

Erik Uszkiewicz:
Populist political communication

During the recent years illiberal and populist waves emerged and became dominant across Europe with its political and ideological narratives. Many people tend to believe that one of the key success factors of the populists is connected to the way how populism is communicated. As many scholars and researchers proved the communication tools and methods used by populists spreading their ideas and ideology is such as important as the core element of the populism.

In the populist political communication the main reference point is the voice of the people, based on the belief that the people share one will which is typically contrasted with the corrupt and immoral elite, different minority groups (in the most often cases the refugees and migrants) or the top of the rich business people. The populist rhetoric pretends to represent the underprivileged, but in fact it supports the interest of another elite. In the recent past as a response to some external conditions and events (such as the global financial and economic crises, the transnational migrant flows and the growing income inequalities) the populists' sounds became even louder. So, in the populist political communication there are three main elements, which have high importance

- i. reference to the "People" and the representation of their interests;
- ii. the battle against the former "corrupt elite" sometimes including part of the traditional media;
- iii. identification and extension of an out-group (eg. migrants, refugees etc.).

For example, in the Czech Republic prime minister, businessman and media oligarch Andrej Babiš when has entered into the Czech domestic politics, positioned himself as the only one who is against everyone: the old elite is corrupt and cannot represent the interest of the people, he is the only clear politician coming from outside of politics.

We can also say that populist politicians and parties are also in favor simplifying complex issues. However, we can say that populists in their communication not only provide simplistic explanations for complex social, economic, and political questions, but expressly focus on different topics which

- on the one hand, dominate the reality of the present;
- and on the other hand (and this is more important) which are capable of producing strong emotional effects and extreme reactions due to their divisive nature.

These facts and the dramatic, shocking elements are contributing to a huge media attention, which provides more and more viewers and readers.

As Julia Rone argued in connection with the radical right media and media usage, sharing of "fake" (false) news not so much defines the radical right media online, rather the fact that firstly,

“they select and focus on very narrow set of topics, and secondly, they frame these topics in strongly biased ways.”¹

This is supplemented with the “post-truth” or “post-fact politics”, which was renewed after the U.S. Presidential Election in 2016 and the Brexit referendum with the emerging role of social media in promoting and propagating rumor and untruth. Furthermore, in our postmodern risk society knowledge is replaced by the culture of risks, fear creation and punitive populism, expressive justice, the over-emotional tone of politics, which lead to the establishment of control society. Control societies employ a complex web of collective strategies through which fear, angst, anxiety, phobia or even hysteria is created and recycled.²

Additionally, a separate communication technical problem is giving fact-based answers to the campaigns which are based on simplifying semi-truths or completely liars. “Populistic politicians typically touch upon the voters’ real fears and concerns, and appear to represent them sensitively, offering seemingly functional and fast responses. In contrast, democratic decision-making appears to be complicated, distant and inefficient, and requires the investment of time and energy to be meaningfully involved. In short, democratic processes seem to be beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.”³

If we are talking about the relationship with the media we have to say it’s diverse: populist politicians need different media outlets in order to spread their messages, however sometimes they tend to stigmatize the independent, critical voices as fake news producers, part of the corrupt elite, agents of foreign interests etc. (see for example Orbán’s reaction to index.hu). As the way in the direction of publicity is a crucial point, not surprisingly they tend to use social media surfaces as a way of direct communication with the people, which provides a direct access to the public without any journalistic interference (see for example the success of Salvini’s direct communication in Italy). Ironically, sometimes these social media messages’ visibility and reach is increased by the traditional media as the content is spread by them. As Mazzoleni pointed out “the media intentionally or not, may serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes”.⁴

Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese in their paper put this question into a broader context in order to evaluate the current European media environment as well. As they pointed out “the power

¹ Julia Rone: Why talking about ‘disinformation’ misses the point when considering radical right ‘alternative’ media.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2019/01/03/why-talking-about-disinformation-misses-the-point-when-considering-radical-right-alternative-media/>

Access: 31 March 2019.

² See more: Judit Bayer et al.: Disinformation and propaganda - impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608864_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf)

Access: 4 April 2019.

³ J. Bayer et al.

⁴ Gianpietro Mazzoleni: “Populism and the Media” In Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, 49-64. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

of traditional, established media outlets wanes in many polities, we need to move away from traditional gatekeeper models and recognize the increasing complexity of the environments in which media organizations now operate. It may well be that commercialization, growing competition, and the Web weaken the traditional publicizing function of established media outlets, but these forces may also encourage some ratings-driven outlets to pander to populist reactionary political agendas and to adopt populist frames on a range of prescient political issues.”⁵

As it's a well-known phenomenon the global discourse and communication sphere has been dramatically changed during the past few years with its regulatory regime, actors, gatekeepers, liability rules, influencers, effects and audience. Social media created a new public space without boundaries, the myth of openness, but with the imbalance of power as well (as the access to these platforms does not mean automatically equal voice in the social media, as some voices are louder). Online influence became more and more important and the features of populist communication strategies (e.g. people-centrism, anti-elitism, promoting the tools and ways of direct democracy) perfectly align with social media characteristics.

The other quite well-known phenomenon is establishing a friendly and close media empire which can be used as a direct tool to disseminate the populist rhetoric and increase the visibility of the populists' messages. For example what we see in Hungary

- the public media is placed under direct government control and regulation;
- national media and telecommunications agency was established;
- the independent media is under a huge political and economic pressure, self-censorship is an everyday phenomenon;
- state-sponsored advertisements dominate and destroy the whole media market;
- the media are increasingly dominated by pro-government outlets, which are frequently used to smear political opponents (Freedom House, 2016);
- government-friendly business figures and oligarchs have supplanted foreign companies as investors in key media (Reporters Without Borders);
- shrinking space for investigative journalism;
- and as a latest development nearly all pro-government private media merged to form a conglomerate - the Central European Press and Media Foundation, under the direct and unequivocal control of the government.

However, Orbán is still speaking about left-wing, liberal dominance on the Hungarian media landscape. Those outlets who are still independent and have a critical attitude towards the power holders are under continuous attack, political and economic pressure and demonized as part of the corrupt elite and servants of liberal hegemony.

⁵ Toril Aalberg - Claes H. de Vorse: Introduction. Comprehending Populist Political Communication.

<https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2470292/Chapter%2b1%2bIntroduction.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Access: 4 April 2019.

Mediums, which are embedded in illiberal or populist governments and parties, no longer leave room for critical voices, and voices opposed to the narrative in contrast to the political mainstream.

In summary, sometimes and some ways the media can also contribute to the populist political communication. On the one hand, media outlets tend to grab and distribute populist messages, on the other hand some surfaces are blaming the elite or the minorities as well, and finally, there is a strong tendency to capture the independent press. The continuing deterioration of the press freedom is illustrated well if we have a look at the evaluation of the V4 countries which during the recent years show greater or lesser extent to the signs of populism.

RSF Index (rankings in the World Press Freedom Index in the different years)	2018	2017	2016
Czech Republic	34	23	21
Hungary	73	71	67
Poland	58	54	47
Slovakia	27	17	12