen's (1995) methodology, normative values were assigned based on truthfulness (encompassing factuality, balance, and diversity), factuality (the requirement for messages to remain factual), balance (equal representation of opinions), and diversity (variety of perspectives). These criteria were quantified, with the aggregate score determining the article's overall sentiment bias, scaled between -2 (very negative) and +2 (very positive). Scores within $\langle -1; 1 \rangle$ were deemed random, signifying a neutral sentiment.

An eleven-member coding team, proficient in Slovak, conducted a reliability test on the manual, ensuring coder neutrality by selecting individuals unaffiliated with the 'For Decent Slovakia' protests. The Cronbach's alpha reliability test yielded high internal consistency scores across all variables (MA=0.988, PA=0.978, MH=0.969, PH=0.994), confirming the manual's adequacy for this sentiment analysis.

A consistent methodology was also employed for headline sentiment analysis, with criteria set to assess: 1) alignment of the headline with the article content; 2) stance or tone of the headline towards the politician; 3) appropriateness of name abbreviation; 4) contextuality of the headline. Unlike article text, randomness in sentiment was not anticipated for headlines, as they are crafted with editorial intent and are expected to have a defined tone.

Headlines were scored on the same $\langle -2; 2 \rangle$ sentiment scale as articles. The reliability of the headline coding was confirmed using the Cronbach's alpha method, yielding high consistency scores for each sentiment category: MA=0.978, PA=0.982, MH=0.973, and PH=0.972.

For the sentiment analysis of 615 articles, three native Slovak citizens residing in the Czech Republic, who abstained from voting in the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections, were employed as coders to ensure a degree of impartiality. Their status as ordinary citizens, combined with their long-term residence outside Slovakia, was intended to minimize any inherent political biases, providing a fresh perspective on the political discourse. Each coder's scores were aggregated to determine an average sentiment value for each media outlet, reflecting relative neutrality. The choice of these citizens, constrained by the availability of Slovak-speaking individuals during the lockdown, was also guided by the belief that their less direct involvement in Slovak politics might lead to a more neutral analysis.

To validate the hypothesis of a more negative media sentiment towards Pellegrini, a paired comparison of sentiment variables was conducted. The sentiments of PA1 and MA2, and PH1 and MH2 were compared, corresponding to the periods when each politician was prime minister. The analysis revealed a significant ($p < 0.001$) difference in sentiment for articles about the prime ministers, allowing for the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) and confirmation of H_4 for this variable. During the period when both politicians were in opposition, the test yielded a p-value of 0.151, indicating a greater similarity in sentiment—though with slightly less variability as reflected in the standard deviation. Despite the higher similarity, the difference is not statistically significant, and thus does not support H_4 .

The analysis of headline sentiments when the politicians were prime ministers indicated a low degree of similarity. However, the sentiment of headlines became more alike when both were in opposition. The degree of similarity in sentiment was found to be directly proportional to the count of instances, which was lowest for the opposition politicians' headlines.

The balance analysis mirrored these findings, suggesting that politicians out of the prime ministerial role are less likely to be featured in headlines. This finding has important implications for understanding the dynamics of media coverage relative to a politician's current role in government.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PA1 - MA2	-,59528416	,36786684	,11632971	-,85844024	-,33212807	-5,117	9	,001
Pair 2	PA2 - MA1	-,12546229	,25310435	,08003862	-,30652224	,05559765	-1,568	9	,151
Pair 3	PH1 - MH2	,07732806	,17280101	,05464448	-,04628633	,20094246	1,415	9	,191
Pair 4	PH2 - MH1	-,00015895	,13168385	,04164209	-,09435990	,09404200	-,004	9	,997

Figure 5: Paired sample test: Sentiment (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

The cluster analysis, following the same methodology as the hierarchical balance analysis, revealed significant shifts in media sentiment between two periods of political leadership in Slovakia. Initially, only four websites were grouped in the neutral first cluster during the first period. In contrast, the second period saw six websites aligning with this neutral cluster, suggesting a shift towards a more uniform media stance.

Medium	Clusters P1	Clusters P2
1:aktuality.sk	1	1
2:cas.sk	1	1
3:dennikn.sk	2	2
4:dnes24.sk	3	1
5:hnonline.sk	1	2
6:pravda.sk	2	1
7:sme.sk	1	1
8:tvnoviny.sk	3	1
9:webnoviny.sk	3	3
10:neutral	1	1

Figure 6: Clusters sentiment analysis (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Remarkably, one news website, associated with the Slovak News Agency (SITA) and of a commercial nature, stood out as it moved to the third cluster during Matovič's term. This indicates a significant divergence in sentiment from other media outlets. Conversely, dnes24.sk and tvnoviny.sk moved from a cluster indicating a difference in sentiment to one suggesting similarity, signalling a substantial reversal in their portrayal of the politicians.

The movement of these websites between clusters—without corresponding significant social or ownership changes—implies that the change in political leadership, particularly the transition from Pellegrini to Matovič, may have influenced the media's sentiment.

The sentiment midpoint comparison underscores a noticeable shift in the media's attitude toward Peter Pellegrini. There was a marked 45% increase towards a more positive sentiment when he transitioned from the role of Prime Minister to that of an opposition member. In contrast, the sentiment towards Igor Matovič shifted by a mere 8%.

These findings suggest that the media's portrayal of political figures can fluctuate notably depending on their political status, with Pellegrini's coverage becoming significantly more positive once he was no longer Prime Minister. This indicates that media sentiment may be closely tied to the political dynamics and positions of the individuals in question.

Period	variable	MA	PA	MT	PT
1P	neutral	-0,05163	-0,65761	-0,06793	-0,23098
2P	neutral	-0,13765	-0,18623	-0,27126	-0,07287
Difference	neutral	-0,08602	-0,47137	-0,20332	-0,15810
Difference in %	neutral	8%	47%	20%	16%

Figure 7: Comparison of the sentiment midpoints (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Final assessment

The research findings demonstrate that media representation, in terms of article balance and sentiment, can indeed precipitate a multiplier effect, with both dimensions corroborating a bias against Peter Pellegrini. This phenomenon may have contributed to reinforcing group identity among Pellegrini's supporters, who, in response to the media's portrayal, rallied in defence of the politician. This pattern is supported by a Focus agency survey (15–17 April 2020) with 1,016 participants. When asked *"In your opinion, who manages/managed the fight with the COVID-19 crisis better, the current Prime Minister Igor Matovič, the previous Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, or both equally?"*, 38% favoured Pellegrini over Matovič, who received 22% approval. Notably, while Matovič garnered 55.1% support from his party's voters, Pellegrini secured a 79% backing from his party's electorate. This discrepancy was also evident among voters of nationalist parties, who predominantly supported Pellegrini, in contrast to liberal party voters, who leaned towards Matovič (Marcišiak, 2020).

This study, alongside the Focus survey, reveals that despite receiving less media coverage during the crisis, which was skewed negatively, Pellegrini retained a favourable public perception. Such findings suggest that a reduction in visibility, coupled with adverse sentiment, can amplify a politician's support base.

While the research provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations, particularly regarding the number of coders and their representation. The use of only three coders, due to the limited availability of suitable candidates, means the findings are not intended to be generalized across the entire nation. Moreover, the potential for political bias, despite efforts to minimize it, remains a concern. Future studies might broaden the scope by incorporating a more diverse range of media outlets and coders and exploring the enduring impact of media sentiment on public opinion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has emphasized the crucial role of media perspectives in shaping political narratives within the CEE context. It demonstrates how media narratives, intertwined with voter behaviour as explained by social identity theory, can contribute to the construction and reinforcement of political perspectives. The research hypothesizes that an unfavourable balance and sentiment towards a politician may produce a multiplier effect, intensifying the perceived negativity of coverage. This premise was confirmed, highlighting how compounded negative portrayals can escalate and amplify adverse public perceptions.

The research illuminates the intricate relationship between media representation and social identity dynamics, providing a nuanced view of how media can shape political discourse and influence voter perceptions. This study enhances the understanding of the dynamics between media representation and political narratives, illustrating the media's capacity to influence not only public perception but also the broader political landscape in emerging democracies.

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