

The concept of populism has been used in recent decades to describe and explain social and political changes in various democracies around the world. The understanding of populism has changed significantly during this period, and the most recent development in the field involves the analysis of the so-called epistemological dimension of populism, that is, matters of knowledge practices and cognition and the role they play in populist discourses. In the context of the so-called post-truth politics era, in which political divisions in different countries are becoming increasingly epistemological in their nature, dividing societies into groups with fundamentally different visions of socio-political (and sometimes even physical) reality, the way in which populist parties and politicians construct and nurture 'alternative' knowledge systems has become highly relevant for populism scholars.

This recent turn, however, has not yet led to any changes in how populism itself is understood and defined. Various elements of populist epistemologies are studied separately and there is no comprehensive theoretical framework that would organise them into a coherent epistemic theory of populism. Moreover, there is also no empirical research that analyses populist knowledge practices and belief formation mechanisms in a holistic and in-depth way. This project aims to fill this gap by developing a theoretical framework to link the two approaches present in the study of populism, that is the supply-side approach (the study of politicians' statements and party programmes) and the demand-side approach (the study of voters' beliefs and attitudes) through a comprehensive description of populist knowledge practices. The latter will be made possible by using the concept of an epistemic community, that is a group with a specific set of beliefs, assumptions, ways of interpreting reality and criteria for assessing the reliability of information.

The second aim of the project will be to apply the theory developed within its framework and conduct an empirical study of an epistemic community composed of loyal, long-time voters of Law and Justice party in Poland. The proposed study will combine expertise from sociology, political epistemology, and social psychology and analyse populist epistemology using qualitative methods, namely individual in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group interviews (FGI). The main research objective will be to identify the underlying information, concepts, attitudes, modes of reasoning, and interpretive patterns that together form the specific epistemology of the group that enables its members to structure and understand the world around them. In order to analyse how these populist knowledge practices provide the means and content to construct the people as a political subject with its own sense of community, identity and agency, the study will focus on describing the epistemic community of Law and Justice voters at four different levels, each linked to a separate set of research questions:

- 1. Discursive practices:** What discursive frames are used in conversations about politics and society? What cultural and linguistic resources are used and how are they articulated? How do Law and Justice supporters actually relate to politicians' discourse and how does the latter affect their reasoning? How is populist discourse re-performed by voters?
- 2. Performativity:** How are political performances perceived in the studied group? Which elements of verbal and non-verbal communication are relevant? How do these performances affect the credibility of populist narratives?
- 3. Communication practices and topology:** What means of communication do the members of the studied epistemic community use? How does information circulate between them? How do they consume and produce information, both online and offline?
- 4. Cognitive, affective, and social-psychological processes:** How is the content of populist discourses or speeches processed and integrated into a voter's broader knowledge? Which cognitive processes, such as heuristic processing or attribution, are important in this process?

The project will contribute to the study of populism in three ways. First, it will develop a theoretical framework for conceptualising populism as an epistemological phenomenon. Second, it will provide methodological tools for future research on populist epistemic communities. Third, as a case study, it will provide empirical data on the micro-mechanisms of constructing identity, as well as a particular vision of community and the social world in the group of loyal Law and Justice voters. The findings of the proposed study will not only enrich analyses of populism in Poland, but will also be useful for international scholars of right-wing populism, especially those analysing political situation in Central and Eastern Europe.