

The Interaction of Populist Politics and (Populist) Media

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Abstract: The paper deals with the issue of the interaction of populist political communication and populist reporting and the style increasingly characteristic of journalists and media outlets. It raises the thesis that populist policy guidance and communication is producing adaptation of media and that media are often actively supporting populist politics. The role and responsibility of media workers who are often exposed to political pressure and influences have been re-examined. The working conditions in the media which help to create the conditions for populist reporting and interpretation have also been analyzed. As there are numerous mechanisms of manipulation that are increasingly more supported through populist politics, we conclude that due to various reasons these influences are often more powerful than journalistic ethics and professional behavior of the media. In the current state of affairs, it makes them extremely topical in the communication process and makes the public and society vulnerable to populism and political manipulations.

Key words: Populism • Public • Manipulation • Ethics • Journalists • Journalism Freedom

INTRODUCTION

The real power, the power we have to fight for night and day, is not power over things, but over people. George Orwell - 1984 Populism (Latin populi-people) is a theme which has been in use in politics and government since ancient times. "Political parties and politicians often use terms of *populists* and *populism* as pejorative terms against their political opponents. Such a view understands populism as an orientation that is in a seemingly empathic relations with the public (especially through rhetoric or unrealistic suggestions) in order to increase demagogic awareness in the political sector" [1]. Although populism in the US and Europe is nowadays linked rather with the right-wing parties, the central principle of populism proclaims that democracy should reflect the will of the people, which means that populism can easily be classified among right-wing and left-wing ideologies and also centrally oriented parties. In the group of populist politicians we can find very diverse actors, from the Tea Party movement, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the US, via Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Parties of Mire Cerar in Slovenia to the National Front in France [2].

Populism as a political term has been increasingly gaining a pejorative meaning in the last years and it further implies the use of broad masses and the voice of

the people for achieving goals and intentions that are not publicly proclaimed. As Jurgen Habermas said, "the people" can only appear in plural form. This fantasy is dangerous, because not only do populists try to use internal and external conflicts in society, but also, they encourage polarization and treat their political opponents as "enemies of the people" while trying to exclude them completely from the political arena [3]. Such polarization of European political forces, both new and incumbent entities, are especially set to portray this divisive quality in the 2019 European elections [4]. Populist logics implies that those who do not support populist parties are not truly a part of the thrust of the people or nation. This in turn creates the impression of representation of a greater fragment of the population – which is not always the case. On the other hand, in many countries, due to the increasingly undefined left and right orientation of political parties and movements, which also questions the position of the center as a civic-social-democratic / moderately conservative part of the political arena, politicians try to animate as many voters as possible by addressing, weighing and pacting with various, often opposing, parts of society [5]. Considering the most well known cases of populist phenomena in Europe, it can be seen that political leaders and movements often rely in some way on a kind of 'media partnership' [6]. Foremost, the results of this study give hope to European

democracy by showing that adherence to the traditional journalistic norms of objectivity, issue-based reporting and well researched substantial analyses can mitigate the effects of tabloid and online media on the popularity of far-right parties [7].

Populist politics is characterized by three elements: the intention to seize the power, corruption and "mass clientelism". The mass clientelism is the exchange of certain material benefits or bureaucratic services for political support of citizens, who thus become "clients" of the populists and exerting an effort to systematically suppress civil society. The media and public appearances are intensively used for all the elements listed: to win reign by discrediting the opponents as corrupt elites, justifying clientelism as a normal *modus operandi* after coming to reign and suppressing civil society, which is particularly expressed through the tendency to create controlled media conditions and the system which glorifies the government and its achievements through populist milieu. The attempts of the populist to over-control in the other elements of the society has already been termed "nanny government" [8] focusing on over regulation of e.g. health. The impression is gained that populism wins in many systems by competing even with the global appeal of liberal democracy, as the later has shown to be insufficiently capable of responding to major challenges and turbulences on a global scale [5].

Experts argue whether populism is the style of policy or strategy in which this style arises. The authors argue that both are valid. For example, recent cases of the US and French presidents offer the opportunity to take note of this difference. The US President, Donald Trump has a populist, rudimentary style of policy. It is mostly based on the coordination of the interests of the military defense system, large corporations and large-scale capital. On the other hand, Macron creates the impression of leading a populist policy of strengthening France and its pride¹. Also, other world leaders resort to populism. Thus they also create a similar political ecosystem, so from the level of the president or prime minister this populist approach descends to the lower ranked members of the political oligarchies who are ready to follow the "brave" examples. From the media point of view, populist politicians create communication strategies which ensure the interruption of the usual routine of appearance in the political arena with the help of staggering effects on media coverage,

increased visibility and the significance of the populist message [9]. In this communication the important role is played by moral agents-medias that bring specific ethical decisions in a particular context, which includes political, social and cultural climate [10].

Modern Populism and the Media Framework: All the power comes from the people. But where does it go?

Bertold Brecht: As a rule, populism has been more present in unstable and crisis times. The last two decades, as well as the beginning of the 21st century, have been passing in the pulsating rhythm of apocalyptic threats by global terrorism, nuclear weapons, ideological fractures, growing cultural and religious differences, planetary warming and climatic environmental degradation, the limitation of natural resources and similar dangers [11]. The gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater and the rising technological innovations additionally accelerate the range and podiums of such discrepancy. However, in order to camouflage the rising dissatisfaction of the public and focus attention to other problems, a new paradigm of governance is formed, which changes political democracy to the sphere of mediocrity assisted continuously by the unscrupulous communication that has significant elements of populism. The globalization is creating increasingly more powerful communication tools under the influence of political, economic and security flow factors, by separating reality from media-mediated performances that give the fascinated masses the opportunity to think of themselves and others in a subjective and simplified populist way [11].

Media is one of the mechanisms, which allows society and individuals to see themselves, the environment and the world. "With a vast amount of information, the public media daily portray our present on an invisible time canvas. This media picture of individual, but also wider, social reality is framed namely by the amount of information and the scope of our knowledge" [12]. Staging communication during the transmission of a certain content changes in the direction of a comprehensive picture of the society and awareness. This builds a social status because the one that appears in the public more often represents relevance, competence, reliability and power. The demagoguery and

¹This is essentially based on French nationalism that has been raising over the last two decades and in this case it is expressed through the strengthening of the form and pomp in the personal appearance and presentation of the state, as well as partly unrealistic idea of equalizing France with Germany as two key generators of European progress and the work on the already existing EU idea in two speeds - i.e. some sort of separation between the more economically advanced and poorer countries within the Union.

populism thus become ways of presenting and displaying characters, images, concepts and ideas. As such, they precede media performances, i.e. operation. They force simplification, narrowing, compression and compaction, as well as rejecting various aspects of complicated social relationships in order to prepare them for mass consumption via media by the placement of stereotypes [13]. "Such conditions allow even for the established politicians to reach for the populist instruments by which they can "reduce the complexities" of social issues and the real political process, to mobilise the electorate backing" [6]. Media within this discourse becomes the central place of political events. From the political point of view adaptation of public appearances skews towards the needs of mass mediacommunication, i.e. "transformation of the political language into the language of a spectacle" [9]. "With the widening audiences of certain media, new opportunities are crawling into the light which allow for growing opportunities for populist communication styles and disregard for journalistic codes of conduct" [6]. The expansion of social media has only prompted new trends that contribute to this phenomenon, like no regulation and fake news. Such trends are not only common in the US and Europe, but also globally, in all regions [14].

The role of media and journalists is threefold: to transfer information relevant to public life; to mediate between authorities and citizens; and to be the first external critic and controller of power [15]. Reporting is dedicated - in theory, even if it is not always applied in practice - to the role of the "watch guard" over public actions and activities. However, "some debates are taking place within the media, yet generally speaking, only within the defined limits that are in accordance with the interests of the already established system" [12]. Additionally, in the areas where the state does not appear in the role of the media owner as a public broadcaster, media tycoons are ready to serve the authorities or certain political options that increasingly aspire to populism and this is present both in the West and in the East. In many countries, the problem is not the freedom of the media - the limits of media freedom are greatly expanded due to the omnipresence of the internet and social networks, but the trouble is that the limits of journalistic responsibility are drastically reduced within that process [16]. In practice, this strongly reflects the rooted belief that the media deceive and manipulate the audience and that it is a willing but indifferent partner, i.e. it is best labeled as "passive" [12].

The described milieu is an excellent terrain for the populist media and politics action, which are increasingly bound in their interdependence since politics intends to control the media through various (i)llegal mechanisms. On the other hand, the media, particularly print media which are pressured by financial problems, are increasingly attracting populist political options that provide them with a part of the income from advertisers through various channels, or fill their budgets by using public funds, subventions. The struggle for control over the media, symbols, meanings, technology of their production and systems of their distribution became an integral part of the daily political struggle during the second half of the 20th century [11]. Mass media certainly belong to the most influential organizations in society, since they are at a crossroad between citizens and their political, economic and social institutions. Accordingly, media workers are crucial for the transfer of basic social values and they offer symbolic indications for action standards, including ethical behavior [17]. "Journalists are a public eye and ear that can see and listen to the public and the public spirit. They are transmitters, mediators and critics in society and the state. They transmit messages; mediate them as an outer shell between authorities and citizens and critically judge public messages, as well as social and life issues" [15].

The performance and decision-making of media professionals should be motivated exclusively in accordance with their conscience and the requirements of the profession regarding truthfulness, fairness, objectivity in presenting the situation, programming the content, etc. However, in parallel with the media-reporting crisis, these principles of media work and reporting have experienced a significant decline in many countries and therefore it can be regarded as a global trend.

Political and Economic Impacts on the Media - Violation of Ethical Standards and Stamping the Path for Populism:

The press, when free, can be good or bad; but it is certain that without freedom it can only be bad.

Albert Camus: Mass media have a particular view of their social role and work under increasing influence of competition and financial pressures, which makes them distinctive participants in the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics of power. Commenting on the influence of the media, Louis A. Day drew a logical conclusion: "If so many commercial and political interests invest so much money in media advertising, it is absurd to

believe that the media have no impact on our behavior. Otherwise, the advertisers must have wasted billions of dollars" [10].

Denis McQuail emphasizes the importance of the media in the construction of public space. He sees journalism through monitoring roles, with emphasis on pointing to events and setting the agenda in a public debate, encouraging areas where journalism helps democratic actions and civic participation [18].

The media is a powerful force to curb voter apathy and to stimulate democratic process. The participation in the contemporary political process is a widely studied and debated topic [19] and in all the regions of the globe [20]. It is increasingly present in all societal segments, especially relevant with the youth [21]. Yet there is one segment of the society, one interest group, that is showing the opposite trend and is even more actively participating in the political process via advocacy and lobbying and that is the corporate sector. It is especially so due to four factors, the relatively small size of the interest group, which in turn spurs their organizational agility, they have access to financial and other resources and the phenomenon of the regeneration of influence [22].

At different times during the development of journalistic vocation and the media mission, professional standards have come to light. Initially, the professional struggle was concerned with the freedom of expression and freedom of criticism and afterwards that fight took place for independence and integrity. Various Ethics Code of Journalists refer to the reliability of the reporting and obligation of journalists to accurately, objectively, fully and punctually report about events of public interest while respecting the public's right to learn the truth. In a democratic society, the accuracy of the facts is an obvious ethical imperative, which is often contrary to populist policy-making and further populist performances by politicians who tend to generalize, discredit and deceive. This accuracy implies a critical overview of populism, which in most cases represents manipulation to the broad masses of people [5].

The media is obliged to place public interest for downright, punctual and truthful informing above all other interests and the public interest implies the publishing of all important information that could help forming personal judgement or an opinion regarding phenomena and events. The work of journalists resides within the relationship of a particular media and the audience. Each medium proposes a certain perception of the current reality that is adapted to its presentation of its own

audience and corresponds to the expectations that are presumed to exist [23]. In this regard, the media are directed towards the needs of the market - auditorium, which should function as an instrument of regulation. Yet, this is where the second problem arises, namely the lower media literacy of the auditorium. Due to the decline in the media culture, which may partially have occurred due to the populist trends in the politics functioning (and its interaction with the media), the needs of the auditorium are increasingly low-minded, which corresponds to populist rhetoric and addressing the masses that exclude analytical thinking.

Today, the reporting research and high quality journalism is in decline and the commercial aspect of the media industry and growing number of events, as well as general acceleration of speed of living styles, all increasingly provoke editors' insistence on the speed of the news release. This problem challenges the vocation, tempts it and offers fictions, lies and manipulations, all in order to maintain or increase the media divinity - the ratings themselves. Often, for this reason, events or statements are made up or they are formatted by additional free interpretations and exaggerations so that they are more interesting to the public. At that rate, mistakes and oversights are often made, but the far greater danger lies in the incomplete verification of information. They are often received from information services, PR managers and media advisers. Their interest is almost as a rule to publish certain information or a story in a certain way in order to influence the audience-specific target groups or the public as a whole. This often gives room for manipulation in the very preparation phase of the message, which directly affects the recipient of the message [5].

Unfortunately, many journalists are often no longer the illuminators of democracy and social development and due to the described degradation, they are all greatly susceptible to the influence of politicians and their advisers and PR managers and advisers. This is particularly expressed in countries that do not have sufficiently firm democratic principles and practices. It is necessary that journalists resist all external pressures aimed at deterring them from the basic responsibility to inform the public truthfully, punctually and comprehensively. "The teams of PR practitioners and advisers are lurking every opportunity to smuggle their goods and clients through the selection of publishing materials and they do not choose the means. Signing a journalistic form prepared by a PR officer with

compensation, etc. can be seen as a phenomenon that attract the most attention of all regulatory bodies and supporters of professional ethics of journalism in the developed countries" [24].

Korni, says that "from a professional standpoint, a benevolence and favorable word and complacency silence are at the same level, because in both cases it is a matter of defying or distorting the freedom of information" [17], while the direct victims of such a procedure are truth and the public's right to learn the (complete) truth. If, for example, the sources of information are spoken from political party, this information must be explicitly stated because their direct or indirect impact on the objectivity of reporting is likely and it is usually their intention.

The journalism ethics is mostly in conflict with economic and political interests and often it is manipulated and defeated by the same ones. Namely, the political and economic interests of the publisher must not influence the editorial policy in a way that would result in incorrect, non-objective, incomplete and untimely informing of the public, but in many countries certain printed and electronic media are perceived by the public as "marionettes" of political parties. By entering the new century, the media joined large businesses and economic pressures tied with the political ones are aggressively struggling to influence the decisions made by editors. Large corporations can push their way forward with the power brokers due to the "resource dependence" that links them, exchanging information, contacts and so contribute to the commercialization of the media within the populist agenda [25]. When marketing strategies lead to an unnatural union of entertainment - populist and journalistic values ??and when they violate the imperative of the media to serve the democratic system, through a discussion about serious and socially important issues, ethical dilemmas are inevitable [5].

The economic interests are not the only aspects that affect the media and create many ethical concerns. Political interests are present in parallel to them. The influence that the government and its bodies perform on the media has more dimensions. The government is one of the main sources of information for mass media. The flow of information from government to mass media benefits both parties. The government needs to have access to media channels in order to inform the public about its programs and projects. The peculiar trend has risen in recent years with populist political movements and that is that choice of media points to the non-readiness to be open to scrutiny and a two-way dialogue. The research

shows that populists tend to favor social media over talk shows [26] which gives them more power in one direction communication and no challenge by political rivals.

The general traditional mass media requires information, supplied by the government, as an instantly usable source of media content on the subject of current and public affairs. However, this pleasant mutual service also creates interdependence. The main drawback of this dependence is that the public interest can slip away from its privileged media - driven force, in the favor of the bargain of services of the government and the media. Due to the aforementioned time pulse and resource constraints, media actors are prone to rely heavily on press releases and already prepared papers distributed by the government. By failing to peek into what is behind these deceptions, media channels risk serving as a government and political tools [23].

CONCLUSION

The only security is the freedom of the media.

Tomas Geofferson: Democracy is in a direct dependence on the dynamics and freedom of public communication. Therefore, political populism in the public sphere deforms the pluralism of ideas, attitudes and opinions. Populism is a threat to democracy as it polarizes the society, undermines the democratic political institutions, instigates intolerance and stigmatizes political opponents and "foreign elements" in the society in the name of the "moral majority" and it enforces simplified pseudo solutions which tend towards the authoritarian society [27].

Political communication is no longer merely an exchange of information, messages, ideas and attitudes placed in a media triangle - public opinion, i.e. between the three groups of actors: politicians, journalists and citizens, but rather the exchange of values which essentially do not have to be long lasting for any factor of this triangle. In this sense, classical politics is increasingly taking on populist elements and discourse and this process has global proportions. The media have gained a whole new role in political agendas and under such conditions even established politicians are increasingly referring to the use of populist instruments that "reduce the complexity" of social problems and the real political processes in order to mobilize support. The media has increasingly become the focus in the political process insomuch as that the political actors are in agreement with limited news

production within the media industry and are adapting public displays, political language and even policies themselves to the needs of the commercialized mass media. So, the mediatisation of the political communication is often identified with the commercialization of public display of politics. The consequences of those changes in the domain of politics are various and they all relate, at different levels, on the dynamics of populism as they serve as the “necessary backdrop for populist messages” [28].

With a wide audience of certain media, there are numerous opportunities for populist communication styles and disrespect of journalism ethics. Thus, the media must (with other participants in the process) share moral responsibility for the degrading of democratic values to the extent to which politics devalued democracy towards populism and the public gave up serious content in exchange for banality.

The ethical standards of media professionals are not separated from the rest of society. Due to the fact that they occupy such a prominent position in society, journalists and media actors have to be at the foreground of those who create moral attitudes in this society. However, due to the sudden degradation of journalism as a whole and journalism as a member of society, it is clear that politicians and public relations experts shape a media image and public opinion to a great extent and that is a secured way to manipulation and spreading the current populist political trend towards the media field. In such a system and society, where interest and money are seen as a replacement for the truth, the development and progress are prevented and thus this problem should be dealt, but for media theorists and practitioners, by other public representatives as well as by society as a whole. Further research could review the non-traditional media and the relationship with populist politics. We hope that this article and similar works will put more attention to this topic because it is of big importance for every society and country regardless of their political system.

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