

Early scholarship, typically within political science, defined populism as a malady of democracy that was a reaction to crises symptoms in contemporary societies. There is, however, no common understanding of media populism and populism as a communication strategy. Thus, the existing understanding of what constitutes populism and populist actors needs to be rethought taking account of the diversity of actors and discourses that permeate the mediated public spheres of European democracies. There also needs to be an understanding of the extent to which the use of public relations strategies empowers populist political communicators. Research in political science and communication science shows that the use of such strategies can enable advocacy groups to set the media agenda.

Throughout Europe, political populism is “on the rise”. In the last European Election, right-wing populist parties as the French National Front, the United Kingdom Independence Party, and the Danish People’s Party accumulated the highest share of voters in their respective countries. In Poland, Kongres Nowej Prawicy (KNP) gained 7 percent of votes in the European Parliamentary elections (11 delegates to the European Parliament), which was the fourth best result of Polish political parties in these elections. One year later, a rock singer Paweł Kukiz, who presented himself as an anti-elitist, anti-systemic and anti-political candidate gained 21 percent of the votes in the presidential elections. Altogether, as many as one quarter of the voters supported anti-systemic political actors during that elections. At the same time, left-wing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain have also been very successful recently. In view of this situation, it appears highly justified to speak of populism as spirit of the time or “Zeitgeist”.

Consequently, the body of scientific literature on populism has been continuously growing. However, most of the previous studies was focused exclusively on one country and political actors. This project aims in studying populist political communication in Poland and comparing the findings with data gathered in 27 other European countries. A framework for this project is provided by the COST Action IS1308 Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics with 28 participating countries. In particular, the project addresses three problems: (1) Defining populist political actors and recognizing determinants of their communication success; (2) Establishing the role of the media in the promotion of populist politics; (3) Understanding how citizens engage with populist political communication. In order to pursue these problems we will use design our study based on a theoretical background of political science and media studies.

In particular, the project will content-analyze (a) how populist actors are represented in the political coverage of journalistic online news media, (b) how the populist actors present themselves on their own websites, weblogs, and social media accounts, and (c) how their media appearances are reconstructed by the audiences in their online comments. It will not only aim at distilling the essence of populism from its multifaceted empirical manifestations but also at deepening our understanding of Internet communication. Finally, the project will provide insights into the relation between characteristics of democratic systems and populism communication repertoires.