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Populism is a multifaceted construct that is difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, some useful attempts have been made. Conceptually, it can be understood as a political ideology, which sees a conflict of values and interests between ordinary people and the political elite as the dominant structuring mechanism in democratic politics and claims that democratic decisions should reflect the people's general will rather than the narrow interests of sections of society (Mudde, 2004; Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002). While populist claims have the merit of addressing modern democracy's failures, there are further aspects of populism, which seem more problematic from a democratic politics point of view. For example, populists have been accused of capitalizing on public discontent and economic or political crises, providing a gloomy outlook on political situations, or making blunt or uncivil statements undermining the legitimacy of political institutions or actors (Taggart, 2004). Sometimes, populism is also associated with excluding specific ethnic or religious groups from the community of the native people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Reineemann et al., 2017). As long as populist movements unfold and transform themselves the scientific discussion is bound to continue.

Apart from the more theoretical discussion about the characteristics of populist ideology, there has been an international trend of electoral success of populist parties and movements. In countries like Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Norway, United States, Brazil or India (the list is not exhaustive), parties and politicians called populist have won elections or entered the government,

while they are the main opposition in others. This brings up the question about the role of the media in the success, spread, and development of “populism,” especially populist parties and movements. The role of the news media in the emergence of populist parties has been extensively analyzed especially against the background of Silvio Berlusconi’s success in Italy that was one of the precursors of the current wave of populist parties’ success (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2007; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). Notably, Mazzoleni’s (2007) research has discussed a couple of hypotheses regarding this relationship: One assumed that there is a media complicity with populists that rests upon a convergence of goals between tabloid media and populist parties in the sense that both organizations ruthlessly strike emotional chords on complex public issues such as immigration or European integration for the sake of their own benefit. In this view, part of the news media are mobilizing agents for populist movements by giving them visibility and legitimacy during their emergent phase.

Also, the media complicity thesis states that the way populist politicians communicate in public about politics — that is, their performance as leaders — provides popular media with excellent raw material for eye-catching stories, which secures them disproportionate amounts of coverage. Although pointing out this convergence of goals, extant research has not been ignorant of the fact that many mainstream media outlets rather adopt an adversarial attitude toward populism and even contribute to the stigmatization of its advocates. In many cases, the leading news media tend to defend the political status quo including the established parties as a group against the populist challengers. In a way, news organizations function as guard dogs of the political establishment and help to secure the predominance of its values. Recent actor-centric research on the media–populism relationship has focused on the role of journalistic culture in this relationship and suggests that a predominance of an educational role perception among journalists acts as a barrier to populism (Maurer et al., 2019).

Yet, there remain at least two big blind spots in the analysis of how media and populism interact: For one, the media ecosystem has undergone a rapid and profound change since the early 2000s when much of the available theory was written. This change is characterized by the advent of a digital public sphere of social media where political actors can communicate directly with the public and use the opportunity extensively. The ease with which they now can provide political messages to large audiences without a journalistic filter or passing the media gates is especially welcome to political outsiders and emerging movements — such as populist parties. They use the counter public sphere for setting an alternative agenda of issues and framing them differently than the editorial media usually do. Moreover, the affordances of social media platforms seem to meet the populist style (Engesser et al., 2016; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Mercier, 2016). Research is only at the beginning of understanding and analyzing this transformation. Moreover, analyses of the populism–media relationship — with the term media now including editorial “offline” and online social

media — concentrated often on the situation in “old” Western European democracies. However, it turns out that in the 2010s, populist parties have experienced some of their most spectacular breakthroughs in the younger democracies of Central and (South-)Eastern Europe. Hence, research about the role of the media in the spread of populism must consider the situation in this region if the state of the art is to advance.

The interest in the topic and its timeliness were proved by the large interest this special issue had in the academic community, with more than 20 contributions received as a response to the open call. This issue includes seven of them, six independent empirical studies covering various dimensions of populist communication throughout Europe, and one methodological piece concerning comparative experiments conducted within one of the largest COST Actions dedicated to the study of populism, “Populist Political Communication in Europe.”

In the first article, Ina Fujdiak and Petr Ocelík analyze the mobilization strategies of the far-right movement in the Czech Republic and Germany respectively, by looking into the vertical and reticular characteristics of the content of hyperlinked pages they provide on their websites. Dorota Piontek and Małgorzata Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk, as well as Tamás Tóth, Dalma Kékesdi-Boldog, Tamás Bokor, and Zoltán Veczán analyze the communication style from two different points of view. On the one hand, Dorota Piontek and Małgorzata Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk discuss a dimension rarely taken into account in empirical endeavors with regards to populist communication style, that is, nonverbal populist cues, in this particular case identified in the Polish presidential candidates' public debates. On the other hand, Tóth et al. analyze the Facebook pages of five major Hungarian political parties. Social media is also the focus of the paper written by Bente Kalsnes, who looks into the strategic use of social media (mostly Facebook content) by two Norwegian and Swedish parties. Ivo Bosilkov and Miglena Sternadori delve into news outlet populist content. The former analyzes four Macedonian right-wing news outlets, while the latter discusses the tabloidization of the Bulgarian edition of women-targeted magazines (*Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*), in order to identify the dominant media frames used in coverage of international populist actors (Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, and Roman Abramovich).

Additionally, Dominika Kasprowicz and Agnieszka Hess provide a methodological account of an extensive comparative experiment conducted within the framework of the COST Action “Populist Political Communication in Europe,” focusing on challenges of such an endeavor and lessons learnt for future comparative experiments.

A separate piece is dedicated to an interview conducted by Agnieszka Stępińska in May 2018 with Péter Bajomi-Lázár, professor of Mass Communication at the Budapest Business School, on the topic of media coverage of Hungarian populist political actors and journalistic practices associated with it.

A section dedicated to the populist academic events provides insights into the final conference of the above-mentioned COST Action, held in Madrid, Spain and

an international conference dedicated to the topic of populist communication which took place in Poznań, Poland.

The book review section presents two milestone books in populist political communication: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), reviewed by Elena Negrea-Busuioc, and Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömback, Claes de Vreese's *Populist Political Communication* (2017), reviewed by Jakub Jakubowski.

Summing up, this special issue adds to the existing literature on populism, from a communication perspective. Its merit is to highlight two main dimensions that cannot be ignored in the present political and media context: the rising success (and therefore interest for research) of populist parties in Central and (South-)Eastern Europe, and the role played by social media platforms in this success. We hope to have at least opened the discussion about these fresh perspectives on populist communication throughout Europe and elsewhere.

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