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SYMPOSIUM

# Introduction: populist discourses and political communication in Southern Europe

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**Abstract** This article provides the contextual background to the symposium on *Populist Discourses and Political Communication in Southern Europe*. It explains the symposium's objectives and introduces the rationale of its articles on Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Within this context, the editors also highlight the specific conditions for the emergence of typical forms of Southern European populism, as well as its distinctive features, focusing on the challenges populism poses to politics and media research. The implications of the phenomenon for the future of the European project are also addressed.

**Keywords** Populism · Southern Europe · Political communication · Political discourse · Italy · Greece · Portugal · Spain

## Contextual background and analytical challenges: crisis and populism

The Eurozone crisis, together with the implementation of draconian austerity measures that led to considerable social upheaval, has left a significant mark on Southern European societies. Given the inability of most established political parties to reinvent themselves to address the emerging challenges effectively, as well as the various corruption scandals plaguing them, the ensuing developments have put in doubt the stability of party systems. They have also polarised debate, reshaping political discourses and political communication strategies in most Southern

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European countries. This conjuncture has created favourable conditions for the emergence and consolidation of populist trends in many countries in this region. In addition, the recent deepening of the migration crisis is also boosting populist actors and populist discourses even further at a pan-European level. More politicians and parties are now making use of populist discursive features and tropes when they address citizens, and resorting to communication strategies that are intended to express closeness to 'the people' and claim to speak on behalf of 'the people' (see, for example, Stanyer et al. 2017), sometimes articulating this call in nationalist terms.[1]

The phenomenon is often presented as a disconnection between ruled and rulers, between a disgruntled people and self-serving elites (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007). And the scale of the problem is so pervasive that many believe that 'something has gone wrong with democracy'. Indeed, 'What has gone wrong with democracy?' was the question posed on a front cover of the *Economist* in March 2014: (Moore et al. 2016: 1). What is striking is that a sense of *democratic malaise* affects citizens in many different geographical locations, both in new and in long-standing democracies (Nye et al. 1997; Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Dalton 2004, to mention just a few references on this topic). Popular disaffection with the political system is on the rise, and social discontent cannot always find its way through established institutions and procedures. No real alternatives seem to be on offer here because the differences between mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties have been, in many cases, significantly narrowed. The tendencies related to what Mair (2013) has described as a 'hollowing' of democracy, and which theorists such as Crouch (2004) and Mouffe (2013) have termed 'post-democracy', play a significant role here. Thus, disaffection and indignation seek extra-institutional discharge through protests, revolts or fringe parties (Mudde 2004: 48–51; Crouch 2004: 4, 59–60, 103; Stavrakakis et al. 2016).

The world has become more complex, and new challenges as well as opportunities have made their presence felt, some of them directly related to the field of communication: notice, for example, the ubiquity of the Internet, which facilitates access to all kinds of information and is often used to exacerbate emotions and polarise positions by different actors. New fears and frustrations—associated with migration flows, intergenerational cleavages, religious hatred and so on—thus become articulated with disaffection with the standard procedures of representative democracy and with growing inequality. And all of this is easily transmitted and finds echoes in the media—particularly in social media, due to their immediacy and interactivity (Graber 2010; Bennett 2016; Highfield 2016). All in all, the emerging landscape provides the ideal breeding ground for the emergence and potential advancement of anti-establishment political forces, old and new, including populist agents.

Nevertheless, the relationship between crisis and populism is not automatic, in the sense that there is no invariable correlation between the two: it is not the case

[1] This poses the question of the relationship between populism and nationalism and the need to distinguish between the two, while acknowledging their many articulations. In this respect, from recent literature see Wodak (2015) and Stavrakakis et al. (2017).

that every crisis will inevitably lead to populism and to the emergence of populist political actors. The key is how the crisis in question is managed by established forces and institutions. When this management fails to take into account popular representation, and when it is publicly perceived to ignore a 'popular sovereignty' that still functions as the foundation of representative systems, polarisation is bound to dominate the political field, diluting and marginalising differences and even allowing the manipulation of emotions such as fear and resentment. In this sense, although not in an automatic fashion, deep economic problems, growing inequalities and the ensuing social dislocations can engender crises of representation that, in their turn, can trigger the articulation of populist discourses and the emergence of populist mobilisations (Laclau 1977: 175; Roberts 2015).

## Populist discourses and the media

The existence of a crisis is not, however, just a triggering mechanism: by dislocating previously hegemonic structures of meaning, a systemic failure causes a process of discursive construction (Moffitt 2016) that also produces the 'crisis', illustrating it in particular ways, attributing blame for it, mapping ways out of it and so on. And these discursive constructions are depicted and framed both by mainstream and by social media. Furthermore, populists are not the only political actors who attempt to meaningfully articulate a crisis and put forward their own 'remedies' and proposals. This commonly results in competing, antagonistic views of the crisis, some populist, but not necessarily and never solely: most often, populist and anti-populist discourses and different types of actors compete to meaningfully represent crisis experiences, channel emotional reactions and chart political orientations.

This antagonistic framing leaves its mark in most attempts to define populism. One can thus understand populism primarily as a specific type of discourse that claims to express and represent popular interests (the 'will of the people') against an elite (or establishment), which is seen as obstructive. The main criteria allowing an operational identification of populism would be (a) people centrism: 'the people' as a point of reference around which other peripheral and often antithetical signifiers and ideas can become articulated and (b) anti-elitism: a dichotomous representation of the sociopolitical domain between 'us' ('the people') and 'them' (the out-groups, which can refer to elites, immigrants, etc.) (Laclau 1977; Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Stavrakakis 2017: 6). This orientation is widely adopted by both discursive (Essex School) and structural approaches (Canovan 1999), as well as by the new mainstream in populism research, meaning approaches that seem to be accepted or at least substantially influence most researchers in the field (e.g. Müller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), in which, however, an additional emphasis is given to the alleged moralistic investment of populist claims.

The antagonistic 'dialogue' between the views articulated by competing actors is inevitably framed by the media. And the role of mediation is constitutive: the media is a crucial agent not only in the transmission, but also the construction of such messages, which are adjusted to a communicative or media logic (spectacle, personalisation, dramatisation, etc.) in order to ensure good media coverage (see

Bennett 1996; Swanson and Mancini 1996; Mughan 2000; Kellner 2015 to cite just a few examples). Different types of media, and mediation in general, are thus essential in any populist articulation and may also be central in determining its appeal. This symposium looks at the function of (discursive) mediation in the broader sense and at the use of specific media by different populist political actors within the crisis conjuncture in four Southern European countries: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

The relation between populism and the media has preoccupied the relevant literature at least since the early 2000s (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). There are, by now, a large number of works analysing how the media affect either the demand side (e.g. Walgrave and de Swert 2004; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009) or the supply side of populist politics (e.g. Ellinas 2010). Although most of these accounts focus on the radical and extreme right, which does not fully reflect the situation in the European South, some of their insights are relevant. According to Mazzoleni (2014), both media coverage and political actors' media strategies are vital in the rise and fall of populist political actors. The high level of mediatisation of politics in modern societies (for a recent analysis of the mediatisation of politics, see Esser and Strömbäck 2014) and the fact that populist political actors, as do any other political actors, rely on the media to get their messages across to voters and the public in general corroborate this view. Bos and Brants (2014: 5) distinguish between political populism intended *for* the media and populism *by* the media, which basically means that the media may simply be receptive to populism or that journalists may be populist themselves.

This symposium tries to examine both these varieties of populism, but is more focused on the use of media by populist political actors and on media coverage of populist political actors and populist discourses, registering the fact that the media have a crucial role in conveying and framing political issues, actors and debates in our societies. To the extent, however, that populist actors often try—or are obliged—to bypass mainstream media, addressing citizens directly (through Twitter or Facebook, for example), our focus also encompasses a third aspect: mediation in the most elementary operation of discursive construction.

## Implications of populist discourses and communication for European democracy

The concept of populism has been used widely, but with many different meanings. In fact, it seems reasonable to argue that, given the fact that there are different types of populism, there should also be different effects of populism on democracy. This is precisely what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) posit: populism can be both a threat and a corrective to democracy, and thus, one should acknowledge both the potentially positive and the potentially negative effects of populism. As they explain (2012; 2017), these effects are also mediated by the level of democratic consolidation and by the level of access to power, whether, that is to say, populists are in government or in the opposition.

While the harmful effects of populism have been widely debated in the academic literature (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Fallend 2012; Pappas 2014; Pauwels 2014; Müller 2016; etc.) and in public debate, some potentially positive effects have not been much investigated empirically so far. For example, positive effects of populism may be related to the inclusion of new topics on the agenda, which usually means more media coverage and recognition of groups, actors, issues and positions that mainstream parties have tended to ignore or avoid. Immigration problems or the discussion of the austerity measures (reasons and consequences) are good examples of this kind of issue, often politically divisive. By placing new issues on the agenda and making them more visible, populism can also act as a driver for political participation.

The reasoning behind most populist claims is also often presented as virtuous and moralising. And most of their appeal lies precisely here. Within the EU countries, many political actors, on both right and left wings, have been increasingly claiming the need to protect ordinary people from the corruption and incompetence of economic and political elites, including EU elites. The way of functioning of the EU is not unrelated to these reactions: due to the Eurozone crisis, elected leaders in Italy and Greece were sidelined and replaced in 2011 by technocrats favoured by the EU (perceived by many citizens as a product of the establishment which was at the origin of the crisis), in particular, by the economist and former European Commissioner Mario Monti and the former central banker and Vice-President of the European Central Bank, Lucas Papademos, respectively. But even before that, major decisions, such as the introduction of a single currency or the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, were taken without actual popular consultations in most countries. In addition, popular cynicism, disaffection, low levels of turnout and protest voting have all been growing, which impacts directly on the legitimacy not only of governments, but also of representative democracy as such.

In the rest of Europe, it is predominantly radical or extreme right-wing parties that have been voted into national parliaments (Hungary, Poland, Belgium, Denmark, Croatia); included in government coalitions (for example, Switzerland, Finland, Latvia); or whose support has been growing (France, the UK, Sweden and Germany); in Southern Europe, however, it is mainly left-wing inspired populism that has managed to win more popular support. Mudde explains that there is a fundamental difference between the populist demands of the new left, the new social movements and the Green parties for deliberative democracy or a participation revolution and the supporter of Berlusconi or Haider: the latter is the 'slightly conservative, law-abiding citizen, but with growing anger, sees the world being perverted by progressives, criminals and aliens' (2004: 557). While the first kind of populist voter wants more participation and less leadership, the second kind wants more leadership and less participation.

In any case, both right- and left-wing populisms oppose the current orientation of the EU, but they put forward alternative visions of how Europe should look in the future. Radical-right parties are against an open Europe, and their ideology is mostly based on both exclusion and the denial of further loss of national sovereignty and identity. Radical-left parties are also against the loss of sovereignty, but demand more openness and more popular participation in political decisions. Neither is

pleased with the architecture and the decision-making processes of the EU. And although inclusionary populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) has adopted a discursive profile inspired by token European values, its dynamic performance in Southern European countries was met with hostility by the EU. The tense economic and political choreography leading to the Greek referendum of July 2015 offers ample evidence of this.

Although support for the EU has declined in most of these countries, overall, it is still only a minority that favours leaving the EU. The 2017 Eurobarometer reveals, for example, that 34% of Greeks polled said that belonging to the EU is a 'good thing' with 32% stating the opposite and 33% casting the EU as neither good nor bad, and that 64% of Portuguese respondents are optimistic about the EU. Yet, without a change of course, this picture might still change. Whether populism will eventually function as a destabilising factor for European democracy or as an incentive for its renewal will depend on the reaction of the European elites themselves; on their ability and willingness to rebalance representation; to advance accountability; and to introduce a new, viable articulation between the local, the national and supra-national levels. Only the future will tell how these dynamic tensions will eventually evolve.

## The symposium: communicative facets of populism and populist discourse in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain

Southern Europe has condensed the diverse, often antithetical, dimensions of populist phenomena worldwide, serving as a fertile breeding ground for various directions of research into populism. This symposium focuses on the different types of populist actors that have emerged in this geographical region, on their discursive strategies and on their use of the media. It thus explores questions such as: How do Southern European populist political actors construct and communicate their messages? What makes populist political actors different from other political actors in these countries? What features of discourse are clearly populist and what are the objectives of this type of discourse? What is the role of the media in general and of social media in particular in populist discourses and political communication strategies? In what ways did the economic crisis and its administration within the EU facilitate the new populist trend?

The symposium constitutes an innovative attempt to approach issues related to populist political discourses and communication looking specifically at the South of Europe. Moreover, the articles included aim at both theoretical clarification and empirical clarification. In fact, the two aims are simultaneously pursued through theoretically inspired accounts of challenging concrete phenomena, thus bridging a theory/analysis divide that sometimes plagues similar projects. Additionally, our case selection is far from arbitrary. There is today a distinct set of populist forces peculiar to Southern Europe that constitute a new trend very different from the traditional radical-right-wing populist phenomena that have, up to now, preoccupied research on populism at the European level. The motivation behind most of these new political forces and their discourses is related to proposing an alternative

paradigm to austerity and the loss of sovereignty, thus questioning the way the European Union currently operates. For example, part of Podemos's and SYRIZA's strategies was to overturn Germany's discourse, trying to convey the image of Germany as the leading decision-maker whose interests were not necessarily coincident with those of the European Union and those of most of the other European countries. Opposing the austerity paradigm also meant claiming to put forward a defence of 'the people' on both the economic and political levels, against the dominant orientation of a European Union that was seen as increasingly marginalising its periphery. Since this is a recent and still evolving phenomenon, not much research has been published yet on this front. Thus, this symposium is the first research venue—at least to our knowledge—to integrate analyses of different types of Southern European populist actors and their discourses and communication efforts.

In addition to being Southern European countries, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain represent different manifestations of populism as well as different responses to populism; they also portray various reactions against the way the European Union handled the Eurozone crisis and the situation of member states with sovereign debt problems. It is possible to find examples of different types of populist political actors in all these four Southern European countries, but the level of influence of these political forces in the political system and in society is very different from country to country. In Greece, they managed to form a government; in Italy, some were also part of coalition governments; in Spain, Podemos had an astonishing result in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election and contributed to breaking the long-standing Partido Popular (PP) and PSOE political bipolarisation in the 2015 and 2016 national elections, while in Portugal, a populist politician (Marinho e Pinto) also managed to get elected to the EP in the 2014 election.

The article on Greece by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis follows the trajectory of the crisis in Greece from the economic level to a crisis of representation that dislocated the established party system and allowed a marginal political actor, SYRIZA (the Coalition of the Radical Left), to articulate a populist discourse that managed to hegemonise the political terrain against the fierce opposition of the old parties and mainstream media. In order to assess this phenomenon and its implications for the study of post-authoritarian Greek politics in general, the authors provide a comprehensive genealogy of populist and anti-populist actors in Greece from the 1980s to the present day, including both parties and news media and exploring their different discursive strategies. The article highlights the need to study anti-populism together with populism to the extent that they mutually constitute a polarised political culture: an argument with additional implications for cleavage theory and for the need to register a populism/anti-populism discursive cleavage.

Kioupkiolis and Seone Pérez highlight the constitutive features of Podemos (a case of inclusionary populism, following Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) through a discourse analysis of materials and interviews with party representatives, in order to better understand Podemos's nature and assess the reasons behind its electoral success. The authors identify and discuss Podemos's main defining features, which include its dualism as both a parliamentary force and a social movement, its left-

leaning populist self-image and its strong reliance on social media and television to mobilise supporters and popularise Pablo Iglesias, the party's leader.

Bobba addresses the Italian case through an analysis of the Lega Nord's use of social media. The article examines the Facebook posts of both the party and its party leader, Matteo Salvini, to detect their main features and to assess what determines the success of such messages, namely which aspects of online populist communication are most valued by the party supporters. It takes into account the key elements of populism (references to 'the people', 'elites' and 'others') and the prevalence of an emotional style in messages and concludes that populist features, emotional style and the leader as the source of communication affect positively the likeability of a message.

The Portuguese case is rather different from all three other cases examined, as no successful long-lasting instances of populism have emerged there so far. This does not mean, however, that there are no populist actors and populist discourses in the country's politics and media, as Salgado shows. The article on Portugal examines the prevalence of populist discourses and styles of communication in different types of online media, in messages and information related to immigration and corruption, two issues that are commonly associated with populist political discourses and strategies. The analysis shows that although not particularly recurrent, some discourses do contain populist features and that social media have amplified the visibility of this kind of discourse in Portugal.

Much remains to be done in order to survey challenging empirical cases from new angles and with the use of innovative theoretical and conceptual toolkits. This symposium has attempted to chart such an orientation by (a) focusing on populist discourses and political communication and not on populism in general, our perspective and methodologies articulate a distinct and clearly interdisciplinary orientation; (b) adopting an angle that can be revealing both in its broader (mediation) and in its more focused aspects (media and political communication); and (c) focusing on an as yet under-researched area, in which populism seems to partially destabilise the reified association between populism and the radical right that has been canonised by European political science. Given that rigorous scientific exploration requires intense dialogue and argumentative exchange, we hope that this symposium in *European Political Science* will trigger much more argument and debate, not just as far as the cases of Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece are concerned, but concerning methods for arriving at rigorous assessments of populism, in its many varieties, and of its implications for (European) democracy as well.

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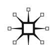

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