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## Introduction to the Special Issue

This special volume explores media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and the FB networks of selected populist leaders and populist parties in Europe. The seven case studies focus on France, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Poland, Turkey and United Kingdom. The comparative research perspective is based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of data sources (URLs) and network analysis. The methodology is explained in the chapter *Media Sources Shared and Networking on Facebook. A Comparative Perspective*. This chapter mainly summarises key findings from a comparative perspective.

Theory is discussed in four clusters in the chapter *Populism and Social Media: An Introduction into Meta-Theory*. The four clusters present: a) a brief review of the definition of populism; b) an overview of the role of social media, and in particular that of FB in the communication of populist political parties and politicians; c) a research overview of theories on media links or content populists sharing or referring to on FB or elsewhere on social media; and finally, d) a research overview of networks and networking theories.

In addition to this content, the issue dedicates a special *Policy Discussion Section* to issues that stress the need to regulate social media in light of a blueprint regulation (Digital Services Act) proposed by the European Commission in December 2020. Experts from the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland and Slovakia present interesting perspectives on the new legislative package. This section was co-edited by Dr Bissera Zankova from the M21 Foundation in Bulgaria. Ultimately, can regulation of social media as suggested by the European Commission help in limiting the most negative aspects of populist discourses in general and spread of misinformation in particular? What are the challenges of this regulatory proposal?

Finally, the special issue contains five reviews, including three local reviews not related to the topic. The first review discusses theoretical-methodological issues related to research on populist communication (not only) in Poland. The second text is a review of a global comparative study that concentrates on the political communication in East and Central Europe. What do these publications tell us with respect to the most recent findings? What are their strong and weak arguments?

This output is a part of the research and dissemination effort funded by the European Commission under DEMOS: Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe Project.

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## Populism and Social Media: an Introduction into Meta-Theory<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction, we discuss theories and theoretical perspectives on social media. On the one hand, we show some problematic aspects of emerging theories and theoretical perspectives and on the other hand, we show the relative usefulness of some older communication and sociological theories. Then we briefly discuss populism from communication and sociological perspectives. In the next part, we provide an overview of theories and theoretical and empirical perspectives on the role played by social media, and in particular FB, in communication of populist political parties and leaders. We discuss structural opportunity factors for populist communication and summarise findings that confirm that different types of social media have different impacts in political communication by populists as well as among different audiences. There also is consensus that social media do not cause populism but rather create an opportunity for easier, cheap and fast dissemination of populist messages. Furthermore, we identify theories and findings related and relevant to networks in general, and political networks on social media in particular. Finally, we present an emerging theory on populism and social media.

**Keywords:** populism, social media, populist communication, populist networks, media and communication theories

This chapter explores theoretical thoughts and empirical findings that guided our research on social media research in general, and media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and networking on FB by populist leaders and populist parties in selected European countries' case studies in particular. We preferred a more focused analytical approach. In other words, instead of using the traditional approach that each case study discusses a bit of theory and a bit of methodology – inevitably either very superficially, or at the cost of missing broader context, or possibly contradictory or at least incoherently — we have attempted to concentrate relevant parts. Therefore, we took advantage of publishing collections of case studies and attempted to present a rela-

<sup>1</sup> The author is thankful for comments to Adina Marincea. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

tively complex and coherent joint theoretical framework. Fundamentally, we compare existing or rather emerging and evolving theories and theoretical perspectives with some of our empirical findings or with experiences gained while conducting research.

*Khan, Lee, Park & Park (2015)* analysed the networked structure of theories in social sciences represented by co-occurrences on the web. They found that there are these distinct clusters of theories of communication (some theories belong to more than just a single cluster, in particular network theory): Mass media theories (such as Uses and Gratification, Agenda Setting), Interpersonal communication and relationship theories (such as Network theory or Symbolic Interactionism), Communication process theories (e.g. Network theory, framing, priming), Language and linguistics theories (e.g. Argumentation theory), Public relations, advertising, marketing, and consumer behavior theories (central is Attribution theory), Communication and information technology theories (e.g. Computer mediated communication, Network theory, Social Presence, Conceptual Design, Adaptive Structuration theory), Media, culture, and society theories (e.g. Dependency theory, Cultivation theory) (*Khan, Lee, Park, & Park 2015*). Apparently, the network theory and analysis (they did not mention the adjective „social“) is somehow cross-fertilising across some of these clusters of theories. Moreover, Adaptive Structuration theory seems to somehow overlap with the Network Theory. Adaptive Structuration theory is focused on the types of structures that are produced by modern communication technologies and the structures that emerge when people interact through these technologies. Thus, we need to focus on Social (Media) network theory as our key analytical tool, accompanied by some relevant secondary theories such as Adaptive Structuration theory.

There are two distinct approaches to social network analysis (Himmelboim 2017). First, there is a sociocentric network approach that focuses on the quantification of ties between users within a defined group or domain. This is the key research method of our case studies, reflected in our focus on mutually shared links among selected populist leaders or parties and their affiliated „friends“ or „followers“.

Second, an egocentric (i.e., personal) network approach focused on a node and the relationships surrounding this node. This may be seen as reflected in our focus on assumed affinity among populist leaders and parties towards alternative, mainly media, sources on FB. In general, it also reflects the primary level of connections on FB. We used this approach in another research.

We shall discuss the network theories and approaches in detail in the section below. However, we shall attempt to identify relevant secondary theories that can be utilised for supporting or expanding the network theory. The overview by Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana *et al* (2018) of 132 publications on social media and social networking<sup>2</sup> found that 17 theories were used by about 50 authors and co-authors. Relatively most frequently was used social exchange theory<sup>3</sup> (six times). This clearly suggests that there is no consensus about the most suitable theory – maybe it is impossible, considering variety of general topics researched (from marketing to psychology) and social media types (18, with FB being relatively most frequently researched). Relatively often used social exchange theory does not seem to be relevant for us – or only at a very high level of abstraction.

<sup>2</sup> In selected information society journals on social media and social networking published between 1997 and 2017.

<sup>3</sup> People consider the potential benefits and risks of social relationships.

Perhaps we should come back to another more general theory. Mason and Carr (2021) have suggested to apply traditional social penetration theory<sup>4</sup> for developing theoretical framework related to „interpersonal relational maintenance in computer-mediated communication“. Yet the authors acknowledge differences between the experiences of face-to-face and computer mediated interactions. In our view, this theory may be useful for explaining certain psychological aspects of political or other forms of social communication. However, it also very much overlaps with further discussed and older but arguably more suitable Uses and Gratification theory.

Qi, Monod, Fang and Deng (2018) presented an interesting analysis of application of philosophy theories to social media analysis, namely Goffman's presentation of the self<sup>5</sup>, Bourdieu's theory of social capital<sup>6</sup>, Sartre's existential vision<sup>7</sup>, and Heidegger's "shared-world"<sup>8</sup>. They found that compared to Goffman and Bourdieu, the theories of Sartre and Heidegger may be more relevant for social media analysis because they were not written from an economic perspective but are more down to earth.

In contrast, for our analytical purpose, Bourdieu's theory of social capital and Goffman's presentation of the self seemed to be quite useful. In particular, Bourdieu's conceptualization is grounded in the theory of symbolic power which can be interpreted as actual *or* virtual resources. Thus, his theory is directly related to political communication in general, and populist online political communication in particular, and very much relevant for social media today.

In the case of Goffman's theory, the central idea is that people, as they interact together in social settings, are constantly engaged in the process of „impression management“ (Crossman 2019). It is difficult to imagine any other current communication tool than social media that would allow very little regulated impression management on a grand scale, at high speed and with immediate feedback.

Yet both Bourdieu's and Goffman's theories can be subsumed under one of the (broader) communication and information technology theories discussed earlier. In particular, it is Social Presence Theory,<sup>9</sup> and, possibly, for Goffman's theory – also Uses and Gratification theory.

Van Dijk's thoughts on social media (2011) are also an influential contribution. He supported a more decentralised and democratic vision of social media. In his view, the evolution of the four information traffic patterns<sup>10</sup> involves a shift towards local units. Yet Van Dijk saw this move towards local units as an opportunity only. In any case, the qualities of such public consultations or conversations are indeed doubtful. Furthermore, Van Dijk argued that social media causes a shift in regulation towards merger of allocution, consultation, registration and conversation. Indeed,

<sup>4</sup> Social penetration theory is based on self-disclosure, reciprocal exchange, and on considering the effect of environmental and situational contexts on interpersonal interactions.

<sup>5</sup> He uses the imagery of theatre in order to portray the importance of the nuances and significance of face-to-face social interactions.

<sup>6</sup> Social capital enables a person to exert power on the group or individual.

<sup>7</sup> Only by existing and acting a certain way do we give meaning to our lives.

<sup>8</sup> In essence, that world is a context of meaningful relationships.

<sup>9</sup> The ability of communication media have to transmit social cues. The level of social presence influences the quality of virtual interactions and outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> Allocution, consultation, registration and conversation.

our research shows that this merger creates new challenges for policy makers as we discuss in the Policy Discussion Section.

Blumler (2015) has attempted at rather challenging but needed task – to provide synthesis of core theories of political communication. This could perfectly fit into our research focus. He argued, although with some doubts, that Chadwick's (2013) concept of the Hybrid Media System is the most integrative of the digital media theories. Chadwick's theory includes a political information cycle instead of traditional news cycle; change of power relations among political actors, in particular elites and non-elites (which is ideal for study of populism); and cooperation between "old" and "new" journalistic voices. Finally, there is a multivariate attention to political communications (Blumler 2015). Yet this – allegedly the most integrative theory – seems to be more description of reality than explanation of it. It is also strange that we could not identify this theory among clusters of media theories discussed above.

As can be seen, and will be discussed further, many available theories are either too general, or, when confronted with empirical findings, do not survive the test without accepting certain limitations or exceptions. There are some unifying or rather (almost) universal theories that belong to more groups or clusters such as Network Theory. There are also authors who prefer to call a theory according to an original author, while others prefer to use more generic names of theories. In general, there are perhaps too many theories. Moreover, some of them are not really theories since they do not explain but rather describe. In fact, some empirical findings discussed further allow us to create proto-theory explaining emerging relationships between populism and social media.

Anyway, the overall concept of network applied to social media analysis is certainly useful. Moreover, as mentioned, some older theories may be used for theoretical justification of social media analyses, too. These include Uses and Gratification Theory (for explaining „followers“ and „likes“), Social Presence Theory (for explaining „likes“ with regard to shared contributions and emoticons) and Cultivation Theory (from the perspective of echo chambers, fake news, hoaxes and impact in general).

In the next pages, first, we define populism. It is a widely discussed term that has different meanings.

Second, we synthesize the most recent or most important research done in this area. The key question we asked was „What role do social media play, and in particular FB, in the communication of populist political parties and politicians? What does research tell us on this topic?“

Third, we tried to summarise theories related to populists and their linking or sharing or just referring to media on FB or elsewhere on social media.

Fourth, we attempted to identify theories and findings related to political networks on social media, more specifically, networks created by political parties and politicians on social media, in particular on FB.

It should be mentioned that this is, inevitably, a limited review – there are too many studies, including books, already available, and many of them are available in local languages. This is nonetheless of the fact that, as Moffitt (2018, p.33) believes, „the first concerted and comparative effort to explicitly track populism's relationship with social media can perhaps be identified as the UK think-tank Demos' 2011 project on 'digital populism' in Europe. Thus, it is about

a decade old tradition of research on social media and populism. This first project examined and profiled the FB supporters of populist parties in several European countries. “ Their sample of the FB fans from populist parties/movements overlapped with our sample only in two, or three cases respectively, mentioned in this volume: the FB fans of (then) the Front National (‘National Front’; France), (then) Lega Nord (‘Northern League’; Italy) and CasaPound Italia – street protest movement (Italy) – the last movement is mentioned in Policy Discussion Section. We mention older findings relevant for these three cases in the section II of this chapter. Before presenting the results relevant for these three particular populist/protest movements, general findings seem to be relevant, too. Thus, it was found that online supporters of examined populist parties<sup>11</sup> (mostly from Western Europe in 2009) were „disgruntled democrats“ – they overwhelmingly believed that voting is relevant, and were against violence. However, these supporters of populists did not believe in the efficacy of current politics. Moreover, there were high levels of disillusionment with mainstream politicians, and greater trust in leaders who spoke their mind (Bartlett – Birdwell – Littler 2011, p.20). This leads us to the issue of populism.

### **Research Overview I – What is Populism About?**

Fundamentally, the characteristics of populism manifest themselves as the co-occurrence of what is seen as the core of populism at manifest level (the unequivocal opposition between people and elite and expressing directly an alleged general will of the homogeneous people) and their articulation in a specific communication style – by definition not consensual, and seemingly rather direct, open, and allegedly fair (Wodak 2015, Kriesi 2018, Neumann-Ernst 2019). In other words, populism uses a specific discursive approach for communicating rather unorthodox (challenging) political ideas. More precisely and normatively less-value loaded, Norris (2020, p.2) considers populism as “a rhetoric about legitimate authority and where power should rightfully lie.“ This latter definition is in line with the majority of causes of populism identified, and found among claims of populists that justify their mission, in the Comparative Part of our research. However, we also added that there must be missing a clear, and relatively consistent ideology such as communist or fascist ones. Otherwise we are unable to differentiate among various ideological streams that also use populist rhetoric as defined above. Moreover, among structural conditions, there must be present (not necessarily publicly recognized and acknowledged) a general moral-political crisis. Furthermore, there may or may not be at the same time populist rhetoric, populist policies and populist party. A party may use populist rhetoric only occasionally (especially when it is in opposition, or during an election campaign). Indeed, as put by Albertini (n.d.), whether a party is populist (mainly in its rhetoric) may depend on the time span, on the media used and in the particular time span in which the detection is conducted and whether the party is in office or in opposition. It should be noted here that we actually faced an interesting

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<sup>11</sup> As authors wrote, many of these groups often combined elements of left-wing and right-wing ideology, mixed with populist rhetoric. They had in common a deep concern about maintaining national (and sometimes European) identity, which they saw as under threat from high levels of immigration.

conundrum in one of our case studies. Tsipras, allegedly Greek populist leader, did not show features of populist communication rhetoric on FB.

### **Why is there support for populist parties?**

Most explanations examining why people in general vote for populist parties in Western Europe emphasised either economic grievances, or disillusionment grievances and/or immigration grievances (Benfield – Howard – Morris 2011, p.43). However, non-representative online survey among FB fans of populist parties suggested that the vast majority of respondents supported populist parties because they identified with their policy offerings (Benfield, Howard and Morris 2011, p.55). Fundamentally, „a desire to protect national and cultural identity is a more important factor in explaining PPAM<sup>12</sup> support than economic grievances, and is perhaps the principal driving force behind concerns about immigration“ (Benfield – Howard – Morris 2011, p.55).

There are some regional specifications. For example, Schakel et al (2017) argue that dissatisfied voters instead of casting ballots for opposition, prefer to vote for new alternatives in Eastern Europe.

In general, support for populism is very much country and period specific. It usually reflects failure of political institutions, including major political parties, from both coalition and (at the moment) opposition) to govern the country in a proper way.

Thus, *“In other words, it appears that what matters for voters is not that much typical populist appeal as used at an abstract level (“Manichean worldview,” “indivisible people,” “general will,” “people-centrism,” and “anti-elitism”), but, rather very transparent, clearly stated, simple, and radical (in a sense, different from the mainstream at least in their rhetorical dimension) party opinions on certain topical political issues.”* (Školokay 2020, p.45).

### **Research Overview II – What role do social media play, and in particular FB, in communication of populist political parties and politicians?**

In general, as put by Esser *et al* (2019), “a whole range of contextual factors influence [...] the use of populist communication [...]“ Similarly, Postill (2019) argued that: “to understand the link between social media and the recent rise of populism we need a global, comparative approach that carefully scrutinises claims about the effects of new media technologies on political change.” Furthermore, Lipiński (n.d.) after extensive research on this issue came to the conclusion that social media just provide a „window of opportunity“. Thus, apparently, we are still in search of answers to this fundamental question. What follows here is just a blueprint of emerging theory.

There is a consensus that we have witnessed a fundamental change in the role of intermediaries (the legacy media) between parties, governments and citizens as well as other stakeholders, after development of the Internet in general (since early 1990s), and social media in particular

<sup>12</sup> Populist parties and movements.

(since 2000s). The traditional gate-keeping role of legacy media has been superseded by a model that allows a direct (more often uni-directional) communication relationship between politicians and voters. In addition to direct or not that much mediated communication (keeping in mind the role of platform policies and local legislation), there is a polarisation of voters also as a result of easy and cheap simplification and amplification of messages (Moreno 2020). Dittrich (2017) has suggested that polarisation is due mainly to two factors: inadvertently, ‘polarisation by design’, due to algorithms; and ‘by manipulation’, or conscious polarisation. Neudert and Marchal (2019) add that both forms or tools of polarisation can, occasionally, merge when political (but also business and military) actors increasingly turn to ‘bot networks’ (that can be humans or machines) to amplify their propaganda, criticise adversaries or intimidate critics, often with ‘micro-targeting’. Furthermore, there is the logic of virality (‘network-enhanced word of mouth’ – a viral diffusion), competing with, or facilitated by the echo-chamber environment’ (where political attitudes are confirmed and amplified) and further created or facilitated through the filter bubbles (which pre-select consonant content). This is what Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, p.3) call ‘hyper-mediatisation of populist communication’. We have witnessed this impact of virality during the 2020 election campaign before general elections in Slovakia. As discussed in the country case study, at that time, two videos became viral, and, arguably, led to an unexpected and impressive victory of one of the populist challengers within an already highly polarised society.

Yet, polarisation is not necessarily a universal result in political communication, nor is it caused exclusively by social media communication. For example, there is no evidence that the mainstream parties in Germany showed a tendency to rely more strongly on populist communication on FB between 2014-2016 (Schwarzbözl – Fatke 2017). Moreover, it should be mentioned that some populists are not very keen on using social media, while others use it in highly effective and innovative ways (Moffitt 2018, p.38). As will be shown in our case studies, there are indeed more cases when populists relied heavily on social media and rather exceptions when populists did not like/use communication on social media, like the case of Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland. Yet social media can help to get a substantial boost by lowering costs of disseminating information for new entrants in politics (thus not only for populists) with relatively low cost and wider reach (Petrova – Sen – Yildirim 2020).

Although some may believe that social media is a easy to use tool for populists, in fact, Bracciale, Andretta & Martella (2021) found that the popularity and success of populism on social media is the result of multiple factors: political positioning (challenger vs. incumbent), platform characteristics (demographics and usage), and communication strategies. For example, Neumann-Ernst (2019, p.39) believes that in the case of the first and the last issue, ie the very fact of being a challenger party increases affinity with populism.<sup>13</sup> Thus, these parties may rely more on populist communication styles to succeed in elections and gain attention from the media, argues Neumann-Ernst (2019, p.39). Moreover, Neumann-Ernst (2019, p.40) explains that ‘party extremism and challenger parties are two independent properties that are relevant ex-

<sup>13</sup> Challenger parties are perceived to be a threat to the party establishment – they highlight issues that have been neglected or not solved by mainstream parties, they mobilize outside of electoral periods and traditional communication channels, and resort to innovative forms of communication.

planatory factors for populist communication.“ This thesis supports our selected or preferred party differentiation applied in the Comparative Part where we argued in line with some other researchers that there is a difference between populism as a form of communication and positive attitude towards democracy by a challenger party on the one hand, and an extremist party that just employs populist rhetoric and is anti-democratic or, in that wider sense, anti-system party, on the other hand.

Fundamentally, Bracciale, Andretta & Martella (2021) also argue that populist communication should be addressed as a whole when seeking to identify its effects on online engagement. Similarly, Neumann-Ernst (2019) found that populist communication in general is dependent on merging of opportunity structures such as communication on social media, the level of party (rhetorical) radicalism or extremism and/or a high affinity to populism related (often silent) issues such as undocumented migration. Indeed, Dittrich (2017) found that for example popularity of *Podemos* on social networks seemed to have reached its peak in March 2017 and was in steady decline since then.

### **Structural Opportunity Factors for Populist Communication**

Neumann-Ernst (2019, p.41) identified the two structurally determined opportunity factors for populism to which we added some additional ones.

First, the lower the degree of journalistic or other (e.g. platform policies or governmental interventions) interference in a communication conditions, the greater the potential for unrestricted populism. She therefore argued that populist communication is highest in social media (channel with low level of interference), followed by talk shows (channel with medium intervention) and news media (channel with heavy intervention). One could argue that „alternative news media“ – understood as those positioned „as correctives of the mainstream news media, as expressed in editorial agendas or statements and/or are perceived as such by their audiences or third-parties“ (Holt – Ustad Figenschou – Frischlich 2019), could be in this sense located between social media and talk shows, or, at least, between talk shows and legacy news media. However, this is not true in most cases examined in this research, as we document in our national case studies. This is in itself a surprising finding, considering the seemingly natural affinity of both entities – there is “alternative” media and there also is “alternative” (populist) politics.

Second, Neumann-Ernst (2019) suggests that the articulation of political issues with a high affinity to populism should foster the utilization of populist communication. These issues most recently included topics such as immigration, regionalism, corruption and crime, European integration (too fast and too deep process) and/or perceived relative poverty and felt economic insecurity, persisting or only slightly shrinking regional differences in the standard of living, all the most often emphasized salient issues by populist actors, especially on social media (Neumann-Ernst 2019, Pauhofová, Stehlíková, Staněk and Páleník 2018, Sharma 2016).

Third, there is the electoral volatility in many European countries which leads to personalisation of politics (Schakel et al. 2017). For example, in the case of Poland, the conditions strengthening the populist actors include flux in voting behavior and low level of party affiliation. As

a result, there is a pool of electorate available for new political challengers with the ideological incoherence and anti-political attitudes (Lipinski and Stepinska 2019).

Moreover, there are some facilitating factors at the level of media systems or electoral systems. For example, there is a strong position of the tabloid newspaper *Fakt* in the Polish media market that provides favorable conditions for disseminating populist messages. Furthermore, there is a strong political polarization alongside a high level of political parallelism of the Polish media system. There is a journalistic culture that cherishes critical attitudes towards those in power. It covers populism but also produces such messages by some journalists and media outlets (Stepinska – Lipiński – Piontek – Hess 2020, p.211).

With regard to the electoral system, it has been argued that for example Slovakia's unique (at least regionally) electoral system (a single electoral district for all nation-wide elections) has facilitated personalisation of politics (even without considering the role of social media). As a result, leaders of political parties or their executive committees, play a decisive role in selection of candidates (Lichý 2016).

### **Different Types of Social Media Have Different Impacts and Purpose in Political Communication**

In general, it matters whether one gets political information through social media or via more traditional sources present on the web, especially for the low educated (Fortunato and Pecoraro 2020). In that sense, McLuhan was right – the medium is (also) the message (for certain audiences).

While both FB and Twitter show several opportunity structures that enhance the potential for populist communication, in particular as mentioned, the possibility of fully circumventing traditional gatekeepers (the legacy media) and almost the full autonomy of speech and issue framing (however, as discussed further in the volume in Policy Discussion Section, there is actually increasing intervention from FB and other actors in this area), FB was the stronger predictor of populist communication. This explains the preference of populist politicians for FB in their communication (Neumann-Ernst 2019, Ernst et al 2017). Furthermore, Jacob, Sandberg and Spierings (2020) found that FB was used by populists primarily to activate anger among citizens, while Twitter was more often used to name and shame journalists or media publicly.

Interestingly, Lipiński (n.d., p.89) discusses „at least two paradoxes that emerge from research”. First, there is the “the paradox of alternative and second, “the paradox of interactivity”. By the first paradox, Lipiński understands that legacy media still remain key reference point for populist parties and movements. By the second paradox, Lipiński believes that populist entities use the social media in the same way as legacy media, preferring top-down communication. However, some country case studies, like the two Slovak populist leaders (Matovič and Kollár) show that populists, especially when in opposition, have no problem to communicate with their supporters, and, occasionally, opponents, rather actively and directly on FB.

Finally, it seems that there may be a trend that viral posts are evolving from text-based to image-based and to primarily video-based (Larsson 2020).

## Examples of Utilising Social Media for Protest/Radical/Populist Movements

Moffitt (2018) identified three major ‘episodes’ of populists’ use of social media from the late 2000s onwards. These were the emergence of the US *Tea Party*, and particularly its novel usage of online forums and FB groups as organising platforms since 2009. Second, it was followed by Beppe Grillo and his virtual political movement *Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)* in the same year. M5S could be seen as a hybrid movement-party that relies heavily on social media as a platform for organisation and ‘e-democracy’. It was actually followed by the Spanish hybrid populist movement-party *Podemos*. Yet *Podemos* went further, experimenting with participatory platforms like *Loomio* (an online decision-making platform), and embracing Reddit as a virtual ‘Plaza *Podemos*’ for online conversation. Third episode of populist social media use came with former US President Donald Trump’s campaign in 2015. As it is generally well-known, once in office, Trump relied heavily on Twitter as a communication tool. We discuss more examples of innovative use of social media further in the case studies, including examples of using virtual reality – the hologram – by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France in 2017, or TikTok by Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland in 2020.

### Research Overview III – Theories about populists linking or sharing or just referring to media on FB or elsewhere on social media

First, we present an alternative theoretical perspective – than those already mentioned – on the role of social media for populists – more focused on broader social impact. For this purpose, Kidd and McKintosh (2016) summarised three theoretical roles of social media in social movements (the latter can be understood for our purpose as populist political parties, or indeed, movements): techno-optimism, techno-pessimism and techno-ambivalence. Techno-optimism emphasises the potential of (social) media to contribute to solving social or political problems. It may also point at the aptness of social media to connect individuals with similar or identical goals. This latter statement provided an explanation how this categorisation fits here.

Techno-pessimism considers the perspective of (social) media to facilitate production and dissemination of hyperbolic and exaggerated messages, including echo chambers, fake news and hoaxes. It may also increasingly reflect the ability of authoritarian governments to control information flow in the online world. Finally, it may reflect gate-keeping free communication opportunity created for populist movements and individuals (if these are seen normatively negatively as is the case usually).

In techno-ambivalence, there are acknowledged the (be that positive or negative or mixed) limited impacts of (social) media. We followed this latter approach, and, indeed, we also provide evidence of such ambiguous occurrences. This latter approach can also be called cyber-realism (Morozov 2011) – the significant catalysts for social change remain social, political and economic developments, acts of individuals and groups, enabled or hampered by structural conditions and not social media alone.

Indeed, as mentioned, some older media theories (based on study of legacy media) such as Uses and Gratifications Theory – for explaining „followers“ and „likes“ (Katz – Blumler – Gurevitch 1973)<sup>14</sup>, Social Presence Theory (for explaining „likes“ with regard to shared contributions and other emoticons) and Cultivation Theory<sup>15</sup> may be still be seen as having analytical value for general social media analysis and theoretical underpinnings. In particular, with the exception of Social Presence Theory, all these theories were found to be useful for the Facebook Influence Model (FIM) developed by Moreno and Koff (2015), one that tackles specifically FB. Moreno and Koff (2015), based on these older theories, newly developed four domains within their FIM: connection, comparison, identification, and FB as an experience (or Immersive Experience Domain). These domains may also be seen as reflecting to different degree sharing and reference experiences.

From the perspective of Connection, FB provides and enhances peer communication, networking and connection (Moreno and Koff 2015). In that sense it best reflects Uses and Gratification theory because there are already at least three key theoretical benefits for users. This also brings it closest to our research goals – namely to map the connections between populists and different types of media sources.

The Comparison Domain merges both Uses and Gratification Theory as well as Cultivation theory. However, it is perhaps less relevant here. It is relevant only in a sense that followers of leaders and parties may find emotional support and mutual ideological or negative emotional affinity – as it has indeed been proven in the case of using FB.

Identification Domain reflects on user’s identity through a profile. This is relevant for us from the perspective of assessing identity or the profiles of populist leaders and their movements/parties. This can be interesting to explore in the case of more permanent “liking” of some persons, events, or institutions.

FB as experience, or Immersive Experience Domain is close to Media Ecology Theory.<sup>16</sup> It should be perhaps noted that this theory is in some countries better known as Media Dependency Theory.<sup>17</sup> This domain is useful for qualitative analysis, in particular for political psychology. It may have some relevance for studies of electoral campaigns, too.

Plume and Slade (2016) suggested that already discussed Uses and Gratifications theory and Self-construal theory (based on Hofstede’s individualist-collectivist scale) are the best suited to research motivations of sharing in social media. Fundamentally, they claim that the theories that have been used have all elements that can be classified under the Uses and Gratifications theory (Plume – Slade 2016, p.3).

In general, peer influence in online and offline social networks is known to affect opinions and attitude (Williams, McMurray, Kurz, Lambert 2015). In social networks of all types there is the clustering – so called ‘homophily’ – based on similar or identical attributes (McPherson et al

<sup>14</sup> It discusses using the media by consumers and satisfaction or not of their needs as a result, see <https://www.communicationtheory.org/uses-and-gratification-theory/>

<sup>15</sup> It sees media having either positive or negative impact on audiences or users, including misperceptions of reality, see Cultivation Theory, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/cultivation-theory/>

<sup>16</sup> The study of media, technology, and communication and how they affect human environments

<sup>17</sup> In a nutshell, an extensive use of media generates dependent relation in the audience, see Media Dependency Theory, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/media-dependency-theory/>

2001). Within social networks, this homophilic interactions aggregate to create partisan groupings also known as already discussed ‘echo-chambers’ (Weaver et al 2018).

It should be mentioned that populist communication is very context sensitive (Rooduijn 2014). There is a lot of research on this topic from different perspectives, e.g. sharing fake news by populists on FB from a legal point (Monti 2018), micro-targeted political ads (Liberini, Redoano, Russo, Cuevas, and Cuevas 2020), content of internet memes posted by Dutch right-wing populist FB (Klein 2019). If we focus on Italy and France, these were among populist parties/movements that have been explored from the perspective of their FB fans in 2009 by Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler (2011). This exploration targeted sociodemographic and ideological motivations of online fans only.

## Research Overview IV – Networks and Networking Theories

We use and discuss here the concept of network, understood as a set of relationships or ties (which exist with or without social media) between different subjects (like people’s profiles on social media, or offline groups, persons or objects). Typically, in network analysis, the subjects of the analysis are called “nodes” while the ties between them are termed “edges” and they are represented as lines connecting two or more dots, creating a “network” of relations which can be mutual or not, directed or undirected.

If we are interested in who shared a certain news source (for example URL, post, profile), we can build a network around it. The news source will be the node, as well as users who shared it will be represented as individual nodes, and between the two there is a direct connection starting from the sharer and leading to the shared. If the respective news source shares news or posts about the persons who shared it, this is labelled as a mutual relation. The totality of such ties between specific nodes that are subject to analysis form a network. Therefore, it is possible to study the “density” of networks – the amount of direct connections that a node has divided by the total number of possible connections. The more connections a node has, the bigger “centrality” it has in the network. An interesting analogy in this regard is presented by Kadushin (2012) when writing about political actors. If two clusters are connected via a central point – an “ego” and the “ego” leaves, then the clusters don’t have a connection anymore (Kadushin 2012).

Definition of social media networks includes four essential features: users (1) have a unique digital profiles; (2) access digital content through a search tool provided by the platform; (3) there are relational ties; and (4) there is network transparency (Kane, Alavi, Labianca and Borgatti 2014, p.280). It should be noted that rather popular Castell’s (2011) theory of network power<sup>18</sup> has been criticised by Anttiroiko (2015) as problematic since Castell in Anttiroiko’s view

<sup>18</sup> Castells defined the power in the networking four different categories: 1) Networking Power (focusing on the power of members or organisations within the specific network); 2) Network Power (focusing on the power coming from social interaction process); 3) Networked Power (focusing on a group of specific actors’ power upon other group of other social actors within the network); and, 4) Network-making Power (focusing on the power to programme specific network and the power to switch different networks or forming alliances between dominant actors of various networks).

remained “laconic” about the concept itself. Therefore, Anttiroiko (2015) argues that ‘network’ in Castells’ social theory is not an analytical concept but rather a powerful metaphor. As such, it has no analytical value. There is some additional criticism of Castell’s theory related to his technological determinism and for replacing people or citizens as political agents with the concept of users (Deller 2016).

In contrast, Kane, Alavi, Labianca and Borgatti (2014) contributed by pointing at two key differences between traditional social networks and social media networks. First, the latter technological novelty raised the issue of platform design and related algorithms. Second, there are opportunities that are far above opportunities present in traditional social networks such as visualizing network structure and searching for content in a network without using relational ties.

There are obviously two basic types of fora – open fora and echo chambers (Williams – McMurray, Kurz, Lambert 2015). However, especially in the case of FB there are many so-called „*Latent ties*“. These are the FB friend lists, or „like“ button, but in fact these are not actively used in case of „friends“ lists (Brown – Michinov 2019). This was indeed found in two case studies – neither Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, nor Slovak leader Boris Kollár used this tool for more or less permanently „liking“ some persons, events or institutions. Moreover, there is quite a consistent pattern: populists’ online communication is often one-sided, with very little interaction with either followers – or friends (Moffitt 2018, p.37). Some findings suggest that the echo chambers can be challenged by major political events, ideology, and intra-party tension that transcend party affiliations (Weaver, Williams, Cioroianu, Williams, Coan, Banducci 2018).

## Conclusion

We explored arguably four key components of studies on social media and populism. First, we explored the substance of populism and populist communication in general. Second, we investigated the role played by social media, and in particular by FB, in communication of populist political parties and politicians. Third, we discussed relevant theories and selected empirical findings on populists linking or sharing or just referring to different media on FB or elsewhere on social media. Finally, we inspected basics about networks and networking theory that is the backbone methodology of our case studies.

We found that there are quite many available theories and theoretical thoughts that, however, do not seem to explain much of the substance of populism and social media (or populist communication in general) but rather describe what is visible. Moreover, some of these theories rely very much on older theories from legacy media field.

We found only one theoretical model – FIM – developed by Moreno and Koff that tackles specifically FB. Yet even these authors based their model on older theories. The FIM conceptualisation may be seen as reflecting to different degree sharing and reference experiences. Moreover, it is still by and large descriptive rather than explanatory.

Nonetheless, there seems to be emerging theory explaining success of populist communication based on empirical research. This theory, based on research by Bracciale, Andretta & Mar-

tella, Neumann-Ernst, Lipinski, Stepinska and others, suggests following basic conditions and structural limitations of populist communication on social media.

First, political positioning of a party/leader: a) challenger vs. Incumbent: being a challenger party increases affinity with populism), b) level of radicalism/extremism: a populist leader must gain attention. Therefore, radicalism combined with demagoguery in rhetoric is the key. Typically, a successful populist leader embodies and unifies major silent worries and wishes of a relevant part of audiences. The test is whether democracy and the rule of law are still seen as the only alternative. Similarly, c) a party that moves into opposition, or that faces election campaign, may turn to populist rhetoric.

Second, platform or social media as well as legacy media characteristics and policies (demographics and usage and platform policies – algorithms, regulations). FB is not accidentally the major populist communication tool in quite many countries. In general, it matters how social media is regulated (if at all), and what are algorithms used by social media (usually, these are market-driven). Surprisingly, alternative media do not play here a crucial role but it seems that alternative media may be replaced by some tabloid media or by captured Public Service media (Hungary, Poland). FB is usually a more suitable tool for populist messages than e.g. Twitter (but there are countries where Twitter is more popular than FB), but in some cases it can be a blog that can serve as populist nucleus (Italy), or even a newsportal (USA) can take such role.

Third, communication strategies: as mentioned, challenger parties or leaders usually rely more on populist communication styles. In that regard, social media or talk-shows remove to a large degree gate-keeping role (although this is changing, e.g. ban on former US president Trump on FB and Twitter). Similarly, party or leader that is ignored by mainstream media (e.g. in Greece both private and public media were captured before Syriza came to power), may try to develop alternative communication strategies and use alternative media. However, these alternative media are usually not those that define themselves as “alternative” but rather e.g. “standard” social media.

It is obvious that the factor of communication strategies may closely overlap with the first factor (political positioning of a party/leader). Similarly, communication strategies may reflect or be impacted by local media policies, i.e. second factor (e.g. already mentioned conundrum faced by Tsipras and Syriza).

Fourth, the degree of electoral volatility and voting patterns, as well as characteristics of electoral system (a single electoral district pushes towards a few personalities instead of more balanced representation and stronger role of more internally democratic party system). Some studies also note differences in voting trends and specific criteria based on regions (e.g. Western Europe and Eastern Europe, see for example Santana, Zagórski & Rama 2020).

Fifth, presence and (a lack of) communication of silent policy issues in a society (such as relative poverty, captured state, undocumented migration, grand corruption, etc). Without this fundamental condition, populism has no chance to succeed.

This can be called the BIG FIVE Factors Theory of Populism and Social Media.

In conclusion, social media do not cause populism but rather create an opportunity for easier, cheaper and faster dissemination of populist messages.

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## France: Two Separate Populist Parties; Two separate networks and One Go-Between Group<sup>1</sup>

This article proposes a literature review of existing works on the use of social networks by the populist parties in France, showing that they are part of the extension of a very different political history in both cases. French populists are divided along clear ideological radical left – radical right lines. The conflict is highly personalised. It heavily relies on social media – in part as a result of criticism of bias on the part of legacy media. Especially J.L.Mélenchon seems to be rather innovative and active in using many social media platforms and novel approaches to communication even when comparing at international level. The results show that the FB pages most shared by the two populist leaders were FB pages related to themselves, their party or other members of their organization. The shared links corresponded to the ideological orientation of the two leaders. We therefore study in detail the populist galaxies online, as a sign of the existence of two opposing political traditions that do not rely on the same networks.

**Keywords:** Facebook, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, LFI, Marine Le Pen, FN/RN, populism, right-wing party, left-wing party, network analysis, media, France

### Introduction

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and the networks of selected populist leaders representing populist parties (terminologically further specified) in France in two periods in 2020. The two politically relevant selected populist actors are Jean-Luc Mélenchon from *La France Insoumise* (Indomitable France, *LFI*) and Marine Le Pen, leader of the *Rassemblement national* (*RN*, *National Rally*, formerly, until early 2018, known as *Front National* – National Front, *FN/RN*) respectively. Looking at the international expert survey (Meijers – Zaslove 2020), in the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) *LFI* reached 8.5 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale (the key discursive indicators: Manichean,

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism, and clearly located to the left of the political spectrum – radical left), while *FN/RN* reached 9.07 degrees of populism and clearly standing on the opposite ideological pole – radical right. However, it should be remembered that the *FN/RN* is characterized above all as an extreme right-wing party, even more than a populist one, making the themes of immigration, national preference and Islam the core of its ideology. Thus, by looking in detail at populists' radical right/left social media discourse in comparison with that of non-populist candidates, we may be more nuanced: populists radical right/left are not always only populists and/or do not defend the same ideology (Maurer – Diehl, 2020).

This paper proposes a complementary insight into the ideological explanations of party attitudes. It aims to investigate the ideological and political roots of two French parties and the way they address the electorate: the Front National/Rassemblement national (*FN/RN*), the “prototypical populist” (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 34) and oldest institutionalized extreme-right party in Europe; and the new left-populist Front de Gauche/France Insoumise (*FdG/LFI*), created during the “new momentum for left-wing populism” of the Euro crisis (Ibid, 37). Both parties contributed to the “electoral earthquake” (Cole 2019, Gougou – Persico 2017, Rouban 2018) in the French party system during the last presidential elections. Four parties concentrated 84.9% of the votes during the first round. Emmanuel Macron ended up 2.7% ahead (with 24.01%) of Marine Le Pen (21.3%). The difference between the second position and the fourth position, held by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6%), was only 618,540 votes among the 31,381,603 French voters.

We have chosen to focus our analysis on FB network because FB is the most popular social platform, and moreover its users represent wide selection of society (Duggan et al. 2015). It also allows more types of interactions (Trieu et al. 2019) than for example Twitter. In France, 74% of internet users also use FB but only 28% of them used Twitter in the second half of 2018 (Global Web Index 2019). Unlike Twitter, FB does not have a character limitation, allowing users to develop longer arguments and affording more space to an extended populist discourse (Ernst et al. 2017). As shown in the table below, the very high degree of personalization of French political life, where leaders have more followers than their party, encourages us to focus on these elected officials rather than on their political organization. It should also be noted that the *FN/RN* is the most followed French party on FB, ahead of the party of the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, and his *La République en Marche* (see table 1).

**Table 1:** Number of followers on Facebook among the main French politicians and their party (January 2021)

	Individual	Party
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI)	1 227 100	217 119
Marine Le Pen (FN/RN)	1 613 262	450 167
Emmanuel Macron (LREM)	3 840 839	250 311

**Source:** Own compilation based on FB publicly available data

Previous work have shown that we are dealing here with two leaders labelled under the category of populist developing different strategies in routine and campaign time (Baloge – Hubé

2021). Indeed, while both refer to the people in similar proportions on FB, none of them really tries to define in an ideological or philosophical way “the people”. Above all, Mélenchon criticizes more often national and international political elites, while Le Pen refers more frequently to “others” as enemies of the people. Additionally, it seems that populism is a “political communication style of political actors” (Jagers – Walgrave 2007, p. 322) used by both political actors differently. For Jean-Luc Mélenchon, populism is the preferred style during a campaign but that has to be less used during the routine period. On the contrary, the process of “de-demonisation” of Marine Le Pen and her party is a campaign strategy: the populism is much more milder during this period. But when she’s less into the media loop, she’s much more populist in her FB public positions.

In politics, to complement Austin’s theory, “to say is to do”, i.e. to make people believe that one can do what one says, and in particular to make known and recognize new principles of division in the social world (Bourdieu 1983). The presented study aims to understand not only their direct communication, but the way they are using a two – or multiple step flow of communication. Talking to their electorate is not only a matter of discursive stance but is only a matter of using some media with whom activists can identify themselves (Baloge – Hubé 2021). Following the same line, we aim to understand how connected populist leaders are with some followers. Taking into consideration that these two parties are often linked by the populist label, and in the same time that they oppose each other on almost everything, several issues emerge, our research question is to understand how the online populist French galaxy is characterized. Is this ideological and historical differentiation also found online by the constitution of two distinct networks? What do these online networks tell us about the populist strategies of the two parties? Our central hypothesis, in light of the literature and the history of the parties, is that populist networks are also characterized by a form of online differentiation. The hypothesis is that their followers are more radical than the leaders. Before that, review of previous related research seems to be useful for contextualisation of our findings.

### **Social Media and Populists in France – A Research Review**

In France the correlation between populist, anti-establishment candidates and heavy reliance on social networks as communication tools is very strong (Villeneuve 2020). The *FN/RN* was the first party in the country to put up a website in the mid-1990s. From 1994, the party owns a website (after having used telephony or first computer tools for its purposes). The party quickly invested and became professional in its use of these networks. It will be the first party in France to open an office in the virtual universe Second Life, in 2006 (Dezé 2011). Since then, it has invested aggressively in its social media operations. *FN/RN* has been well-known for its digital prowess, aggressively launching online campaigns that included viral hashtags, memes, and animated videos. Similarly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, demonstrated a similar social media pre-eminence, with a YouTube channel hosting some videos with over 5,000,000 views and a FB following of over 900,000 in 2017. Furthermore, Mélenchon fans even created a video game, *Fiscal Kombat*, where players took on the oligarchy by chasing after rich men and redistributing their

wealth (Hendrickson – Galston 2017). Mélenchon is also one of the first politician in France to launch a twitch channel, a social media particularly popular among young people. For Mélenchon, the electoral strategy is to capture the young educated digital citizens. La France Insoumise used also the Russian application Telegram and Discord to communicate discreetly during the 2017 campaign (Sedda 2020). The *FN/RN* online supporters included a group of activists known in France as la “Fachosphère” (named after an investigative book by two French journalists) (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017). So summarize, in France, Le Pen or Mélenchon post online much more frequently than their counterpart from mainstream parties (Kusela 2017).

Content-wise, an analysis of all FB posts by *FN/RN* party and comments by supporters during nine years found that in terms of populist features, it was the cult of personality that was the defining feature of *FN/RN* on FB. It was also this feature that distinguished the *FN/RN* from the mainstream parties in France. In fact, the *FN/RN* coupled the personality cult around Marine Le Pen with nationalism. When it comes to other populist themes such as peoples’ centrism or anti-Europeanism, these topics were not at the center of *FN/RN* communications (Stockemer 2019). A content analysis of posts (press releases) on the party’s FB from 2013 to 2015 showed that Marine Le Pen has changed the *FN/RN* in two ways. First, she has rendered the party’s discourse more populist and second, she has managed to reframe the party’s leitmotif of immigration (Stockemer – Barisione 2017). This can be seen as a sign of the party’s strategy of de-demonization.

Maurer and Diehl (2020) examined the sentiment and rhetorical targets of attack in the Twitter feeds in 2017 presidential elections. They found that Le Pen’s rhetoric was directed against the political power system as a whole. In contrast, Mélenchon avoided the French term ‘people’ and systematically replaces it by the less-charged word ‘gens’, which is more ambiguous and often carries a non-political connotation. Regarding their online strategies during 2019, Baloge and Hubé study variations in the discourse of the two parties identified in the literature as populist (Front National and La France Insoumise) during campaigning and routine periods by analyzing the Facebook posts of their two leaders (in Bennett – Lipinski – Stepinska et al. 2020). We observe that the two leaders do not use the same strategies and that the variations between the two periods highlight two different uses of populist rhetoric in addition to two ideologies that are opposed in many respects. While both refer to the people in similar proportions, none of them really tries to define in an ideological or philosophical way the people. Above all, Mélenchon criticizes more often national and international political elites, while Le Pen refers more frequently to “others” as enemies of the people.

For Jean-Luc Mélenchon, populism is the preferred style during a campaign but that has to be less used during the routine period. On the contrary, the process of “de-demonisation” of Marine Le Pen and her party is a campaign strategy: the populism is much more milder during this period. But when she’s less into the media loop, she’s much more populist in her Facebook public positions. Looking in the leaders media practices, they showed quite different media practices (Baloge – Hubé 2021). Jean-Luc Mélenchon mobilized traditional and alternative sources, while Marine Le Pen quoted, with one exception, only traditional sources, generally well established within the French journalistic field. This can be seen as a sign of the normalization strategy of the extreme right-wing party, which seeks to absolutely avoid relaying openly racist, homopho-

bic, anti-Semitic or Islamophobic sources. In the case of Marine Le Pen, we thus see a militant division of labor in terms of the radicalization of discourse confirming our hypothesis. While the FN/NR leader euphemistically supported her communication strategy on mainstream sites, her supporters invested in FB groups where much more radical statements can be made (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017, Villeneuve 2020), frequently going beyond the limits of freedom of expression by making racist, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic statements. As mentioned before, it is therefore surprising to note that Marine Le Pen never relayed extreme-rights websites (*Égalité et Réconciliation*, *Français de Souche*, *Le Salon beige* or *Boulevard Voltaire*) which are part of her party constellation (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017). These differences in terms of strategies and use of social networks are a continuation of two different partisan histories.

### **The two parties' historical and ideological roots**

The two parties studied in this article have very different political heritage. The Front National has typical extreme-right roots, anchored in anti-Semitic, anti-communist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative and/or fascist traditions, but managed to move “from pariah to republican democratic contender” (Mondon 2014). Founded in 1972 by partisans of the extreme-right movement, partisans of a new fascist “national revolution” and a New Order (*Ordre nouveau*), and some other anti-Gaullist conservatives, within a few years the party was led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, former MP during the Poujade Momentum and called *Front National pour un ordre nouveau*. But the party had to wait until the 1980s to earn its first electoral success. Le Pen had succeeded in throwing the hard-core neo-fascist elements out of the party in 1978 in order to transform the Front National into an electoral machine (Dezé 2012, Igounet 2014). The party benefited from the context of the 1980s: the election of France’s first socialist President, François Mitterrand, the economic crisis, and the neo-liberal slant of the French right-wing parties, including a “tax hate” in the policy agenda as the the FN had done some years previously, etc. During the 1983 local elections, Le Pen won 11.3% in Paris, and the joint RPR-FN list managed to win the Parisian suburb of Dreux. In 1986, the party entered the National Assembly after the introduction of the proportional vote and featured a large group of 35 MPs. Party strategy then tried to build coalitions with the conservative parties (RPR and UDF). During the 1988 legislative election and the 1992 and 1998 regional elections, the conservatives accepted the FN, made coalition lists and/or won certain Regions with the support of FN regional MPs. In exchange for this support, FN MPs were made vice-presidents in some regions. This was the case in Haute-Normandie and Franche-Comté (in 1992, for example). It was the first step in the long process of “de-demonization” that ended with the 1998 split in the party and the 2002 elections. The party has followed this strategy again in recent years. In 2011, in preparation for the 2012 elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen (83 years old) made room for his second daughter, Marine. With the help of young public relations employees and technocrats, using polls and working on discourse, she succeeded in framing her arrival as the sign of the party’s “normalization” and “respectability” (Mondon 2014), even though she was still a hard-liner (Dezé 2015). In 2013, the FN reached a membership of 73,000. Being in the FN seemed to open new windows of political opportunity. As Sylvain Crépon and

Nicolas Lebourg point out, “the FN constitutes [...] a formidable tool for social promotion for those members who agree to be invested in local elections” (Crépon – Lebourg 2015). Following the same de-demonization rationale, the party changed its name in 2018 to become the National Rally. Due to the peculiarities of the French electoral system, the party only counts a few elected members: in 2019, 20 MEPs, 6 MPs, 1 Senator and 28 mayors (and only 3 mayors in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants).

The story of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party is very different, with its starting point the left wing of the mainstream Socialist Party (PS). Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a (mainstream) political professional. After being a Marxist and Trotskyist activist in the 1970s, he joined the Socialist Party in 1976 and quickly became chief political affairs officer of a socialist mayor, in Massy, a town located 15 kilometers from Paris. Fascinated by François Mitterrand, he was an active member of the party. In 1986, at the age of 35, he became the youngest French Senator. In 1992, along with some other quadragenarians, he created “The Socialist Left” movement within the PS. He appealed to the electorate to vote for the Maastricht treaty in 1992. In 2000, he became Minister of Vocational Education in Jospin’s socialist, green, and communist government. In 2002, the defeat of Lionel Jospin by Jean-Marie Le Pen was a shock for him (Poulet 2019, p.171). His analysis was that the PS should be more leftist. In 2005, he was a partisan of the No vote for the European constitutional treaty, but remained in the party, working on Ségolène Royal’s campaign in 2007. However, after this second defeat, he left the party in 2008 with other socialists to found a new left-wing party (Parti de gauche, PG), inspired by the German example of Oscar Lafontaine’s Die Linke in 2007. The PG formed an alliance with the communist party and another small leftist party to make a coalition, the Left Front (Front de Gauche – FdG), under whose banner Mélenchon participated in the Presidential elections in 2012 and in the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections. After the 2012 results, he radicalized his discourse with more provocative populist tones, inspired by Podemos, Syriza and Bernie Sanders (Castaño 2018). In 2016, La France Insoumise (Indomitable France) was created as an eco-socialist movement, an electoral machine based on a horizontal hierarchy – it is a movement, not a party. In 2019, the party had 17 MPs, 2 Senators and 5 MEPs.

Looking only at the historical and ideological roots of the two parties, it is clear that they do not belong to the same political family. But seen from the viewpoint of the leader’s strategy, both use a typical pattern of populism constructed around the leader (Weyland 2001 and 2017), presenting him or her as the saviour of polity. The history of the FN/RN is closely bound to the Le Pen family. In many ways it can be considered as a political enterprise with the characteristics of a hereditary monarchy, also embodied by Marine Le Pen’s niece and former party deputy, Marion Maréchal Le Pen. As Sylvain Crépon and Nicolas Lebourg point out, “the omnipotence of the leader, defined by the party’s statutes, means that anyone seeking to influence the party’s machinery must have a direct line to its leader. There are no recognized trends within the FN, where contradictory debates are almost non-existent” (Crépon – Lebourg 2015, 446). The LFI is also the product of a political enterprise in which Jean-Luc Mélenchon plays the central role, alongside elected officials who, like him, have chosen to leave the Socialist Party. However, this question of the “leader” is not specific to parties claiming to be or categorizing themselves as populist. The Fifth French Republic, characterized by hyper-presidentialism and

a solitary exercise of power (François 2010), has been marked since General de Gaulle by the figure of the providential man, the political leader, and this is true of all parties, including those who propose a more parliamentary Sixth Republic, such as the LFI. Moreover, French political media coverage shows that France has one of the highest levels of personalization in the Western world (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

These results are also reflected in an analysis of the manifestos during the 2012, 2017 and 2019 elections shows that counter-intuitively, the party that most often appealed to the people in its programs was Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party (Baloge – Hubé 2019). The way they invoked the people was, however, quite different. In Mélenchon's manifesto, the people were mentioned as the embodiment of popular sovereignty, often backed by forms of direct deliberation, whereas, for Marine le Pen, the people were often concerned by the national and nationalist question. At the same time, both parties rejected the elites. Looking at these arguments for the people and against the elite, it can be said that these parties have a common ideological faith (Stanley 2008). But the way they use it in no way explains their positions. Historical roots still structure party discourse towards the two groups (social classes and migrants) in a classical left-right divide. Jean-Luc Mélenchon strives to defend the “working classes” and the “employees”, while Marine Le Pen worries about the “impoverishment of the middle classes and working classes” (2017) and fiscal policies for SMEs (5 proposals out of 144 in 2017). Ultimately, the parties differ, with an inclusionary populism (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Font – Graziano – Tsakatika 2021) defended by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and classical far-right arguments painted as populism by Marine Le Pen (Surel 2019, Daigle – Neulen – Hofeman 2019).

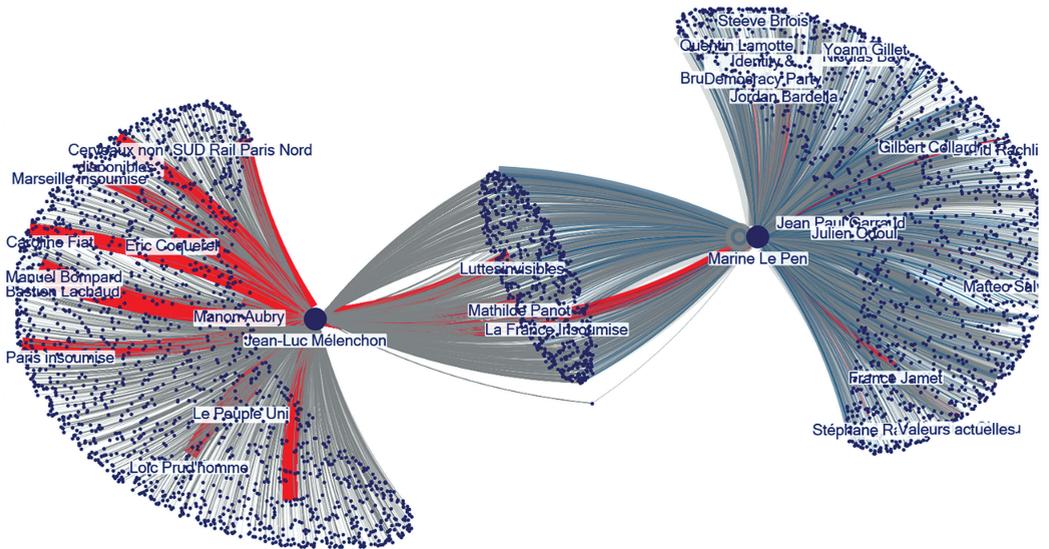
### Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts<sup>2</sup>

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than the other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of inter-connection between different pages. Third, the degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing. This aspect is important, since for Marine Le Pen, 40 percent of her likes on FB originated outside France in 2017 presidential election campaign. Analysis of the networks of the two populist leaders revealed that their networks are very different and unrelated, confirming that both parties aren't similar. The analysis of reciprocity thus showed that the two leaders had similar communication strategies, since they both had reciprocal networks with mainly elected officials and political organizations, and at the same time their networks were very different, since these officials and organizations were almost never the same, as shown in the two graphs below:

On each side of the graph appear central personalities of the *FN/RN* and the *LFI*. The main difference between the two parties was that Jean-Luc Mélenchon was part of reciprocal networks

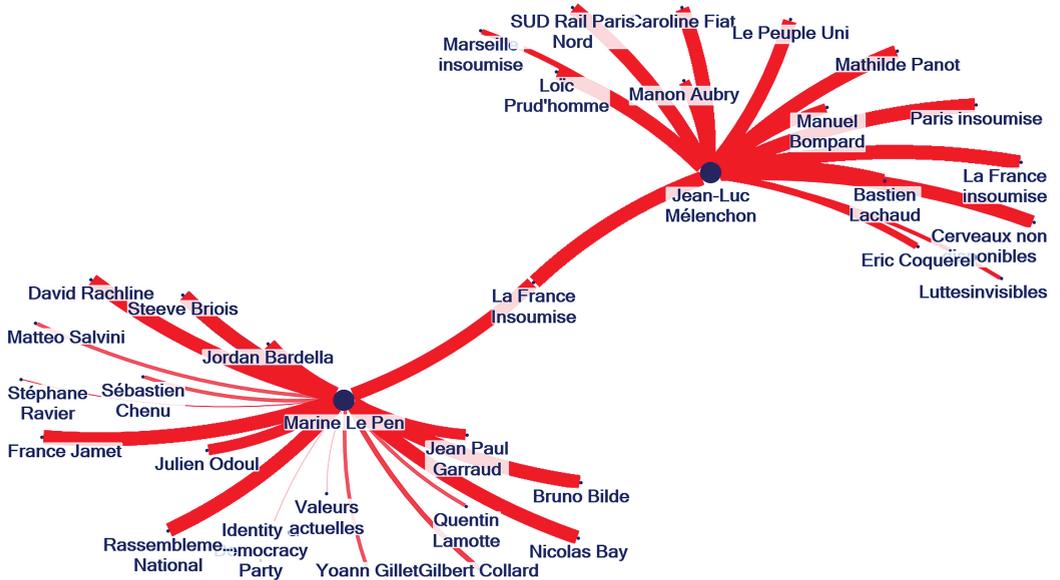
<sup>2</sup> The analysis was carried out on Facebook data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the Crowd-Tangle API developed by Facebook (CrowdTangle Team, 2020)

Chart 1: Facebook Populist Network in France



Source: Marinca, 2020

Chart 2: Populist Pages' Reciprocity Network



Source: Marinca, 2020

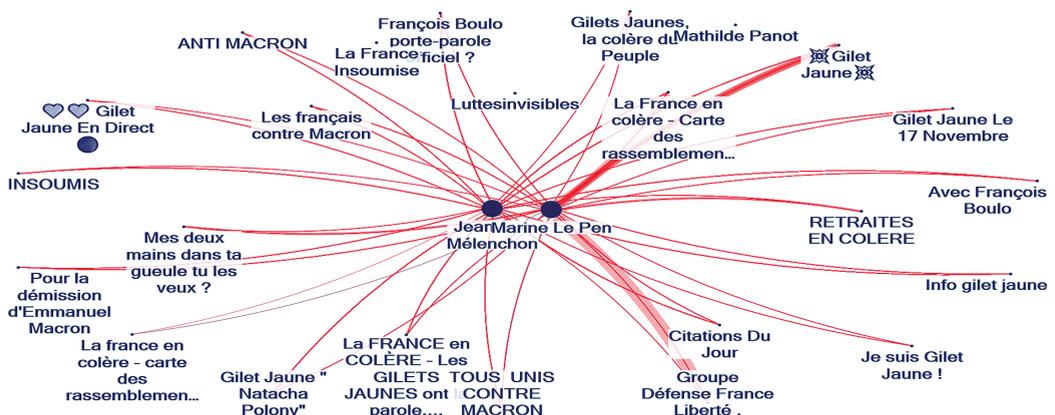
leaving more room for organizations. This was the case of “*Marseille Insoumise*” and “*Paris Insoumise*”, two local branches of the party, “*Sud Rail*”, a trade union, and “*Cerveaux Indisponibles*”, “*Luttes invisibles*” and “*le peuple uni*”; online protest groups. This result illustrates well the strategy of Mélenchon to create a movement against the left traditional parties; Marine Le Pen referred reciprocally only to her party, the FN/NR, *Identity and Democracy*, a political group in the European Parliament, and *Valeurs Actuelles*, an extreme right-wing newspaper.

As mentioned before, it should be noted that the two political leaders also very frequently referred to similar sources, mainly traditional media well established in the French media landscape: *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *20 Minutes*, *France Info*. It was only on this point that the media practices of the two elected officials came together: both shared sources that criticized the government’s actions. For example, on February 29, 2020, they both shared an article in the free of charge newspaper *20 Minutes* about the use of article 49.3 of the constitution and the motion of censure launched by the left and the right. Earlier in the year, on January 16, 2020, they both shared an article on the *France Info* website, dealing with the municipal elections and how a circular could favour the results of Emmanuel Macron’s party. Finally, on several occasions, they quoted the same article from *Le Monde* about the resignation of Jean-Paul Delevoye, the High Commissioner for Pensions in the Government of Edouard Philippe, after a series of revelations targeting him (suspicions of conflicts of interest, cumulation of activities forbidden).

The analysis of the FB pages sharing each leader more than ten times showed that here too, two very different networks could be observed. 297 FB pages shared 15,960 posts by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This was much more than in the case of Marine Le Pen who had 187 FB pages sharing 7,540 posts of Marine Le Pen. An even more precise analysis showed that only 20 FB pages shared both Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon at least 10 times each, but in very different proportions (718 posts for the former, 2,995 for the latter), as shown in the graph below:

FB Pages that shared more than 10 times the posts of each leader had very specific profiles. A large proportion of them claimed to belong to the *Yellow Vests* movement, a critical social move-

Chart 3: Pages sharing both Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon at least 10 times each



Source: Marincea, 2020

ment against Emmanuel Macron, affiliated with no official organization. Instead, these two leaders sought to present themselves as the best representative of this unorganised movement. The table below identifies and then quantifies the FB pages shared more than 10 times by the two leaders. We have distributed these pages into five categories: page affiliated with *LFI*; page supporting or close to the *FN/RN*; *Yellow Vests* Support Page; groups opposed to Emmanuel Macron; and finally – *Other* (ex. website proposing famous historical, intellectual and funny quotes).

**Table 2:** More frequently shared posts

<b>Most central (shared both pages at least 10 times each)</b>	<b>Shared Mélenchon</b>	<b>Shared Le Pen</b>
<b>Page affiliated with LFI</b>		
INSOUMIS	820	10
<b>Page affiliated with the RN</b>		
Mes deux mains dans ta gueule tu les veux ?	11	30
Groupe Défense France Liberté .	10	29
<b>Yellow Vests pages</b>		
François Boulo porte-parole officiel ?	135	30
Avec François Boulo	101	18
Info gilet jaune	98	34
Gilet Jaune „ Natacha Polony“	94	18
La FRANCE en COLÈRE – Les GILETS JAUNES ont la parole....	48	21
Gilet Jaune En Direct	35	11
Gilet Jaune Le 17 Novembre	24	16
Je suis Gilet Jaune !	14	14
Gilets Jaunes, la colère du Peuple	10	29
<b>Groups opposed to Emmanuel Macron</b>		
La France en colère – Carte des rassemblements	719	153
Pour la démission d'Emmanuel Macron	54	34
TOUS UNIS CONTRE MACRON	41	25
ANTI MACRON	29	19
RETRAITES EN COLERE	28	15
Les français contre Macron	27	38
<b>Other</b>		
Citations Du Jour	162	33

Source: Own compilation

We can observe that some groups of *Yellow Vests* are almost in a balance between the two leaders. But in the majority of cases, the centrality of the two pages seems unbalanced, once again testifying to two very distinct networks, confirming that we are dealing with two political families with little in common in their communication and relationship strategies.

An interesting result here is the attempt to capture the movement of the *Yellow Vests*. This movement claims independence from traditional political parties. Its protest dimension and opposition to the government of Edouard Philippe and Emmanuel Macron has however made it a target for many parties. The studies and surveys available on the political preferences of *Yellow Vests* do not make it possible to decide which figure from the opposition is preferred by individuals close to this movement. Political science research, carried out by questionnaire during popular protests, showed a greater identification of participants with the left (44% against 15% for the right, 52% with no affiliation to the right nor the left) (Bedock et al. 2019). Conversely, surveys (conducted among supporters and not participants) revealed a more frequent *RN* vote (44% against 12% for the *LFI*). The network analysis of each party allows us to note at the very least that Jean-Luc Mélenchon was more active on the internet and social networks than Marine Le Pen in the desire to be the spokesperson of this mobilization, without however having succeeded in embodying and gathering in any name, in a consequent way, those who identify with this movement. But a specific study on the *Yellow Vests* galaxy is needed.

## Discussion

The networks formed by the two populist leaders faithfully reflected their ideological orientation. Each one thus maintained relations with close elected officials or members of his or her party, while excluding his/her opponent. From this point of view, network analysis confirms the very great impermeability of the two types of populism observable in France. It is also noteworthy that Jean-Luc Mélenchon invested much more in social networks and maintained a denser network than his far-right opponent. An unexpected result therefore lies in the frequency with which Marine Le Pen referred to traditional media, whereas his opponent more often mobilized alternative sources, whose owners are less easily identifiable. Thus, in the case of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the proximity to a range of alternative sources confirms his negative attitude to the traditional media. Reviews such as “*Frustration La Revue*”, “*le bon sens*”, “*Mémoire des luttes*”, “*Lundi AM*”, “*Investig’Action*” or even “*Osons Causer*”, testify to the variety of leftist sources mobilized by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in parallel with more classical media. These media can be qualified as alternative, due to the fact that they are generally not registered in the official register of French media, by an online presence and by hybrid forms of journalism, at the crossroads of information and activism.

Our study therefore confirms our initial hypothesis: the *RN/FN* and *LFI* thus extend their ideological, historical and communicational differences online. Such differences raise questions about the relevance of the populist category to describe two parties that are opposed on many points. Further work may confirm these initial observations. In particular, it would be interesting to study the militant galaxies of the two parties, following on from the work of Fabienne Greffet (2020, see also Gibson – Greffet – Cantijoch 2017), by proposing a network analysis focusing

on online interactions. Finally, this network analysis tells us something about the communicative strategies of the two leaders but tells us relatively little about the elaboration of these strategies. Interviews with the two leaders and their communication teams would help us understand what is a political opportunity strategy and what is a transformation of political ideologies.

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## Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by a Populist Leader in Greece

Greek politicians tend to more intensively use their social media accounts during the pre-electoral periods. In general, Syriza had to fight both established mainstream parties and the mainstream media since its founding, including while in power. Yet Syriza's campaign on the Internet between 2006 and 2015 relied mainly on alternative media activists. In 2019, Alexis Tsipras prioritized sharing content from digital sources (mainly own created content such as comments or videos posted on his FB page) and occasionally articles from the websites of newspapers or links from the Syriza website or FB account. Not surprisingly, there were no links shared from radio or TV stations. The content shared by Tsipras, other than his own messaging which constituted the vast majority of his posts, came from predominantly left or centre-left publications. The reciprocity network of Tsipras was limited to posts shared between the account of Alexis Tsipras and the official account of his party. The accounts that shared the posts of Alexis Tsipras, were either accounts or pages dedicated to Alexis Tsipras or Syriza. The communication strategy of Alexis Tsipras lacked a discernible "populist pattern" of communication, at least in terms of the types of sources shared and the type of social media network that the leader of Syriza participates in.

**Keywords:** populism, Syriza, Tsipras, Facebook, media, social media, networking, Greece

### Introduction

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and networking by a selected populist leader in Greece in two periods in 2020. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the leader Alexis Tsipras of Coalition of the Radical Left (*Syriza*). Tsipras and (indi-

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rectly) *Syriza* are selected as the main populist political actors in Greece due to the fact that they constitute the most visible and successful populist political actors in the country, and are arguably among the most successful populist parties in Europe. There is widespread agreement in the relevant literature (e.g. Mudde 2015; Stavrakakis – Katsambekis 2014), that *Syriza* constitutes a populist party, particularly since the onset of the economic crisis in Greece in late 2009. In fact, “Populism is the bedrock ideology of the Greek political system, since it affects both the left and right wings of the political spectrum” (Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli – Andreadis 2016, p.8). Moreover, interestingly, “left and right populist political parties present common characteristics; anti-globalization, anti-Western, and anti-imperialist rhetoric has had a long history in Greek political culture (Doxiadis & Matsaganis 2012 cited in Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli and Andreadis 2016, p.8).

The 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset shows that *Syriza* reached 7.64 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale (the key discursive indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrist and anti-elitism, and clearly located to the left ideological spectrum – radical left)<sup>2</sup>, while the *Independent Greeks – National Patriotic Alliance (ANEL)*, the second party considered here for analysis, reached 8.46 degrees of populism and clearly standing on the opposite ideological pole – radical right.<sup>3</sup>

*Syriza* was formed in 2004 as an electoral alliance of leftist parties and organizations and entered parliament in elections the same year. A decade later it was in government. It was the only example when anti-austerity parties (*Syriza*), together with the right-wing populist party *ANEL* – a party formed during the crisis — managed to come to power in an EU M.S. The *Syriza* government from 2009 to 2015, and its fall, has been unquestionably a major political event not only for Greece. For some time, *Syriza* plans threatened to endanger the Euro and, in effect, the whole EU. Moreover, from a populism studies perspective, the Greek crisis was deeply rooted in poorly performing institutions at all levels affecting interactions at home and abroad (Koutsoukis and Roukanas 2011).

However, the analysis does not include *ANEL*, the junior partner of *Syriza* in the two successive coalition governments of 2015 and 2015-2019, due to the fact that in the period covered in the analysis<sup>4</sup> *ANEL* had already exited government and had been consigned to a status of electoral irrelevance. *ANEL* performed poorly in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) Election, capturing only 0.80 percent of the vote, and its leader Panos Kammenos decided not to compete in the July 2019 national election. The party of Kyriakos Velopoulos, *Greek Solution (EL)* eventually replaced *ANEL* as the main right-wing populist actor in the Greek party system but that happened only after the surprise result of the May 2019 EP Election. For that reason, our analysis focuses solely on Alexis Tsipras, whose party went to both the EP election competition in May

<sup>2</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0> Interestingly, PASOK and ND were seen as little populist, with 2.86 points or 2.59 respectively at 10 points scale. Historically, both parties could be seen as populist.

<sup>4</sup> The first period stretched from April to June 2019, capturing the *electoral period* related to the European Elections. The second was an eight months *routine period*, occurring between July 2019 and February 2020. Finally, the *Covid-19 period* goes from March to April 2020.

2019 and in the national parliamentary election in July 2019 as the only party in control of the Greek government. *Syriza* failed in the 2019 general elections. One reason for its failure was flux in policies – during its time in office, the party has increasingly shifted its priorities to become whatever Tsipras saw these policies and priorities should be (Baboulias 2019).

Historically, there was Left–Right polarization between the two major parties /(*Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)* and *New Democracy (ND)*/ from the 1970s until the end of the 2000s (Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2019, Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli 2019). Fundamentally, *Syriza*'s rise to prominence established a new, sharp polarisation within the Greek political system: pro-austerity/pro-memorandum political forces (mainly represented by *PASOK* and *ND*) against anti-austerity/anti memorandum forces (mainly represented by *Syriza*), or in general, attitudes toward the EU were polarizing the Greek electorate, and that pro/anti-EU polarization was closely associated with the austerity measures enforced by the bailout agreements (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2018, Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2019, Antonakaki, Spiliotopoulos, Samaras, Pratikakis, Ioannidis, Fragopoulou 2017). There was the post-2010 crisis of political representation (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2018). In party politics, the salience of the materialist cleavage exacerbated by the country's severe and protracted economic crisis gave rise to populist and/or radical forces of both the right and the left (Halikiopoulou 2020). Before moving to the specific research topic, an overview of social and legacy media roles in populism in the country might be useful, to allow deeper contextualisation of our findings.

## Research Overview

It is essential to start discussion with a general overview of the Greek media landscape before and around the period when the *Syriza*-led coalition came to power. Greek media landscape showed a lack of content pluralism before *Syriza* came to power (Kyriakidou 2013). The audiovisual media have traditionally been under the total supervision of the government in power, while private media depended on the state in other ways (Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli 2019). A few media tycoons managed to set the predominant biased reporting through their media. In 2016, Greece ranked 89th in the World Press Freedom Index, with 80% of the population showing distrust in the country's TV channels. The inadequate legal framework has failed to protect journalists from external pressures (Panagiotopoulos 2016). Perhaps the most controversial and well-known example was abrupt closure of the public broadcaster *ERT* in 2013 by the Conservative-led government as part of its fiscal policy of cuts (Iosifidis and Katsirea 2015). Paradoxically, the deregulation of the state monopoly of broadcasting frequencies in the late 1980s led to a great number of private TV channels and radio stations but it did not help much in creating efficient media content pluralism. In contrast, the regulatory framework contributed to the concentration of media outlets (Boucas and Iosifidis 2015). During the crisis, the mainstream media has adopted a pro-memorandum agenda (see Doudaki et al. 2016). The mainstream media portrayed *Syriza* as a populist defender of the 'drachma lobby, being anti-EU, against NATO, a party that 'flirts with violence' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014, 134 in Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli, Andreadis 2016, p.7). *Syriza* received some limited media support through a comedy

show on TV, in some tabloid websites, in a few small-scale, alternative outlets, and its own, party-owned media whose reach remained negligible. The only relatively mainstream and independent outlet that supported Syriza was *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, a daily newspaper published by a cooperative of journalists and employees. The only media supporting Syriza has been *Documento* newspaper (The Manifold 2020).

Within this context it is much easier to understand why prior to Syriza's electoral victory in January 2015, the party had committed to declare a war to the media "oligarchs" (Drakaki 2016). Indeed, the *Syriza-ANEL* government planned to allow for the existence of only four private nationwide TV channels in 2016 – until the Highest Court of Justice, declared it to be an unconstitutional move (Katsirea 2017). At the same time, the government allowed a limited number of available TV licenses. It should be explained that there was no transparency in the procedure of licencing framework previously for decades. There were only temporary licenses renewed by successive governments. Some even argued that private media were allowed to broadcast without paying for the requisite licenses, in exchange for favorable reporting for government policies (Biri 2016). When in government, Syriza boycotted the largest news broadcaster *SKAI* from summer 2018 onwards, following its dissatisfaction with *SKAI*'s wildfire coverage. However, this was all in vain. Before the 2019 general elections, in majority of the key media it was the opposition party *ND* that had dominated the media coverage and journalistic interviews (Baboulias 2019). The Rule of Law 2020 report by the European Commission raised some questions with regard to the effectiveness of rules geared at ensuring transparency of media ownership as well as key concerns related to insufficient mechanisms to ensure respect for professional standards in the practice of journalism.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Greek journalists and media, although opposing more radical populists, tacitly tolerated the major parties' populism and corruption for a long time. This was due to the clientelism between political elites and the media owners that in effect, has resulted in a highly centralized state policy. This, in turn, has led to a journalistic culture cautious about reporting news that could be embarrassing to state officials (Boucas and Iosifidis 2015, Lekakis 2017, Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli 2019). This was a sort of vicious circle – before Syriza attempted to break it.

Before moving to the role of social media, it may be interesting to note that the first Greek political party that featured a web page in the parliamentary elections of 1996 was *PASOK* (Lapas, Kleftodimos and Yannas 2010), followed by all the other major parties in the next two years. Online communication did not become a part of the campaign strategy of candidates until the prefecture and municipal elections of 1998. The use of the internet in political campaigns was more widespread in the 2000 parliamentary elections with 17% members of the Greek Parliament online and almost half of parties running campaign websites (citing Kotsikopoulou 2002). Between the 2000 to the 2004 Parliamentary elections, the number of online campaigning politicians doubled. Yet the number of Greek households with Internet connection in 2004 was below 18%. *PASOK*, *ND* and *Syriza* were the three leaders in the adoption of web 2.0 technologies in campaigning. However, Greek parties ignored FB as a new tool for communication till 2008.

<sup>5</sup> EU report Greece: Serious problems in justice, corruption, media pluralism, <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/10/01/greece-commission-report-justice-pluralism-corruption/> October 1, 2020.

The *Syriza* party was on FB by January 2009, following the communist party *KKE* and *PASOK* lead (Lappas, Kleftodimos and Yannas 2010).

### Social Media and Populism in Greece

Except using FB for analysis of selected topics used in rhetoric by populist politicians (e.g. Theodoropoulou 2019) we found only a limited number of studies that tackled more specific communication by populists on FB (in contrast, much more was analysed Twitter which was found to serve propagandistic purposes, see e.g. Deželan and Vobič 2016). Ferra (2019) examined four different online and social media platforms during a seven-year period to uncover the impact of digital media on the contentious politics of crisis in Greece, as well as the impact of the political economic sphere on the formation of the Greek digital mediascape. An earlier study has argued that “populist explanations of the Greek crisis based on conspiracy theories have been aided by social media (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, pp. 47–52”, in Papanthanasopoulos, Giannouli, Andreadis 2016, p.7). Similarly, Ferra and Nguyen (2021) argue that online media as means of public engagement and tools of public protest organization became decisive factors. In contrast, a more recent study suggested that social media provided only a kind of virtual support for (one of many) the anti-austerity movement *Aganakrismenoi Apofasismenoi Ellines* (between 2011-2017). Specifically, social media diffused negative emotions and spread pessimistic sentiment among the general public (Chung 2019, pp. 234-235)

However, Albertini (n.d.) found the absence of populist messages in *Syriza*’s political communication on FB in early 2016. It is useful to explain this contradiction with the academic mainstream that assumes that *Syriza* and Tsipras are populists. As put by Albertini, this finding can be explained by the period when the study was conducted – while *Syriza* was in office in early 2016. As put by Albertini, whether a party is populist depends on the time span, on the media used and in the particular time span in which the detection is conducted and whether the party is in office or in opposition.

It is surprising to find that there is comparatively limited research on social media use by populist political parties and politicians in Greece. This may be related to the fact that politicians tend to more intensively use their social media accounts during the pre-electoral periods (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019, p.11). Clearly, in view of the bias in mainstream media, there was no much need for the majority of parties and politicians to get deeply engaged with social media communication. Only the 2014 elections to the EP marked the beginning of a more systematic use of social media in Greece (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019). Based on data from a comparative study of 16 countries participating in the 2014 EP elections, Greece had one of the lowest levels of penetration when comparing the total number of FB users with the number who followed a political party (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019, p.7). In other words, citizens were not much interested in politicians and political parties’ messages on social media. Yet the research on social media roles or functions in political communication started to gain attention among researchers, as is documented in a study on 2014 municipal elections (Lappas, Yannas, Triantafyllidou, Kavada, Kleftodimos & Vasileiadou 2015).

## Alternative Media and Journalism in Greece

One of the key research questions tackles the media sources used by populists. However, we know little about alternative media sources in Greece. Thus, some background and contextualisation is necessary. The 2009 economic crisis has brought significant challenges to the media environment of Greece. Not only new political actors, but also journalists, as well as citizens were able to become content producers. Thus, while mainstream media supported austerity measures (Lekakis 2017), social media increasingly served as the alternative public sphere (Mylonas 2017) or, to put it more generally, digital technologies were generally seen as a means for bypassing media gatekeepers and contacting specific audiences directly (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019). There were some attempts at new forms of cooperative journalism – bringing together journalists and online communities such as “*Radio Bubble*”, which operated through a communal hashtag, a platform for bloggers and an online radio station (see Nevradakis 2021). There also was production of independent documentaries called *#greekdocs* as the epitome of alternative media production and anti-austerity activism (Lekakis 2017). Alternative media (around sixty) included blogs and websites such as *Indymedia* and *realdemocracy.gr* (which included minutes of meetings and referenda), the Editors’ Newspaper (*EfSyn*), the magazine *Unfollow*, *Katalipsi ESIEA*, the blog of the 2009 occupation of the Athenian Union of Journalists headquarter, and the online Press Project, but also alternative media from centre-right such as *Anti-news* (see Vatikiotis and Milioni 2019). The website “Anti-news” can be described as a specific case – it offers an account of how right-wing supporters perceived populism (Karavasilis 2017). Obviously, there was also a strong antifascist online network. It appears that Greek activists have proved resistant to fully adopting major social media, being afraid of censorship and surveillance. Instead, they focused on combining the use of these platforms with more independent sites such as blogs, citizen-led platforms and initiatives, such as open radio (Croeser and Highfield FCJ-193).

However, the long-term financial sustainability of such initiatives is questionable (Boucas and Iosifides 2020). Moreover, there are controversial experiences present, too. First, there are obvious contradictions between alternative news and social movements on the one hand and commercial social media platforms on the other, such as in case of the Occupy movement. Second, the exploitation of social media by the *Golden Dawn* (*Chrysi Avgi*) party points at negative sides of social media roles (Nikolaidis 2019).

## Political Parties, Politicians and Social Media

In earlier periods (around and before 2010) political parties seemed to be satisfied with a tight “top-down” campaign communication strategy. Interestingly only crises led to a rise in the growth of “bottom up” campaigns by users. Ironically, political parties’ online activities and users’ participation in party activities followed opposite directions in a crisis period (Lappas, Kleftodimos and Yannas 2010). It is interesting to note that *Syriza* actually emerged within and against the dominant anti-populist discourse of both the mainstream parties (that earlier and later themselves were populist while in power or in opposition, respectively) and the media (Stavarakakis and Katsambe-

kis 2018). This was clearly visible in both election campaigns before the 2012 and 2015 general elections (Ferra 2019). It would be hardly surprising if *Syriza* would not turn to social media as a substitute or counter-force in communicating and at the same time, fighting biased legacy media.

Let us focus at Greek politicians on social media. The majority of Greek MPs had a FB account (85,7%), followed by Twitter (69%) and 26,7% had an Instagram account in 2019 (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019). Apparently, Greek parties have a community of followers that are willing to engage, but the political content worth engaging with is absent (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019, p.9). FB is perceived as the social medium with the broadest reach. Instagram is considered as more of a youth platform and less political. Twitter is perceived as having an impact on the news agenda. Neither politicians nor the political communication consultants considered YouTube as an essential communication platform (Jackson, Lilleker, Veneti 2019, p.9).

However, coming back to the 2012 and 2015 *Syriza* campaigns on FB, it was FB communication that looked more like classical webpages rather than currently interactive FB pages (Ferra 2019). Smyrnaio and Karatzogianni (2020) found that *Syriza's* campaign on the Internet between 2006 and 2015 relied mainly on alternative media activists. Its success was mainly due to the European political context and the opportunities it offered to the radical Left, rather than the communication strategy (Smyrnaio and Karatzogianni 2020).

Next, we explore how Greeks used social media.

## Users and Social Media

From the perspective of users, Greeks reported using on average more than five online news sources per week (the second highest among 38 countries). However, among the most visited websites were a number of news websites and blogs that regularly engaged in conspiracy theories. More than two-thirds (67%) of Greeks used social media as a source of news, while 20% of Greeks online (and 32% of those under 35) claimed that social media were their *main* source of news. Apart from FB (58%) and YouTube (36%), Greeks used messaging applications widely to share and discuss news (Kalogeropoulos 2019). Already in 2015, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2016) placed Greece at the top of the list of countries where citizens used social media as a news source, with 27 percent of the public stating that social media constitute their main source of news – more than TV and print consumption combined.

## Methodology

As is the case with the rest of the countries analysed in the present deliverable, the analysis of populist communication in Greece covers three different periods, corresponding to different moments in the Greek political cycle: an electoral one, b) a routine period and c) the Covid-19 emergency. The electoral period corresponds to the electoral campaign period prior and a few days after the European Elections in late May 2019, namely from April to June 2019. The routine period refers to the following 8 months, namely from July 2019 to February 2020. It should be

noted however, that in the case of Greece, unlike other countries, this period covers also the very brief electoral period of the national snap election that took place very soon after the European Election, specifically on 7 July 2019. The last period, the so-called Covid-19 period, stretches from March 2020 to April 2020. So it is important to keep in mind that the routine period covers a much larger time period compared to both the electoral and the Covid-19 periods.

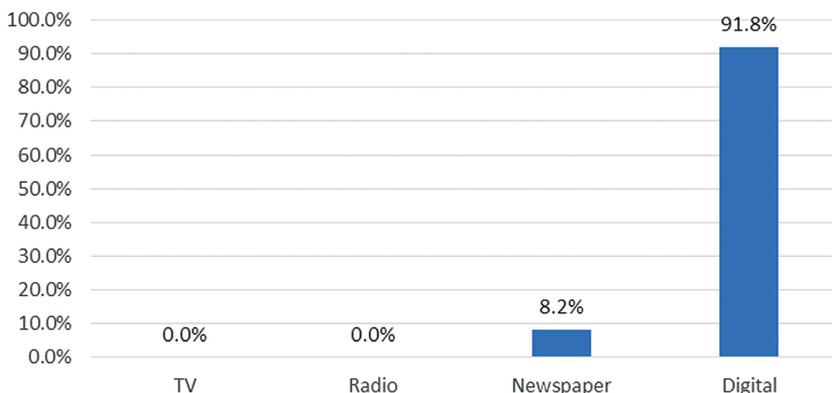
### Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leaders

In this part we study the types of media sources that seem to be by and large preferred by populists. We focus on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to figure out what type of media sources seemed to be preferred as well as ignored by populists. The analyses were carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

#### Source type

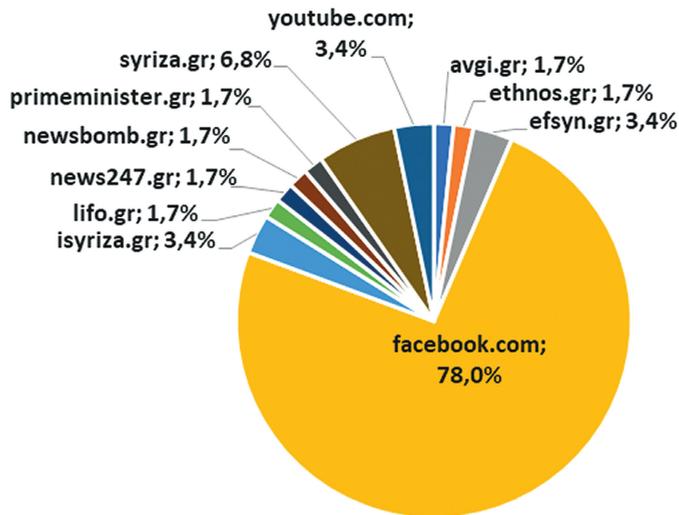
Alexis Tsipras prioritized sharing content from digital sources (mainly own created content such as comments or videos posted on his Facebook page) and occasionally articles from the websites of newspapers or links from the *Syriza* website or FB account. There were no links shared from radio or TV stations, whereas digital sources accounted for about 92 percent of all posts. However, the type of content shared by Tsipras can be broken down to organic content created by Tsipras himself (about 77 percent of all posts), whereas the rest included posted links to articles posted in newspaper websites and news web portals or to the *Syriza* website. Among

Figure 1: Diversity of channels



Source: Own compilation

Figure 2: Main sources shared by Alexis Tsipras



Source: Own compilation

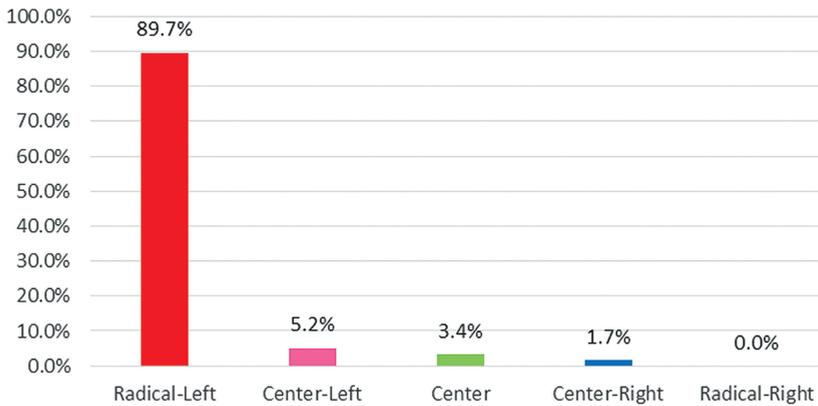
the posts, there were two links to songs uploaded on youtube.com, which were unlike his other postings in tone and content. There was little differentiation during the electoral period. The sample from that period is smaller but the distribution of sources is not changed to any meaningful degree. The main difference is that content of the posting is more oriented to Tsipras reporting from the campaign trail, as one would expect.

### Media registration

Practices of registration of media sources vary in Greece, ranging from the regulated and concentrated market of nation-wide TV stations to the unregulated and fragmented market of news websites. However, the media sources shared by Tsipras include well known newspapers and news websites, whose status as news media is not in question regardless of the respectability of the source (which ranges from legacy newspapers to tabloid-like popular news websites). Non-journalistic sources are limited to party (*Syriza*) or government sources, such as the webpage of the prime minister.

### The dominant political/ideological orientation of the media sources shared

The content shared by Alexis Tsipras, other than his own messaging which constituted the vast majority of his posts came from predominantly left or centre-left publications, even though a small number of articles from newspapers and news websites with a centrist (*Lifo*), non-ideo-

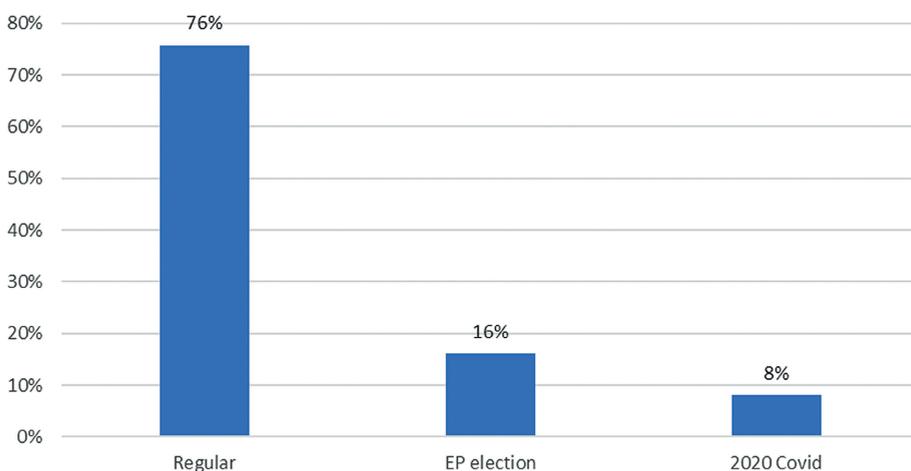
**Figure 3:** Political/ideological orientation of media sources shared by Alexis Tsipras

Source: Own compilation

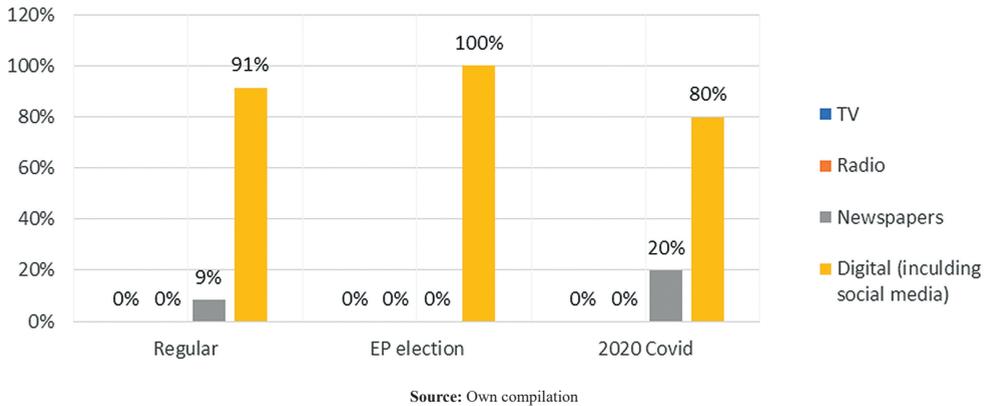
logical (*news247*) or even right-wing conservative (*newsbomb.gr*) orientation were shared. The overwhelmingly leftist orientation of Alexis Tsipras is not unsurprising given the explicitly leftist identity of *Syriza* and of its leader.

### Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular period

According to the sample collected between the three periods (regular period, electoral period prior to the May 2019 European Parliament election, and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020) there seems to be far more social media activity by Alexis Tsipras in the regular period

**Figure 4:** Percentage of sampled posts by period (Regular, EP election, 2020 Covid)

Source: Own compilation

**Figure 5:** Source of sampled posts by period (Regular, EP election, 2020 Covid)

compared to the other two periods. About 3 out of 4 posts took place in the regular period but the distribution of the posts by source do not significantly change in each period. However, this should come as no surprise given the fact that the so-called “routine period” covers more calendar months in relation to the other two periods. Most posts correspond to digital sources (mainly social media but also links to articles from news portals). It is also noteworthy that there is no noticeable differentiation in terms of either the source of the posts, their ideological orientation or their general characteristics over the three periods. Digital sources (own Facebook content and links to articles coming from mainly left-center media sources) dominated the communication practices of Alexis Tsipras (see Figure 5).

### **What role did the public service media play in each of these periods, compared to commercial /private sources?**

The role of public service media was absent in the communication of Alexis Tsipras as only 1 out of 61 posts originated from a public media source, which was the webpage of the prime minister. Some of his own facebook posts included excerpts from interviews or speeches that Alexis Tsipras had given which aired on the public TV station (*ERT*). However, the format was video files created by Tsipras himself, making it difficult to categorize separately from the rest of communication in the message and hard to quantify. When sharing articles or other external links, Tsipras relied almost exclusively on privately owned newspapers or news portals.

### **Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders’ posts**

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions within this network. Second, network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between different pages. Third, the

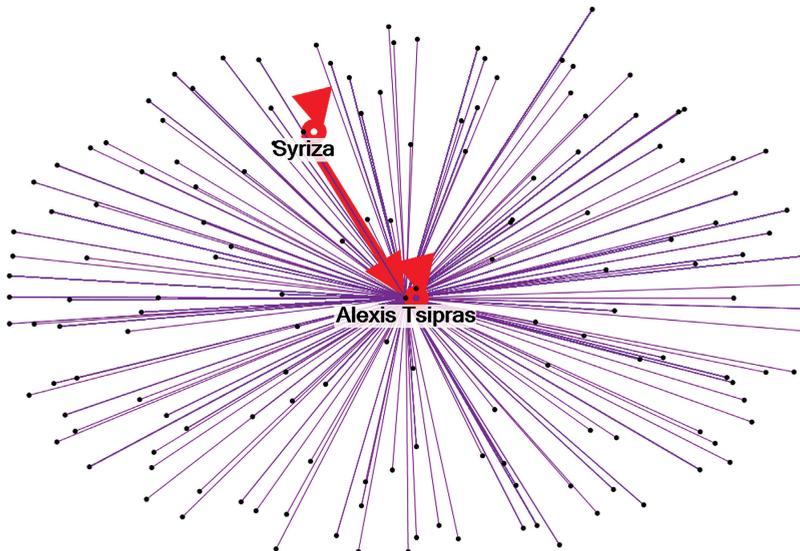
degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing.

### Network analysis of sources that shared posts by Alexis Tsipras

Figure 6 shows that the reciprocity network of Alexis Tsipras is limited to posts shared between the account of Alexis Tsipras and the official account of his party, *Syriza*. So in effect, there was no reciprocity between Tsipras and external, non-party accounts. The accounts that shared posts made by Alexis Tsipras were not really in a reciprocal network with Tsipras, as he only shared back content posted by the official *Syriza* account.

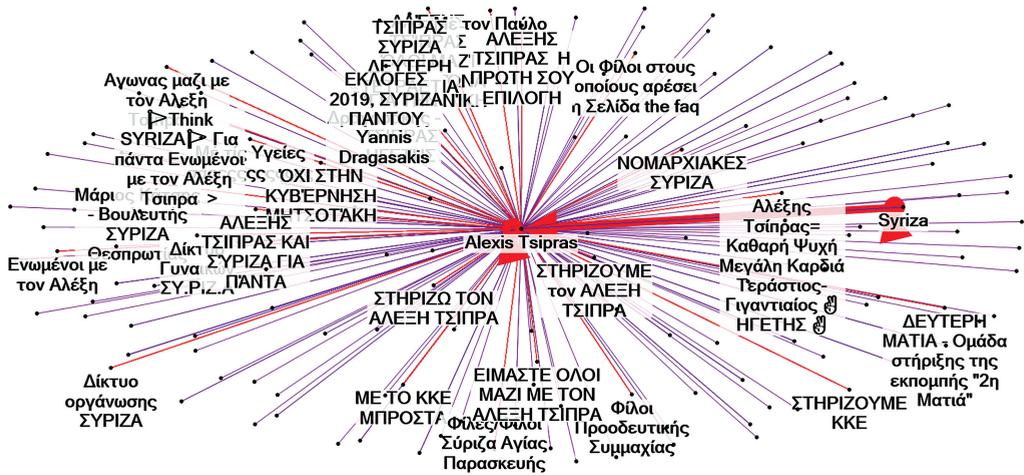
Taking a look at the accounts that shared the posts of Alexis Tsipras, we detect from their names that these were either accounts or pages dedicated to Alexis Tsipras or *Syriza* (see Figure 7). For example the page that shared most times posts of Alexis Tsipras (107) is named “Struggle with Alexis Tsipras”. Others had similar names, such as “ALEXIS TSIPRAS LEADER” (69) or “ALEXIS TSIPRAS AND SYRIZA FOREVER” (64). The only surprising result is that the only non-*Syriza* affiliated pages that appear to routinely share posts coming from Alexis Tsipras’s account are connected to the Greek Communist Party (*KKE*). For example, the page responsible for the second most posts from Alexis Tsipras’s page is called “Forward with *KKE*” (97), and there is another similarly named page (“We Support *KKE*”) that features on the list (with 27 posts). What is noteworthy is that no other populist actors or FB pages seem to participate in the network of

Figure 6: Reciprocity Facebook network of Alexis Tsipras



Source: Own compilation

Figure 7: Pages sharing posts of Alexis Tsipras more than 10 times. Source: Marinca, 2020



Source: Own compilation

Alexis Tsipras. The FB network of *Syriza*'s leader seems to be confined within his own party and – to a lesser extent – the wider social media ecosystem of the Greek Left.

## Conclusions

Social media served more for expressing and sharing anger than other purposes. It also appears that blogs and other special platforms-based communication tools played a more important role than FB or Twitter both for politicians, political parties and the public. *Syriza*'s campaign on the Internet between 2006 and 2015 relied mainly on alternative media activists. The emergence of this alternative communication network was facilitated by captured private and public media in Greece.

One could say that the communication strategy of Alexis Tsipras lacks a discernible “populist pattern” of communication, at least in terms of the types of sources shared and the type of social media network that the leader of *Syriza* participates in. Tsipras shared mostly direct forms of communication, prioritizing excerpts from speeches or interviews, and when he linked to external sources these were either party-related sources or standard national media sources. This does not preclude the use of populist language in the communication of Tsipras (e.g., in the 2015 September election campaign, his rhetoric was seen as populist, see Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli 2019) but it does not follow the pattern of either sharing content from dubious sources or creating networking links to other populist actors in the country. In this sense, one could argue that the style of communication observed on social media is more “mainstream” than “populist”. However, it should be noted that populism in Greece has been mainstream among major political

parties as well as in the mainstream media, We have found support for this surprising finding in another author (Albertini) who studied a different period.

Finally, “the rise and fall of SYRIZA is a cautionary tale. Greek citizens still have not come to terms with the underlying causes and trauma of the harsh austerity measures.” (Papathanassopoulos 2019, p.38). Thus, one can expect that populist, or, at least radical policies and occasionally populist rhetorics will still play an important role in the future.

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## Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Populist Leaders in Italy<sup>1</sup>

Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube) seem to be the key tool for accessing news in Italy. Coincidentally, they are also the key tool for communication and (internet-based) organisational aspects of two rather different populist parties (5SM and League) and their leaders, Di Maio (until January 2020) and Salvini. Salvini and Di Maio's FB pages shared contents that were not exactly analogous but still they present some similar characteristics. Among differences one can note that Salvini in contrast to Di Maio shared more frequently local content. Moreover, Salvini virtually ignored European sources. Network analysis showed that Salvini's FB page network was relatively far more extensive than Di Maio's. Interestingly, FB groups and pages sharing Di Maio's posts were rather symbolic in numbers and mainly organized as bottom-up initiatives by small groups of militants that were not directly or formally linked to the 5SM. Conversely, those FB pages and groups more prone to share Salvini's contents tended to perceive themselves as local sections of the party. Both leaders tended to share content that supported their arguments, or at least content that they could use to support their own interpretation.

**Keywords:** populism, Facebook, Luigi di Maio, Matteo Salvini, M5S, Lega, Italy, social media, networking

### Introduction

This study focused on information sources shared on Facebook (hereinafter, "FB") by two Italian populist leaders, between April 2019 and April 2020. This report adopted as case studies the 5 Stars Movement (5SM) and the League (L) – formerly Northern League. Precisely, we analysed the FB public pages of their leaders: Luigi di Maio<sup>2</sup> and Matteo Salvini. The parties they lead were selected for the analysis since they are the only ones openly recognized by the academic literature as populists (Bobba and Legnante 2017; McDonnell and Bobba 2015; Tarchi 2015). However, in this respect, some differences must be specified. The League is a right-wing populist party; its political communication is focused on blaming social outgroups (notably,

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

<sup>2</sup> Di Maio resigned as "capo politico" (political boss) of the 5SM on January 22, 2020. His role has been taken over by Vito Crimi. However, especially on social media like FB, Di Maio is still the leader de facto of the Movement, as well as the most influential member of 5SM in the actual Government.

non-European migrants). The 5SM instead, has a more social-inclusionist approach, focusing more on the ideals of people's participation in political decision making, and on its moral con-traposition to social and political elites. According to Vittori (2017) the 5SM is both populist and 'sovereignist'; Coticchia and Vignoli (2020) preferred to define it as a 'left-libertarian populist party'. Assuming populism as a political communication style, the League's discourse is often described as "complete populism" (Jagers & Walgrave 2007), whilst the 5SM's one as "anti-elitism populism" (ibid.).

The 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset shows that 5SM reached 9.4 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale. The political discourse of the move-ment was found to be centered on a Manichean worldview, presenting the people as an indivis-ible and intrinsically good entity; experts considered the 5SM as very critical against the elites, whilst supporting the idea of the importance of the general will, obtaining high scores of people centrism<sup>3</sup>. The League reached 8.6 degrees of populism<sup>4</sup>. Its ideological positioning is clearly recognised as rightist and nativist, therefore its political communication is focused on the issues of immigration and law and order, often involving strategies of emotionalization and personal-ization of the political contents.

Our analysis covered three different time periods. The first period stretched from April to June 2019, capturing the *electoral period* related to the European Elections. The second was an eight months *routine period*, occurring between July 2019 and February 2020. Finally, the *Covid-19 period* goes from March to April 2020. Unlike the second period, when regional elections of Calabria and Emilia Romagna were held, in the third one all elections were postponed due to the pandemic.

In particular, this paper aims to analyse the FB networks of the pages of Di Maio and Salvini. The next section will describe the Italian political landscape, highlighting the relevance of the chosen actors and their interdependence in the Italian political arena. The following section will summarize the major findings carried out by scholars who deepened our understanding of populists' strategies when using social media for electoral campaigns and standard political com-munication. Another paragraph will define social media as key components of the Italian Hybrid Media System (Chadwick 2017), showing their role and their importance in nowadays political communication field. Finally, the distinctive features of the electoral campaigns conducted by the League and by the 5SM in 2018 will be presented in the last analytical section. Our findings will be described in two different parts. The Analytical Part 1 will analyze the kinds of media contents shared by the two leaders through their FB account. The focus of this section will be on the type of sources they shared, aiming to establish which media outlet populists tend to promote, whether these outlets were transparent or not, whether they were based at a national or local level, whether they were clearly politically aligned. The Analytical Part 2 will be focused mostly on networks properties. Here the networks' dimensions will be compared; finally, we will qualitatively analyze some nodes which bridge between the two networks.

<sup>3</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

<sup>4</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

## Political Landscape

The Italian Constitution provides that the Government shall last five years. However, the Italian governments have usually had short duration. Since the founding of the Republic in 1948, there have been only two governments that lasted longer than three years – Berlusconi II (2001-2005) and Berlusconi IV (2008-2011)<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, since the 1990s, Italy has been considered as a fertile ground for populism, or even as a populist ‘paradise’ (Tarchi 2015). In particular, in the last decade, the entry on the scene of the 5SM with its unexpected landslide electoral results in 2013 has turned upside-down Italian politics. At its first electoral test at a national level, the 5SM obtained indeed about a quarter of the valid votes, and – 5 years later – it proved to be not a one-hit-wonder. In fact, at the 2018 general election, the party consolidated its electoral support by achieving over 33% of the votes, becoming the leading party in Italy. Although the party is going through a phase of organizational restructuring (and despite the polls signal some decline in support), the 5SM was in government across all the periods described above, remaining one of the most relevant political actors in the Italian political scenario.

Likewise, the League – after a deep organizational and ideological transformation occurred in 2018 – was able to increase its support at the polls, resulting in the most successful party at the 2019 European Parliament Elections, with a striking 34.3% of the valid votes. The League is the most important Italian right-wing party not only according to number of its parliamentary seats, but also according to more recent polls data obtained in 2020 and 2021<sup>6</sup>. The other relevant right-ist Italian parties are Go Italy (led by Silvio Berlusconi) and Brothers of Italy (led by Giorgia Meloni). Interestingly, Salvini represents the pure nativist heir of Berlusconi, which now seems to be shifting its party to centrist and mainstream stances (Roncarolo and Cremonesi 2019). However, according to other authors, Berlusconi, who initially was an entrepreneur entering the political field promising to run the state as a firm, now still promotes a technocratic and “soft” populism (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020). A growing number of studies depict Giorgia Meloni as populist (Campus 2020); this is also supported by POPPA’s scores and measurements. The academic consensus is still not achieved, but it is likely that in the future Brothers of Italy may become a must-include party when studying Italian populism.

Hence, the League and the 5SM are the main populist political actors in Italy, and we decided to assume the two parties as case studies. It should be also noted that from June 2018 until the late summer of 2019, they even shared the government of the country (the so-called Conte I government). The government experience shared by the League and the 5SM was based on agreement between the two about a common policy manifesto. The set of policy proposals was built around the cornerstones of the two parties. Accordingly, the League was responsible for execution of policies fighting illegal immigration – in line with the anti-immigrant claims of the

<sup>5</sup> Italian five longest governments from 1948 to 2016, by duration, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/678886/italian-five-longest-governments-by-duration/>

<sup>6</sup> On 5/03/2021 Euromedia Research conducted a poll about Italian’s voting intentions. The League emerged as the most popular Italian party (23,6% of consensus shares), followed by the Democratic Party (18,3%) and the 5SM (14,5%). However, these data may be fluid and unstable, since one third of the sample declared to be still undecided about which party to vote, or oriented to abstain from voting. The poll is available at: <http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/ListaSondaggi.aspx>

party. This was by no means unimportant public policy issue. As put by Gattinara (2017): “The so-called ‘refugee crisis’ marks a crucial juncture in Italian politics”. Gattinara furthermore argues that other institutional and mainstream actors merely mirrored public anxieties and security claims rather than trying to actively engage with citizens’ concerns. As a result, they have helped to create a fertile breeding ground for xenophobic and populist reactions, concluded Gattinara. In contrast, 5SM focused on the universal basic citizenship income and in particular on the reduction of the number of parliamentarians – in line with its populist communication, focused on anti-elitism and people-centrism.

The coalition government between the League and the 5SM ended on the initiative of Matteo Salvini, who was also Minister of Interior in that coalition government. This happened in the aftermath of the 2019 European Parliament elections, which certified a growing popular support for the League; thus, they seemingly indicated a need for a change in power leverage within the government. Salvini stated the necessity to organize a new national election, hoping to become Premier of a right-wing government. However, the political crisis was resolved with the passage of the League to the opposition and the birth of a new coalition government formed by the 5SM and the the main establishment parties: the Democratic Party and Italy Alive, a new party led by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (see Chiaramonte, De Sio & Emanuele 2020). This government is often called Conte II, as Giuseppe Conte remained the Prime Minister.

These two governments were in charge in the periods of our research. However, it is important to underline that in January 2021 another political crisis occurred. The crisis was related to the Covid-19 pandemic management and, especially, to the economic measures needed to overcome the crisis. This situation was resolved in February 2021, when Mario Draghi became the premier of a national unity government, supported by a large coalition formed by the major Italian political parties, but Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy.

### **Social media and populism in Italy**

There is quite extensive research on populism and communication, especially with respect to social media in Italy. In general, according to Reuters Institute (2020), Italian data signal that newspaper’s readership continues to fall steadily, with a decreasing trend which is consistent with that one recorded in the previous years. Television news viewership data are instead more stable, especially when compared to other countries; television is still widely diffused in Italy, but its market shares in the telecommunication market are constantly eroded by the growing importance of social media and digital devices. Indeed, the Reuters Institute found that smartphones are the main device used to get online news. Interestingly, two-thirds of the Italians use them at least once a week to access news (Reuters Institute 2020, p. 75). At the same time, the quota of Italian citizens getting political information from untrusted sources is rising. More precisely, 52% of respondents of Reuters Institute’s survey reported relying on FB for news, while about 29% use WhatsApp, and almost quarter of respondents gets information from Youtube (24%). Therefore, data regarding the trust in news are particularly low if compared to many other countries. Notably, less than 30% of the population declared to trust the news they found in the media system (this, as is discussed further, is related mainly to social media). Thus, this

macro perspective may hide the differences in trust's level associated with each component of the Hybrid Media System (Chadwick 2017).

Yet the Flash Eurobarometer 464<sup>7</sup> highlighted important data about trust in media outlets. The trust of Italians in traditional newspapers is lower than in the average of European countries, but it remains relatively high, since 60% of respondents declared to trust these outlets. Similarly, 56% of Italians stated they “totally trust” or “tend to trust” information broadcasted by national televisions. Only 26% of Italians trust the news they consume through social media or through messaging applications. These shares may seem low, but they must be compared to the levels of trust received by other social institutions. Another survey<sup>8</sup>, showed that trust is scarce in the Italian context. Indeed, only 33% of the respondents declared to trust the State, only 23% the national Parliament, only 9% the political parties.

Therefore, these data depict an interesting scenario. Television is still central in Italy, distributing news to a vast public while also being trusted by them. Traditional newspapers are undergoing a crisis in revenue and readerships, but still play a pivotal role in the media system, producing highly trusted information which then spreads in the other components of the system. Finally, social media and messaging apps are more and more used, also when it comes to information and political communication. However, this growth seems to be associated with citizen's skepticism and distrust in their contents, as shown by Eurobarometer data.

These general trends in information and media consumption are actually consistent with the kind of use that populists make of social media. As stressed in previous research, social media were found to be a convenient environment for populists (Ernst et al. 2019; Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Engesser et al. 2017), and – not surprising – this kind of pattern was confirmed in Italy as well. Populist parties and their leaders have a quite prominent and effective presence on social media, and on FB in particular. Interestingly, one could also point out that to some extent the Internet and social media are crucial elements of the organizational structure of Italian populist parties. The 5SM is renowned to be born on the Internet and it fits exactly the paradigms of the digital party (Gerbaudo 2019) or ‘cyber party’ (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti & Marino 2019). 5SM is also extremely active and followed on the most important social media in the country, which is FB. For instance, the former leader of the 5SM, Luigi Di Maio, had 2.3 million fans on FB (as of 2020/2021). On the other hand, it should be also underlined that Matteo Salvini invested a lot in social media as well. More precisely, his transformation of the League was based exactly on a strategic use of social media, allowing him to put aside some of the regionalist claims that were traditionally promoted by the party, shifting towards a more nationalist-appealing message (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Remarkably, in terms of fan and engagement, Salvini is one of the most prominent politicians on FB in Europe (with 4.4M likes on his official fan page as of 2020/2021). Also, it should be pointed out that Salvini's social media communication stands out for attacking and blaming other politicians, the European Union, Italian media, and the intellectuals (e.g. Bobba and Roncarolo 2018; Bobba 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 464: Fake News and Disinformation Online – Detailed information on public opinion website | European Union Open Data Portal (europa.eu)

<sup>8</sup> Rapporto 2020 (23°) – Rapporto gli italiani e lo stato – Demos & Pi

## Populist political communication during 2018 election campaign

The electoral campaign before the 2018 general elections was marked by an intensive use of the social media (Mazzoleni 2018). The analysis by Bracciale, Andretta & Martella (2021) of digital campaigns conducted by Italian party leaders on that occasion supports the theorization of populism as a communication strategy. Thus, stylistic aspects were effective elements in engaging social media audiences. These communication features included sharing of personal feelings and moments, use of emotions, and attacks on competitors. Even if both the leaders resort to a populist communication, some differences may be found in the specific stylistic elements they implemented in their political discourse. On the one hand, Di Maio's communication was often oversimplified and centered around his charismatic figure; he was also the politician who better exploited the widespread anti-elitist feelings, harshly criticizing media, political and economic elites. Salvini preferred to center his electoral campaign and to structure his populist discourse in opposition to the migrants' outgroup.

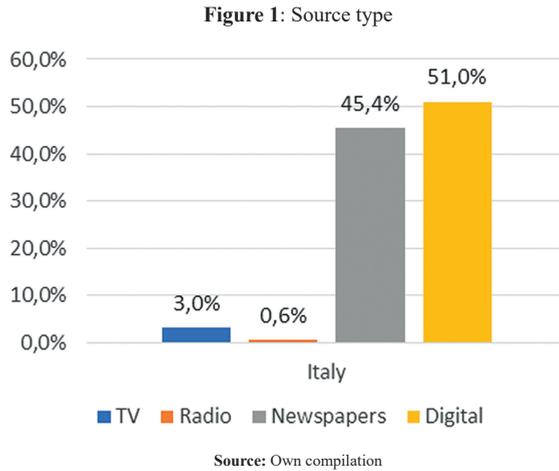
More communicative differences were found when examining different social media. For instance, Di Maio's attacking style triggered more engagement on FB than on Twitter, and simplification best activated Salvini's audience on Twitter rather than on FB. Appeals to negative feelings clearly worked for both leaders on Twitter, such as references to charismatic leadership were effective for both Salvini's and Di Maio's Twitter audiences. Salvini induced much more engagement on FB by ostracizing immigrants, while Di Maio's critics against the elites performed better on Twitter. Therefore, the success of populist communication on social media is the result of multiple factors, including political positioning (challenger vs. incumbent), platform characteristics (demographics and uses), and the precise communication strategies which are adopted to 'perform' populism, in its various forms (Bracciale, Andretta & Martella 2021).

### Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leaders

In this section we will analyze the types of media sources shared by populist leaders through their FB accounts. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. Our aim was twofold, since we were interested in both what was shared and ignored by populists. The analyses were carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

In general, as shown in Figure 1, a half of links redirecting outside the leaders' FB pages was composed of digital sources, whilst newspapers account for almost another half of the sources. TV and Radio were instead pretty marginal sources. However, individually, there were significant differences. Salvini linked very much newspapers, as we will discuss further.

Moreover, it should also be noticed that as pertains to the ownership of each media content, most of the sources were found to be private (precisely, more than 95% of the sources linked by the leaders).



One interesting fact is that, as stressed in Figure 2, two thirds of the sources in both cases were local or national. Only a residual portion of the sources was genuinely European or supranational. One possible explanation for the relative high occurrences of local sources is that local news outlets are more likely to focus on common people’s stories. Sharing them, populist leaders may present themselves as close to the people, while also achieving a greater appeal over the public on social media. Supranational sources may be instead scarce since their news may be perceived as remote and unimportant by the electors. Indeed, previous research has also underlined that events’ proximity is a driving factor for engagement on FB (Salgado and Bobba 2019).

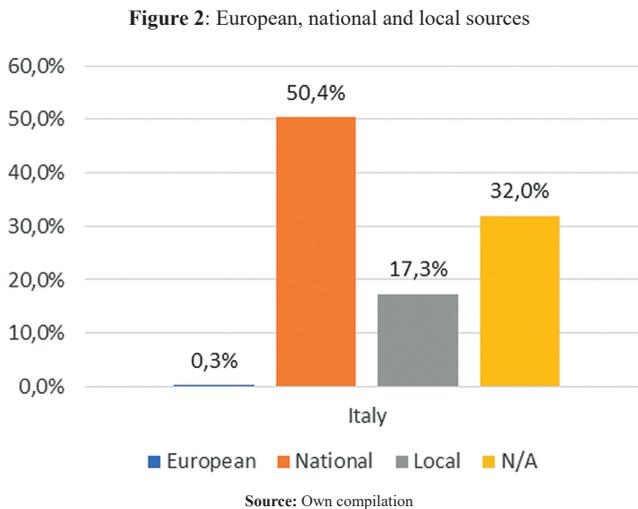
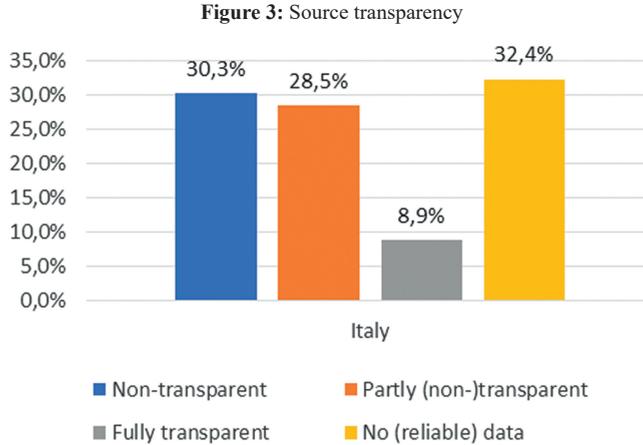
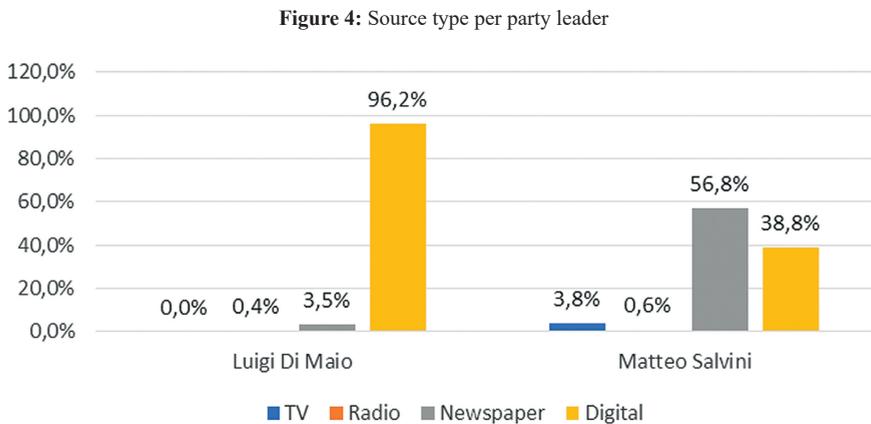


Figure 3 provides information about the ownership transparency of media outlets linked by populist political actors. Interestingly, less than 10% of the sources can be defined as fully transparent in terms of their ownership. Almost 70% of the sources linked by the two Italian leaders are indeed not entirely transparent, while about a third of the sources are non-transparent at all.



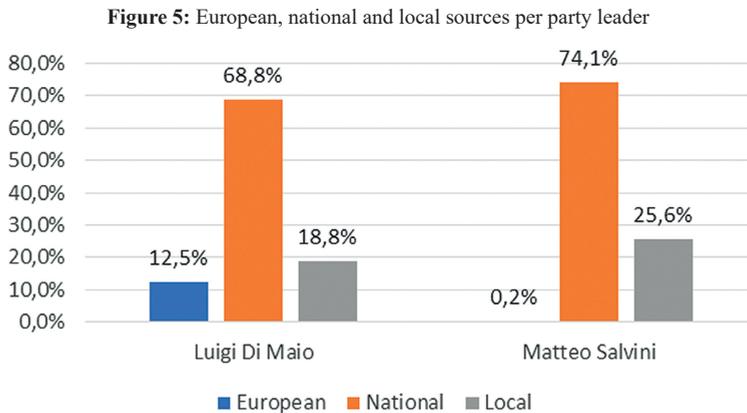
Source: Own compilation

In general, Salvini and Di Maio’s FB pages share contents that are not exactly analogous but which still present some similar characteristics. As concerns the kind of source linked, figures provided in Figure 4 report that both Di Maio tends to share mainly digital sources while Salvini shares a lot of newspapers links. TV and Radio are instead confirmed as marginal sources.



Source: Own compilation

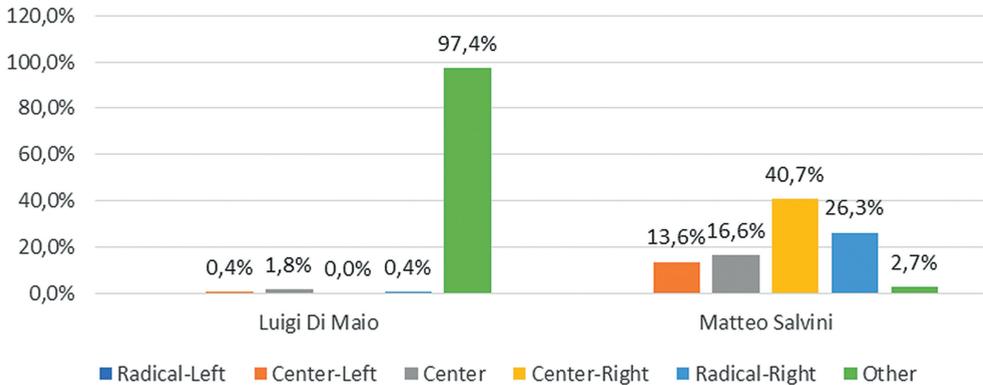
There are similarities between the two leaders as far as origin of sources is concerned. Figure 5 shows that in both cases sources linked are mostly national. However, while Di Maio paid some attention to European sources in addition to local issues, Salvini focused more on local issues and ignored pan-European issues. Indeed, Salvini often shared contents published by local politicians of his party, such as Lucia Borgonzoni or Donatella Tesei, or by local media (i.e. “Il Resto del Carlino”). Di Maio tended to share posts published by national media outlets, such as Ansa and Corriere della Sera. Di Maio also shared contents produced by European sources, such as those published by Piernicola Pedicini, spokesman for the movement in the European Parliament. European sources were virtually absent in case of Salvini. Therefore, the high quota of local media outlets in this list may be at least partially explained by Salvini’s behaviour, which inflates this data. Perhaps, local news may be vital for his communication strategy, since they allow him to better show episodes of small criminalities, especially when committed by immigrants.



Source: Own compilation

Finally, it is generally difficult to assess a left-right ideological positioning of the sources shared by both politicians. Only 69 outlets could be clearly coded as politically aligned. Figure 6 shows that Di Maio almost exclusively shared content coming from non-ideological sources (other). On the contrary, Salvini was more prone to link centre-right, and radical right wing outlets. Di Maio often shared contents produced by other members of the 5SM, whose pages were obviously coded as post-ideological. As concerns the League’s leader, indeed, we see from Figure 6 that more than one-third of the sources he shared were published by right-wing sources, such as local members of the party or politically aligned media outlets (such as “Il Giornale”). These findings show the heterogeneity of the electoral bases of the two populist parties. While the League has thrived especially in areas characterized by ‘cultural backlash’, as well in contexts characterized by Euroscepticism and societal malaise, the success of the 5SM can be largely explained with poor economic and institutional performances – i.e. perception of bad governance (Albertazzi & Zulianello 2021).

Figure 6: Sources of political leaning



Source: Own compilation

It is worth mentioning that a qualitative analysis of the sources revealed that both Salvini and Di Maio's pages shared contents published by the same outlets, which emerged as extremely popular in Italy. In particular, they both share *ansa.it*, which is the main press agency in Italy, and *Corriere.it*, one of the most relevant newspapers in Italy. This finding was also supported by the network analysis, which will be better described in the next section.

### Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular

The qualitative analysis shows that there were no remarkable differences in the distribution and nature of the sources in different periods. The two leaders did not change their social media activity nor the kind of sources linked during the three different periods covered by our analyses. However, during the third phase, characterized by the advent of the pandemic, the Covid-19 issue monopolized the attention of both Salvini and Di Maio. Here politicians in government, opposition parties and news broadcasters, were under pressure, struggling to portray themselves as key players in the public arena; what they all wanted to avoid was to be perceived as self-interested actors harming the interest of the society at large (Newell 2020).

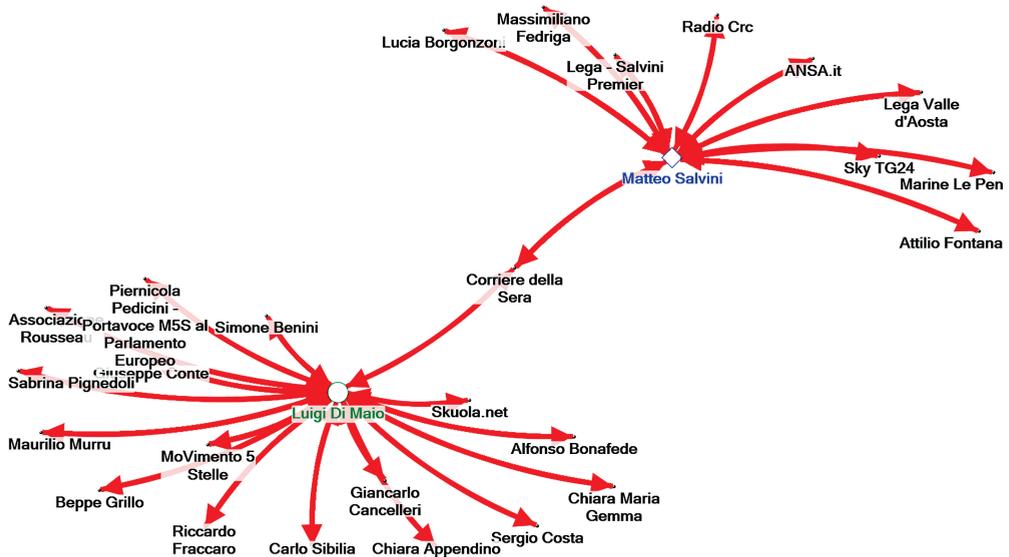
### Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts

In this section we will examine several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the dimensions of the two networks generated by the leaders' pages (ex. one much bigger than other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between different pages in the networks. Third, the degree of centrality of each node within its network. Finally, we were interested to learn which pages were the connectors between the two networks, and if there was reciprocal sharing of information. Local research (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti & Marino 2019)

suggested that on Twitter, sources mainly shared by supporters of 5SM and the League were characterized by higher levels of insularity compared to those shared by supporters of other parties. Moreover, on FB, news items published by highly insular sources received a higher number of shares per comment.

Focusing on the structure of the network derived from the FB public pages of the two leaders, it emerges with great evidence that Salvini's page network is far more vast than Di Maio's. Also, as shown in Figure 7, the two pages do not seem to overlap that much. In this respect, the only exception is represented by the FB page of the "Corriere della Sera" page. As mentioned above, this is not surprising, since the "Corriere" is one of the main newspapers in Italy in terms of readership, and it is also one of the most followed Italian FB pages.

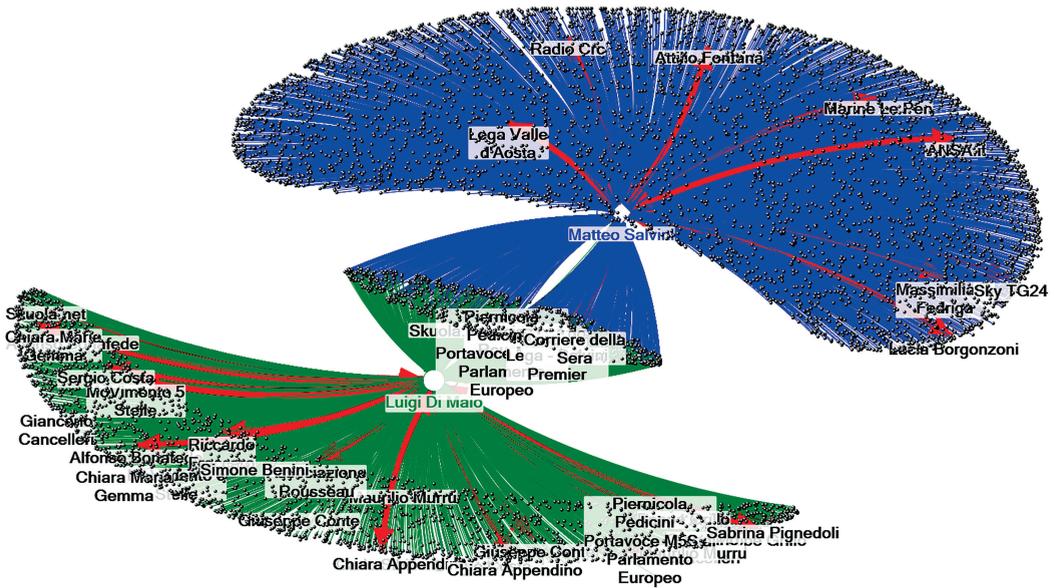
Figure 7: the structure of the network



Source: Marincea, 2020

All in all, the two networks are quite big. As mentioned above, this is not a surprising output, since the two FB pages are similar in terms of engagement and they are both particularly prominent within the Italian FB. During the analyzed periods, Di Maio's contents have been shared by about 530 public pages, while this quota is even higher for Salvini: over 680 shared his contents (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Content Sharing



Source: Marincea, 2020

As expected, for both Di Maio and Salvini the pages more active in sharing their contents were precisely fan pages directly linked to the leader or its party. For instance, we catalogued the FB pages called “5 STAR MOVEMENT – LET’S GOVERN ITALY” (for what concerns Di Maio) and “SALVINI PREMIER” (for Salvini) as well as many others with similar names. A qualitative analysis of these pages shows that groups and pages sharing Di Maio’s posts were mainly organized as bottom-up initiatives by small groups of militants that were not directly or formally linked to the 5SM. Conversely, those pages and groups more prone to share Salvini’s contents tended to perceive themselves as local sections of the party. More detailed analyses revealed that the number of pages sharing contents from both the two leaders were few in absolute number. Indeed they were just 32 and they can be defined as generic populist aggregations in which – probably – the two “souls” of the former Conte I government remained intertwined, now spamming one against each other.

## Conclusions

Initially, this paper described the Italian political landscape and presented the main Italian political parties. Among them, the League and the 5SM were selected as case studies in order to study two actors unanimously recognized as populists. Our research focused on the FB pages of their leaders – Salvini and Di Maio – examining their FB networks. We analysed both the

contents shared by them and the FB pages which shared their posts, in a time span stretching between April 2019 and April 2020. Then, the relevance of FB within Italian's Hybrid Media System was discussed. Social media users are increasing, but survey data show that FB and messaging apps are still perceived as a source of low quality information, vastly untrusted by citizens. Therefore, legacy media (such as newspapers and television) retain their importance and market shares. The paper also investigated the role of social media in populists' political communication. FB emerged as central in their strategies, allowing them to structure their political discourse with decreased constraints. This phenomenon was highlighted in relation to the 2018 general election campaign.

Being the numbers of engagement quite large, there are no big surprises in the analysis of the network of the two FB pages, nor in terms of what the FB pages share. Salvini's network proved to be larger than Di Maio's, although not in a particular accentuated way. The two FB pages seemed to have a quite differentiated audience that interact and debate very rarely, or in very small and peripheral situations. Salvini and Di Maio used news sources to sell their arguments and topics, it was thus not important the source from which they derived the story, but rather the interpretation that the two leaders gave to the same fact. A signal of this is the fact that both the leaders tended to share posts published by the most important press agency and newspaper in Italy (ANSA and *Corriere della Sera*). It is important to underline that even if FB provides politicians a tool to immediately dialogue with their electoral bases, political leaders still use the platform to vinctuate news produced by professional journalism. Therefore, even if the political system is now able to interact with citizens without the intermediation of the legacy media, political leaders, especially Salvini, still partially rely on legacy media when communicating with their audiences. Indeed, our analyses showed that more than half of the external links shared by Salvini redirected towards newspapers websites. This may be explained examining trust data. As discussed above, Italians trust in the media is strikingly low when compared to other European countries. However, aggregated data tends to hide the differences among each media which compose nowadays Hybrid Media System. In this regard, it is important to specify that Italian's trust in the newspapers is certainly low, but it is still higher than Italian's trust in social media. Moreover, Italian political actors (i.e. political parties and political leaders) and social institutions are often trusted by less than 20% of the citizens. Therefore, when redirecting to newspaper websites, political leader is sharing news products which are more likely to be believed than a FB post written by a common FB user or by an official communication produced by a certain political institution. Low trust scores obtained by Italian politicians may force them to re-intermediate their political communication using legacy media as precious intermediaries, exploiting their credibility. Their communication strategy is precisely to frame a news product in the way which is more likely to be positively perceived by their electors.

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## Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Populist Leaders and Populist Parties in Poland<sup>1</sup>

National-conservative Law and Justice Party (*PiS*) is seen as quite open to the innovative use of social media. Moreover, the government led by *PiS* is aiming at regulating social media in a dual way – on the one hand to prevent blocking by social media platforms, on the other hand to allow intervention and blocking by authorities. Regarding our findings, not surprisingly, the preferred source of information for both *PiS* and *Confederation* (*Konfederacja*) were digital sources. TV was the least often linked media outlet for *PiS* and radio for *Confederation*, respectively. All the linked media were national or with mixed origin, there were no links to European/supranational media. The overwhelming majority of links were websites and social media accounts of *Confederation* and *PiS*, their individual politicians or YouTube materials produced by these two groupings. Left and liberal media were systematically ignored when around 10% were common to both profiles, including FaceBook (FB). These were mostly mainstream media of diverse type (news websites, YouTube, radio, TV) and left, centre and centre-right ideological leanings. The political orientation of the shared sources reflected the inclination of populist parties and their coalitions to promote right wing discourses. *PiS* as a large party oriented towards the centre represents centre-right and *Confederation* represents radical right. The references to the media classified as centre-right constituted 96% of *PiS* sample and 66% of *Confederation* sample.

The network analysis showed that both parties were embedded in two almost separate bubbles which are linked together by a very limited set of sources. They stayed in reciprocal relations mostly with their own separated structures, organizations, politicians or FB discussion groups.

**Keywords:** Facebook, PiS, Confederation, populism, network analysis, media, Poland

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and their networking by selected populist leaders and populist parties in Poland in two periods in 2020. The two politically relevant selected populist actors are: Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, hereafter: *PiS*) and Confederation (*Konfederacja*) party. The *PiS* constitutes an example of populist right-wing party, with national-conservative core ideology (Kessel 2015) and as such is

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

representing a radical antiliberal critique of the political status quo before coming to power (Stanley and Cześniak 2019). The 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset shows that *PiS* reached 9.20 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale (the key discursive indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and anti elitism)<sup>2</sup>, while *Confederation* has not been included yet into populist indices, being established in early 2019. Some emerging studies suggest that its electoral manifesto – as different from electoral rhetoric – made it less populist than the *Civic Coalition* (*CO, Koalicja Obywatelska*) or Polish Coalition (*Koalicja Polska*) (Germano 2020). Although populism as a feature of political discourse was particularly salient during *PiS* victorious 2015 electoral campaign to the Polish parliament (Jaskiernia 2017), populist discursive strategies were employed already in the 2005 electoral campaign (Pienkos 2006) and with the lapse of time it gradually became more prominent in the party manifestos and speeches of its leader Jarosław Kaczyński and other party members. For example, there is heavy reliance on historical discourse that seeks to promote a Manichean, dichotomy and totalizing re-definition of the categories of victim, hero and perpetrator (Cadier and Szulecki 2020).

In the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections and in the subsequent general elections later that year, *PiS* and its minor coalition partners (the *United Right*)<sup>3</sup> secured a dominant position (45.4% of votes, and 43.59% of votes with 235 seats, accordingly). This was due to a campaign filled with homophobic slogans and criticisms of ‘gender ideology’, assisted by generous social spending framed as a people-oriented ‘revolution of dignity’, ultimately representing itself as being effective and delivering party (Górecki, Plescia and Żerkowska-Balas 2020). Fundamentally, Polish politics remains dominated by the metapolitical question of who has the moral right to govern Poland (Bill and Stanley 2002). In that sense, putting aside populist aspects of rhetoric, “PiS’s project of building a new state supported by the Catholic Church is not based on populism, but on conservative moralism, with the goal to cleanse Polish society of the legacies of the (communism)” (Ryzak 2020, n.p.).

Therefore, it is not that surprising that another important result of the October 2019 general elections was the relative success of *Confederation*, a radical right-wing grouping founded at the beginning of 2019 on the eve of an electoral campaign for the European and national parliaments, with 11 seats won in the latter (6.81% of votes). *The Confederation* took the shape of the right-wing coalition consisting mainly of conservatives and libertarians from the *KORWIN* party and radical right *National Movement*. The party promotes homophobic, pro-life, Euro-rejectionist and nationalist views articulated together with the radically free market ideology (Szczerbiak 2020). The party showed its ability to surpass *PiS* from the right flank and succeeded in forcing *PiS* to radicalize its message. *PiS* in its attempts to eradicate all the possible actors on its right side of the political spectrum resorts to radical discourse without any direct references to *Confederation* and at the same time uses ideologically friendly public and private media for direct attacks on the political grouping. On the other hand, *PiS* is one of the most criticized parties by *Confederation* which strives to undermine *PiS* right-wing

<sup>2</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

<sup>3</sup> United Right is a conservative political alliance in Poland between PiS, United Poland and the Agreement.

identity and collect support from the groups of *PiS* supporters disappointed with the policies of the incumbents.

In general, the campaign for the 2019 general elections was a somewhat peculiar one, as the parties seem to have mostly focused on increasing voters' turnout rather than competing with each other (Kozłowska 2019). International observers reported on the media bias and intolerant rhetoric in the campaign (ODIHR 2019). This trend has been noticed in many indices of freedom and democracy<sup>4</sup> and is to large extent triggered by the breadth and significance of changes in the media system. Indeed, the institutional aspects of the media system in Poland have changed since *PiS* came to power in 2015. It's important to note however that the party strengthened certain tendencies already present in the Polish media system. A system that resembled a polarized pluralist model, characterized by political parallelism, high level of politicization of public media by the government and political parties and commentary-oriented journalism with the clear ideological divisions between various media outlets (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012). Moreover, the political control over media had significantly increased with the amendments of the media law which transformed public media into the mouthpiece of the government. In late 2020, *PiS* adopted an amendment which allowed to terminate the contracts of the members of management and supervisory boards of the Polish Television and the Polish Radio. Already in 2016, the Parliament created a new state organ, National Media Council which took a lot of the constitutional prerogatives of National Broadcasting Council (*KRRiTV*). In the years that followed one could observe the increasing partisanship of public television and radio. The imbalance of the public service media affects also the visibility of political actors. Consequently, there is a significant difference in the amount of time in the public media devoted to *PiS* in comparison to other political actors. For example, according to the research conducted by *KRRiT PiS* was afforded 59 percent of airtime and opposition *CO* only 16 percent (mk 2016). Another study conducted before 2019 elections confirmed extreme imbalance of public television in respect of fairness ("almost complete lack of criticism towards *PiS* and complete negation of the opposition"). In the flagship news bulletin of *TVP* pro-government opinions were represented three times more often than other opinions (Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie 2019). The same results were brought by the close monitoring of *TVP* before the 2020 presidential elections (Kozielski 2020). Further, more than two hundred employees of public broadcasters were fired and exchanged for employees charged with the task to produce support for the government and depreciate the opposition and other actors opposing the incumbents and their policies.

All the above-mentioned changes which led to the actual public media capture by the government of the *United Right* contributed to the radical polarization of the media system. Although Poland still has a diverse media landscape, political changes also affected private broadcasters. First, a number of private media (particularly the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Electoral Newspaper*) with the biggest circulation and influential TV channel *TVN* were consistently attacked by state media and *PiS* officials quoted in their programmes. Secondly, state-owned companies ceased to buy advertisements in critical media. At the same time the advertising revenues improved significantly the situation of right-wing publication. For example, two liberal journals

<sup>4</sup> Including Freedom House which since 2020 classifies Poland as semi-consolidated democracy.

*Newsweek* and *Polityka*, experienced a fall in their advertisements revenues by 7.9 percent and 14.6 percent, respectively, between June 2015 and June 2016. At the same time, advertisement revenues rose at right wing weeklies *Do Rzeczy* (14.4 percent) and *wSieci* (38.5 percent) (Goczał 2016). In other words, revenues were reallocated to the media loyal to the ruling party. Thirdly, the access to the information became more difficult, journalists have reported troubles with collecting the information as politicians and institutions controlled by them limited access to sources of information for the critical media using favourable public service media or social media instead (Chapman 2017). Ultimately, in December 2020 Orlen, a state-controlled energy company announced the acquisition of a media company *Polska Press* with more than 20 regional dailies, 120 weekly magazines and 500 online portals across the country (Czuchnowski 2021). Importantly, the incumbent party occasionally expressed its will to control the online sphere claiming that companies such as FB are limiting the freedom of speech, as we discuss further.

### The Polish media landscape

The media in Poland have become deeply polarised due to the media policy of *PiS* party supporting institutionally and financially pro-government media and attacking critical media with a wide range of means, including article 212 of criminal code – under which journalists can be sent to prison for defamation. Media reform seems to be one of the efforts to “repolonise” and “deconcentrate” the media market (IPI 2021). In the social media field, the Ministry of Justice has published a draft act on freedom of speech on social media platforms in February 2021. The draft act envisages establishment of the so-called Freedom of Speech Council, which would safeguard the constitutional freedom of expression on social networking sites as understood by the Government. The Ministry of Digital Affairs and FB signed an agreement on the appeal procedure against content blocked on the website in 2018. The draft act also provides that if a website blocks an account or deletes a certain entry, even though its content does not violate/infringe upon the law, the user will be able to lodge a complaint with the service provider. Simultaneously, the government is working on legislation aimed at exerting control over online content and allowing the government to intervene in removing such content or blocking access to such websites (Gad-Nowak and Wnukowski 2021). Moreover, a group of right-wing activists affiliated with the *PiS*-friendly weekly *Gazeta Polska* has launched a local version of FB called *Albicla*. The founders mentioned a concern over the dominance of US social media companies and their impact on free speech as reasons for their move (Inotai and Ciobanu 2021).

Indeed, online sources and television are the most important sources of news locally. There is a growing importance of social media as a dominant source of information which enjoyed a steady increase from 84% in 2015 to 87% in 2020. Television as a source of news occupies second position as it dropped from 81% in 2015 to 75% in 2020. Interestingly there was a steep increase of social media as a source of information from 52% in 2015 to 66% in 2020. The smartphone became more important than computers in respect of devices used for accessing news for the first time. As to the online media, internet user penetration rate increased from 2015 to 2020. The rate of people with access to the internet increased and reached 84.9 percent in 2019 with

the largest group of internet users aged 16 to 44 (Statista 2020). Importantly for our study, there were 19 million social media users in Poland in January 2020 and this group increased by 7.8% between April 2019 and January 2020. The social media penetration was at the level of 50% in January 2020 (Kemp 2020). Moreover, the most popular and engaging social media platform for Poland is FB. Also, it overtakes other types of social media and messaging platforms in respect of news consumption.

**Table 1:** Social Media Consumption in Poland

Rank Brand	For News	For All
1. Facebook	65% (+4)	83%
2. YouTube	36% (-3)	75%
3. Facebook Messenger	24% (+2)	73%
4. Instagram	12% (+3)	34%
5. Twitter	11% (+1)	21%
6. WhatsApp	10% (+1)	31%

Source: Reuters 2020

Interestingly, trust in news has declined by three percent since 2019 and remains at the level of 46%. It seems that the growing belief of the radical bias of the public media pushes people towards private media or online media. These sources score higher in terms of trust than the public service broadcaster *TVP* perceived as a mouthpiece of the government. Despite significant advertisement revenues from state-controlled companies, conservative media are failing to increase audience or trust (Makarenko 2020). It does not mean however, that conservative media are not trusted at all or their trust stays at the very low level. The polarization of the media system entails rather the strong division between those trusting and not trusting the specific media outlets. „*Gazeta Polska*”, right wing weekly explicitly supporting the government provides a very interesting example of this polarization with 43% of trusting respondents and 31% not trusting its reporting (Reuters 2020).

The above-mentioned trends in media consumption, political parallelism of the media system and growing polarization are perfectly reflected in the behaviour of two parties under scrutiny. First, *PiS* was able to skilfully use social media yet during the 2015 parliamentary and presidential campaign and change the image of the traditional, conservative and technologically backward party. The success in the social media was the result of the deliberate strategy to credit the online campaign to the “zealous team of *PiS* supporters in their 20s” (Chapman 2017). *PiS* was more active, able to mobilize more supporters and produce more activity on its social media profiles than the biggest oppositional party, liberal *CO* (Chapman 2017; Chapman and Cienski 2015). In the subsequent years the media strategies were two-pronged. On the one hand *PiS* directed its messages to the older groups of the electorate through public media generously financed from the budget, on the other, it targeted the younger voters through the messages and

paid advertisements in social media (Wanat 2019; Mierzyńska 2019). Paradoxically, the radical pro-*PiS* bias of public media which led to silencing any information about *Confederation* or strong attacks on the grouping from all pro-*PiS* media strengthened the credentials of the party as the excluded and real anti-establishment force persecuted by the elites. Moreover, it pushed the party to focus its communication strategy on social media. Accordingly, in terms of the level of interactivity and fans on FB *Confederation* is one of the most prominent political forces in social media. Its profile is liked by 476,000 fans, outdoing bigger and much more politically relevant *PiS* (287,000) or *Civic Platform* (251,000). It should be noted that contrary to the 2019 EP election campaign when the party promoted anti-Semitic and homophobic messages, the party significantly moderated its discourse before the October 2019 parliamentary elections and 2020 presidential elections (Sitnicka 2019). While the election-related campaign was harsh, monitoring of FB pages of politicians, parties, traditional media, and influencers did not reveal any posts which would contain problematic speech or disinformation. Political parties used FB mainly to mobilize their voters (Lech et al. 2019). Interestingly, while political parties did not use microtargeting techniques at large scale in 2019 general elections, at the same time, widely-defined audiences paired with small ad budgets might suggest that there was a role of FB algorithms in optimising political ad delivery (Iwańska et al. 2019).

As mentioned, the aim of this article is to analyse the type and other aspects of media links shared by FB profiles of these two populist actors. The sample covers four periods, three standard periods adopted for the analysis of other cases of this special issue plus an additional period preceding 2019 parliamentary elections (13 September 2019-13 October). Before doing so, some overview of previous research in related areas is useful.

## Research Review

This review is focused primarily on the communication aspects of populism on social media. Stepinska, Lipinski, Piontek and Hess (2020) summarized that most of the Polish scholarship on populism published between 1990 and 2015 might be categorized as either theoretical considerations on populism or thoughts as to why certain political parties or leaders in Poland should be categorized as populist. One of the few such studies was the analysis of the content of electoral programs and parliamentary reports conducted by Przyłecki (2012), who examined the electoral platforms of major political parties as well as selected statements made by politicians during debates in the lower house of the Polish parliament. Since that time, local studies about populist actors have been predominantly focused on communications aspects, while less attention has been focused on relations between the media and populism, or on the effects of populist political communication on citizens. For example, Klupal (2019) found that Polish parties mostly used their FB as a channel informing about other party activities, rather than as a tool to mobilize their supporters in the 2011 and 2015 general election campaign in Poland. Interestingly, five days of FB monitoring before 2015 elections suggested that traditional parties, including the two dominant ones, *PiS* and *PO*, were the ones with the highest FB activity while the challengers clearly did not put as much effort into this campaign channel. Finally, the parties used FB as an infor-

mation channel (Štetka, Surowiec, Mazák 2018). Similarly, a study by Batorski & Grzywińska (2018) found that only a small fraction of FB users was active in public political discussions that took place on political pages of FB (structural dimension) in 2013 and 2015. However, the level of engagement depended on the political events taking place within the public sphere offline, and whether there was an electoral campaign or not. Parties and politicians that were visible in traditional media were also attracting active fans in social media (representational dimension). Nonetheless, non-parliamentary groups had more active fans than would result only from their popularity in mainstream media. Finally, the online public on FB was fragmented and clustered into homogenous political groups (interactional dimension), thus supporting the hypothesis of ‘echo chambers’ (Sawicka 2019).

Moreover, more recent publications on populism in Poland offer not only empirical evidence on the presence of a populist style in messages disseminated by political actors, but also an insight into the media’s role in fostering populism (Stepinska 2020). Among the conditions strengthening the populist actors one can point at inconsistency of voting behavior and lack of partisan links with political parties, and a consequent availability of the electorate for new political parties, the ideological incoherence and anti-political attitudes (Lipinski and Stepinska 2019). Moreover, there are some facilitating factors at the level of media system. First, a strong position of the tabloid newspaper *Fakt* in the Polish media market provides favourable conditions for disseminating messages including indicators of populist style. Second, a strong polarization of the political scene alongside a high level of political parallelism of the Polish media system. Third, a journalistic culture that highly values interventionism and a critical attitude towards those in power provides a space for not only covering populist statements by the media, but also originating such messages by journalists themselves (Stepinska, Lipiński, Piontek, Hess 2020, p.211).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the politician with the biggest FB user engagement in Poland in November 2020 was Rafał Trzaskowski (Mayor of Warsaw, 2019 presidential candidate with support of opposition parties) with 157 thousand total engagement. Following Trzaskowski were Robert Biedroń (LGBT activist who has been serving as a Member of the European Parliament since 2019) and Szymon Hołownia (journalist, television personality, writer, publicist, politician and humanitarian activist).<sup>5</sup>

### **Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leaders**

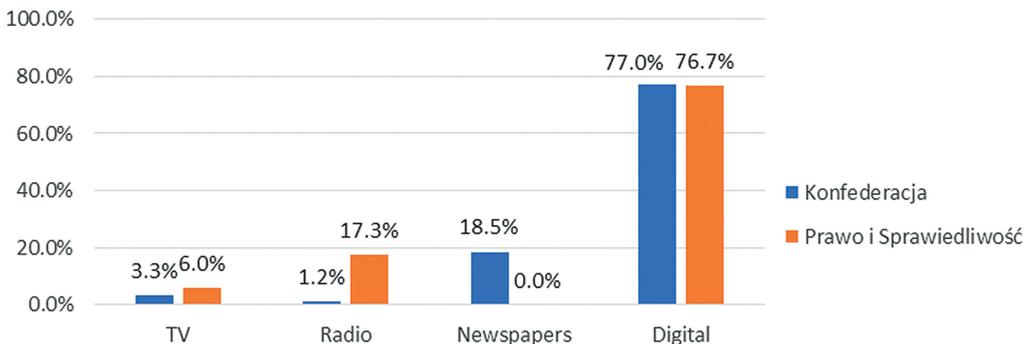
In this part we study the types of media sources that seem to be by and large preferred by populists. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to figure out what type of media sources seemed to be preferred as well as ignored by populists. The analysis was carried out on FB data downloaded using the CrowdTangle app developed by FB (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1036942/most-engaging-politicians-facebook-poland/>

## Classification of sources shared by populist groupings

As regards the type of media sources, the analysis of the media links posted on FB allows detecting very clear tendencies. In both cases, the preferred source of information were digital sources which were used at the same level by *PiS* and *Confederation* (77%). The rest of the sources were relatively marginal in comparison to digital sources. Even though the links to these media were relatively insignificant one can still discern a few differences between the analysed profiles. First, TV was the least often linked media outlet for *PiS* and radio for *Confederation*, respectively. However, *Confederation* used quite often newspapers' links while *PiS* relied on radio sources. Apparently, *PiS* decided to follow a two-pronged strategy, targeting the older segments of the electorate through radio and younger cohorts through social media. Secondly, *PiS* did not post any links to newspapers despite the number of print media explicitly supporting the party, with its politicians having an important voice in these media either as permanent authors or in the role of interviewees. Thirdly, *PiS*'s profile was relatively the most diversified in respect of the media types. It posted links to almost types of the media, whenever there was any information on the grouping or its leaders involved or information or whenever the information was in line with the party agenda. It was in line with the recent literature on media and populism emphasizing the affirmative usage of traditional media to support its own agenda despite the frequently radical criticism of the mainstream media (Haller and Holt 2019). Finally, all the linked media were national or mixed, there were no links to European/supranational media.

Figure 1: Types of sources

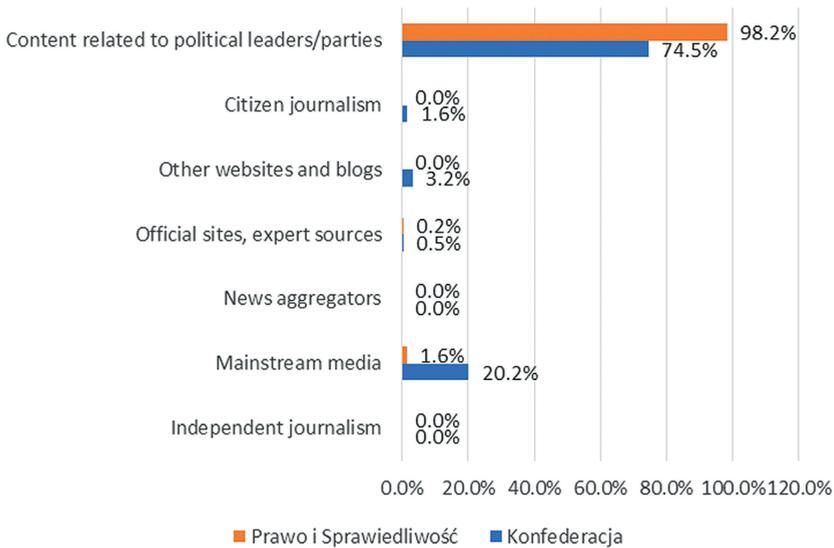


Source: Own compilation

The analysis of the types of digital sources revealed very clear patterns. Virtually none of the profiles shared official or expert sources. Only in case of *Confederation* the website devoted entirely to economic issues was linked once. *Confederation* was also more willing to post links to news websites more frequently (20%) in comparison to *PiS* (2%). It included mainstream news websites like *natemat.pl* or *wp.pl*. Moreover, *Confederation* incidentally posted links to other websites which were opinion websites or blogs promoting radical right views or being in line with Russian propaganda like *konserwatyzm.pl* or *kresy.pl* or citizen journalism (for example,

radical right *medianarodowe.pl*). However, the overwhelming majority of links were websites and social media accounts of *Confederation* and *PiS*, their individual politicians or YouTube materials produced by these two groupings (75% and 98%, respectively). It is clear that the social media and websites of these two groupings create separate bubbles which mutually reinforce their messages inside and support each other.

Figure 2. Types of digital sources

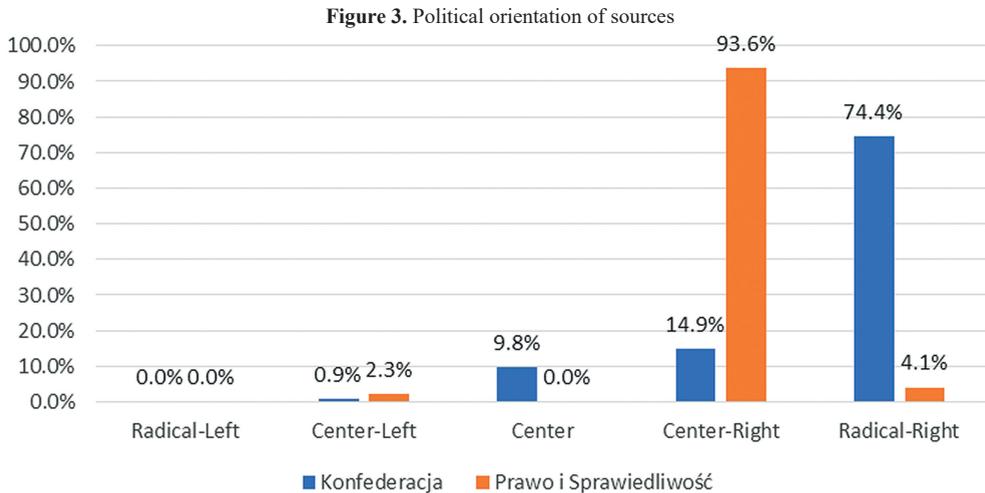


Source: Own compilation

Among the media which were systematically ignored and very rarely linked to were left and liberal media representing the mainstream of the public debate like newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, weekly *Polityka* or TV channel *TVN*. Interestingly, it is the *Confederation* that introduced more variety of media types on its profile, rather than *PiS*, strongly focused on its own social media environment. Current research notices frequently traditional, non-interactive usage of social media by populists (for example: Grill 2016, 92; Waisbord, Amado 2017, 1337). Virtual lack of links to citizen journalism or blogs in the Polish sample provides additional contribution to these findings.

The political orientation of the shared sources reflects the inclination of populist parties and their coalitions to promote right wing discourses (Figure 3). Moreover, it reflects the ideological difference between *PiS* and *Confederation*, where *PiS* as a large party oriented towards centre represents centre right and *Confederation* represents radical right. One has to remember however that both parties, but *PiS* in particular, in order to capture the support of specific segments of the electorate strategically shifted between centre and the margins on the ideological field. In general, however, the references to the media classified as centre right constitute 94% of *PiS* sample and 15% of *Confederation* sample. (but 74 % for radical right) One can find more ideological

diversity and some sources which can't be classified on the left-right axis on *Confederation* profile. For example, *Confederation* posted links to the centre-left media (2%), centre (8%), centre right (15%), whereas PiS did so only to centre left (2%) and incidentally to the radical right (*wpolityce.pl* – website supporting PiS with very radical, Eurosceptic, anti-gender, ideological leanings).



Source: Own compilation

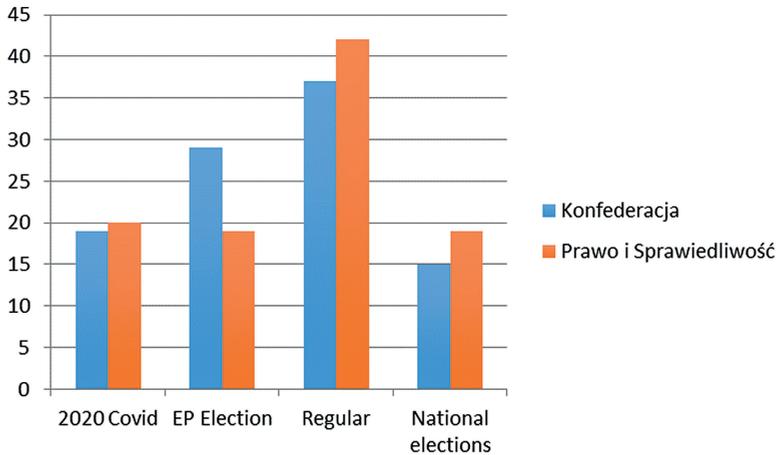
Next, we studied differences between the different populist leaders/parties in their media preferences. In particular, we were interested to learn to what extent did they draw on the same media sources and/or share sources connected with each other's profile/party.

The analyzed profiles referred to a total number of 60 sources. Around 10% (7 sources) were common to both profiles, including FB. These were mostly mainstream media of diverse types (news websites, YouTube, radio, TV) and left, centre and centre right ideological leanings. The most important difference between two profiles is the number of unique sources, 17 for PiS and 36 for *Confederation* confirming again the bigger differentiation of the radical right's profile. Secondly, a significant number of the unique sources referred to by PiS profile is constituted by public media supporting the party. Thirdly, *Confederation* referred to the radical right-wing media which were not mentioned by PiS, but also to a number of websites focused on economic issues. That reflects not only radical right but also neoliberal ideological agenda of one of the groups constituting *Confederation*.

The analysis of the distribution of the links to the media across four sampled periods does not reveal significant differences among them (Figure 4). Contrary to the expectation the number of sources in the regular period was higher than in the electoral period. The difference is relatively moderate in *Confederation* and more visible in case of PiS. As regards *Confederation*, the sources posted during the regular period constituted 37% of all the sources whereas in the national election period and COVID-19 pandemic period 15% and 19% respectively. The numbers were

higher (29%) in the EP elections period. These figures were even more differentiated across analyzed periods in case of *PiS*. Here, the number of posted sources in the regular period is twice as high (42%) as from the other three periods.

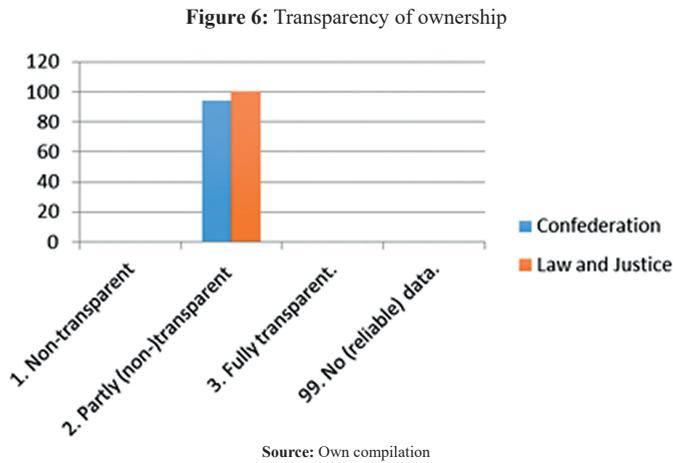
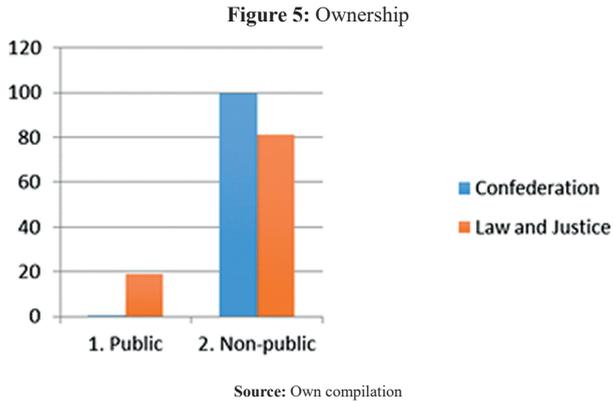
Figure 4: Distribution of sources across sampled periods



Source: Own compilation

In the majority of cases, both profiles used non-public sources. There is however, a difference between *PiS* and *Confederation* profiles. As regards *PiS*, links to public media constituted 20% of all the links whereas in case of *Confederation* its accounts were only for 0,4%. As mentioned before, subjugation of the public media by *PiS* led to their extreme bias towards the governing party. Consequently, public media were particularly important for *PiS*, providing the favourable space to promote its agenda and systematically criticizing or silencing the opponents. Accordingly, the reluctance of *Confederation* towards public media resulted from their negative representation or, most frequently, complete silencing. Another reason for the high presence of non-public media is the domination of digital sources, mainly FB accounts of individuals, parties or discussion groups.

As far as the transparency of ownership is concerned, Polish situation represents partly non-transparent case. According to Klimkiewicz (2017: 8), this situation results from two factors. First, changes in the media ownership are fast and continuous. Second, there is no aggregating register which would provide complete data about media ownership in one place. Accordingly, additional effort is needed to collect relevant information. In the analyzed case in the *PiS* the entire sample represents only partially transparent information on the ownership of the specific media outlet. In case of *Confederation* it was 94 %, as there were some media outlets which are non-transparent or there is no reliable data. For example, there is no reliable data on some extreme right websites promoting anti-Semitic, xenophobic, homophobic, and most recently anti-vaccination messages (for example: *narodowcy* or *Media narodowe*).



The procedures of registration in Poland are quite strict. According to the article 20 of the Press Law there are only two formats (newspapers and magazines) which are required to register in court. Nevertheless, Polish courts frequently assume that online outlets fulfilling criteria stipulated in the Press Law should automatically be classified as newspapers or magazines and registered. Consequently, as there is no official register, the coding of the analyzed sample was based on the assumption that besides social media the rest of the media outlets linked to by two populist profiles under analysis are registered. Accordingly, 27% of *PiS* and 28% of *Confederation* were seen as registered and 73% and 72% non-registered for the respective political actors. In the case of *Confederation* there are some marginal cases where the information is difficult to obtain.



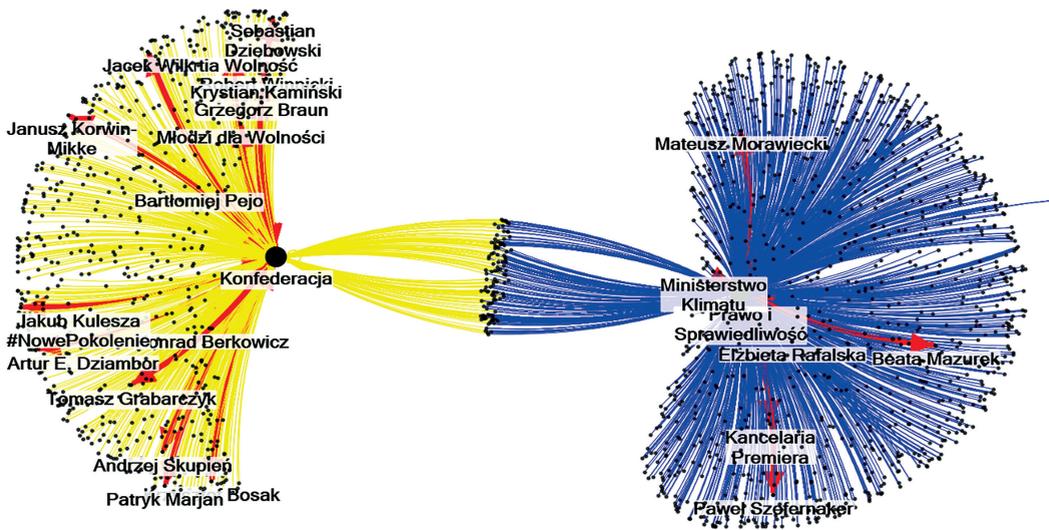
Source: Own compilation

## Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between different pages. Third, the degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing.

A disproportion was found between the two profiles in terms of network reciprocity which reflects the relevance, structure of political organization and social embeddedness of the two political actors under consideration. Moreover, both parties were embedded in two almost separate bubbles which are linked together by a very limited set of sources being shared by and shared mutually by two profiles. They stay in reciprocal relations mostly with their own separated structures, organizations, politicians or FB discussion groups. In the period under consideration 143 pages shared *Confederation* profile and 277 shared *PiS* profile. The discrepancy between profiles is even bigger in terms of the number of posts sharing *PiS* profile, with 1963 posts for *Confederation* and 5784 posts for *PiS*. In both cases the type of FB pages sharing two actors profiles were profiles of the local branches of party organization from specific geographical locations (for example: *PiS Piekary Śląskie*, *PiS, Piotrków Trybunalski*), local branches of the organizations constituting *Confederation* (*Ruch Narodowy Starachowice*, *Wolność Kłobuck*), youth organizations (*Młodzi dla Wolności*, *Forum Młododych PiS Konin*), party politicians (Beata Mazurek, Janusz Korwin-Mikke) or even public institutions (Ministry of Health /*Ministerstwo Zdrowia*) or public media (*TVP*) in case of *PiS*. Importantly, among the accounts sharing *Confederation's* posts were extreme right profiles of individuals (S. Michalkiewicz) or discussion groups (*Polska to MY Rdzenni Polacy nigdy goście !!*, *Nie dla obcej dominacji w Polsce*, *Polonizacja*, *Polscy patrioci*, *Polska a nie Polin*) confirming, disseminating and articulating with other ideological elements the radical agenda of this grouping.

Figure 8: Facebook Populist Network in Poland



Source: Marincea, 2020

## Network Centrality

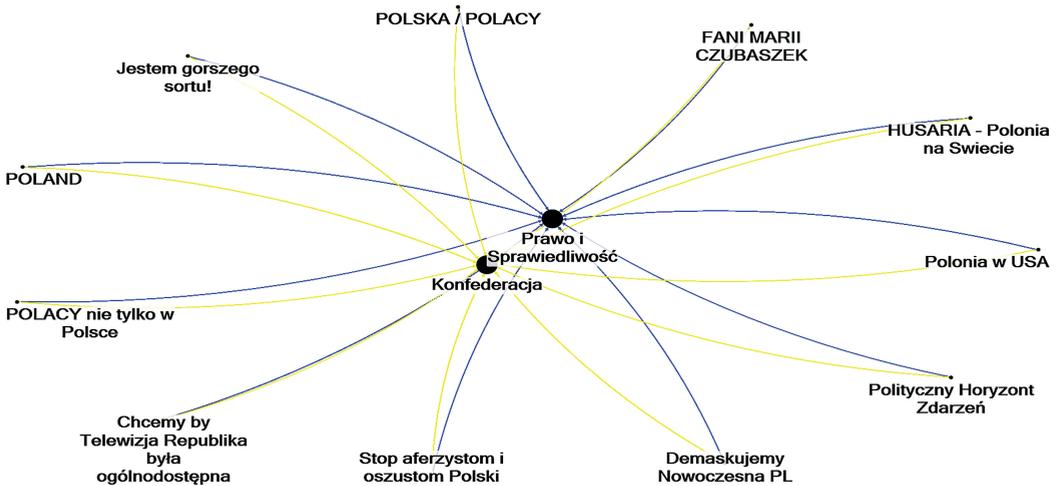
We examined here the number of FB pages that shared each of the two profiles at least 10 times. Further, we analyzed which were the main disseminators for each of the two (by biggest number of shares) and how equally or disproportionately they shared each of them. Finally, we examined these pages in terms of their type, ownership, registration, political orientation etc.

There were only 11 FB pages which shared both profiles under analysis in the periods under consideration. Interestingly, although *PiS* has more widespread network than *Confederation*, the FB pages shared by both parties were posting material from *Confederation* profiles almost twice as frequently as *PiS* posts (243 and 133). These FB pages are public or closed discussion and fan groups. At least four provide a platform for the Polish diaspora living abroad, which is explicitly stated in the name of one group (*Polonia w USA*). At least eight of them more or less frequently promote radical right agenda close to *Confederation*, expressing xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, but also very strong Ukrainophobia what might indicate Russian influences emphasized by the analysts following radical right social media (Mierzyńska 2018). Interestingly, one of the pages is a fan page of Polish writer and satirist Maria Czubaszek, and another one (*Jestem gorszego sortu!*) provides a platform for disseminating oppositional, anti-*PiS* propaganda.

**Table 2:** Most central FB pages (shared at least 5 times each)

	POLAND
1.	Stop aferzystom i oszustom Polski
2.	Polonia w USA
3.	POLSKA / POLACY
4.	Jestem gorszego sortu!
5.	Chcemy by Telewizja Republika była ogólnodostępna
6.	Demaskujemy Nowoczesna PL
7.	HUSARIA – Polonia na Swiecie
8.	POLACY nie tylko w Polsce
9.	Polityczny Horyzont Zdarzeń
10.	FANI MARIII CZUBASZEK

Source: Marincea, 2020

**Figure 9:** Most central FB pages (shared at least 5 times each)

Source: Marincea, 2020

## Conclusions

The two political profiles constitute separate spheres connected together through a very narrow number of FB pages. That reflects the polarized character of Polish public sphere and strong

divisions on the right side of the political spectrum. Despite radicalisation of *PiS* agenda and populist language of communication *PiS* network does not contain most radical or extremist pages. On the other hand, the much smaller and definitely less politically relevant *Confederation* uses all the opportunities to inform about its agenda and disseminate the messages about other media and groups disseminating its agenda. Secondly, in both cases, the preferred source of information were digital sources which were used at almost the same level by *PiS* and *Confederation*, but the latter one refers to the much more diversified sources than *PiS*. It might be explained by the fact that *Confederation* had to use every opportunity to present its messages, contrary to *PiS* which can always count on public media. Interestingly, in line with the tendencies in the Polish society, TV as a source does not constitute a very important part of the sample. Thirdly, references to citizen journalism were not important at all. Fourthly, two groupings were embedded in the network of the local branches of parties and party members mainly. In case of *Confederation* there is some leaning towards more spontaneous grassroots fan groups or FB discussion groups which share much more extreme content than the party itself. That allowed the party to move strategically from the radical position towards a more moderate stance, what was noticeable particularly well during the 2019 parliamentary elections.

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## **Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Populist Leaders and Populist Parties in Slovakia**

The case study undergoes an analysis of the Facebook (FB) activity of two Slovak populist entities, one lead by Boris Kollár and *OLaNO* movement. The aim was to explore whether and how they construct a populist network and draw on media sources that are out of the mainstream or associated with a populist style. Both selected entities were highly active and quite successful in their communication on FB throughout most of the last five years at least. The study finds that these entities publish sources and connect with other FB pages that mostly confirm their parties' positions and alliances. Yet there was no preference for alternative sources, understood as disseminating hyper-partisan or fake news and hoaxes, often associated with populist parties. Rather, *OLaNO* had some reciprocity in media visibility with mainstream liberal media, in the sense that the party drew on liberal mainstream sources, which also covered the parties' activities. In sharing posts, Boris Kollár had the most intensive dissemination network, while movements *WAF* and *OLaNO* were very similar in terms of size of their network. There was a rather low cross-promotion. *OLaNO* supporters were more appreciative of the efforts made by murdered journalist Ján Kuciak, and showed a stronger focus against *Smer-SD* (Direction-Social Democracy). In contrast, Kollár was associated more with pro-Christian, national and social rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Populism, *OLaNO*, *Sme rodina*, Facebook, Slovakia, network analysis, social media

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and networking on this social platform by selected populist leaders and populist parties. The study has two analytical parts. In the first part, it provides a classification of sources shared or ignored by populist

<sup>1</sup> The data was coded by two Slovak coders – Viera Žúborová and Lubica Adamcová and then checked and an agreement was reached between the two coders. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

leaders and their parties in Slovakia in two selected periods in 2020. It focused on differences between the selected populist leaders/parties as reflected in their preferences of media sources. Furthermore, it asks to what extent populist parties and their leaders drew on the same media sources and/or shared sources connected with each other's profile/party.

Previous research has suggested that FB was used simply as one of many communication channels. This could be seen in the frequent usage of sources by political parties in Slovakia on FB. Significantly, a study from August 2016 showed that the parties most often linked articles in the media, blogs, and own online contributions (198), followed by pictures (122) and increasingly more popular videos (69) (Rózsa 2016). The least frequently linked were textual messages in the form of FB status. Zagrapan (2016) also identified that already between 2012 and 2014 the parties shared with priority legacy media sources, but also ideologically close parties and associations, including blogs of non-party members. In this way, these associations served as confirmation of parties' claims or attitudes.

In the second part, this case study engages in network analysis of sources that shared populist leaders' posts. This analysis follows findings from a research that argues that there is no correlation between number of fans and party preferences in polls. What matters most is communication interaction or as it is called, engagement (Rózsa 2016). If the first part of the analysis is limited to two Slovak political actors, Boris Kollár and *OLaNO – Ordinary People and Independent Personalities*)<sup>2</sup>, the network analysis in the second part also includes the movement led by Kollár – *We are a Family (WAF)*<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, for the purpose of our research we selected the FB profile of a populist leader (Boris Kollár) and movement/party of another populist leader, Igor Matovič – who does not have an up-to-date public page, but only a private account. The selected party was *OLaNO*. Boris Kollár was leader of *WAF*. While until general elections in February 2020 Matovič (with private FB profile only) was less popular than his movement, in case of Boris Kollár and *WAF* it was the opposite: Kollár was more popular than his party on FB.

Regardless of this difference, both parties/movements and their leaders showed a high level of populism. According to the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset, *OLaNO* showed 7 degrees magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale, while *WAF* showed 7.8 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale (key indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism).<sup>4</sup> Both parties and their leaders (Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár respectively) just happened to move from their long-term role in opposition to being members of the government or in executive positions (as the Prime Minister or Speaker of the Parliament

<sup>2</sup> The full name is OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti, NOVA, Kresťanská únia, ZMENA ZDOLA. It has changed its name three times since its founding. This change reflects legal requirements of electoral law in case of coalitions.

<sup>3</sup> In Slovak, the name of the party is Sme rodina, which would be abbreviated as „SR“. There is no established local abbreviation for Sme rodina, and occasionally used foreign abbreviation „SR“ does not seem to be clear enough, considering that in the Slovak language, „SR“ is the abbreviation of the official name of the state. So we used the English abbreviation instead – WAF.

<sup>4</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>, see more in Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove, “Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (POPPA)”, (2020) <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>, Harvard Dataverse.

respectively, since March 2020). Thus, the key research questions are even more relevant: do they “like” alternative or any other (mainstream) media on their FB pages and what are their networks on FB?

Moreover, the selection of these two parties for further analysis was also relevant from the perspective of social media use in political communication. *OLaNO* had the highest number (3,201,755) of all types of interactions on FB among political parties throughout 2020. *WAF* was third in the number of interactions (1,102,550), the second place was occupied by *Smer-SD* (1,232,700). Even more impressive was the total number of interactions of Igor Matovič in 2020 – 6,370,753 – more than all other members of the Cabinet combined (Tóth 2021). Similarly, the highest engagement of the followers during 2019 campaign to the European Parliament was recorded on the FB page of *OLaNO* (52,000), followed by *WAF* (29,000). Similarly, the highest number of posts on FB was presented by *OLaNO* (129), followed by *WAF* (88) (Oravcová, Plenta and Vicenova 2019). Both parties were among the first (*OLaNO*) or third (*WAF*) most popular parties on FB based on interactions during the six weeks of campaign before 2020 general elections (Klingová *et al.*, 2020). *Smer-SD* was the second most popular party on FB. However, *OLaNO* was the clear leader, having about the same popularity on FB as the three following political parties combined. *WAF* published 22 times more contributions on FB than on its website during the official 2019 election campaign before elections to the EP (Struhár, 2019).

For further analysis, we followed a common theoretical-methodological approach described in a separate chapter. Before going into the analysis, we deemed it necessary to have an overview of previous local research on populism and political communication in the country.

## Research Review

There is no specific research on this topic but there are quite many studies that tackle aspects of parties’ political communication on social media. We provide an overview of the most relevant studies. Major political parties started to join FB around 2009 (Bardovič 2018). The general use of social media by political parties could be noticed for the first time before 2010 general elections when all parties used at least some social media. In general, the first time social media played an important electoral role in Slovakia was in the 2016 parliamentary elections according to sociologist Slosiarik<sup>5</sup>. Before that, during the 2012 – 2014 period, the online communication strategy of political parties was rather one sided. Political parties mostly just released some information that was further disseminated on communication channels. Among the most interactive on FB were *Freedom and Solidarity* (Slovak: *Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS*) and *OLaNO*.

There were two dominant tools of communication and information dissemination – party websites and FB, with secondary roles of YouTube and Twitter (Zagrapan 2016). The FB pages of parties were used mostly to reach the desired audience (Zagrapan 2019). In retrospect, the most successful trend in FB activities could be noticed in case of *OLaNO*, while *WAF* was atypical with rather rapid initial increase of its followers. *WAF* used the FB following of its founder,

<sup>5</sup> *Sme*, December 31, 2016, p.2.

Boris Kollár, before the 2016 general elections. Communication activities of the *Kotleba – People’s Party—Our Slovakia (LSNS)* were the most often analysed by local scholars. *LSNS* was well represented on FB, with many FB pages for local branches, allowing the quick promotion of any party activity on a local and micro-local level (Zagraban 2019). The *LSNS* party utilized the politics of “Othering” through dissemination of populist and nativist frames, while using FB for self-organization between 2013 and 2015. Its discourse was spread through networks of active fans (Kluknavská & Hruška 2019). *LSNS* used the FB profile primarily for the presentation and promotion of Marián Kotleba, the chairman of the party, as a candidate for president in the upcoming 2018 elections. Identically, Bardovič (2018) found that the communication of *LSNS* was directed significantly onto the leader and is realized through the regional, district or fan pages of *LSNS*. Only a few MPs of *LSNS* have individual profiles or pages on social network sites. It should be mentioned that FB blocked key pages of *LSNS* already in 2017.<sup>6</sup> This was the only party that faced these communication challenges repeatedly.

Content-wise, *Smer-SD*, *Most-Hid* and *SaS* used FB profiles more intensively for reflection of their sectoral interests before the 2016 general elections. Communication of the *SaS* political party was characterised by a focus on criticising the government coalition, particularly *Smer-SD* and the *SNS*. *Most-Hid* periodically published posts about its ministers’ activities, while *Smer-SD* was mainly trying to communicate its key political topics (Garaj 2018). *SNS* before general elections in 2016 communicated on FB less frequently than ideologically similar parties in Slovakia and Czech Republic under the same condition. *LSNS* linked information from ideologically close webs, while *SNS* prioritised own electoral theses (Filipec, Garaj, Mihálik 2018).

If we focus on popularity trends, in August 2016, *SaS* had the highest number of FB fans, followed by *LSNS* and newly established *WAF* – using Fanpage Karma (Rózsa 2016). In 2017, *SaS*, *OLANO* and *WAF* were the most popular parties on FB, with growing online popularity of the latter two parties (Tím Digitálka 2017). In 2018, *SaS*, *OLANO* and *WAF* had the highest number of “likes” on FB while *LSNS*, *SaS* and *OLANO* had the highest number of subscribers on YouTube. For Instagram, the highest number of followers was held by *OLANO*, *WAF* and *SaS*, while Twitter seemed to be relevant only for *SaS* (Bardovič 2018). In general, then strongest coalition party, *Smer-SD*, had, together with its coalition partner at the time, *Most-Hid*, a rather low fan base on FB, while *SaS* with a relevant fan base did not seem to utilise this base sufficiently (Tančinová 2018).

If we consider impact, then the 2017 regional elections showed that activity on FB possibly translated to election results only in case of *OLANO* and to a lesser degree for *SaS*. Neither *WAF* nor *LSNS* profited much electorally from their activities on FB. However, this was much impacted by the type of electoral system and for example lower interest of *WAF* leader in these elections (Tím Digitálka 2017). Ďurman (2019) has shown that the most expensive campaign on FB was carried out by *Smer-SD* in 2019, while *LSNS* did not invest any money in FB campaigns. Other major parties could be in most cases located in-between these two extremes. Yet *LSNS* was relatively successful and *Smer-SD* fared much worse than four years earlier (of course, there

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.webnoviny.sk/facebook-zrejme-zablokoval-hlavnu-stranku-kotlebovcov/>

were other factors at play here, too). Murray Svidroňová, Kaščáková and Bambuseková (2019) analysed the FB pages and profiles of all 15 candidates for the post of President of the Slovak Republic in 2018. Using the Facepager tool they calculated the number and type of posts and interactions (i.e. number of likes and shares) for the candidates by calculating interaction rate. It was suggested that there is a big potential of social media use in political marketing.

Zuzana Čaputová, the winner of the elections had the highest number of “likes” and “comments”, but only the second highest number of shares. The overall FB interactions rate of the final winner in elections was only at 6-7<sup>th</sup> shared place (this means that they reached equal value). Overall, the more individual candidates added posts to their FB pages or profiles, the more their followers who engaged in the discussions became aware of them. This increased their viewership and the number of comments received on their posts as well as the post sharing itself.

Arguably, among the most successful messages during the 2020 general elections campaign disseminated via social media and which were then taken over by legacy and alternative/controversial media were two videos produced by *OLaNO*.<sup>7</sup> The first video had 1.6 million views, over 20,000 shares and about 32,000 reactions. The second video had 827,000 views, 20,000 likes and over 7,000 shares.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, it should be mentioned that a group of researchers under the name of *Katedra komunikácie* monitors performance (interactions) of politicians, political parties and state authorities profiles on FB since 2020.<sup>9</sup>

### Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leaders

In this part we focus on the classification of sources shared or ignored by populist leaders in Slovakia in two selected periods in 2020. This part includes the examination of the dominant political/ideological orientation of the media sources shared. We then compare different types of coverage by type and period: electoral versus non-electoral and event-driven versus regular coverage. Finally, we ask what role the public media played in each of these periods, compared to commercial /private sources.

#### Source type

Boris Kollár and *OLaNO* prioritized digital sources (including social media). This list included first of all FB pages, accounts or groups, irrespective of the period of posting (event or non-event intervals). The preference for digital sources was identical both for *OLaNO* (91% of

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/obycajni.ludia.a.nezavisle.osobnosti/videos/1022527271460391/>, <https://www.facebook.com/obycajni.ludia.a.nezavisle.osobnosti/videos/226224758539549/>

<sup>8</sup> Zengevald, Patrik (2020). Veľký úspech a internetový dosah za málo peňazí (The Big Success and Internet Reach for a Little Money) [online]. Available at: <https://www.startitup.sk/matovicove-vidео-z-cannes-a-cypru-priniesli-vela-hudby-za-malo-penazi-co-na-to-hovori-odbornik/>.

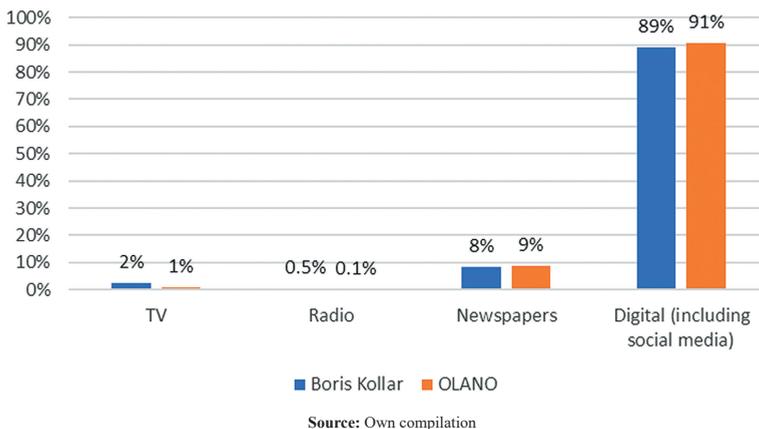
<sup>9</sup> <https://katedrakomunikacie.sk/politicky-index/>

all posts sharing a link were digital sources) as well as for Boris Kollár (89% of all posts sharing a link were digital sources).

The hierarchy of media channels was the same for both: newspapers and magazines were the second most often shared source but with big distance from digital sources (with 8% by Kollár and 9% by *OLaNO*) followed by TV channels (2% in Kollár's posts and 1% in *OLaNO*'s) and with almost total absence of radio: less than 0.5% for each.

Overall, it would seem that the diversity in terms of type of media channel, or better said lack of diversity, is surprisingly similar for both political opponents (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Diversity of channels



Another common tendency was the clear preference for FB content over other types of digital information sources. Both Boris Kollár and *OLaNO* prioritized FB sources over any other, irrespective of the period of coverage, with a similar frequency varying from over half of all posts sharing a link to over 80%, depending on the period analysed.

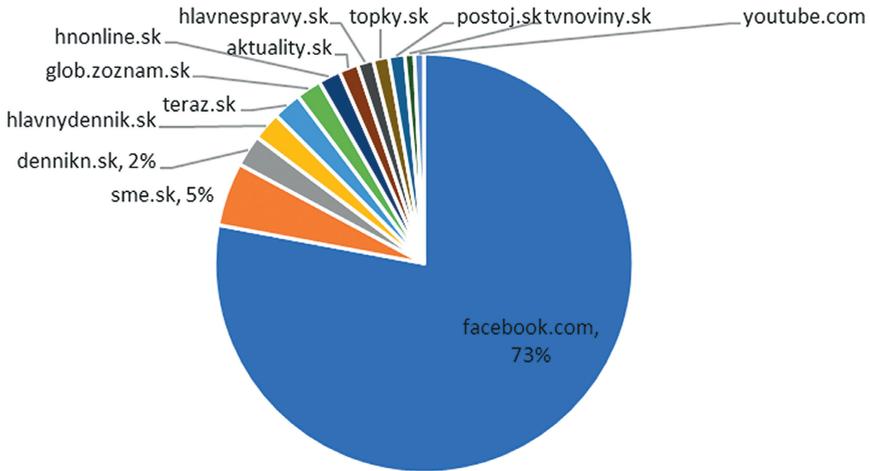
Overall, both Kollár and *OLaNO* shared FB pages in 73% of all their posts with a link. However, the diversity of sources was clearly higher in Boris Kollár's case. Despite posting a lower number of links, it was almost half compared to *OLaNO*. Among all 438 such posts, besides other FB pages, Kollár shared 39 unique sources. This was almost identical if compared to *OLaNO* – with 33 unique sources in addition to FB, out of 754 posts.

Many of the most frequently shared sources overlapped: liberal-centre newspaper and portal *sme.sk* was the second most often shared (after FB sources) by Kollár – 5% of all posts, and the 5<sup>th</sup> most shared by *OLaNO* – with 3% posts.

Then there was liberal-centre newspaper and portal *dennikn.sk* which was the 3<sup>rd</sup> most often shared media source by Kollár – 2% posts and the 3<sup>rd</sup> by *OLaNO* – 5%, respectively.

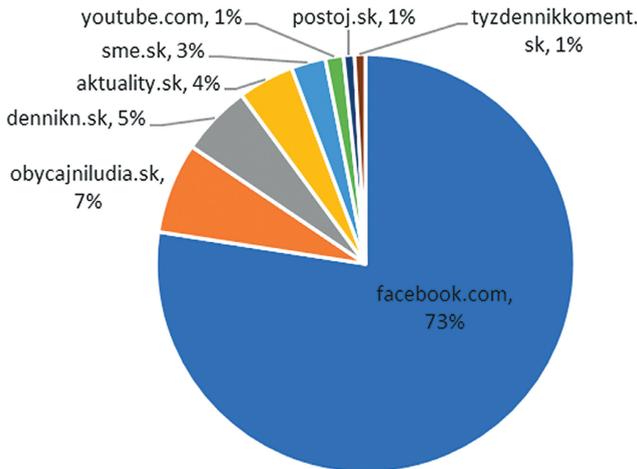
This sample was followed by online only centrist news portal with investigative team *aktuality.sk* (foreign owned) that was the 4<sup>th</sup> most shared by *OLaNO* – 4% posts, and the 8<sup>th</sup> by Kollár – in 1% of the posts. It had actually the same level of sharing as for conservative Christian news

**Figure 2:** Main sources shared by Boris Kollár (in at least 1% of all posts with a link)



Source: Own compilation

**Figure 3:** Main sources shared by OLaNO (in at least 1% of all posts with a link)



Source: Own compilation

and current affairs *postoj.sk* and *youtube.com* platform (1% each of them for each of the two political actors).

However, there were sources that only one of the two populist entities shared during the 13 months under study. The “alternative” news site *hlavnydennik.sk* was shared only by Boris Kollár, in 2% of his posts, another alternative news site *hlavnespravysk* was also shared minimally – just in 1% posts.

As for *OLaNO*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> most shared source was the party website – *obycajniludia.sk* (7% posts), which Kollár did not share (being a political adversary). There were two other examples of websites that only *OLaNO* shared, in less than 1% posts: a little known online only commentary weekly *tyzdenikkoment.sk* and centre-right business weekly website *etrend.sk*.

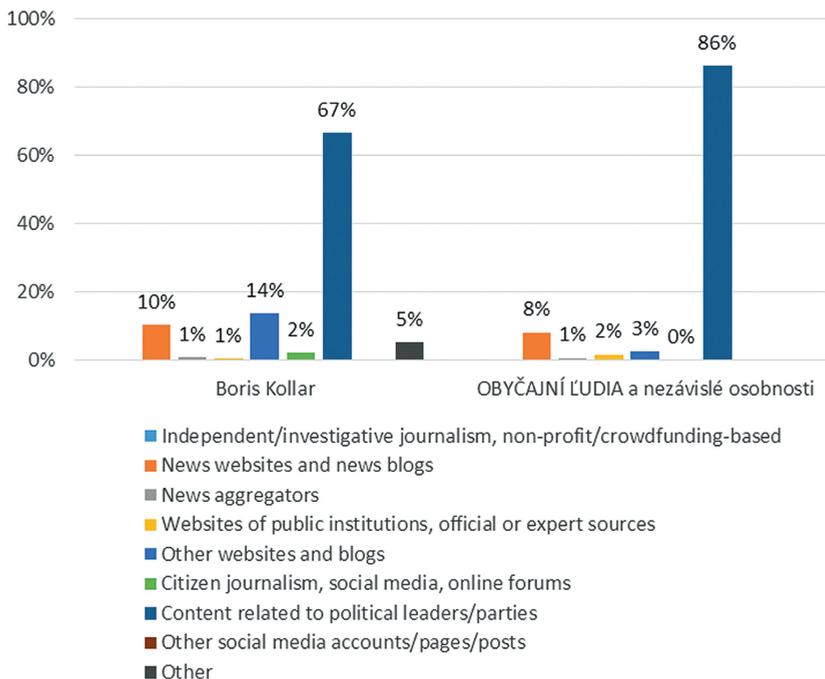
A more in-depth analysis of the *type of digital sources* shared by each analysed subject shows similarities and differences that occurred (Fig. 4). There was a clear, shared, preference for content from the political party or members of the political party of each political actor analysed. This was more pronounced for *OLaNO* – 86% of all digital sources, and less so for Boris Kollár – 67%.

The second most favourite source of digital information for both were news websites and blogs (8% Kollár, 7% *OLaNO*).

Public authorities' websites or expert sources were not very popular, not even during the COVID-19 crisis. They were almost entirely missing on Kollár's FB, and on *OLaNO* FB they made up only 1% of all posts. Nonetheless, it seems that Kollár used a higher variety of digital sources compared with *OLaNO*.

It is also important to note that in 10% of the cases (Kollár) and almost in 20% of cases (*OLaNO*) information sources did not fit the categories in the codebook, being difficult to code in a reliable way.

Figure 4: Types of digital sources shared



Source: Own compilation

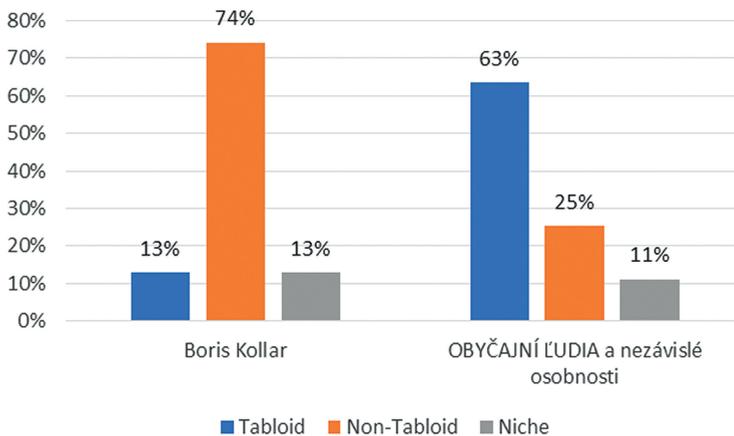
Overall, the two populist actors have used their FB pages in all three analysed periods more as a self-promotion tool, to make themselves, their party and colleagues visible rather than to inform people on different issues.

The populist actors' appeal to news websites was very low. In Kollár's case it was even lower than for other non-news media. It was strikingly common for both that it was less frequent than expected the presence of independent or investigative journalism, non-profit or crowdfunding-based journalistic initiatives.

In the case of Boris Kollár, he has explained his attitude towards alternative news sources as follows: "If these portals such as *"Hlavné správy"* will bring truthful information, I have no problem sharing them. However, I definitely won't share hate and fake news" (in Kern, 2020).

In terms of *newspaper type* (Fig. 5), as mentioned, there seemed to be a slight difference in preferences. Boris Kollár favoured quality or at least non-tabloid newspapers and magazines (74% posts), while OLaNO shared tabloid content more frequently (63%), though the difference from non-tabloids was not that big considering shares were overall low.

Figure 5: Printed type (newspapers and magazines)



Source: Own compilation

## Media registration

In terms of Assessing media registration, this proved to have been a difficult research task. Only about a quarter of the links were coded as registered media for each of the two political actors. Only 4% (Kollár), respectively 3% (OLaNO) of the posts were identified as not registered officially as news media. However, most sources (around 70%) either could not be classified as such (for example because many were FB pages of different kinds – like politicians' pages) or because there was no easily available, transparent and free of cost access to data in this regard.

## The dominant political/ideological orientation of the media sources shared

A similarity between the two political actors analysed was that they seemed to share information sources that lean more towards the right side of the political spectrum (Fig. 6). However, there were also important differences. Boris Kollár seemed to show a much more ambiguous political and ideological leaning, not captured by the standard left-right spectrum. Those sources coded largely as “other” (69% posts) were mostly right-wing populist and anti-immigration, conservative, but some sources were also considered as disseminating *disinformation* or, as they call themselves, “alternative” websites (ex. *hlavnespravny.sk*, *hlavnydenik.sk*, *napalete.sk*, *parlamentnelisty.sk*, *denniks.sk*, *napalete.sk*). These widely seen (there is a certain liberal bias in Slovakia here) disinformation sources made up to 4% of the sources shared by Boris Kollár, and were usually shared regularly, but also appeared once during EP elections (*hlavne.sk*) and during the COVID-19 crisis (*hlavnespravny.sk*).

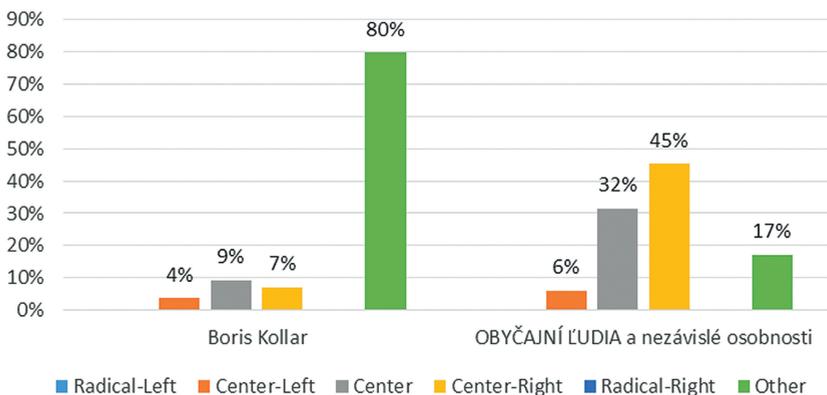
Kollár also showed a preference for the black humour / satiric *Zomri* page, which *OLaNO* also shared, but only once.

*OLaNO* leaned more towards the conservatives, rather than populist or anti-immigration sources. Its sources would more traditionally be defined as center-right leaning. Its sources would more traditionally be defined as center-right leaning.

The only source considered center-left that was shared was newspaper *Pravda*, distributed by (Kollár).

Considering the (rather disputed) political / ideological orientation of Kollár and *OLaNO*, the sources they shared seemed to by and large mirror it. There was not much preference for a pluralistic media resources landscape. In addition, only 19% of the sources shared were considered fully transparent for both actors. There was also the issue of the difficulty to assess transparency of ownership in the absence of data (especially in the case of the sources shared by Boris Kollár).

Figure 6: Political/Ideological orientation of sources shared



Source: Own compilation

## Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular period

In terms of frequency of posting in different time periods, both political actors shared information sources more often during regular political time periods (an average of 37 sources shared per month by Kollár and 60 by *OLaNO*). A difference between them was that *OLaNO* kept a similar frequency during the COVID-19 crisis (59 sources shared per month), while Boris Kollár shared significantly less sources (29 per month), identical to the EP electoral campaign (30 sources/month). This could reflect his new role of Speaker of the Parliament during this period. *OLaNO* shared other information sources the least often during the EP campaign (51/month).

What stands out is that both Kollár and *OLaNO*'s over-relied on FB in all three periods. Boris Kollár shared information from other FB pages, accounts or groups especially during the start of COVID-19 crisis (in 82% of all posts), in 72% during the regular coverage and slightly less during the EP campaign (67% posts).

*OLaNO* followed the same pattern, slightly more pronounced, sharing other FB sources in 89% of all COVID-related posts, 74% during regular coverage and 60% during the election campaign.

Analysis of FB pages prioritised by each of them during the COVID-19 crisis, Boris Kollár shared his party's page (*WAF*) in 38 out of 57 posts, while all other FB sources were shared three times (the case of Kollár's personal public FB account<sup>10</sup>) or just once: Igor Matovič's page, a car rental company's page<sup>11</sup>, the page of Police of the Slovak Republic – Banská Bystrica Region<sup>12</sup>, regional news from Dlhé nad Cirochou a okolie, his political fellow Milan Krajniak's page<sup>13</sup> and Regionportal.

Other sources in addition to FB that Kollár shared once or twice during the COVID-19 months were also mostly of digital type, like: public wire agency portal *teraz.sk*, news and current affairs online only portal *aktuality.sk*, online news portal of private TV Markíza *tvnoviny.sk*, controversial – alternative news portal *hlavnespravvy.sk*, *pomahameludom.sk* (“we are helping the people”), portal of private wire agency *webnoviny.sk*, one TV channel's website – *prezenu.joj.sk* and two newspaper websites business newspaper *slovensko.hnonline.sk*, and video section of liberal centre right newspaper *Sme* – *video.sme.sk*.

In other words, it was a mixture of quality and „alternative” as well as other types of media sources. This implies that, overall, Boris Kollár clearly prioritized digital sources (especially social media) over mainstream news. This is natural, considering how FB and other social media function.

This pattern is even more clear in the case of *OLaNO*, that prioritized digital only sources in 105 out of all 117 posts that shared a media source during COVID crisis, and 101 out of these were from FB. However, the diversity of these pages was bigger for *OLaNO* than Kollár. Similar to Kollár,

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/boris.kollar>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/AVISworld/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/KRPZBB>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/poslednykriziak/> which in the meantime changed its URL to <https://www.facebook.com/krajniakmilan/>

most posts shared were from the party leader – Igor Matovič (24 out of 101), followed by other more known party members or candidates for being MPs: Jaro Nad’ – 12 posts, Kristián Čekovský – 6 posts, Eduard Heger – 7 posts, Gábor Grendel – 4 posts, Michal Šipoš – 4 posts, etc.

Less frequently, *OLaNO* also shared digital news sources like quality news portal *aktuality.sk* (5 times), *beta.ucps.sk*, international news websites like *bloomberg.com* (1 post), newspapers’ websites: quality liberal newspaper *dennikn.sk* (6 posts), quality liberal newspaper *domov.sme.sk* (1 post), tabloid magazine with political and current affairs news and commentaries *www1.pluska.sk* (1 post) or pages of TV channels: public television *spravy.rtvs* (2 posts) and public wire agency video portal *TV.teraz.sk* (1 post).

*OLaNO* shared its party website once during the COVID-19 crisis. There seemed to be slightly more diversity in the sources shared by *OLaNO* compared to Boris Kollár, which may also be due to the difference in the types of pages: one is a party page and one is a more personal (but publicly available), individualized party leader page.

A similar tendency was kept during regular coverage, with somewhat more diversity due to the longer time interval and different topics approached.

On Kollár’s FB page, 211 out of 292 posts that shared a media source originated from public pages: from his party *WAF* (138 posts), content made by himself (like videos) or from his other, personal account (34 posts), other pages: a native Slovak living in Italy and supporting also Matteo Salvini – Luboš Hrica (3 posts), Martin Petriska (3 times), Patrick Linhart (2 times), Petra Krištúfková (M.P) (3 times), Matteo Salvini’s page (Italian right wing populist politician, shared once) and other party colleagues or supporters. Among his other preferred FB pages seemed to be the black humour *zomriofficial* page, regional state police pages (*KRPZBB* – also shared during the COVID period, and *policiaslovakia*).

Other digital sources outside FB included a mixture of quality, tabloid and alternative media sources: *hlavnydennik.sk* (9 posts), *teraz.sk* (5 posts), *topky.sk* (5 posts), *hlavnespravy.sk* (4 posts), *aktuality.sk* (2 posts), *tvnoviny.sk* (2 posts), *blog.postoj.sk* (1 post), *postoj.sk* (2 times), and others (about half alternative, and half established media), shared only once during the eight months studied: *lekom.sk*, *lifenevns.sk*, *magazin1.sk*, *napalete.sk*, *omediach.com*, *parlamentnelisty.sk*, *regionportal.sk*, *skslovan.com*, *webnoviny.sk*.

Then there were TV channels – mostly quality and liberal news outlets, including both Slovak and Czech public television stations: political current affairs discussion programme *NatelosMichalomKovacicomTVMarkiza*, *novatelevize*, *spravy.rtvs*, *TelevizneNoviny*, *videoarchiv.markiza.sk*, *ct24.ceskatelevize.cz* and *rtvs.sk* (all shared only once).

Among newspapers, the most often shared were quality liberal (centre-right) media, and occasionally tabloids, conservative weekly and business newspaper: *dennikn.sk* (8 times), *sme.sk* (8 times), *blesk.cz* (once), *cas.sk* (twice), *slovensko.hnonline.sk*, *tyzden.sk*, *www1.pluska.sk*.

Shared only once: *OLaNO*’s source sharing during standard political time period was somewhat similar to that during COVID-19 crisis. 356 out of 483 posts shared other FB pages, most often of two MPs: Miroslav Sopko (61 posts), Eduard Heger (41 posts), then different FB events (39 posts), chairperson Igor Matovič (34 posts), Jaro Nad (politician) (34 posts), Ján Marosz, MP, (25 posts), Erika Jurinová (head of self-governing region for *OLaNO*) (17 posts), Jožo Pročko – page (entertainer who ran in elections and became an MP (17 posts), Peter Pollák,

MEP (15 posts), Jaroslav Nagy (14 posts), Marek Krajčí, MP (9 posts), Natália Milanová, MP (7 posts), Romana Tabak (activist, 7 posts), Martin Fecko, MP (5 posts) and others.

Other digital sources commonly referred to were: quality online only news portal *aktuality.sk* (19 posts), general affairs registered online weekly *tyzdennikkoment.sk* (4 posts), the blog section of the conservative Christian website *blog.postoj.sk* (2 posts), portal on European affairs *euractiv.sk* (1 post), public wire agency portal *teraz.sk* (1 post), tabloid portal *topky.sk* (2 posts), alternative news portal *europskenoviny.sk* (2 posts), *glob.zoznam.sk* (2 posts), commercial TV portal *tvnoviny.sk* (1 post), and the party website *obycajniludia.sk* was shared in 26 posts. The black humour *zomriofficial* shared by Kollár was also shared by *OLaNO*, but only once.

For *OLaNO*, digital sources were again clearly prioritized, especially social media, but newspapers were also a somewhat common reference source, though 10 times less often than digital sources. The newspapers shared by *OLaNO* were: quality liberal newspaper (both print and online version) *dennikn.sk* (27 posts – including 1 from YouTube), liberal newspaper (both print and online version) *sme.sk* (17 posts), business magazine *etrend.sk* (3 posts), business newspaper *hnonline.sk* (2 posts), conservative weekly magazine *tyzden.sk* (2 posts), tabloid newspaper *www1.pluska.sk* (2 posts).

The only video channel (formally called TV) shared was *TV.teraz.sk* (1 post) on a public wire agency website.

Radio was the least favourite source of shared information: Kollár drew info from only one radio: traffic *RadioExpres* (twice, via FB and YouTube), during the regular period. The same radio – *RadioExpres* was shared once by *OLaNO* during the standard period.

We could see so far that there were some overlaps and similar tendencies during the regular reporting period and special reporting period during COVID-19 crisis.

For the election period, 60 out of 89 posts sharing a media source on Boris Kollár's page made reference to another FB page/account, just like in previous cases. In most cases, Kollár shared his party's page (24 posts), uploaded content from his own page or personal account (18 posts), or shared his colleagues' (and MPs) posts: Ľudovít Goga (3 posts), Milan Krajniak (2 posts), as well as Matteo Salvini's official page and his fan club page (2 posts), and one time: Identity & Democracy Party, Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom, Luboš Hřica, Ivan Lučanic, Peter Pčolinský (MP) and Miloš Svrček.

Other digital sources included the same varied mixture of quality sources, tabloid sources and alternative sources: *aktuality.sk* (3 posts), *teraz.sk* (2 posts) and others appearing only once: *Máme rádi Karla Gotta* – fanclub of famous Czech pop singer, *Mukli SK*<sup>14</sup> (about persons in jail, but heavily covering politics), black humour page *zomriofficial*, blog on used cars shopping *blog.autobazar.eu*.

As for newspapers, only quality, mostly center-right, liberal, such as *sme.sk* (5 posts), *hnonline.sk* (4 post), *dennikn.sk* (2 posts) and centre-left *spravy.pravda.sk* (1 post) were shared during the electoral campaign. It appears that Boris Kollár limited the diversity of sources shared the most during the EP campaign, where he prioritized party-related sources, European allies from the radical right (Salvini, IDP, Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom – MENF), main-

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/odsudeni>

stream newspapers and two digital news websites which were common information sources for all periods and for both Kollár and *OLaNO*.

Kollár's communication during the EP campaign seemed to be somewhat more formal, though his preference for the dark humour website *Zomri* remains constant and visible even during these times.

As for *OLaNO*, the diversity of the sources seemed to be even more restricted during the campaign. For example, 93 out of all 154 links shared were from other Facebook pages: 14 from different FB events, Miroslav Sopko, MP for *OLaNO* (11 posts), Jaro Naď, MP for *OLaNO* (9 posts), Marek Krajčí, MP for *OLaNO* (6 posts), Ján Marosz, MP for *OLaNO* (9 posts), Igor Matovič, MP for *OLaNO* and then P.M. (4 posts), Jaroslav Nagy (5 posts), Veronika Remišová, previously MP for *OLaNO* (4 posts), Eduard Heger, MP for *OLaNO* and later minister of finance (4 posts), Erika Jurinová, head of self-governing region for *OLaNO* (4 posts), Michal Šipoš, MP for *OLaNO* (3 posts), Peter Pollák, MEP for *OLaNO* (3 posts) and others shared only once or twice.

Other digital sources shared by *OLaNO* during the EP election campaign included a mixture of online only media: *aktuality.sk* (10 posts), *tyzdennikkoment.sk* (2 posts) and shared only once: *blog.etrend.sk*, *blog.postoj.sk*, *jaronad.sk*, *navody.digital*, *redflags.slovensko.digital* and the party website was again shared 23 times.

Only one TV website was shared by *OLaNO* during the electoral campaign: *bbc.com* (1 post), and four newspapers: *dennikn.sk* (9 posts), *sme.sk* (10 post), *cas.sk* (1 post), *independent.co.uk* (1 post). Similar to Kollár, *OLaNO* also seemed to have formalized its communication and source-sharing during the EP elections.

Overall, there were common tendencies in the type of sources prioritized during each interval by both Kollár and *OLaNO*, with a clear predominance of digital sources (including social media), that can be found in 88% to 95% of all posts during each period. This can be explained by the fact that the media platform used for communication is itself digital (FB pages of the two political actors), but it also seems to support the literature that emphasises that social media and digital media are indeed a vehicle for promoting populists.

Interestingly, Kollár draws on digital sources especially during the COVID-19 crisis (95%), while during both regular and electoral times, digital sources were slightly less frequent (88%). However, these differences can be seen as somewhat negligible.

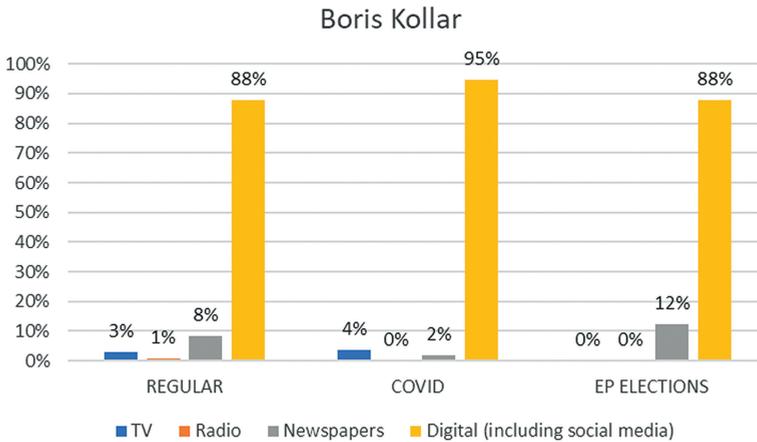
For *OLaNO*, the differences were smaller: digital sources were shared in 92% of the electoral campaign sample, 90% in COVID-related interval and 89% during regular coverage. Similarly, *OLaNO* draws on newspapers most equally often irrespective of the period: 9% in non-events times, 8% during the COVID crisis and 7% during elections.

On the other hand, the discrepancies for Boris Kollár were more clear but still relatively marginal: newspapers were shared mostly during elections (12% posts), less often regularly (8%) and, somewhat surprisingly, the least often during the pandemic (2%). This last low number can be perhaps explained by the fact that Kollár became too busy in his post of Speaker of the Parliament.

A very clear tendency that emerged was the big absence of radio as source of information for both political actors. Only one radio channel was shared by both – traffic radio *RadioExpres*, two times by Kollár and once by *OLaNO*, and all were within regular reporting period.

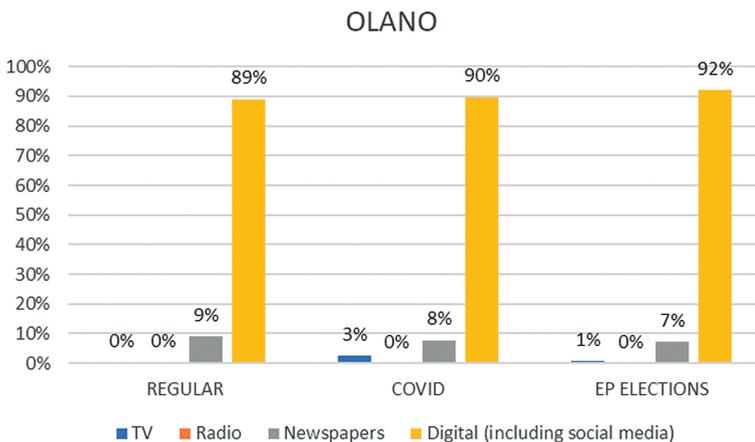
TV channels were also very infrequently used during all analysed periods. When they did represent a source, it was mostly during the COVID-19 pandemic: in 4% of Kollár’s posts and 3% of *OLaNO*’s. **These findings are most probably also due to the nature of the communication environment: digital communication draws on other digital sources, due to proximity.** Further studies could delve deeper by checking whether these political actors’ communication via TV or radio is similar or different to their online presence. If there is substantial difference in what and how news is reported by digital versus traditional media, this could potentially generate two separate public spheres that have very different views on the surrounding political realities.

Figure 7: Types of sources by sample – Boris Kollár



Source: Own compilation

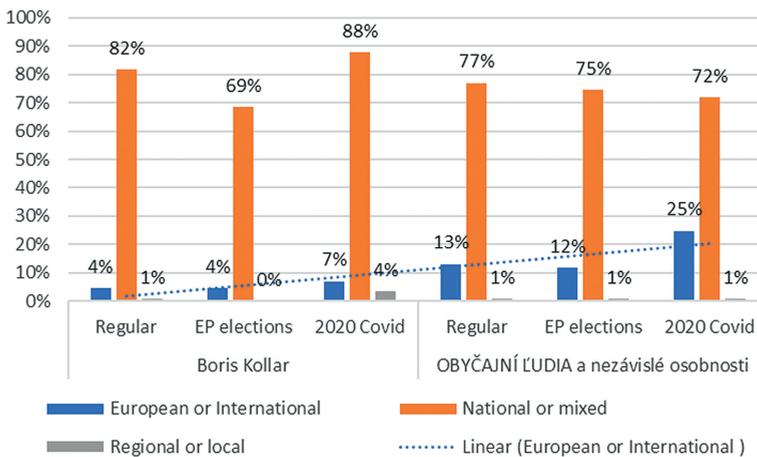
Figure 8: Types of sources by sample – *OLaNO*



Source: Own compilation

Another difference that would be expected, drawing on Europeanization literature (Koopmans, Erbe & Meyer, 2010; Koopmans, 2010), is that events with a European or international dimension should draw more Europeanized or globalized coverage. To test this, we checked what types of media sources were more often cited during the three intervals. The results seem to confirm this hypothesis only to some extent (Fig. 9). During regular coverage it was the least common that European or international sources were shared and national sources clearly predominated. This was valid for Boris Kollár (4% of all posts) and to some extent, for *OLaNO* (13% of posts).

Figure 9: Level of coverage of the news source



Source: Own compilation

Interestingly, EP elections did not generate more Europeanized coverage than during regular coverage, neither for Kollár, nor for *OLaNO*. But where the tendency becomes obvious it was with the pandemic-related information, which draws the most international coverage for both political actors (7% Kollár, 25% *OLaNO*). Remarkably almost absent during all periods were regional and local sources, which only became somewhat more frequent in Kollár's posts during the COVID-19 crisis (4%). Among the European or international sources shared by the two political actors were *Matteo Salvini*, Czech media sources, *BBC*, *Bloomberg*, *Euractiv*, *Independent* or *Greenpeace*.

### What role did the public service media play in each of these periods, compared to commercial /private sources?

In absolute numbers, the role of public service media was very low, almost negligible, in the communication of both populist actors, who each shared links to public information sources in

around 1% of their posts. Common references were made only to the (PSM) Radio and Television of Slovakia (spravy.rtv), cited by *OLaNO* during the COVID-19 crisis and by Kollár during regular coverage. Kollár also shared a link to the *ČT24* (PSM Czech language news TV channel) and to the FB page of the Slovak police (*policiaslovakia*), all during regular coverage.

*OLaNO*, on the other hand, showed a clear tendency of drawing on publicly owned sources of information during the COVID-19 crisis (8 out of all 10 such references were during this time). They shared the FB pages or website of the Government Office, Parliament and other public institutions (Ministry of the Interior under political influence of *OLaNO*, National Council of the Slovak Republic/ Parliament, Trnava self-governing region under political influence of *OLaNO*). During the regular and elections periods, *OLaNO* shared the page of Žilina Self-governing Region (where it had its political representant). These differences may be explained only by different positions of both actors – while *OLaNO* was more prominently represented in the government, Kollár became Speaker of the Parliament.

## Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that shared populist leaders' posts

For network analysis, we focused on reciprocity of the network, its centrality and the main promoters of messages. In this part we conducted the network analysis adding also the public page of Sme Rodina (We Are Family – *WAF*), Boris Kollár's party. We were interested to explore the overlap between the two and the sources that were uniquely connected to one or the other.

Based on the CrowdTangle data (Mancuso et al, 2020; Marincea, 2020) analysed with NodeXL<sup>15</sup>, we constructed a directed graph with 1022 vertices (nodes) and 1035 unique edges (unique connections between nodes) out of a total number of 11,161 edges<sup>16</sup>. In the center were three main vertices: the public pages of *WAF*, Boris Kollár and *OLaNO* (Fig. 10). The network represents all public pages that have shared posts from the three pages, between January 2019-April 2020 and the red arrows show reciprocity in connections.

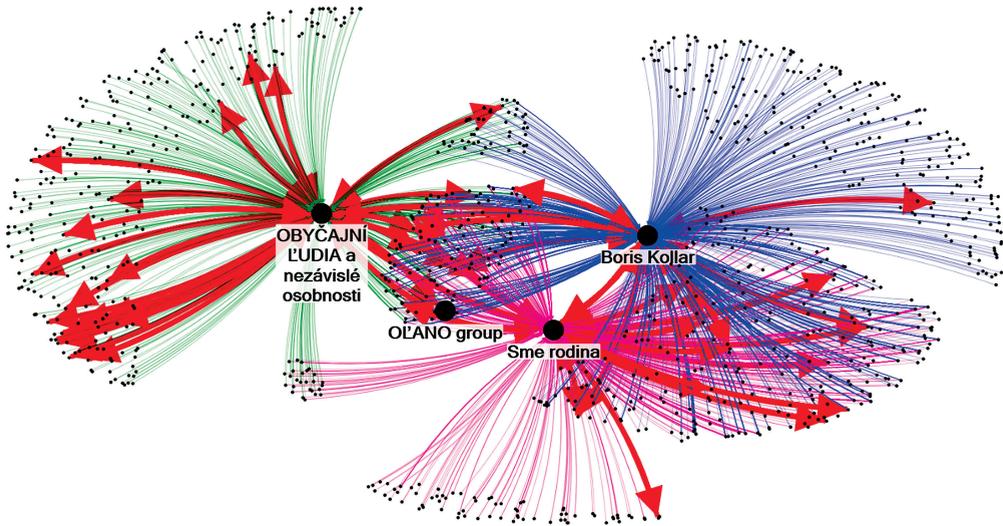
The general overview (Fig. 10) shows that among the three pages, Boris Kollár had the most intensive dissemination network<sup>17</sup>, while *WAF* and *OLaNO* were very similar in terms of size of their network. This seems to confirm the literature on populist communication which argues that personalization through charismatic leaders is often a successful strategy in gaining visibility.

<sup>15</sup> Version 1.0.1.418.

<sup>16</sup> The total number of edges represents each time one public page shared a post from one of the 3 pages under study. This also includes the pages shared by the 3 pages, in order to identify reciprocity. Additional graph metrics: graph density – 0.0016, Average Geodesic Distance – 2.34, Maximum Geodesic Distance (diameter) – 3, Reciprocated Vertex Pair Ratio – 0.034 and Reciprocated Edge Ratio – 0.065.

<sup>17</sup> Kollár was shared 4721 times by 639 different public pages, while his party Sme Rodina – 3399 times (by 472 unique Facebook pages) and *OLaNO* – 2985 (by 472 unique FB pages).

Figure 10: Facebook Populist Network in Slovakia



Source: Marincea, 2020

## Reciprocity Network

In the entire network, there were 56 reciprocal connections, meaning that each of the three pages shared posts from pages that also shared them back. In Fig. 10, reciprocal connections were the ones marked by the red arrows. In Fig. 11, these were zoomed in to be seen more clearly. While previously it was shown that Boris Kollár had a bigger dissemination network (number of pages sharing his posts), the reciprocity was lower for him and his party than for *OLaNO*. This means that there was more reciprocal promotion among *OLaNO* party members than among *WAF*. Kollár seemed to endorse back very few of the people or pages that promoted him (only 11, compared to *OLaNO* – 29 and *WAF* – 16). This might paint him as a more individualistic leader and his party as having weaker ties among its members, at least in terms of social media strategy.

In most cases, reciprocal connections were between party members / party pages and supporters like, for *WAF* and Boris Kollár: Lubos Hrica (supporter of the movement and of Salvini, living in Italy), Ludovit Goga (member of *WAF*), *Sme Rodina – Detva* (regional hub), etc., but also the Slovak Police page, interestingly enough. There was also cross-posting between all the three pages, and the link between them was also made by the dark humour satire FB page *Zomri*, which posted about *OLaNO* and Boris Kollar, while both of them shared *Zomri* as well. There was also a direct link between Kollár and a prominent party member Milan Krajniak (MP, later minister of labour), as well as a curious connection with “sympathisers from Moravia” (region in the eastern part of the Czech Republic).

As for *OLaNO*, the same pattern can be observed – namely reciprocity is mostly with party

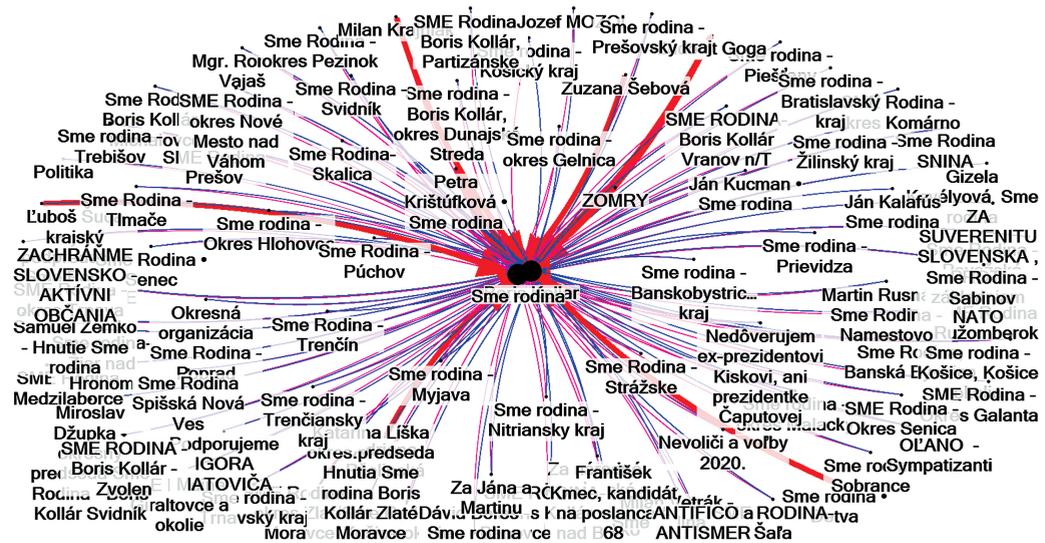


### Network Centrality

As expected, there was a wide overlap between the FB pages that shared Boris Kollár and those that shared *WAF* (Fig.11 and Fig.12). Only 97 out of the 472 pages sharing *WAF*'s posts shared only the party, and not the leader as well, while the rest – 80% shared both. Most of these pages were either party branches or members, and some were also reciprocal connections (see above). But there were also pages like *OLaNO Sympatizanti* (*OLaNO*'s Sympathisers) or *ANTI-FICO* a *ANTISMER* (two groups targeting negative sentiments towards the major political party and its leader in Slovakia at that time). Some signalled common concerns like *Saving Slovakia*, *Active Citizens and For Sovereignty of Slovakia* – all that could be seen as having populist overtones.

Interestingly enough, there was also quite some overlap with *OLaNO*'s public Facebook page (Fig. 10). 162 out of the 462 (35%) pages sharing *OLaNO* also shared Boris Kollár at least once (Fig. 12), and almost the same number was valid for *WAF*: 142 out of 462 – 31% (Fig. 13). As could be expected, these pages largely overlapped and tended to be pages of party members or party branches. This shows that these types of pages, pertaining to the populist parties, play a central role in the dissemination network on social media.

Figure 12: Pages sharing<sup>19</sup> Boris Kollar and Sme Rodina



Source: Marinca, 2020

<sup>19</sup> In the graph are shown only the pages that share each of the two pages at least 10 times.



Nonetheless, there were a few FB pages that shared only *OLaNO* and Boris Kollár (46 pages). Interesting overlaps seem to be two groups of expat Czechs and Slovaks in Switzerland and the Netherlands – supporters of these movements. There was – surprisingly – a minor overlap with Czech anti-populists, „We want better Czechia without Babiš and Zeman” and „We simply won’t buy products produced by Babiš’s companies”. Then it was relatively frequently shared „We should stop terrorists from Brussels.” There was also an anti-fascist narrative – „We are fighters against fascism, Nazism and their ideologies!”

This selection makes some sense, though. On the one hand, there were supporters of another party, “*ZA LUDŮ*” *abroad*” (a moderate, centrist party), and, on the other hand, a rather opposite group “*KOTLEBOVCI – Ludová strana Naše Slovensko (Oficiálna skupina)*” (radical right-wing party with neo-fascist, mostly hidden, tendencies). There were some other connected expatriate groups (Tirol, Copenhagen, Ireland, UK, Bavaria, Czechia, Switzerland).

Among media sources, two of them were identified: alternative online magazine *DAV DVA* – culture-politics revue, and less known FB discussion group *Politika* (Politics).

*DAV DVA* is self-defined as “civic initiative that promotes notions about alternatives towards the current economic-political system.”<sup>22</sup> It is a follow up to interwar intellectual leftist group *DAV* and associated journal (1922-1937). FB group *Politika* (Politics) had less than 400 members as of August 2020. It was created in January 2017. It was self-defined as “Free portal for political opinions and public issues opinions of narrower but somehow similar spectrum (for time being). Some (of our) opinions are strongly worded (with) others we would like to become familiar with.”<sup>23</sup> Based on overview of key postings, it was pro-*OLaNO* and against-Fico (former Prime Minister) group.

What can be said about the main connectors within the populist networks? The analysis found that there were only nine public pages that seemed to share all three profiles (Fig. 15), although with different frequency. These can be considered bridges between the different political actors and their different publics or some might be channels that either a) aim for more political pluralism and a somewhat more balanced position or b) pages that support one of the parties and frequently oppose the other, as a result.

They shared opposition towards *Smer-SD* which was until March 2020 the main party in government (*Zomri*, *Politika*, *Antifico a Antismer*, *OLaNO Sympatizanti*, *Za Jana a Martinu*).

Analysis of shared pages by each of the three political actors showed some interesting patterns. First, only three of them shared all three FB pages a somewhat substantial number of times each (in this case we chose the threshold of 10 times each). Moreover, these were distributed very differently: *OLaNO – Sympatizanti* (Sympathisers) shared the *OLaNO* page 250 times, which was to be expected, while it shared Boris Kollár only 15 times and *WAF* 12 times. This makes it obviously biased in favour of one of the two parties, and therefore in the second category listed above. This is to be expected from a group that explicitly contains party supporters.

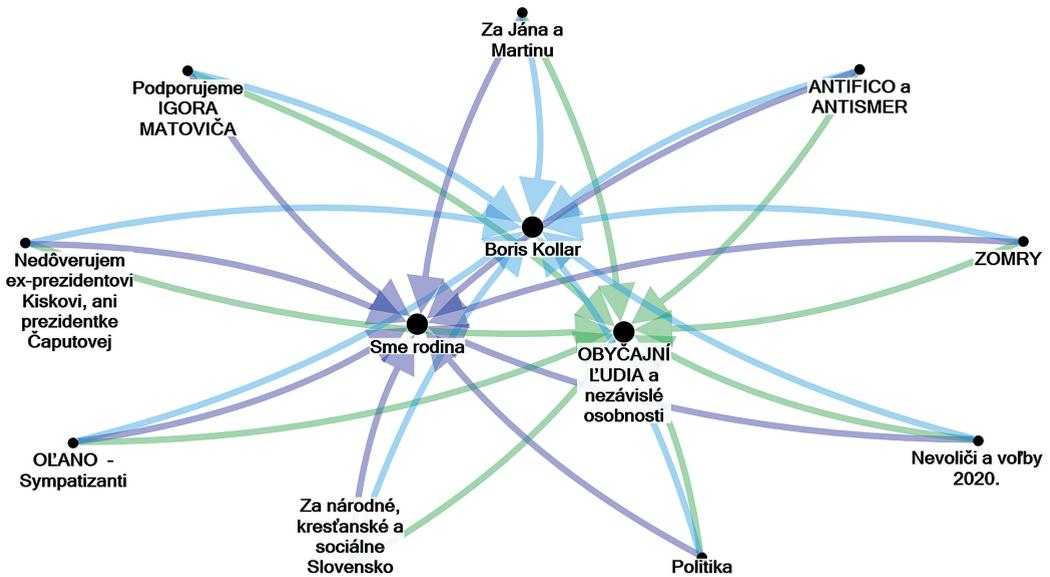
Similarly less frequently shared, but overall much more balanced was the group *Nevoliči*

<sup>22</sup> <https://davidva.sk/dav/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1666426526989340>

a voľby 2020 (Non-voters and 2020 Elections). This group shared *OLaNO* 32 times, while it shared Boris Kollár 11 times and *WAF* 10 times. On the other hand, the page “I do not trust either ex-President Kiska or President Čaputová (*Nedôverujem ex-prezidentovi Kiskovi, ani prezidentke Čaputovej*) was biased toward Boris Kollár (65 shares) and *WAF* (31 shares) compared to *OLaNO* (22 shares), but the difference was less striking.

Figure 15: Pages sharing<sup>24</sup> all three profiles (3 degrees centrality).



Source: Marincea, 2020

Somewhat more balanced was the satirical *ZOMRY* (13 shares Kollár, 10 shares *WAF*, and 19 *OLaNO*). Obviously, political satire was popular among opposition parties and leaders.

Similar patterns became visible when we compared the number of times certain pages promoted only two of the competing political actors that shared each of them<sup>25</sup>. The pages that clearly gave more visibility to *OLaNO* than Boris Kollár were: *Za Jána a Martinu* (220 – *OLaNO*, 22 Kollár), We support Igor Matovič *Podporujeme IGORA MATOVIČA* (209 – *OLaNO*, 11 Kollár), *ANTIFICO a ANTISMER* (57 – *OLaNO*, 10 Kollár), and somewhat more balanced: *ZOMRY* (19 – *OLaNO*, 13 Kollár) and *Politika* (21 – *OLaNO*, 10 Kollár).

At the opposite end was For National, Christian and Social Slovakia, *Za národné, kresťanské a sociálne Slovensko* which seemed to favour Boris Kollár (43 Kollár, 13 – *OLaNO*). However, we cannot tell only from this data alone if the visibility was positive or negative. This needs

<sup>24</sup> Irrespective of the number of times each page is shared.

<sup>25</sup> Keeping the threshold of min. 10 shares each

further, more qualitative and in-depth exploration. What can be said is that *OLaNO* supporters were more appreciative of the efforts of investigative journalists, while also being more focused against the government's main party at the time. In contrast, Kollár was more associated with pro-Christian, national and social rhetoric.

## Main promoters

We also analysed who the main promoters were for each of the three political actors. Considering that in order to ensure some level of visibility and consistency, each page should be shared several times, we kept the 10 times threshold for each. This resulted in 97 unique pages sharing Boris Kollár at least 10 times, 79 for *WAF* and only 24 for *OLaNO*. This suggests that the former two political actors had a wider network of “loyal” disseminators. In most cases, with very few exceptions, this network was made of pages of the party branches or members<sup>26</sup>. Other specific FB non-party pages were: For National, Christian and Social Slovakia) *Za národné, kresťanské a sociálne Slovensko* (43 shares), For Sovereignty of Slovakia, *ZA SUVERENITU SLOVENSKA, Against NATO Bases, PROTI základniam NATO* (27 shares) or Save Slovakia – Active Citizens, *ZACHRÁŇME SLOVENSKO – AKTÍVNI OBČANIA* (18 shares) among others. More or less the same pages shared *WAF* with a similar frequency.

*OLaNO* followed a similar pattern of sharing. However, the reason for it being shared less overall is, most probably, that it had much fewer pages of party branches (or rather circles of supporters) of party members in its social network (indeed, *OLaNO* had only 4 members in almost 10 years of its existence). This made it more diverse and, as we showed in the first part, stronger in terms of mutual support (reciprocity) or less centered on one figure.

Unlike their competitors, the top disseminators for *OLaNO* were not other party members or branches per se, but the “fan” group *OLANO – Sympatizanti* (250 shares) started by the *STOP Štátnej MAFII* page (Stop State Mafia – related to perceived state capture), followed by For Jan and Martina – a page honouring murdered investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée *Za Jána a Martinu* (220 shares), We support Igor Matovič – *Podporujeme IGORA MATOVIČA* (209 shares), *OBYČAJNÍ LUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti – OLANO* – the *OLaNO* public group (182 shares), *OLaNO – Trenčiansky kraj* – Trenčín region) (74 shares), Great Anti-Corruption March – *Veľký protikorupčný pochod – sympatizanti* (70 shares), *ANTIFICO a ANTISMER* (57 shares) etc. As identified earlier, these pages suggest key ideas that are behind political activism – protest against the government, especially the key governing party *Smer-SD*, represented by its leader Robert Fico, and believed to be responsible for the captured state.

It stands out from these results that, even though Boris Kollár clearly had a wider network on social media (FB), this was mostly due to the multitude of party-related FB pages and did not necessarily say much about real support from citizens or media institutions. In fact, the media did not seem to give him much visibility.

<sup>26</sup> ex. *SME Rodina – okres Trnava* shares Kollár the most – 120 times, followed by *Sme rodina • Detva*, *Sme rodina – Boris Kollár, okres Dunajská Streda*, *Sme rodina – Myjava*, *SME RODINA-Boris Kollár Vranov n/T* etc.

On the other hand, *OLaNO* had a smaller party network, but more support from non-party sources, including citizens and media outlets – which refrained less from giving visibility to *OLaNO* than to Kollár.

## Conclusions

Clearly, in both cases digital sources were prioritised, and first of all FB content. This is hardly surprising considering the digital nature of communication via social media. As one could have expected, both FB pages prioritized party-related sources (mostly selected MPs) and in case of Kollár, European allies from the radical right (Salvini, IDP, MENF). However, it was somewhat surprising to find that both populist FB pages gave a slight preference to mainstream liberal newspapers and digital news websites (including of tabloid type), during all examined periods. We could identify “alternative” news sources only in very limited numbers. Among somehow by and large ignored media types sources one could identify both radio and TV channels. Instead, more often but still marginally were utilised videos produced by a public wire agency.

A similarity between the two political actors analysed was that they seemed to share information sources that leaned more towards the right side of the political spectrum. However, *OLaNO* leaned more towards the conservatives, rather than populist or anti-immigration sources.

In absolute numbers, the role of public service media was very low, almost negligible, in the communication of both populist actors. There were only negligible differences in results for selected political periods. Fundamentally, neither populist actors showed any significant connection to *alternative media sources*. Both populist actors preferred a mixture of quality, tabloid and somewhat alternative media. The two populist actors have used their FB pages in all three analysed periods more as a self-promotion tool, to make themselves, their party and colleagues visible rather than to inform people on different issues. Nonetheless, it seems that Kollár used a higher variety of digital sources compared with *OLaNO*.

In terms of populist networks, Boris Kollár had the most intensive dissemination network<sup>27</sup>, while movements *WAF* and *OLaNO* were very similar in terms of size of their network. There was a rather low reciprocity of cross-promotion. Kollár but also *WAF* endorsed back very few of the people or pages that promoted them (only 11, and 16 respectively), while *OLaNO* endorsed 29 pages. In most cases, both Kollár’s and *OLaNO*’s reciprocal connections were between party members or party pages and their supporters. However, unlike *WAF* and Boris Kollár, *OLaNO* also had reciprocal connections with different media channels. Thus, *OLaNO* was seen as more acceptable among the mainstream media.

To a certain degree, there was a connection to the emigrant-based support base as well as to the Czech – paradoxically – anti-Babiš (then P.M.) and anti-Zeman (then President) pages.

There were only nine public pages that seemed to share all three profiles. They shared the opposition towards the *Smer-SD* party – until March 2020 the main party in government, as well as

<sup>27</sup> Kollár was shared 4721 times by 639 different public pages, while his party Sme Rodina – 3399 times (by 472 unique Facebook pages) and *OLaNO* – 2985 (by 472 unique Facebook pages).

a low trust towards the President of the state and, finally, they represented non-voters. In other words, low trust in selected political structures/actors or a strategic anti-establishment positioning, typical of populist and protest political movements/leaders could be identified as a common factor between them. *OLaNO* supporters were more appreciating of the efforts by murdered journalist Ján Kuciak, and seemed to be more focused against then government's key party. In contrast, Kollár was associated more clearly with pro-Christian, national and social rhetoric. However, neither populist subject had any close and long-lasting relationship to alternative media. In fact, *OLaNO* was actually endorsed by some of the legacy liberal media.

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## Media Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Erdoğan and the AKP in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Erdoğan represent the culturally heterogeneous periphery against the old ruling elite in Turkey. After almost two decades in power, Erdoğan and the AKP subdued the mainstream media while they aim to realize the same scenario with respect to the social media. Social media are spaces for governmental or pro-governmental propaganda, but also for the expression of political dissent. Politicians in Turkey have been using various social media platforms more effectively since the 2010s. This research reveals that the great majority of the content shared by Erdoğan and the AKP Facebook (FB) accounts belong to their own media production teams. The shared sources are disseminating pro-government propaganda. The Erdoğan FB account has a more intensive network than the AKP FB account. We also found that the main promoters of these two FB accounts were using pseudo names, which might indicate that the main promoters were political trolls.

**Keywords:** Facebook, AKP, populism, Erdogan, network analysis, media, Turkey, Twitter

### Introduction

This research studies media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and networking by the populist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey in 2019 and 2020. To be more specific, this research covers posts that were sent by two FB accounts for 12 months between April 2019 and April 2020. Studying the social media posts of Erdoğan and the AKP FB pages in this period allows us to capture and cover a variety of events that had a profound effect on the Turkish national context during this period.

First and foremost, this time span covers the most recent and probably the most contentious local elections of the modern Turkish history. In March 2019, Turkish citizens went to the ballot box to elect their new mayors across the country. The results were disappointing for the AKP government and Erdoğan as the AKP candidates lost the elections to the opposition candidates in Istanbul and Ankara, which were two major strongholds of political Islamists since the 1994 local elections. The winning margin in the case of Istanbul was especially too close (a little more than 20,000 votes in a city with 8.6 million eligible voters). The AKP, how-

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

ever, rather than conceding the defeat, asserted that the elections in Istanbul were ridden and consequently pushed for snap elections. Despite the lack of hard evidence, the High Election Council accepted the *AKP*'s plea for snap elections. The High Election Council scheduled the new elections for June 2019. This decision however, polarised a political landscape that was already one of the most polarised in the world (Somer 2019). The government also used the mainstream media as well as various social media platforms to disseminate the discourse that the election in Istanbul was ridden by the opposition while the opposition and its supporters mostly turned to social media platforms to voice their views as they had little to no access to major media outlets in Turkey.

The second major event of the period was the Covid-19 pandemic, which have started to spread across the globe by early 2020. On 11 March 2020, the Turkish Minister of Health announced the first positive Covid-19 case in Turkey. Nevertheless, the discussion on the Covid-19 pandemic started weeks before the announcement of the first positive case. While the mainstream media and the pro-government accounts on different social media platforms defended the view that the government had been extremely successful in its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the opposition, through social media and also through some media outlets that were marginalised by the government, argued that the *AKP* government was hiding the true scope of the pandemic in Turkey. Therefore, the pandemic in Turkey was characterised by a polarised media landscape where the pro-government media and social media accounts defended government actions as well as argued for the government success in dealing with the pandemic while the opposition asserted the view that the government was not transparent about the severity of the pandemic in Turkey.

The *AKP* has been in power since the November 2002 elections in Turkey. This fact makes the *AKP* the longest ruling populist party in Europe (Yabancı and Taleski 2018). Among major political parties in Turkey, only the *AKP* could be considered as a populist party, since it is the only party, which features the core characteristics of populism (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). Indeed, populism has been a defining feature of the *AKP* government and its leader Erdoğan's policy-making since the party was founded (Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar 2018; Yabancı and Taleski 2018, Aytaç and Elçi 2018). Their policy style demonstrates several populist features such as (1) a strong anti-institutionalist character (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), (2) an anti-establishment discourse (Park, 2018; Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar, 2018); (3) antagonization that benefits from pre-existing divisions within the society (Selcuk, 2016; Park, 2018), (4) a persistent emphasis on national will as well as association of national will with Erdoğan (Selcuk, 2016; Yabancı, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), and (5) the mobilization of masses for political goals of the party (Castaldo, 2018; Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar, 2018).

Rather unsurprisingly, an analysis of parliamentary group speeches of political leaders in Turkey between 2011 and 2019 (N = 569) reveals that Erdoğan is significantly more populist than other political leaders (Elçi, 2019). Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), is the least populist among political leaders. While the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), Devlet Bahçeli also benefits from a Manichean discourse; the co-leaders of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) use an anti-elitist discourse (Elçi 2019).

Aytac and Elçi (2018) suggest that a sociocultural divide inherited from the Ottoman Empire, which pitted the ruling elites of the “center” against a culturally heterogeneous “periphery” has contributed to the rise of populist politics in Turkey. The parties representing the periphery have argued that Turkish politics is based on a struggle between “the people” and the Western-oriented secular “elites,” who were controlling major state institutions despite their poor electoral performance (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). The *AKP* and its success in Turkish politics represent the victory of periphery over this Kemalist center. Because the *AKP* has been in power for almost two decades, supporters of this party have emulated the core premises of populism since the exclusion of periphery by the Kemalist elite has ended after the *AKP* consolidated power (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). The symbolic declaration of the consolidation of the *AKP* power came when a hyper presidential system, which was introduced in July 2018, resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of the president at the expense of the parliament and other state institutions (Verza and Mat 2020).

### **Mainstream Media and the *AKP***

The mainstream media was a significant instrument used in February 1997 post-modern coup when the Kemalist elite led by the military forced the resignation of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) government (Aslan 2016). This was a major factor determining the attitudes of the *AKP* towards the mainstream media in Turkey, as the leading members of the *AKP* were also the members of the RP party back in 1997. Hence, the *AKP* remained suspicious of the activities of the mainstream media from the beginning. Because the *AKP* government felt threatened by the mainstream media even after coming to power in November 2002, one of its goals was to create its own media organizations while also trying to transform the mainstream media’s ideological orientation (Bulut and Yörük 2017).

The *AKP* government have claimed the control of the mainstream media in Turkey gradually (Coskun, 2020). It used a carrot and stick policy in acquiring the control of the mainstream media outlets. Those supported the *AKP* government and its agenda were rewarded with lucrative state contracts and official advertisements in their newspapers while those following a neutral or a more critical line were punished via censorship, tax penalties and even prison terms. One of the most illustrative cases happened in 2009 when the Dogan Media Group was punished with 6.8 billion TL (USD 4.5 billion in 2009 exchange rates) as the newspapers and broadcasts owned by this media group continued criticizing the *AKP* government (Hürriyet, 2016). This harsh penalty forced the Dogan Media Group to sell two of its major newspapers, *Milliyet* and *Vatan*, to the pro-government Demiroren Group. As the pressure on the Dogan Group had continued over the years, it had no choice but to sell its remaining newspapers (foremost *Hürriyet*) and the broadcasts (*CNNTurk*, *Kanal D*) to the Demiroren Group for only USD 916 millions in 2018.

The *AKP* government’s control over the mainstream media has been undisputed since 2018. Moreover, as of 2020, no major news outlet in Turkey can afford to stand above the partisan fray (O’Donohue, Hoffman and Makovsky 2020). For example, the pro-government Turkish newspaper *Yeni Şafak* with a circulation over 100,000 copies contributes to the production, dissemination,

as well as the mobilization of the populist discourse of the *AKP* government clustering around the politics of the definition of “the people”, which is defined by the *AKP* and its leader in the first place (Kaptan 2020). In the few past years, the Turkish society have also become more polarized along party lines in following main sources of news and the media brands, with opponents of *AKP* moving from TV (which is still the major source of information) to social media platforms and other online news sources (O’Donohue, Hoffman and Makovsky 2020). It is under these circumstances that the social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook (FB) acquired more significance for actors opposing the government and its policies. There also emerged two contrasting and opposing realities of Erdoğan and the *AKP* government in social media platforms; namely anti-Erdoğan (opposition) and pro-Erdoğan (supporters) communities (Keskin 2020). Following section provides additional key specific features of the use of the social media in Turkey.

### National Context

Newman (2020) explains that digital media are widely used and have become an alternative venue for critical voices though television is still the most important source of news for the majority of Turkish citizens. Moreover, printed media is losing its significance in Turkey. Kizilkaya and Utucu (2021) reports that daily circulation of best selling newspapers in Turkey has dropped below 200,000 while digital media has continued to expand its overreach in Turkey. As of 2020, 83% of the people in Turkey had access to the Internet and 72% of the society used their smartphones to access to the news or social media in Turkey (Newman 2020). Yanat (2017) argues that despite the fact that TV still remains as the main news source (47%) that online sources, including social media, are at the top of the list of sources of news used weekly by Turkish citizens. Furthermore, the share of online sources, including social media, (39%) as main news source is only second to TV while the shares of printed media (6%) and radio (6%) has decreased significantly.

These figures demonstrate the changing nature of journalism and social communication in Turkey. Already in 2014, more than 90% of the Internet-using population aged between 15 and 64 owned a FB account while more than 70% of the same age group also used Twitter in Turkey (Parks et al. 2017). Social media platforms in Turkey are spaces for governmental or pro-government propaganda, but also for dissent against the *AKP* government as it is exemplified by proliferation of important critical activist platforms and journalism outlets including but not limited to *diken.com.tr*; *Otekilerin Postasi* (The Post of Others), *Capul TV* (now *Hayir TV*), *T24*, *140 Journos*, and *sendika.org* (Yeğen 2015 and Yesil (n.d.) in Bulut and Yörük 2017, p.4094). Indeed, though still lagging behind the digital reach of pro-government media (47.8 million users) digital reach of independent media in Turkey has increased to 33.5 million users in Turkey (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021). Furthermore, independent media outlets have continued to expand their digital reach in Turkey while pro-government media outlets digital outreach has stalled (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021).

Despite these figures, social media and digital media remain important for the *AKP* government. In fact, the most famous case of using the social media for helping a populist leader in

power to protect his office was in Turkey when a faction within the military attempted a coup d'état in July 2016. Erdoğan, rather than yielding, answered this challenge to his government with an appeal through the Internet and *Facetime*. While the state TV was overrun by the putschists, private broadcasts such as *CNN Turk* and *A Haber* eagerly broadcasted and encouraged citizens to take it to the streets in order to challenge the putschist takeover. Following this, several pro-government social media accounts echoed the rallying call of Erdoğan. Opponents of the coup flooded social media platforms with commentaries and images as well as live videos (Abutaleb 2016).

Others noted a more frequent use of social media by politicians in Turkey since 2010 (Kuyucu 2018a) way before the failed coup attempt in 2016. Bulut and Yörük (2017) argue that Twitter has become one of the major instruments in Turkish politics. Tellingly, the party with the most visibility on Twitter before 2011 general elections was the *AKP* (Kuyucu 2018a). The *AKP* has relied on a polarizing discourse using a large pro-government (and acting on behalf of the establishment) troll army on Twitter. Twitter trolls, allegedly serving the people, fetish 'the national will' and demonise any 'enemy', who dare challenging the political and cultural transformation propagated by the *AKP*. The result of this process is a digital culture of lynching and self-censorship (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). Pro-*AKP* journalists also act like social media trolls and openly target journalists, academics, and artists, who are critical of the policies and the discourse of the *AKP* government. Moreover, these trolls serve as raider troops for the new *AKP* policies or discourses in Turkey. Hence, Turkey is a case where political online trolling is a major factor in determining and manipulating the agenda (Bulut and Yörük 2017; Karatas and Saka 2017). Before the general elections in 2007, YouTube also played an important role in Turkish politics. The Supreme Electoral Council banned election campaigns on televisions, thus parties moved their election propagandas to YouTube. Almost 10,000 videos with political content on YouTube was streamed millions of times. Videos streamed on YouTube included party leaders' meetings with the people, specially-crafted cubes, campaign songs, electoral promises and other images criticizing political rivals (Kuyucu 2018a).

Three largest parties (*AKP*, *CHP* and *MHP*) and their leaders in Turkey actively use FB, Twitter and Youtube (Darı, 2018, in Kuyucu 2018a). The *AKP* and the *CHP* official social media accounts have around 10 million followers whereas these three party leaders' personal social media accounts have over 30 million followers (Kuyucu 2018b). Erdoğan alone had around 13 million followers on Twitter as of April 2018. Only in April 2018, Erdoğan's social media posts received 714,624 likes and 155,655 retweets (Kuyucu 2018b). On YouTube, the total number of visits received by these parties' accounts was around 78 million. Despite this high volume of activity on social media, political parties in Turkey prefer a one-way communication rather than devising a more interactive communication style with their voters. Most recently, the *AKP* and the *CHP* have begun using mobile phone apps in order to sustain communication with voters. In the case of the *AKP*, the prominent position of the leader is more obvious as this party has also developed a separate app featuring Erdoğan (Yalçınkaya 2018 in Kuyucu 2018a).

## Elections and Social Media

Before the general elections of 2011, politicians and political parties in Turkey used social media platforms to promote their activities and their election promises (Bayraktutan et al. 2012, in Kuyucu 2018a). The analysis of the use of Twitter before the general elections in 2015 showed that the then-*AKP* leader Ahmet Davutoğlu mostly tweeted about his party's activities whereas Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu shared mostly electoral promises, and Devlet Bahçeli tweeted messages on various matters. Among these three leaders, Devlet Bahçeli had the lowest number of followers on Twitter but he was tweeting most frequently (Silsüpür 2016 in Kuyucu 2018a). A further analysis of the use of Twitter by these three parties in the 2015 general elections revealed that they used their accounts generally to disseminate news about the party or to make announcements (e.g. location and time of meetings) (Celik and Aktas 2017 in Kuyucu 2018b). Therefore, in Turkey politicians' and political parties' use of the social media was mostly for propaganda or dissemination of their activities, which did not leave much room for interaction with followers (Bulut and Yörük 2017).

In 2021, the state legislated that after October 2020, social media platforms with over one million Turkish daily users should open offices or appoint a legal representative in Turkey (DW 2020). The authorities have also introduced a ban on advertising if social media companies fail to appoint a legal representative. In case social media platforms fail to comply with the new regulations, the last step declared by the state authorities is to narrow the broadband used by social media platforms, a decision that could seriously slow down the visitor traffic if imposed. Although this attempt to regulate the social media somehow follows general regulatory trends elsewhere, in Turkish context it may have more serious consequences on the nature of political debate and freedom of expression. This is because the *AKP* government has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness in developing various surveillance strategies that include legal and technical restrictions, such as blocking access to social media platforms, requesting content removal and prosecuting and detaining Turkish social media users on charges of insulting government officials (i.e. Erdoğan) or supporting terrorist organizations (Karatas and Saka 2017). Hence, opposition concerns that the *AKP* government may use the new regulations to curb online dissent against its rule is not without any base.

Indeed, as Parks et al. (2017) suggest, social media users in Turkey operate under the government's strategy of "networked authoritarianism". To control the public sphere on social media, the *AKP* government relies on digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017 in Parks et al. 2017), trolling and lateral surveillance (Marwick 2012 p.7, in Parks, Goodwin and Han 2017). Nevertheless, some authors suggest that these governmental strategies did not help their efforts to control the media landscape in Turkey and contributed to growing levels of distrust towards the media and increasing fragmentation (and polarisation) in the ways in which Turkish citizens get their news (O'Donohue et al. 2020). Opposition voters, rather than getting their news through channels controlled and promoted by the *AKP* government, gravitated towards sources that were beyond the government's grip. Research shows that independent media outlets beyond the *AKP* control receive 16.5% more interactions on social media and they are more successful than pro-government outlets in different dimensions such as follower growth, the number of viral content, and number of engagement on Facebook (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021).

Despite lagging behind the opposition actors on these dimensions, the importance attributed to social media platforms by the *AKP* government did not wane. As the analysis below demonstrate, Erdoğan and the *AKP*, rather than sharing media content produced by other bodies, choose sharing content produced by their own media teams. In this respect, one does not observe diversity in the number of sources shared by these two accounts.

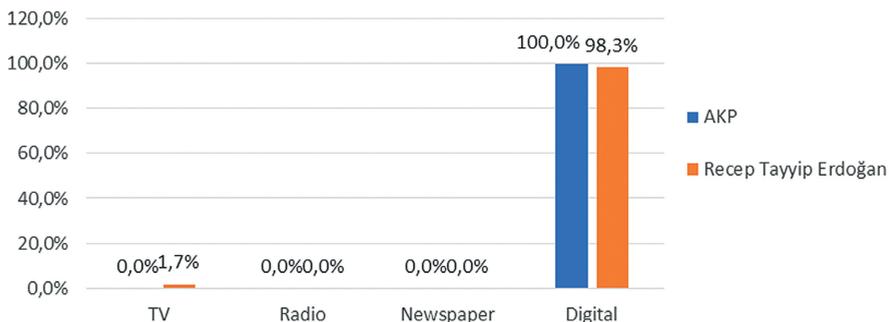
### Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist FB Accounts

In this part we study the types of media sources that are preferred by the populist *AKP* government in Turkey. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and regardless of the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to understand the type of media sources preferred or ignored by populist movement in Turkey. The analysis was carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

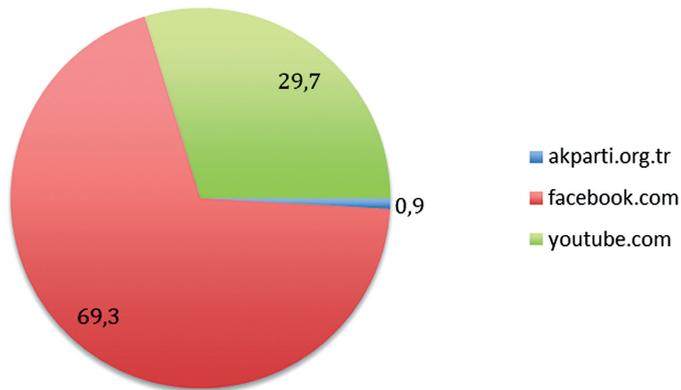
#### Source Type

The analysis demonstrates that the media sources preferred by the *AKP* government and Erdoğan do not demonstrate diversity. The analysis actually reveals that the great majority of the content shared by these two FB accounts belong to Erdoğan's or the *AKP*'s own media production teams, which is digitally produced and broadcasted only on their FB, Youtube and Twitter accounts. That is Erdoğan and the *AKP* frequently benefit from their own media production teams to disseminate their discourses and views on different matters. This finding is actually in line with Weyland's (2017) major argument on populism, which suggests that populist leaders prefer direct communication with the people by bypassing traditional media instruments.

Figure 1: Diversity of Channels

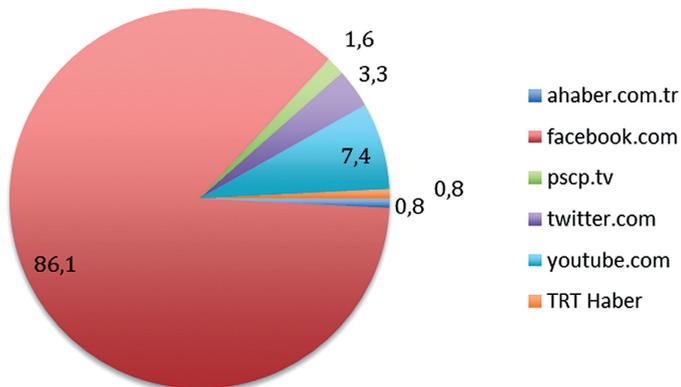


Source: Own compilation

Figure 2: Main sources shared by the *AKP*

Source: Own compilation

Figure 3: Main sources shared by Erdoğan

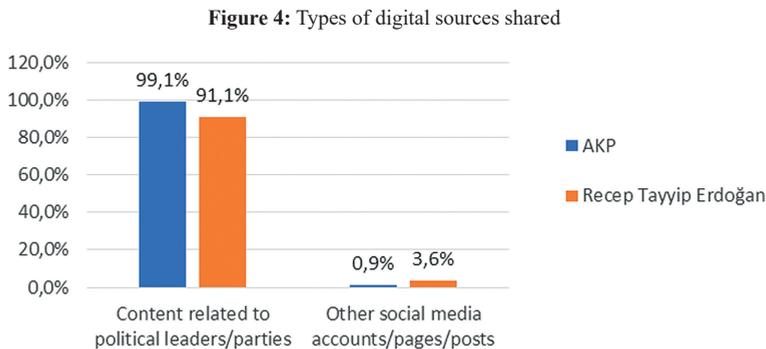


Source: Own compilation

Indeed, when one explores the diversity of channels used by the *AKP* social media accounts, there is no variety as all media content is digital, which is produced either by the *AKP* media team or other accounts directly associated with the *AKP*. In fact, there were only three links that were not produced by the *AKP* media team. The first one belongs to Binali Yildirim who was the previous *AKP* leader and handpicked by Erdoğan in 2014 to lead the party after Erdoğan forced resignation of the then-prime minister Davutoğlu (the leader of the *AKP* between August 2014 and May 2016). The second one was Mehmet Ozhasaki's account. Mr. Haseki was the *AKP* candidate in Ankara in the March 2019 municipal elections. The last one belongs to the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, which is also controlled by the *AKP* government. Accordingly, the *AKP* social media account abstained from sharing media content produced by private or public media companies.

Analysis demonstrates that the situation is not very different in the case of Erdoğan FB account. There were only two external links that the Erdoğan FB account has shared, one belongs to *A Haber* and the other one belongs to *TRT Haber*. *A Haber* and the media company owning *A Haber* are strictly pro-Erdoğan. The CEO of the media company that owns *A Haber* is the brother Berat Albayrak – Erdoğan’s son-in-law. *TRT Haber* is the public television broadcast, which lost its constitutionally protected impartiality and became pro-Erdoğan under the *AKP* government. The rest of the media sources shared by the Erdoğan FB account are digital and produced by Erdoğan’s own media team, who always follow Erdoğan during his daily chores.

Figure 4 below shows types of digital sources shared by the Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB page.



Source: Own compilation

## Media Registration

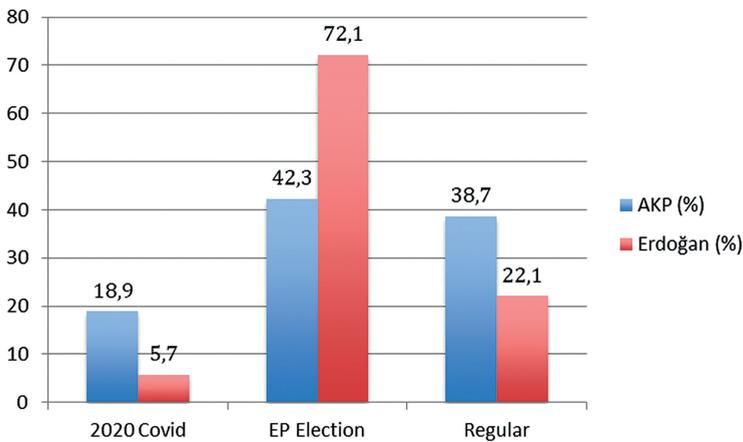
As the great majority of media content shared by the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB account were produced by their own media teams, they are not officially registered as media companies. The only exceptions to this rule are *TRT Haber* and *A Haber* that were shared by the Erdoğan FB account, which only comprise 1.6% of 122 posts of all his posts.

## The dominant political/ideological orientation of the media sources shared

In terms of ideology of the media sources shared by the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB accounts, it would be difficult to make a conclusive assessment. It is clear that *A Haber* shared by the Erdoğan FB account is a right-wing broadcast, which has been generous in its promotion of conspiracy theories allegedly targeting Erdoğan’s rule. For example, *A Haber* suggested that the most recent student protests over Erdoğan’s top-down appointment of a new rector to the Boğaziçi University, one of the leading universities in Turkey, were attempts to incite a second

Gezi against Erdoğan government in Turkey (A Haber 2021).<sup>2</sup> Its content was seen as the most extreme broadcast among two groups of party supporters, 67% of CHP voters viewed the pro-government media outlet *A Haber* “very unfavorably” whereas only 8 % of *AKP* voters thought the same (O’Donohue et al. 2020). The state broadcast *TRT Haber*, which was supposed to be an impartial body according to the Turkish constitution, has also lost its impartiality under the *AKP* government. Therefore, *TRT Haber* has become another broadcast that is strictly controlled by the government. The rest of the posts shared by the *AKP* FB account (111/111 posts) and the Erdoğan FB account (120/122 posts) were content produced by their own teams. As these social media teams are responsible from disseminating the propaganda of their patrons (Erdoğan and the *AKP* respectively), one can suggest that these media sources are following the ideological orientation of the populist *AKP* government (Çınar 2018).

Figure 5: Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular period



Source: Own compilation

Neither the *AKP* nor the Erdoğan FB accounts had changed their primary media sources in the municipal elections period when compared to the no-election periods. Quite similarly, they continued sharing digital sources produced by their own media teams during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Two exceptions to this rule (*A Haber* and *TRT Haber* sources shared by the Erdoğan FB account) were shared in the regular period where there was neither the municipal elections nor the Covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, the role that the public media plays is quite marginal in these two FB accounts. Only one post shared by Erdoğan included content produced by the public broadcast *TRT Haber*.

<sup>2</sup> To this date, the 2013 Gezi Protests remain the most widespread protest wave against Erdoğan and his government. Millions of people took it to the streets in June 2013 after the government’s decision to raze a small park in the famous Taksim Square in İstanbul. Gezi Protests lasted for weeks throughout Turkey. Erdoğan defined this protest wave as a coup attempt against his rule.

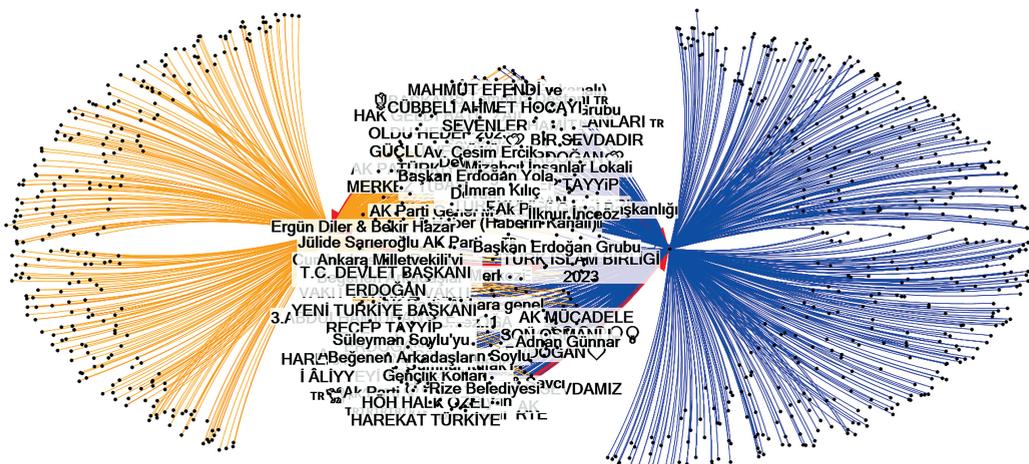
One notable finding is that both the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB accounts shared substantially more media content during the local elections. As explained at the beginning of the article, this period coincided with the highly controversial snap elections in Istanbul after the *AKP* government declined to accept the election results in March 2019. The new elections in Istanbul were scheduled for June 2019 and in this particular period; the *AKP* organization and Erdoğan were campaigning hard to win the snap elections.

## Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts

Our network analysis studied several aspects of the networks of Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB accounts. First, we analyzed whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than other). Second, we studied the network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between these FB accounts and other accounts. Third, we explored the degree of centrality, which basically refers to the overlap between the networks of the *AKP* and Erdoğan. Finally, we were interested to learn which social media accounts were the connectors between the two, and if there were any reciprocal sharing.

We conducted the network analysis with the FB pages of Erdoğan and the *AKP*. Based on the CrowdTangle data (CrowdTangle Team, 2020; Mancuso et al, 2020) analysed with NodeXL, the research team constructed a directed graph. In the center of the analysis were two main vertices: the FB pages of Erdoğan and the *AKP* (See Figure 6 below). This network represents all public pages that have shared posts from these two social media accounts between January 2019 and April 2020. Red arrows, though very few in numbers refer to reciprocity between accounts.

Figure 6: Facebook Populist Network in Turkey



Source: Marincea, 2020

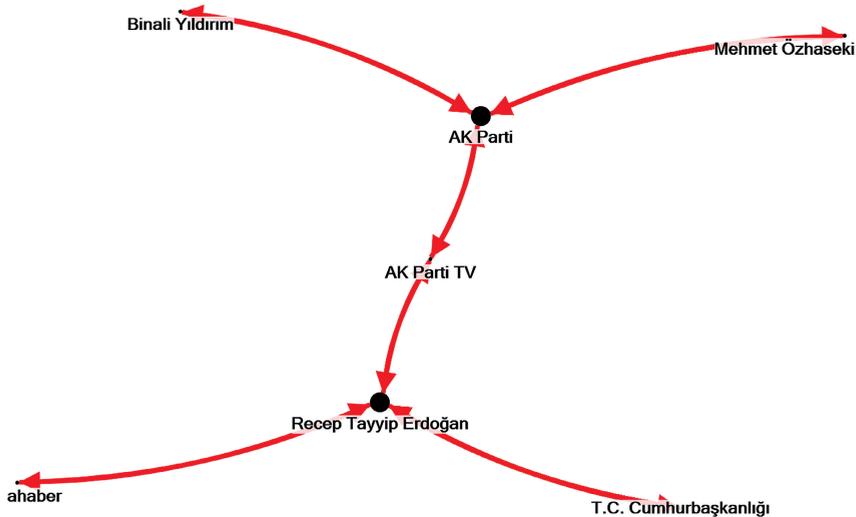
An exploration of Figure 6 reveals that the Erdoğan FB account has a more intensive network than the *AKP* FB account. This finding confirms the literature on populist communication, which argues that leadership is central to populist strategy (Weyland, 2017). This finding also confirms the previous research arguing that Erdoğan is the most important figure of the populist movement in Turkey (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018).

## Reciprocity Network

In the entire network, there were only six reciprocal connections. The Erdoğan FB account had three reciprocal connections with the *AK Parti TV*, *T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı* and *AK Parti TV* accounts. These three accounts are affiliated either with Erdoğan or the *AKP* directly. Hence, the Erdoğan FB account only reciprocated with those accounts closely associated with his social media team and his party.

Similar to the Erdoğan account, the *AKP* FB account had three reciprocal connections. Again, the *AKP* FB account only reciprocated with FB accounts affiliated with the party. *AK Parti TV* is the social media account, which shares media content produced by the *AKP* media team. Binali Yıldırım is the ex-leader of the *AKP*, who was handpicked by Erdoğan himself to look after the *AKP* once Erdoğan fell apart with the then party leader Davutoğlu.<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Ozhaseki served as a minister in the previous *AKP* Cabinets and he was the *AKP* candidate in Ankara in the March 2019 municipal elections. Currently, he is the deputy leader of the *AKP*.

Figure 7: Populist Pages' Reciprocity Network



Source: Marincea, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu was also chosen by Erdoğan himself to lead the *AKP* after he was elected as the new president of Turkey in 2014.



## Conclusions

Social media users in Turkey suffer from the governmental strategy of “networked authoritarianism“. In particular, the *AKP* government relies on digital vigilantism, trolling and lateral surveillance (Parks et al. 2017) in its attempts to control and suppress online dissent. Despite its heavy control over the use of social media in Turkey, the government has continued criticizing social media platforms for inciting terrorism, causing disinformation or trying to fray above the rule of law (Sozcu 2021). Ironically, the social media was one of the mechanisms that helped the *AKP* to stop putschists overthrowing the government in the failed military coup in 2016.

As the analysis revealed, the *AKP* and the Erdoğan FB accounts ignored mainstream media or the public media in their posts. More importantly, their own media production teams created the media content that were shared by these two accounts. In this respect, we can suggest that the populist movement in Turkey has preferred to eliminate intermediaries in its communication with the media. Furthermore, we found that the main promoters of the Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB accounts were acting under pseudo names, hinting that the main promoters were political trolls used by the populist movement in Turkey to disseminate its views and control the political agenda.

Regarding our findings, one particular recommendation of this research would be encouraging social media platforms to regulate social media accounts in terms of their ownership as well as the content these accounts share. Indeed, in 2020, Twitter suspended 7,340 accounts that the *AKP* was using for manipulation and political trolling (Evrensel 2020). However, as the experience of the Trump presidency in the US revealed, FB was more lax in its control of the political content that its users share. This negligence contributes to a social media environment where post-truth propaganda and disinformation could disseminate without any obstruction. Following Verza and Mat (2020), we also recommend other policy actions such as more investment in fact-checking organizations as well as more support for independent online news outlets that indeed became increasingly more important for freedom of expression and information in Turkey after the mainstream media lost its independence in the face of government interventions.

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## **Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Nigel Farage and the UKIP Party in the UK**

This article explores how *UKIP* and Nigel Farage used social media to amplify their message. Mainly digital sources, such as websites and social media, were the preferred source type of both profiles, but more for *UKIP* than for N. Farage. The most shared digital content of both profiles was websites and social media accounts of their political parties. The second most used source type was print media – mainly national newspapers. Radio stations were the least used source by *UKIP*, while TV channels the least used source by N. Farage. The higher use of radio sources concerns links to *LBC Radio*, where he presented a show between 2019 and 2020. TV channels and radio were largely ignored by both profiles as sources. In terms of ownership, sources used by either profile were in their vast majority private due to prevailing type of ownership in the UK. Both profiles relied more on quality newspapers and magazines rather than tabloids but this was often accompanied by a critical approach to the content of such sources. The analysis found that Farage's profile has only four reciprocal connections. In contrast, *UKIP* had a much larger reciprocal network of 25 different pages. While in terms of reciprocity the two profiles maintained different networks, the analysis of centrality showed a significant number of 63 pages shared the profiles of both *UKIP* and Nigel Farage. Although the profile of N. Farage had a much smaller reciprocal network and the number of shares of the two profiles by the central groups disseminating their messages was roughly equal, yet, the *Brexit Party* and N. Farage were the more successful political actors in the period of interest to this study – in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections.

**Keywords:** Facebook, populism, UKIP, Nigel Farage, network analysis, media, Brexit Party, UK

### **Introduction**

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and their networking by selected populist leaders and populist parties in the UK in three periods in 2019 and 2020. The methodology and theoretical underpinning are described in a separate (common)

chapter, therefore this article discusses only specific aspects of the methodology applied to this national case study. The two politically relevant selected populist actors were the United Kingdom Independence Party (*UKIP*) and Nigel Farage, leader of the party from 2006 to 2009 and 2010 and 2016.

N. Farage was selected as a case because of his significance as a quintessential populist leader both of the *UKIP* and the *Brexit Party* (Kelsey 2016; Tournier Sol 2020). In addition to being the leader of both these parties, he was also a Member of the European Parliament and has had a prominent presence in British media, both as a commentator in radio and television programmes as well as because of being the focus of media coverage (Chicon 2020; Kelsey 2016). Soon after he left *UKIP*, he established the *Brexit Party* in November 2018. The *Brexit Party* was renamed into *Reform UK* in early 2021, but N. Farage quit its leadership soon after (Walker 2021). In summer 2021, he became a presenter in the *GB News*, a TV channel that has been described as the UK version of *Fox News* (Waterson 2021).

*UKIP* was selected as a case study because of its representativeness as a radical right, populist party which has had a significant influence in British politics in the last decade. Initially a single-issue party supporting withdrawal from the EU, it performed well in the 2013 local elections and the 2014 European Parliament elections (Cutts, Godwin and Milazzo 2017; Tournier-Sol 2015; Vassilopoulou 2019). Its success has been attributed to several reasons, including tapping into social and economic inequalities and disaffection with mainstream politics (Goodwin 2014), mobilising Eurosceptic tendencies and debates around national sovereignty (Boriello and Brack 2019; Tournier Sol 2015), focusing on immigration as a high-salience issue and (Evans and Mellon 2019; Tournier-Sol 2015), effectively using a populist rhetoric combining hostility to elites with representations of the people as ‘victims’ as well as racist and anti-immigration rhetoric (Breeze 2019; Tournier-Sol 2015), and receiving considerable media coverage (Kelsey 2016; Murphy and Devine 2020). Although its success in national elections has been limited – it only elected one MP in the 2015 elections, and none in subsequent ones – the party has had a significant impact in UK politics. In particular, *UKIP*’s threat to the *Conservative Party* shaped the latter’s agendas on immigration, the European Union and Brexit (Bale et al 2018; Tournier-Sol 2015; 2020; Usherwood 2019). In the case of *UKIP*, the party’s FB page rather than that of the leader was selected as the key social media profile, as following the departure of Nigel Farage and in the period of data collection there were continuous leadership crises in the party (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020).

Data was gathered for three different periods. The selected electoral period for this research is the European Parliament elections of May 2019. This was dominated by the process of Brexit, and in particular issues around the negotiation of the withdrawal agreement with the European Union and its impact on the domestic political landscape, divided at the time over the potential of a ‘no-deal’ Brexit (Vasilopoulou 2020). The regular period selected for this research included the snap national elections of December 2019, triggered by the governing *Conservative Party* in order to address difficulties, due to its lack of Parliamentary majority, in managing the Brexit process (Prosser 2021). The *Brexit Party* opted not to contest seats likely to be won by the *Conservative Party*, due to its waning support since the strengthened *Conservative Party* was in a stronger position to pursue Brexit – the key issue for both parties – to its completion (Prosser

2019). During the ‘COVID’ period, media coverage in the UK was dominated by issues related to the pandemic, and preoccupation with the pandemic led to increased consumption of TV news and online media (Ofcom 2020a; 2020c).

## The Media Landscape

The UK media landscape is considered pluralistic and with a high level of commercialisation, with both public and private TV broadcasters, a range of national and local print newspapers (Binderkrantz et al 2017; Craufurd Smith and Stolte 2012). According to the Reuters International report, adults rely increasingly on online media for news consumption, while the use of television as source of news has declined from 75% in 2019 to 55% in 2020 although the Reuters report notes a subsequent rise in consumption of TV news in following months due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Reuters 2020; Ofcom 2020a). The use of print media for news has similarly declined steeply from between 2013 and 2020, from 59% to 22% in January 2020 (Reuters 2020). News consumption differs among age groups, with younger people (16-24) more likely to use internet sources while older groups remaining attached to TV, radio and print media as news sources (Ofcom 2020a).

Social media penetration in the UK was estimated at 72% in 2020, with 50.89 million users spending on average 102 minutes a day on social media (Statista 2020). Almost three quarters of all UK adults have at least one social media profile. Usage is higher in the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups, with 95% and 93% having at least one social media profile but remains above average in the 35-44 (88%) and 45-54 (82%) age groups (Ofcom 2020b). Almost half of adults use social media for news consumption (Ofcom 2020a). As table 1 shows, FB is the most used for this purpose.

**Table 1:** Social Media Consumption in the UK

Rank Brand	For News	For All
1 Facebook	24% (-4)	65%
2 Twitter	14% (-)	29%
3 YouTube	7% (-3)	51%
4 WhatsApp	7% (-2)	56%
5 Facebook Messenger	5% (-1)	46%
6 Instagram	3% (-1)	30%

Source: Reuters 2020

Trust in media has declined since 2015 by 20 percentage points (Reuters 2020), possibly reflecting the dynamics of Brexit and broader polarisation on controversial issues. Nevertheless, some established media score relatively high for brand trust (Reuters 2020), with the *BBC* being

the most trusted source. UK media have been characterised as Eurosceptic and many established newspapers and other media sources supported Brexit (Reuters 2020). While social media are used for news consumption, trust in them as news sources is low – 6% according to the Reuters International report (2020). Yet, in 2019 26% of users reported that they do not fact-check news content accessed through social media (Ofcom 2020b).

### Populist actors and the media

While the selected populist actors (*UKIP* and Nigel Farage) have been critical of some established media – in particular the *BBC*, their views and agendas have been supported by many UK media, in particular national newspapers *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *Daily Star* while *Daily Mirror*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* were pro-Remain, with *The Times* being pro-Remain during the campaign, but then supporting the government during the withdrawal negotiations (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo 2016; Cushion, Thomas, & Ellis 2015; Hughes 2019; Kelsey 2016; Murphy and Devine 2020; Waterson et al 2019). Hughes (2019) and Murphy and Devine (2020) argued that UK media have given *UKIP* coverage disproportionate to their electoral support, especially on EU-related issues and in advance of the Brexit referendum. While the electoral success of *UKIP* has been limited – for example Nigel Farage, even as the leader of the party, never succeeded in getting elected locally (only to the European Parliament) – they attracted significant attention from the media and had an influence on shaping political agendas in the UK, in particular on immigration and Brexit (Bale et al 2018; Tournier-Sol 2020; Usherwood 2019). Conversely, *UKIP* and the *Brexit Party* has also been regarded as effective in using traditional media to promote their messages (Reed 2016; Hughes 2019). Media interest in *UKIP* appears to have declined after Nigel Farage stood down as a leader after the referendum in 2016 and left the party in 2018 (Tournier-Sol 2020; Usherwood 2019).

*UKIP* and the *Brexit party* (since January 2021 *Reform UK*) have also been adept at using both traditional and social media to disseminate their political agendas and messages (Davidson & Berezin, 2018; Gonawela et al 2018; Loucaides 2019; Savage 2019; Tournier-Sol 2020). Social media platforms have been instrumental in the manner both parties communicate with supporters, disseminate party messages within supportive communities while avoiding direct challenges from political opponents, but also for attracting supporters from other political groups and maintaining links to cognate political parties and groups (Davidson & Berezin, 2018; Loucaides 2020; Klein and Pirro 2020; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020). Nigel Farage, both as the leader of *UKIP* and later *The Brexit Party* has been adept at using both conventional – not limited to news formats but also for example entertainment shows – and social media for reaching out to his followers and disseminating his agenda (Gonawela et al 2018; Chicon 2020; Savage 2019). Further, he controversially had a slot in London Radio Station LBC, allowing him a further venue to disseminate his political message and populist rhetoric (Chichon 2020). Preference for social media usage is also linked to avoidance of fact-checking requirements of the more conventional media, resulting in the possible dissemination of ‘fake news’ (Kramer 2017).

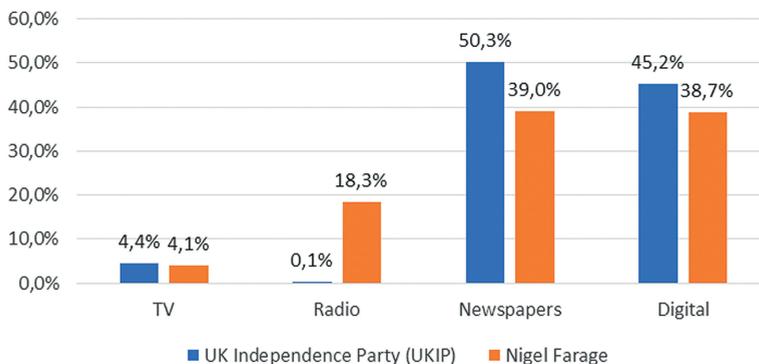
## Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leader and UKIP

This part explores the types of media sources that seem to be by and large preferred by populists. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to figure out what type of media sources seemed to be preferred as well as ignored by populists. The analyses were carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

### Findings: Classification of sources

Digital sources such as websites and social media are by far the preferred source type of both profiles (Figure 1). More than a third of all coded sources used by Nigel Farage are digital, with in the case of *UKIP* the percentage is even higher, almost half of all sources. The second most used source type is print media – mainly national newspapers, which account for about half and 40% of all sources used by the two profiles respectively. Radio stations were the least used source by *UKIP*, while TV channels the least used source by N. Farage. The higher use of radio sources by N. Farage (18%) concerns links to *LBC Radio*, where he presented a show between 2019 and 2020. Nevertheless, one observation we can draw from the findings is that TV channels and radio were largely ignored by both profiles as sources, while the also low presence of links to print media reflects the broader decline of consumption of print news in the UK (Reuters 2020; Ofcom 2020a).

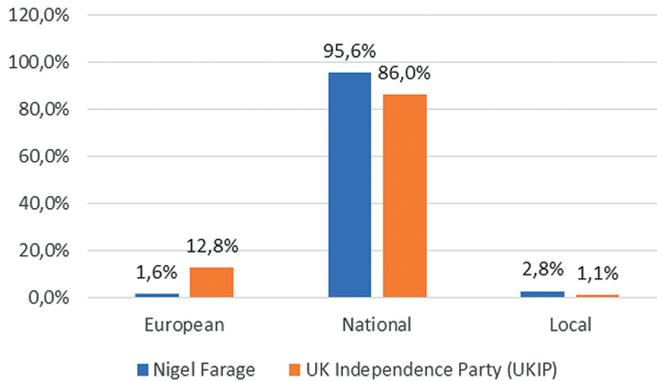
Figure 1: Types of sources



Source: Own compilation

Further, clear majority of all sources shared by N. Farage and by *UKIP* have a national focus in terms of coverage, with European and regional sources being shared considerably less – more so for *UKIP* (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Coverage of sources

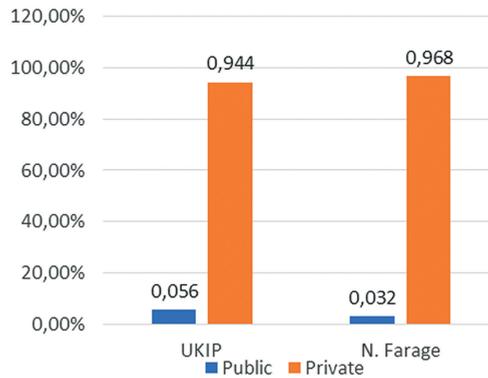


Source: Own compilation

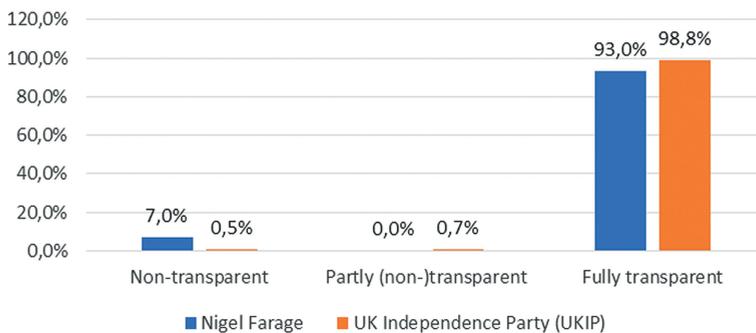
In terms of ownership, sources used by either profile were in their vast majority private (Figure 3). One reason for the extremely high percentage of sources coded as private is the predominantly private and commercial character of media in the two national contexts of most sources used by the two profiles, the UK and the US (Binderkrantz et al 2017; Craufurd Smith and Stolte 2012). In the UK, for example, only two broadcasters, the *BBC* and *Channel4* can be characterised as public, while most print and online media are privately owned. A further reason is the presence of mainly FB and YouTube social media accounts of individuals or groups, and in particular of their own profiles and the *UKIP* party. The high use of social media sources also accounts for a relatively high proportion of sources that are not registered as media or news sources, constituting 32.2% of all sources used by *UKIP* and 33.9% by N. Farage.

Nevertheless, this has little bearing on the transparency of ownership of shared sources (Figure 4). Most UK-based news sources such as print newspapers and online news are registered as companies or are owned by media groups. This information is stated as rule in their webpages and can be further confirmed through a government website<sup>1</sup>. US and European media sources also contain similar information on ownership and editorial personnel. Further, other websites and social media sources shared by both profiles are on the whole clear in terms of ownership, either belonging to named individuals or groups such as, for example, various *UKIP* branches in the UK. Less transparent sources – especially in terms of funding – tend to be associated with conservative and alternative right websites and social media accounts such as the website *Brexit Central*, the YouTube channels of *Prager U* and *Brexbox* (a news site associated with the *Brexit party* but with no information on funding sources or key personnel), the webpages of political commentator Guido Fawkes and the *Conservative Woman* blog.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>

**Figure 3: Ownership of sources**

Source: Own compilation

**Figure 4: Transparency of Ownership**

Source: Own compilation

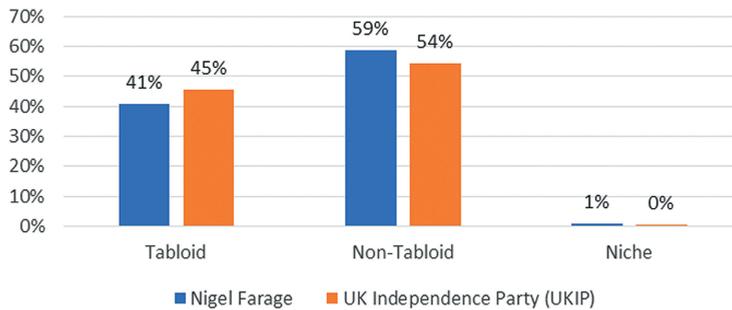
Further analysis of the print and digital sources also reveals some interesting patterns. Both profiles rely more on quality newspapers and magazines (54% for *UKIP* and 59% for N. Farage) rather than tabloid<sup>2</sup> ones (Figure 5). While this could be interpreted as an effort to rely on respected mainstream media not identified as populist, it should also be noted that in some cases links to such newspapers are accompanied by posts critical of the news contained in the linked source<sup>3</sup>.

The analysis of types of digital sources shared also revealed some interesting patterns (Figure 6). None of the profiles shared citizen journalism sources, and only *UKIP* shared a relatively

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between ‘quality’ and ‘tabloid’ newspapers here relies on the content and journalistic style of the newspapers used by the two profiles.

<sup>3</sup> For example, <https://www.facebook.com/UKIP/posts/2659403670748173>

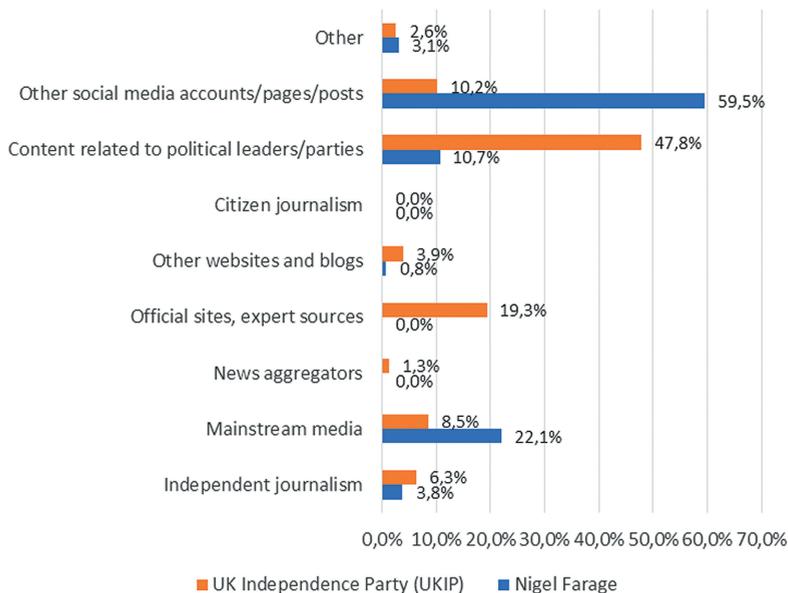
Figure 5: Types of Print Sources



Source: Own compilation

high number of official or expert sources (20%). Shares of news aggregators were extremely limited. Farage shared rather relatively high level of mainstream media sources. The most shared digital content of *UKIP* profile was websites and social media accounts of political parties. However, Farage was more diverse, with majority of shared posts classifies as “others”. In the case of the profile of N. Farage, all sources shared correspond to his own YouTube channel and FB page as well as FB posts by other *Brexit* party candidates and the official *Brexit* party account. Similarly, nearly all sources – with the exception of two *Labour* party sites – shared through the

Figure 6: Types of digital media



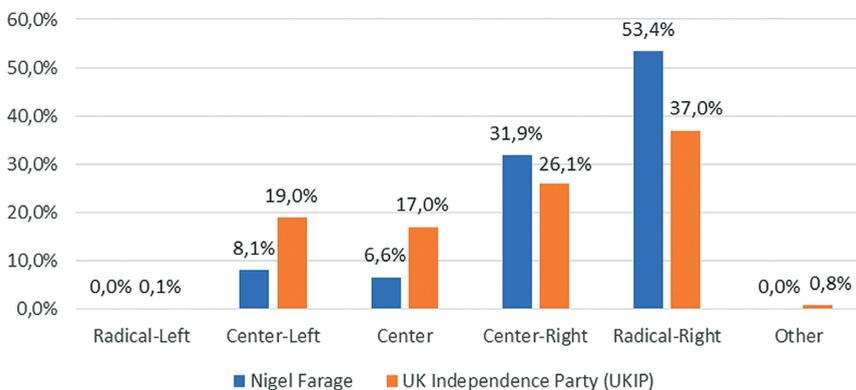
Source: Own compilation

*UKIP* account correspond to web pages and social media accounts linked to the party and its election candidates.

Therefore, the use of digital sources confirms existing research findings that *UKIP* and Farage use social media to amplify their message (Gonawela et al 2018; Klein and Pirro 2020; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020). The relatively high use of other, non-party, social media accounts and other websites by *UKIP* also appears to amplify populist messages: among such sources are several right wing commentators, some associated with alternative right views, such as UK commentators Katie Hopkins, who was banned from Twitter for promoting hate speech and YouTube commentator Sargon of Akkad (real name Carl Benjamin), an unsuccessful *UKIP* candidate and far-right activist eventually banned from YouTube for advocating the rape of a MP<sup>4</sup> (Klein and Pirro 2020).

The political orientation of the shared sources (Figure 7) also suggests a similar pattern of amplification of centre-right and right-wing ideologies and discourses. Sources with a radical right orientation were the most frequently shared by both *UKIP* and N. Farage (over a third and over a half respectively). The second most often source type was actually centre-right for both actors. It is difficult to draw strong conclusions on the basis of this finding, but the use of more centrist and even centre-left sources by both profiles suggests an effort to appear moderate. N. Farage, in particular, is thought to have distanced himself from *UKIP* over the latter's increasingly extreme political agendas (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020), although his social media communications have often adopted tropes that are racist and hostile to migration (Stone 2020) *UKIP* has tried to attract *Conservative* voters, although under the G. Batten leadership it increasingly associated itself with the far-right political spectrum (Klein and Pirro 2020; Ridge-Newman 2020; Weaver et al 2018).

Figure 7: Political orientation of sources



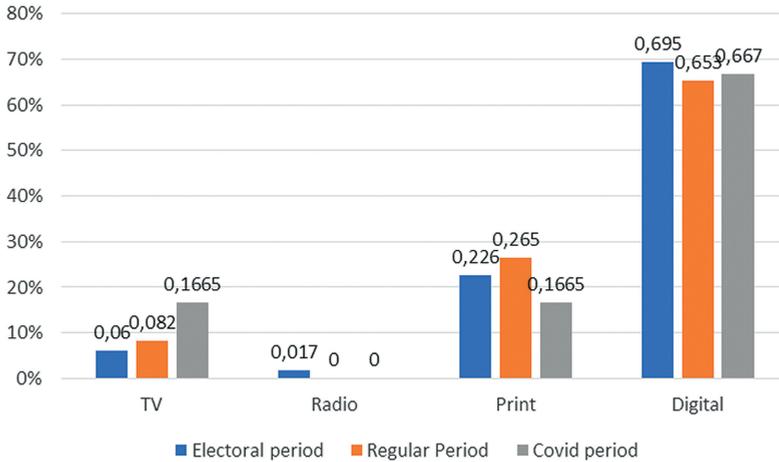
Source: Own compilation

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.buzzfeed.com/markdistefano/youtube-says-sargon-of-akkad-has-been-suspended-from-being>

### Electoral v. non electoral coverage

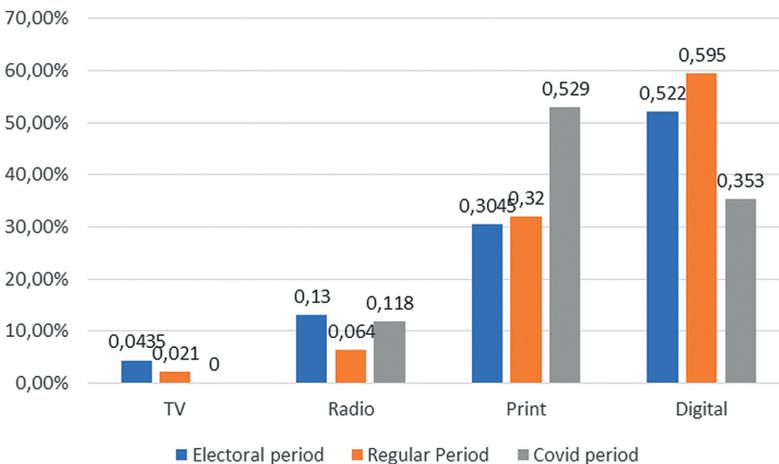
Some differences in the way sources were used by the two profiles can be observed during the three selected periods. Unlike *UKIP*, which used a similar number of sources during the election and regular periods, N. Farage shared approximately half the number of sources during the election period than in the regular one (Figures 8 and 9). In the case of *UKIP*, digital sources remain

**Figure 8:** Use of Sources during selected periods – UKIP



Source: Own compilation

**Figure 9:** Use of Sources during selected periods – N. Farage



Source: Own compilation

the most shared type among all three periods, with a slightly higher use of print sources during the regular period (Figure 8). Similarly, digital sources were the most shared by the profile of N. Farage in the electoral and regular periods, but print sources were the most shared during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Figure 9). Two conservative daily newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph*, had the highest number of shares (six each) during this period, suggesting again the positioning of N. Farage in the right of the political spectrum. A further difference from the profile of UKIP is again that shares of radio sources are the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in the profile of Nigel Farage, again due to sharing content exclusively by *LBC radio*. A limitation, however, is that both profiles share considerably fewer sources during the COVID-19 period (Table 2).

The pattern of ownership of sources in the three periods, by both profiles, remains the same as in the overall results: the overwhelming majority of shared sources are privately owned (Charts 8 & 9).

**Table 2:** Shares of sources in the selected periods

	UKIP			N. Farage		
	Electoral period	Regular period	Covid period	Electoral period	Regular period	Covid period
TV	7	8	1	1	1	0
Radio	2	0	0	3	3	2
Print	26	26	1	7	15	9
Digital	80	64	4	12	28	6
Total	115	98	6	23	47	17

Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

## Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share UKIP and populist leaders' posts

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than the other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of inter-connection between different pages. Third, the degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing.

### Network reciprocity

One striking difference between the two networks concerns the number of reciprocal connections with other profiles. The analysis found that profile of N. Farage had only four reciprocal connections: with *The Brexit Party*, which he was leading, the newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*,

**Table 3:** Reciprocal connections

<b>Reciprocity</b>	<b>Page</b>
The Brexit Party	Nigel Farage
Michael Heaver	Nigel Farage
LBC	Nigel Farage
The Telegraph	Nigel Farage
UKIP Oldham Branch	UKIP
UKIP Wales	UKIP
Richard Braine, Brexit Now	UKIP
David Kurten AM	UKIP
Elizabeth Jones for Brexit.	UKIP
Gareth Bennett	UKIP
Leave.EU	UKIP
Mike Hookem	UKIP
Neil Hamilton MS/AS	UKIP
Raheem Kassam	UKIP
Robert Hill UKIP	UKIP
UKIP Rotherham	UKIP
RT UK	UKIP
Sargon of Akkad	UKIP
Ernie Warrender UKIP	UKIP
UKIP Gravesham	UKIP
UKIP Scotland	UKIP
I'm voting UKIP in the next election	UKIP
UKIP Northern Ireland	UKIP
UKIP Oldham Branch	UKIP
UKIP Veterans	UKIP
UKIP Wales	UKIP
War Plan Purple	UKIP
UKIPEastMidlands	UKIP
Young Independence	UKIP

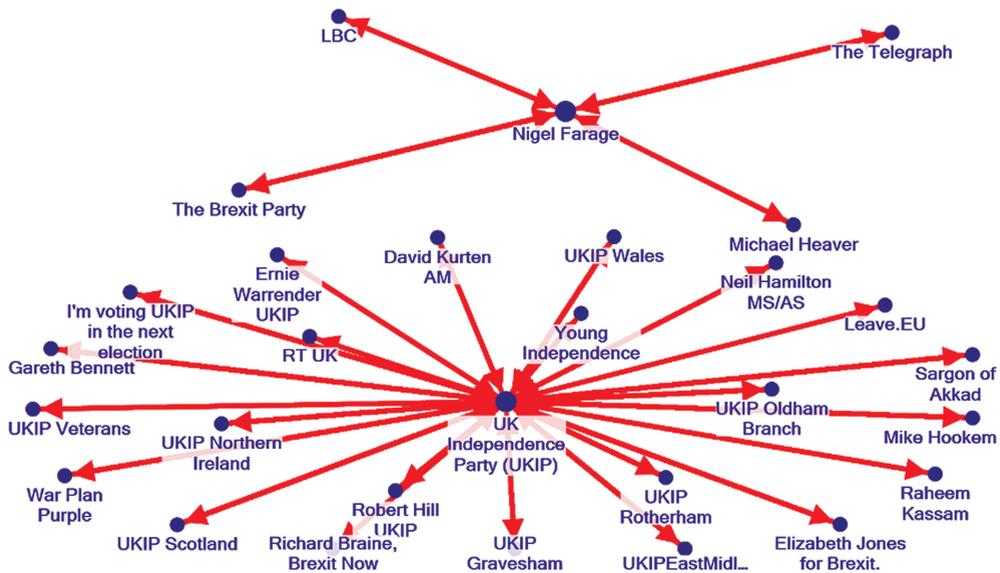
Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

the radio station *LBC*, where he presented a programme, and the MEP candidate Michael Heaver (Table 3, Figure 10). The latter also run a website – *Westmonster.com* – that features among the sources shared by N. Farage. All other three reciprocal profiles were also among the sources shared a significant number of times by N. Farage: *the Brexit Party* 66 times, *LBC Radio* 54, and *The Telegraph* 47.

In contrast, *UKIP* had a much larger reciprocal network of 25 different profiles. The scope of these reciprocal connections is however rather narrow. They include *UKIP* local branches and specific groups – youth, veterans and War Plan Purple, the ‘cultural wing’ of *UKIP* (Klein and Pirro 2020), *UKIP* MPs, MEPs and candidates, a former *UKIP* advisor, and an unofficial campaign group, *I’m voting UKIP in the next elections*<sup>5</sup>. The Brexit campaign website – *Leave.eu* also features among the reciprocal connections, suggesting the affinity of *UKIP* with support for Brexit. Only one news profile, *RT UK*, features among the reciprocal connections. However, the strength of reciprocal connections is variable – for example, the two profiles of Mike Hookem, one of the *UKIP* MEPs, were shared a total of 99 times during the election period, but the profiles of some other candidates just once or twice (Mancuso et al 2020).

One factor explaining the discrepancy in the sizes of the reciprocal networks of the two profiles might be the relatively recent establishment of the *Brexit Party*, which was founded in April 2019, soon before the European Parliament Elections in May 2019. For example, some of the branch FB pages – which in the case of *UKIP* constitute a considerable part of the reciprocal

Figure 10: Reciprocal network



Source: Marincea, 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ukipman/>

network – were set up between May and September 2019<sup>6</sup>, some after the election on May 23 2019. However, the limited reciprocal network of the Nigel Farage profile could also suggest a strategy of orienting his campaign towards other resources or keeping a tighter but stronger social media network.

A last observation is that the two reciprocal networks do not overlap. This can be attributed partly to electoral competition, since both parties in the 2019 EP election were competing in attracting the Brexit-supporting, right wing, nationalist electorate, as well as to the distance between N. Farage and *UKIP* from which he resigned (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020).

## Centrality

While in terms of reciprocity the two profiles maintain different networks, the analysis of centrality shows that there was a significant number of 63 profiles that have shared both the profiles of *UKIP* and Nigel Farage (Annex 1, Figure 11). This finding in itself suggests strong connections between the two profiles, which become clearer with the closer consideration of the types of central profiles. First, a significant number are groups supporting Brexit. At least 24 (some have closed down since the data collection or are private) out of the 63 profiles are Brexit-supporting groups, and an additional three anti-EU, while a further three groups opposing Brexit. Six profiles are ‘appreciations groups’ for Brexit-supporting, Conservative politicians. A further five are groups not exclusively focused on Brexit but with broader conservative, alt-right and anti-immigration politics, as well as at least one which has content promoting COVID-19 denialist views. While some of these groups tend to share one profile more than the other – for example, the top two sharers, *I’m a Brexiteer* and the *Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Group* shared nearly twice as many posts by N. Farage than *UKIP* – the dynamics of Brexit appear to be a crucial factor in shaping network centrality around the two profiles.

A further noticeable feature of network centrality is the presence of groups that were directly linked to either the two parties, such as *UKIP* local branches or *Brexit Party* supporters’ groups. Some of these parties tended to share one profile – the one they are linked with – more than the other. For example, the *UKIP Sutton Surrey* and *Warrington and Leamington* local FB groups shared mostly posts of the *UKIP* profile, while *The Brexit party: Supporters* and *BREXIT PARTY SUPPORTERS UK* privileged N. Farage posts. Yet, in some cases, such as the Bury, Lancashire *UKIP* group there is a smaller difference between the number of shares. This pattern is significant given the absence of reciprocity from the N. Farage profile. In essence, even though he had left *UKIP*, FB pages linked to the party continued to disseminate his profile.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Jackstreeterbrexitparty/>, <https://www.facebook.com/CoventryWarwickshireBrexitbranch/>, <https://www.facebook.com/TheBrexitPartyMK/>



with controversial or politically extreme content – for example on migration or Brexit. Both *UKIP* and Nigel Farage have made efforts to distance themselves from extreme right views in the past. Hence, their use of reliable, establishment sources can be seen in the context of strategies to present themselves as politically mainstream political actors, different from more extreme ones – for example far-right ultranationalist and Islamophobic groups such as English Defence League (EDL) and *Britain First* – in the UK political environment.

While mainstream and independent media content, as well as social media content not linked directly to the two profiles or their parties was shared by the two profiles, it was digital content produced by the two profiles or their party mechanisms such as local party branches profiles on FB that was most frequently shared by both profiles. This is consistent with the arguments of existing research on the strategies of *UKIP* and N. Farage as well as on other populist parties (Kramer 2017; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020; Savage 2019; Weaver et al 2018). In the case of N. Farage, his sharing of content linked to *LBC Radio*, where he was a presenter during the selected time periods, illustrates the same tendency. Further, while the reciprocal network of N. Farage is limited, *UKIP*'s reciprocal network consisted almost exclusively of accounts connected to the party, further suggesting a strategy of amplifying the party's political message within a network positively disposed towards *UKIP*.

The political orientation of the sources shared by the two profiles also provides some insights into their political communication strategies and agendas. While both profiles share content from websites that can be classified as centre left and centrist, most of the shared sources are within the ideological spectrum of the right. In particular, sources with a radical right orientation are the most frequently shared by N. Farage. Whereas this classification covers their party-generated content, other prominent alt right sources feature among those shared by either or both profiles, such as news outlets like *Breitbart*, *Guido Fawkes*, *Fox News*, YouTube channels such as *Prager U* and commentators such as Katie Hopkins. In short, both profiles disseminate predominantly centre-right and far right alt-right views (Klein and Pirro 2020) and appear to support the view that *UKIP* has 'filled a discursive gap after the *BNP* (*British National Party*), *Britain First*, and *EDL* were censored from social media platforms' (Klein and Pirro 2020: 1395; also Hern 2019). The findings support Klein and Pirro's (2020) argument that after the Brexit referendum, *UKIP*'s political communication strategies tried to target alt-right audiences active in particular online, insofar that the sources shared by the party's profile reflect this ideological space.

Nevertheless, the analysis of reciprocity suggests that this effort was not reciprocated by influential alt-right or right-wing media as none feature among the party's reciprocal network. Rather, the main disseminators of the two profiles' messages in the selected periods were other profiles supporting the 2016 referendum vote for leaving the EU, including FB groups with Brexit as their key focus, as well as appreciation groups of politicians who supported Brexit, and secondarily groups representing party branches or supporting either *UKIP* or the *Brexit Party*.

However, more research would be required to explore the relation between the findings of this research on social media networks and electoral success. The profile of N. Farage has a much smaller reciprocal network and the number of shares of the two profiles by the central groups disseminating their messages was roughly equal – 3406 for N. Farage compared to 3347 for *UKIP*. Yet, the *Brexit Party* and N. Farage were the more successful political actors in the period

of interest to this study – in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, it elected 29 MEs, while *UKIP* failed to elect any (Fella, Uberoi and Cracknell 2019). Hence, while online networks and strategies are important in understanding the impact of populist parties, other factors need to be taken into account when considering their electoral impact.

#### Annex 1

Centrality	Shared N. Farage	Shared UKIP	TOTAL
I'M A BREXITEER	431	288	719
Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Group	441	274	715
UKIP – Sutton Surrey	13	390	403
UKIP Warwick and Leamington	44	334	378
Brexit Newsgroup	207	115	322
THE SILENT MAJORITY (UK)	174	114	288
Ex-UKIP Supporters	53	122	175
Reunite EU – British European Rejoiners	31	139	170
Forever Europeans (Remain in the European Union)	12	141	153
UKIP Brent and Camden Branch	19	132	151
The Bruges Group	86	50	136
UKIP Bury, Lancashire	56	64	120
BRITAIN BEYOND BREXIT	76	35	111
THE EU IS A FAILED 'STATE'.	77	29	106
The (unofficial) Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Society	71	32	103
We are the British People	67	34	101
Police Alerts UK & News reports	78	20	98
The Brexit party: Supporters	85	13	98
Brexit, Great Britain & Beyond: The Right Way Forward	67	27	94
BREXIT PARTY SUPPORTERS UK	79	12	91
Sir Iain Duncan Smith appreciation group	53	38	91
Fishing For Leave	76	14	90
Sack Remain Rebels From Parliament	61	24	85
UKIP Central Suffolk and Ipswich	14	71	85
Boris Johnson Appreciation Group	46	38	84
The People's Voice UK	45	34	79
Anti EU – Pro British	51	27	78
Campaign for bringing Tony Blair to Justice	40	36	76
Jacob Rees-Mogg Back-up Group	48	28	76
Brexit Christchurch	18	57	75

Centrality	Shared N. Farage	Shared UKIP	TOTAL
Concerned of the United Kingdom & our freedom from the EU.	57	17	74
The Brexit Central HQ: Public	44	24	68
We Love Our Country, Vote Leave	56	11	67
Brexit: The future of Britain – Daily Express group	39	24	63
We Support Jacob Rees-Mogg!	39	22	61
The Very Brexit Problems club	13	46	59
The List – An Active Voice	37	20	57
THE 17.4 MILLION WANT NO DEAL The Nick Simon Group	34	20	54
National English Unity	28	25	53
The Brexit Party Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire	34	19	53
Pro United Kingdom-Anti E.U.	27	25	52
Cannock Chase Open Discussion Group	15	34	49
YELLOW VEST HULL	17	31	48
The List	35	11	46
I hate the BBC	14	30	44
UK Brexit.	21	19	40
OFFICIAL BREXIT PEACEFUL BUT LOUD AND PROUD RALLIES	11	28	39
Bassetlaw Coronavirus Covid-19 Support Group	26	12	38
BREXIT NEWS	26	12	38
BREXIT PARTY North West Supporters	26	12	38
Britain's Got Brexiteers	27	11	38
UKIP West Hertfordshire	12	25	37
The independent britain north east group	17	18	35
All Politicians Are Self Serving Bastards	12	20	32
Why leave the EU?	14	18	32
Brexit – Daily Mail group	17	14	31
Operation Overlord	15	14	29
Battle for Britain	18	10	28
Leavers of Yorkshire	14	12	26
Politics & Beyond. The Fightback!	15	10	25
PROUD TO BE BRITISH	14	10	24
Bin the BBC	12	11	23
Total Shares	3405	3347	6752

Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

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## Media Sources Shared and Networking on Facebook. A Comparative Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Populist leaders tend to be more popular and more followed than their parties or movements. Exceptions, like Igor Matovič, or Jaroslaw Kaczyński, confirm the rule. The major differences in party versus leader's popularity („likes“) could be found for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Matteo Salvini, Alexis Tsipras and their respective parties. These three leaders were clearly FB stars (with caveat that Tsipras was actually not populist in his communication) and their parties seemed to be much less relevant for those who used FB. The most negative significant divergence in popularity on FB between a party and a party leader was noticed in the case of PiS and Jaroslaw Kaczyński. Kaczyński's FB page could be called as a niche phenomenon in Polish political communication. Also, Kaczyński was the least frequent actual user of FB among party leaders as well as the leader with the lowest popularity („likes“ in absolute and relative numbers) among political leaders in our sample among FB users. Similarly, FB seemed to be a rather irrelevant tool for *PiS* considering its FB popularity, although *PiS* actually communicated quite actively on this platform.

While populists tend to be associated with alternative, highly biased, radical or conspiratorial media sources, the analyses in the national case studies showed that these types of sources were exceptions rather than the norm in almost all cases. The most often shared sources were digital sources or social networks. The least often shared were radio or TV channels. The rather ambiguous ideology promoted by Luigi di Maio and Boris Kollár was also reflected in their preferences for ideologically diverse media sources.

**Keywords:** Facebook, Populism, Media, Network Analysis, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, UK

We explored media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and the networks of populist leaders and populist parties. The methodology and theoretical underpinnings of the research are laid out in a separate chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to examine selected results from a compara-

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

tive perspective. In addition to comparing selected findings (to be specified further) from case studies, we present here some original comparisons based on additional data (to be specified further). The case studies focused on France, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Poland, Turkey and United Kingdom (UK). This country selection reflects the importance of populism in these countries either in a long-term perspective (France, Greece, Italy and Slovakia), or during a relatively shorter period (let us say a decade), but having significant impact on the country. Such examples of impact were considered to be UK's exit from the European Union (EU) or Poland's challenges to EU policies and European values in what concerns the rule of law and democracy (see, e.g. Kustra-Rogatka 2020 or the European Commission the 2020 Rule of Law Report).<sup>2</sup>

Some countries or case studies could be considered from both shorter and longer impact perspectives. For example, Greece has been a case of populist politics for decades (Pappas 2014, Mudde 2017) that, however, resulted in EU-wide implications, threatening the very existence of the financial system (European Monetary Union), and implicitly, possibly the political system of other EU member states in the 2015 „Grexit“ crisis. As put by Miguel Otero-Iglesias:<sup>3</sup> „The Grexit Summer of 2015 will be remembered as a key moment in the history of the European monetary union. We were very close, indeed, to see for the first time a member state leave the Eurozone“ (Otero-Iglesias 2016, p.3). Or, as put by Gaikwad, Scheve and Weinreb (2015, p.1): „At stake was a decision with deep ramifications for the political and economic future of both Greece and Europe.“

Of course, this sample could also include additional countries with presence of important populist parties and leaders such as the Netherlands or Hungary. However, we limited our sample to countries where we could rely on cooperation with local or international experts.

Moreover, further selection of parties and leaders took into account their specific role in local politics as reflected in „power“ or „intensity“ of populism measured among these populist subjects. This can be seen in the following Table 1.

After reviewing available populist datasets, among many available but still imperfect populist indices, we selected the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset as arguably the most reliable. It measures populism by means of expert survey, where populism is operationalized using various sub-indicators, on a scale of 0-10. We used as reference a dataset that contains the mean expert judgments per political party.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Brussels, 30.9.2020, SWD(2020) 320 final, Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Poland, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1602579986149&uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0320>

<sup>EP</sup> Press Releases, 14-07-2020 Rule of law in Poland: MEPs point to “overwhelming evidence” of breaches, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200712IPR83209/rule-of-law-in-poland-meps-point-to-overwhelming-evidence-of-breaches>

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**Table 1:** The Level of Populism Based on POPPA Data Set (2018)

Country	Political Party /Political Leader	Level of Populism
France	Front National /National Front/ <i>Rassemblement national</i> / RN, <i>National Rally</i> / <i>Marine Le Pen</i>	9.07
France	<i>La France Insoumise</i> (Rebellious France or Unbowed France /LFI / Jean-Luc Mélenchon	8.45
Greece	Syriza /Alexis Tsipras	7.63
Italy	M5S /Five Stars Movement/ Luigi di Maio	9.46
Italy	Lega /The League / Matteo Salvini	8.60
Poland	Law and Justice Party/ PiS /Jaroslaw Kaczynski	9.20
Poland	Konfederacja (Confederation)	Not included (9.31 under old name)
Slovakia	Sme rodina /We are a Family / Boris Kollár	7.83
Slovakia	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities / OĽaNO / Igor Matovič	7.01
Turkey	The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) / Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Not included
UK	United Kingdom Independence Party /UKIP//Nigel Farage	6.99
	Average Populism Score of selected sample:	<b>8.36</b>
	Average Populism Score of entire 28 countries dataset	4.39

Source: Own compilation and summary calculation based on POPPA dataset <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

As can be seen in the Table 1, all selected populist parties showed rather high level of populism. On average, it reached 8.36 degrees on a 10 points scale. Occasionally, an argument could be made that we should have included political parties that were even more populist, such as more radical right wing rather than mostly typical populist parties selected here. However, primarily selection was done by local experts, and it took into consideration the participation in the European Parliament elections in 2019. Moreover, those more radical parties with a right wing authoritarian tendency either did not play an important role in politics, being ostracised to a certain degree by other populist or non-populist parties, as was the case of *Kotlebovci – LSNS* (*Kotlebovci – People’s Party – Our Slovakia*) in Slovakia, and/or their top representatives were sentenced for neo-fascist tendencies, specifically for running a criminal organization, such as as the *Popular Association – Golden Dawn (XA)* in Greece. In fact, the same happened to Marián Kotleba, the leader of *Kotlebovci-LSNS*, who was sentenced (subject to appeal) to jail for spreading fascists symbols.

Fundamentally, we attempted to make a distinction between populism and left or right (authoritarian) radicalism. This worked in most cases except France where the populist political spectrum is clearly and sharply divided into left-right dimensions. In other words, it is primarily defined by ideology rather than ideologically empty or populism. Similarly, the cases selected for

Greece and Italy also resemble some left-right dimensions, but in more subtle ways. It should be noted here that in such cases it is questionable whether we discuss left-wing populist party or/and a leader (e.g. *La France Insoumise* – Rebellious France or Unbowed France (*LF*) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon) or primarily populist subject. Following logical division, if there is prevailing and relatively coherent ideology, then priority in conceptualisation/terminology should be given to ideology, while populism is often just the way or style in which this ideology is expressed. Thus, *LF* would rather be categorized primarily as radical *left* party and only secondarily defined as (more) populist.

Conversely, another case is that of parties or movements with no clear-cut ideology and/or a mixed, contradictory or changing ideology, where policies are often unstable and rhetoric shows typical populist features such as anti-elitism, cherishing “the people” etc. In this case, then it is more likely that the political party or movement be categorized as a typical *populist* movement, often – especially in Central-Eastern Europe, an anti-corruption one. This is the case of *Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO)* and Igor Matovič in Slovakia.

As mentioned, selected Italian cases (*M5S /Five Stars Movement/* led (then) by Luigi di Maio and the *Lega (The League)* led by Matteo Salvini) are more complicated cases for making such conceptualisation, although they are also showing some left-right distinctions. This discussion is important since, for example, Greek *Syriza* led by Alexis Tsipras showed high level of populism according to POPPA, but, in fact, the analysis presented in this volume on Greece (as well as previously cited analysis in that particular case study on Greece) showed that there was actually no populism in Tsipras’ communication on FB. This finding raises a number of important questions such as – can we have a populist party with a non-populist leader, or at least one with a non-populist discourse strategy on social media? Is Tsipras only occasionally populist, or does he employ different communication tactics in different settings? Similarly, how can we understand Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s reluctance to communicate on FB? These questions cannot solely be answered in our present analysis, which can be seen as a limitation of the research, but they are directions for further inquiry in the study of populist communication and tactics.

Although our comparative approach does not focus on causes of populism, nonetheless, some of the case studies compared here revealed possible deeper salient issues or metapolitical questions causing populism to flourish. It is worthy to mention them here too – keeping in mind that these are advanced by the authors of the respective case studies, who usually found inspiration in works of others. Thus, in case of Poland (see case study), politics seems to be dominated by the question of who has the moral right to govern Poland, an issue most openly advocated by PiS. For Turkey (see case study), it is the socio-cultural divide from the past that pitted the ruling elites of the “center” against a culturally heterogeneous “periphery” or vice-versa. In other words, it is about feeling abandoned or ignored by the elite.

In case of UK (see case study), the populist upsurge then represented by *UKIP* reflected issues of sovereignty at the national level boosted by a key political decision on immigration. In other words, the metapolitical question was sovereignty as contemplated primarily, but not exclusively over the issue of migration. In case of France (see case study), the leftist *LF* is probably an attempt to use an agonistic cleavage between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in a radical individualised form of the French left. In contrast, for the right *FN/RN*, the hatred of foreigners and immigrants

is the main motivation. This can be translated as a protectionist vision of society in both cases. For Slovakia (see case study), while *OLaNO* can be seen as an anti-corruption movement, tolerant of minorities and to large degree benevolent towards migrants, right-wing movement *We are a Family (WAF)* is claiming to protect local population against potential migrants and other threats or sins or omissions (a lack of action or policy) committed by (then or previous) ruling elite. Yet the metapolitical question connecting both cases is the juxtaposition of a corrupt (in broad terms) versus a fair and just society.

In case of Greece (see case study), while long-term causes of populism were deeply rooted in poorly performing institutions at all levels, the rise of *Syriza* could be seen as a mirroring crisis of political representation (specifically, pro – and anti-austerity/memorandum policies), enhanced by the salience of the materialist cleavage. In case of Italy (see case study), ‘refugee crisis’ marks a crucial point in contemporary politics, giving rise to the *Lega* and Salvini at a national level, while *M5S* voiced primarily overall distrust towards political elites. Indeed, Italy is infamous with its instability of governments, thus showing a long-term crisis of representation of traditional parties. However, it should be mentioned again that populism in majority of these case studies has longer history – meaning also deeper roots. It appears that behind the rise of populism in all above mentioned cases lies a lack of ability or interest of mainstream actors in addressing timely and successfully national and/or supranational societal challenges (Kriesi 2015).

### Populists and Facebook

Our research had two analytical parts. First, we explored sources shared by populist leaders and/or populist parties on FB. Second, we examined the network analysis of sources that shared populist leaders’ and/or populist parties’ posts on FB. Before presenting this partial analysis, we show here some overview of populist parties/leaders’ performance on FB to allow a reader to become familiar with general FB communication context in a comparative perspective. First, we show in the Table 2 dates when populist parties or leaders joined FB, and what was their popularity in terms of „likes“ and „followers“ in early March 2021.

**Table 2:** Selected Parties/Leaders on FB (Total Numbers, March 1, 2021)

Party/ Leader	Year when Party/ Leader joined FB	Number of Likes	Number of Followers	FB Link
RN Marine Le Pen	August 2008 May 2010	467,009 1,568,588	451,149 1,609,684	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/RassemblementNational">https://www.facebook.com/RassemblementNational</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/MarineLePen">https://www.facebook.com/MarineLePen</a>
LFI Jean-Luc Mélenchon	February 2016 April 2008	170,569 1,106,068	218,834 1,241,727	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/lafranceinsoumise">https://www.facebook.com/lafranceinsoumise</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/JLMelenchon">https://www.facebook.com/JLMelenchon</a>

Syriza	November 2008	116,016	114,307	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/syrizaofficial">https://www.facebook.com/syrizaofficial</a>
Alexis Tsipras	March 2008	465,742	472,381	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/tsiprasalexis">https://www.facebook.com/tsiprasalexis</a>
M5S /Five Stars Movement (change of name)	October 2009/	1,477,111	1,543,420	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/movimento5stelle">https://www.facebook.com/movimento5stelle</a>
(then) Luigi di Maio	February 2015 September 2008	2,332,749	2,644,741	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio">https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio</a>
The Lega (change of name from Lega Nord Padania to Lega – Salvini Premier)	July 2012/ December 2017	804,46	1,040,167	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier">https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier</a>
Matteo Salvini	January 2010	4,498,043	4,856,361	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial">https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial</a>
Law and Justice Party/ PiS	O c t o b e r 2009	288,197	299,178	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl">https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl</a>
Jaroslav Kaczyński	March 2014	16,850	18,477	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/kaczynskijarowlaw">https://www.facebook.com/kaczynskijarowlaw</a>
Confederation (change of name from Konfederacja KORWiN Braun Liroy Narodowcy to Konfederacja)	February 2019 / July 2019	483,901	599,708	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/KONFEDERACJA2019">https://www.facebook.com/KONFEDERACJA2019</a>
Sme rodina /We are a Family/	November 2015	105,406	119,084	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/HnutieSmeRodina">https://www.facebook.com/HnutieSmeRodina</a>
Boris Kollár	July 2015	139,974	147,996	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/BorisKollarOfficial">https://www.facebook.com/BorisKollarOfficial</a>
OLaNO	January 2012	172,979	228,440	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/obycajni.ludia.a.nezavisle.osobnosti">https://www.facebook.com/obycajni.ludia.a.nezavisle.osobnosti</a>
Igor Matovič (personal account; he used to have a public FB page but hasn't used it since 2013)	2012 (?) or earlier	3,000 (friends)	282,221	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7">https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7</a>
AKP /	December 2011	1,186,514	1,164,867	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/AKGenclikgm/">https://www.facebook.com/AKGenclikgm/</a>
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	March 2010	9,809,598	10,065,224	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/RT Erdogan">https://www.facebook.com/RT Erdogan</a>
UKIP	May 2011	540,689	506,533	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/UKIP/">https://www.facebook.com/UKIP/</a>
Nigel Farage	September 2010	1,012,306	1,116,860	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/nigelfarageofficial">https://www.facebook.com/nigelfarageofficial</a>

Source: Own compilations based on publicly available data on FB

As can be seen from Table 2, first, populist leaders tend to be more popular and more followed than their parties or movements. Exceptions, like Igor Matovič, or Jaroslav Kaczynski, confirm the rule. Unlike the others, Matovič had only a personal profile, which shapes the interactions differently, personalizing them even more. Jaroslav Kaczynski also had as ‘unofficial fanpage’ only.

Second, in most cases, populist leaders created their FB profiles either at the same time as the FB profiles of their parties/movements were created, or, more often, earlier. This may suggest that the use of FB as a tactical political communication tool might have been adopted later,

at least at an institutional level. Marine Le Pen is an exception, which can be explained by her role as successor of her father in leading the *FN/RN*. Similarly, the Polish exception – Jarosław Kaczyński’s late joining FB – can be explained by his personal negative attitude towards using social media actively<sup>4</sup>, and towards media in general (see Pacewicz 2021). This, however, did not prevent him, probably on advice of his team, to appear on TikTok in late 2020.

Third, the least frequent actual user of FB was Polish leader of *PiS*, Jarosław Kaczyński. His last entry on his FB dated January 24, 2021 (checked as of March 5, 2021). Moreover, it was a link to “High Class Racing”. This finding shows that a populist, or, more precisely in his case a national-conservative populist politician, may be successful in politics without having many „likes” or „followers” on social media. Electoral success is not always reflected in social media popularity, as the pool of the electorate may be more adept of using other media channels like television. Indeed, Kaczyński and *PiS* have secured mass-media coverage via the public service media which was captured since 2016 by way of different regulations increasing political control over them (Klimkiewicz, 2020). For this reason, social media coverage might not be as strategically relevant.

We also examined all FB pages to check the frequency and type of posting, as can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3a:** Typology of Posting on FB (February 1-28, 2021)

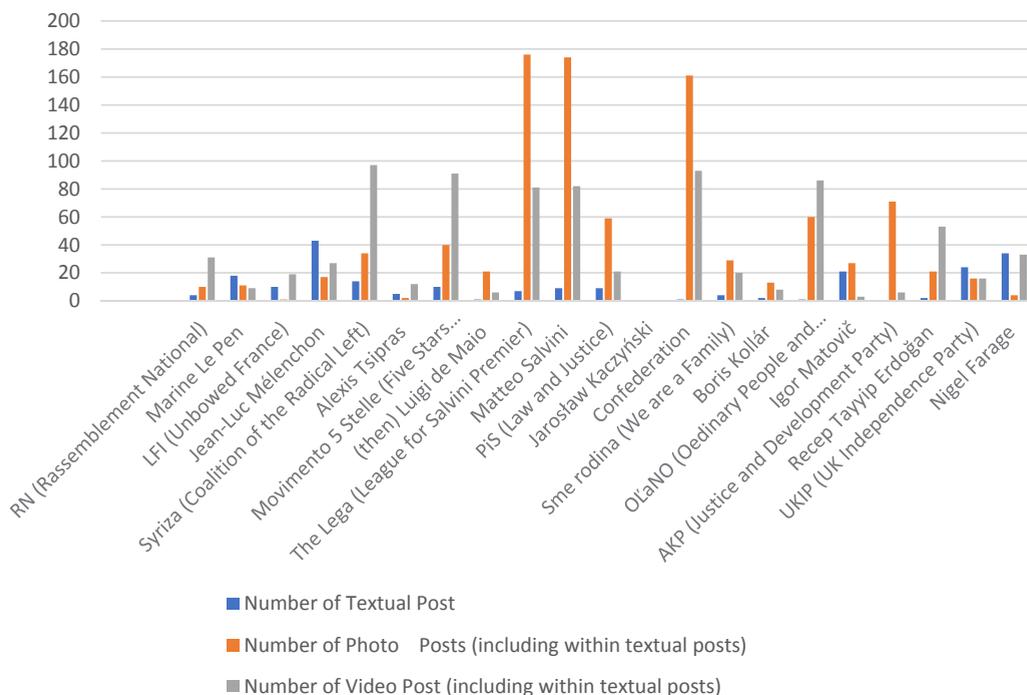
Party/ Leader	Number of Textual Post	Number of Photo Posts (including within textual posts)	Number of Video Posts (including within textual posts)
RN (Rassemblement National)	4	10	31
Marine Le Pen	18	11	9
LFI (Unbowed France)	10	1	19
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	43	17	27
Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left)	14	34	97
Alexis Tsipras	5	2	12
Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Stars Movement)	10	40	91
(then) Luigi di Maio	1	21	6
The Lega (League for Salvini Premier)	7	176	81
Matteo Salvini	9	174	82
PiS (Law and Justice)	9	59	21
Jarosław Kaczyński	0	0	0
Confederation	1	161	93

<sup>4</sup> See n.a. Wiemy czemu Kaczyński boi się internetu! (We know why Kaczyński is afraid of internet!). (29 July 2015), *Fakt*, <https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/dlaczego-kaczynski-nie-lubi-portali-spoecznościowych/m6mcddeg>

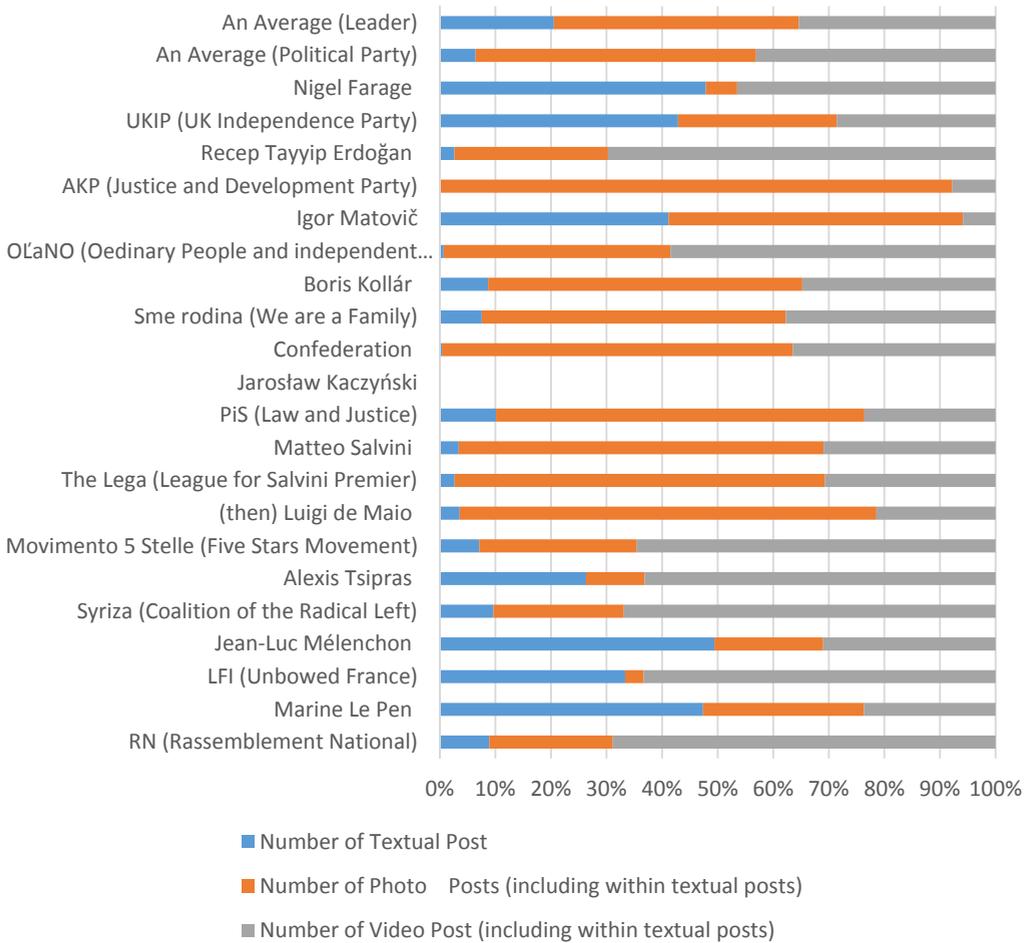
Sme rodina (We are a Family)	4	29	20
Boris Kollár	2	13	8
OLaNO (Ordinary People and independent personalities)	1	60	86
Igor Matovič	21	27	3
AKP (Justice and Development Party)	0	71	6
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	2	21	53
UKIP (UK Independence Party)	24	16	16
Nigel Farage	34	4	33
An Average (Political Party)	8	60	51
An Average (Leader)	14	29	23

Source: Own calculations based on FB publicly available data

**Table 3b:** Frequency of Posting on FB (Visualised) (February 1-28, 2021)



Source: Own calculations based on FB publicly available data

**Table 3c** Frequency of Posting on FB

Source: Own calculations based on FB publicly available data

As can be seen from Tables 3a-c, the most active users were the Italian *Lega* and Salvini, followed by the Polish *Confederation*. The least active – zero postings – proved to be Polish leader Jarosław Kaczyński. In contrast, his party, *PiS*, was actually above average active in communicating on FB.

The most frequent communication tool was (audio)visual, in the form of photos, followed by videos. Indeed, some reports suggest that ideologically conservative *PiS* is – ironically – the most progressive political body in using modern online communication strategies in Poland (Wanat 2019). Yet although there are *PiS*-aligned FB Pages and social networks in general that amplify content favorable to *PiS*, networks on the opposite side of the political spectrum disseminate counter-discourse (Bush, Gielewska, Kurzynski 2020).

Furthermore, we were interested to compare share of “likes” within total population aged 15+ up to 65 years age. This can be seen as a rough indicator of importance of FB communication among our sample. There are minor differences between “likes” and “followers”, but still, “likes” more likely reflect popularity – some may follow just for being informed. In fact, FB announced in January 2021 that it will do away with the “Like” button to instead focus on Followers (Perez 2021), but this measure has not yet been implemented at the beginning of September the same year.

**Table 4:** Share of Those Who Liked FB Profile

Party/ Leader	Total Population Aged 15-65 (Year in Brackets identifies when it was measured)	Share of “likes” within Total Population for a party and a leader
RN Marine Le Pen	40 300 000 (2017)	1,16% 3,89%
LFI Jean-Luc Mélenchon	40 300 000 (2017)	0,42% 2,74%
Syriza Alexis Tsipras	6 677 000 (2020)	1,74% 6,98%
M5S /Five Stars Movement (change of name) (then) Luigi di Maio	38 521 000 (2020)	3,83% 6,06%
The Lega (change of name from Lega Nord Padania to Lega – Salvini Premier) Matteo Salvini	38 521 000 (2020)	2,1 % 12,12 %
Law and Justice Party/ PiS Jaroslaw Kaczynski	24 995 000 (2020)	1,15% 0,01 %
Confederation	24 995 000 (2020)	1,94 %
Sme rodina /We are a Family / Boris Kollár	3 699 000 (2020)	2,85% 3,78%
OLaNO Igor Matovič (a private page, plus he used to have another FB page)	3 699 000 (2020)	4,68% 0,08% – data are not mutually compatible
AKP Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	56 572 000 (2020)	2,10% 17,34%
UKIP Nigel Farage	43 223 000 (2020)	1,25% 2,34%

Source: Own calculations based on UNESCO demographic database <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=143#> + FB data

As can be seen from Table 4, the highest ratio of a party FB page “likes” among population was found in case of *OLaNO* movement in Slovakia with 4,68%. In fact, *OLaNo* could be seen rather as a virtual movement since it did not have relevant permanent party base – it had 4 founding members for a decade until it was forced by the law to open its ranks and accept a few dozen party members. Yet it was in government since 2020.

In case of the leaders, the FB winner was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. His achievement was actually relevant both in relative and absolute terms. Simply put, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the FB man not only for Turkey, but apparently – in relative numbers – also globally. This seems to be in contrast with the emphasis put by local researchers on the use and importance of Twitter in Turkey. Alternatively, it can be that Twitter is even more important than FB for Turkish politics and that would make Turkish politics as social media driven exceptional case.

The lowest percentage of party/leader FB pages' "likes" was found in France for *LFI* and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland. In other words, both *LFI* and Kaczyński are not really relevant FB entities. This was also true, to a certain degree, for *PiS* party. We have already mentioned that in case of Kaczyński his communication of FB seems to be rather of random or symbolic nature.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the relative overlap of popularity of some parties' and leaders' FB pages and rather radical differences in popularity among other parties and leaders. For the former category, the closest overlap could be noticed for *Sme rodina /We are a Family/* and its leader Boris Kollár from Slovakia. For the latter category, the most radical differences in party versus leader's popularity could be found for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Matteo Salvini, Alexis Tsipras and their respective parties. These three leaders are clearly FB stars (with the caveat that Tsipras was actually not populist in his communication) and their parties seem to be less relevant for those who use FB.

Before delving deeper into comparison of these results, we present some interesting findings of either expected versus unexpected results, both from political science and political communication perspectives.

## Methodology

We employed a dual approach of the analysis, in order to uncover the types of information sources that were linked with populists – either because populists shared them, or because they shared the populist profiles. The analysis was carried out on Facebook data (Mancosu et al. 2020; Marincea 2020) from 17 Facebook public pages of populist leaders and parties from the 8 European countries. We selected three different time intervals totalling 13 months, with and without major events: before and after the European Parliament elections in 2019 (April – June 2019), during regular reporting (July 2019–February 2020), and at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (March-April 2020). The analysis was carried out at the following two levels:

(1) *Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of data sources* (URLs). Using the Crowd-Tangle API (CrowdTangle Team, 2020), we downloaded all posts that shared a URL (news website or other types of websites, other Facebook pages, Twitter, YouTube etc.) from an average of 2 populist profiles in 7 countries: France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey and UK. A simple codebook was elaborated for the classification of the extracted media sources (URLs) based on their type, ownership or political/ideological orientation. Based on this, we carried out a content analysis of the links extracted from the Facebook posts shared by the populist profiles during the analysed time intervals.

(2) *Network analysis.* Using the CrowdTangle API, we downloaded all references from the public pages that shared the links (URLs) posted by our sample of profiles in each country between 1 April 2019 and 1 June 2020 (13 Months total). This resulted in a dataset with 193,910 unique posts that shared the posts from the 16 profiles in the 7 countries analysed. We mapped these using NodeXL. The analysis is complimentary to the classification of sources shared by populists carried out at level (1) of the analysis and aims to reveal the networks around populist leaders, degree of reciprocity, the role of mainstream versus more alternative media sources, the density of connections, overlaps and differences.

This dual approach allowed us to map the wider network of interconnections around populist communication on Facebook. By following these two steps, we aimed towards two research objectives:

(1) To identify the information sources that a) populists draw on and that b) populists promote, and to categorize them. The research questions that guided this enquiry were:

RQ1. Do populists in different national contexts rely more on mainstream, traditional/established media sources, or do they prefer alternative news sources and social media, including citizen journalism?

(2) To provide an overview of the interconnections between populist actors and other relevant individual or collective public actors (i.e., media, politicians, celebrities, etc.). Mapping the populist networks allows us to see who are the main promoters of populist messages on social media, who are the amplifiers of populist messages, and to what extent the networks of different populist parties or leaders overlap. Hence, the research question driving the network analysis is:

RQ2. Who are the main disseminators of populists' messages on social media and what degree of reciprocity is there between them and the populists they share?

This two-steps analysis is needed in order to capture a comprehensive picture of populists' connections on Facebook. When choosing this approach, the following arguments have been considered. Due to the access gained to the CrowdTangle tool developed by Facebook, we opted to use it because it allowed us to extract big data on both the links shared by populist profiles, as well as the profiles distributing these links and posts via the populist profiles. For step (1) of the analysis, we aimed for a more descriptive dimension of these sources and their categorization. The unit of analysis, therefore, was the *URL domain*. We developed a codebook (available on request due to space limitations) including categories such as: source type (i.e., digital sources, newspapers/magazines, radio, TV); type of source ownership – whether it is public (PSM) or non-public; scope of publishing (European/international, national or mixed, regional or local); type of printed or digital sources; political orientation of sources; whether the source is formally registered as media or not; and transparency of ownership. We decided to drop an initial variable related to the trustworthiness of the sources because of the difficulty in assessing it reliably.

After centralizing and aggregating the sources shared in each country by unique web domains or Facebook pages, the national experts proceeded to categorize them using the codebook. For this categorization existing secondary data was also used (reliable data concerning the bias or political positioning of different news outlets – ex. Reuters Institute Digital News Report). We decided to categorize as media sources Facebook, YouTube or other social media pages, considering that many posts on Facebook share other social media pages and that these platforms have become one of the main news providers online (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Leaving them out of the analysis would have given a very incomplete picture. In addition, this tendency in itself gives us a sense of the extent to which social media is becoming a source of information and competing news provider.

Another way to establish the level of respectability and trust was considered to be through the creation of a new category: registered/non-registered media. In each country there are media that are registered as such by the profession and while in some this data is more readily transparent and available, in others this is less often the case. This lack of data accessibility can in and of itself be an indicator about the transparency and professionalization of the journalistic field. Another category was discussed – “controversial coverage/non-controversial” source, but was dropped because of its difficulty to operationalize reliably.

In the second phase – (2) the network analysis, a different dataset was used – one with external links, namely the public FB pages and groups that shared the 14 populists’ posts. These were then mapped using the NodeXL software package developed by Microsoft Excel. For each country, the network contained one (Greece), two (most other countries) and up to three (Slovakia) different populist pages that the national experts considered most relevant to include. In many cases, these were political rivals, which made it all the more interesting to explore the degree of overlap or isolation of their respective individual networks.

The nodes in the network were represented by individual public FB pages or groups, and the edges – their connections with other pages. In order to have a manageable dimension of the network, we mapped only the edges of the main pages under study – the populist ones. Or simply put, who shared them, but not the connections between the pages that shared them as well. However, we did measure the reciprocity between the populist pages and those who shared them. This was done using the data from phase (1) – what populists shared. We also used the data from this first step when qualitatively looking into the sources that were most central in the network and those who were the main promoters of the populist profiles.

This dual approach allowed us to have more insight into the online sources that are close to populists in different countries and that may play a key role in reinforcing populist discourse and attitudes.

However, our research approach also has some important limitations. Probably the most significant one is that we were only able to identify those sources that were explicit from their URL. Populists can sometimes share videos made by themselves or from YouTube, which may actually be recordings of public or commercial TV channels. There is no way to identify these original sources of the recordings other than to go manually through each of these videos, which was not feasible as an overall strategy. Second, for many sources there is no information available regarding their registration status, ownership or political orientation, which limits the insights that we can have. And third, our analysis does not assess how the respective source is contextualized, if it is placed

in a positive, neutral or critical context. For example, some pages may share the posts of populist leaders to criticize them. Such a positioning can only be identified either by manual coding – which is not feasible for thousands of posts, or through other automatic means, such as sentiment analysis – whose reliability is a matter of discussion. Our research does not cover these assessments. However, it is reasonable to assume that pages that are critical towards different sources will, in most cases, limit their distribution and visibility. As the analysis also shows, the sources that promote and give high visibility to a page are usually supporters of that page.

### Expected Versus Unexpected Results

As mentioned, it was not expected that the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras from the unquestionably populist left party (according to POPPA index) would show no inclination to using populist rhetoric in his FB communication. Similarly, it was not expected that Polish populist right-wing leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski would – more or less – ignore FB communication.

Contrary to the expectation, there was no prevailing preference for alternative sources, understood in their negative connotation as disseminating hyper-partisan or fake news and hoaxes, often associated with populist parties or leaders (Hameleers, 2020; Corbu & Negrea-Busuioac, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). Although there were some occasional cases when populist leaders or populist parties shared or liked some non-mainstream publications (e.g. in the case of Kollár in Slovakia, or Le Pen in France), these were rather exceptions than the norm. The most typical example of a leader who used controversial sources was that of Italian leader Matteo Salvini.

At the party level, rather unexpectedly, Slovak *OLaNO* had some reciprocity in media visibility with mainstream liberal media, in the sense that the party and its leader drew on liberal mainstream sources, which also covered the parties' activities.

### Comparative Research Findings for Case Studies

First, we present in the Table 5 the basic types of media sources preferred or ignored by the populist parties and leaders. As can be seen in Table 5, the most often shared sources were digital sources (including social networks). The least often shared were radio or TV channels. Print and online versions of newspapers were usually the second most often shared source. Exceptions are Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and AKP – that shared just a very limited sample of sources which were pro-governmental TV stations.

Second, we were interested in the qualitative types of print media sources by and large preferred or ignored by the populist parties/leaders on FB. The results are presented in Table 6. Surprisingly, available data suggest that populist parties and populist leaders actually prefer non-tabloid (more or less mainstream) media sources. There are three partial or full exceptions. Slovak *OLaNO* that preferred in majority of cases tabloid media. Then UKIP and N. Farage preferred almost equally both tabloid and non-tabloid media. Niche and other media could also be detected among about a half of the sample.

**Table 5:** The basic types of media sources (Types, and % rounded)

Party/Leader	The most often shared	The second most often shared	The third most often shared
Marine Le Pen	Digital 54%	Newspapers 33%	Radio 7%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	Digital 81%	Newspapers 13%	Radio 3%
Alexis Tsipras	Digital 92%	Newspapers 8%	
Luigi di Maio	Digital 96%	Newspapers 3%	Radio (1 single reference)
Matteo Salvini	Newspapers 57%	Digital 39%	TV 4%
PIŠ	Digital 77%	Radio 17%	TV 6%
Konfederacija	Digital 77%	Newspapers 19%	TV 3%
Boris Kollár	Digital 89%	Newspapers 8%	TV 2%
Sme Rodina	Digital 83%	Newspapers 13%	TV 4%
OLaNO	Digital 91%	Newspapers 8%	TV 1%
AKP	Digital 100%		
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Digital 98%	TV 2%	
UKIP	Newspapers 50%	Digital 45%	TV 4%
Nigel Farage	Newspapers 39%	Digital 39%	Radio 18%

Source: country case studies

**Table 6:** Tabloid, Quality and Niche Print Media Preferences (in %, rounded)

Party/Leader	Tabloid	Non-tabloid	Niche	Other
Marine Le Pen	1%	<b>90%</b>	9%	0%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	0%	<b>86%</b>	14%	0%
Alexis Tsipras	0%	<b>100%</b>	0%	0%
Luigi di Maio	0%	67%	0%	33%
Matteo Salvini	3%	83%	0%	14%
PIŠ	0%	0%	0%	0%
Konfederacija	5%	<b>89%</b>	7%	0%
Boris Kollár	13%	<b>74%</b>	13%	0%
Sme Rodina	14%	<b>57%</b>	29%	0%
OLaNO	63%	25%	11%	0%
AKP	0%	0%	0%	0%
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	0%	0%	0%	0%
UKIP	45%	<b>54%</b>	0%	0%
Nigel Farage	41%	<b>59%</b>	1%	0%

Source: country case studies

Furthermore, although populists can be seen located in both left and right, they are usually in „valence“ version located in the centre. In other words, as put by Curini (2018), the content of political competition has substantially shifted from policy to non-policy factors, such as corruption issues. Thus, we were interested in finding their preference for media sources based on the media political-ideological orientation. The results can be seen in Table 7. It can be argued that using media sources that are difficult to categorize according to their political-ideological perspectives, can sometimes be indicative of populism. These include among our sample only Luigi di Maio and Boris Kollár. They have no typical ideology that would be reflected in their preference for ideologically close media sources. Alternatively, they are populists who are relatively open-minded in what concerns the media sources they consume or share. On the other hand, as discussed earlier, those populists who show strong inclination ideologically towards left or right media sources, can usually be seen as „radical left“ or „radical right“ respectively. These include Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Marine Le Pen, Alexis Tsipras and among parties *Confederation*.

Nigel Farage together with Matteo Salvini, and among parties *PiS*, *UKIP* and *OLaNO* can be described as political entities that show – based on their sources preferences – a mixture between ideological and populist features.

**Table 7:** Political-Ideological Orientation of Sources on FB (in %, rounded)

Party/Leader	Radical-Left	Center-Left	Center	Center-Right	Radical-Right	Other/NA
Marine Le Pen	0%	2%	26%	19%	<b>53%</b>	1%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	<b>81%</b>	6%	9%	3%	0%	1%
Alexis Tsipras	<b>90%</b>	5%	3%	2%	0%	0%
Luigi di Maio	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	<b>97%</b>
Matteo Salvini	0%	14%	17%	<b>41%</b>	<b>26%</b>	3%
PiS	0%	2%	0%	<b>94%</b>	4%	0%
Konfederacja	0%	1%	10%	15%	<b>74%</b>	0%
Boris Kollár	0%	4%	9%	7%	0%	<b>80%</b>
Sme Rodina	0%	7%	21%	12%	0%	<b>60%</b>
OLaNO	0%	6%	<b>32%</b>	<b>45%</b>	0%	17%
AKP	0%	0%	0%	<b>100%</b>	0%	0%
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	0%	0%	0%	<b>99%</b>	1%	0%
UKIP	0%	19%	17%	<b>26%</b>	<b>37%</b>	1%
Nigel Farage	0%	8%	7%	<b>32%</b>	<b>53%</b>	0%

Source: country case studies

### Alternative/Conspiratorial/Controversial Sources Shared

We provide further a selected summary from the following country case studies. The Polish *Confederation* incidentally posted links to other websites which were opinion websites or blogs

promoting radical right views or being in line with Russian propaganda like *konserwatywizm.pl* or *kresy.pl* or citizen journalism (for example, radical right *medianarodowe.pl*). For UK, among such sources were several rightwing commentators, including those associated with alternative right views. For Greek Tsipras, there were two links to songs uploaded on YouTube, which were unlike his other posts in both tone and content. For Slovak populists, there was no preference found for conspiratorial or radical sources either. In case of Italy, about one third of the external links shared by Salvini and Di Maio redirected towards the websites of mainstream newspapers.

### **Rarely linked or ignored media**

In the case of Poland, among the media which were systematically ignored and very rarely shared were left and liberal media representing the mainstream of the public debate like newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, weekly *Polityka* or TV channel *TVN*. For UK, none of the profiles shared citizen journalism sources, and only *UKIP* shared a very low number of official or expert sources. For Turkey, there was no variety as all media content was digital and produced either by the AKP media team or other accounts directly associated with the AKP. In fact, there were only three links that were not produced by the AKP media team. This shows how state monopoly has captured the online as well and especially social networks, which were some years ago still regarded as a potential counterweight to unchecked state power. For Slovakia, in absolute numbers, the role of public service media was very low, almost negligible. Remarkably almost absent during all periods were regional and local sources. For France, surprisingly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon ignored left-wing newspaper *L'Humanité*. But he referenced, instead, *Le Figaro*, *Les Echos* or *Le Point*, newspapers of the right or center-right.

### **Characteristics of the FB networks**

In the case of Polish party *Confederation* there was some leaning towards more spontaneous grassroots fan groups or FB discussion groups which shared much more extreme content than the party itself. The two political profiles constituted separate spheres connected together through a very narrow number of FB pages. Reciprocity network of Alexis Tsipras was limited to posts shared between his account and the official account of his party, *Syriza*. There was no reciprocity between Tsipras and external, non-party accounts. Salvini's FB page network was far more extensive than Di Maio's. FB groups and pages sharing Di Maio's posts were rather limited in numbers and mainly organized as bottom-up initiatives by small groups of militants that were not formally linked to the *5SM*. Conversely, those FB pages and groups more prone to share Salvini's contents tended to perceive themselves as local sections of the party. Slovak movements *WAF* and *OLaNO* were very similar in terms of size of their networks.

## Conclusion

There are useful lessons for researchers on this topic from a methodological point of view. First, the priority should be given to a lower number of researched items. For example, it proved to be less relevant to find whether a particular source was officially registered or not. Rather, it is political or ideological orientation, or other features (like business model – whether they are crowdfunded by audiences) that seem to be more interesting and relevant for analysis. Similarly, a summary on local debates on what constitutes „alternative/ controversial/ populist“ media may be productive, too.

Second, within this context, for comparative studies, methodological and theoretical debates should be published separately (as we have attempted to do in this volume). This gives space for carrying out in-depth studies.

Third, it may be more useful to compare (traditional) electoral versus non-electoral periods rather than some exceptional circumstances like the pandemic crisis (save for martial law or when waging a war).

Fourth, research overview reflecting use of social media in a country is essential. However, this should not exclusively be done from the perspective of users (like statistics on usage of legacy and social media), but rather from the perspective of social media usage by political parties or other researched subjects (like in Tables 2 and 3 in this chapter). Most chapters in this volume have included a „research overview“ that served such specific purpose.

Finally, for international comparative studies, focusing on general political-legal aspects (like freedom of the press or specific media regulation) and political party context is of outmost importance. Yet this should highlight „localised“ available theories or hypotheses on the rise of populism among discussed political parties and leaders rather than a simple description of local situation.

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• **DISKUSIA** •

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SPS.2021-3.5>



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## Digital Services Act Proposal (Social Media Regulation)

The purpose of this section is to bridge research, theory and policies, thus making academic publications more relevant and useful for stakeholders and policymakers. We pursue multidisciplinary exploration of issues and propose an approach that crosses boundaries among research fields such as political science (and its subfields public policies and political communication), law, or economy (e.g. in the case of financing of electoral campaigns or taxing technological companies). We present a mosaic of positions, opinions and views that summarise the gist of current national and international discussions. Last but not least – our publication reflects policy and research agendas of the day, thus keeping a record of history.

The focus of our section in this issue is on a seminal instrument proposed recently by the European Commission that will have a long lasting impact on the media regulation within and beyond Europe – the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA) package.

We present some keywords that summarise the basic ideas in the texts below to guide our readers in their journey through the complicated European digital services and platforms regulatory landscape.

**Ondřej Moravec** – structural issues of DSA implementation into national legislation,

**Ivan Smieško** – DSA interim or preliminary measure,

**Ewa Galewska** – DSA maintains the liability rules for providers of intermediary services,

**Gergely Gosztanyi** – developments in social media regulation in Hungary,

**Sirio Zolea** – social media and fundamental principles of the constitutional order in Italy,

**Pascal Schneiders** – comparison of the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) and the DSA in their approaches against the visibility of online hate speech and hate crime.

## Introduction

This particular contribution discusses a blueprint of the DSA submitted by the European Commission for public consultations on December 15, 2020. DSA is a regulatory proposal important for major social media platforms among which Facebook (FB) is no doubt the most prominent. In general, social media are widely seen as the central political communication tools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to discuss issues related to their operation and regulation within the ambit of political communication.

One of the explanations about the role of social media nowadays is that they represent a modern communication tool that serves populists. Through these channels populists can easily disseminate their ideas to the public without a need to rely on intermediaries such as allegedly or really biased legacy media. More precisely, FB is a communication channel thoroughly made use of by the majority of populists. Moreover, social media, but also some relatively niche (often labelled as controversial, alternative or conspiratory) news sites and online magazines, seem to serve the interests of local or foreign actors, to spread their messages, either as a form of public diplomacy or with a greater degree of viciousness and hidden desire for benefits. Finally, there have been issues such as Christchurch shooting broadcast live online via social media that related to public morals, and/or terrorism (see COM/2018/640 final)<sup>1</sup>, and raised an urgent need for efficient and effective social media regulation (see *EU Code of Practice on Disinformation*).<sup>2</sup> There have been many debates about the best way to face these challenges at different levels (e.g., for the European Commission, see further COM/2020/790 final<sup>3</sup> and in different countries, see e.g. Školkay 2020) and at the same time or as a consequence, early regulatory measures have been adopted by many European and non-European countries such as Germany or Australia. Although there are countries that managed to regulate very large social media within their territory, to adopt a broader and common regulatory framework for very large social media platforms is viewed as a better idea. Indeed, as mentioned, the European Commission submitted for public consultation a blueprint of Digital Services Act (“DSA”). Earlier versions received over 3,000 comments. This regulation should be directly applicable to the EU member states. In the following text we present a selection of topics that seem to be relevant for regulating large social media in general. Indirectly such themes also relate to populist political communication in particular, providing in one way or another way a feedback or an inspiration to the DSA draft.

<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0640>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/code-practice-disinformation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

## What is the DSA About?

The DSA will tackle mainly platforms with at least 45 million users in the EU. Very small platforms should be exempted from the majority of obligations. According to the draft, all platforms, except the smallest, will be required to set up complaint and redress mechanisms and out-of-court dispute settlement mechanisms, cooperate with trusted flaggers, take measures against abusive notices, deal with complaints, vet the credentials of third party suppliers, and provide user-facing transparency of online advertising. Very large online platforms will have to meet risk management obligations, external risk auditing and public accountability, provide transparency of their recommender systems and user choice for access to information, as well as share data with authorities and researchers (see QANDA/20/2348).<sup>4</sup>

The definition of platforms includes not only social media but also online intermediaries such as internet service providers, cloud services, messaging and marketplaces that transmit or store content of third parties. The DSA proposal is complemented by measures envisaged in the Digital Markets Act (DMA). From a political communication perspective, this second regulatory document is also relevant since it focuses on ads in general (in addition there is a forthcoming initiative of the European Commission on political advertising).

Ondřej Moravec argues that DSA should not be seen as content-regulation that authoritatively defines limits of public debate. Rather, the DSA proposal states duties to intermediaries. The goal of this type of regulation should be establishing proper conditions for procedural framework that would allow accessible, efficient and effective ways for application of content regulation that already exists. He discusses this issue further.

## PART 1: The Political and Legal Regulatory Issues with Regard to Social Media

Developments in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Italy show that there are multiple issues that beg for faster, better, fair and transparent regulation of social media, or, in general, for regulation of online intermediaries, or political communication in general, be that with or without reference to populist subjects or “alternative/disinformation/controversial” sources. Moreover, some populist-lead governments seem to develop “dual” policies towards social media, as the Polish approach discussed further illustrates, while the Hungarian government seems to be moving fast towards social media regulation but not that much transparently in its regulatory intentions.

The Czech example shows that communication on FB in general is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, some populists face from time to time threats to ban their FB pages by FB itself. Thus, already in July 2020, FB issued a warning that it may ban FB pages of Tomio Okamura, his vice-chairman Radim Fiala, and FB page of their populist movement *SPD (Party of Direct Democracy)*.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Okamura and both party representatives (then MPs) announced that

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_20\\_2348](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348)

<sup>5</sup> POPPA dataset indicates 9,1 level of populism, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0>

if this would happen, all three entities would challenge such a decision at local and international courts. In two out of three cases FB announcements were indirect, just appearing in the section of the page “Quality of the Page”. In addition no specific reasons for breaking community rules were stated in those two cases (Fiala and *SPD*). For Okamura, the reasons were more explicit but, obviously, controversial: First, there was sharing of an adjusted photo of a political opponent who allegedly was involved in porno scandal. Second, there was sharing of a photo in which marching Wehrmacht GI were seen but allegedly with an anti-Nazi comment. Third, there was a public approval of a promised measure (the use of military) by the Serbian president against undocumented migrants who were to be involved in criminal activities.<sup>6</sup> FB soon stated that this was just a „technical mistake“ (Tvrdoň 2020). At that time, Okamura had 259,000 followers on FB, Fiala 29,000 and a FB nation-wide *SPD* profile was followed by 31,000 followers (Heller 2020).

On the other hand, Okamura himself faced legal proceedings due to communicating on FB. In 2019 a lower court issued a verdict that mandated Okamura to apologize to the Institute of Independent Journalism for calling it „fraudulent, connected with billionaire George Soros“, while also calling journalists „media septic tank“.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Olga Richterová, vice-chairperson of the Czech Pirate Party sued a female activist who twice shared on FB the same hoax concerning her person, in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the fact-checking portal *demagog.cz* contributed, after some hesitation – in spite of the traditional policy of the major social media platforms to not assess political statements – that both FB and Instagram had labelled Okamura’s contributions in 2020 as partially incorrect. That happened for the first time in the Czech Republic and in the case of a politician. There was actually in-house discussion about what is and what is not political expression. In the cited case, Okamura shared partially incorrect information produced by a third party. FB considered this as falling outside protected free speech of political parties and politicians (Jadrný 2020).

In the case of Hungary, Gergely Gosztonyi writes that one has to agree with the quotation of the European Court of Human Rights in *Cengiz and Others v. Turkey*, that the Internet “has now become the primary means by which individuals exercise their freedom to receive and impart information and ideas”.<sup>9</sup> Tech companies also perceived the recently changed worldwide political climate. In a conference in February 2020, the CEO of FB, Mark Zuckerberg said that there is frustration about how tech companies were taxed in Europe.<sup>10</sup> As one of the consequences, FB paid HUF 3.8 billion (EUR 10.6m) in advertising tax to the Hungarian budget.<sup>11</sup> The Justice Minister Judit Varga also stated it to be an “important step towards a good direction in lawful

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Facebook-hrozi-zrusenim-facebookove-stranky-Tomia-Okamury-Radima-Fialy-i-hnuti-SPD-Okamura-se-chce-branit-i-u-soudu-630531>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.omeiach.com/cesko/16064-okamura-se-ma-ospravedlnit-ustavu-nezavislej-zurnalisty>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/hoax-nepravdivy-vyrok-sireni-facebook-zaloba-piratska-strana-soud.A210317\\_104406\\_domaci\\_iri](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/hoax-nepravdivy-vyrok-sireni-facebook-zaloba-piratska-strana-soud.A210317_104406_domaci_iri)

<sup>9</sup> *Cengiz and Others v. Turkey* App nos 48226/10 and 14027/11 (ECtHR, 1 December 2015), 49. More details: Gosztonyi, Gergely: The European Court of Human Rights and the access to the Internet as a means to receive and impart information and ideas. In: *International Comparative Jurisprudence*, 2020/2, p. 134–140.

<sup>10</sup> BBC: Facebook boss ‘happy to pay more tax in Europe’. 14 February 2020, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51497961>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/VargaJuditMinisterofJustice/photos/a.2025259724159640/4118386184846973/>

and arranged cooperation with big technological companies”.<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Justice started drafting a new bill that aims to make big platforms comply with the law and operate transparently, while at the same time participating in the preparation of similar regulations in the EU. The public knows little about the draft.. Attila Péterfalvi, Head of the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, suggested in August 2020 that the government should pass a legislation on social media, giving a definition and case-law to which profiles can only be suspended with a legitimate cause.<sup>13</sup> The said reason behind the proposal was that “Today, everyone can be arbitrarily switched off from the online space without any official, transparent and fair proceeding and legal remedy.” – a question that the DSA also tackles.<sup>14</sup> Some suspect that the Hungarian government would wish to prevent controversial party leaders from being removed from their platforms prior to the 2022 election.” (Porter 2021). Similarly to what one could see worldwide, there is a growing criticism in Hungary that more and more government officials are complaining that their Christian, conservative, right-wing opinions and views are not reaching enough audience. They call it ‘Facebook censorship’ (Béni 2019). The Ministry of Justice will propose a law to the Parliament in spring 2021 according to the plans. One could learn from the Justice Minister’s FB page that Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for Internal Market ‘asked for (...) patience before submitting a Hungarian law’.<sup>15</sup>

In Poland, the Ministry of Justice has published a draft act on freedom of speech on social media platforms in February 2021. The draft act envisages establishment of the so-called Freedom of Speech Board, which would safeguard the constitutional freedom of expression on social media platforms. The Polish government viewed blocking then US President Donald Trump’s accounts on FB and Twitter as censorship. The Ministry of Digital Affairs and FB signed an agreement on the appeal procedure against content blocked on the website already in 2018. The draft act also provides that the user will be able to lodge a complaint with the service provider. Simultaneously, the government is working on legislation aimed at exerting control over online content (Gad-Nowak and Wnukowski 2021). A group of activists affiliated with the *PiS* (*Justice and Law* party)-friendly weekly *Gazeta Polska* has launched a local version of FB called *Albicla*. The founders mentioned a concern over the dominance of US social media platforms and their impact on free speech as reasons for their initiative (Inotai and Ciobanu 2021).

The Slovak example documents that independent attempts at debunking may face legal challenges. For example, there was a legal complaint by one of local “alternative” news websites (*hlavnespravdy.sk*) that protested to be included into an online list of de facto “fake news and hoaxes” run by an NGO. This legal intervention resulted in Preventive Measure 13C/6-2019/268 issued by a local court that officially stopped for a while such labelling. The complainant also lodged a legal action in a separate court suit claiming that as a result of such actions by a local NGO, it had suffered losses from a blocked ads income because of this labeling (3Cob/39/2019-301).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/VargaJuditMinisterofJustice/photos/a.2025259724159640/4118386184846973/>

<sup>13</sup> MN: Nonsense: Attacks on the government for defending freedom of speech. 4 August 2020, Magyar Nemzet, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2020/08/velemenynyilvanitast-sert-a-facebook-indokolatlan-cenzuraja>

<sup>14</sup> DSA, 42.: „provider should inform the recipient of its decision, the reasons for its decision and the available redress possibilities to contest the decision.”

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/VargaJuditMinisterofJustice/photos/a.2025259724159640/4183135275038730/>

At the same time, increasing occasional intervention from FB led to decreasing reach of some controversial websites in 2020 (Struhárik 2020b).<sup>16</sup> For example, the two FB pages of controversial online and offline magazine *Zem a vek* (Earth and Age) have been cancelled by FB in late 2020. A few years ago FB erased some FB pages affiliated with the right-wing radical Marián Kotleba.

The Police also raised criminal charges against a controversial webportal *badatel.net* in early 2021, following an initiative by the Minister of Health regarding dissemination of inflammatory news /related to COVID-19. This website was among the most popular FB pages in 2020, having over a quarter million interactions (engagement level) in 2019 (Struhárik 2020a).

On the other hand, there is a change in terminology used among some fact checkers and fake news debunking organisations when they increasingly put these activities and sources under a more neutral umbrella term “controversial” instead of outright “fake news” and “hoaxes” or disinformation sources.

The government attempts to pass legislation and strategies that would allow more successfully to block “illegal activities” which may, in some interpretations, include not only child pornography, but also “disinformation”.<sup>17</sup>

The Italian example shows that the choice of FB to block the public pages of several Italian political organizations and of their leaders has been seen as controversial in the country. It has even been the subject of a few judgments. In the absence – as opposed to more traditional media such as television (*par condicio* law) – of a specific statute law regulating the treatment and the visibility of political actors on social media, Italian judges had to seek a delicate balance of interests, applying principles from national and European law and from international conventions. In particular, the judgments concerning the “*CasaPound case*”, occasioned by the attempt of FB to remove the page of a far-right organization, establish by case law some fundamental principles, mostly derived from the Italian Constitution, which might be applied in the future. This verdict could be juxtaposed with the different decision which was, almost simultaneously, established in “*Forza Nuova case*”. Such a decision, though, seems to be more specifically influenced by the explicit propaganda, slogans and symbols published by the FB pages of this party and of its leaders, more directly linkable to Fascism, which is outlawed according to the Italian Constitution.

The association *CasaPound* and one of its leaders, whose FB account had been removed, took the ban to court, through the urgent procedure of article 700 of the Italian Civil Procedure Code. In accordance to this Code, the conditions to obtain an urgent measure from the judge are the plausible and probable existence of the claimed right (*fumus boni iuris*) and the present danger that such a right could actually suffer an imminent and irreparable injury, while waiting for the conclusion of an ordinary trial (*periculum in mora*). The Tribunal of Rome recognized the pres-

<sup>16</sup> mk, “Facebooku došla trpezlivosť už aj so Slobodným vysielateľom” [FB has lost patience with Free Broadcaster, too], O médiách, October 20, 2020, <https://www.omediach.com/hoaxy/19020-facebooku-dosla-trpezlivost-uz-aj-so-slobodnym-vysielacom>

<sup>17</sup> <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/150460/vlada-prijala-narodnu-strategiu-kybernetickej-bezpecnosti-dolezita-bude-aj-podpora-vyskumu/>, <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/151295/pravomoci-nbu-v-oblasti-kybernetickej-bezpecnosti-by-sa-mali-posilnit/>

ence of both these conditions<sup>18</sup>. As for the *fumus boni iuris*, the judge stated that the exclusion of that association from Facebook was in contrast with the right to pluralism, because the relationship between FB and its user is not merely a relationship between private entities. In fact, FB holds a special position when bargaining with a user, this enterprise has to strictly adhere to the principles of the Constitution and of the overall national legal order, especially with regard to freedom of expression, unless, in a full trial, the violation of legal and constitutional principles from the user is, in turn, demonstrated. Social networks have nowadays a prominent role in the implementation of fundamental principles, such as pluralism of political parties (protected by art. 49 of the Constitution), because a political entity which is not on FB is practically excluded (or severely limited) from the Italian public debate. No post analyzed by the judge showed to be specifically directed to incite violence and hate against minorities (while the general behavior of *CasaPound* and of its members was not the subject of the trial, unlike several penal proceedings over time). As for the *periculum in mora*, the relevant and prominent role of FB among social networks, when it comes to the implementation of political pluralism, makes the exclusion from its community the source of an injury that is not likely to be (fully) repaid in money, especially with regard to the reputational damage. Already before the judicial decision, Italian legal commentators had highlighted<sup>19</sup> the important and general scope of this dispute. Indeed, the controversy directly involves the problematic issues regarding the transfer of the freedom of expression and related control functions from the well-known field of the constitutional safeguards, with a general competence of the State, to the undetermined field of the private policies, with a factual censorship activity of the social media platforms. This power is often exercised through the use of artificial intelligence algorithms and, in any case, without a consistent, appropriate and transparent sanctioning proceeding. Social networks like FB should be considered as a sort of public service, subjected to the related national legal principles in every country where it is available.

The decision was challenged by FB, pursuant to article 669 (13)<sup>20</sup> of the Italian Civil Procedure Code, and an appellate bench of three judges confirmed the judgment at first instance<sup>21</sup>. In particular, they stated that, even though the relationship between FB and its user fundamentally develops on the basis of a civil law contract, untyped in the Code, nevertheless its contractual qualification does not imply that the obligations between the parties exclusively depend on the clauses of the deal. The general limits to the sphere of private autonomy do apply, particularly the general clauses of the legal order (good faith, prohibition of abuse of right, etc.), interpreted in accordance with constitutional principles. Constitutional principles can also be directly implemented in order to limit private autonomy. If the position of FB is protected by art. 41 of the Constitution (freedom of enterprise), the position of the user is protected by its articles 21 (freedom of expression) and article 18 (freedom of associations), which are paramount in the

<sup>18</sup> *Tribunal of Rome, Section specialized in enterprise issues, n. 59264/2019, Ordinance of 11 December 2019.*

<sup>19</sup> See B. Mazzolai, *La censura su piattaforme digitali private: il caso CasaPound c. Facebook*, in *Il diritto dell'informazione e dell'informatica*, vol. XXXV, issue 1, 2020, pp. 104-121.

<sup>20</sup> Articles 669 and 669terdecies are two different articles of the Italian Civil Procedure Code.

<sup>21</sup> *Tribunal of Rome, XVII civil section, n. 80961/19, Ordinance of 29 April 2020*; for a short analysis in English language, see *Facebook v. CasaPound*, in *Global Freedom of Expression* (Columbia University), <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/casapound-v-facebook/>.

constitutional system. Associations can be excluded from the service and specific behaviors on the social network can be prohibited only according to the limitations to the freedom of association and to the freedom of expression provided by the law, according to the Constitution and to international law sources. In this case, FB had not presented sufficient specific allegations to prove that *CasaPound*, for the purposes of the dispute, was an illicit organization (for example, because of reconstruction of the banned Fascist Party, for apology of Fascism, for incitement to discrimination or violence for racial, ethnic, national or religious reasons, for negationism, etc.: all violations punished by the penal law).

Between the two *CasaPound* judgments, the same Tribunal of Rome also decided the apparently similar *Forza Nuova* case, presented by another far-right political organization but this time the court dismissed the claim, pursuant to art. 700 C.P.C. Such a fact, at first glance, could show that there is still no precise orientation of the Italian judges on this matter. However, in the text of the decision<sup>22</sup>, some new reasons appear, possibly explaining the different outcome, without completely contradicting the *ratio decidendi* of the *CasaPound* case. In fact, the judge extensively analyses the public propaganda of *Forza Nuova*, in general and with particular reference to the posts published by the association and by its leaders that had made a claim against the removal of their own pages. The text of the decision highlights the presence of several symbols and slogans explicitly exalting Fascism and asserting racial discrimination. In this case, having in mind contents that are illicit under the Italian constitutional and legal order and once FB came to learn about them, and in connection with its terms<sup>23</sup> and community standards<sup>24</sup>, terminating the contracts with *Forza Nuova* and with its leaders, appeared to be not only legitimate, but also dutiful measures. Indeed, otherwise FB might even have incurred liability, also in light of the European legal framework.

In conclusion, it is my belief that Italian judges, faced (similar to their colleagues in many other countries) with delicate issues involving fundamental principles of the constitutional order to apply and balance. Judges are wisely trying to find an equilibrium point between allowing a (perilous) general and unlimited power of private political censorship of social network platforms and giving liberty to social networks to become a (likewise hazardous) unlimited amplifier for authoritarian and discriminatory illicit and anti-constitutional contents. Taking account of the importance of these issues, a specific legislative intervention might perhaps be the best way to regulate and balance both trends, particularly in a country like Italy where civil law prevails.

<sup>22</sup> *Tribunal of Rome, section specialized in rights of the person and immigration, n. 64894/2019, Ordinance of 23 February 2020*; cf. B. Mazzolai, *Hate speech e comportamenti d'odio in rete: il caso Forza Nuova c. Facebook*, in *Il diritto dell'informazione e dell'informatica*, vol. XXXV, issue 3, 2020, pp. 552-595.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/terms.php>

<sup>24</sup> <https://m.facebook.com/communitystandards/>

## PART 2: Digital Services Act

### How Does DSA Compare with the German Network Enforcement Act?

Pascal Schneiders focuses on comparison of the DSA with the German Network Enforcement Act. The proposal for the Digital Services Act (DSA-P) has some interesting parallels to the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG) passed in Germany at the end of 2017. Both the NetzDG and the DSA-P address, more or less explicitly, (inter alia) the fight against the visibility of online hate speech and hate crime (which, as legal terms, are not likely to be defined by law throughout; see Valerius, 2020, pp. 667, 678). Both the NetzDG and the DSA-P do not introduce any new criminal offenses themselves but are intended to serve law enforcement. Both the NetzDG's and the DSA-P's measures against illegal content include notice and take-down mechanisms and, out-of-court dispute settlement bodies, cooperation with trusted organizations, and, last but not least, the duty of platform providers to inform law enforcement authorities of suspicions of serious criminal offences. The experiences gained with the NetzDG can help to understand the opportunities and risks associated with the content moderation obligations against illegal content provided for in the DSA. In the context of the NetzDG, particularly heated discussions have been held about the privatization of law enforcement (Eickelmann et al. 2017; Guggenberger, 2017, p. 100; Kasakowskij et al. 2020). This criticism might also be applied to the DSA-P.

Thus, in the first instance, the providers of social networks decide which reported content is (“manifestly”) unlawful (§§ 3 (2) Nr. 2-3 NetzDG) or illegal (Art. 14 in conjunction with Art. 5 (1) DSA-P) and must therefore be taken down or blocked (admittedly without the operators of social networks taking on the *prosecution* of criminally punishable content). Linked to this are concerns about the restriction of freedom of expression through over-removal by the service operators (Mchangama & Fiss 2019, p. 5; Liesching 2018, p. 27; Nolte 2017, p. 556). This is because there would be economic and regulatory incentives for service providers to remove content when in doubt in order to avoid reputational damage or fines under the NetzDG (Eifert et al., 2020, p. 52; Heldt 2019, pp. 4–5; Liesching 2018, p. 27; in contrast Theil, 2018).

In their evaluation of the law, Eifert et al. (2020) argue that the NetzDG (instead of enforcing criminal law) may have contributed to “network providers concretizing their community standards and intensifying their enforcement precisely because, at least from the point of view of some network providers, an examination and deletion according to community standards leads to the NetzDG regime with its fine provisions not applying” (Eifert et al., 2020, p. 50). That is, it can be assumed that the social networks concerned have expanded their community standards in the course of the NetzDG and are increasingly using these standards (instead of the criminal law) as a rationale for removing content (Fanta 2018; Heldt 2019, p. 9).

Whether the DSA-P creates regulatory disincentives for overblocking cannot yet be conclusively assessed, as the determination of the penalties that take effect in the event of infringements of the Regulation by providers of intermediary services is a matter for the Member States under Art. 42 (1) DSA-P. However, the DSA-P provides for measures against abuse of the notice and action mechanisms through frequent, manifestly unfounded notifications of allegedly illegal

content (Art. 20 (2) DSA-P). In addition, users should be able to challenge removals or blockings of content deemed illegal or incompatible with the terms and conditions of the service providers. This is to be enabled via an internal complaint-handlings system for a period of six months following the decision of the platform provider (Art. 17 (1) DSA-P). Ultimately, central to the identification and assessment of any over- or underblocking will be access to data. To date, Art. 31 (2) DSA-P provides for data access for “vetted researchers” to identify and understand systemic risks. These include the dissemination of illegal content and resulting negative effects, as well as intentional manipulation of the service (Art. 26 (1) DSA-P). This data access should be extended for analyses of potential negative consequences (just like overblocking) resulting from the content moderation obligations introduced in the DSA.

### **What is Problematic with the DSA Draft from National Perspectives? Structural Issues of DSA Implementation into National Legislation**

Ondřej Moravec has focused on fundamental issues that may stem from the local implementation of DSA. Recognizing that the subject of the analysis is a “mere proposal” for a DSA regulation, we will pay attention to those attributes that can be considered as its structural basis. I consider them (in addition to the direct form of regulation already mentioned) to be the content neutrality of the DSA and the mandatory procedural framework through which the content regulation provided by national law is to be applied. The method of regulation of user content also remains outside the scope of DSA regulation. The DSA does not seek to impose to platform operators the rules governing the insertion of user content, unless the latter is explicitly illegal.

The introduction of the platform operator’s obligation to establish and make available transparent rules according to which the operator will handle complaints about objectionable content should be done. Also the state’s obligation to create a mechanism through which persons certified by a national authority (digital services coordinator) should review internal platform decisions is important to be included. It will therefore be a matter of accompanying national legislation as to what the whole process will look like in its final form.

The national legislator will therefore have to determine at least who will act as national coordinator, how the persons responsible for deciding disputes between platforms and service users will be certified, the rules governing proceedings before certified persons and whether and how their decisions will be subject to judicial review.

### **Decision-making of the platform operator and its legal nature**

Platform operators are already setting rules that users of platform services must follow. If someone feels affected (typically her right to protection of personal honor or the right to privacy) by the content published through the platform, the only option is to contact the platform operator to seek redress, e.g. by removing defective content. In the case of a negative (or no)

reaction from the platform operator, the possibility of claiming the protection of personal rights through the courts is possible, but this possibility is rather theoretical. The practical effort to protect personal rights in these cases encounters such a number of pitfalls that the person concerned generally abandons the judicial exercise of his or her rights. In this respect, the DSA proposal is undoubtedly a step forward, since it obliges platform operators to accept and make available rules for dealing with complaints about illegal content that is made available through the platform.

The legal nature of these rules (where they exist) remains unchanged. These are private law rules based on a contract between the operator of the platform and its user and are designed unilaterally by the operator. However, the inequality can be taken into account when deciding on possible legal disputes between the operator and the user.

When applying DSA, the platform operator finds itself in a very specific situation. In some situations (typically hate speech) this decision will take place in the sphere of public law (the platform operator finds itself in the situation of a content regulator), in other cases it is a decision on private law disputes. However, in these cases, the platform operator is not entrusted with the power to exercise state power. The platform operator can be considered as a defining authority that controls the Internet by technical means (Polčák 2018, p.13). However, the relationship between the defining authority and the user of the platform remains a private relationship (Rámešová 2019, 35).

### **Digital Services Coordinator**

The DSA proposal envisages that the platform operator's internal decision will be reviewable in an out-of-court dispute resolution system. The task of national legislation will therefore be to determine who becomes the coordinator of digital services, which entities will be certified for out-of-court dispute resolution, the rules under which these proceedings will take place and whether and how these decisions will be judicially reviewable. According to the DSA proposal, the Digital Services Coordinator should be an independent administrative body. In the conditions of the Czech Republic, among the existing authorities it would be suitable in particular the Broadcasting Council.<sup>25</sup> The extension of the competences of the Broadcasting Council to be provided.<sup>26</sup> There is a presumption that the requirement of the necessary expertise of the body could be met.

If, in my view, the national legislature had opted for this solution, it would have to be preceded by a very thorough review of the position of the Broadcasting Council and whether the organization of the Council's activities would in all likelihood allow the effective exercise of the powers

<sup>25</sup> However, it cannot be overlooked that the DSA also covers issues related to e-commerce (electronic marketplaces, etc.), an agenda that is far removed from the Broadcasting Council. However, the DSA makes it possible to entrust certain agendas to bodies other than the digital services coordinator.

<sup>26</sup> In the past, RRTV's scope has been extended to include the supervision of on-demand audiovisual media services.

conferred on the DSA by the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC).<sup>27</sup> The Council Office, which is established by law, is a purely service body without any powers of its own, all decisions are taken by the Council as such by voting at a meeting of the Council. The Czech Telecommunication Authority and possibly also (albeit only in part of the matter) the Personal Data Protection Authority stand closest to the agenda.

### **Certified arbitration centres and out-of-court dispute resolution system**

One of the coordinator's powers is to grant certification to entities that will decide disputes between platforms and users of their services if the user is not satisfied with the platform's decision. Certified persons should be platform independent, have sufficient expertise and have easy access to management using electronic means of communication. These may be bodies set up by the state or private individuals. The DSA talks about *dispute settlement*, but at the same time stipulates that the decision of the certified person is binding on the platform.

The decision-making of certified authorities is in many ways reminiscent of arbitration centres' decisions known from domain disputes. This is alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in arbitration<sup>28</sup>, which, however, does not have the nature of "classical arbitration", in which the jurisdiction of the arbitrators is based on the will of the parties. The DSA assumes that an arbitration centre may be established by the state as well as by a private body (eg an arbitration center), provided that it meets the requirements of Article 18 (2) of the DSA.

The nature of the arbitration centres decision is also an open question. The DSA stipulates that this will be a decision that will be binding on the platform. If the arbitration centre is an administrative body, it can probably be an administrative decision of its kind.<sup>29</sup> In the case of private arbitration centres, the legal nature of the decision is unclear. It is certainly conceivable that the decision of the arbitration centre will also be seen as an administrative decision.<sup>30</sup> The advantage of such a solution would be a uniform regime of decision-making of arbitration centres regardless of their nature. Another possibility is to consider the arbitration centre's decision as a legal proceeding taking place in the sphere of private law.

The resolution of these problems is crucial for the subsequent judicial review of the arbitration centre's decisions. In this respect, it is not possible to be fully inspired by functioning ADR dispute resolution systems in the field of domain names. The DSA proposal explicitly provides for judicial review of the court's decision in accordance with national law. In the conditions of the legal system of the Czech Republic, it will be a matter of proceedings in matters decided

<sup>27</sup> These are, for example, the issuance of interim measures or investigative powers.

<sup>28</sup> The decision in the ADR is not enforceable by a public authority (executor, etc.), its enforcement stems from the technical nature of the matter (the registrar cancels the domain registration, analogously the platform deletes the defective content or blocks the account).

<sup>29</sup> Administrative bodies can also decide on private law relations, in the conditions of the Czech Republic cf. eg decision-making of a financial arbitrator or the Czech Telecommunication Authority.

<sup>30</sup> In the conditions of the current state, it is no exception that the performance of administration is entrusted to a person of private law; however, it is essential that such a power be clearly established by law, cf. Rámešová, p. 35.

by an administrative body. In addition, the DSA proposal explicitly states that the out-of-court dispute resolution system does not replace and in no way affects the possibility for the persons concerned to assert their claims in court, typically in personality proceedings. These legal actions are decided by civil courts.

In conclusion, although the DSA is a directly effective regulation and as such does not require transposition into national law, it is clear that the final form of regulation, as it will be applied, depends to a large extent on the accompanying legislation. One of the most important tasks of a national authority is to prepare an appropriate institutional and procedural framework in which decisions on the handling of illegal content will be taken. The designation of a national digital services coordinator presupposes examining whether a state body already exists that could become a digital services coordinator.

The DSC should, among other things, certify the arbitration centres, which will be responsible for resolving any disputes between the platforms and persons who are not satisfied with how the platform has handled the warning of illegal content. Although the arbitration centre's decision will be platform-dependent, the DSA directly assumes that this decision will be subject to judicial review of the rules of national law. The whole system must therefore be properly linked to the judicial system of the Member State concerned.

It is clear from the above that the implementation of the DSA into national law will be a relatively challenging process, the success of which is conditioned by the cooperation of several administrative departments and political representation, on whose decision the final form of the system will depend.

### **The liability rules for providers of intermediary services**

Ewa Galewska argues that the blueprint of DSA was preceded by a variety of EU acts and documents that addressed the problem of tackling the illegal content online<sup>31</sup>. The measures proposed by the EU expressed the opinion that providers of intermediary services guard the Internet and should tackle illegal content online through self-regulatory measures. One of the most serious consequences of imposing such an important task upon intermediaries was the necessity

<sup>31</sup> E.g.: European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2017 on online platforms and the digital single market (2016/2276(INI)) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-06-15\\_EN.html#sdocta7](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-06-15_EN.html#sdocta7) COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Tackling Illegal Content Online Towards an enhanced responsibility of online platforms <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2017/EN/COM-2017-555-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-PDF> COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2018/334 of 1 March 2018 on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32018H0334&from=PL>; DIRECTIVE 2010/13/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32010L0013&from=pl> DIRECTIVE (EU) 2019/790 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 April 2019 on copyright and related rights in the Digital Single Market and amending Directives 96/9/EC and 2001/29/EC <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019L0790&from=PL>

to refer to the system established in the eCommerce Directive<sup>32</sup>. Pursuant to thereof provisions providers of intermediary services should not be liable for the content if they lack knowledge or awareness of its illegality. In the light of new requirements based on more proactive attitude of intermediaries to detecting the illegal content provisions of eCommerce Directive seemed unclear and difficult to apply (e.g. Frosio 2018, Kaesling 2018).

In the light of the above it is astonishing that DSA maintains the liability rules for providers of intermediary services set out in e-Commerce Directive and describes them as “a foundation of the digital economy”<sup>33</sup> claiming that they were well interpreted in the ECJ case law<sup>34</sup>. Pursuant to Articles 3,4,5 of DSA the exemption from liability is based on lack of awareness of providers of intermediary services that the content in question is illegal. Thus such exemptions should not apply where provider of intermediary services plays an active role of such a kind as to give it knowledge of, or control over provided or processed information<sup>35</sup>. This could create the same difficulties the EU already experienced when trying to adjust the system of liability of providers of intermediary services to new requirements relating to their more proactive attitude. The EU legislator intends to solve this problem by applying the rule that providers of intermediary services shall not be deemed ineligible for the exemptions from liability solely because they carry out voluntary own-initiative investigations or other activities aimed at detecting illegal content or take the necessary measures to comply with the requirements set out in DSA (Article 6 DSA). However, it further explains that such activities should be carried out in good faith and in a diligent manner<sup>36</sup> that may also call the clarity of DSA provisions into doubts. The DSA also maintains the rule developed in eCommerce Directive that providers of intermediary services should not be subject to a general obligation to monitor the information which they transmit or store, nor actively to seek facts or circumstances indicating illegal activity (Article 7 of DSA). In order to strengthen this rule the legislator adds that nothing in DSA should be construed as an imposition of a general monitoring obligation or active fact-finding obligation, or as a general obligation for providers to take proactive measures in relation to illegal content<sup>37</sup>.

The analysis of DSA allows to draw the conclusion that the legislator did not resign from promoting the idea of more proactive attitude to tackling the illegal content by providers of intermediary services. Obligations of such a nature are imposed especially upon very large online platforms that are supposed to assess the systemic risks stemming from the functioning and use of their service, as well as by potential misuses by the recipients of the service, and take appropriate mitigating measures<sup>38</sup>. Among these risks DSA mentions risks associated with the misuse of their service through the dissemination of illegal content<sup>39</sup>. Risks assessments should be con-

<sup>32</sup> Directive 2000/31/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2000 on certain legal aspects of information society services, in particular electronic commerce, in the Internal Market („Directive on electronic commerce“) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32000L0031>

<sup>33</sup> Explanatory Memorandum., p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Explanatory Memorandum., p. 3

<sup>35</sup> Motives 18.

<sup>36</sup> Motives 25

<sup>37</sup> Motives 28.

<sup>38</sup> Motives 56.

<sup>39</sup> Motives 57.

ducted by taking into account in particular how content moderation systems implemented by the very large online platform influence the systematic risks (Article 26 (2) of DSA). As a part of mitigation of risks a very large online platform shall put measures tailored to the identified risks. As one of such measures the legislator indicates adapting content moderation (Article 27 (1)(a) of DSA) that is defined as “ (...) the activities undertaken by providers of intermediary services aimed at detecting, identifying and addressing illegal content or information incompatible with their terms and conditions, provided by recipients of the service (...)” (Article 2(p) of DSA). Furthermore, pursuant to Article 12 (1) of DSA it is imposed upon providers of intermediary services that they in their terms and conditions should include information on any restrictions applied by them in relation to the use of their service in respect of information provided by the recipients of the service. That information should include information on any policies, measures and tools used for the purpose of content moderation. Also in the following Article 13 of DSA that concerns reports that providers of intermediary services are to publish every year, the legislator refers to the content moderation engaged in at the providers’ own initiative.

The analysis of DSA provisions leads to the conclusion that EU intends to sustain the regime of intermediaries liability that developed under the regime of eCommerce Directive. It also expressed its idea that providers of intermediary services should undertake voluntary measures to tackle the illegal content online, however these expectations are narrowed in comparison with EU soft law regulations in this area. On the other hand, as Article 1 (5) of DSA explicitly states it is to complement and does not affect sector-specific legislation that is addressed only to specified kind of content (e.g. terrorist content, child sexual abuse material) disseminated on certain types of services (e.g. video-sharing platforms, online platforms). Regulations that require more proactive measures from providers of intermediary services were criticized in the legal literature, as being contrary with main principles of the responsibility for the illegal content<sup>40</sup>. The European Commission noticed this problem before the blueprint of DSA was published. Therefore, whenever proactive measures are being promoted in the area of tackling the illegal content online and obligations of proactive nature are imposed, it emphasizes that they do not influence Articles 12-15 of eCommerce Directive. In the light of the above it is understandable that the EU legislator tries to clarify the situation in which internet intermediary fulfils its obligation to actively fight the illegal content online by for instance undertaking activities aimed at detecting such a content and at the same time its liability is exempted on the basis of DSA provisions. Still the question is if in the light of the existing sector specific acts and soft law the afore-mentioned provisions of DSA would effectively indicate providers of intermediary services that the fact that they obtained a knowledge or awareness of an illegal content as a result of their voluntary measures triggers their responsibility?

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<sup>40</sup> E.g. M. L. Montagnani, A. Trapova New Obligations for Internet Intermediaries in the Digital Single Market— Safe Harbors in Turmoil?, *JOURNAL OF INTERNET LAW* 2019, s. 3-4.

## “Interim” or “Preliminary” Measure

In the following pages Ivan Smieško analyses probably the most important tool in the DSA planned toolbox – “interim” or “preliminary” measure which is an extreme legal intervention in the case of violating DSA. According to Article 41 Section 1 of DSA Digital Services Coordinators („DSC“) can consider that the provider has not sufficiently complied with previous intervention. In such a case, if there is a serious harm, and that the infringement entails a serious criminal offence involving a threat to the life or safety of persons, DSC can request the competent judicial authority of that M.S.) to order the temporary restriction of access of recipients of the service concerned by the infringement.

Due to its radical impact on basic rights, it is necessary to set this institute as precise as possible in order to avoid illegal and unnecessary violation of user’s rights to freedom of speech.

The essential condition is that there must be a “serious criminal offence” which “threatens the life and security of the persons”.

There are three core legal issues enforcing authorities should deal with here. First, there can be different interpretations of the term “serious criminal offence”. Second, the interpretation of the act that “threatens the life and security of the persons” seems to be rather ambiguous. Third, it is unclear who has the right to define both notions when a serious criminal offence is committed.

These are serious legal challenges due to the diverse legal systems of M.S. We are going to discuss problems one by one from the point of view of the Slovak legal system and law enforcing authorities.

What is striking is that the term „serious criminal offence“ can be interpreted differently. Second, it can include a very heterogeneous aggregate of illegal conducts. Third, this term means that it cannot be included in any criminal offence. Yet there is no legal definition of this term in the DSA. For the time being there is no a unified European Criminal Code, where the term could be defined. At the European level some definitions of criminal offences do exist but these definitions are related only to the acts where they are placed. To apply these definitions to the DSA would be an inadmissible extensive interpretation.

By applying linguistic, logical and doctrinal interpretation we can hardly subsume under the term “serious criminal offence” for example criminal offence with a maximum three years of imprisonment. In Slovak legal context “serious” means “bad or dangerous”(OLD, n.d.-a). Slovak Penal Code provides for “particular serious crimes”, where the lowest level of penalty is 10 years of imprisonment, so the term “particularly serious” has a double effect.

Let us turn our attention now to the second legal term used – if it “threatens life and security of the persons”. First, the question is should these common goods be interpreted as objects of the criminal provisions protecting life and security of persons or do they represent a consequence of the criminal offence? Another question is why there is no mention of threats related to health? It is true, that if life is threatened, health is also threatened, however the opposite is not true. Threats to life and safety can be the result of several criminal offences, not only those whose objects directly relate to the protection of life and security. According to the linguistic interpretation, the threat to life and security should be the result of such an action. Life is the ability to breathe, grow, reproduce. This right belongs to living creatures and this makes them different

from “objects” that do not have such a right, it is about the state of being alive as a human; an individual person’s existence (OLD, n.d.-b).

Security can be defined as protection against something bad that might happen in the future and the activities cover the protection of a country, building or a person against attack, danger, etc. (OLD, n.d.-c).

The logical question is which criminal offences should be included into this list?

First, it must be a criminal offence committed by publishing some contribution or rather contributions of different types (images, videos, statuses, messages, etc.) which cause serious harm and the provider has not sufficiently dealt with such content. These will be therefore verbal ways of committing a crime (or part of it), which are directly capable of endangering the life and security of persons. Endangering the lives of people is quite simple to define, as it is clearly different from a crime where the consequence is death. Endangering the security of persons is a harder nut to crack. It is not clear from the text itself whether the threat to security is immediate or remote, not only in terms of time, but also in terms of the relationship to a particular person. For example, the commission of the criminal offence of sabotage would be a threat to the safety of persons or is the protection of the state system, its integrity, sovereignty, defense, security, independence is also automatically a threat to the security of all persons? Following a logical interpretation, it can be concluded that the threat to the security of persons is too broad. Thus, it cannot be de-contextualised. Because a security threat is an alternative to a life threat, it is only possible to recognize a security threat that, with its intensity, can achieve a life threat, i.e. a more serious security threat, more immediately in terms of time. It follows that, if we will have to follow the case law, that will already define what can be considered as endangering the security of persons. *De lege ferenda*, the EU-wide exhaustive calculation of criminal offenses should be set. Such a move would prevent different approaches by national courts in M.S. For example, a case against Slovakia would be sanctioned in a way that would be accepted in Hungary or in Austria. It is a legal norm of a European reach and should therefore apply equally.

In the case discussed, theoretically the following crimes according to the Slovak Criminal Code (next “CC”) could be included: the crime of participation in suicide according to § 154 CC, the crime of trafficking in human beings according to § 179 sec. 4 and 5 of the CC, the crime of extortion according to § 189 sec. 3 and 4 of the Criminal Code, the crime of gross coercion according to § 190 sec. 4 and 5 CC, and according to § 191 sec. 3 and 4 of the CC, the crime of coercion according to § 192 par. 3 and 4 of the CC, the crime of torture of a close and entrusted person according to § 208 sec. 3 and 4 of the CC, the crime of sabotage according to § 317 sec. 2 and 3 of the CC, crimes of intelligence and threats of classified information according to §§ 318 and 319 sec. 3 of the CC, the crime of abuse of power of a public official according to § 326 sec. 2 to 4 CC, crime of terrorist attack according to § 419 CC, crime of participation in combat activities of an organized group in another state according to § 419a CC, crime of some form of participation in terrorism according to § 419b CC, crime of terrorist financing according to § 419c CC, crime of establishment, support and promotion of the movement aimed at the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms according to § 421 sec. 2 CC, the crime of production of extremist material according to § 422a CC, the crime

of spreading extremist material according to § 422b sec. 2 CC, incitement to national, racial and ethnic hatred according to § 424 sec. 3 CC, crime apartheid and discrimination of persons according to § 424a CC.

Finally, let us check the provision of article 41 sec. 3 letter b) of the DSA that tackles the right to define when a serious criminal offence is actually committed. Criminal law theory says that the so-called merit decisions are those which end criminal proceedings, i.e.. a decision on the criminal offence, its perpetrator and the imposition of a criminal or protective measure. The most important merit decisions are the resolution to stop the prosecution, liberating judgment or sentencing judgment, and the criminal order (Ivor, 2010b, p. 515). These decisions are issued exclusively by the prosecuting authorities and criminal courts after the submission of previous evidence in the preparatory proceedings or court proceedings, and not by civil courts. According to the above-mentioned logic and grammatical interpretation, one should wait for a merit decision in criminal proceedings, which would serve as a basis for the issuance of an interim measure by a civil court. However, if we look at how this would actually happen taking stock of the length of criminal proceedings, which expand at least for a few months, such a procedure is absurd and it would deprive an interim measure of its preventive and quick role in the criminal process. The correct procedure should be the one that if there is a suspicion of committing a criminal offence according to the list discussed before, such an initiative, or the criminal report should be sent to the relevant prosecuting authorities and the same criminal report should be attached to the initiative aiming to issue an interim measure. It is not possible to wait for the delivery of a decision in the so-called pre-trial proceedings pursuant to §§ 197 or 199 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Even in the clearest cases in which the criminal offence can be precisely determined, again the question about the passage of time between the filing of the complaint to the issuing of a decision arises. That period may again take a month and long duration could lead to particular obstructions for the institute to perform its role. *De lege ferenda*, the wording should be amended to “the infringement constitutes a suspicion of a serious criminal offence, etc.”

Institute of interim measure is itself a good instrument of law enforcement in case of serious violations of the DSA. However, the analysis showed that current draft text has serious deficiencies. These deficiencies have to be corrected because otherwise there will be breaches of freedom of speech and of the principle of legal certainty.

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium’s (or, if applicable, author’s) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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## • RECENZIE A ANOTÁCIE •

Stępińska, A. (ed.): **Populist Discourse in the Polish Media**, Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, 2020, 180 p., ISBN 978-83-65817-87-7

This is a rather unusual and selective review of the book. The priority is given to in-depth elaboration of theoretical and methodological issues of the research on populist communication as discussed in the book, instead of providing a summary of results and detailed overview of structure of the book.

The book consists of four key parts and introductory chapter „Theoretical Background and Methods of the Study on Populist Discourse in the Media.“ Of the four key parts, the first part covers „Populism in Print Press“, the second part presents „Populist Discourse on Television“, the third part discusses „Populist Discourse in Social Media“ and the final part analyses „Us’ and ‘Them’ in the Polish Populist Discourse“. Obviously, populism in radio is missing – and this is unfortunate, considering infamous stories about Radio Maryja’s political role in Poland. For example, one of the first studies on this subject was published already in 2008 by Wysocka, clearly linking populism and this radio broadcast, while the 2017 study by Krzemiński even argues that Radio Maryja is a producer of the national-Catholic ideology (the latter perhaps better characterises the current Polish politics and discourse rather than too general word „populism“).

Yet it should be noted that the Polish authors, or Polish science in general, seem to pay rather high importance to methodological issues, as it can be observed from inclusion of two (and a quarter) chapters of this type in this volume. This is certainly promising trend towards higher quality (validity and reliability). Thus, one can wonder, what can we learn from selected chapters?

Let us focus at the introductory theoretical chapter „Theoretical Background and Methods of the Study on Populist Discourse in the Media“ written by Agnieszka Stępińska, Marta Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Jacek Wyszynski, then at the chapter 7 - Theoretical Background of Studies on Populist Political Communication in Social Media, written by Jakub Jakubowski, and, finally, we should explore a few ideas from methodological-theoretical part of the chapter written by Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska „8. Populism and Social Media. Analysis of the Political Communication Activities of Paweł Kukiz and Citizen Social Media Users During the 2015 Electoral Campaigns.

This selection is justified by still challenging definition(s) of populism and populist communication as well as rather new research agenda on social media and populism. In other words, we have to be very careful when selecting our conceptual-methodological approach to the study of such contested research topic in a new research (and media) environment. Wrong or imperfect definition or selection of concepts and methodology can impact our results or their interpretation. To start with, the authors Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszynski correctly note that „linguistic manifestations of populism may imply the occurrence of two phenomena: (1) an

internally established political orientation, i.e. populist ideology, and (2) a pragmatic linguistic attitude, not reflected in the political orientation of the producer of the statement (sender), i.e. populist style“ (p.5). In other words, and somehow corrected, „substantial“ populist rhetoric may reflect deeper populist messages as well as a typical populist style of „original“ populists, while „pragmatic“ populist communication may reflect just occasional populist(s) or rather demagoguery<sup>1</sup> communication produced by usually not typical populist parties or leaders (e.g. during an election campaign) or by subjects not primarily defined as populist (such as communists).

Similarly, the key to understanding the results is familiarity with initial coding approach which is - „the recognition of one of the three constitutive features of populism in at least one sentence: (1) reference to ‘the people’, (2) anti-elitism, or (3) the exclusion of ‘out-groups’ „(p.10). In other words, this is what the book considers as three key elements of populism – at the same time, any of these three elements is sufficient for considering something as being populist. Well, this is potentially highly controversial approach. Is any criticism of elites unfair or populist? Does any reference to „the people“ mean by definition populism? True, the authors mentioned that they also used the historical-discursive approach which allowed them for the inclusion of contextual relationships. As such, this is intellectually highly demanding task.

It may be useful to review the process how the authors came to this research methodology. The first theoretical chapter defines populist discourse, citing Jagers and Walgrave, primarily as „a communication framework which includes references to the people, identification with the people and aspirations to speak for the people” (p.1). It is seemingly correct, but not complete or sufficiently precise definition. As it is stated, it may include both communist and fascist ideologies. Although both these ideologies include populist rhetoric (or, as mentioned, more precisely demagoguery) – and specifically as described by cited Jagers and Walgrave – we see that this definition by Jagers and Walgrave becomes over-inclusive or over-used concept. One could argue that communists primarily referred to the „working people“, while fascists stressed „race“ (Germany) or „nation“ (Italy). Yet the most important (official) newspaper for Nazi Germany was the *Völkischer Beobachter* (National Observer) and for Italy it was *Il Popolo d'Italia* (“The People of Italy”). Similarly, the *People's Daily* is an official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, clearly, communists, fascists and/or Nazi ideologies also refer to “the people”. Are they primarily defined as populists? Fundamentally they can be seen as populists, but we do not define them primarily as populists.

This distinction becomes somehow clear to the authors Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszynski, who state that “the essence of populism is anti-elitism – an attitude of opposition to all those in power.” (p.1). This is actually very important distinctions since it recognises that populism can actually thrive only under democratic regime. Only then there are “elites” that can be opposed relatively freely. Yet, the conceptual definition is still blurred:” The people’ can be a nation (right-wing populism), a class (left-wing populism), or a sovereign (in a specific vision of democracy based on a literal understanding of the power of the people).” (p.2). However, we observe left-wing populism in Latin America, but also in some European countries (Spain,

<sup>1</sup> Political rhetoric that seeks broad support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argumentation.

partly Italy) that speaks about “people” or “nation” but not the class. Moreover, I would argue that populism is, indeed, only a specific vision of democracy based on a literal understanding of the power of the people. In all other cases mentioned here we deal with specific ideology *with* populist rhetoric, or, rather, demagoguery.

Be that as it may, the authors Stepińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszynski seem to accept Jagers and Walgrave’s 2007 definition of populism a style of political communication, distinguishing four types of populism: (1) empty populism, where references to ‘the people’ are the only element present, (2) anti-elitist populism, with references to ‘the people’ combined with attacks on ‘the elite’, (3) exclusionary populism, with references to ‘the people’ combined with the exclusion of ‘out-groups’, and (4) complete populism, which is a combination of the references to ‘the people’, attacks on ‘the elite’, and exclusion of the ‘out-groups’/‘the others’. Yet, considering that there is also inclusionary populism present (see Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013), this widely used concept has its own omissions. Indeed, the Polish authors used for coding only category of ‘out-groups’ (political, economic, geographical, etc.) (p.8), but not ‘in-groups’.

The authors then turn to discussion about populist communication as defined by the Polish ethnolinguists, especially by Kołodziejczak and Wrześniewska-Pietrzak. These ethnolinguists seem to capture the essence of populist discourse in a correct (or, at least, better way than previously cited authors: “(1) the mythically understood ‘people’ always takes the focal position in the constructed vision of the world, (2) ‘the people’ are always placed in opposition to those who are not members of this group (e.g. ‘the elite’ or ‘out-groups’), (3) the linguistic image of the social world is simplified, which is accompanied by a high degree of intelligibility of the message, aimed at the greatest possible number of recipients, and finally (4) there is always a leader, acting as a real or self-proclaimed vox populi” (p.3). Interestingly, this definition seemed to be ignored in later analysis.

This is not an unimportant discussion. In conclusion, as the authors themselves acknowledge, the interpretation of research results by authors who used their own theoretical constructs and methods may pose a number of methodological (and often epistemological) difficulties (p.5). Indeed, for example, one can find among analytical categories „(5) social state (a note by reviewer - maybe better understood as “welfare state”) calls for an increase in budget deficits to improve quality of life, especially among the poorest; promises to increase spending on social, educational, housing, and health purposes, etc.);“ (p.9). However, such a call, without providing context or background, and, if available, assessment of previous and follow up public policies, does not mean to be by default seen as „populist“, ie apriori negatively seen. The question that one had to ask first, would be - what kind of social policy is in a country? Is it fair? Does it reflect a proper re-allocation of resources? What are long-term consequences of up-to-date social policies? Etc.

Similarly, category „(11) intervention in the free market (negation of free market democratic institutions; critique of the free market; advocating an increase in the role of the state in the economy; market regulation)“ (p.9) seems to be too much normative one. First, there is no free market – this is just mythology (see, e.g. Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*, or Houseman 2006; Schotter 1985). Instead, there is a regulated market economy. The whole concept of the European Union and national governments in most advanced societies is increasingly based on regulation of „free“ markets. And if there is missing regulation, like in our example of social media

discussed in this volume, there are sooner or later important negative „externalities“. Moreover, „free market“ and „democracy“ are opposite poles. Thus, we can hardly have „free market democratic institutions“. Finally, there is no reason to believe that a „critique of the free market“ is a unique feature of populism. It is well-known that it was the key argument of communists.

Thus, there is an important lesson here – conceptual and methodological issues should be given even higher priority than it was the case in already rather developed currently discussed case.

For chapter 7, it is interesting and should be acknowledged as a honest approach, but at the same time it is somehow disappointing to read that (*Italics added*): „It *appears* that populism and communication via social media have many common characteristics. On account of *the lack of proper analyses*, however, this statement remains *only an academic intuition*. These two phenomena are mutually related and they can support and complement one another for the benefit of politicians and the media as such. It can be *presupposed* that the nature of communication conducted via social networks supports the style and strategies of populists who are keen to use tools such as Facebook and Twitter.“ (p.115-116).

In other words, based on this text, we do not know much reliable information about this relationships. Although the author then supports this „academic intuition“ by some statistical data, namely FB followers of selected Polish populist and non-populist politicians, the findings are inconclusive. For example, the author somehow ignores the fact that Jaroslaw Kaczynski showed zero followers on FB in 2019. This somehow undermines his hypothesis that „the nature of communication conducted via social networks supports the style and strategies of populists who are keen to use tools such as Facebook and Twitter.“ (p.116). In general, it is true statement, but there is this strange exception. Kaczynski is not keen to use social media, but still, he (or PiS, Justice and Law Party) was more successful than either J. Korwin-Mikke or P. Kukiz, each with hundred thousands followers on FB. A few sentences further the author suggests that “It is also worthwhile to verify the hypothesis that social networks provide a useful functionality to politicians and citizens who implement populism in their communication processes.“ (p.116). Well, maybe it is not necessary to check this because we see that social media indeed work in such as way – as „a useful functionality“ - if they are used at all.

The author comes back to his ambivalent thesis cited above at page 119, this time citing in support Engesser et al. work from 2016, who wrote that due to „the high degree of fragmentation of social media content, the populist elements become simplified, making it easier for social media users to interpret and complement them with their own ideological approaches. This significantly enhances the dissemination of populist messages.“(p.119). Yet, in itself, there is no difference in that explanation from how tabloid media report and comment on both populists and non-populists. What is different, and it is not mentioned there, it is speed, the lack of gatekeepers, quick availability of feedback and communication possibilities, easy further dissemination, echo chambers, etc. Some of these factors are indeed summarised by the author in the Table 7 that represents „tangential points between populism and social media“ (p.119). This list includes on the (right side) section „*Features of social media supporting populist strategies*“ (simplified): Social media as ‘the media of the people’, content independent of mainstream media, no political correctness, simplified and emotional nature of messages, online community as a ‘homogenous and virtuous society’ (better known as „echo-chambers“), criticism, limited gatekeeper functions,

multiple sources, the personalization of politics and emergence of a star-like online system, image, Pop-culture language.

This list is potentially useful, but it is apparently imperfect. It is not clear what it is based on (except „Own elaboration“). In particular, the left part of the table - *Populist ideological factor/style* – includes, for example, „Exclusion of ‘the others’ . Yet, as mentioned, we know that there are inclusionary populist movements, especially in South America, but also in Europe such as *Syriza*, *Podemos* and *the Five Star Movement* or *5SM* (Font, Graziano & Tsakatika 2021). Similarly, „The principle of “more leadership, less participation” is against what we can observe, at least formally, in the case of the 5SM. Vittori (2020) calls it ‘plebiscitarian’ movement party. I do not hide the claim that – nonetheless - one could observe „increasing centralization within the 5SM (Deseriis 2020).

The author also briefly discusses „new (network) media logic“ (p.120). However, it is not clear how it works except that „one of its important elements consists of politicians encouraging media users to be active (creating a so-called “buzz” around a given issue and helping attain their goals).“ But what are the other elements? It is not at all clear why this is then called network media logic when it looks like something similar to old-fashioned gossiping – the difference being that it is done in public, live and *en masse*. Furthermore, the author adds these aspects to „the media logic“: means of emotionalization, shocking language, and other tools of populist narration.“ (p.120). Again, this can be seen as an old-fashioned tabloid „media logic“, or, even theatre-like acting or performing style, somehow similar to Goffman’ suggestion about the nuances and significance of face-to-face social interaction. Moreover, it is not clear what is a difference between „new (network) media logic“ and „the media logic“.

What the author brings as a relatively original (this idea has been expressed by other authors, including citations in the first chapter of this volume) but ultimately controversial idea is that he „recognizes that citizens/media users are fully-fledged senders in the classical communication model.“ (p.122). Yet, from the perspective of a populist subject (be that a party, a movement or a leader), citizens are, by definition (just considering their sheer number), usually less relevant actors.

In summary, this theoretical background is rather under-developed. It is promising, but at the moment it looks more like a rough review of highly selected books and ideas on populism and social media with some tentative own author’s theoretical contribution.

Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska discussed additional theoretical-methodological issues in the chapter „8. Populism and Social Media. Analysis of the Political Communication Activities of Paweł Kukiz and Citizen Social Media Users During the 2015 Electoral Campaigns. They by and large summarised some ideas of well-known researchers with following observations on the role of social media in populist communication (adjusted by the author of this review).

- a) social media enable much more direct and immediate, short, simplified posts, and interactions among users than allow traditional media. Thus, social media are becoming (de facto) a tool for free of charge expression of anti-elitist attitudes and for frequent reference to ‘the people’.
- b) this process is supported by the algorithms and overall design of social media (instead of

„media logic“ as argued by Jakubowski and Adamczewska, referring to other researchers) that tend to support direct and open conflict framing, strategic framing, and personalization”.

c) in effect, social media exacerbate the division between ‘the political and media elites’ on the one hand, and ‘the people’ on the other hand.

It should be noted that this is still somehow normatively negatively framed. There may be a positive contribution or result – social media may be seen as facilitating expression of salient issues in a society to potentially politically relevant actors (read „populists“). I know, this sounds a bit pro-populist, but is n’t it also a true statement?

In conclusion, we see that inspite of great attention paid to theoretical-methodological issues in the research on populist communication in the reviewed volume, there may still be found some bits of liberal bias in theory and methodology of research on populist communication. Moreover, theory as presented here, and follow up methodology, are inevitably a little bit challenging from perspective of validity and reliability of results. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that this appears to be qualitatively rather high level academic mainstream in research on populist communication.

Andrej Školkaý

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Eibl, O. – Gregor, M. (eds.): **Thirty Years of Political Campaigning in Central Eastern Europe**, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 426p., ISBN 978-3-030-27693-5

Populists and social media are the culmination of the most recent trends in studies of political communication. Some argue that there would not be some populists without social media – or at least not that successful. Moreover, some sociological and political science theories see populism primarily as a communicative style. Therefore, it makes sense to review a book that presents the recent history of political communication in part of Europe. Not coincidentally, many chapters end with a few critical remarks on social media roles in political marketing and related foreign interferences.

This useful and large (over 420 pages) edited volume offers, in a nutshell, a historical overview of national electoral campaigning in 18 countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is divided into broader geographical historical regions such as Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia (currently this is actually the official name, just a few years ago it was Macedonia or, internationally, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Romania, Slovenia and Serbia (Montenegro is missing), Eastern Europe (Moldova, Ukraine, Russia (a tiny Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic is missing, as well as perhaps more important and more interesting case of Belarus). There are some other countries that could claim to belong to Eastern Europe, such as Armenia or Georgia. However, it is clear that 18 political entities is quite sufficient to cover in a single volume.

Yet it is arguable whether a short introductory (and summarising) chapters that familiarize the reader with these (a bit artificially drawn) regions were really necessary. At the end, there are apparently no visible „regional“ specifics regarding political marketing in these groups of countries. Therefore, I further prefer to focus my attention here to the country case studies rather than to „regional“ overviews. Furthermore, a short overview of the legal framework for campaigns is certainly useful, and unfortunately not so often present in publications of this type.

### **A Proper Definition is Key**

An introductory chapter „A Brief Historical Overview of Political Campaigning: Theories, Concepts, and Approaches“ written by the editors is both a useful and necessary introductory note. However, it is questionable how editors applied the definition of political marketing: „*Generally, it can be understood in two ways. First, it is a philosophy, an attitude, and a perspective. Second, it is a set of activities used to implement that philosophy (Crompton and Lamb 1986).*“ (p.1).

This definition is further a bit updated, referring to 1996 source, but I still think that there are newer, better, more specific and simpler definitions, for example one cited in Menon (2009, p.3) „*According to Harrop political marketing is not just about political advertising, party political broadcasts and electoral speeches but it covers the whole area of party positioning in the electoral market. In the words of Kavanagh, political marketing is a set of strategies and tools to*

*trace and study public opinion before and during an election campaign, to develop campaign communications and to assess their impact.*“ or, according to Bigi (2016, p.21, 23-24): „...a set of activities, processes, or political institutions used by political organizations, candidates, and individuals to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange promises of value with voter-consumers, political party stakeholders, and society at large (Hughes & Dann, 2009, p. 359)... „...the process of applying tools developed for the commercial marketplace into the political field...“ In the next sub-chapter (Campaigning Throughout the Twentieth Century: a Historical Overview) of the first chapter, the editors wrote: *“Until the mid-twentieth century, the party systems in Western countries were stable,...“*. It is not clear to me why they did not review the party system in the regions they focused at. Of course, an argument can be made that political marketing, or, in general, political campaign strategies have (more) developed in the other part of Europe, but this should be clearly stated. In any case, a reader would be more interested in the party system in Central and Eastern Europe (at least during the interwar period, and then again after the Cold War). It can also be said that at least much of what the editors cite or review about interwar political campaigning in Western Europe can be applied to Central and Eastern Europe, perhaps with more nuances such as, arguably, the higher level of electoral corruption present in Central and Eastern Europe then and, in some cases, possibly still today.

### **Comments on Selected Country Case Studies**

It is impossible to review all the case studies. Therefore, with the aim to highlight the most interesting text, as well as to suggest possible ways of improvement for the next edition, I selected rather randomly some countries for a more in-depth analysis from different perspectives.

It should be mentioned that each country case study has multiple tables that mark stages of political campaigning in each country. This is an excellent idea. These tables include year(s) of elections, (basic) electoral system characteristics, basic campaign characteristics, campaign focus (either issues or candidates), main campaign topics, presence of external (either international or domestic) advisors (spin doctors) and type of communication (ads and media). Maybe also the overall structure of individual chapters could follow this outline.

Yet it is questionable that one can collect all such details back to the past, and with sufficient reliability. Indeed, in some tables one can find „N/A“ notes. On the positive side, this highlights the importance of such publishing endeavours for keeping the historical record.

### **A Small Can be Inspirational**

Estonia is an example that being small can be an advantage – there is an online voting in national elections possible as of 2005 (with first relevant e-elections held in 2007). In 2019, 43.8 percent of voters used online voting. This factor is one of three „socio-political“ characteristics according to authors that may impact campaigns and elections in this country, the two other things being - positively, free press and, negatively, or at least seen as a complication, unresol-

ved ethnic divide from the times of occupation. Referring to free press, it is perhaps strange to find that: „Estonia is ...the only country where free airtime (for ads) in public media is not granted to contestants.“(p.84). Yet, as suggested, dual regulation of elections (electoral system rules and of electoral campaigns rules, including party and campaign financing and time allowed for campaigning in legacy media) are also important in each country. Although in some countries these two key factors may undergo only limited changes in thirty years, in other countries both electoral campaign rules and electoral system rules have certainly experienced quite many changes. Thus, next studies may decide whether to consider to include an overview of such changes throughout decades – or just to focus on political marketing as executed by political parties.

If we come back to Estonia, it is noteworthy to mention a strange merger of a very old and a very modern tool: „By the 2019 parliamentary elections, social media had become the main campaign platform for the majority of Estonian political parties. However, door-to-door campaigning also reached new heights (p.34 - interestingly, this „return to basics“ has also been noted for the 2016 national elections in Lithuania, p.72, and in the 2017 general elections as face-to-face meetings in Czechia, p.106).

It is also interesting to observe how – especially populist leaders/parties or challengers - find inspiration abroad and in new ways of communicating: “...before the 2019 election, *EKRE* attracted young protest voters on social media with meme campaigns inspired by the visual aesthetic of video games“ (p.35). Moreover, it is an important observation that: “...journalists in both traditional and online media in Estonia have stepped up their critical coverage of the campaign.“ (p.35).

### **A Concise Style is Usually Better Style**

Latvia case study suggests opportunities for editing. For example, there is this a bit of redundant text: „*Latvia is a democratic and parliamentary republic which was established in 1918, occupied by the USSR in 1940, and regained its independence in 1991. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Satversme), legislative power belongs to parliament (Saeima), which is the central state authority. The Saeima is ‘composed of one hundred representatives of the people’ and ‘elected in general, equal, and direct elections, and by secret ballot based on proportional representation’ (The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia 1922). The Saeima is elected for a period of four years.....A proportional electoral system was used in Latvia before the Soviet occupation and it was restored after the renewal of independence with several amendments, such as a lowered voting age, prohibition against electing persons who have cooperated with the security services of the USSR or were members of the Communist Party after 13 January 1991, a four per cent and later five per cent threshold to reduce the fragmentation of parliament.*“

I would suggest re-writing this section as follows: „The Latvian Parliament (Saeima) has 100 MPs who can be elected for four years term in a proportional electoral system based on five regions with a five percent threshold for a party.“ Isn’t it sufficiently crystal-clear for an international reader? Similarly, also the following text (p.52) is perhaps too detailed: „*The Law on*

*Financing of Political Organizations (Parties) sets restrictions on the amount of election expenses. They are calculated from the monthly average gross work remuneration for the year before last published by the Central Statistical Bureau which is approximated in euros; a coefficient of 0.0004 for the Saeima (in case of dismissal, the coefficient is 0.0003) and local government council elections, and a coefficient of 0.0003 for European Parliament elections; and the number of voters in the previous Saeima elections, electoral district, or local government council (The Law on Financing of Political Organizations (Parties)1995). For example, the expenses of parties and party unions should not have exceeded EUR 533,347.95 for the campaign across Latvia during the 2018 Saeima elections (The Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau 2017). “ Perhaps, it would be enough to state that: „The law sets restrictions on the costs of election campaigning. For the 2018 national elections, the allowed amount was about a half million EUR per party.“*

Similarly, terminology or language style could be unified, such in case of „*Voters.....have the opportunity to express their attitude toward individual candidates by using plus and minus signs.*“ (p.51). Wouldn't it be perhaps better to write that: „There is a preferential voting for up to X candidates.“ And so on....For example, consider this sentence (p.54): “*Nevertheless, the use of foreign political campaigning approaches in Latvia is limited due to the specific features of Latvia's political campaigning environment which is characterised by weak political parties, limited understanding of political processes in society in general, and the low quality of political journalism (Bērziņa 2016).*“

I would argue that this claim could be made quite universally across the region and perhaps throughout the world. Anyway, such a claim may not be seen as a limitation for using political marketing - on the contrary, as the author actually mentions right in the following sentence.

Such examples when some additional editing would be beneficial can be found in other parts. For example, (p.105):“*Early elections in 2013 were called because of a political crisis caused by police intervention at the Office of the Government due to suspicion the head of this office and Prime Minister Nečas' future-wife, Jana Nagyová, had influenced the intelligence service.*“ This sentence could be shortened radically, stating only: “There were early elections in 2013.“ All details of crisis are irrelevant within political marketing context in general, and for foreign audiences in particular.

### **Controversial Generalisations**

I compiled some claims that seem to me to be too general, thus, probably too imprecise – and possibly incorrect.

For example (p.55): „*One of the differences between campaigning in Latvia and the West is that political parties tend to lose their connection with voters right after the elections, whereas in the West, parties tend to use the principle of permanent campaigning.*“ Is this really true?

Another example (p.55): “*However, in terms of customer relationship management, which is common sense in European political parties, Latvia's political parties are still far behind other European countries*”“ (Dmitričenko 2011, 145).” One can wonder – how relevant is this obser-

vation for Latvia almost ten year later? And is there really „customer relationship management... among European political parties“? Finally, how is this concept or method different from „keeping connections with voters“?

To write that some subject: „...was not terribly active...“ (p.74) may be difficult to imagine empirically, and certainly is subject to different interpretations.

The following claim is almost certainly correct: „*After the 2018 election campaign, it was claimed that public media had by and large met the requirements to cover all candidates in the special campaign bloc, but the overall news programmes were clearly biased towards governmental forces.*“ (p.117). However, there are missing any sources for either positions (who claimed bias and who claimed that everything was just fine).

### Never Heard / Read Before

There is information that probably most experts never read or heard before. I have selected some of the most interesting examples:

Diaspora's impact on national elections - Latvia (pp.56-67): „*During the 2018 parliamentary elections, the representatives of twelve Latvian political parties went to Leicester, United Kingdom for election debates. For the first time in history, Latvian Television provided live media broadcasts of election debates in the United Kingdom.*“

This is a rarely explored aspect of diaspora impact on national elections.

State co-sponsored party propaganda - Lithuania (p.69): „*The CEC was obliged to print the election manifestos of parties free of charge*“ as well as, perhaps contrary to the previous approach: „*...advertisements shorter than thirty seconds cannot be used to present political programmes and speak about actual public issues...*“

This suggests a high value placed by Lithuanian authorities on educating voters.

An early (2010) special negative online trolling in Czechia: „*Both parties attacked each other through specialised micro-webpages: 'Blue Disease' attacking ODS, and 'Paroubek Against You' attacking ČSSD.*“ (p.104).

This highlights often ignored negative campaigning, often executed through third-party actors.

Ethnically-based party funding that does not help in transparency in Hungary: „*...only natural persons with Hungarian nationality are allowed to donate*“, „...while at the same „*Experts say that the lack of transparency in campaign finances jeopardises the public audit safety process*“ (p.117).

This suggests both importance and specifics of campaign regulations.

Being the first in innovation locally: „*Ferenc Gyurcsány has been the first to try new ways: In 2005, he launched an online political game for young people; in 2014, one could communicate with him via a mobile application*“ (p.122).

## Social media, Internet and Campaigns – Lesson Learned

Lithuanian chapter nicely summarises the importance of online communication (called, perhaps in an old-fashioned way, „the Internet“) not only for Lithuania. Be that called either way, online communication and social media in particular, are seen as: *„important in shaping public discourse, agenda setting, and maintaining a politician’s image. ...it also compliments other means of communication but it is not of great importance,.... Political parties were using Facebook only to provide the information from their websites and to spread this information (a complimentary function of social media); politicians were using Facebook more interactively and were likely to post their messages and opinions and attempt to reply to the comments of followers and keep relationships with citizens “* (p.73). Furthermore, *„The ...three central motives for using social media.....: The first is marketing, meaning that the candidates used it to increase the visibility of their candidacies and parties in the public sphere. Social media was yet another place to promote their politics and one in which they could reach voter groups outside traditional media—young people, for example. Moreover, marketing in social media is more personal than in mainstream media. Second, mobilisation was a key motive for being present on Facebook, from inviting people to meetings with politicians to getting out the vote. Third, social media represented new opportunities to connect with voters, get feedback on political issues, discuss politics more continuously, and engage more voters than through older media“* (pp.74-75).

## Conclusion

Overall, in spite of all criticism, this is a great book. There is always a trade-off – either one goes into depth, or in extensive coverage. I would have difficulty writing such a chapter within an allocated slot. This book, by necessity of its extensive comparative approach, offers an interesting, but rather general overview of campaigning in selected countries. In that sense, its expected readership are more likely students of political marketing, and, first, political sciences, rather than experts in political marketing. In any case, perhaps it would be wise to think about the next volume that could define a clear and in-depth structure that would be followed for each country study. A good example can be found in the book in the chapter on Hungary. The authors suggested the following parameters: *“market segmentation, positioning, strategy, messages, candidates, campaign staff and organisation, the use of media, and other means“* (p.117). Maybe this is what was originally suggested by the editors, but it was more or less produced by other contributors only in a table format. Ideally, an alternative approach would also mean to cover just a single election – be that elections to the European Parliament, or national elections. I fully understand that this is a challenge, but at the same time, there are already quite many individual or comparative studies that cover campaigns to the European Parliament (see Boicu, Branea, Stefanel 2017). Moreover, scientists and activists in virtually every EU country produce studies or books that cover national elections.

Finally, there is a message that is highly relevant for this special issue: *„How to cultivate and sustain respectful and reasonable political debates in the face of widespread emotional ‘trolling’*

*and dishonest algorithmic manipulation for electoral gain on the Internet remains one of the biggest challenges for political communication in Estonian as well as in other modern democracies.*“ (p.36).

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