Matevž Tomšič (ed.)

Media, Populism and European Democracy

PETER LANG

The book offers insight into different relevant issues related to recent developments in the political and media space in Europe. The authors are interested in how these phenomena affect the future of the democratic system and the general development of the European Union. The special focus is on populism as one of the most discussed political phenomena in recent years. The assumption is that the rise of populism in Europe is a reaction to the anomalies and consequences of globalisation as well as a symptom of the crisis of established politics. Furthermore, the spread of populist messages is related to the profound change the media space is facing, particularly with the crisis of traditional media. Populists utilise different media channels that often serve to spread disinformation. Strengthening European democracy requires improving institutional effectiveness, responsiveness and accountability toward the citizenry, as well as building a European identity.

Matevž Tomšič is a political sociologist and Professor at the School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica. He also works at the Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto and the Study Centre for National Reconciliation. His research interests include political elites, leadership, democratisation and political culture.

ISBN 978-3-0343-5612-1

www.peterlang.com

Cité européenne / European Policy, No. 55

Media, Populism and European Democracy

Cité européenne / European Policy

Editor: Pascaline Winand

VOL. 55

Matevž Tomšič (ed.)

Media, Populism and European Democracy

PETER LANG
Bruxelles · Berlin · Chennai · Lausanne · New York · Oxford

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

An electronic version of this book is freely available, courtesy of libraries collaborating with Knowledge Unlatched (KU). KU is a pioneering initiative aimed at making high-quality books Open Access for the public benefit. The Open Access ISBN for this book is 978-3-0343-5613-8. For more details and access to the OA version, visit www.knowledgeunlatched.org.

ISSN 1376-0890
ISBN 978-3-0343-5612-1 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-0343-5613-8 (ePDF)
ISBN 978-3-0343-5614-5 (ePUB)
DOI 10.3726/b23640
Dépôt légal D/2025/5678/52

Published by Peter Lang Editions Scientifiques Internationales - P.I.E. SA, Brussels (Belgium)

info@peterlang.com

This publication has been peer reviewed.

www.peterlang.com

Contact for General Product Safety Regulation (GPSR): gpsr@peterlang.com

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Introduction

Matevž Tomšič

We often hear that Europe finds itself at a crucial point in its political future. Typically, this refers to the European Union as a distinct political entity, which is not found on other continents, as it exemplifies a multi-level governance system, with a division of powers between the Union's institutions and its member states. Thus, for the European elections in 2024, many politicians and other opinion leaders explained that the direction of political development would largely depend on the election results. Several of them warned against the danger posed by the electoral success of political forces that could threaten the Union's political and other stability.

This brings us to the phenomenon of populism. This one is not 'from yesterday'. There has been considerable discussion about the rise of populist politics, which targets not only the established political elites but also the institutional structure itself, for at least two decades (see, for example, Mudde 2004, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, Tarchi 2016). The actual 'alarm' was triggered in 2016 by Donald Trump's first victory in the presidential election in the United States of America and the referendum vote for the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Then things quieted as the populists seemed to be waning a bit (Trump also lost the 2020 election). However, in recent years, the successes of political leaders often characterised as populists have begun to decline again. Not only in the new members of the Union with a relatively short democratic tradition but also in countries with an established democracy at its heart—such as the Netherlands, where the right-populist, anti-migrant and anti-Islam Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders won a relative majority in the 2023 parliamentary elections (and consequently became the biggest party in the coalition government, although without its leader in the position of Prime Minister); or Austria where the similarly oriented Freedom Party of Austria received more votes than any other party at the 2024 elections (though it was unable to the form a government); and Germany, where after the 2025 elections, the far-right Alternative for Germany became the second largest party in parliament.

Before the 2024 European Parliament elections, predictions suggested that the bloc of far-right, nationalist, and populist parties would be significantly

strengthened. This would lead to changes in the political relations in the parliament and, consequently, within the EU institutions. More than a few observers considered such developments problematic from the perspective of the European Union's political future, as most of these parties are considered Eurosceptic (though the level of Euroscepticism varies among them). However, these predictions have only partially come true. There was indeed a 'shift to the right' as both the moderate and the radical right grew stronger. However, the three largest political groups (the centre-right *European People's Party*, the centre-left *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats* and the centrist *Renew Europe*) have a style of a comfortable parliamentary majority. Therefore, no major political upheavals are expected.

Populism as a political phenomenon is not easily defined. We must be aware that we are dealing with a highly diverse concept. Despite its global occurrence—or perhaps because of it—it is difficult to provide a single, universally acceptable definition (Tomšič, 2023). The ambiguity of the concept is one of its main characteristics (Petri, 2023). There is no consensus within the academic community about what populism actually is. There is even less of that in political circles and among the general public, as it often adapts to political and other needs. It can be viewed from different perspectives: as a political ideology, political conduct, political strategy and a style of political communication (Tomšič 2022). Some connect it with phenomena such as the personalisation of politics, which involves strengthening the role of political leaders vis-à-vis other actors in the party system (Pappas 2016; Urbinati 2014; Cabada and Tomšič 2016; Tomšič and Prijon 2013). The manifestations of populist politics and their impact on political dynamics depend on global factors (such as the nature of global capitalism and its crises) and the specificities of national environments (for example, domestic value orientations and political traditions).[1]

The rise of populism is often perceived with unease or even fear. Many people regard such politics as a threat not only to the existence of the European Union but also to the very system of liberal democracy itself (see, for example, Taggart 2004; Mueller 2026; Urbinati 2019). However, populism has divergent political and social effects, and the factors influencing its growth

[1] In conceptual terms, populism is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

are also varied. Let us only look at the European area. We can see considerable differences in the character of populism and the political 'weight' of populist parties and movements. When discussing the effects of populism, it is essential to consider the specific variant in question (Adam and Tomsšič 2020). On the one hand, we have so-called 'soft' populism, which is mainly about populist rhetoric while respecting constitutional principles such as the separation of powers and fundamental rights and freedoms; on the other hand, there is so-called 'hard' populism, which rejects—or at least relativises—these constitutional principles (Tomšič 2024: 481). While the former does not have serious effects on the functioning of democratic institutions, the latter can be problematic in this regard.

The present book, titled *Media, Populism, and European Democracy*, offers insight into various relevant issues related to recent developments in the political and media spaces of the European Union. The authors are interested in how these phenomena affect the future of the democratic system and the general development of the European Union. The special focus is on populism and its social and political repercussions. The assumption is that the rise of populism in Europe is a reaction to the anomalies and consequences of globalisation as well as a symptom of the crisis of established politics and deficiencies of mainstream politics, both at national and EU levels. Furthermore, the spread of populist messages is related to the profound changes the media space is facing, particularly in the context of the crisis of traditional media and journalism. Commercialisation and tabloidisation of media space, as well as the increased importance of the new (social) media, on one hand, and the mediatisation of politics on the other, significantly contribute to the populist appeal. Populists utilise different media channels that often serve to spread disinformation and fake news.[2] Populist communication affects not only political dynamics but also the functioning of the public sphere, which in turn influences citizens' perceptions of social reality.

The edited volume consists of eight chapters, to which the editor's introductory and concluding chapters are added. The authors discuss populism,

[2] The book relates to the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence led by Prof. Matevž Tomšič at the School of Advanced Social Studies titled Media, Populism and Political Stability in the European Union.

its characteristics, the manner in which it communicates and its impact on the functioning of democracy and the rule of law. They also address the characteristics of the contemporary media landscape and media communication (both traditional and new media), as well as their impact on political processes and other relevant aspects of social development. The contributions are diverse in terms of subject matter. Still, their entirety conveys the understanding of the connection and intertwining of events in the political and media spheres, as well as how this shapes the developmental dynamics within the European Union.

Populism is often perceived as a significant challenge to constitutional democracy. In her chapter, Petra Kleindienst explores the implications of its rising tide for the state of human rights, the separation of powers, human dignity and democratic values. The basis of her thematisation is the concept of constitutional democracy, which promotes pluralism and the autonomy of the individual, fostering self-improvement and protecting the common good. She states that populism emerges from citizens' unaddressed interests and needs within the existing democratic setting, which often results from a lack of responsiveness on the side of established political elites. By examining the relationship between different types of populism and constitutional democracy, the analysis sheds light on populism's potential to coexist with the concepts of human dignity and human rights within the democratic framework.

Populism is one of those political phenomena that politicians, commentators and researchers have been paying close attention to in recent years, especially from the perspective of political communication. Matevž Tomšič's chapter examines the role of the media in disseminating populist appeal in contemporary European democracies. It highlights the main traits of populist politics, particularly the types of messaging it employs and the mechanisms it uses to address the public. The author claims that the impact of the media on the spread of a political message depends on the broader political constellation and the political impulses to which people are exposed. This also holds for populist messaging. One can claim that although the media undoubtedly influence the spread of malicious messages, they are not in a position to enable or prevent the success of populist protagonists. The reach of their messages in a significant way depends on their rivals from the ranks of established politics.

There are different regional characteristics of populist discourse. In his contribution, Ladislav Cabada reflects on the discursive strategies related to populist-driven, anti-European Union and generally anti-Western actors in East-Central Europe, with a specific focus on the Czech case. The outbreaks of consecutive crises in the twenty-first century strengthened anti-Western sentiments in this region. Such anti-Western positions do not have an identical nature, but their promoters can create flexible coalitions that undermine the system of liberal democracy in the region. The so-called alternative media, i.e., social networks, play a crucial role in disseminating and reinforcing the perceived divide between Central Europe and Western Europe. The author's analysis focuses on this new media scene, which is closely tied to the fake news industry and conspiracy theories.

One can also perceive populist communication as a personal trait of a particular political actor. Rok Bratina presents a case study examining the phenomenon of Borut Pahor, who can be perceived as the most successful politician in the history of independent Slovenia, and situates it, particularly in the context of the 2012 presidential elections. The question the author wants to answer is whether Pahor's campaign for the presidency of the Republic can be characterised as populist, considering all the identified characteristics. The analysis of secondary sources leads us to the conclusion that in Pahor's case, we cannot speak of classical populism but of a unique and relatively benign version of it, which we refer to as 'Pahorism'.

Objectivity remains a central challenge for professional journalism in the rapidly evolving media landscape. Namely, its absence is a driver of disinformation and fake news, often associated with populist discourse. Tamara Besednjak Valič and Janja Lozar examine the intersection of objectivity and media, with a focus on the period from 2017 to 2023. Their research study discusses the critical concepts of credibility, democracy, content analysis, ethics and the evolving role of journalists in society. The analysis encompasses the ethical dimensions of journalism, exploring if and in which ways journalistic norms and culture influence local and global narratives. Based on a comprehensive content analysis, the authors offer an understanding of how objectivity is conceptualised and navigated within the multifaceted realm of contemporary media studies.

The phenomenon of new social media has dramatically changed established media principles. In the latest communication scheme, the once-powerless

recipient can become the very producer of public opinion. Milan Zver discusses the problem of media regulation. The gradual decline of traditional media's monopoly on informing the public about political and other issues has prompted politicians to consider additional rules in this area. The reason for this is often cited as the fight against extremist and populist discourse. Currently, the Media Freedom Act is being adopted at the European level. A new Media Act is being adopted in Slovenia at the same time. The author is very sceptical of both, claiming that with additional regulation, both acts will limit rather than promote media freedom.

Free access to information is strongly linked to the formation of personal and collective opinions. It can be perceived as one of the critical building blocks of democratic governance. At the same time, access to information is also crucially linked to media literacy, which is considered one of the most essential tools for countering the aforementioned negative media phenomena often associated with populist messaging. Alenka Pandiloska Jurak shows the foundations of adopting Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in different European macro-regions. In her contribution, she reviews data on the use of computers and ICT to communicate with public authorities, aiming to determine and explore the trends and developments in this area.

Industrial symbiosis, as a circular economy approach, and digital innovation are now tangible and unstoppable realities that profoundly affect every sector of contemporary society. Meanwhile, social media and the web serve as crucial and indispensable platforms for dissemination. Erika Džajić Uršič explores the dynamic interplay between Industrial Symbiosis (IS) and social media, playing a catalytic role in sustainable development. This development is based on environmental sustainability and the 'green transition' that has recently come under attack from populist politics. This is in the form of a stage and a privileged forum from which to observe, understand, and attempt to change the complexity of reality. This combination is particularly relevant for the younger generations. The author perceives social networks as integral to companies' and brands' new communication and sustainable development models.

The authors address the aforementioned set of topics in a comprehensive and complex manner. In doing so, they demonstrate how these topics, despite their diversity, are interconnected. It is a combination of theoretical-conceptual and empirically oriented texts, which, in this way, complement each other.

They use various methodological approaches in their analyses, from quantitative statistical methods to text analysis and case studies. Such a range of methods is not only understandable but also the only sensible one, given the diversity of the topics. The edited volume thus represents a valuable contribution to a deeper understanding of the current state of affairs on the European political and media scene.

We can state that maintaining, strengthening and legitimising European democracy requires improving the institutional effectiveness in terms of capacity for problem-solving, responsiveness and accountability of political media and other relevant public actors. Furthermore, it rests on strengthening European identity, based on existing European cultural heritage, in terms of 'raising awareness of common history and values, and reinforcing a sense of belonging to a common European cultural and political space'.[3] We speak about values such as freedom, tolerance, equality and pluralism, which are often perceived as universal but have European origins. This calls for close cooperation between political and other actors from different levels (European, national and local). In this context, mass media, both traditional and new, play a crucial role, particularly in terms of truthfulness and credibility in informing the public. Only the revitalisation of democracy in the form of a combination of participative and representative aspects, supported by free, responsible and unbiased media, with the active role of highly media-literate citizens dedicated to democratic values, could make populist claims less attractive. In this context, the European Union must be more active as a global player.

References

Adam, F. and Tomšič, M. (2020). The future of populism in a comparative European and global context. *Comparative Sociology*, 18(5/6), 687–705.

Cabada, L. and Tomšič, M. (2016). The Rise of person-based politics in the new democracies: the Czech Republic and Slovenia. *Politics in Central Europe*, 12(2), 29–50.

[3] See European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage. Commission Staff Working Document. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage. Commission Staff Working Document. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019. <NC0319331ENN.en.pdf (icomos.org)>

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563.

Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017). *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mueller J.W. (2016). *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pappas, T.S. (2016). Are Populist Parties 'Charismatic'? The Evidence from Europe. *Constellation*, 23(3), 378–390.

Taggart, P. (2004). Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 269–288.

Tarchi, M. (2016). Populism: Ideology, Political Style, Mentality? *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 23(2), 95–109.

Tomšič, M. (2024). Who or What Caused the Rise of Populism? *Politics in Central Europe*, 20(4). 467–486.

—. (2023). Populism, media messaging, and media literacy. *Politics in Central Europe*, 19(1s,), 455–470.

—. (2022). Political elites, leadership, and the rise of populism In: S. Kukovič and P. Just Simona (eds.), *The rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cheltenham, Northampton: E. Elgar, 10–23.

Tomšič, M. and Prijon L. (2013). Person-based Politics in Italy and Slovenia: Comparing Cases of Leadership's Individualisation. *International Social Science Journal*, 64(213/214), 237–248.

Urbinati, N. (2019). Political Theory of Populism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22,111–127.

Urbinati, N. (2014). *Democracy disfigured. Opinion, truth, and the people*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Navigating the Waves of Populism: Human Dignity and Constitutional Democracy

Petra Kleindienst

ABSTRACT
This article explores the rising tide of populism around the world and the implications this holds for human rights, the separation of powers, fundamental freedoms and democratic values. While many authors suggest that the global surge in populism may be considered an attack on these democratic tenets, the paper distinguishes 'hard' from 'soft' populism, particularly focusing on the latter's compatibility with the concept of human dignity as a cornerstone of democratic systems. The goal is to ascertain whether and how populism, despite employing populist rhetoric, aligns with the concept of human dignity. The article draws on the concept of constitutional democracy, which promotes pluralism and centres on the individual, fostering self-realisation while also protecting the common good. Examining the soft populism–constitutional democracy relationship sheds light on the potential held by populism to coexist with the concept of human dignity within the framework of constitutional democracy.

Keywords: soft populism, hard populism, human dignity, constitutional democracy, common good

Introduction

Populism, a term that has substantially influenced contemporary political discourse, is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which has elicited varied interpretations and debates among scholars (Weyland 2001; Mudde 2007; Sikk 2009; Barr 2009; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Block and Negrine 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017; Lavi 2022; Tomšič 2022; Webber 2023). Often seen through the lenses of political ideologies, strategies and styles, the concept has garnered widespread attention for its impact on democratic structures and processes.

The relevance of populism in the context of this article lies in its dichotomy, presenting both a challenge and a possible catalyst for democratic evolution. The relationship between populism and democracy is intricate and often contentious. Populism's challenge to pluralism and its inclination to promote a unified, indivisible entity of the people hold considerable implications for democratic principles and the rule of law. This aspect is explored by several scholars (Allred, Hawkins, and Ruth 2015; Müller 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Halmai 2018; Galston, Hunter, and Owen 2018; Urbinati

2019) and highlights the tensions populism creates in democratic frameworks. However, Tomšič (2022) differentiates between 'soft' and 'hard' populism, where the former respects constitutional principles and the latter challenges them, thereby impacting democracy differently. The article builds on the differences between soft and hard populism and analyses it in relation to constitutional democracy. The constitutional democracy is interpreted as a 'modern *polis*', where the majority is subject to and limited by law, and the 'neutrality' of the state is based on strict non-neutrality with respect to the fundamental values that form the constitutional order, especially when it comes to the rights held by humans (Rhonheimer 2013). Constitutional democracy emphasises the importance of the individual as an autonomous subject, ensuring their rights and freedoms while promoting pluralism and the common good.

The interplay between populism and constitutional democracy is further complicated when human dignity is considered. The concept of human dignity, central to constitutional democracy (Dupré 2016), underlines the inherent value and equality of all human beings, as noted by scholars (Kleindienst 2017; Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022). Although an extensive body of academic literature exists on the phenomenon of populism and its connections and impacts on constitutional democracy (Pinelli 2011; Hardt, Heringa, and Nguyen 2020; Fabbrizi 2020; Arato and Cohen 2022), the prevailing literature often overlooks the question of *whether and how populism aligns with the concept of human dignity within the constitutional democracy framework*. In this article, the mentioned gap is addressed by exploring the *distinction between hard and soft populism* and building on *initial and realised dignity* as key dimensions of the human dignity concept.

After the introduction, the term populism is examined. Then the article focuses on the procedural and substantive aspects of democracy needed for understanding the democratic system's functioning and forming the basis of a constitutional democracy. The article delves deeper into the concept of human dignity as part of constitutional democratic settings before exploring the interplay of the phenomena of populism, constitutional democracy and human dignity.

Populism

In recent years, the concept of populism has attracted widespread attention, with various commentators concentrating on different attributes as being central to it. There is often disagreement about which elements to include and

their significance (Webber 2023). Populism is widely regarded as an essentially contested concept (Mudde 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In a political context, populism can be seen as a *thin-centred ideology*, separating 'the pure people' from the corrupt elite and advocating the general will of the people (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Tomšič 2025). This perspective often aligns with a moralistic view of politicians, positioning morally pure and unified people against corrupt elites (Müller 2016) or as mass *movements* engaging in anti-establishment politics (Sikk 2009; Barr 2009). These movements claim that they represent 'the people', champion popular sovereignty and argue that their political agendas are entirely grounded in and derive their legitimacy from the people's will (Espejo 2012; Webber 2023). In criticising elites, populists stress the ideal of equal participation (Webber 2023). Some scholars depict populism as a *political strategy* used by personalistic leaders to gain power through the support of large, mostly unorganised groups of followers (Weyland 2001). Populism is occasionally characterised as a *political style* (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Block and Negrine 2017), particularly in terms of communication (Jagers and Walgrave 2007) and persuasion (Kazin 1998), often eschewing technocratic language in favour of slang and demonstrative tactics to resonate with ordinary people (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Ostiguy (2017; 2020) takes a socio-cultural, relational approach, defining populism as a political relationship between leaders and the social base that is influenced by socio-historical factors. In summary, populism broadly refers to a range of political strategies, ideologies, styles and movements. Donders (2020) notes that the common thread in various definitions of populism is their anti-establishment and anti-elitist stance, with populist movements and parties claiming to represent the unheard voices of 'ordinary people' against the establishment and the elite (ibid.).

Populism is often portrayed as a phenomenon that is problematic or even detrimental to the functioning of democracy, frequently neglecting the rule of law (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Many authors contend that lying at the heart of populism is a rejection of pluralism (Müller 2016; Galston, Hunter, and Owen 2018; Urbinati 2019), since it compromises the unity of the people and exalts them as an indivisible entity with shared values, desires and interests (Lavi 2022; Tomšič 2022). Webber (2023) observes that, at first glance, such a statement might appear inclusive. However, the seemingly inclusive

nature of populism is in conflict with the reality that, within any human community, citizens often have profound disagreements. Populists do not reconcile these disagreements. Instead, their claim to represent the entirety frequently promotes a narrow and biased definition of 'the people' (ibid.). Müller (2016) also demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, populists can govern based on their claim to the exclusive moral representation of the people. Populists are expected to emanate from the people's will, granting them a relatively 'free hand' in decision-making upon assuming power. This suggests that populism is also linked to the rejection of power division and elite-dominated political institutions, such as parliaments or courts (Stanley 2008; Tomšič 2022). Müller (2016) notes that if populists gain sufficient power, they tend to establish an authoritarian state which excludes those deemed not to be among the 'proper people'.

Nevertheless, Tomšič (2022) argues that populism is responsible for different effects on the functioning of a democratic order. On one hand, for example, we have 'soft populism', which, while employing populist rhetoric, respects constitutional principles like the separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms. On the other hand, there is 'hard populism', which rejects these constitutional principles. While the former has no serious effects on democracy, the latter can be problematic from this viewpoint (ibid.). The contrast between negative and positive aspects of populism is described in the scholarly literature. Some scholars argue that populism weakens liberal democratic institutions (Plattner 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It is also characterised by marked impatience with, and deep distrust of, the institutional mechanisms of government. These include parliamentary procedures, hearings, debates, elections, the rule of law, the separation of powers and the functioning of the courts (Webber 2023). Other scholars attribute populism with the potential to enhance institutions of political participation and improve the representative connection between politicians and citizens given its focus on vertical mechanisms of democratic accountability, such as elections and direct democratic mechanisms (Mény and Surel 2002; Laclau 2005). Similarly, Schmitter (2019) identifies both the positive aspects of populism, like opening up the political space, deconsolidating sclerotic party systems, mobilising previously passive individuals and groups and expanding the range of possible political solutions, and its negative aspects, including destabilising the decision-making process, raising unrealistic expectations among

citizens, creating mistrust in the political system, introducing exclusivism and intolerance into political life, and professionalising politics. According to Tomšič (2022), populism is mainly problematic when combined with personified politics, that is, a charismatic, strong leader making decisions independently without close regard for other branches of government. The concentration of power, together with the rejection of pluralism, can lead to the establishment of (semi-)authoritarian practices, such as undermining the rule of law and civil liberties and controlling the media and civil society (ibid.). These often include tendencies to define 'the people' around ascriptive characteristics like racism, religious intolerance, rejection of cultural diversity, opposition to sexual minorities, a highly gendered approach to social interaction, opposition to immigration, and a sense of wounded dignity, victimhood, disrespect, or vulnerability (Webber 2023).

Procedural Democracy, Substantive Democracy and Constitutional Democracy

Democracy ('demokratia'), a term of Greek origin, is composed of the word 'demos' (people) and 'kratia' (rule), meaning that it signifies the rule of the people (Held 1989). Democracy is frequently defined as a form of governance, a form of arrangement and organisation of the political community, and as a way of legitimising government (Rieu et al. 1995). Generally, it represents a label for a regime where power is exercised based on the support of the majority of citizens (Rieu et al. 1995) and is characterised by self-rule in the decision-making process whose outcomes are binding on all members of the democratic community (Dimitrijević 2015). Self-rule in a democratic society means that people are not governed by some authority or external force, since people are ultimately not heteronomous subjects but the executors of their own (collective) autonomy. If members of the community cannot govern directly (i.e., direct democracy), they must seek an agreement or a way to help them maintain trust in the idea of a community of rulers and the ruled. The ruled, therefore, entrust those who rule with the task of making decisions in their favour through the electoral process according to predetermined procedural rules (i.e., indirect or representative democracy) (Post 2000). Still, the members of a democratic political community, who, among themselves, face insurmountable differences and must adopt common rules

of the game or the lowest common denominator in creating, maintaining and strengthening this community (Davis, Goidel, and Zhao 2021).

Contemporary perceptions of democracy vary widely. They include the minimalist or electoral perspective, which mandates only 'free and fair elections', and broader interpretations that link democracy with concepts of liberty, participation, contestation and accountability, among others (Chapman et al. 2023). The existing literature also implies that a consensus exists concerning what democracy is not (König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022).

Dimitrijević (2015) outlines two interpretations of procedural democracy: (1) democracy refers to a set of procedural rules for appointing the legislature responsible for enacting laws. People delegate decision-making authority to government representatives in line with pre-defined procedural rules and (2) the principle of 'one person, one vote'. The attributes of procedural democracy are intimately tied to the foundational structure of the so-called (formal) legal state, which comprises the formal principle of equality and the principle of legality (Bugarič 2006). The procedural aspect of democracy mainly involves the process of electing a representative body, namely, the rules of the electoral process, establishing the institutional form, and the decision-making rules of the representative body to benefit the governed. Known for articulating one of the most fundamental formal definitions of democracy (referred to as the minimalist definition of democracy—see, for example, Schmitter and Karl 1991; Huntington 1993; Przeworski 1998), Schumpeter (2008) describes it as an institutional arrangement for the making of political decisions where relevant actors gain the power to decide by competing for the electorate's votes. To sum up, procedural conceptions of democracy emphasise the proper forms and procedures and tend towards an instrumental understanding of democracy as a mere means (Van Der Zweerde 2018).

Dimitrijević (2015) contends that democracy, grounded in the 'one person, one vote' principle and the concept of collective self-governance by equal individuals, cannot simply be reduced to a procedural requirement. This principle inherently raises the question of why individuals should be treated equally in the democratic process. As a result, it suggests that procedural democracy and procedural rules need to be based on specific substantive assumptions. The need for elections of a representative body, adhering to the principle of granting each citizen one vote, is thus an essential, yet not the sole criterion for democracy. Democracy cannot, therefore, be exclusively depicted as an

institutional agreement, organisational structure or a governance method (see Marks 2003), indicating that a minimalist conceptual view is inadequate (also noted by Tomšič 2002). Karl (1990) describes this approach to define democracy, with an overemphasis on electoral competition over its other facets, as the fallacy of electoralism.

Procedural democracy only refers to the procedural and institutional aspects of democracy, lacking the substantive elements that bolster the concept of equality within the democratic process. This means that in a democratic system, alongside a procedural democracy, a 'substantive' (social) democracy must be established. Following an initially minimalist approach to defining democracy, Dahl (1971; 2000) presented a more comprehensive view of democracy that went beyond bare formal requirements to include the provision of certain freedoms. Substantive conceptions of democracy lean towards understanding democracy as a good in itself (Van Der Zweerde 2018). They involve an expansive understanding of democracy that balances support for both democratic process and outputs (Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel 2022). Nonetheless, substantive democracy is more concerned with the content of governing policies, the substantive actions of rulers and the outcomes produced by the democratic process (see Janda et al. 2017). Such outcomes should be underpinned by principles embedded in constitutional documents and relevant international human rights frameworks. These principles include human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the common good and the quality of governance, among others. Substantive democracy, therefore, seeks to actualise fundamental democratic goals and principles. It focuses not just on the form of the democratic process but more on the content and the implications of its outcomes, aiming to ensure equality among citizens. Haack (2011) links substantive democracy to the idea of the common good and a fulfiling life, centring on equality, justice, human development and participation. In a democracy, the principle of equality is upheld by considering and integrating the interests of all citizens while forming legislature, applying the law equally to all entities and ensuring rights are granted or limited in a manner that is appropriate, proportional and necessary for achieving democratic objectives. When a substantive democracy that embodies democratic values complements a procedural democracy, the democracy not only entails the sovereignty of the collective body but also the moral equality of individuals, according to Dimitrijević

(2015). Procedural democracy is primarily designed to safeguard democratic values that reinforce and legitimise the substantive democratic framework. A democracy grounded in substantive normative standards moves beyond simply addressing how, when and what democratic acts, rules and decisions to create. It considers the correctness of these elements rather than merely the preferences of the majority. Community members, driven by moral equality, must discern what is right and assimilate the substantive, correct principles and rules (Dimitrijević 2015).

The integration of procedural and substantive democracy corresponds well with the concept of constitutional democracy (Elster and Slagstad 1988; Habermas 2001; Kis 2003; Murphy 2007). The core of this concept is constitutionalism (Rosenfeld 1994; Waldron 2010; Adams, Meuwese, and Hirsch Ballin 2017), and it is combined with the collective governance of the people in a procedural sense. On the most abstract level, constitutionalism refers to a set of rules concerned with how a practice or institution is organised and run (Bellamy 2014). Ragazzoni (2022) implies that a constitutional democracy is an ambitious project. It interlaces the principles of majority rule with minority rights and embodies a political and institutional structure of public life intentionally designed to assure and protect rights and freedoms, peacefully settle social and political disputes and maximise citizen participation in democratic self-governance. Key to achieving these objectives are procedural methods that improve the responsiveness and accountability of elected officials, restrain the power of the ruling majority, facilitate the reciprocal checks and balances associated with institutional rights and permit citizens to regularly evaluate their representatives and, if desired, choose new ones (ibid.). The connection between democracy and constitutionalism surfaced notably in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taking various forms. For instance, in England, it emerged during the revolutionary awakening in the late 1640s and again in 1688; in the United States, it was marked by the Declaration of Independence and the formation of the Constitution in 1787; and in France, during the French Revolution in 1789. Especially after the Second World War, democratic regimes began to be recognised as constitutional regimes (Rosenfeld 1994; Waldron 2010; Adams, Meuwese, and Ballin 2017). Franklin and Baun (1995) propose that establishing a constitutional state may be a preliminary step towards achieving full democracy. On the one hand, constitutional democracy points to the importance of the

individual as an autonomous subject, ensuring their rights and freedoms. While promoting pluralism, its basis and essence centre on the individual, thus nurturing each individual's self-realisation. On the other hand, constitutional democracy is committed to the protection and preservation of the common good. Rhonheimer (2013) stresses that the 'political common good', which is the common good of society as a political community, is to be differentiated from the common good in an integral sense. The latter includes all of the values that are realised freely, whether by single persons or by the various practical and intermediate societies that comprise society as a whole. Although constitutional democracy has the task of realising the integral common good, it limits itself to the political common good that is determined by the nature of political praxis itself (ibid.). Dimitrijević (2015) notes that the procedural–substantive combination of democracy not only acknowledges the status of each individual as an autonomous entity but also considers the nature of their interpersonal, social and political ties. As a result, constitutional democracy establishes procedural rules within procedural democracy aimed at safeguarding the substantive elements that make up substantive democracy.

From the text above, we can conclude that constitutional democracy obliges individuals to recognise others as autonomous subjects endowed with human rights and freedoms and to respect them as human beings equal to themselves. At the same time, it bestows upon individuals the right to expect similar treatment from others in both vertical and horizontal relationships (Kleindienst 2017). This concept of constitutional democracy is potent because it emphasises human rights and fundamental freedoms, deeply rooted in human dignity (Dupré 2016). Individuals within a constitutional democratic community are expected to acknowledge and respect others as equal, autonomous, rational and moral beings and to refrain from imposing their own views on others. They are encouraged to listen to and collaborate with each other, making sure their actions do not clash with the interests of other individuals or the common good. Through their relationships among themselves and with society, individuals shape and refine their identities. This is also stimulated also by what lies at the core of constitutional democracy—human dignity, which is universally inherent to all human beings to the same extent notwithstanding the differences existing among them. As implied in the following text, the unique human value is

manifested in human dignity, thereby serving as both the foundation and objective of democracy (Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022).

Despite the various factors, within the framework of constitutional democracy, there is more to consider than just its procedural and substantive aspects. Constitutional democracy gains true strength only when its foundational tenets and principles align with the beliefs of the citizens. Franklin and Baun (1995) express scepticism regarding the effectiveness of imposing democratic structures, arguing that the rise of constitutionalism is more likely in environments with certain cultural assumptions or characteristics among citizens. In a similar vein, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) state that democracy is not merely the result of elite negotiation and constitutional engineering; rather, it hinges on the deeply ingrained orientations and values of the people. They assert that real democracy is not an autonomous machine that operates independently once established, and, instead, it relies on the people (ibid.). Habermas (2001) contends that democracy must be grounded in principles whose validity is inherent and not dependent on their consistency with positive law. This implies that the concept of constitutional democracy can only fulfil its purpose if it is recognised as legitimate by citizens, who believe in the current democratic system's appropriateness and effectiveness and internalise its core values and principles. These values and principles draw their worth and power from human dignity (Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022). The concept of human dignity is 'at the forefront of safeguarding meaningful democracy and is reshaping its significance by protecting human beings' unique identities and interactions' (Dupré 2012: 265).

The Meaning of Human Dignity in Democratic Settings

In the contemporary paradigm, human dignity may be understood as a concept with two dimensions: initial and realised dignity (Kleindienst 2019). According to Kleindienst (2017), initial dignity implies the respectable status of a human being or the status of the individual's absolute inner value. It indicates the dimension of human dignity that belongs to the individual simply by virtue of the fact that they are a member of the human species. Initial dignity originates from human nature as such and distinguishes human beings from the members of other species. 'It thus constitutes a kind of metaphysical element which is inseparably linked to humans and, as such,

exists in any space and time' (Kleindienst 2017: 124). Considering that all human beings are endowed with inherent dignity, since they are human beings, we may conclude that it is initial dignity that represents the essence of a human being. We can say that initial dignity constitutes a human being and may therefore be characterised as a constitutive element of such a creature (Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022).

'Realised dignity is a dimension of human dignity that tells us the extent to which human dignity is realised/implemented in the case of a particular individual' (Kleindienst 2017: 126). This means it is not necessary that every human being naturally endowed with initial dignity simultaneously also enjoys realised dignity. Unlike initial dignity, realised dignity is impermanent and unstable (it may be only temporary). 'It can have different levels such that someone can have a higher or lower level of realised dignity than their fellow human' (ibid.). 'Realised dignity is therefore reflected in a person's relationship towards him- or herself and towards other people. It represents the dignity that people can perceive and feel when in touch with themselves and their fellow humans' (ibid.). When we say that someone has lost their dignity, we are talking about their realised dignity (Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022).

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) highlight the special role of human dignity in democracy, tracing its significance back to the end of the Second World War when the protection of human rights became a central concern (Vatter 2020). The stature of dignity and its link to democracy grew stronger with each wave of democratisation in Europe. This commenced in the south with the fall of wartime regimes in Spain, Greece and Portugal and continued with the collapse of communism in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (Dupré 2012; 2013; Peers et al. 2021). The mentioned shift led to the establishing of institutions where people wield control over political power and human beings occupy a central role. Dupré (2012) and Peers et al. (2021) further note that this principle was enshrined in the preamble of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which declares that the European Union places the individual at the centre of its activities, in turn underscoring human dignity as the core of European democracy. While ancient and modern theorists like Plato, Aristotle and Rawls have pinpointed freedom and equality as democracy's cornerstones (see Rawls 2003; Robinson 2011; Ober 2012), post-Second World War developments have positioned human dignity at the heart of the democratic system (Capps 2009). This focus on

dignity is not simply reflected in legal texts but is also increasingly recognised by constitutional courts. These courts frequently refer to human dignity in the context of fundamental democratic challenges, affirming its status as a key tenet of democracy (Maksymov and Satokhina 2020).

Human dignity is an essence or a constitutive element of a person. By establishing dignity as a foundational aspect of the democratic system, individuals are afforded the opportunity to realise their capacity to define their own goals (see Kant 2002), develop their identity and achieve self-fulfilment and self-realisation. Maslow (1954) defines self-realisation as the achievement of an individual's existential essence. In Dworkin's perspective, self-realisation is attaining the state of 'living well'. Dworkin (2011) contends that living well transcends mere survival and involves the pursuit of a so-called good life within the boundaries essential for human dignity. Individuals should aspire for a good life in a critical sense, acknowledging their responsibility to live well and understanding that living well is not solely about deriving satisfaction from life but about being good in a meaningful and valuable manner (ibid.).

It is important to recognise that life within a democratic community calls for rules for communal living. These rules must be just, providing people with valid reasons to adhere to them (Ober 2017). The rules should regulate relationships on both a horizontal level (individual to individual; within the community) and vertical level (state to individual; power relations). Kuhn (2014) clarifies that the term 'demos' (people) relates to the character of communal life in a democratic political community (horizontal level), whereas 'kratos' pertains to the nature of power in democracy (vertical level). Political culture is vital on both levels, as it shapes the cultural identity of the political community and the principles upon which the political order's legitimacy is founded (ibid.).

As an organisational form, democracy centralises both initial and realised human dignity, thereby safeguarding individuals' essence and identity while fostering further human development in terms of self-realisation. Human dignity is thus a foundational element and ultimate goal of constitutional democracy (Dupré 2012). On the one hand, democracy is established to protect and promote human dignity; on the other hand, the establishment of democratic institutions is predicated on human dignity, propelling these institutions to further develop their core values and essential cultural

foundations (Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022). As human dignity implies the capacity for autonomous decision-making, considering both self and others, it forms a robust basis for individual participation in the democratic process and maintaining control over it. Moreover, human dignity is vital for the existence of a democratic system, laying the groundwork for collective self-governance where citizens are equal, free and actively engaged. Dignity also plays a regulatory role in optimising equality and freedom, the key tenets of democracy (Ober 2017).

The Interplay between Populism, Constitutional Democracy and Human Dignity

Populism frequently challenges immigration and critiques pluralism, questioning the importance of diversity and minority rights (Donders 2020). Populists often exhibit behaviours that stoke racial resentment or similar conduct, such as intolerance of multiculturalism, nationalistic isolationism, longing for historical greatness, distrust of foreigners, traditional misogyny, sexism and hostility to racial groups and Muslims, creating a divisive 'Us vs. Them' dynamic (Norris and Inglehart 2016). Populism tends to represent a radical threat for liberal-democratic constitutionalism when removing or at least significantly reducing the constitutional boundaries to majoritarian hegemony, altering the classical model of checks and balances to give ever more power to the executive branch by reducing the authority held by the legislative and judicial powers (Fabbrizi 2020). Populism becomes problematic in several contexts: first, when populists dismiss the role of constitutional or supreme courts as institutions safeguarding against the excesses of majoritarian legislative and executive power; second, when they argue that legislative power, being grounded solely in electoral legitimacy, should not be constrained by a higher constitutional authority; and third, when populist constitutionalism promotes the view that the constitution should not be seen as a law above majoritarian politics. Instead, it is perceived as an outcome of conflict and competition among political forces (ibid.). This stance can hold profound implications for democracy and its underlying values and principles. It indicates 'hard populism'. Notably at risk is the principle of human dignity, which asserts that every person is inherently valuable and deserves respect. When constitutional checks are weakened and majoritarian

hegemony prevails, the safeguards that protect individual rights—particularly those of minorities—are eroded, making it easier for the state to overlook or suppress the inherent worth of each individual.

However, it is important to understand that (hard) populism primarily affects what is known as 'realised dignity', which is inherently fragile and subject to change. Realised dignity can vary in degree, allowing for differences in the level of realised dignity experienced by individuals (Kleindienst 2017). Unlike realised dignity, 'initial dignity' remains unaffected by external factors like populism. This form of dignity is inherently linked to being human and is not subject to diminishment or loss. It is uniformly inherent to every individual, intrinsic and unalienable, meaning that it cannot be separated or violated. The concept of initial dignity underscores the unique value held by each human being as an exceptional member of the human species (Kleindienst 2017; 2019; Kleindienst and Tomšič 2022).

While the prevailing view among scholars is that populism poses a threat to democracy (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016; 2017; Galston, Hunter, and Owen 2018; Halmai 2018; Urbinati 2019), here one finds assertions that populism represents the only true form of democracy (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Several studies (Pinelli 2011; Allred, Hawkins, and Ruth 2015; Houle and Kenny 2018) indicate that populism undermines constitutional democracy by attacking elements of constitutional democracy such as free media, checks and balances on the executive branch, elections, civil rights and liberties. However, some authors argue that populism can function as either a threat to or a corrective for democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Tomšič (2022) observes that populism serves as a signal highlighting deficiencies in representation and responsiveness within democratic systems. It emphasises the need for enhanced institutional efficiency, particularly in problem-solving, responsiveness and accountability to citizens. Further, it stresses the importance of reinforcing a common identity. Populism is indicative of a crisis in established politics and the shortcomings of mainstream political elites. According to Fabbrizi (2020), populism should be distinguished from traditional anti-parliamentary theories, as it does not inherently dismiss representative democracy. From a populist perspective, democracy involves a consistent appeal to the 'majority's will' in all facets of political life encompassed by the constitutional framework. As pointed out by Ferrara (2018), populist movements frequently acknowledge elections

and representative institutions as part of their strategy to reclaim them from the corrupt elite.

Brownsword (2001) notes that human dignity has two functions: empowerment and limitation. It promotes individual empowerment and supports autonomy, safeguarding personal decisions from external influences. As a foundational principle of democracy, human dignity supports the growth, self-realisation and identity formation of an individual; yet as Dworkin (2011) emphasises, this must be aligned with the concept of 'living well'. This means that human dignity also serves as a limitation on personal autonomy when it is necessary to safeguard the interests of other individuals or the well-being of the community. Human dignity encourages respect for others and facilitates harmonious coexistence within a democratic society. Each citizen is responsible for contributing to the common good, often requiring self-restraint to benefit collective interests. In this context, the constitutional democratic state plays a significant role, tasked with realising the integral common good. However, it primarily confines itself to addressing the political common good (Rhonheimer 2013). According to Kateb (2014), the contemporary concept of human dignity combines the universality of human dignity on one side while preserving the uniqueness of the human being on the other. This means that, on one side, it features the idea of the equal human dignity of all human beings (i.e. initial dignity); on the other, the realisation of human dignity is only possible when considering that every individual is still part of the individualisation process, i.e., self-fulfilment, the pursuit of one's goals or self-realisation of one's personality (i.e. realised dignity).

When researching the connection of human dignity with the process of individualisation, one can draw a few parallels between human dignity and 'soft populism'. Drawing on Laclau's (2005) perspective, Betz and Oswald (2022) suggest that populism analysis should begin on the individual level. They argue that populism emerges when people's aspirations are overlooked in the existing democratic setup, often due to political elites' lack of responsiveness. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), this view introduces the concept of 'the common people', contrasting the elitist perspective by acknowledging the dignity and wisdom of groups marginalised by their socio-cultural and economic status. In a similar vein, Babones (2018) hence argues that populism forces the political class to respect the dignity of the electorate. He posits that populism compels the political class to honour the

electorate's dignity. Further, he stresses that a healthy democracy calls for esteemed experts to engage seriously with the 'mundane' views of ordinary citizens. This is achievable through the fundamental principle of constitutional democracy: human dignity. Human dignity is universally inherent in all human beings to the same extent, irrespective of the differences among them. We can thus deduce that soft populism, which utilises populist rhetoric while respecting constitutional principles such as the separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms, aligns with the concept of human dignity.

Conclusion

Contemporary constitutional democracies are invariably populous, culturally diverse states accompanied by complicated histories and a broad variety of governmental arrangements. The term is today deployed to cover a wide range of regimes (Loughlin 2019). However, constitutional democracy is inextricably connected to the term 'common good'. Constitutional democracy leaves open the possibility, and indeed the obligation, of the realisation of the integral common good on the part of society, which, in any case, must not be subjected to the totalising action of a political power that understands itself to be the bearer of all values, responsible for their integral realisation (Rhonheimer 2013).

Lying at the heart of constitutional democracy is the concept of human dignity. This principle, universally inherent in all human beings, underscores the equal treatment and moral equality of individuals within a democratic system. In fact, as Rhonheimer (2013) states, the modern democratic constitutional state is a product of civilisation and culture, i.e., political culture. The ethos of political praxis is formulated in the context of this culture and reflects its moral rationality. It is not the institutions alone that bring about peace, liberty and justice; people always play a fundamental role (ibid.). It is through the lens of human dignity that populism's impact on democracy can be understood. Populism, especially in its 'hard' form, poses a threat to the principles of human dignity by challenging the foundational aspects of constitutional democracy. 'Hard' populism can undermine the very foundations of constitutional democracy and human dignity. When the concept of human dignity is aligned with 'soft' populism, this suggests the potential for a positive influence within democratic settings.

In summary, the interplay of populism, constitutional democracy and human dignity is a complex phenomenon. While populism can serve as a reminder of the deficiencies in representation and responsiveness within democratic systems, it also holds the potential to destabilise the foundational principles of constitutional democracy. The challenge lies in understanding and addressing the varied manifestations of populism within the framework of constitutional democracy and human dignity. This article may serve as a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies, which will require a clearly articulated and well-elaborated concept of human dignity as a robust theoretical starting point—particularly given the frequent ambiguity surrounding the term in existing literature. It would be especially valuable to examine how various media representations of populist movements—both 'hard' and 'soft' populism—shape the perception and protection of human dignity. Future empirical research should therefore include analyses of media content (such as news reports, commentary and social media) and its impact on the interrelations between populism, constitutional democracy and human dignity.

References

Adams, M., Meuwese, A., and Hirsch Ballin, E. (2017). *Constitutionalism and the Rule of Law: Bridging Idealism and Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Albertazzi, D., and McDonnell, D. (2008). 'Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre'. In D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism*, pp. 1–11. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Allred, N., Hawkins, K. A., and Ruth, P. S. (2015). 'The Impact of Populism on Liberal Democracy'. Lima, Peru. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Impact-of-Populism-on-Liberal-Democracy-Allred-Hawkins/1afa977cd2b318198726cca6cca50302297666ff>, accessed 17 March, 2025.

Arato, A., and Cohen, L. J. (2022). *Populism and Civil Society: The Challenge to Constitutional Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Babones, S. J. (2018). *The New Authoritarianism: Trump, Populism, and the Tyranny of Experts*. Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity.

Barr, R. R. (2009). 'Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics', *Party Politics*, 15 (1), 29–48.

Bellamy, R. (2014). 'Constitutional Democracy'. In M. T. Gibbons (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, pp. 713–728. Hoboken: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0202>.

Betz, Hans-Georg, and Michael Oswald. (2022). 'Emotional Mobilization: The Affective Underpinnings of Right-Wing Populist Party Support'. In M. Oswald (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, pp. 115–143. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Block, E., and Negrine, R. (2017). 'The Populist Communication Style: Toward a Critical Framework', *International Journal of Communication Systems*, 11, 178–197.

Brownsword, R. (2001). 'Freedom of Contract, Human Rights and Human Dignity'. In D. Friedmann and D. Barak-Erez (eds.), *Human Rights in Private Law*. Hart Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472559197>.

Bugarič, B. (2006). 'Formalna vs. Vsebinska Demokracija: O Vlogi Pravne Države v Sloveniji', *Revus*, 6 (January), 7–12.

Capps, P. (2009). *Human Dignity and the Foundations of International Law*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Chapman, H. S., Hanson, M. C., Dzutsati, V., and DeBell, P. (2023). 'Under the Veil of Democracy: What Do People Mean When They Say They Support Democracy?', *Perspectives on Politics*, February, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722004157>.

Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

—. (2000). 'A Democratic Paradox?', *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (1), 35–40.

Davis, N. T., Gaddie, R. K., and Goidel, R. K. (2022). *Democracy's Meanings: How the Public Understands Democracy and Why It Matters*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Davis, N. T., Goidel, K., and Zhao, Y. (2021). 'The Meanings of Democracy among Mass Publics', *Social Indicators Research*, 153 (3), 849–921.

Dimitrijević, N. (2015). 'Always above the Law? Justification of Constitutional Review Revisited'. In M. A. Jovanović (ed.), *Constitutional Review and Democracy*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Eleven International Publishing.

Donders, Y. (2020). 'Diversity in Europe: From Pluralism to Populism?' In J. Vidmar (ed.), *European Populism and Human Rights*, pp. 52–71. Brill, Nijhoff.

Dupré, C. (2012). 'Dignity, Democracy, Civilisation', *Liverpool Law Review*, 33(3), 263–280.

—. (2013). 'Human Dignity in Europe: A Foundational Constitutional Principle', *European Public Law*, 19 (Issue 2), 319–339. <https://doi.org/10.54648/EURO2013020>.

Dupré, C. (2016). *The Age of Dignity: Human Rights and Constitutionalism in Europe*. Hart Publishing.

Dworkin, R. (2011). *Justice for Hedgehogs*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Elster, J., and Slagstad, R. (1988). *Constitutionalism and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Espejo, P. O. (2012). 'Paradoxes of Popular Sovereignty: A View from Spanish America', *The Journal of Politics*, 74 (4), 1053–1065.

Fabbrizi, V. (2020). 'Constitutional Democracy in the Age of Populisms: A Commentary to Mark Tushnet's Populist Constitutional Law', *Res Publica*, 26(3), 433–449.

Ferrara, A. (2018). 'Can Political Liberalism Help Us Rescue "the People" from Populism?', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44(4), 463–477.

Franklin, D. P., and Baun, M. J. (eds.). (1995). *Political Culture and Constitutionalism: A Comparative Approach*. Comparative Politics Series. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe.

Galston, W. A., Hunter, J. D., and Owen, J. M. (2018). *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Haack, K. (2011). *The United Nations Democracy Agenda: A Conceptual History*. Manchester: New York: Manchester University Press.

Habermas, J. (2001). 'Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?', *Political Theory*, 29(6), 766–781.

Halmai, G. (2018). 'Is There Such Thing as "Populist Constitutionalism"? The Case of Hungary', *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 323–339.

Hardt, S., Heringa, A. W., and Nguyen, H.-T. (eds.). (2020). *Populism and Democracy*. The Hague, the Netherlands: Eleven International Publishing.

Held, D. (1989). *Modeli demokracije*, trans. by B. Kante, S. Gaber, and V. Jalušič. Ljubljana: Univerzitetna konferenca ZSMS, Knjižnica revolucionarne teorije.

Houle, C., and Kenny, P. D. (2018). 'The Political and Economic Consequences of Populist Rule in Latin America', *Government and Opposition*, 53(2), 256–287.

Huntington, S. P. (1993). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press.

Inglehart, R., and Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jagers, J., and Walgrave, S. (2007). 'Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319–345.

Janda, K., Berry, J. M., Goldman, J., Deborah D., and Manna, P. (2017). *The Challenge of Democracy: American Government in Global Politics*. Boston, Massachusetts: Cengage Learning.

Kant, I. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, A. W. Wood (ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Karl, T. L. (1990). 'Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America', *Comparative Politics*, 23 (1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422302>.

Kateb, G. (2014). *Human Dignity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Kazin, M. (1998). *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kis, J. (2003). *Constitutional Democracy*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press.

Kleindienst, P. (2017). 'Understanding the Different Dimensions of Human Dignity: Analysis of the Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia on the "Tito Street" Case', *DANUBE: Law and Economics Review*, 8(3), 117–137.

—. (2019). 'Zgodovinski temelji sodobne paradigme človekovega dostojanstva', *Phainomena*, 28(108–109), 259–282. <https://doi.org/10.32022/PHI28.2019.108-109.11>.

Kleindienst, P., and Matevž, T. (2022). 'Human Dignity as the Foundation of Democratic Political Culture: Legal and Philosophical Perspective', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 18(2), 385–404.

König, P. D., Siewert, M. B., and Ackermann, K. (2022). 'Conceptualizing and Measuring Citizens' Preferences for Democracy: Taking Stock of Three Decades of Research in a Fragmented Field', *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(12), 2015–2049.

Kuhn, S. (2014). 'Unmasking Instrumental Support for Democracy: A New Approach for Measuring the Political Culture of Democracy'. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2531713>, accessed 17 May 2025.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London; New York: Verso.

Lavi, L. (2022). 'Between Populism and Democracy: "The People" in Election Discourse'. *European Political Science*, 21(3), 359–377. Loughlin, M. (2019). 'The Contemporary Crisis of Constitutional Democracy', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 39(2), 435–454. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqz005>.

Maksymov, S., and Satokhina, N. (2020). 'Human Dignity as a Universal Legal Value', *Revista Amazonia Investiga*, 9(31), 96–103.

Marks, S. (2003). *The Riddle of All Constitutions: International Law, Democracy, and the Critique of Ideology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Mény, Y., and Surel, Y. (2002). 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism'. In Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.). *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, pp. 1–21. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moffitt, B., and Simon, T. (2014). 'Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style'. *Political Studies*, 62(2), 381–397.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

—. (2017). 'Populism: An Ideational Approach'. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook*

of Populism, pp. 27–47. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York: Oxford University Press.

Mudde, C., and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Müller, J. W. (2016). *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

—. (2017). 'Populism and Constitutionalism'. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, W. F. (2007). *Constitutional Democracy: Creating and Maintaining a Just Political Order*. The Johns Hopkins Series in Constitutional Thought. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Norris, P., and Inglehart, R. F. (2016). 'Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash'. In *Roundtable on Rage against the Machine: Populist Politics in the U.S., Europe and Latin America*, pp. 1–44.

Ober, J. (2012). 'Democracy's Dignity'. *American Political Science Review*, 106(4), 827–846. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541200038X>.

—. (2017). 'Democracy and Dignity'. <https://silo.tips/download/democracy-and-dignity-norwegian-academy-of-science-and-letters-inaugural-lecture#>, accessed 19 June 2024.

Ostiguy, P. (2017). 'Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach'. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, pp. 73–98. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York: Oxford University Press.

—. (2020). 'The Socio-Cultural, Relational Approach to Populism', *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, 13(1), 29–58. <https://doi.org/10.1285/I20356609V13I1P29>.

Pandiloska Jurak, A. (2025). Media Literacy, Access to Information and European democracy in the Light of ICT Adaptation. In M. Tomšič (ed.), *Media, Populism and European Democracy*. Peter Lang.

Peers, S., Hervey, T. K., Kenner, J., and Ward, A. (eds.). (2021). *The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights: A Commentary*. Oxford, UK: New York, NY: Hart Publishing.

Pinelli, C. (2011). 'The Populist Challenge to Constitutional Democracy'. *European Constitutional Law Review*, 7(1), 5–16. Plattner, M. F. (2010). 'Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 21(1), 81–92. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0154>.

Przeworski, A. (1998). *Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense*. Yale University.

Ragazzoni, D. (2022). 'Introduction: New Directions in the Study of Constitutional Democracy'. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 36(4), 409–412.

Rawls, J. (2003). *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, E. Kelly (ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Rhonheimer, M. (2013). *The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy and on Catholic Social Teaching*. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press.

Rieu, A. M., Duprat, G. (1995). *European Democratic Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.

Robinson, E. W. (2011). *Democracy beyond Athens: Popular Government in the Greek Classical Age*. Cambridge University Press.

Rosenfeld, M. (ed.) (1994). *Constitutionalism, Identity, Difference, and Legitimacy: Theoretical Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Schmitter, P. C. (2019). 'The Vices and Virtues of "Populisms"', *Sociologica*, 13(May), 75–81.

Schmitter, P. C, and Karl, T. L. (1991). 'What Democracy Is… and Is Not', *Journal of Democracy*, 2(3), 75–88.

Schumpeter, J. A. (2008). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought.

Sikk, A. (2009). *Parties and Populism. Working Paper*. London: Centre for European Politics, Security and Integration (CEPSI), SSEES, UCL.

Stanley, B. (2008). 'The Thin Ideology of Populism', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13(1), 95–110.

Tomšič, M. (2002). *Politična stabilnost v novih demokracijah*. Ljubljana: Znanstveno in publicistično središče.

—. (2022). 'Political Elites, Leadership, and the Rise of Populism'. In S. Kukovič, and P. Just (eds.), *The Rise of Populism in Central and Eastern*

Europe, pp. 10–23. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802205534.00008>.

—. (2025). 'The Role of Mass Media in Spreading Populism'. In M. Tomšič (ed.), *Media, Populism and European Democracy*. Peter Lang.

Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Van Der Zweerde, E. (2018). 'The Quality of Democracy: Beyond Substantive and Procedural Understandings'. In *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, pp. 425–429. Philosophy Documentation Center. <https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp232018691595>.

Vatter, M. (2020). 'Dignity and the Foundation of Human Rights: Toward an Averroist Genealogy', *Politics and Religion*, 13(2), 304–332.

Waldron, J. (2010). 'Constitutionalism: A Skeptical View', <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/hartlecture/4>, accessed 20 May 2024.

Webber, J. (2023). 'Understanding Populism', *Social & Legal Studies*, 32(6), 849–876. <https://

Weyland, K. (2001). 'Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics', *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>.

Mass Media and the Rise of Populism

Matevž Tomšič

ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the role of the media in the rise of populism in contemporary European democracies. In doing so, it highlights the characteristics of populist politics, particularly in terms of how its messages are disseminated and the mechanisms it employs. It also analyses the changing nature of media in interdependence with other social changes. One can assume that the influence of the media on the spread of a certain—in this case, populist—type of political message depends on the broader political constellation and the political impulses to which people are exposed. It can be claimed that although the media undoubtedly influence the spread of populist messages, they are not the ones who either enable or prevent the success of populist protagonists. A lot depends on their rivals from the ranks of established politics.

Keywords: populism, mass media, media messaging, Europe

Introduction

Mass media are a key communication channel in many areas of modern society. They are the most critical information transfer mechanism (Deane 2005; Pinter 2025). Most of what we humans learn today comes from them. They also play a vital role in connection with political life. It can be said that mass news media, i.e., newspapers, radio and television stations, as well as online portals, indirectly but significantly influence the course and outcomes of the political process, thereby acting as an element of the political space. At the same time, the media is often referred to as the 'fourth branch' of power (Carter 1977; Splichal 2005). Of course, in this case, it is not about power in the sense of formal powers (as the executive, legislative and judicial branches have), but about the influence that the media has by providing citizens with information about the situation in politics, the economy and other areas at home and abroad (Tomšič 2023). In this regard, the activity of the media in the sense of control over the authorities is often mentioned, to which the phrase about the media as 'watchdogs of democracy' (Butler 2018) is linked.

However, the media, on the other hand, can also be (ab)used for various particular (political, ideological, economic, etc.) interests (Boulianne 2011; Croteau and Hoynes 2006). This is usually done by those who have power and

influence in society. They include political actors, especially those in power, who view the media primarily as a means to achieve their goals by influencing public opinion. When discussing politics, it refers to the understanding of the media as a tool for promoting a specific political organisation and its ideas, solutions and value orientations.

Mass media can be understood as a specific (sub)system of society (Hallin and Mancini 2024) within which communication processes take place. This includes various media contents, their carriers and the institutional and regulatory framework within which this content is created. The characteristics of media systems depend to a large extent on the political, economic and cultural environment in which they are embedded.

Although the ability of the media to construct people's consciousness is often overestimated, their influence on people's views should not be ignored (Tomšič 2023). Therefore, we can say that social and political dynamics largely depend on the way the media space operates (Hjavard and Lundby 2023). From the perspective of the development of democracy, not only is the freedom of expression of individuals and groups essential, but the possibility of their views is also being presented to the public comprehensively and fairly. And that no view is *a priori* privileged. In the case of media dominance of a specific part of society, one of the fundamental democratic postulates is denied, i.e., equality of political competition, since different political alternatives do not have the possibility of proper articulation. This can artificially cause an imbalance in the political space. In a situation where one of the political groups has a monopoly position, the plurality of views and opinions of citizens is not ensured, so they cannot create their own autonomous ideas about what is right for them and what is not, who to vote for and who not to vote for. Therefore, without an autonomous and plural media space that would allow the expression of a wide range of views, formed on the basis of different ideological and value orientations, where various social groups can have their own 'voice', the quality of democracy is seriously impaired.

When talking about the functioning of the media, of course, we cannot ignore the role played by the creators of media content (journalists, editors, publicists, influencers, etc.). It largely depends on their integrity and professionalism whether the media can maintain an impartial—or at least

impartial—attitude towards political and other social stakeholders. However, this is very difficult to achieve given the frequent connections between political and media elites, as well as their collusion (Esmark 2014).

As indicated in the introductory chapter, populism is one of the most widely discussed contemporary political phenomena. There is general agreement among scholars that populism divides society into two entities: the common people and the elite, who are perceived as homogeneous and mutually opposed (Moragas-Fernandez et al. 2025). Populism is the subject of interest in various scientific disciplines (Hunger and Paxton 2021; Naxera et al. 2024; Zhang and Liao 2023; Jones and Frost 2025). They deal with the types of populism, its characteristics, origins and regional specifics, as well as its impact on social and political dynamics (more on the definition of populism in the following section). Politicians, commentators, and researchers have been paying close attention to it in recent years. The negative labelling of populism prevails in public. Some authors even consider it a threat to democracy (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mounk 2018; Mueller 2016). Populists are said to threaten the political future of the European Union with their anti-European rhetoric. However, there are significant differences regarding the very definition of populism, as well as regarding highlighting the key causes of its rise.

Among the latter, some also include the mass media, specifically their growing influence in today's political life (Rončević and Tomšič 2022; Besednjak Valič et al. 2023). This chapter explicitly addresses the role of mass news media in the rise of populism in Europe. It deals with the question of to what extent and in what way these have contributed to the popularity of populist messages. In doing so, it highlights the characteristics of populist politics, particularly in terms of how its messages are disseminated and the mechanisms it employs. It also analyses the changing nature of media in its interdependence with other social changes. One can assume that the influence of the media on the spread of a certain—in this case, populist—type of political message depends on the broader political constellation and the political impulses to which people are exposed (Tomšič 2023). It can be claimed that although the media significantly contribute to spreading populist appeal, they are not decisive in the success of populist politics. Its success depends on the reception of populist messages by the electorate.

Populism as a Multifaceted Phenomenon

Due to its elusive nature, it is challenging to provide a concise and universal definition of populism (Chiran and Tomsic 2020; Webber 2023). Different dilemmas, ambiguities, contradictions and simplifications often arise when dealing with it. Namely, populism belongs to the 'essentially contested concepts' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It is typically used as a label that members of established political elites and their supporters affix to their critics (Blokker and Anselmi 2020). In this context, we can sometimes speak about a form of 'populist hype' and the spread of anti-populism (De Cleen et al. 2018). It is difficult to draw the line between populism and non-populism; it is difficult to determine whether an act is populist or not, whether a political leader is a populist or merely popular (Adam and Tomšič 2020; Tomšič 2022). Namely, success in a democratic political race requires the popularity of political protagonists, without which good electoral results cannot be achieved. Therefore, almost every politician, regardless of ideology, political positioning or personal political style, from time to time practices at least some elements of populism, if not in the content of their actions, at least in how they communicate (Tomšič 2022). This is especially true for those who are directly elected to their positions.

In this regard, phenomena like populist politics should be studied and considered from different points of view; various perspectives must be regarded to avoid ideological and subjective biases. The rise of populism in contemporary democracies is a complex interplay between structural conditions and the characteristics of political actors (Adam and Tomšič 2019). It is related to the change in social cleavages that are the basis of political divisions (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), prevailing value patterns, mode of political organisation and decision-making, as well as to the (lack of) responsiveness of established political elites and their (in)ability to resolve the most critical social problems.

Populism is a divergent political phenomenon in various respects. We can discuss 'varieties of populism' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Ivaldi et al. 2017). It is diverse in terms of *ideological orientation*. In both academic circles and the general public, the most discussed is right-wing populism when parties are mentioned, such as the *National Rally* in France, *Lega* in Italy, the *Freedom Party* in Austria or the *Party for Freedom* in the Netherlands, as they are generally more successful in terms of election results. However, in some European countries, we are also dealing with strong left-wing populism, as

seen in the cases of *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain and the *Left* in Slovenia. There is also a so-called centrist populism that rejects political positioning, as is the case with *ANO 2011* in Czechia. Furthermore, populists differ in their thematic focus, specifically regarding what their central theme is, with which they aim to garner the support of the electorate (Tomšič 2022; 2023). Some raise the issue of migration; others focus on regional autonomy or national sovereignty (mostly right-wing parties, such as the National Rally or Lega), while still others concentrate on the fight against capitalism (mostly left-wing parties, like *Syriza* or the *Left*). There are also differences in their orientations regarding *international alliances*. In the European environment, this mainly refers to the attitude towards Russia (Tomšič 2025). On the one hand, we have populists who are pro-Russian and who show sympathy for the regime of President Putin. On the other hand, we have those who are anti-Russian. They were the first to dominate until the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but then some of them began to renounce their support for Putin (an example of this is the French *National Rally*).

Populism can be examined from multiple perspectives as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing various aspects of political life. First, it can be perceived as *ideology*, although diverse, incoherent and 'empty-hearted' (Riedel 2017). It nevertheless rests on some ideological principles. Mudde (2004: 534) defines populism as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'. However, the content of this 'will of the people' varies greatly among populists. Second, populism can be viewed as a distinct form of political behaviour. We speak about the type of leadership, particularly the relationship between the leader and his followers, where the key component is trust (Soare 2017). This means that populist leaders must demonstrate—or at least pretend—that they are 'one of us', i.e., to belong to the ranks of the 'common people'. Third, political conduct is related to *political strategy* (Weyland 2017). Its main aim is to mobilise the support of the citizenry for the populist cause. This refers to the selection of topics, the manner in which citizens are addressed, the attitude towards political rivals and the formation of political and social alliances. Moreover, finally, populism can be perceived as a *political style* (Moffit and Torney 2014). This refers particularly to its style of communication (Jagers

and Walgrave 2007; Moffit and Torney 2014; Krämer 2017). Populist messages are essential for activating support for the ideas of populist political actors (Hameleers et al. 2021). Characteristics of populist discourse will be further thematised in the following section.

Despite many differences, there are some common characteristics of populism(s). The most important one is *anti-elitism* (Mudde 2004; Vachudova 2021). As has been said, it is a marked opposition to established elites who are presented as selfish, exploitative and incompetent. This is not just about the political elite but is often joined by other influential groups, such as the business (corporate) or intellectual elite. That is why populists declare themselves protectors of the people they want to free from elitist oppressors. It is paradoxical that some of them, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump or Andrej Babiš, come from the top of the social elite. Populists also share a common *notion of the political community as a homogeneous entity*. They are prone to glorifying 'the people' as an indivisible whole with shared values, wishes and interests (Lavi 2021). Therefore, they are averse to pluralism, as it undermines people's unity. This is also related to the *rejection of the division of power*, as populist politics is supposed to be the emanation of the people's will, so a leader, party, or movement should have relatively 'free hands' in making decisions when it comes to power. Moreover, finally, in the context of the European Union, populism is coupled with *Euroscepticism*. Most populist parties are also Eurosceptic and vice versa (Conti 2018). At the global level, populists usually share *anti-globalist* orientations, rejecting global neoliberal capitalism, criticising transnational corporations and opposing the authority of transnational political organisations.

Populism can be seen as the rejection of the established political order and the ideologies on which it rests. It is against globalism and transnationalism, which are associated with the sovereigntist notion, which claims that nation-states shall not be subjected to any 'higher' authority. It is against neoliberalism and/or multiculturalism, claiming that they contribute to the erosion of autochthonous traditions of communities and thus undermine their identities.[1] Populism can be perceived as a reminder of the lack of

[1] The rise of populist sovereignism (in Europe and elsewhere) is strongly related to the revolt against 'internationalist' ideologies like multiculturalism and fears of a loss of capacities of nation-states to make sovereign decisions on their matters (De Spiegeleire et al. 2017).

representation and responsiveness in the democratic system or, as Mudde (2021) provocatively claimed, as 'an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism'.

Mass Media and Populist Appeal

A specific type of discourse characterises populist politics. It is known for plain messages based on a black-and-white depiction of social reality (Tomšič and Prijon 2013; Tomšič 2023). From them comes the logic of 'us against them', i.e., ordinary people against the elites. In this, ordinary people are often portrayed as good and honest, while elites are depicted as irresponsible and corrupt. You are portrayed as victims of oppression and abuse by the latter. Populists appeal to ordinary people for support, since they describe themselves as the only ones who can protect them from the 'vicious' elites.

Populist discourse strongly emphasises the emotional dimension, meaning it appeals to people's emotions (Wirz 2028). It addresses their traumas, frustrations and fears. The speech is straightforward and characterised by concise and impactful messages. Populist politicians use this way of expression to make it understandable to ordinary people and demonstrate their connection with them (showing that they are part of them).

The rise of populism is related to the increased role of the media in the political process, i.e., the so-called 'mediatization of politics' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Campus 2010; Marcinkowski 2014), which brought to the situation where modern mass media, especially electronic ones (radio, television), increasingly build their stories on 'spectacle' where images play a more critical role than ideas and programs. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent during pre-election campaigns, which receive intense media coverage. Therefore, candidates for elected positions try to appear as attractive as possible to the broadest possible circle of (potential) voters.

In such circumstances, how political candidates present themselves to the audience is more critical than how relevant and/or feasible their political ideas, proposals and solutions are to resolve political, economic and social problems (Tomšič and Prijon 2023). In this context, entertainment skills play a vital role, since politics is often understood as a show with voters as spectators. And finally, it is characterised by a firm reliance on the personality of a populist leader (Cabada and Tomšič 2016). We are speaking about the

phenomenon of charisma as a key trait of a populist leader. Such a leader is positioned simultaneously as an 'exceptional person with superior abilities' and a 'man of the people' who understands their needs and desires.

The leader often symbolises the populist party or movement and presents himself as a guarantee for the successful implementation of its goals. Such personalisation is not typical of all populist parties and movements (Adam and Tomšič 2020). Charismatic figures do not head some of them. However, a strong and recognisable leader significantly increases their chances of electoral success (Adam and Tomšič 2019). There are several personal traits common to most populist leaders. They are, as a rule, strongly extroverted personalities who are prone to practice direct contact with the voters. Simultaneously, they are very skilful in media communication, meaning that they can establish an appealing public image through visual impressions. Their discourse targets people of a particular country or region rather than a specific social group or constituency based on a particular ideological platform. Such politicians tend to present themselves as political 'outsiders' with nothing in common with the established political structures.[2] Moreover, they often build an image of 'self-made men' who achieve their success based on their skills and diligence.

One should not neglect the role of new digital media in the rise of populism (Gebaudo 2014; Flew and Iosifidis 2020). These media are based on network principles, erasing the border between producers and users of information, which leads to a dehierarchisation of the news production process. In such a situation, anyone, from a political leader to an ordinary citizen, can create information and disseminate it to the public. Anyone with an account on a social network is their online content producer. Of course, this does not mean that messages from different message creators have the same resonance with the public.

In such a situation, the role of traditional gatekeepers is reduced. For example, in the past, political actors, be it individual politicians or political parties, if they wanted to launch their message to the public (for example, present their point of view on a particular social issue, offer a proposal to solve a specific problem, etc.), called a press conference and invited representatives

[2] The irony is that some of them are undoubtedly part of the elite, at least in terms of wealth, if nothing else. This undoubtedly applies to Donald Trump or Andrej Babiš, the latter is one of the richest people in his country). Nevertheless, both managed to create the impression among many citizens that they are one of them.

to its media (this is still an essential tool of political communication). Then, they had to rely on them to convey that message in a way that was as favourable to him as possible. That means they were dependent on them.

The use of social networks has a significant impact on the situation. Thus, it allows political messages to be spread beyond traditional media channels. Nowadays, political protagonists can address the voters directly, reducing their dependence on traditional media. Let us only consider Donald Trump's presidential campaigns, where he managed to 'bypass' traditional media—which was most adverse to him—through Twitter and other new media. The Internet enables direct communication between a leader and the people (the constituency). In this way, traditional media gradually lose their role as political mediators.

Although new media enable more and more people to share their ideas and views, leading to increased diversity, there have been numerous debates in recent years about the negative aspects of their use. Many see social networks as a significant generator of spreading misinformation, 'fake news', and 'hate speech' (Dragomir 2017; Nh and Taeigagh 2021). This ought to be linked to the increasing dispersion of information resources and the lack of control over them. These negative media phenomena are often perceived as integral to the populist discourse (Mudde, 2004). This refers to the tendency of such discourse to exaggerate and simplify social reality, or even falsify it. This was very evident, for example, during the height of the COVID-19 epidemic, when many unverified explanations appeared about the virus itself, its origin and the way of spreading due to the effects of vaccines against it, some of which fall into the category of 'conspiracy theories' (about who made the virus and who benefits from vaccine production) (Douglass, 2021).

These developments are related to the phenomenon of post-truth politics, where facts become less important in forming public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal feelings. Thus, some politicians do not even try to hide the fact that they are not telling the truth (which is, according to them, always 'relative').

However, even established politics are not immune to the negative phenomena. It is not only populist politicians who manipulate and spread disinformation and fake news. Those politicians who belong to traditional parties that cannot be considered populist often use these practices to justify their goals. Let us recall the case of information about alleged weapons of mass

destruction allegedly possessed by Saddam Hussein's regime, which was presented by the administration of US President George W. Bush as the reason for the invasion of Iraq. These later turned out to be untrue (Iwanek 2010). Not to mention re-election campaigns, when politicians, be they established and non-established, often compete who beautify their image on the one hand and, on the other hand, spoil the images of their opponents on the other, and who will make more unrealistic promises to the people.

In this regard, we can draw a parallel with the media world. It's not just the new media that spread fake news. This is also done by established traditional media, even those considered very respectable. For example, in 2003, a scandal erupted in the *New York Times* when it turned out that journalist Jayson Blair had falsified information and stories (stories on sniper attacks in Washington and on missing soldiers in Iraq) (Calvert and Richards, 2003). Journalist Class Relotius did a similar thing in 2018 in the weekly *Der Spiegel* (a series of stories on Trump supporters in the United States). To make matters even more problematic, he even received certain awards for his falsified articles (Stojanovski, 2020). These two and similar cases significantly undermined the credibility of traditional media and thus also the trust in them by their 'clients'.[3]

In this regard, we can see that the boundaries between 'real' and 'fake' news are often blurred in both politics and media. Thus, as far as the mode of operation is concerned, it is often challenging to distinguish populist politics from non-populist ones, traditional from new, and serious from sensationalist media. Just as the so-called established politics use populist approaches, the so-called serious press use sensationalist approaches.

Reception of Populist Messages

The strength of populist forces—in terms of electoral success and impact on the decision-making process—varies considerably between different European countries in terms of electoral support for populist parties and movements, as well as the strength of the latter in the decision-making process (Tomšič

[3] From the point of view of media credibility, it is particularly problematic that certain warnings about the controversial practices of the journalists appeared but were ignored by the people in charge of respective media organisations, as their writing was 'in line' with editorial policy.

2022). Populists are the strongest in Hungary, where they are the *de facto* ruling political force (although in formal terms, the government is a coalition, and the *Fidesz* party is strongly predominant). In some countries, populists prevail in the government coalition, as is the case with Italy with *Brothers of Italy and League* (current government) and in Slovakia with *Direction* and *Slovak National Party* (in the period 2016–2020). In others, they are junior partners in government coalitions, as in Spain with *Podemos* or Slovenia with *Left* (current government).[4] Even when populists are not in power, their political 'weight' differs significantly. In certain countries, populists are in strong opposition, and, as such, they nevertheless have some political influence, as is the case in France with the *National Front*, in Czechia with *ANO 2011*, Greece with *Syriza*, or Sweden with *Swedish Democrats*. In countries like Germany, they are relatively isolated from mainstream politics. Still, their popularity among the electorate is growing, as is the case with the *Alternative for Germany* (after the 2025 election, the second strongest party in the Bundestag). However, there are also countries where populists are almost insignificant, playing the role of a weak opposition at best (Ireland). We can state that manifestations of populism vary significantly across each EU country. This means that they depend on the historical heritage, the national political culture and the specific socio-economic circumstances in which each country finds itself. Different national traditions are among the primary causes of the variety of populism, i.e., the multiple types of populism across Europe.

Based on this, we can conclude that there are significant differences in the impact of populist messages on citizens' political choices. This depends on several factors. First, the general social climate is essential. In a situation where conflicts shake society. When widespread distrust exists in social institutions and their bearers, populist messages can more easily achieve wider popularity. This is especially true in crises, when people find themselves in difficulties, feel that their existence is uncertain and judge that political decision-makers are not ready or able to solve their problems. Second, there must be populist policymakers who can formulate such messages to appeal to citizens. Having already been mentioned, the personalities of political leaders, skills and their charisma and communication skills play a crucial

[4] This was also the case in Austria during one of former governments (2027–2029) where the Freedom party was a junior partner.

role. And third, there must be proper communication channels. This means that the media must be receptive to populist messages.

When we discuss modern media, they find themselves in a paradoxical position regarding populism. On the one hand, most of the dominant media in Western countries are generally negative towards populism.[5] Even the populists themselves are generally quite critical of the dominant media, as they consider them part of the establishment and a tool in the hands of the elites. On the other hand, the media are often accused of assisting populists in spreading their messages with their logic of operation—especially with their sensationalism. In such a context, populist messages, which are typically concise, public and impactful, attract considerable attention. Moreover, the media, which primarily strives to achieve as many views as possible, cannot ignore this.

The power of populist messages depends on the concurrence of various factors (Tomšič 2025). Of course, each political environment has its specifics, which arise from historical development, dominant cultural patterns and relationships between different social groups. The ties between the political protagonists play a significant role, that is, the relations within the political elite, as well as the relations between the political elite and other segments of the elite (business, intellectual and media elite) (Higley and Burton 2026; Higley and Lengyel 2000; Best and Higley 2010). On the one hand, a high degree of consensus within the elite is an element of political stability. On the other hand, excessive consensuality, which leads to the erasure of political differences, often results in the alienation of elites from a large part of the citizenry, who begin to think that they are 'all the same', thereby opening the door to anti-elitist populists.

Why do Populists Succeed?

The rise of populism is closely tied to the challenges facing contemporary democracy. Democracy's core institutions, particularly political parties, are facing increasing distrust in several Western countries (Makarovič and Tomšič 2015). There are many elements related to the behaviour of established political parties, such as ideologisation, clientelism, corruption and other

[5] Exceptions in this regard are countries like Hungary where party Fidesz that is usually described as populist in in power for longer period and has substantial influence in media space.

dysfunctional practices that contribute to negative attitudes towards them (Tomšič and Prijon 2013). In such a climate, new political entrepreneurs can easily gain popularity, especially those who build their campaigns on personalised and sometimes 'non-political' platforms (Cabada and Tomšič 2016; Tomšič 2022). These political protagonists have been building their campaigns either through 'managerisation of politics', based on the notion of 'politics as business', according to which the country should be run as a business firm, or through 'moralisation of politics', i.e. proclaiming moral renewal of politics and bringing higher standards of political culture (Cabada and Tomšič 2016). Their common point is opposition to the existing elites, whom they consider the main culprits of the democratic system's crisis.

There is a widespread perception of the inefficiency of democratic political institutions and a lack of leadership reflected in the incompetence and irresponsibility of established political elites (Adam and Tomšič 2019). Protests in different parts of the European Union that have been taking place over the past two decades have been manifestations of citizens' (or at least some social groups') discontent with the current socio-economic and political situation.[6] Poor coping with the financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent migrant crisis in 2015, at both national and European levels, strengthened these feelings. In particular, the latter played a critical role. It turned out that the Union had no scenario for effectively dealing with the great mass of people from its nearer and more distant surroundings who wished to settle within its borders. As envisaged by the so-called Dublin Regulation, the migration management system *de facto* collapsed, as it turned out that it could not be implemented under the given conditions, as some members of the Union (Poland, Hungary and Czechia) explicitly refused to implement it (Tomšič 2025). The poor performance of both European and national institutions in addressing migration issues provided a strong impetus for populist political forces, particularly those on the right side of the political spectrum. They campaigned with the presentation of themselves as defenders of their home people against foreign 'intruders' on the one hand and against established

[6] A notable example of this occurred in 2024 when the farmers occupied the roads from Germany to Spain, from Belgium to Romania. They protested against the reduction of subsidies, excessive bureaucratic burdens and environmental regulations that limit their activity.

elites on the other (Adam and Tomšič 2020). In this way, the right-wing populists channelled to their side the fears of many Europeans, who consider the massive and uncontrolled immigration of people from the Third World to be a threat to their security, well-being and way of life.

Populists are often accused of exploiting people's discontent for their own political agenda, i.e., by playing on people's emotions, igniting passions and inflating fears to gain the sympathy of ordinary citizens, who, in this way, will recognise them as the political alternative that is best for them. However, they only take advantage of the opportunities offered to them (what all politicians do—to a greater or lesser extent). But they are not the ones who caused the problems put many people in trouble (or at least to feel that way). For this, they had the appropriate mechanisms. In most Western countries, populists still lack key levers of power. For the same reason, they did not cause an increasing number of citizens to lose trust in the institutions of parliamentary democracy, particularly those in charge of them. The established elites' unresponsiveness primarily contributed to the inefficiency in addressing people's needs and key social problems (Tomšič 2022; 2025). Blaming populists for political and social issues from the side of established elites can be seen as a means of diverting attention away from their own responsibility.

Events that have greatly shaken Western politics and the public in recent years, such as the British decision for Brexit and Donald Trump's victory in the 2019 and 2024 US presidential elections, which many analysts characterised as the triumph of populist politics (Ugorji 2018; O'Donnell 2021), were essentially—if not predominantly—the expression of resistance to the established elites. In the case of the referendum on the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, the vast majority of the British political elite from the right to the centre to the left (there were rare exceptions, such as the then mayor of London and later prime minister Boris Johnson) united in support of maintaining a position in the European transnational connection (Hume 2017). In this endeavour, the economic and cultural elite joined in, and most of the mainstream media supported them. When Trump decided to run for the presidency as the candidate of the *Republican Party*, the party's establishment was predominantly against him (Sloan and Smotkin 2016). When he won the primaries and faced his *Democratic* opponent, Hillary Clinton, most of the American social elite, from businesspeople to Hollywood celebrities and other entertainers, expressed more or less open dislike of the idea of him as a

US president. This also holds for American media, which, in large numbers, explicitly endorses Clinton.[7]

In both cases, we had on one side the majority of the electorate, which advocated one option, and on the other side, the majority of members from various factions of the elite, who advocated another option. The decision of the majority of citizens was, therefore, not only an expression of distrust in the political elite but also in other segments of the elite, including mainstream opinion makers.

We see that the support of the mainstream media is not a guarantee of political success. This is shown by the examples of certain carriers of populist politics, who achieved victorious results even without their support (or even in the face of their strong opposition). Based on this, it could be concluded that the influence of traditional media on people's electoral choices. This is especially true for print media, which is reflected in the decline in their circulation. At the same time, the importance of social networks is growing, and some populist politicians (but not only them) know how to make good use of them.

However, the rise of populism is not an inevitable development. In recent years, populists have not been successful everywhere. In some places, they also experienced defeats. The last such example was, for example, the parliamentary elections in Poland in 2023, when the firm traditionalist policy of the *Law and Justice* party, which some considered problematic from the point of view of the rule of law (Greskovits, 2015), was rejected by the majority of voters after many years of rule. Trump also lost the 2020 election after four years to the typical representative of the establishment, Joe Biden. On the other hand, for example, the French leader Emmanuel Macron, who is considered by many to be a typical elitist (critics even label him as 'president for the rich') (Christafis 2017), has twice defeated the populist Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections. This happened despite many protests against his government's actions.[8] The success or failure of populists depends mainly on how established elites respond to their messages.

---

[7] Among the 100 largest US daily newspapers by paid circulation, 57 endorsed Clinton while only two endorsed Trump (Rutenberg 2016).

[8] Let us recall the Yellow Jackets protests, ongoing weekly events that began in November 2018 that brought together dissatisfied citizens from different sides of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

In recent years, there have been alarming predictions about the rise of populism. It is mainly associated with the extreme right. According to many commentators, the rise in the influence of populist parties and movements in shaping political decisions could threaten the political future of this transnational connection and even the very development of democracy in Europe. They highlight that the populist rejection of pluralism, neglect of the rule of law and negative attitude towards various social minorities are the most problematic features (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mueller 2016). At least in a particular form (so-called hard populism), it is also problematic in relation to constitutionalism and the protection of human dignity. It represents a particularly significant threat in countries with an authoritarian past, where democracy is not yet sufficiently consolidated (Bugarič 2019; Lengyel and Ilonszki 2012).

We can say that many populist political actors know how to successfully exploit the weaknesses of the established elites, causing them to lose the trust of citizens (and this mistrust can be transferred to the entire political system). This represents a 'niche' for them, on which they build their political appeal. The popularity of some of them has grown significantly in recent years, in certain cases even to the point that they have come to power. However, it cannot be said that it is a trend that cannot be stopped. In some places, traditional politics copes better; in others, it is more difficult against populist challenges. But it cannot be said that he is always on the defensive. Certain populists who rose to power also lost it after a specific time. And they accepted this fact (or had to take it), although sometimes it was difficult for them. This means that they are not necessarily a threat to democracy[9] but instead represent an impulse that forces democratic politics to undergo an urgent renewal.

When we talk about the role of mass media in spreading populist messages and their contribution to the rise of populism, we can say something like what we say about their role in modern democratic politics in general. Mass media undoubtedly influence the spread of malicious messages, but they are

[9] An interesting case is former Slovenian President and Prime Minister Borut Pahor. He was often labelled as populist. However, his 'populism' manifests predominantly, if not exclusively, in his people-centred behaviour in cultivating close contacts with ordinary people. Such conduct is without any autocratic tendencies.

not the ones that either enable or prevent the success of populist actors. Much depends on their rivals from the ranks of established politics. The latter are also not immune to the spread of disinformation and fake news through media channels. Above all, they must be able to solve key social problems successfully. Only in this way can they reduce the appeal of populist messages.

References

Adam, F. and Tomšič, M. (2020). Roots and manifestations of populism in contemporary democracies. In M. Makarovič and B. Rončevič (eds.), *Technology and social choices in the era of social transformations*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 167–190.

—. (2019). 'The future of populism in a comparative European and global context', *Comparative Sociology*, 18(5/6), 687–705.

Albertazzi, D. and McDonnell, D. (2008). 'Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre'. In D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, pp. 1–15. Houndmills: Basingstoke, Hampshire: PALGRAVE Macmillan.

Besednjak Valič, T., Rončević, B., and Tomšič, M. (2023). 'How media pluralism navigates ideological orientations: the case of Slovenia', *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, art. 1143786, 1–11.

Best, H. & Higley, J. (2010). 'Introduction: Democratic Elitism Reappraised'. In H. Best, and J. Higley, J. (eds.), *Democratic Elitism. New Theories and Comparative Perspectives*, pp. 1–22. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Blokker, P. and Anselmi, M. (2020). 'Introduction: Multiple Populisms. Italy as Democratic Mirror'. In P. Blokker and M. Anselmi (eds.), *Multiple Populisms*, pp. 1–13. London & New York: Routledge.

Boulianne, S. (2011). 'Stimulating or Reinforcing Political Interest: Using Panel Data to Examine Reciprocal Effects Between News Media and Political Interest' *Political Communication*, 28(2), 147–162.

Bugarič, B. (2019). 'Central Europe's descent into autocracy: A constitutional analysis of authoritarian populism', *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(2), 597–616.

Butler, P. (2018). A Free Press: Boisterous Watchdog of Democracy. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 38(2), 15–22.

Cabada, L. and Tomšič, M. (2016). 'The Rise of person-based politics in the new democracies: the Czech Republic and Slovenia', *Politics in Central Europe*, 12(2), 29–50.

Calvert, C. and Richards, R.D. (2003). 'Journalistic Malpractice: Suing Jayson Blair and the New York Times for Fraud and Negligence', *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal, 14(1)*, 1–28.

Campus, D. (2010). 'Mediatization and Personalization of Politics in Italy and France: The Cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy', *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15(2), 219–235.

Carter, D. (1977). *The Fourth Branch of Government*. New York: Random House.

Chiran, D. and Tomsic, M. (2020). 'Populist ideology and speech patterns in e-communication between 2013 and 2016: discerning populism from political popularity', *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 20(1), 30–57.

Conti, N. (2018). 'National political elites, the EU, and the populist challenge', *Politic*, 38(3), 361–377.

Croteau, D. and Hoyes, W. (2006). *The Business of Media*. London: Sage Publications.

Deane, J. (2005). 'Media, democracy and the public sphere'. In O. Hemer and T. Tufte (eds.), *Media & Glocal Change Rethinking Communication for Development*, pp. 77–90. Buenos Aires: CLASCO.

De Cleen, B., Glynos, J. and Mondon, A. (2018). 'Critical research on populism: Nine rules of engagement', *Organization*, 25(5), 649–661.

De Spiegeleire, Stephan, Skinner, C., and Sweijs, T. (2017). The rise of populist sovereignism: What It Is, Where It Comes from, and What It Means for International Security and Defense, Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.

Douglass, K.M. (2021). 'Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*', 24(2), 270–275.

Dragomir, A.M. (2017). 'The Fake News Phenomenon in the Social Networks Era', *Strategic Impact*, 64/65, 54–65.

Esmark, A. (2014). 'Politicized Media? Partisanship and Collusion in the European Context'. In B. Pfetsch (ed.), Political Communication Cultures in Western Europe, pp. 148–170. Berlin: Springer.

Flew, T. and Iosifidis, P. (2020). 'Populism, globalisation and social media', *International Communication Gazzette*, 82(1), 7–25.

Gidron, N. and Bonikowski, B. (2013). 'Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda'. In: Weatherhead Working Paper Series, No. 13-0004, 1–38.

Greskovits, B. (2015). 'The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe', *Global Policy*, 6(1), 28–37.

Hallin, D and Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hameleers, M., Schmuck, D., Schulz, A., Wirz, D.S., Matthes, J., Bos, L, Corbu, N., and Andreadis, I. (2021). 'The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Populist Attitudes Across Europe: Evidence From a 15-Country Comparative Experiment', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 33(3), 49–51.

Higley, and Burton, M. (2006), *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Higley, J. and Lengyel, G. (2000). 'Elite Configuration after State Socialism'. In J. Higley and G. Lengyel (eds.), *Elites after State Socialism* pp. 1–20. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Hjavard, S, and Lundby, K. (2023). 'Understanding Media Dynamics'. In W. Gödert and K. Lepsky (eds.), *Information Literacy and Autonomy*: A Cognitive View, pp. 52–64. Berlin: De Gryter.

Hume, M. (2017). *Revolting! How the Establishment Are Undermining Democracy and What They're Afraid Of*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.

Hunger, S. & Paxton, F. (2021). 'What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science', *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3), 17–633.

Ivaldi, G., Lanzone, M.E. and Woods, D. (2017). 'Varieties of Populism across a Left-Right Spectrum: The Case of the Front National, the Northern League, Podemos, and Five Star Movement', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 34(4), 354–376.

Iwanek, T. (2010). 'The 2003 Invasion of Iraq: How the System Failed', *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, 15(1), 89–116.

Jagers, J. and Walgrave, S. (2007). 'Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319–345.

Jones, D.W. and Frost, E. (2025) 'The rise of populism: a psychosocial commentary', *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 1–6.

Lavi, L. (2021). 'Between populism and democracy: 'the People' in election discourse', *European Political Science*, 21(3), 359–377.

Lengyel, G. and Ilonszki, G. (2012). 'Simulated Democracy and Pseudo-Transformational Leadership in Hungary', *Historical Social Research*, 37(1), 107–126.

Lipset, S.M. and Rokkan, S. (1967). *Party System and Voter Alignments*. New York: Free Press.

Makarovič, M. and Tomšič, M. (2015). 'Democrats, authoritarians, and nostalgics: Slovenian attitudes toward democracy', *Innovative issues and approaches in social* sciences, 8(3), 8–30.

Mazzoleni, G. and Schulz, O. (1999). '"Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?', *Political Communication*, 16(3), 247–261.

Moffit, B. and Torney, S. (2014). 'Rethinking Populism. Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style', *Political Studies*, 62(2), 381–397.

Mounk, J. (2018). *The People vs Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mudde, C. (2021). 'Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism', *Government and Opposition*, 56(4), 577–597.

—. (2004). 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563.

Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017). *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Naxera, V., Kaše, V., Stulík, O. (2024). 'The more populism types you know, the better political scientist you are? Machine-learning based meta-analysis of populism types in the political science literature', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32(4), 1057–1074.

O'Donnell, M. (2021). *Crises and Popular Dissent: Divided West*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Marcinkowski, F. (2014). 'Mediatisation of Politics: Reflections on the State of The Concept', *Javnost – The Public*, 21(2), 5–22.

Moragas-Fernandez, C. M., Capdevilla Gomez, A., and Berti, C. (2025). 'Marching Against a Rising and Manipulative Threat: Metaphorical Constructions of Populism in the Spanish and the Italian Press', SAGE Open, 1–15.

Mueller J.W. (2016). *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nh, L.H.X. and Taeigagh, A. (2021). 'How does fake news spread? Understanding pathways of disinformation spread through APIs', *Policy & Internet*, 13(4), 560–585.

Pinter, A. (2005). *Sodobne teorije javne sfere*. Ljubljana: FDV.

Riedel, R. (2017). 'Populism and Its Democratic, Non-Democratic, and Anti-Democratic Potential', *Polish Sociological Review*, 199(3), 287–298.

Rončević, B. and Tomšič, M. (2022). Čigavi 'psi čuvaji'? Pomanjkanje pluralnosti kot glavna značilnost slovenskega medijskega prostora = Whose 'watchdogs'? A lack of pluralism as the main feature of the Slovenian media space. In *'Quo vadis, Slovenija?: refleksije ob tridesetletnici samostojne in neodvisne slovenske države* ['Quo vadis, Slovenija?': reflection at 30 years of independent Slovenia], Ljubljana, Državni svet Republike Slovenije, 57–71.

Rutenberg, Jim. 'The Editorialists Have Spoken; Will Voters Listen?'. *New York Times*, October 5, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/business/media/the-editorialists-have-spoken-will-voters-listen.html>

Sloan, S., and Smotkin, R. Fault lines: GOP civil war deepens. CNN, 9.5.2026. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/08/politics/donald-trump-gop-civil-war>

Soare, S. (2017). 'Populism and Leadership: Is There Anything New Under the Sun? *Studia UBB Europea*', LXII(3), 121–149.

Splichal, S. (2005). *Kultura javnosti*. Ljubljana, FDV.

Stojanovski, M. (2020). 'When a Credible Source Turns 'Fake'. The Relotius affair and the German system for combating fake news'. In S. Giusti and E. Piras (eds.), *Democracy and Fake News. Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics*, pp. 188–198 London: Routledge.

Tomšič, M. (2026). 'Who or What Caused the Rise of Populism?', *Politics in Central Europe*, 20(4), 467–486.

—. (2023). Populism, Media Messaging and Media Literacy. *Politics in Central Europe*, 29(1s), 455–470.

—. (2022). 'Political elites, leadership, and the rise of populism'. In S. Kukovič and P. Just (Eds.), *The rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe*, pp. 10–23. Cheltenham & Northampton, Edward Elgar.

Tomšič, M. and Prijon, L. (2013). 'Person-based politics in Italy and Slovenia: comparing cases of leadership's individualisation', *International social science journal*, 64(213/214,), 237–248

Ugorji, M. (2018). 'BREXIT, Trumpism and the Agency of Populism in Contemporary Political Communication', *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism*, 8 (1), 1–5.

Vachudova, M. (2021). 'Populism, democracy, and party system change in Europe', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24, 471–498.Webber, J. (2023). 'Understanding Populism', *Social & Legal Studies*, 32(6), 849–876.

Weyland, K. (2017). Populism a Political-Strategy Approach. In C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48–72.

Wirz, D. (2018). 'Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication', *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 1114–1138.

Zhang, X. & Liao, Y. (2023). 'A Bibliometric and Visual Analysis of Populism Research (2000–2020)', *SAGE Open*: 1–15.

Populist Central European Regionness as the Part of Anti-Western Narrative: Example of Conspiracy in Czech 'Alternative' Media and Discourse[1]

Ladislav Cabada

ABSTRACT
Central European Identity and Central European regionness belong to the very traditional and deeply rooted discourses in Poland, Czechia, Germany and other nations in the region. The regional cooperation is usually positively reflected both in the theoretical literature, as well as (European/EU) political life. Nevertheless, specifically on the example of the Visegrad Group and its development in the last decade, we can also observe more critical voices, labelling this body as 'populist cooperation'. In the contribution, we specifically reflect on the discursive strategy related to the populist-driven, anti-European Union and generally anti-Western actors in Central Europe. This critical discourse analysis focuses on the case of the Czech Republic within the broader context of the Visegrad Group.

Keywords: populist regional cooperation, Central Europe, 'alternative' media, quasi-media, Czechia

Introduction

At the beginning of February 2022, just a few days before the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (*Centrum proti terorismu a hybridním hrozbám*, CTHH), operating within the Czech Ministry of the Interior, published a short analytical report entitled 'Central European Identity as Part of the Anti-Western Narrative in the Quasi-Media Scene' (*Středoevropská identita jako součást protizápadního narativu na kvazi-mediální scéně*) (CTHH, 2022). This short anonymous text explores one of the ideal-typical narratives of Visegrad cooperation and Central Europe, characterised by anti-liberal attitudes and populist regionalism and

[1] This contribution is the result of Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 110–1 *Political Science, Media, and Anglophone Studies* (2024) based on a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-term Strategic Development of Research Organizations.

the tendency to place the region in opposition to the 'West'/'Brussels' or to present it as an alternative to the European integration process.

A strong wave of discontent against the analysis immediately arose, generally stemming from criticism of the alleged censorship by the Ministry of Interior. At the same time, particularly from groups sympathetic to the aforementioned anti-liberal regional-populist narrative of Central Europe, voices were raised (Vachatová 2023), claiming that the analysis and its author were 'banning' Central European cooperation itself. Significant criticism has been generated from the environment that has long been associated with the 'quasi-media' scene in the Czech Republic and with the key political entity that is linked to it. This entity is the Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a příma demokracie*, SPD) movement, an anti-Islamist and right-wing redistributionist political and business project of its leader, Tomio Okamura.

In addition to this established parliamentary subject (the SPD and its predecessor Dawn of Direct Democracy /*Úsvit přímé demokracie*/ have been represented in the Czech Chamber of Deputies since 2013), there are several other political parties with even more radical agendas. This includes several other political actors (small parties, social media related with these actors, etc.) with even more radical agenda and programmatic and an anti-Ukrainian/pro-Russian and anti-European rhetoric, which is usually complemented by a positive reflection of that part of the political scene in the Visegrad Group and wider Central or Central Eastern Europe that is in line with such narratives. These entities have continuously formed in the period of the so-called polycrisis after 2015, and only their fragmentation has so far prevented them from becoming a relevant political force. They not only include the quasi-media that frequently use disinformation strategies—social media, but also classical electronic media, e.g. Raptor TV represented by Žarko 'Raptor' Jovanović, one of the most visible faces of the Czech quasi-media scene with a pro-Kremlin orientation and ties to the pro-presidential Citizens' Rights Party—Zemanists (SPOZ) and the *SPD* (Cabada and Tomšíč 2016).

In our analysis, we want to present the main characteristics of the anti-Western narrative associated with the topic of Central European cooperation and identity in the Czech political and (quasi-)media environment in the form of a unique case study. We will place this analysis in the broader context of the plurality of Central European narratives and their modalities. Specifically, we focus on how different narratives of Central European

cooperation (Visegrád) are used in political competition both in the domestic political arena and internationally.

In the first part of this chapter, we will present the genesis of the disinformation and anti-Western political and (quasi-)media scene in the Czech Republic after 2010. We will focus in particular on the construction of a populist dichotomy distinguishing between a 'good', 'clean' and 'value-positive' Central Europe, on the one hand, and a decadent and declining West on the other. In the second part of the study, we then focus on the key actors, narratives and communication strategies associated with the regional-populist discourse of the Visegrad Group and wider Central Eastern Europe. Our aim here is not an exhaustive overview of all actors or the discursive strategies and speech acts they employ, but rather a case study based on critical discourse analysis. By subscribing to this analytical approach, we simultaneously declare that we are aware of at least a partial normative and value framework for our analysis, which, in this case, grows out of the conviction that only a liberal form of democracy can be identified with the concept of polyarchy and the rule of law, while so-called illiberal forms of democracy are just another form of authoritarianism based on an exclusive reflection of society and the privileging of collective identity, including its hierachisation, over individually based freedom.

Modalities of Visegrad and wider Central European cooperation

Specifically, in the Visegrad Group (V4), the refugee crisis in 2015 and the following years strengthened the mental gaps between so-called 'old' and 'new' Europe. Barša (2022) called this moment the great hour of Central European national conservatism. The 'migrant cleavage' after 2015 generated within the politics of fear used by the populist neo-illiberal actors presents a new and strong mobilisation tool. As Klíma (2020: 152–161) notes: 'By its explosive nature it generated an atmosphere of mass alarm and thereby hurled into the political arena an emotional wave of patriotism, nationalism and xenophobia'.

Securitisation linked to the 'tribal atavistic reaction to perceptions of insecurity' (Tucker 2020: 132) produced a new negative quality envisaged in the rise of nativism. Many Central European politicians, including the

then-government representatives, promptly and effectively used this issue and stressed the jeopardy caused by the fact that—they said—the politicians from 'Old Europe' and/or 'Brussels' do not consider such dangers seriously. The discussion on the so-called relocation quotas (Bauerová 2018), which put the V4 countries in visible opposition to the EU mainstream, has become just one piece of a puzzle based on an increasingly strong opposition to the direction of the European integration process.

Czech President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023) and the populist technocrat Andrej Babiš, whose ANO 2011 movement participated in the government from 2013 to 2021 with himself as the Prime Minister in 2017–2021, have also joined in the criticism of the European Union as an institution that promotes allegedly flawed values (e.g. gender issues) and self-defeating economic decisions (European Green Deal) and that ignores the sovereignty of nation-states (see, for example, Babiš 2021). Andrej Babiš, repeatedly declaring his ideological affinity with Viktor Orbán, has continuously strengthened populist and anti-Western tones, while, at the same time, his minority government on the floor of parliament has increasingly sought support for its policies from the SPD in addition to the Communists.

In the 2010s, we were witnessing the 'return' of traditionalism in the V4 not only with regional aspects but also national 'specifics'—in Czechia and Slovakia, we repeatedly observe a national-conservative 'coalition' of (former) Communists and pan-Slavic (pro-Russian) conservative streams, both with Eurosceptic tendencies (Cabada 2021). In Czechia, such a government was led by A. Babiš, whose movement created the minority cabinet with *Social Democrats* (thereby strengthening the nativist faction) and with the support of both extremes, the *Communist Party* and *SPD*. Babiš and President Zeman created a specific anti-EU duopoly during this period.

A fundamental turn towards national populism and sovereigntist discourse that strongly identifies Czech and Visegrad 'anti-colonial' identity comes in A. Babiš in connection with the defeat of his movement in the parliamentary elections in September 2021 and his departure to the opposition, and even more sharply with his election campaign in the presidential elections in early 2023, where he has already used a whole repertoire of anti-Ukrainian and nativist slogans with a clearly anti-Western and anti-German message, strongly polarising the Czech society (Czech Academy of Science 2023; see Klicperova-Baker and Urban 2023).

This anti-German sentiment has overlapped with Euro-negativist voices, as in the case of Hungarian and above all Polish national populists, which present Germany primarily as an imperial leader of the European Union or the European Union as an instrument of unilateral German policy (Kořan and Jůzová 2016). Over the last decade, this narrative has overlapped significantly with the illiberal national-populist trend within the Visegrad Group and has not only repeatedly compared the European Union to the functioning of the Soviet empire but even portrayed the long-standing German Chancellor Angela Merkel in an almost diabolical form. Naturally, these prejudices may also have older impulses linked to the negative perception of Eastern Europe and its people. The migration wave to Europe in 2015 only deepened these attitudes and stereotypes. The so-called 'Willkommenskultur', personified by Angela Merkel on one side, and the similarly pretended attitudes of a significant part of Visegrad leaders, media and societies, on the other, became a significant stimulus reinforcing these negative stereotypes (Cabada 2024).

Czech politics faced a dilemma as to how much to prioritise or even absolutise Visegrad cooperation regarding the weakening of the positive image of Czechia in Germany and in the EU-15. This decision was at the risk of contributing to further deterioration of Czechia's image in various Western discourses, including the German one. The first strong voices also appeared in 2015, calling for Czechia not to risk its reputation and position by cooperating with national populists in Hungary and Poland, and instead to focus clearly on ties with key EU-15 countries and especially Germany. To a large extent, the approach of the former director of the Institute of International Relations, Petr Kratochvíl (2016), was the initiating step in this matter. He raised the issue of a clear break with the Visegrad partners who had strayed from the path of liberal democracy.

Kratochvíl formulated the so-called double bind as the fundamental dilemma of Czech foreign policy and European policy, with Germany, on the one hand, a key neighbour and key economic partner, and on the other hand, the cooperation with populists within the Visegrad Group. As Urbanovská (2017: 84) notes: 'The sustainability of the perception of Czech diplomacy as a bridge between German and Visegrad politics, however, seems questionable to Kratochvíl, especially in light of the internal political developments in Poland and Hungary'. This is why he prefers strategic cooperation with

Germany, which he describes as democratic, liberal and economically successful in apparent contrast to the Visegrad countries mentioned above.

Kratochvíl's position was in line with the values of politicians and other participants in the discourse on Czech regional, European and foreign policy, who fundamentally rejected the transformation of the Visegrad format into an anti-liberal populist anti-integration project based on personalised management and mobilisation activities against 'Brussels' and liberal democracy (Söderbaum et al. 2021: 14–16). This issue was also perceived in the broader context of the Czech foreign policy's break with the human rights tradition and the turn towards pragmatic economic diplomacy (Cabada 2020). Kratochvíl's most prominent opponents, in contrast, were the supporters of Viktor Orbán or Jarosław Kaszyński, led by Andrej Babiš, Tomio Okamura and some visible politicians of the *Civic Democratic Party* (ODS), such as prominent 'Euro-realist' Jan Zahradil. Both analysts and diplomacy sought to overcome the dilemma of 'Germany or Visegrad'.

Hard Czech Eurosceptics 'deem West European powers as simply too dangerous, too arrogant, too dominating and too perfidious to accept the "Lisbon dictate"' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015: 159). By these actors, Czexit is presented as the only tool to save national sovereignty. The Eurorealists, or soft/pragmatic Eurosceptics, 'share some of the arguments of the hard sceptics – they singled out the strengthening of the great (most populous) states… While they do not deny the perfidiousness of West European great powers, they see the EU as a bulwark against one even more perfidious and dominating great power – Russia' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015: 159). Considering the development after 2015, even the last sentence might be problematised. Czech President Zeman, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Slovak Prime Minister Fico repeatedly showed their affinity towards Russia, even after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, this role was taken up not only by the radical SPD movement but also by Andrej Babiš, who repeatedly spoke out with clearly anti-Ukrainian and anti-European rhetoric.

All this produced a new round of sovereignty-based conflict that 'has been the long-standing basic frame of ECE political communication, with regular offensives against "enemies", culminating in a hate campaign during the refugee crisis. In this recent stage the historical trajectory of populism from above, with its primarily cultural and nativist profile, identity politics gets the upper hand. Paternalistic elite populism has introduced an economic

nationalism discourse with a strong anti-EU rhetoric' (Ágh 2019: 121). Such conclusions are fully in scope with other recent observations labelling the V4 the populist cooperation and leader-driven format oriented against the Western institutions, including the European Union (Söderbaum et al. 2021). We should not forget that such a development also reflects the existence of a specific political culture in ECE, prone to nationalism and parochialism, which is still widely shared by vast parts of the population. Politicians can quickly mobilise civil society to support un-civil policies (Navrátil and Kluknavská 2020).

In many ways, the V4 countries have become the most visible actors of a more general social and political polarisation based on the phenomenon of cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and the formation of an old-new cleavage between 'liberal cosmopolitans' and 'counter-cosmopolitans' (Rensmann 2012: 77). As Scott (2021a,:21) pointed out, 'common denominator of illiberal populism in Central Europe is a questioning of many of the basic premises of European Union, particularly more cosmopolitan ideas of shared European citizenship and cultural tolerance'. Political philosopher Pavel Barša (2022) then places Central European Sovereignism in a global context: 'Underneath two different concepts of international politics lie two incommensurable visions of the human world. One places its centre of gravity in the universal reason and values of individuals as members of the human species, the other in the particular stories of national collectives'.

An alarming trend is the 'mainstreamisation' of nativism as the accompanying feature of the anti-EU stance in the V4. Here, the Hungarian Fidesz and Polish PiS parties—and more so their leaders—are the clear trend-setters not only in the region but also in the European Union. Furthermore, in the V4, the migration issues not only affected the far-right parties or national conservative mainstream parties but also increased the soft Eurosceptic stances among historically rather pro-integration parties like the Czech *Social Democratic Party* and *Direction—Slovak Social Democracy* (*Smer*). As Hloušek (2023) notes: 'The migration crisis exacerbated trends towards a sinister mixture of populism, Euroscepticism, and sovereigntist discourses among CEE parties'.

In the V4 and the wider CEE, critics of the strengthening of transnationalism in the European Union have gained control over cabinets and other institutions and have built their own ones, emphasising the primacy

of national politics and national interest in order to face the EU narratives. They criticise the European Union, primarily the European Commission (EC), as exceedingly activist and call for its 're-bureaucratization' and its subordination to the Council of the European Union, using the classic populist repertory, presenting themselves as defenders of the nation and the Visegrad/Central European people from the hegemony and oppression from the Brussels elites (Domaradzki 2022). Central European populists led by V. Orbán present the 'people of the V4' as a protagonist that is traditionally and permanently oppressed, but within the symbolic politics present themselves as the greatest fighters for the protection of alleged Christian values against the (ultra)liberal developments taking place in 'the Old Europe' and against migration (Cabada 2021).

While the regional populists in Central Europe perceived themselves as 'pioneers', the Western European mainstream and liberal-oriented media view them as anti-democratic 'laggards'. The stigmatisation of CEE was affected, among other things, by a long-term geo-political and geo-cultural perception based on the stereotype of 'the Europe in-between', understood as 'the outer circle' of Western Europe / the EU, a (semi-)periphery and a source of (potential) instability. Europeanisation and socialisation paradigms were therefore perceived as a tool for prevention of a return or a movement towards violence (Lovec et al. 2021: 4). Central Europe, primarily the V4, became 'the big bad wolf' and has been presented as a coherent group of Eastern countries permanently blocking EU policies (Walsch 2018). Numerous 'counter-union' statements of Central European politicians, some having a clear populist basis but many of them being rather well reasoned (the issue of double standards, the absence of discussion and generally the absence of alternatives in the area of public policies), may even be seen from the perspective of 'the counter-stigmatisation strategy' (Lovec et al. 2021: 12).

From the vantage point of certain critical or constructivist theories, the development of V4 and (some of) its member states towards de-democratisation, the disruption of the principle of the rule of law and anti-liberalism are a manifestation of a self-fulfiling prophecy. As a result of the systematically established image of the V4 as a problematic subject, it has actually become a problematic subject. This means, among other things, that within the V4, positions deviating from the 'common' voice are marginalised (typically, numerous statements or reservations of Slovak dissidents are ignored

or presented as irrelevant). In contrast, from the outside, their strength and importance are often overestimated. As demonstrated by Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi (2021), the V4 has been transformed under the ideological leadership of the anti-liberal 'counter-revolutionaries' Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczyński and the opportunists A. Babiš, M. Zeman or R. Fico (Hesová 2021, 130–131) into a populism-driven format. The above-mentioned protagonists prefer intergovernmental concepts emphasising the autonomy of member states and the high interaction rate (Söderbaum et al. 2021: 14).

The populism-framed regionalism is based on three key institutional preferences: the principle of personalised governance (*leader-driven format*), political symbolism and *á la carte* cooperation. Apart from that, its typical feature is an effort at distancing from the international liberal order and the protagonists who are presented as its representatives Within the *á la carte* cooperation, populists focus on selected international topics with the aim of domestic mobilisation and symbolic protection of the nation's integrity (a typical recent example is the issue of migration) (ibid.: 3–16).

In relation to this, one may observe that (not only) Visegrad populist leaders undertake targeted attacks on liberalism as such, on institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and within the European Union, particularly on the EC, as well as on certain leaders who (allegedly) represent ILO including their own dominance in this unfair regime (for instance, Germany, represented by Chancellor A. Merkel). It is, in particular, V. Orbán, who is presented by his proponents as a strong leader having to face allegations of populism and anti-democratic practices from western hypocrites, since he is a true challenger of the EU's neo-colonial influence (Furedi 2017).

The outlined development of V4 as a populist regional organisation, with V. Orbán as the obvious leader, benefiting from the ideological accord with the one-generation-older J. Kaczyński and from pragmatic counter-union cooperation with certain Czech and Slovak politicians who act as somewhat passive supporters of these two ideologists. This has naturally resulted in a situation where the entire V4 has become the populist 'challenger' of the EU's institutions, primarily the EC. The leaders of Fidesz and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość view themselves as the leaders of the European 'counter-revolution', which they clearly already demonstrated in 2016 at the meeting in Krynica (Cabada 2021: 297). They have become the most prominent Central

European politicians using the new stream of anti-globalism and nativism, which is globally connected to D. Trump, J. Bolsonaro and F. Duterte. This stream is characterised by strong anti-liberalism and an emphasis on moral and symbolic politics, going as far as a culture war.

The culture war is fought primarily over social norms, national values and historical symbols (Hesová 2021: 131). According to Hesová, culture wars in Central Europe have been taking place on three main planes: as a war over the past or collective memory, a war over identity and a war over morality. As concerns the conflict over the past, revisionism in relation to both the Communist period of history (the Czech Republic) and to older periods, primarily the inter-war period, or in the case of Slovakia and Hungary (as well as Slovenia, Croatia or the Baltics), the period of World War II can be observed. Identity conflicts are focused on the definition of a nation and Europeanism through so-called Christian values. In the case of national populists and nativists, the lack of the necessary liberalism regarding respect towards all individuals' freedoms and rights can be observed. Moral politics is focused on the topics of gender, the so-called traditional family, abortions, etc. All such disputes deepen the gap between the two ideological groups and become primarily a tool in the struggle over cultural hegemony and eventually also political hegemony.

It is also apparent that the above-described culture wars and their topics extend beyond the V4 and CCE and create a framework for a Europe-wide or even global conflict between two conceptions, moving further away from each other. Clear evidence of the overlap and penetration of national-conservative populism from the V4 and CEE into the European level is the cooperation of V. Orbán and M. Salvini and other western right-wing populists before the 2019 elections into the European Parliament, and also after these elections in the Parliament. A very ambitious project of uniting nativist and anti-liberal (formally) Christian streams in Europe is the *Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, presented at the beginning of July 2021. The first place on the list of 16 signatories belongs to J. Kaczyński, while V. Orbán is listed fourth (Gotev 2021). Their parties are accompanied on this list by, for example, the Italian far-right formations *League* and Brothers of Italy, the National Rally led by M. Le Pen, the Dutch Flemish Interest and the *Austrian Freedom Party*. The Declaration is the essence of the so-called culture counter-revolution and the struggle for 'Christian' Europe. The liberal

ideological framework of integration and all the efforts for a 'European' approach are perceived here as a violation of the principle of coexistence of free states. Among other things, according to the signatories, the European Union 'is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that intend to bring about a cultural and religious shift in Europe focused on the establishment of a European super-state, the destruction or abandonment of European traditions, and the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles'. The main authorship of the declaration is attributed to J. Kaczyński, who is supposed to be the host of the 'follow-up' programme conference in September 2021. The reasoning and narrative show a substantial influence of V. Orbán (*mal* 2021). The ideological and political connection of the illiberal populists was confirmed by the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024. Although the results did not lead to a dramatic change in the distribution of votes for individual factions, a significant group of those who signed the Declaration joined forces in the newly elected European Parliament to form a new faction called Patriots for Europe.

The polarisation of societies and politics continued during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued throughout the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine (Hrbková et al. 2023). In particular, the latter crisis has sharpened and clarified the positions of the individual V4 countries. While Hungary, through its continuous cooperation with Putin's regime, has taken another significant step towards the role of European pariah, the new Czech government, under the leadership of Petr Fiala and the new president Petr Pavel, has managed to emancipate itself from the anti-EU discourse of the Viktor Orbán-dominated V4.

Basic Contours of the Anti-Western Image of Visegrad

All of the aforementioned anti-liberal, Eurosceptic or anti-European tendencies and often also pro-Russian or more generally pan-Slavic in the sense of the conflict between Slavs and the West (Anglo-Saxon)/ narratives were briefly, but nevertheless succinctly, reflected in the analytical report of the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats.

As the report points out in its introduction, 'in addition to the classical understanding of the Central European space as a common identity and political entity, in recent years the Czech Republic has increasingly

abused this concept, especially in the context of efforts to negatively define itself vis-à-vis other countries and to undermine political ties with our allies'. The study then emphasises its focus on 'how the concept of Central European identity is being politically abused in the fight against the West, especially by actors promoting Kremlin and pro-Kremlin interests' (CTHH 2022).

Just days before the Russian army invaded Ukraine, the study highlighted how the quasi-media scene (often funded and/or supported by Russia) portrays a dichotomy between the 'degenerate West' or 'effeminate Gayrope', on the one hand, and a strong, values-solid and tradition-protecting Russia on the other. The study further points out that this Binary and Manicheist opposition of the 'Good' and the 'Evil', in which the West is evil, can take different forms and modalities. Thus, in relation to the position of Central Europe, it notes that 'more subtle forms also appear in pro-Kremlin propaganda, particularly in the diffusion of loyalty towards the West in the Central and Eastern European space. One of these forms is the construction of a specific narrative around Central European identity and its exceptionalism, without the need to pit the identity of the East against that of the West' (CTHH 2022). In other words, Central Europe is presented as a cultural and political entity that preserves the correct character of Europe precisely through its opposition to the West, but, at the same time, does not generate the potential for such a narrative from the East—Russia or China—and its emancipation from the West is not reflected in relation to the potential negative influence or threats from the East (unless these Eastern influences are directly perceived as positive).

In our opinion, the study points very accurately to the argumentative fouls and the strategy of affective polarisation based on (negative anti-Western) sentiment and the populist distinction between the 'common people' and 'normality', on the one hand, and the 'excesses of liberal political elites' on the other. As the study notes: 'It is the alternative identity of Central Europe that stands against the space| of the demonized West in the logic of the quasi-media scene. This is characterised by an emphasis on "common sense", which is opposed to the alleged excesses of the West, especially in the field of cultural issues (e.g. gender, ecology, political correctness, etc.). These topics are often deliberately overstated … so that they can be used as

a means of defining oneself against the West … This dichotomy creates a caricature of the clean and uncorrupted space of "normal" Central Europe untainted by "mindless progressivism" and the "spoiled" and "degenerate" West' (CTHH, 2022).

The study also highlights how anti-liberal political agendas are intertwined with the idea of a shared Central European 'normal' politics. The quasi-media scene thus presents anti-liberal politicians like Viktor Orbán, R. Fico or J. Kaczynski as an 'ideal', and their critics in the Czech environment as followers of the 'Brussels dictate'. The anti-liberal approach or the restriction of the rights of certain categories of people is then put in the context of so-called traditional values and their protection. In the Czech political arena, these attitudes have long been most prominently cultivated by President Miloš Zeman and the SPD political movement to which he has adhered.

Let us mention, for example, the wording used by SPD MP Jiří Kobza in response to the results of the early Slovak parliamentary elections at the end of September 2023. According to him, the return of R. Fico to the prime minister's position and the success of the national-populist parties in Slovakia mean that the V4 will gain momentum. 'Given what is happening with the wave of migration to Western Europe, Central Europe is becoming the last island of true Europeanism. So Central Europe and the V4+ is the future of Europe, I am deeply convinced of that' (ČT24, 2023).

This declaration fits into a broader framework of building a sovereignist and regional-populist Central Europe in which the V4 countries would be joined by other like-minded nations. When, in the course of 2022, Czech politicians repeatedly refused to negotiate with their Hungarian counterparts in the V4 because of their opportunistic stance on the issue of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the SPD and the quasi-media scene, headed by the online news portal *Parlamentní listy* (this media outlet has no connection to the Czech Parliament – L.C.), presented this move as an attack on the V4 and a concession to 'Brussels': 'The anti-Hungarian attitudes of the politicians of the Czech government parties threaten the long-standing close and beneficial cooperation of the Central European states and thus our national interests. On the contrary, the SPD movement supports the closest possible cooperation between the V4 countries in all formats, i.e. strategic cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary – including its

possible extension to include other countries historically and culturally close to us, such as Austria, Slovenia and Serbia'[2] (SPD 2022).

An even harsher reaction came in March 2024, when the Czech government, through Prime Minister Petr Fiala, announced the suspension of joint negotiations with the Slovak government in response to pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian statements by the Slovak prime minister and other members of the Slovak government coalition. The SPD's partner, with which it has formed a single list of candidates for the European Parliament elections—the political party *Tricolour*—has called the move not only a disruption of bilateral relations but also an attack on the V4: 'Fiala's government is also breaking up Visegrad. Brussels did not like Visegrád because it stood together against mass immigration, against the dictates of Brussels and against neo-Marxism, and was a significant force for resistance. That is why the EU and the EU collaborators are trying to destroy it' (iPortal.cz, 2023).

In the above-mentioned statements, we can clearly observe how the concept of centrist populist regionalism overlaps with the more general themes of anti-EU attitudes and demands to leave the European Union, as well as illiberal conservatism based on opposition to liberalism, which is very often labelled as neo-Marxist or more generally left-wing. This illiberal regionalism 'targets a deeply conservative outlook on political community with a much greater focus on national sovereignty – it involves both a negative image of European division as well as a positively framed cultural counternarrative to dominant East–West stereotypes … [It] exists as competing notions of "European dystopia" along lines of a struggle between liberal and illiberal values' (Scott 2021b: 6).

The dystopian image of (Western) Europe is a key narrative of Central European illiberal regionalists and can be linked both to the idea of sovereignty (a separate region between Germany, Russia and Poland with a

[2] Like the project of European integration, the project of a sovereignist Central Europe has no final form. To quote from SPD leader Tomio Okamura's statement, he offers a somewhat different political-geographical configuration: with the progressive Islamisation of Western Europe, we also need to start working more on cooperation between the states of Central Eastern Europe, what I would call 'Visegrad plus'. That is to say, the Visegrad states plus, for example, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, possibly Italy or, if some German states are saved from Islamisation, Saxony or Brandenburg (Okamura 2024).

specific identity and values) and to admiration for Russia and the East more generally as a space resisting value erosion. Let's demonstrate this fact again, first of all, with the position of the SPD and T. Okamura as he formulated it in August 2021 during the election campaign for the parliamentary elections. Okamura first defines five common interests of the Central European states: '1) to prevent mass immigration and the Islamization of our countries, 2) to prevent the emergence of a neo-Marxist truth-loving superstate under the hegemony of Germany and France, 3) to preserve the European character of our countries against multiculturalism, 4) to create a defensive and geopolitical community in the space between Germany and Russia (and Turkey), 5) to create an economic community of independent states. We must build this grouping in case Western Europe cannot be saved and in case the EU becomes a United European Emirate'. He then refers to Central Europe as a colony of the West and labels pro-European actors as traitors (Charvátová et al. 2022).

For readers who are not fully familiar with the structure and development of the Czech party system, it should be emphasised that part of its anti-Western rhetoric has been adopted by the largest opposition movement, *ANO 2011*, and primarily its leader Andrej Babiš, since 2021 at the latest. The paradox of this situation lies in the fact that while Okamura's SPD is part of the Eurosceptic Identity and Democracy faction at the European level, ANO 2011 is associated with the progressivist and liberal RENEW faction. At the same time, let us point out that alongside these parliamentary opposition movements, especially in the context of the coronavirus crisis and the subsequent Russian attack on Ukraine, several parties and movements have emerged that grow out of opposition to vaccination, conspiracy theories and also general opposition to (Western) Europe. Among the more important ones, we should mention the PRO (Law, Respect, Expertise) party led by Jinřich Rajchl. Despite its high ambitions, this party did not succeed in the EP elections, but it should be pointed out that during the V4 foreign ministers' meeting in Prague in March 2024, Hungarian Minister Péter Szijjárto met with Rajchl.

The quasi-scene, however, is a diverse mix of politicians, public intellectuals, think tanks and (social) media. In order to demonstrate the way in which key anti-Western elements of Central European identity are transferred from the political and media environment to the academic environment, we will present in the yawn of this section the views of one of the key intellectuals of this current—Petr Drulák, professor of political science, former ambassador to

France, and also foreign policy advisor to Jaroslav Bašta, *SPD* presidential candidate. Drulák presented the anti-Western narrative of Central Europe very clearly, e.g. in an interview for the Hungarian portal Hungary Today (Deme 2023).

At the beginning of the interview, Drulák articulates his general dissatisfaction with the development of the European Union, when he notes: 'When we turned towards the West some 30 years ago, we imagined it as a space of values, ones that were trampled on by the communists. We have imagined it as a place with security guarantees and that of prosperity. We have imagined that the West can offer us all these things. Today, however, we see that the West is in a state when it cannot guarantee either of these. And it is not only that the West cannot guarantee them, it seems to actively question them' (ibid.).

He then goes on to describe the crisis associated with the European Union's flawed policies—migration and environmental, directly linking these mistakes to the West's flawed value set, which he contrasts with the correct values of the 'new' European Union—Central Europe: 'In terms of our security, look at the migrant crisis that is, to a large extent, generated by the politics of the European Union. These are all undermining our security. As far as our prosperity is concerned, due to an uncritical liberalization in the 1990s, we have assumed a role of second-rate economies, suppliers of suppliers. This is not a road to prosperity for Central Europe. Then, of course, there is the question of values. A lot of things that are today regarded as values in the West, in our region we do not accept as values. We do not accept a certain inflation of genders as a value for instance, nor do we view the green transition as such' (ibid.). He concludes these reflections by stating the dystopian future ('The West is falling apart') and the necessity of sovereign emancipation of Central Europe ('What we have to find is a sovereign solution').

The academic vocabulary then turns to hate speech, where the concepts of European integration and European identity are compared to an infection. As Drulák formulates: 'This ideology has infected a number of great European nations. The ideology, to a large extent, originates from Germany. Germans now seem to define themselves based on the denial of nationhood. This masochistic, schizophrenic definition of nationhood is not viable, but has still been carried into the center of the new European identity … Yet this is Berlin's problem as well. The fact that Germans have rid themselves of their national identity means that merging with Brussels comes all the easier than for instance in the case of France, where the idea of nationhood is

still strong … So Germany is strongly tied to Brussels in a way that no other European country is. With their intolerance springing from their conviction that they are defending the true ideals, Berlin is using the European Union's institutions as a tool to force other nations to submit to the same ideals' (Deme 2023). The identification of the European Union with Germany is frequent in Czech Eurosceptic discourse, including Tomio Okamura repeatedly referring to the European Union as the Reich, while former President Václav Klaus repeatedly compared the European Union to the Soviet Union and, at the same time, criticised the fact that Germany, in his opinion, currently wields more power in Europe than it did during the Nazi period.

Drulák repeatedly stresses the existence of a conspiratorial deep state and advocates the population replacement thesis, considering migration to Europe to be orchestrated. In line with Orbán or Fico, he sees the philanthropist George Soros as the culprit, but here, too, he returns to his criticism of Germany and finds a more prominent culprit—the German Lutherans: 'The fact that George Soros financially supports some of this is a drop in the ocean. I am way more worried about some German foundations and the role of the German Lutheran Church that are financing the boats bringing these people to our shores. They openly coordinate their work with people smugglers. This is a much bigger problem than Soros' financing'.

Even more radical rhetoric is used by Drulák and people who agree with his positions in other contexts. Drulák is one of the key players in the non-governmental association, Svatopluk, named after the nineth-century prince of the Great Moravian Empire, who is seen as a symbol of dominance in Central Europe, unity and, at the same time, emancipation from the West in the form of the Carolingian Empire. Let's just present a short text from the association's presentation on the website: 'We want to unite patriots of the left with patriots of the right. Together they must confront the transnational extremism of the contemporary liberal and progressive centre. The extremism of warmongers, climate and human rights activists and transnational capital' (Spolek Svatopluk 2024). So, we see that liberalism is seen as 'extremist', support for Ukraine is equated with a 'desire for war' and support for human rights is criticised as 'activism'.

We find similar starting points in another epistemic community in which Drulák and activists and academics like him are involved—the Patrimonium Sancti Adalberti (*Institut svatého Vojtěcha*), named after St. Vojtěch (Adalbert).

On this platform, ultraconservative members of the Catholic hierarchy (in the Czech environment, led by former Cardinal Vojtěch Duka) meet with representatives of left- and right-wing sovereigntist movements. A typical feature of the Institute's conference or publication production is the axiom that Central Europe is (as it was ten centuries ago) exposed to geopolitical pressure from external actors, including (and especially) the European West (cf. Saint Adalbert and Central Europe, 2021).

In response to this geopolitical proximity, sovereignists offer national and Central European emancipation around 'traditional' values as well as a strong state—resistance to 'minimal state' liberalism and individualism (and promotion of strong paternalistic modern state), as well as globally conceived transnational economic liberalism, is the platform on which this radical right and left can connect. This is well demonstrated in another book entitled *Sovereignty from Left and Right*, prepared and edited by P. Drulák, who describes himself as a 'conservative socialist' (Drulák 2022). This book brings together neo-Marxist activists such as sociologist and MEP Jan Keller, philosopher and one of the most prominent figures of the Slovak *Smer* party, Ľuboš Blaha, and Marxist economist Ilona Švihlíková, along with ultraconservative and now openly pro-Russian Christian democrat Ján Čarnogurský and anthropologist and historian Ivo Budil, who gradually moved from Christian democracy to the anti-systemic *PRO* party.

The construction of Central Europe in opposition to the West is attractive not only for Russian (geo)politics but also for China. This can be well demonstrated by Ladislav Zemánek's text, which was written under the auspices of a Chinese think tank focused on cooperation with Central Eastern Europe (China-CEE Institute). Zemánek (2022, 1) reflects on the activities of the Patrimonium Sancti Adalberti while specifically highlighting their focus on the West: 'Some circles throghout the region started to elaborate a conceptual framework, institutional structures as well as pratical projects in orer to defend and further develop the peculiarity of Central European nations face to face increasing pressures from the EU elites that advance their interests'.

Like people affiliated with the institute, Zemánek sees liberalism as the key problem, stating in connection with a conference to be held at the institute in June 2022: 'Participants addresses the problem of contemporary Western liberalism that undermines the very foundations of our societies including national traditions, specific social patterns, family as well as fundamental

rights and freedoms, subordinating the to particular interests of transnational, liberal democratic elites' (Zemánek 2022: 2). Like most Central European sovereigntists, Zemánek subsequently adores Viktor Orbán as a 'role-model' Central European politician, while, at the same time, he also sees positively the possibility of the national-populist concept of Central Europe being extended from the V4 platform to the broader V4+ format. Completely in line with the position of the Putin regime and the supporters of 'balance' in the attitude between Russia and Ukraine, the author adores Orbán as a peacemaker and attacks the Polish and Czech governments: 'Whereas Hungary has adopted a balanced position, Poland together with the Czech Republic has embraced the anti-Russian, hawkish policy' (ibid.: 4).

The example of this study provides a good illustration of the fact that while many Central European sovereigntists may indeed start from the idea or impression that the emancipation of Central Europe from all external actors is possible, their anti-Western positions are perceived by key non-Western actors (Russia, China, possibly even Turkey or Iran) as a useful means of disrupting Western unity and projecting their own influence in the region. In this light, the analysis of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats presented above is fairly accurate. This is all the more true because many actors of the sovereigntist and anti-Western discourse in the Czech Republic and Central Europe act in accordance with and in conjunction with the interests of these external actors, as shown by the numerous scandals concerning the funding of academics from China and similar scandals concerning the direct and indirect funding of the activities of these actors from Russia, not only within the V4, but also in Austria and Germany (Lioliasová and Pavlíček 2021).

Conclusion

In our case study, we have tried to present a rather complicated and complex phenomenon of the anti-Western construction of Central Europe. Its complexity is due to the number and, at the same time, fragmentation of actors (individuals, epistemic communities, political parties and other types of interest groups, (quasi-)media, etc.), as well as the natural ideological differences between them. As Scott (2021a, p. 18) shows very precisely in his analysis, the common denominator of these currents is a specific form of nation-making: 'Visegrád cooperation is closely linked to projects of nation-making in the

very specific sense of defining political roles (positionality) within the context of European integration'. The author associates you primarily with the 'inability of national elites to communicate EU integration as a meaningful political project as well as by the inability of Brussels to convincingly connect the conditionalities of EU integration with a sense of democratic development and ownership' (Scott 2021b: 20). However, we should not forget the influence of the older legacies that overlapped or amalgamated with the communist legacy in Central Eastern Europe.

In this sense, Scott notes elsewhere in his text that the V4/CEE nations fear marginalisation in the EU/Europe: 'The V4 project of regional cooperation is very much part of a long-term attempt to secure political influence, pushing, among others, against potential marginalization within Europe. The identity and significance of V4 as a regional grouping thus involve more than questions of cooperation policies and practices, they reflect many of the tensions that characterize the European integration project' (ibid: 2). Like many other authors, Scott also highlights how, within the V4, the formerly more economically based scepticism towards the West/EU-15 has transformed into culture wars: 'Illiberalism bears that mark of a counter-hegemonic movement inspired by a rejection of neo-liberalism not only as an economic order but as a system that has sought to modernize and "colonize" the societies of Central and Eastern Europe' (ibid: 6). Similarly, Lamour (2021: 8) also sees the development of the V4 and its relations to the 'European core' as a complex into which sovereigntists incorporate broader value issues: 'Right-wing' populist stakeholders position themselves in this multiscalar European power struggle, in which Euroscepticism and a rejection of neoliberalism and globalisation have been growing since the 2000s. Similar to our analysis, he highlights a significant activation of intellectual sovereignty: 'The negative aspects of new regionalism and the drama right-wing political stakeholders have made of extra-European migrant flows have triggered fear and resentment among citizens. This context has also boosted an intellectual milieu proposing a conservative, reactionary and culturalist vision of society in space' (ibid.: 10–11).

Paradoxically, we can also perceive the steps taken by Central European politicians, which have a clear positive and pro-European framework, as defining themselves against the West. As, for, example Barša (2022) demonstrated, 'the trip of Janša, Fiala and Morawiecki to Kiev in March 2022 was not only an expression of solidarity with Ukraine, but also a symbolic gesture

towards Western Europe: we are coming on your behalf and in line with your policy, but we are expressing it more boldly and consistently than you are; this is also because, unlike you, we understand this region better, it is our region'. Other analysts perceive the situation similarly, pointing to a deep-rooted sense of moral superiority and triumphalism of Central European politicians (Šitera and Eberle 2023).

We should not overlook the fact that, specifically in the Czech environment, the traditionally rooted Euroscepticism of elites and society (in the case of society, much stronger than in other V4 nations) represents fertile ground for sovereigntists. As Gozalishvili (2020, 4) notes: 'Euroscepticism embedded in national-populist discourses provides a room for these powers for using a platform of the V4 for reinterpreting discourses about "Europe" and the connotation of it in rather exclusionary and xenophobic terms, while staying members of the EU'. Let's state the conclusion together with the repeatedly mentioned P. Drulák that migration crisis 'reinforced the ideology of Sovereignism in all four Visegrad countries …, it put the focus on the roles of Reformer and Prosperity Builder and it also reinforcesd the Visegrad co-operation itself' (Drulák 2024: 211–212). At the same time, the Czech position is still regionally or technocratically populist and does not reach the ideological-political intensity of the Orbán regime in Hungary. Czech Sovereignism 'cannot be identified with any coherent set of ideas which would go beyond slogans about the need to pursue the national interest' (ibid.: 212).

Bibliography

Ágh, A. (2019). *Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe. The Divide in the EU and the Emerging Hard Populism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Atton, Ch. (2002). *Alternative Media*. SAGE.

Babiš, A. (2021). 'Národní suverenita nebo evropská identita při integraci Evropské unie', 12 November 2021, <https://vlada.gov.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=191910&tmplid=50>, accessed 29 May 2025.

Barša, P. (2022). Na troskách Visegrádské čtyřky vzniká nová střední Evropa. *Alarm.cz*, 8 June 2022, <https://a2larm.cz/2022/06/na-troskach-visegradske-ctyrky-vznika-nova-strednievropa>, accessed 22 April 2024.

Bauerová, H. (2018). 'Migration Policy of the V4 in the Context of Migration Crisis', *Politics in Central Europe*, 14(2), 99–120.

Beneš, V., and Harnisch, S. (2015). 'Role theory in symbolic interactionism: Czech Republic, Germany and the EU', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50(1), 146–165.

Cabada, L. (2024). 'Czech-German Relations at the Intergovernmental and European Levels', In L. Tungul (ed.), *Resilience Unveiled: Shaping the Future of Central Europe*, pp. 40–52. Prague: Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies, TOPAZ and Political Academy of Austrian People's Party.

Cabada, L. (2021). 'Nativist and Anti-Liberal Narratives in Conservative Populist Agenda in Central Europe', *Teorija in praksa*, 58(2), 284–304.

Cabada, L., and Tomšič, M. (2016). 'The Rise of Person-Based Politics in the New Democracires: the Czech Republic and Slovenia'. *Politics in Central Europe*, 12(2), 29–50.

Charvát, J., Charvátová, D., and Niklesová, E. (2022). 'Populism as a Communication Strategy: A Case Study of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party and Tomio Okamura', *Communication Today*, 13(2), 106–121.

ČT24. (2023). 'Visegrádská skupina je překonaná, míní Urbanová. Teprve nabírá dech, oponuje jí Kobza', *Czech TV*, 4 October 2023, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/svet/visegradska-skupina-je-prekonana-mini-urbanova-teprve-nabere-dech-oponuje-kobza-1083>, accessed 22 April 2024.

CTHH. (2022). Report of the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, Czech Ministry of Interior, February 2022, <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/stredoevropska-identita-jako-soucast-protizapadniho-narativu-na-kvazi-medialni-scene.aspx>, accessed 22 April 2024.

Czech Academy of Science (2023). 'Polarizace během kampaně u kandidátů na Hrad sílila. Babišovi odradila voliče', *Media release*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.avcr.cz/export/sites/avcr.cz/.content/galerie-souboru/tiskove-zpravy/2023/PSU_polarizace-volby-data_310123.pdf>, accessed 17 April 2024.

Deme, D. (2023). 'Quo Vadis Central Europe? A Discussion with Prof. Petr Drulák'. *Hungary Today*, 11 April 2023, <https://hungarytoday.hu/

quo-vadis-central-europe-a-discussion-with-prof-petr-drulak/>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Domaradzki, S. (2022). 'Opportunistic Legitimisation and De-Europeanisation as a Reverse Effect of Europeanisation'. In R. Foster and J. Grzymski (eds.), *The Limits of Europe: Identities, Spaces, Values*, pp. 233–259. Bristol University Press.

Drulák, P. (2024). 'Conclusions: Czechia and Central Europe', In P. Drulák (Ed.), *Roles and Ideologies in the Czech Foreign Policy: the Case of European Migration Crisis*, pp. 211–222. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Drulák, P. (ed.). (2022). *Svrchovanost zprava i zleva / Zvrchovanosť sprava aj zlava*. Prague: Dauphin.

Furedi, F. (2017). *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU*. Routledge.

Gotev, G. (2021). 'Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini, Kaczyński join forces to impact on the future of EU', Euractiv, 2 July 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/orban-le-pen-salvini-kaczynski-join-forces-to-impact-on-the-future-of-eu/>, accessed 29 May 2025.

Gozalishvili, N. (2020). 'Disintegration through Integration? Turning to the Transnational Approach to Study National-Populism on the Example of the Visegrád Group'. *V4 Think Visegrad Platform*, <https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-Visegrad-2020-CEID-Study_GOZALISHVILI.pdf>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Hesová, Z. (2021). 'Three Types of Culture Wars and the Populist Strategies in Central Europe'. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 28(2), 130–150.

Hloušek, V. (2023). 'Linking European integration illiberalism: 'Laboratory' of Central-Eastern Europe'. *Politics in Central Europe*, 19(2), 217–234.

Hrbková, L., Voda, P., and Havlík, V. (2023). 'Politically motivate interpersonal biases: Polarizing effects of partisanship and immigration attitudes'. *Party Politics*, 0(0) (online first), 1–15.

iPortal.cz (2023). 'Fialova vláda ničí přátelské vztahy s bratrským Slovenskem a a rozbíjí Visegrád'. 12 March 2024, <https://www.iportal24.cz/domaci/trikolora-fialova-vlada-podporuje-valku-za-kazdou-cenu/>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Klíma, M. (2020). *Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe. Political Parties, Clientelism and State Capture*. London: Routledge.

Kořan, M., and Jůzová, J. (2016). 'V4 25 let poté. Kde jsme byli, kde jsme a kde můžeme být', Institute of International Relations, 28 September 2016, <https://www.iir.cz/en/v4-25-let-pote-kde-jsme-byli-kde-jsme-a-kde-muzeme-byt>, accessed 29 May 2025.

Kratochvíl, P. (2016). 'K Visegrádu zády, k Berlínu čelem'. *iHNed.cz*, 30. November 2016, <http://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-65537370-k-visegradu-zady-k-berlinu-celem>, accessed 14 March 2024.

Klicperova-Baker, M., and Urban, M. (2023). 'Democratic Spirit, Emotions, Help, and Hope during the Russian war against Ukraine: Experience from the Czech Republic'. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 1–19. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12486

Lamour, Ch. (2021). 'A Radical-Right Populist Definition of Cross-National Regionalism in Europe: Shaping Power Geometries at the Regional Scale Beyond State Borders'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.13052.

Lioliasová, P., and Pavlíček, Tomáš (2019). 'Konference financované Čínou měly propagandistický ráz, tvrdí sinolog', iRozhlas, 25 October 2019, <https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/tomas-zima-martin-hala-milos-balaban-univerzita-karlova_1910251547_kro>, accessed 29 May 2025.

Lovec, M., Kočí, K. and Šabić, Z. (2021). 'The Stigmatisation of Central Europe via (Failed) Socialisation Narrative'. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, doi: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00229-9.

Navrátil, J., and Kluknavská, A. (2020). 'Civil Society Trajectories in CEE: Post-Communist 'Weakness' or Differences in Difficult Times?', *Politologický časopis/Czech Journal of Political Science*, 27(2), 101–118.

Norris, P., and Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural Backlash. Trump. Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Okamura, T. (2024). Post at Twitter/X, 6. February 2024, <https://x.com/tomio_cz/status/1754658288669487534>, accessed 15 March 2024.

Rensmann, L. (2012). 'Volatile Counter-Cosmopolitans: Explaining the Electoral Performance of Radical Right Parties in Poland and Eastern Germany'. *German Politics & Society*, 30(3), 64–102.

Saint Adalbert and Central Europe (2021). Prague: Patrimonium Sancti Adalberti.

Scott, James W. (2021a). 'Post-Millenial Visegrád Four Geopolitics: illiberalism and Positionality within the EU'. *Deturope* 13(2), 13–33.

Scott, James W. (2021b). 'Visegrád four political regionalism as a critical reflection of Europeanization: deciphering the "Illiberal Turn"', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. doi: 10.1080/15387216.2021.1972023

SPD (2022). Politické usnesení SPD, 22 November 2022, <https://www.spd.cz/politicke-usneseni-spd-138/>, accessed 14 March 2024.

Spolek Svatopluk. (2024). <svatoplukzs.cz>, accessed 14 March 2024.

Šitera, D., and Eberle, J. (2023). 'Riziko triumfalismu: ruská agrese a znovuvzkříšení střední Evropy', In: *Svět v proměnách 2023: analýzy ÚMV*, pp. 58–64. Prague: Institute of International Relations.

Söderbaum, F., Spandler, K., and Pacciardi, A. (2021). *Contestations of the Liberal International Order. A Populist Script of Regional Cooperation*. Cambridge University Press.

Tucker, A. (2020). *Democracy Against Liberalism. Its Rise and Fall*. Polity Press.

Urbanovská, J. (2017). 'Spolková republika Německo v české zahraniční politice'. In: M. Kořan et al, *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2016. Analýza ÚMV*, pp. 83–115). Prague: Institute of International Relarions.

Vachatová, N. (2023), 'Zvoní svobodě slova u nás hrana? Dva roky vládnutí za pomoci dezinfománie', Společnost pro obranu svobody projevu, 16 November 2023, <https://www.sosp.cz/zvoni-svobode-slova-u-nas-hrana>, accessed 28 May 2025

Zemánek, L. (2022). 'Czech Republic social briefing: A Vision of Revived Central Europe: Towards Integration and Emancipation'. *China–CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, 52(3), <https://china-cee.eu/2022/12/28/czech-republic-social-briefing-social-development-in-2022-democracy-in-danger/>, accessed 27 March 2024.

‘Pahorism’ as an Alternative to Populism? A Case Study of Borut Pahor and the 2012 Presidential Elections

Rok Bratina

ABSTRACT
This chapter presents the phenomenon of Borut Pahor, the most successful politician in the history of independent Slovenia, and places it in the context of the 2012 presidential elections. The objective of this paper is to present the characteristics of the pre-election campaign and to contrast them with the characteristics attributed to populism. The question we want to answer is whether Pahor’s pre-election campaign for the presidency of the Republic, taking into account all the identified characteristics, can be characterised as populist. The analysis of secondary sources leads us to the conclusion that in Pahor’s case, we cannot speak of classical populism, but of a unique version of it, which we refer to as ‘Pahorism’.

Keywords: populism, campaign, Borut Pahor, pahorism

Introduction

Borut Pahor is a Slovenian politician who has achieved practically everything a politician in the Republic of Slovenia can achieve in his political career. With the exception of the position of minister, he has managed to occupy such important and influential positions as the post of Prime Minister (2008–2011) and the post of President of the Republic, which he has occupied twice (2012–2017, 2017–2022). If we add to this the post of President of the *Social Democrats* (SD) political party and the post of Member of the European Parliament, then it is clear to everyone that we are talking about a very successful, if not the most successful, politician in the Republic of Slovenia (Cerar 2017, Karba 2020).

In addition to his success, Pahor can also be said to have been quite popular throughout his political career. In fact, Pahor has always ranked highest in the popularity charts of Slovenian politicians, which are prepared and published every month by the Ninamedia Institute for Public Opinion Research (2024). Yet whoever analyses in more detail the trend in Pahor’s popularity over the course of his political career will find that there is a period where Pahor’s popularity has fallen sharply. For example, in a popularity ranking

published in June 2011, Pahor received such a low score that he was ranked 22nd last, which meant that he was not present in the July ranking (ibid.). To understand his 'unpopularity' in those weeks, it is important to mention that Pahor was then Prime Minister of a government that did not have the backing of the public or any of its coalition partners. A Pahor-led government would have needed this kind of support in order to effectively address the challenges brought on by the financial and economic crisis. Thus, in the context of the June poll, it is worth highlighting Referendum Sunday (June 5, 2011), where Slovenian citizens had the opportunity to have their say on three laws proposed by the government. Taking the above into account, it is of course not difficult to guess that all three proposed reforms 'fell'. It was also or mainly because of this event, which one of the coalition partners' presidents called a 'super slap' that the government was voted no confidence in the National Assembly in September (Božič 2011, Maksuti 2011).

If, in the autumn of 2011, Pahor had been almost completely written off by the Slovenian public, a year later the picture was completely different. Thus, in the ranking of popularity of politicians for September 2012, Pahor was ranked fourth, while in October 2012, he had already reached third place (Ninamedia 2024). In this context, it is worth pointing out that shortly before the publication of the poll, the deadline for submitting a candidacy to run in the presidential elections had passed, and that it had been known since the *SD* party congress in June that Pahor would also be running in the elections. Although opinion polls had favoured the then President of the Republic, Danilo Türk, from the very beginning, a major turning point took place in November.

The victory in the first round of the presidential elections (11 November 2012) and the jump to first place in the popularity ranking of politicians (Ninamedia 2024), from where Pahor managed to oust his opponent Türk, show that the former prime minister has somehow managed to convince again a large part of the public, which had practically written Pahor off a year ago. In this respect, we assume that an important factor contributing to this turnaround is also and above all his unique pre-election campaign, which will be presented in more detail in this article. Given the ubiquity of populism, which is increasingly used nowadays as a means of discrediting politicians, in the case of Pahor, who has been labelled with this label far too often in his career, it is worth asking whether, given its essential characteristics, his

pre-election campaign can be described as populist. As indicated in the previous paragraph, in this article, we will first describe populism and present some of its main characteristics. Given that the focus of the paper is on Pahor, the first section will be followed by a section on the role and characteristics of a charismatic leader. Finally, there will be a presentation and analysis of the 2012 presidential election campaign, followed by our concluding thoughts, in which we will consider Pahorism (based on its identified characteristics) as a type of alternative political strategy.

The Phenomenon of Populism

Historical Roots

When talking about concepts, it is important to remember that these are terms people use to refer to certain phenomena that stand out, in one way or another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, from other more or less related phenomena. The different names given to phenomena, therefore, presuppose, on the one hand, the different characteristics that people attribute to them and, on the other hand, the different attitudes that they also or mainly cultivate as a result of their perception of these characteristics. One of these concepts is the term populist, which is said to have been 'invented' by David Overmyer, a lawyer from Kansas, linking it to the word '*populus*', which, in Latin, means 'people' (Tindall 1972).

Overmyer is known to have first mentioned the term in its noun form, explicitly linking it to members and representatives of the *People's Party*, a new political movement that emerged in the early 1890s out of the Farmers' Alliance, comprising a number of diverse and politically independent organisations that united farmers from North Carolina, Texas, Alabama and other states in the south of the United States. The 'birth' of the term is said to have taken place on the Santa Fe train, on which two journalists were sitting. Thanks to them, the term, then capitalised, spread rapidly in the media in the following days, meaning that the American public was forced to accept it (Jäger 2017).

To understand the emergence of the *People's Party*, and with it populism, it is, of course, necessary to be familiar with the circumstances at the time. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that the period following the end of the Civil War (1861–1865) and above all brought about a boom in industrialisation, which was accompanied by modernisation, urbanisation and a

major economic boom. This did not, of course, bypass agriculture, which includes the expansion of arable land, the invention of new machinery and the immigration of farmers from abroad. The problem with this was that it all contributed to increasing farm yields, which, at some point, led to a glut in the market for agricultural produce. At the same time, since the United States did not restrict imports from elsewhere (but maintained high tariffs on imports of manufactured products), prices of produce logically fell. The lower income from sales posed a serious existential threat to farmers who had taken out loans for their land, machinery and other implements (Reinberger 2003).

In connection with the above, it is worth mentioning some of the demands that were enshrined in the party's political programme, which was presented at the founding convention in Omaha on 4 July 1892, when the candidates for the presidential election were being selected. We mention these demands in order to get a sense of what was considered 'populist' at the time, which will help us to understand the similarities and differences that are mentioned in relation to populism today. The political programme, known as the Omaha Platform, reveals that the 'Populists' supported a number of policies and initiatives, including currency inflation, the elimination of private banks, the establishment of a federal loan system, an income-based tax system, state ownership of telephones and railroads, direct elections for senators, an eight-hour workday, immigration restrictions and the ban on foreign ownership of American estates (Postel n.d.).

That the above demands were in favour of the peasants was also agreed by James B. Weaver, who discussed the unenviable position of the peasant in his book *A Call to Action: An Interpretation of the Great Uprising, Its Source and Causes*, also published in 1892. We mention Weaver because he was the one who was chosen as the *People's Party* candidate to stand in the 1892 presidential election at the aforementioned electoral convention. The percentage of the vote that Weaver received in the election (8.5 per cent of the electorate voted for him) showed that the 'Populists' were unrecognisable at the national level and, as such, still in the shadow of the established Democrats and Republicans.

In any case, by the time of the next presidential elections, organised in 1896, the members of the *People's Party* were already deeply divided. More

precisely, two strands had formed within their ranks. While the first (the *fusionists*) sought a merger with the Democrats, who saw much similarity in the political programme of their presidential candidate with their demands, the second (the *mid-roaders*) insisted that the 'Populists' should nevertheless remain an independent player on the political scene, establishing themselves as a third force on a polarised political scene. As it turned out in the following years, the will of the fusionists prevailed, marking the beginning of the end of the *People's Party*, but not of the 'populist' ideas that lived on. In the following decades, they established themselves and became part of the pre-election discourse of the candidates of one or other of the dominant parties. Examples include Roosevelt's New Deal of 1933 (see Leuchtenburg 2009) or Clinton's economic strategy of 'Putting people first' (see Clinton and Al Gore 1992).

The reason for presenting the roots of populism is to point out that, at least at the beginning, it aimed to promote itself as something that is neither left (the Democrats) nor right (the Republicans), but which, from every part of the political spectrum, embraces or adopts those ideas and concepts that appeal to the people, which, of course, are necessarily contrary to the interests of the elite. The example of the *People's Party* suggests that populism is also or primarily about the struggle to define the centricity of the centre, on the one hand, and to occupy the middle on the other, something that Borut Pahor did so well in the 2012 presidential campaign. In any case, this 'leap into the past' will also serve as a cue or orientation for understanding those features of populism that we will highlight below.[1]

---

[1] We have presented the roots of populism because we want to stress that, at least initially, it wanted to promote itself as something that is neither left (Democrats) nor right (Republicans), but which, from every part of the political spectrum, embraces or adopts those ideas and concepts that appeal to the people, which of course is necessarily contrary to the interests of the elite. The example of the People's Party shows us that populism is also or mainly about the struggle to define the centrality on the one hand and to occupy the 'middle' on the other, which Borut Pahor did so well in the 2012 presidential campaign. In any case, this 'leap into the past' will also serve as a cue or orientation for understanding those features of populism that we will highlight below.

In Search for Definition

Between 20 and 21 May 1967, a conference was held at the London School of Economics, bringing together academics from all over the world to discuss how to arrive at some tangible definition of populism (see McRae et al. 1967). The title of the conference was appropriately 'To define populism'. In the light of the above, the organisation of this conference should be seen as clear evidence that the term populism, which initially appeared in the United States to designate a specific political actor, has become so established over the next 75 years that it has come to be used in academic circles (and in the media) to refer to the emergence of other more or less similar political actors, which, of course, emerged in different social and cultural contexts (ibid.). The term populism has also been used to describe the emergence of other, more or less similar political actors (ibid.), which, of course, emerged in a different context (ibid.).

On the basis of the papers presented at the conference, Walicki (in McRae et al. 1967, 14–15) first defines populism as socialism, which occurs in underdeveloped countries and addresses peasants facing the challenges of modernisation. In this sense, Walicki sees populism as a tool of the educated, on the one hand, and as a representation of the modernising tendency, on the other, which clashes with an idealised past. Given that, in his view, the above definition mainly refers to the Russian *Narodnikov* movement, which is only one of the political movements in which populist characteristics can be found, he goes on to propose a more general definition, which sees as populist all those movements that address the masses, are radical in outlook and are led by intellectuals (ibid.).

Building on Walicki, Wiles (in McRae et al. 1967, 16–18) defined populism as a loosely organised ideology based on the virtues of ordinary people, referring to their habits and customs. In contrast to Walicki, who implicitly still referred more or less to Russian populism in his general definition, Wiles suggested that the definition should also take into account the American form of populism as manifested in the United Kingdom. In this sense, Wiles sees populism as an ideology that contains, among other things, anti-elitist and anti-war elements, is exclusionary in nature, supports an expansionist monetary policy and is committed to religion. Finally, according to Wiles, populism is not an ideology that addresses people who are poor, rejected and oppressed, but, on the contrary, it is essentially opposed to such people (ibid.).

In connection with the above, it is worth mentioning the thought of Seton-Watson (in McRae et al. 1967, 46–50), who generally understands populism as the admiration and worship of the people. Unlike Wiles, Seton-Watson rejects the thesis that all populisms are susceptible to religion. On the contrary, he argues that it is the people who, in their most extreme forms, represent a kind of substitute for God for populist movements. In this respect, Seton-Watson points out that populism can only be expressed by opposition movements, not by those in power. He means that there are no governments and regimes in the world that are populist, but there are movements that have risen to power through populism. He goes on to see the creation of an enemy (e.g. landlords, bureaucrats, bourgeoisie, Russian tsars and Jews) as one of the characteristics of populism, which can also be found in movements that he does not think are such and which serves as a tool for mobilising the people.

Another participant we think worth mentioning is Macfarlane (in McRae et al. 1967, 88–89), who does not see populism as an ideology, but who thinks that ideologies are those that can be more or less populist. In this sense, Macfarlane distinguishes between populism appearing in thick and thin ideologies. If, by the former, he understands those ideologies characterised by rationally organised ideas, striving for an inclusive and contented community ordered on the basis of human benevolence or goodness, he understands the latter in the sense of dealing with people who face concrete challenges, encompassing relatively few demands and expectations that are easy to achieve. As for populism, which appears in thin ideologies, one of its characteristics is the construction of an enemy (e.g. banking elites and immigrants) over which a section of the people who have either not done well in the existing situation or whose current prospects for pursuing their interests are less than expected can 'justifiably' find themselves. In other words, it is a section of the people who are dissatisfied and who feel that they are being wronged (ibid.).

Macfarlane (in McRae et al. 1967, 126–128), referring to Seton-Watson, points out on another occasion that although all populisms have in common the fact that they oppose or advocate something, this does not make them ideologies, but individual ideologies may include certain features that are perceived as populist. In this respect, Touraine (in McRae et al. 1967, 9–15), in the following discussion, introduces the idea of so-called populist situations, which consist of four essential elements.

1. *Popular group*: It is assumed that the majority of the population is beyond the processes of economic change. In this case, their promotion of tradition and worship of the people can be seen as an expression of disagreement with the status quo and a desire to defend certain moral virtues.
2. *Economic power centres*: As mentioned above, this is a group of individuals who, on the one hand, exercise social control over economic change, and, on the other hand, there is an awareness among them that change must not jeopardise their social position and the privileges that go with it.
3. *Economic processes*: These are all activities that aim to change the status quo while, at the same time, tending towards stability. Accordingly, there is a preference among the people for political intervention, expressed through the actions of various state institutions and organisations, which are not the most trusted by the people.
4. *Political channels*: There is an assumption that people tend to be more opposed to certain economic processes than to economic power, the characteristics of which they see as expressions of irrational forces. As a result, people do not engage with deeper economic problems but remain superficial in addressing them.

Populist situations are, therefore, situations where there is a contact between economic power centres, partly inside and partly outside society, and the masses, partly involved in the process of change and partly excluded from it. As Touraine (ibid.) further explains, it is precisely in this (lack of) knowledge on the part of the economic elites of the real well-being of the people, on the one hand, and their (i.e. the people's) lack of participation in the process of change on the other, that a certain void can be perceived, which populism fills.

Now that we have seen some attempts to define populism, highlighted some of its key characteristics and outlined the situation in which populism occurs, it would be appropriate to conclude by mentioning the definition that was generally the most well received at this conference (although, of course, it has also been criticised in various ways). And given that attempts at a definition have continued and are continuing in the years and decades that have followed (e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Werner Müller 2017; Revelli 2017), it is quite obvious that even the one proposed by Hall (in McRae et. al.

1967, 145) is not perfect,[2] but it is relevant enough to be meaningfully linked to Borut Pahor's presidential campaign:

> *Populist movements are movements aimed at power for the benefit of the people as a whole which result from the reaction of those, usually intellectuals, alienated from the existing power structure to the stresses of rapid economic, social, cultural or political change. These movements are characterised by a belief in a return to, or adaptation of, more simple and traditional forms and values emanating from the people, particularly the more archaic sections of the people who are taken to be the repository of virtue (ibid.)*

The Characteristics of a Charismatic Leader

The importance of a charismatic leader in expressing populism was also discussed at the above-mentioned conference. Gellner (in McRae et al. 1967, 151) emerged as the main proponent of this idea, seeing the charismatic leader as the embodiment of populism, which made his involvement in the movement seem legitimate. On the other hand, Shapiro (in McRae et al. 1967, 157) most openly opposed this idea, arguing that charismatic leaders are the very examples of individuals that populist movements reject or fight against.

Yet, if we recall Hall's definition at this point, we will see that he also mentions intellectuals, referring to them as those who have, in some way, succeeded in mobilising the masses. In this sense, we can assume that if one wants to be accepted by the people as one of their own, then one must be able to approach them, which requires a certain amount of intelligence. In other words, an intellectual person is likely to demonstrate knowledge of the problems, habits and virtues of the people to whom he refers. But to be able to appeal to the crowd, he must also have a certain charisma (Albertazzi and MMcDonnel 2008).

To understand the importance of charisma in an individual who displays leadership ambitions, Antonakis (2012, 262) explains that this is the reason why people show affection and admiration for such an individual, expressed

---

[2] Not only is it incomplete, but, as can be seen, the definition is also about explaining the characteristics of movements that are identified as populist, and not populism as such. Yet, at this point, it can be assumed that these very characteristics are also and above all characteristics of the concept of populism.

through their support for the ideas he or she expresses in public. As stated, these are usually ideas that the charismatic leader 'adopts' as his own, but are otherwise relevant to the people he is addressing. In this context, the characteristics of a charismatic leader include self-confidence, exceptional rhetorical skills, energy and a sense of purpose and vision (Seeman and Ashall 2018).

In relation to the above, it is worth noting that some authors consider charisma to be such an important ingredient that they include it in one way or another in the definition of populism. As an example, we can mention the definition of Hawkins (2003, 1140), who understands populism as a charismatic mode of association that combines with democratic discourse and embodies the will of the people. On the other hand, Weyland (1999) perceives populism as a political strategy employed by a charismatic leader.

On the other hand, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2014) point out that populism cannot simply be equated with a charismatic leader, although we have noted above that the two can fit very well together. For example, they argue that an individual with charisma can only facilitate the emergence of populism, but it is not an essential feature of it. In this sense, populism is to be understood as the party product of the efforts made by charismatic individuals to mobilise the people. According to Max Weber (Pappas 2016), however, such individuals only come to the specific circumstances, which he classifies as times of political crises and other action-worthy situations. Otherwise, the same author (Weber 1978, 241–242) defines charisma as that individual characteristic that is universally recognisable, perceived as extraordinary and which makes that particular individual different from others or visibly stand out.

Drawing on Williamson (1992, 347), we can say that a charismatic leader becomes a populist the moment they try to gain power by promising various benefits and concessions to the lower classes in particular, in order to attract them to support and follow them. A common strategy of populist leaders, which, in a sense, relates to the above, is also that mentioned by Prior and van Hoef (2018), namely, to consciously create a divide between politics, on the one hand, and society, on the other, using arguments that are based on morality and that generally arouse negative feelings.

As regards the discursive practices of populist leaders with charisma, it is worth referring to Karlsson (2023), who mentions in this regard the demands for respect and recognition of the lives of ordinary and working

people, who are supposedly neglected by the elites and existing institutions. In short, on the one hand, there is the construction of the people and, on the other hand, the construction of the enemy, which, in populist discourse, represents somebody who is guilty of creating crisis situations that call for action. Incidentally, the author observes that despite the above-mentioned characteristics, there are those who divide populists into left and right.

Table 1: The characteristics of left and right populism

	Left-wing populism	*Right-wing populism*
The 'people'	The working class, ordinary, decent people, welfare recipients, the "precariat"	'Native' citizens, patriots, often rural and religious, ordinary, hardworking people, taxpayers
The 'elite'	Neoliberals, right-wing media, right of center political parties, experts, capitalists, IMF, World Bank	Academics, experts, left-wing media, established parties, international organizations, EU, cosmopolitan elites
The 'others'	Big business, capital owners, foreign companies, actors on the global markets, US, EU	Migrants, non-natives, ethnic and religious minorities, Muslims, Jews
Key themes	Anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, neoliberalism, exploitation, protectionism, anti-Americanism, inequality, redistribution, restoring welfare systems	Nationalism, cultural identity, anti-immigration, traditionalism, law and order, anti-globalization, national sovereignty, protectionism, restoring welfare systems

Source: Karlsson (2023, 13)

Analysis of Pahor's Presidential Campaign 2012

On Thursday, 24 May 2012, the evening news programme, Pogledi Slovenije (Views of Slovenia), was broadcast, where each week selected guests were confronted with current political events. On that day, among other things, the new leader of the left, which is in a political crisis, was discussed. Borut Pahor, as President of the Social Democrats, also took part in the programme. In it, he was forced to answer questions about his cooperation with the right. This political option was then embodied by Janez Janša, president of the *Slovenian Democratic Party* (SDS). Pahor justified this cooperation on the grounds that Slovenia was in a financial and economic crisis and that it was mainly because of this that it was necessary to support unpopular but sensible measures that would resolve the situation. Otherwise, what will happen is that:

> (…) *the least wealthy people, the middle class. The rich people will already be looking for an opportunity for themselves, but those on whose behalf I would like to speak first and foremost, the middle class, those who work for a living, who live on their work and their knowledge, will hardly find themselves in these situations and will be forced, doomed to various nationalisms and social populisms and demagogies that will take them even lower into the merry-go-round of the crisis* (…) (Pahor in Pogledi Slovenije 2012).

In this context, it is worth mentioning Marta Kos Marko,[3] who, in one of her replies, explicitly described Pahor as a populist who is haunted and thinks he is the messiah who will bring salvation. In order to understand her words, it should be recalled at this point that the broadcast took place a few days before the SD party's electoral congress, which took place on 2 June in Kočevje. We mention the congress firstly because Pahor lost and was thus forced to say goodbye to his post as party president, and secondly because on that very day, Pahor informed everyone present that he would be standing as a candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections.

Characteristics of the Presidential Campaign

Shortly after announcing his presidential candidacy, Pahor met with a select group of young people to draw on their advice and opinions to devise a strategy that would help him reach the widest possible range of people. At this meeting, one of those present introduced Pahor to the idea of work brigades, which the former Prime Minister, after much deliberation, put into practice. As Pahor (2023) describes, his decision was based, among other things, on the assumption that Slovenians generally value work and the values inherent in work. With this in mind, Pahor tried out 42 jobs over the following months, working a total of 254 hours (ibid.). Given the circumstances (economic and financial crisis), this approach can be seen as an excellent decision, as it went some way to erasing the anger and frustration that had previously prevailed among the people. Moreover, as a politician, Pahor has somehow managed to distance himself from the elites (which included politicians) and get closer to the people.

---

[3] She is a former Slovenian journalist, foreign correspondent, diplomat and spokesperson for the government led by the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS). She was a candidate for the presidential elections in 2022 with the support of the Freedom Movement (Gibanje Svoboda), but withdrew from the race before the start of the campaign.

In the picture below, you can see how Pahor tried out his role as a worker at the municipal utility Saubermacher and Komunala. As a garbage collector, he and his colleagues went from door to door, holding the truck, where people were waiting for him alongside the garbage bags. As Pahor said at the time, the work can be '(…) *fun, it can also be tiring, but I find it mutually beneficial, both for me and for the people*' (Sobota.info 2012). In this context, the former Prime Minister could not have expressed his presidential campaign, which he called 'Together, let us encourage each other', more clearly.

Figure 1: Pahor as a garbage collector.
Source: zurnal24.si (2012)

Pahor breaks down his campaign message into three points (Pahor 2013, 136), indicating that he will seek the votes of all eligible voters, regardless of their political or any other beliefs. The three points are, therefore, (1) to be a president for all and party-neutral, (2) to unite the national and civic community and (3) to take a step towards reconciliation. In order to understand the message of the political campaign, emphasising integration and

cooperation, it is worth, at this point, briefly introducing the two opposing candidates, who, unlike Pahor, have in the past (through their statements and actions) each in their own way made it clear which electorate's votes they are counting on.

Firstly, there is Danilo Türk, who is seeking a second term as President. Although he entered the presidential race again as a non-party candidate, a certain section of the public (mainly right-leaning voters) associated him with the so-called 'transition left'. This feeling was not only due to the support of (former) prominent members of the left (e.g. Milan Kučan) but also to his statements and actions during his first run for the presidency. One example is his statement (Delo 2009), in which he described the victims of post-war killings (after the Second World War) by communist forces as a second-class issue.[4] We highlight this statement because it, in a way, indicated that he was not prepared to move beyond the decades-long conflict, which is still a ready-made tool for polarising Slovenian citizens. In addition, we can mention his presidential trip to Sarajevo, for which the taxpayers had to pay 89,000 euros. This activity showed him to be a representative of the elite in the eyes of many (Dnevnik 2008).

Furthermore, the second candidate for the presidency of the Republic was Dr Milan Zver, who, unlike Türk (and also Pahor), ran with the support of the centre-right SDS and *New Slovenia* (NSI) (24ur.com 2012). It has to be said that with this approach, he 'gave up' a large part of the electorate from the very beginning, and a predominantly left-leaning one at that. As regards the latter, it is worth pointing out that in the case of Slovenia, the left-wing electorate is larger or more numerous than the right-wing electorate, which puts Zver at a disadvantage compared to Türk (and Pahor) from the outset. This is not least reflected in the monthly popularity charts, where Zver has never managed to surpass the share of Türk and Pahor (see above).

---

[4] The debate on the post-war killings is still a hot political topic in Slovenia, and Pahor was well aware of this, which is implicit in the second and third points that Pahor mentions as items on his political programme. The post-war killings are just one of the major issues dividing the Slovenian public.

Figure 2: Pahor in a TV confrontation.
Source: Delo (2012)

As Crnović (2016) notes, Pahor's political campaign was primarily based on the representation of working-class men who are hard-working, on the one hand, and take care of their bodies and appearance on the other. As for the latter, it is worth noting that Pahor, as a politician, was already known as someone who likes to dress well and exercise regularly. It should be mentioned here that he also tried his hand at mannequins when he was a student, and the Slovenian public was already aware of his addiction to sport. In short, we can say that, compared to the two opposing candidates, Pahor was the one who connected with the people not only in words but also and above all in deeds.

Anyone who looks carefully at the picture above (see Figure 2) will see that Pahor is the only one of the trio who did not wear a tie during the debates. This can also be seen as one of the strategies to make people feel that he is not an elitist, but a simple man of the people. Pahor touches on the latter in part in his book (2023, 141), when he describes how he transformed himself into a politician after his work 'in the field': *I rolled up my sleeves and buttoned them again, I put on my jacket, but I didn't want a tie. I didn't feel the need for it, for its message. I felt great, the message was clear and understood by all* (ibid.).

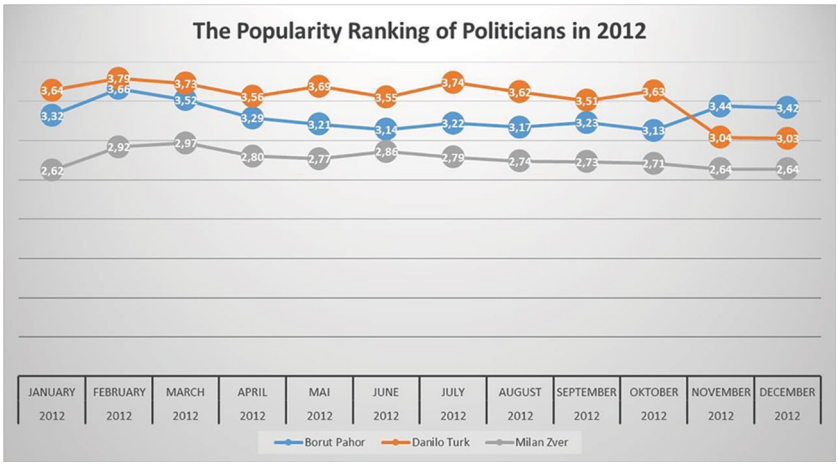

Figure 3: The popularity ranking of politicians in 2012.
Source: Adapted from Ninamedia (2024)

Pahor understood the difficulties brought on by the economic and financial crises. He also had extensive knowledge of the issues that split the electorate into two camps. With this knowledge, he was able to run an election campaign that appealed to a wide range of voters. By his experience and charisma, he was able to sidestep even the most uncomfortable matters, such as the contentious topic of the so-called 'uncles from the background', which he blamed for his failed prime ministerial tenure. With this explanation, he not only avoided direct responsibility but also managed to win over part of the right-wing electorate (Starič and Žerdin 2012).

Conclusion

To summarise, to win the support of as wide a range of voters as possible, Pahor first presented himself as a representative of the people (doing various jobs). Based on that, he then offered himself as a kind of 'saviour' who would be able to unite a divided Slovenia to face a common challenge—addressing the consequences of the economic and financial crisis. In his view, the crisis is solvable if the citizens are united. However, in order to justify his confidence among the people, Pahor presented himself in the pre-election confrontations as a victim of the political and economic elites ('uncles from the background'),

saying that they had hindered him from pursuing his goals in one way or another. His approach to the people, addressing their problems and finding solutions in cooperation and alliances, can be seen as an expression of populism, according to what has been said in theory. However, since Pahor is also known for his charisma and rhetorical skills, we offer a new name for his approach here, namely Pahorism.

The question that we can ask ourselves in conclusion is whether Pahorism is an alternative to populism, or is it just one of its variants? In light of what has been researched, it can be said that Pahorism has all the essential characteristics of populism, in which it primarily addresses people and promotes their ideals, opposing the elites, accusing them also or mainly of being responsible for the polarisation of the civic and national community. On the other hand, another characteristic of Pahorism is that it is unifying, seeking to bridge political and other differences by looking for things that bring people together. If we say that the main characteristic of Pahorism is integration and cooperation, then in this case, it seems to be an alternative with populist characteristics. Pahor (see 2023, 100–107), who himself says that he is not a populist, but just someone who tries to be likeable, has led us to make this assessment. The fact that he managed to win the presidency again five years later and that he has been at the top of the popularity charts for politicians throughout this time speaks for itself.

Last but not least, Pahorism's dual nature puts it in a unique position because it seeks to transcend conflict rather than exacerbate it. This strategy might provide a more sensitive, inclusive kind of populist leadership during a period of growing political polarisation.

References

Albertazzi, D., and McDonnell, D. (2008). *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. New York: Sage Publications.

Antonakis, J. (2012). 'Transformational and Charismatic Leadership'. In D.V. Day and J. Antonakis (eds), *The nature of leadership*, pp. 256–288. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Božič, A. (2011). 'LDS predlaga sestavo nove levosredinske vlade'. *Delo*, June 8. <https://old.delo.si/novice/politika/lds-predlaga-sestavo-nove-levosredinske-vlade.html>.

Cerar, G. (2017). 'Borut Pahor: Prvi politik, ki je opravljal vse tri najpomembnejše predsedniške funkcije', *Rtvslo.si*, September 19. <https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/grem-volit-2017/kandidati/borut-pahor-prvi-politik-ki-je-opravljal-vse-tri-najpomembnejse-predsedniske-funkcije/432961>.

Clinton, B., and Gore, A. (1992). Putting People First: How We Can All Change America. Hagerstown: Dorley House Books, Inc.

Crnović, D. (2016). 'Borut Pahor: uprizarjanje delavske moškosti kot strategija predsedniške kampanje', *Dialogi*, 52(3–4), 56–73.

Delo. (2012). V živo: Prvo soočenje predsedniških kandidatov', <https://old.delo.si/novice/volitve/v-zivo-prvo-soocenje-predsedniskih-kandidatov.html>.

Hawkins, K. (2003). 'Populism in Venezuela: The Rise of Chavismo', Third World Quartery, 24(6), 1137–1160.

Jäger, A. (2017). The semantic drift: Images of populism in post-war American historiography and their relevance for (European) political science', *Constellations*, 24(3), 310–323.

Karba, P. (2020). 'Desetletje Boruta Pahorja', *Razpotja*, X1(42), 55–59.

Karlson, N. (2023). 'Populism: Defining Characteristics'. In N. Karlson (Ed.). *Reviving Classical Liberalism Against Populism* (pp. 7–20). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377013078_Populism_Defining_Characteristics>.

Leuchtenburg, W. (2009). *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932–1940*. New York: Harper Parennial

MacRae, D., Schapiro, L., Deakin, F.W., Seton-Watson, H., Worsley, P., Gellner, E., and Berlin, I. (1967). Conference on populism: verbatim report. London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/102463>.

Maksuti, A. (2011). Leto 2011: Referendumska plima, ki je odnesla vlado. *Rtvslo.si*, December 28. <https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/leto-2011-referendumska-plima-ki-je-odnesla-vlado/273633>.

Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser, C. R. (2014). Political Leadership and Populism. Oxford Handbook on Political Leadership. <https://works.bepress.com/cas_mudde/97/>.

Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ninamedia. (2024). <https://ninamedia.si/>. April 20 2024.

Pahor, B. (2023). *Zmaga je začetek*. Ljubljana: Beletrina.

Pappas, T.S. (2016). 'Are Populist Leaders "Charismatic"? The Evidence from Europe', *Constellations*, 23(3), 378–390.

Pogledi Slovenije. (2012). *RTV 365*. <https://365.rtvslo.si/arhiv/pogledi-slovenije/137225915>.

Prior, A., and van Hoef, Y. (2018). 'Interdisciplinary Approaches to Emotions in Politics and International Relations.', Politics and Governance, *6*(4), 48–52.

Revelli, M. (2017). *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss*. London: Verso Books.

Semaan, R., Dean, P., and Ashill, N. (2018). Sophisticated, Iconic and Magical: A Qualitative Analysis of Brand Charisma. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36462.05442>.

Starič, T., and Žerdin, A. (2012). '+Dva kandidata, dva značaja, dve viziji, dve presoji', *Delo*, November 20. <https://old.delo.si/zgodbe/sobotna-priloga/dva-kandidata-dva-znacaja-dve-viziji-dve-presoji.html>.

Tindall, G. B. (1972). 'Populism: A Semantic Identity Crisis', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 48(4), 501–518. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26443307>.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Werner Müller, J. (2017). *Kaj je populizem?*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

Weyland, K. (1999). 'Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe', *Comparative Politics*, 31(4), 379–401. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/422236>.

Williamson, E. (1992). *The Penguin history of Latin America*. London: Allen Lane.

Zurnal24.si. (2012). 'V rdečem kombinezonu je praznil smetnjake', <https://www.zurnal24.si/forum/thread/v-rdecem-kombinezonu-je-praznil-smetnjake-10911>.

Towards Journalism Culture: A Systematic Literature Review of Journalist Values in Contemporary Media

Tamara Besednjak Valič, Janja Lozar

ABSTRACT
This chapter investigates the intersection of journalism's values, the role of objectivity and trust and the role of journalists in contemporary society, focusing on the years between 2017 and 2023. By narrowing our gaze to English-language scientific publications, we analyse the topics of objectivity in journalism, the role of Journalists and their position within different power relations, among others. As we scrutinise this dynamic landscape, our research, adopting the systematic literature review method, aims to synthesise existing knowledge and contribute to the ongoing discourse on journalists' value and role in journalism in society, offering insights relevant to scholars, practitioners and enthusiasts alike. Through a comprehensive analysis, we provide a thorough understanding of how journalist values and culture are conceptualised and navigated within the multifaceted realm of contemporary journalist studies.

Keywords: journalism, media, culture, values

Introduction

Pursuing objectivity is a cornerstone of journalistic practice in the ever-evolving media landscape (Ward 2019). This pursuit embodies a complex and enduring challenge. In the chapter below, we are scrutinising a particular intersection of journalism's foundational values by focusing on the role of objectivity and trust in the western media cultures against the backdrop of contemporary societal dynamics of recent years. The timeframe for our analysis spans the years 2017–2023.

The change and challenges to journalism and journalists' practices seem to be quick and demanding, but more importantly, ongoing (Singer et al. 2023). Namely, media, particularly news media, are becoming increasingly reliant not only on citizen journalism but also on user-generated content. These dynamics blur the borders between professional journalists and the traditional audience and, at the same time, alter the landscape of journalism production and consumption (Hujanen 2016). In the context of political behaviour, the change has brought about it is the populist movements and parties across Europe who have adeptly harnessed digital platforms and social networks as tools for political communication and mobilisation. This change

allowed them to reach mass audiences directly and distribute their narratives without traditional media filters (Dittrich 2017). Journalists, traditionally viewed as gatekeepers of information (Singer 2014), have found themselves at the advent of the great change. Journalists nowadays aim to draw a clear distinction between the broader act of publishing, which is accessible to anyone, and the professional domain of journalism, which they regard as a specialised field defined by occupational norms and standards (Lowrey 2006). This distinction is grounded in journalistic principles such as editorial judgment, adherence to established norms and verification processes, all of which are employed to assess the credibility and value of information prior to publication (Singer 2014). The occurring shift also demands reconsideration of journalism's core values, ensuring the distinction from non-journalistic endeavours (Hujanen 2016). In this context, the most challenging practices seem to be content creation, filtering and distribution (ibid.).

However, journalists are traditionally perceived as those who follow the norm and maintain impartiality, neutrality, fairness and credibility in providing information (Deuze 2005: 446–447). According to Tuchman (1978), journalists are expected to be truth-seeking professionals, dedicated to delivering factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting. The high demands are coupled with ethical standards that pertain to the notion of journalists upholding a distinct set of ethical standards, ensuring validity and legitimacy in their work (Hujanen, 2016). Such perceptions establish the portrait of a journalist as a detached and objective observer. Journalists, therefore, adopt an outsider's perspective with a focus on factual presentation. Based on this, journalists became perceived as autonomous and, therefore, independent from external influences, usually manifested in economic or political pressures (Soffer 2009). However, despite the outlined journalists' stand, they are to actively engage with diverse voices, promoting dialogue and fostering engagement (Soffer 2009: 474, 487–488). Following this, the role of journalists in society is always underpinned by their relationship with audiences (Hujanen 2016). Nowadays, with numerous societal changes, particularly within the role of social media, the main position of journalists is shifting. The shift moves the role of controlling and transmitting information to audiences, namely from gatekeeping (Singer 2014), to a new role where journalists now have to adapt and approach the audiences on a more peer-to-peer level, raising the bar for adaptability, openness, transparency and participation (Hujanen 2013; 2016; Singer 2014; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013).

Regardless of the changing role of journalists, the question of their work being trustworthy remains pivotal. As trust in journalism is declining, this casts doubts on traditional perceptions of the role of journalists as the truth bearers (Salmon 2021; Schudson 2019; Ingram 2018). In the past, trust was gained through established routines and rituals (Schudson and Anderson, 2008; Tuchman 1978), but today's journalist practices are far from routinised (Canella, 2023). Nevertheless, the routines the journalists employ are partly connected to their traditional gate-keeping role. As Shoemaker and Vos (2009) elaborate, before being published, the news has to pass through numerous gates controlled by journalists or editors before being presented as news items and reaching the public. White (1950) understood that the personal preferences of editors and journalists, as well as audiences, influenced the decision to use or reject news stories. With today's differentiated role, the journalists might not have this power anymore; however, they can exercise their role in enhancing or suppressing the initiated or published stories/news (Singer 2014).

Nevertheless, journalists' positions in contemporary society are far from simple and onefold. Based on this, further research for a better understanding of their perceptions in the position of their core role being challenged seems necessary. To offer more in-depth responses, a systematic literature review of the state of the art in current research trends seems fit.

The work was developed around the main research question: what are the prevailing themes and nuances in the discussions surrounding journalist values, culture and journalists' role in the Western media society in the period between 2017 and 2023?

This chapter is structured in the following way: firstly, we discuss the role of journalists in contemporary society, where we detect the main trends and perceptions from the literature. In the second part of the chapter, we focus on the empirical part of delivering a Systematic Literature review, assisted by the Covidence tool. The results and discussion follow.

Main Journalistic Values and Challenges in Contemporary Society

Journalists and their role in society have long been a subject of scholarly interest; however, this interest has intensified in response to the significant changes brought about by technological advancements and the rise of social

media (Singer et al. 2023). The disruption caused by the social media revolution has notably transformed journalistic practices, prompting renewed academic attention to the evolving functions and responsibilities of journalists in the digital age. Journalists increasingly rely on social media when politicians label their unfavourable journalism as 'fake news' (Canella 2023).

Objectivity

Nevertheless, objectivity is the core value in journalism, and the concept emerged as a fundamental demand to distinguish between facts and values (Mindich 2000). It established itself as the cornerstone of journalism during the specific historical moments of the 1920s and 1939s, an era known for the intentional exploitation of mass media for populist purposes (Martine and De Maeyer 2019; Schudson 1978). After this, objectivity became a core feature of journalism in the modern, post-WWII era (Nerone 2015) and a primary occupational norm (Schudson, 2001). However, objectivity is not easy to reach, and the process was shaped by commercial, professional and political factors (Maras 2013; Boudana 2011). Martine and De Maeyer (2019) conceptualise objectivity as the chain of references presented in news articles. This approach can provide a detailed portrayal of objectivity in practice within news reporting. Additionally, such an approach can introduce fresh perspectives for comprehending and contrasting various journalistic styles and news platforms, focusing on how news articles present diverse arrangements of reference chains. Lastly, it can lay a robust groundwork for broader inquiries into the objectivity of journalistic coverage by encouraging scrutiny of whether the evidence presented in news articles adequately connects to external sources of evidence (Martine and De Maeyer 2019). With much effort being invested in ensuring the objectivity of their own writing, yet still, authors claim, it is impossible to separate facts from values: 'Journalists try hard to be objective, but neither they nor anyone else can in the end proceed without values' (Gans 1979: 39).

Truth and Credibility

Credibility in journalism remains the complex construct that has been examined across several disciplines. Scholars such as Gaziano and McGrath (1986), Metzger et al. (2003) and Meyer (1988) have highlighted several dimensions essential for assessing the credibility of news content, including trustworthiness, believability, fairness, bias, completeness and accuracy.

Trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty of the media outlet, and believability relates to whether the information appears plausible. Fairness and bias are sometimes treated interchangeably, but have different meanings. Fairness reflects the balanced reporting, while bias indicates the presence of an ideological slant.

Completeness pertains to whether the report covers all the relevant aspects of an event, while accuracy relates to the factual correctness of the provided information. Meyer (1988) contributed to this discussion by developing the credibility index based on audience perception. Metzger et al. (2003) further proposed that credibility does not only rely on the message, but also on the source and the communication medium itself, particularly in the digital environment. Meyer (1974) and Sundar (1999) have discussed how the social and psychological factors, like trust in institutions, prior knowledge, and media consumption behaviour, influence the individuals' evaluation of credibility. These dimensions rarely act alone, and their combined effect may shape the audience's interpretation of journalism content in ways that are not always predictable.

Moreover, drawing on cognitive theory, research has shown that individuals' assessments of media credibility are shaped by a range of factors, including the communication channel, the perceived reliability and intention of the source, the nature of the content, contextual cues, situational variables and timing—each of which may operate independently or interactively (Wu 2019; Austin and Dong, 1994; Delia 1976).

With the rise of the post-truth paradigm, journalistic credibility has faced a significant new challenge. The communication environment became characterised by strategic messaging that emphasises emotional appeal and ideological alignment at the expense of factual accuracy (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). If, traditionally, journalism has been regarded as a normative and authoritative institution tasked with upholding truth and objectivity, in the post-truth paradigm, it has increasingly become implicated in the broader erosion of public trust (van Dalen 2019).

Press Freedom and the Challenge of Ownership Concentration in Democratic Societies

Media freedom is pivotal in maintaining a diverse media landscape and is fundamental to democratic principles. Limiting media freedom is widely regarded as a significant violation of democratic values (Whitten-Woodring

and Belle 2014). The two most powerful sources of limiting media freedom can be detected through media ownership and ruling political power.

Since 2010, it has been noted that the concentration of media ownership has escalated. In the United States, for example, a handful of companies control over 90 percent of the market share (Jacobs 2020; Rapp and Jenkins 2018). In this context, one can assume the priorities of corporate executives to overshadow the interests not only of workers and unions (McChesney 2004) but also the public and their interest in accessing unbiased information and news. Corporate ownership prioritises profits, leading to cutbacks in news-gathering expenses, including reductions in journalists, news bureaus and investigative reports. All listed impact the quality of journalism and journalists' stories. Additionally, there's a notable increase in the production of 'soft news' stories, appealing to wealthier consumer audiences (Jacobs 2020). All of the above limit media freedom and subject media freedom to the personal interests of media owners. The second stream of media influences can be related to political influences, particularly the politicians in positions of power. For example, this issue is noted as relevant in European Union countries like Hungary and Poland (Bátorfy & Urbán 2020; Surowiec et al. 2020). Furthermore, European Union institutions frequently address similar challenges related to media freedom in various European nations (Besednjak Valič et al. 2023).

In addition to ownership and political influence, editorial gatekeeping remains a fundamental mechanism in shaping media output. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) emphasise that news undergoes multiple stages of editorial selection before publication. White (1950) recognised that editors and journalists' personal and audience preferences influence the decision to include or exclude news stories. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) further dissect these influences into five levels of analysis: individual, routine, organisational, extra-media and ideological. All these levels can be understood on both micro levels (journalists and editors' personal preferences) as well as from the point of view of media ownership and political influences.

Democracy and the Rise of Populism

In addition to the above discussions, increasing attention has turned towards how media systems engage with the rise of populism. Besides the structural and technological transformations in journalism, especially over the last

couple of decades, the changes have created a setting that populist actors have learned to navigate and often exploit to their benefit. Jacobs (2020) outlines several overlapping trends contributing to this shift: (a) alterations in ownership structures and new, unstable revenue models that have weakened the autonomy of many news outlets; (b) the rise of convergence culture along with algorithm-driven content distribution; and (c) the growing visibility and normalisation of populist narratives in public discourse. These changes blur the line between traditional journalism and politically motivated communication. As a result, the media today don't simply report on populist politics but rather risk amplifying it. This happens either through structural changes or deliberately via editorial choices shaped by broader institutional or market pressures.

Populism as an ideology considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups (Tomšič 2023; Mudde 2004), with one group being the innocent people and the other group being the corrupt elite. Canovan (1999) further elaborates this division through the moral dimension, and Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) add the notion of this division, further combined with other ideologies such as nationalism or socialism, reinforcing the dichotomous worldview. Based on this Tomšič (2023) not only recognises right-wing but also left-wing populisms. Nevertheless, the importance of the question of democracy is the style of communication that populism uses to address the voters and supporters. Populist messages inevitably support the ideas of populist political actors (Hameleers et al. 2021). The changes that media landscapes are going through, particularly with the rise of social media, make them vulnerable to adjusting to the repetitive publishing of populist messages.

Based on this, journalism's significant role in democracy (see an example of the metaphor for journalists as the watchdogs for democracy in Besednjak Valič et al. (2023) has long been a source of research interest for researchers. While this relationship remains influential, it is often insufficiently examined and theorised, potentially limiting our understanding of journalistic norms and practices (George 2013). For example, previous research indicates that leftist parties in Slovenia tend to have stronger connections than their rightist counterparts across various strategic sectors, including financial power groups, academia, the judiciary and the

media. Consequently, this imbalance results in a disproportionate level of influence and informal power within society (Kleindienst and Tomšič, 2017; Tomšič and Prijon 2014; Tomšič 2008; Adam 1999). Some scholars even suggest the presence of an ideological hegemony favouring the left, particularly evident through media channels (Adam and Tomšič 2012; Adam et al. 2009). The situation further distorts the media landscape (Besednjak Valič et al. 2023).

Technological Advancements and Automatisation of Journalistic Work

With technological advancements in algorithms and the accessibility of big data, the integration of automated journalistic writing is increasing (Caswell and Dörr 2018; Thurman et al. 2017; Dörr 2016). The disruption caused by automated journalism is expected to continue, with projections indicating that more than 90 per cent of news articles will be written by machine reporters by 2025 (Graefe et al. 2018; Levy 2012). The expansion of automated journalistic writing is primarily observed in data-driven topics such as weather forecasts, routine sports coverage, financial news (Caswell and Dörr 2018; Waddel 2018; Kim et al. 2016; Latar 2015), traffic reports, earthquake alerts (Young and Hermida 2015), crime reports, business updates, political analyses and disaster coverage (Caswell and Dörr 2018). As the listed domains rely heavily on structured data and seem less problematic from the standpoint of automated journalism, their expansion into more interpretive or context-sensitive areas raises significant concerns (Lewis et al. 2019). Lewis, Guzman and Schmidt (2019) find it problematic to apply automated journalism to political reporting or crisis coverage. The latter introduces challenges related to nuance, accountability and editorial judgment (ibid.). Moreover, as algorithms increasingly shape narrative frames, further questions arise regarding transparency in sourcing, potential biases in data selection and the erosion of journalistic autonomy (Porlezza 2024), along with the creation of filter bubbles, privacy, shifting power dynamics, gatekeeping, editorial independence and the metrification of journalistic values (Helberger et al. 2022). Without critical oversight, the growing reliance on machine-generated content risks commodifying news production and undermining its democratic function.

Methodology

Approaching the methodological conceptualisation, we first selected one database as the baseline for our Systematic Literature Review (here onwards SLR). For this purpose, we selected the SCOPUS database. Based on the research question, we selected key concepts that served as guidelines for the article search. The specified query included the following: we searched the key concepts: 'objectivity' and 'media' by titles, abstracts and keywords. We limited the query between 2017 and 2024 (the query was done in February 2024). This period was chosen to capture scholarly work produced after the 2016 US presidential election and the discussions stemming from it, addressing social media's threat to democracy (Howard et al. 2018; Tufekci 2017; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

To narrow down the volume of works, we limited areas of query to sociology, social sciences, psychology and arts but excluded the doctoral thesis. We further limited the query to English-language texts. We further limited the query to include keywords like: 'journalism', 'journalists', 'ethics', 'bias', 'journalism culture', 'journalistic norms' and 'populism'. This query delivered us a total of 141 results. All results were imported into the COVIDENCE tool, where the screening continued in accordance with the PRISMA flowchart. The results are summarised in Figure 1.

The title and abstract screening yielded a result where 107 studies were found unsuitable for further analysis, and 34 studies were sought for full-text retrieval. Out of those, we excluded three studies due to the inability to find them online. Thirty-one studies were assessed for eligibility. The eligibility criteria were as follows: wrong population research, as we sought the research done by engaging journalists personally, wrong study design, as we sought a qualitative study design, case study too narrow, focusing on a narrow thematic, not relevant for broader discussion on values and not in line with a research question. As summarised in Figure 1, six studies analysed the wrong population, eight had the wrong study design, four were too narrow as case studies and two were not in line with the research question. The review led us to the final set of eleven studies, which we included in the final data-extraction analysis step. Among the more interesting findings was that we did not notice any systematic literature reviews, making our work even more interesting.

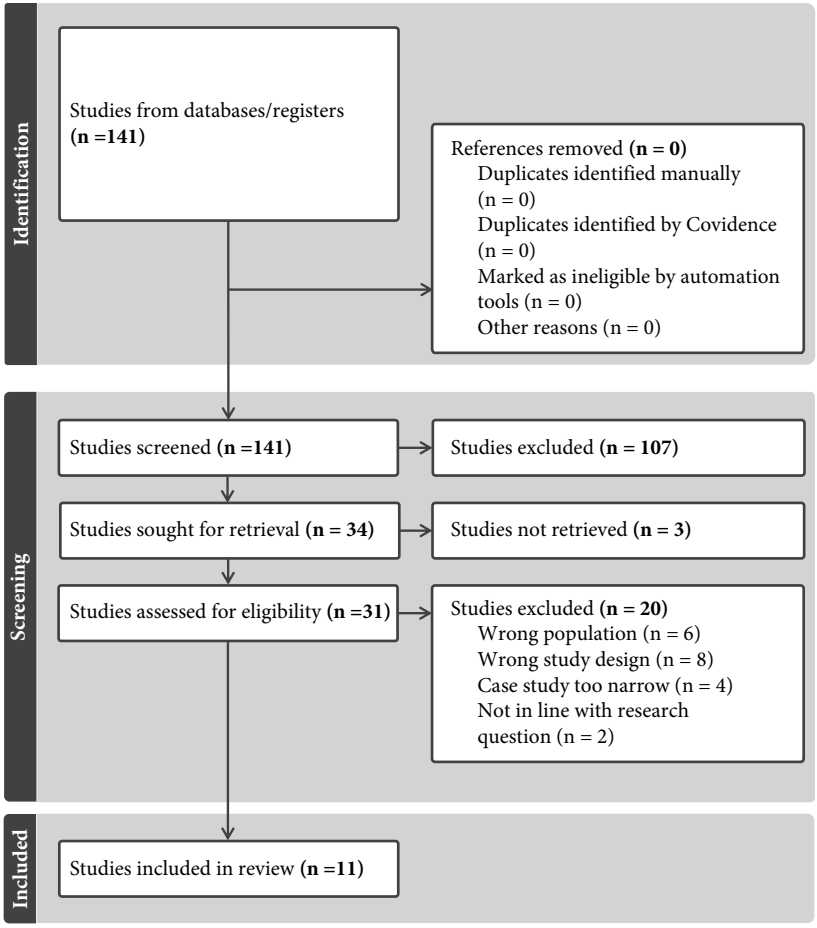

Figure 1: The PRISMA flowchart.
Source: COVIDENCE, own work

Following the main query and review of other relevant literature, we composed a list of categories and topics the studies will cover. The screening was conducted based on the selected categories. In Table 1, we elaborated on the key categories as a result of topics that emerged within the context of our review. The main categories we considered necessary for our study are the following: 'second-hand stories, fake news, machine written news', 'role

of journalists in society', 'perceptions of journalism as a profession', 'press freedom, role of state, role of media owners', 'journalism values', 'role of journalism in society' and 'trust'.

Table 1: Predefined categories of research discussions.

Category (as a set of topics)	Topics of research, as detected in the process of screening
Second-hand stories, fake news, machine-written news	Fake news; journalistic rituals to legitimise second-hand stories; fake news perception, effectiveness of fact-checking, machine-written news, auto-written news stories vs. human-written stories, digital media expansion
Role of journalists in society	Mediators of information, promoters of critical thinking among the publics, community engagement, truth tellers.
Perceptions of journalism as a profession	Journalism as an ideology, the relation between objectivity and professional roles, objectivity and impartiality of environmental journalists, interventionist orientations, journalism ideals, Press as authority, journalists' self-disclosure, journalists' interpretation of traditional journalistic norms
Press freedom, the role of the state, the role of media owners	Press freedom, state influence over press coverage, journalistic influence on democracy, journalistic sensibilities towards different authorities
Journalism values	Ethical principles/practices/challenges in different media; Professionalism, independence, and objectivity in media coverage; Evaluation of empathy, trust and credibility in journalistic sources; Truthfulness, independence, transparency; Negotiation of objectivity, dissatisfaction with the concept of objectivity
Role of journalism in society	Mediators on disagreements about what is the truth, commitment to transparency and fairness; journalism as an advisory body committed to democracy; post-truth era as baseline for trustworthy journalism.
Trust	Eroding trust due to a lack of unbiased and low-quality reporting.

Source: own work

Results

Following the two main research questions, the responses we can provide are the following:

RQ: What are the prevailing themes and nuances in the discussions surrounding journalist values, culture and journalists' role in society in the period between 2017 and 2024?

The themes prevailing in research between 2017 and 2023, discussing journalism values and journalism culture, were detected as follows: second-hand stories, fake news, machine-written news; role of journalists in society, perceptions of journalism as a profession; press freedom, the role of state, role of media owners; journalism values; role of journalism in society; and trust. The themes are outlined and explained in Table 2, where the references to articles' deadlines with individual themes are presented.

Table 2: List of studies included in systematic literature review

Author surname, name	Year of publication	Article title	Journal title	Type of research	Category
Canella Gino	2023	Journalistic Power: Constructing the 'Truth' and the Economics of Objectivity	Journalism Practice	Qualitative research 27 self-identified journalists or reporters from Twitter	Role of journalists in society, perceptions of journalism as a profession, press freedom, role of state, role of media owners, journalism values, role of journalism in society
Duffy et al.	2018	Frankenstein journalism	Information, Communication & Society	Ethnographic study of eight digital newsrooms	Second-hand stories, fake news, machine-written news, role of journalists in society, role of journalism in society
Wittchen, Maria Bendix	2023	Between harm and sensationalism Court reporters negotiating objectivity when reflecting on ethical dilemmas in the Submarine Murder Trial	Nordicom Review	Qualitative research - 10 interviewers	Journalism values

Author surname, name	Year of publication	Article title	Journal title	Type of research	Category
Robbins, D; Wheatley, D.	2021	Complexity, Objectivity, and Shifting Roles: Environmental Correspondents March to a Changing Beat	Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group	Qualitative research, interviews, 13 participants	Role of journalists in society, perceptions of journalism as a profession, press freedom, role of state, role of media owners, journalism values, role of journalism in society
Bucholtz, Ianis	2020	It Has to Be in One's Head and Heart: The Understanding of Journalism Ethics in Latvian Media	Journalism Studies	Qualitative research, 20 semi-structured interviews with editors of various Latvian media outlets	Journalism values
Nerdalen Darbo, Karoline; Skjerdal, Terje	2019	Blurred boundaries: Citizens journalists versus conventional journalists in Hong Kong	Global media and China	Qualitative research - 12 semi-structured interviews	Perceptions of journalism as a profession, Journalism values
Schapals, Aljosha Karim in Bruns, Axel	2022	Responding to 'Fake News': Journalistic Perceptions of and Reactions to a Delegitimising Force	Media and Communication	Qualitative research - 33 in-depth interviews	Second-hand stories, fake news, machine-written news, role of journalists in society, perceptions of journalism as a profession, role of journalism in society, trust
Paz Garcia, Ana Maria	2018	Ideology of objectivity in political journalism. Attitudes, values and beliefs around truth as a possible horizon?	SBPjor	Triangulation through content analysis and interviews with 8 journalists	Role of journalists in society, press freedom, role of state, role of media owners, journalism values, role of journalism in society

(*Continued*)

Table 2: (Continued)

Author surname, name	Year of publication	Article title	Journal title	Type of research	Category
Panievsky, Ayala	2021	Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them	International Journal of Communication	Qualitative research - 40 semi-structured interviews	Role of journalist in society, press freedom, role of state, role of media owners, journalism values
Cooper, Glenda	2018	'Our Relationship? It's the Odd Mucky Weekend, Not a One Night Stand'	Journalism practice	Qualitative research - 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews	Second-hand stories, fake news, machine-written news, press freedom, role of state, role of media owners
Henkel, Imke; Thurman, Neil; Moler, Judith; Trilling, Damian	2020	Do Online, Offline, and Multiplatform Journalists Differ in their Professional Principles and Practices? Findings from a Multinational Study	Journalism Studies	Survey data from the Worlds of Journalism Study	Press freedom, role of state, role of media owners, journalism values

Source: own compilation

Second-hand Stories, Fake News and Machine-written News

The concept of objectivity in journalism is traditionally achieved by referring directly to original sources. This practice creates a necessary distance between the journalist and the story, fostering an environment of impartiality (Cooper 2018). In the modern media landscape, journalists often gather preliminary material from platforms like Facebook (Cooper 2018; Duffy et al. 2018). However, to transform this information into credible news, they must undertake rigorous processes such as fact-checking and consulting multiple sources. These steps are part of a journalistic ritual designed to ensure objectivity and maintain the integrity of news reporting (ibid.). Journalists use these methods to legitimise the information and produce fresh, original stories (ibid.). In assessing the reliability of their sources, journalists differentiate

between those that are considered reputable and those that are less so. More trustworthy sources undergo a 'rigorous gatekeeping' process (Cooper 2018; Duffy et al. 2018), which includes checks for accuracy and newsworthiness. When journalists create stories based on information from these sources, they often hyperlink to the original articles (ibid.). This practice not only credits the original source but also enhances the credibility of the new story, presenting it as independent, objective and transparent. The rapid production of news following the release of an original story is crucial. It is believed that the sooner a follow-up story is published, the more legitimate it is perceived (Duffy et al. 2018). However, in this pursuit of speed and freshness, there is a risk of compromising depth and accuracy, especially if adequate fact-checking is not performed. The term 'fake news' has a significant impact on public perception, casting doubt on the credibility of journalists and the media at large. Often used by politicians and authorities, this label can distract from substantive issues and further their own agendas. Labelling stories as fake threatens not only journalistic integrity but also endangers democratic processes by undermining trust in the media (Schapals and Bruns 2022). Furthermore, the defence of fake news as a form of free speech, regardless of the truthfulness of the content, poses additional challenges (ibid.). This phenomenon is not seen merely as a journalistic problem but as a societal issue, indicative of a broader distrust in institutions and authorities (ibid). This aligns with the 'risk society' theory (Beck 1992), which posits that modern society is characterised by a pervasive sense of uncertainty and scepticism towards traditional institutions. Overall, while journalists strive to maintain objectivity and trust through detailed sourcing and fact-checking, the challenges posed by the spread of fake news and the rapid pace of digital media consumption continue to test the boundaries of credible journalism.

Role of Journalists in Society

Journalists serve as critical mediators of information, connecting the public with the realms of politics, culture and society while upholding a commitment to deliver unbiased and accurate information. Their primary obligation is to defend the truth, ensuring factual integrity through rigorous fact-checking and presenting reality without distortion, thereby holding those in power accountable (Duffy et al. 2018). By offering well-researched, thoughtful perspectives, journalists promote critical thinking among the

public, essential for informed decision-making and public discourse (ibid.). In an environment often characterised by hostility, particularly from political figures who may feel threatened by negative or incisive coverage, journalists navigate significant challenges to their professionalism and integrity (Robbins and Wheatley 2021; Duffy et al. 2018). They engage actively with communities, fostering connections that enhance the relevance and impact of their work (Robbins and Wheatley, 2021) and adapt to changing conditions by being self-critical and reflective (Duffy et al. 2018). This adaptability extends to their approach to populist rhetoric, where they mediate criticism by maintaining journalistic standards without engaging directly in disputes, thereby reinforcing the profession's role in supporting democratic processes and societal well-being (ibid.). Through these efforts, journalists reassert their historical role as essential conduits of information, rather than mere gatekeepers, and emphasise their unwavering obligation to tell the truth above all else (Canella 2023; Duffy et al. 2018).

Perceptions of Journalism as a Profession

The perception of the journalism profession is marked by the challenges of maintaining objectivity in a subjective world, the heightened scrutiny faced by journalists of colour (Canella 2023), the balancing act between independence and compliance with editorial policies, and the ongoing struggle to increase diversity within the media landscape (Schapals and Bruns 2022; Robbins and Wheatley 2021; Darbo and Skjerdal 2019). This complex interplay of factors defines the modern journalistic ethos, emphasising the need for both individual integrity and institutional reforms to better serve the public and reflect its diverse voices.

Press Freedom, the Role of the State and the Role of Media Owners

Journalists worldwide are experiencing difficulties in maintaining independence and integrity and are under economic, political and social pressure. Political figures are accusing the media as biased and untrustworthy. This is particularly problematic when political leaders prioritise their right to reply over the accuracy and relevance of information, potentially overshadowing truth in media coverage (Panievsky 2021). Business interests also impact editorial lines significantly (Robbins and Wheatley 2021). Media owners can

influence how stories are reported and aligned with a specific business or political agenda (Canella 2023; Paz García 2018). There is also pressure for the non-specialist reporters, who often have to report on specialised topics, which can lead to challenges in covering complex issues and maintaining the necessary depth and nuance in reporting (Robbins and Wheatley 2021). The politicisation of specialised reporting illustrates the challenges faced in maintaining journalistic integrity in highly polarised environments (Panievsky 2021; Robbins and Wheatley 2021). Journalists need to fact-check and provide balanced viewpoints in different polarised media landscapes, especially in a polarised media landscape where giving stakeholders unchecked access to platforms can mislead the public. Ensuring the inclusion of right-of-reply from all ideologies remains crucial (ibid.). Online journalists, particularly in Eastern Europe, feel they are under more external pressure yet also find it important to adopt an adversarial watchdog role, more so than their offline counterparts (Henkel et al. 2020). The digital space may not only offer more freedom from traditional editorial constraints but also come with its own set of challenges, including increased political and economic pressures. Journalists often find their freedom of expression limited by economic necessities such as needing to pay rent or make a living, which may force them to conform to editorial lines that do not fully align with their professional or ethical standards (Robbins and Wheatley 2021; Paz García 2018).

Journalism Values

We can talk about the relativity of objectivity depending on the circumstances reported by the journalists. Objectivity is their main value and guide, but in cases of serious crimes, it also happens that the journalist reports in a way that takes the side of the victim (Wittchen 2023; Darbo and Skjerdal 2019). Nevertheless, they maintain a degree of objectivity by presenting all the facts and both sides of the story (Robbins and Wheatley, 2021; Darbo and Skjerdal 2019; Paz García, 2018). In such cases, journalists also face their own ethics and morals, as they strive to be as impartial and non-judgmental as possible (Canella 2023; Paz García 2018). For example, when reporting court verdicts, they emphasise that it is the responsibility of the court to determine guilt. A new strategy for reporting on criminal acts also involves turning to the reader with an interpretation of the facts and an explanation of their importance (Wittchen 2023; Darbo and Skjerdal 2019). They discuss the facts

with lawyers and prosecutors and try to present the story as objectively as possible, provide bare, unbiased facts, cover all perspectives and make the reporting as balanced as possible.

The common thread among all interviewees covering various fields and topics is neutrality, objectivity and truth, avoiding conflicts of interest and covert insinuations (Bucholtz 2020; Henkel et al., 2020; Darbo and Skjerdal 2019; Paz García 2018). Journalists face a difficult task when it comes to populism. Populists address the audience, thereby eroding trust in journalists, who then regulate their work methods in response (Panievsky 2021; Henkel et al. 2020). With the desire for truly objective and unbiased journalistic reporting, journalists' adaptation of stories somehow confirms the accusations of populists. Instead of defending professionalism, self-censorship undermines their credibility and increases the audience's belief in their bias (Panievsky 2021; Bucholtz 2020; Henkel et al. 2020). Interviewees defined objectivity as a passive, neutral form of journalism, where journalists are merely a channel for conveying messages and connecting the audience with leaders, not as active purveyors of truth (active gatekeepers and watchdogs). Journalists should avoid such defensive methods, and politicians should as well. Defending the media by politicians can only harm it, as the public may see it as a defence due to political interest (Panievsky 2021). For journalists, the best approach is non-reaction. Overall, these articles reflect the complex landscape of journalism today, where the medium of operation (offline vs. online) and regional political climates significantly influence journalistic practices and professional values. The shift towards online journalism brings both opportunities and challenges, reshaping the traditional watchdog role and introducing new dynamics in audience engagement and ethical practices.

Role of Journalism in Society

Journalists should perceive public criticism as a contribution to the formation of new knowledge and a collective social process and engage with it (Canella 2023). Disagreement about the truth should not lead to journalists proving themselves and searching for even more facts, but rather represent how different perspectives and power relations affect the acceptance/understanding of stories (ibid.). The future of journalism may be about maintaining professional values of objectivity and preserving the institutional authority of journalism, while also giving importance to collaboration, transparency

and fairness, thus reviving journalism's historical role as an advisory body committed to democracy (Canella 2023; Schapals and Bruns 2022; Paz García 2018). The role of the media in society would then be to present facts and leave the interpretation, opinions and merging of viewpoints that lead to objectivity to the audience, thus democratising judgement (Robbins and Wheatley 2021; Duffy et al. 2018). Readers have become very active and engaged in fact-checking and expressing opinions, especially on various online platforms (Robbins and Wheatley 2021). Just as reporting by journalists has become very complex, the audience is increasingly educated and aware and journalists do not need to spend time explaining basic concepts (ibid.). In a flood of falsehoods that circulate, true journalism can once again become an important value in society, a trustworthy institution and a public good (Schapals and Bruns 2022). In these unpredictable times, it may be a real opportunity for journalism to gain popularity precisely because of its values, committed to truth and objectivity. In these moments of uncertainty, people lack security, trust and truth. It has even been observed that people are returning to trustworthy sources and are also willing to pay small amounts of money for access.

Trust

Trust in journalism is under significant strain due to various factors induced by the media itself, such as biased reporting and failing to represent the diverse realities of the audience. According to interviewees, the media have brought distrust upon themselves from the public by not responding to accusations and becoming lazy. They have stereotyped certain segments of the population and ignored others (Schapals and Bruns 2022). Similarly, some media outlets have incited misunderstandings and polarisation through controversial reporting styles ibid.). Also, the failure to understand that multiple realities can exist has led to people's distrust in the media. The distrust in politicians and traditional structures is linked to a broader scepticism towards the media. As public sentiment shifts against traditional institutions, including the media, there is a significant impact on how journalism is perceived. The media's alignment or perceived alignment with discredited institutions can further erode trust. Despite the challenges, there is a strong belief that high-quality, reliable journalism can restore and maintain trust in the media.

Conclusion

Seeing from the results of our analysis, a more communicative approach towards objectivity, where journalists construct so-called 'chains of references' (Martine and De Maeyer 2019), is promising in terms of raising a type of journalist culture that inspires truth and contributes towards spreading the knowledge. The chains of references include witnesses, whistleblowers, observations, notes, audio and video recordings, public records, and various documents. As such, the objectivity remains consistent and such an approach aims to provide readers with factual information that is solid and resilient against objections (ibid.). In this context, the chains of references are in a way part of 'professional ideology' (Deuze 2005: 446–447). The professional ideology shall consist of five core traits or values: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. We were able to note all the items listed in our research. The existence of professional ideology is also confirmed through our research in aspects dealing with technological disruptions, similar to what was detected by Deuze (2019). Similarly (Deuze 2005), categorising (Hanitzsch 2007) it discusses journalism culture, which includes aspects such as institutional roles of journalists (ideal of journalist as public service), epistemological roles (aligned with values of objectivity and truth) and ethical roles. Additionally, along with the demand for fact-checking, modern opinion columns of media professionals who follow different streams of information seem to be a solution. As such, opinion columns (Jacobs and Townsley 2011) are media creators who act as guides through important facts and who follow countless information, selecting the relevant ones. Practice developed in the late 1920s seems, in a media environment with abundant choices, more credible, since contemporary media products are of questionable quality, the principles of impartiality and objectivity have diminished (Sehl et al. 2022). The results of our research (limited to research under our review) confirm that journalists are aware of this and are taking a stance towards aiming for more objectivity in their work.

To sum up, bare objectivity and the presentation of facts are classic journalistic values, but times have changed, and today's audience is much more educated, aware and demanding. Following this, old approaches need to be reshaped. Journalists, therefore, should not see the audience as competitors but as co-creators of reality. In line with their work, journalists should acknowledge the coexistence of different truths and realities. Additionally, reporters' objectivity is very relative and solutions like chains of reference

seem in place for resolving the question of trust and integrity. Moreover, there is a sense that people are seeking security, meaning they are returning to following the classic reporting and are willing to subscribe to news from established reporters because they struggle to form a correct picture of the situation amidst the flood of opinions. Potential further research could address the question of journalism as a source of knowledge of current matters as a way of restoring the essence of journalism culture.

This study contributes to the understanding of democratic resilience by highlighting the evolving role of journalism in navigating complex media transformations and the challenges posed by populist communication within the European Union and wider. By examining journalistic values amidst shifting audience dynamics and technological change, the research sheds light on how media practices can support informed citizen engagement and counteract misinformation. It also underscores the necessity for media institutions in the European Union to adapt in ways that strengthen democratic discourse, enhance transparency and resist the polarising effects of populist narratives. Thus, the findings offer valuable insights into sustaining journalism's foundational role in upholding democratic norms in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

Study limitations: The main limitations stem from the SLR design, which focuses on analysing works from 2017 to early 2024, excluding earlier foundational works that could provide valuable context. However, the timespan is clearly justified by key political events as the cut-off point for analysis. Additionally, the focus on English-language publications and selected academic disciplines narrows the diversity of perspectives, possibly introducing language and disciplinary biases. Lastly, the strict eligibility criteria limited the final sample to 11 studies, which affects the generalisability of findings.

References

Adam, F. (1999). 'Ambivalentnost in "Neznosna Lahkost" Tranzicije'. In: R. Grafenauer (ed.), *Sproščena Slovenija: Obračun za prihodnost*, (pp. 99–113). Ljubljana: Nova Revija.

Adam, F., Kristan, P., and Tomšič, M. (2009). 'Varieties of Capitalism in Eastern Europe (with Special Emphasis on Estonia and Slovenia)', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 42(1), 65–81.

Adam, F., and Tomšič, M. (2012). 'The Dynamics of Elites and the Type of Capitalism: Slovenian Exceptionalism?', *Historical Social Research*, 37(2), 53–70.

Albertazzi, D., and McDonnell, D. (eds.) (2008). *Twenty-First Century Populism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Allcott, H. and Gentzkow, M. (2017). 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–235.

Andén-Papadopoulos, K., and Pantti, M. (2013). 'Re-Imagining Crisis Reporting: Professional Ideology of Journalists and Citizen Eyewitness Images', *Journalism*, 14(7), 960–977. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913479055>.

Austin, E. W., and Dong, Q. (1994). 'Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Believability'. *Journalism Quarterly*, 71(4), 973–983.

Bátorfy, A., and Urbán, Á. (2020). 'State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary', *East European Politics*, 36(1), 44–65.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: SAGE Publications LtD.

Besednjak Valič, T., Rončević, B., and Tomšič, M. (2023). 'How media pluralism navigates ideological orientations: the case of Slovenia', *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, art. 1143786, 1–11.

Boudana, S. (2011). 'A Definition of Journalistic Objectivity as a Performance', *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 385–398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710394899>.

Bucholtz, I. (2020). '"It Has to Be in One's Head and Heart": The Understanding of Journalism Ethics in Latvian Media'. *Journalism Studies*, 21(3), 370–387. <https:// doi=10.1080%2f1461670X.2019.1664316>.

Canella, G. (2023). 'Journalistic Power: Constructing the "Truth" and the Economics of Objectivity', *Journalism Practice*, 17(2), 209–225. <https://doi=10.1080%2f17512786.2021.1914708>.

Canovan, M. (1999). 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2–16.

Caswell, D., and Dörr, K. (2018). 'Automated Journalism 2.0: Event-Driven Narratives: From Simple Descriptions to Real Stories', *Journalism Practice*, 12(4), 477–496.

Cooper, G. (2018). '"Our Relationship? It's the Odd Mucky Weekend, Not a One Night Stand": Journalists and Aid Agencies in the UK, and the Current Challenges to Sourcing in Humanitarian Disasters', *Journalism Practice*, 12(8), 954–965. <https:// doi=10.1080%2f17512786.2018.1513813>.

van Dalen, A. (2019). 'Journalism, Trust, and Credibility'. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch, (eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, (p. 16). New York: Routledge.

Darbo, K. N., and Skjerdal, T. (2019). 'Blurred Boundaries: Citizens Journalists versus Conventional Journalists in Hong Kong', *Global Media and China*, 4(1), 111–124. <https://doi=10.1177%2f2059436419834633>.

Delia, J. G. (1976). 'A Constructivist Analysis of the Concept of Credibility', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62(4), 361–375.

Deuze, M. (2005). 'What Is Journalism?: Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered - Mark Deuze, 2005', *Journalism*, (6), 422. <https://doi.org10.1177/1464884905056815>.

Deuze, M. (2019). 'What Journalism Is (Not)', *Social Media + Society*, 5(3), 2056305119857202.

Dittrich, P.-J. (2017). +Social Networks and Populism in the EU: Four Things You Should Know+. *Policy Paper Institut Jacques Delors*, 192.

Dörr, K. N. (2016). 'Mapping the Field of Algorithmic Journalism', *Digital Journalism*, 4 (6), 700–722. Retrieved May 9, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21670811.2015.1096748>.

Duffy, A., Tandoc, E. C., anf Ling, R. (2018). 'Frankenstein Journalism', *Information Communication and Society*, 21(10), 1354–1368.

Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gaziano, C., and McGrath, K. (1986). 'Measuring the Concept of Credibility', *Journalism Quarterly*, 63(3), 451–462.

George, C. (2013). Diversity around a Democratic Core: The Universal and the Particular in Journalism. *Journalism*, 14(4), 490–503.

Graefe, A., Haim, M., Haarmann, B., and Brosius, H.-B. (2018). 'Readers' Perception of Computer-Generated News: Credibility, Expertise, and Readability', *Journalism*, 19(5), 595–610.

Hameleers, M., Schmuck, D., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., Matthes, J., Bos, L., Corbu, N., and Andreadis, I. (2021). 'The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Populist Attitudes Across Europe: Evidence From a 15-Country Comparative Experiment'. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 33(3), 491–510.

Hanitzsch, T. (2007). 'Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Toward a Universal Theory'. *Communication Theory*, 17(4), 367–385.

Helberger, N., van Drunen, M., Moeller, J., Vrijenhoek, S., and Eskens, S. (2022). 'Towards a Normative Perspective on Journalistic AI: Embracing the Messy Reality of Normative Ideals', *Digital Journalism*, 10(10), 1605–1626.

Henkel, I., Thurman, N., Möller, J. and Trilling, D. (2020). 'Do Online, Offline, and Multiplatform Journalists Differ in Their Professional Principles and Practices? Findings from a Multinational Study', *Journalism Studies*, 21(10), 1363–1383.

Howard, P. N., Wolley, S., and Calo, R. (2018). 'Algorithms, Bots, and Political Communication in the US 2016 Election: The Challenge of Automated Political Communication for Election Law and Administration', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 15(2), 81–93.

Hujanen, J. (2013). 'At the Crossroads of Participation and Objectivity: Reinventing Citizen Engagement in the SBS Newsroom', *New Media & Society*, 15(6), 947–962.

Hujanen, J. (2016). 'Participation and the Blurring Values of Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), 871–880.

Ingram, D. (2018). 'Media Logic(s) Revisited'. *Media Studies*, 12(02), 123–126.

Jacobs, R. N. (2020). 'Virality, Algorithms, and Illiberal Attacks on the Press: Legitimation Strategies for a New World'. *Sociologica*, 14(2), 217–233.

Jacobs, R. N. and Townsley, E. (2011). *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA.

Kim, S., Oh, J., and Lee, J. (2016). 'Automated News Generation for TV Program Ratings'. In: *Proceedings of the ACM International Conference on*

Interactive Experiences for TV and Online Video, (pp. 141–145). TVX '16. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2932206.2933561>.

Kleindienst, P., and Tomšič, M. (2017). 'Human Dignity as the Foundation of Democratic Political Culture: Legal and Philosophical Perspective', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 18(2), 385–404.

Latar, N. L. (2015). 'The Robot Journalist in the Age of Social Physics: The End of Human Journalism?'. In G. Einav (ed.), *The New World of Transitioned Media: Digital Realignment and Industry Transformation*, (pp. 65–80). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Levy, S. (2012). 'Can an Algorithm Write a Better News Story Than a Human Reporter?' *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2012/04/can-an-algorithm-write-a-better-news-story-than-a-human-reporter/>, accessed 9 May 2024.

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H. and Cook, J. (2017). 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era', *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4), 353–369.

Lewis, S. C., Guzman, A. L., and Schmidt, T. R. (2019). 'Automation, Journalism, and Human–Machine Communication: Rethinking Roles and Relationships of Humans and Machines in News', *Digital Journalism*, 7(4), 409–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1577147>.

Lowrey, W. (2006). 'Mapping the Journalism–Blogging Relationship', *Journalism*, 7(4), 477–500.

Maras, S. (2013). *Objectivity in Journalism: Key Concepts in Journalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Martine, T., and De Maeyer, J. (2019). 'Networks of Reference: Rethinking Objectivity Theory in Journalism', *Communication Theory*, 29(1), 1–23.

McChesney, R. W. (2004). Monthly Review | The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas. *Monthly Review*. <https://monthlyreview.org/product/political_economy_of_media/>, Accessed 9 May 2024.

Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., Eyal, K., Lemus, D. R., and Mccann, R. M. (2003). 'Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media

Environment', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 27(1), 293–335.

Meyer, P. (1988). 'Defining and Measuring Credibility of Newspapers: Developing an Index. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly'*, 65(3), 567–574.

Meyer, T. (1974). 'Media Credibility: The State of the Research', *Public Telecommunications Review*, 2(4), 48–52.

Mindich, D. T. Z. (2000). *Just the Facts: How 'Objectivity' Came to Define American Journalism*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press.

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. '*Government and Opposition*', 39 (4), 541–563.

Nerone, J. (2015). *The Media and Public Life: A History*. Cambridge: Polity Pess.

Panievsky, A. (2021). 'Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them', *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2136–2155.

Paz García, A. P. (2018). 'Ideology of Objectivity in Political Journalism. Attitudes, Values and Beliefs Around Truth as a Possible Horizon?', *Brazilian journalism research*, 14(2), 432–459.

Porlezza, C. (2024). 'The Datafication of Digital Journalism: A History of Everlasting Challenges between Ethical Issues and Regulation', *Journalism*, 25(5), 1167–1185.

Rapp, N., and Jenkins, A. (2018). Chart: These 6 Companies Control Much of U.S. Media. *Fortune*. <https://fortune.com/longform/media-company-ownership-consolidation/>, accessed 9 May 2024.

Robbins, D., and Wheatley, D. (2021). 'Complexity, Objectivity, and Shifting Roles: Environmental Correspondents March to a Changing Beat', *Journalism Practice*, 15(9), 1289–1306.

Salmon, F. (2021). 'Chapter Six. The Rise and Fall of Blogging in the 2000s'. In: *Chapter Six. The Rise and Fall of Blogging in the 2000s*, (pp. 92–103). Columbia University Press.

Schapals, A. K., and Bruns, A. (2022). 'Responding to "Fake News": Journalistic Perceptions of and Reactions to a Delegitimising Force'. *Media and Communication*, 10(3), 5–16.

Schudson, M. (1978). *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York: Basic Books.

Schudson, M. (2001). 'The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism*', *Journalism*, 2(2), 149–170.

Schudson, M. (2019). 'Where We Are and Whither We Are Tending', *Journalism*, 20(1), 77–79.

Schudson, M., and Anderson, C. (2008). 'Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism.' In K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch (eds.), *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, (p. 88*101). New York: Routledge.

Sehl, A., Simon, F. M. and Schroeder, R. (2022). 'The Populist Campaigns against European Public Service Media: Hot Air or Existential Threat?', *International Communication Gazette*, 84(1), 3–23.

Shoemaker, P. J., and Reese, S. D. (2014). *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective*. New York, NY, US: Routledge/ Taylor & Francis Group.

Shoemaker, P. J., and Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping Theory*. New York: Routledge.

Singer, J. B. (2014). 'User-Generated Visibility: Secondary Gatekeeping in a Shared Media Space', *New Media & Society*, 16(1), 55–73.

Singer, J. B., Lewis, S. C., and Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2023). 'Journalism in the Quarterly: A Century of Change in the Industry and the Academy', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 100(4), 773–792.

Soffer, O. (2009). 'The Competing Ideals of Objectivity and Dialogue in American Journalism', *Journalism*, 10(4), 473–491.

Sundar, S. S. (1999). 'Exploring Receivers' Criteria for Perception of Print and Online News', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76(2), 373–386.

Surowiec, P., Kania-Lundholm, M., and Winiarska-Brodowska, M. (2020). 'Towards Illiberal Conditioning? New Politics of Media Regulations in Poland (2015–2018)', *East European Politics*, 36(1), 27–43.

Thurman, N., Dörr, K., and Kunert, J. (2017). 'When Reporters Get Hands-on with Robo-Writing', *Digital Journalism*, 5(10), 1240–1259.

Tomšič, M. (2008). 'Historical Development of Slovenian Political Elite', *Innovative issues and approaches in social sciences*, 1(2), 47–66.

Tomšič, M. (2023). 'Populism, Media Messaging, and Media Literacy'. *Politics in Central Europe*, 19(s1), 455–470.

Tomšič, M., and Prijon, L. (2014). Ideological Profile and Crisis Discourse of Slovenian Elites. *Politics in Central Europe*, 10(1), 53–74.

Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. University of Michigan, Michigan, USA: Free Press.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press.

Waddel, F. T. (2018). 'A Robot Wrote This? How Perceived Machine Authorship Affects News Credibility', *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 236–255.

Ward, S. J. A. (2019). Objectivity and Bias in Journalism, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.853>.

White, D. M. (1950). 'The "Gate Keeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News', *Journalism Quarterly*, 27(4), 383–390.

Whitten-Woodring, J., and Belle, D. A. V. (2014). *Historical Guide to World Media Freedom: A Country-by-Country Analysis*. CQ Press.

Wittchen, M. B. (2023). 'Between Harm and Sensationalism Court Reporters Negotiating Objectivity When Reflecting on Ethical Dilemmas in the Submarine Murder Trial', *Nordicom Review*, 44(1), 106–122.

Wu, Y. (2019). 'Is Automated Journalistic Writing Less Biased? An Experimental Test of Auto-Written and Human-Written News Stories', *Journalism Practice*, 14(8), 1008–1028.

Young, M. L., and Hermida, A. (2015). 'From Mr. and Mrs. Outlier to Central Tendencies: Computational Journalism and Crime Reporting at the Los Angeles Times', *Digital Journalism*, 3(3), 381–397.

The Problem of Excessive Regulation of Media. Etatisation of Media Space?

Milan Zver

ABSTRACT
The phenomenon of new social media has greatly changed established media algorithms. The communication process no longer takes place only on the line from the media producer, through the media carrier, to the media recipient. In the new communication scheme, the once powerless recipient can turn into the very producer of public opinion. This is fantastic. The gradual loss of the monopoly of traditional media has encouraged politicians to start thinking about additional regulation of this area. At this very moment, the Media Freedom Act is being adopted at the European level. A new Mass Media Act is being adopted in Slovenia at the same time. With additional regulation, both acts will limit rather than promote media freedom.

Keywords: media, regulation, European Union, Slovenia

Introduction

The history of the media is fascinating, particularly when viewed in terms of the development of mass media such as traditional print, radio and television. They form an essential part of the modern era in the broadest sense of the word. But profound changes are taking place in the field of media. Even the most established interpreters of social phenomena, such as sociologists, have until recently failed to recognise the emergence and significance of new social media that have fundamentally altered established media algorithms. The classical media rule, or rather the traditional media business model that states that communication flows on a line from the media producer through the media carrier to the media recipient, has collapsed like a house of cards. The so-called permanent (mass) producers of public opinion, some have even called them producers of social sense, have in recent times received unexpected competition from sources outside the usual media structure, such as Facebook, Instagram, X (ex-Twitter), TikTok, Spotify podcasts or Apple Music, etc. The monopoly of the traditional dominant media is no longer as clear. The once powerless recipient can, with the help of the new social media, easily become a producer of public opinion. This is a major revolution in the processes of communication.

In the dominant media, this change, which has certainly increased the scope for freedom in this field of human existence, has caused a real panic.

The print media had fallen into crisis even before the advent of new social media, with TV and radio following in its wake.[1] Changes in the media landscape have led to government (state) interventions on a scale that democracies have never seen before. A strong state-based regulation of the media field has emerged.

In totalitarian systems, the restriction of media freedom was not seen as an issue, as it is inherent in the system. After the revolutionary takeover of power after the Second World War, for example, all the media in Slovenia were simply nationalised and turned into a transmission service of the ruling *Communist Party*.

But a distinction must be made between the violent media massacre in totalitarian regimes and regulatory interventions in democracies. Both interventions are artificial, but with a fundamental difference. We cannot simply lump together the regulation of the media space at the time of the creation of the BBC in the United Kingdom with the radical change in the media landscape in the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the recent regulation by the European Union and the envisaged change in Slovenian legislation in this area do stand out. Let us briefly outline both reforms.

The European Media Freedom Act

In addition to their basic mission of informing and thus shaping public opinion, the media are also important for the establishment and maintenance of all types of political power. In this case, we are talking about the instrumentalisation of the media. Totalitarian, autocratic, hybrid, theocratic, etc. regimes also need them to maintain power. Without the brainwashing of their citizens, what would Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, Xi Jinping, Ebrahim Raisi, etc. do? That is why control over the media is an essential condition for maintaining power. But it is not the only one, which is why violence is a common feature of all undemocratic regimes. Control of the media is only one of the factors.

---

[1] The EC measures citizens' trust in the media twice annually: 58% trust radio, 51% trust TV, 51% trust the press and 35% trust the internet. EUMF (2024)

Regulation of the media in democracies is different. The very process of adopting the legal framework is democratic, with a freely elected parliament adopting the text of a law by majority vote. This gives the law (democratic) legitimacy, and it is implemented as such. But this does not mean that everything is done in the spirit of democracy in formally democratic countries or alliances. On the contrary, there are countless sidetracks, and that is what we would like to draw attention to here. After all, we have both mature or stable democracies and weak, vulnerable ones. In the latter, freedom of the media leaves a lot to be desired.

Decision-makers at the EU level, encouraged by President Ursula von der Leyen, who announced the Act as early as 2021, have decided that this area needs to be re-regulated more thoroughly in order to strengthen the internal market, harmonise the functioning of media regulators, etc. The proposer has worked hard to put together the legal bases for the adoption of the regulation and finally found them in the common framework of the internal market.[2] In this context, it is being emphasised that the proposal is based on the Action Plan for European Democracy, although the concept itself is not defined.

The reasons for adopting the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) are said to be multi-fold. The first to be emphasised are the protection and pluralism of the media. The proposers go on to note that the internal media services market is supposedly not sufficiently integrated and that national restrictions hinder free movement. The external factor is repeatedly raised, with third countries supposedly systematically spreading disinformation. Only further down the line do the legislators—the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament—emphasise the protection of editorial and journalistic independence. The protection of the recipients is not at the forefront.

It is beneficial that the new legislation also addresses the structural issues that are most prevalent in post-communist countries: non-transparent ownership, including, in some cases, excessive concentration of the media and regulation of state advertising to ensure undistorted competition.

---

[2] The legal basis for regulation is Article 114 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The Article is general as it relates to the adoption of measures for alignment of the provisions of laws and other regulations in Member States.

The text proposed by the EC was agreed in *trialogue* among the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament (EP), the European Union's two legislative bodies. Following its adoption by the EP plenary in March, it will enter into force on the 20th day following its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.[3]

The Act is then intended to establish a common framework for media services in the EU internal market. Interestingly, the regulation does not put the recipients and their right to objective and comprehensive information at the centre of its objectives, as is usually the case with this type of legislation, but gives priority to the producers and broadcasters of news. Structural problems in the media system, such as the lack of transparency in media ownership and the allocation of state advertising funds to media service providers, lead to the politicisation of the media and result in biased reporting. Article 3 does refer to the right of recipients of media services 'to receive a variety of news and current information content for the benefit of public discourse' (EMFA), which is worded quite awkwardly. The first question that should be asked is why, for the benefit of public discourse? Then there is also a lack of a definition of comprehensive and objective information.

The main purpose of the Act is then to improve the functioning of the internal media market, which has four specific objectives: (1) to encourage cross-border activities and investment, (2) to increase regulatory cooperation and convergence, (3) to facilitate the provision of quality media services and (4) to ensure a transparent and fair distribution of economic resources (advertising, etc.) (EMFA).

The facts, however, show that a powerful part of the Eurocracy has a sublimated interest in the adoption of European media regulation: to apply pressure to Member States if the dominant media do not produce appropriate content. According to the debate on the European floor, this means particularly Hungary and, in the past, also Poland. The European Commissioner and Vice President of the European Commission, Vera Jourova, has publicly stated that the Act will influence behaviour in the Member States, explicitly

[3] At first reading, the EMFA was adopted by the European Parliament by 448 votes in favour, 102 against and 75 abstained.

mentioning Hungary in this context.[4] It was understood as a political tool against Hungary and Poland, also by the Slovenian MEP Irena Joveva, at the time of its adoption in the EP.[5] Some right-wing MEPs rejected the proposal, arguing that it constitutes an EU interference in the competencies of Member States.[6] EMFA was also welcomed by the rapporteur and Chair of the Culture Committee in the EP Sabine Verheyen.[7]

The legislators argue that the act will not interfere with Member States' competencies regarding the financing of public service media in line with *subsidiarity*, nor will it interfere with 'national identities or regulatory traditions in the media field'. In short, the historical and cultural background has been considered (EMFA). But has it in practice?

In a sense, the legislators have answered this question for themselves as they ponder the appropriate level of *regulatory intensity*. The lowest form of regulation is so-called recommendations, e.g. on media pluralism and independence, that is to say, a certain encouragement to Member States to regulate this area appropriately themselves. A higher level of regulation is a legislative proposal, whereby such an approach would set common rules for the internal media services market. The recommendation would act as an incentive for Member States and media companies to act accordingly. The highest level of regulation is the so-called enhanced regulatory proposal that would also include additional obligations for media companies and regulators, as well as a transparent and fair allocation of economic resources in the media market. At the EC's suggestion, the legislators have bypassed the first

---

4 EU's Media Freedom Law Targets Poland and Hungary. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/eus-media-freedom>.

5 EU's Media Freedom Law Targets Poland and Hungary. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/eus-media-freedom>, p.1.

6 EU's Media Freedom Law Targets Poland and Hungary. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/eus-media-freedom>, p.2

7 'This is a huge win for media freedom. We have managed to secure all Parliament's most important demands: editors will be more independent in their decision, media ownership will be more transparent, and media freedom will not be restricted by big platforms. This is a significant legislative milestone to safeguard the diversity and freedom of our media and protect our democracies'. V: Deal on the EU Media Freedom Act: <https://www.europa.eu/news/en/>, p.2

regulatory option that respects the sovereignty of the Member States and grounded their act on options two and three. The European executive power has also granted itself the permanent monitoring of the implementation of the regulation, in which the newly created European Board for Media Services is to take a key role. The monitoring includes '(a) a detailed analysis of the resilience of media markets in all Member States, including the degree of media concentration and risks of foreign manipulation of information and interference; (b) a review and forward-looking assessment of the resilience of the internal media services market as a whole; (c) a review of the measures taken by media service providers to ensure the independence of individual editorial decisions' (EMFA). These are extensive competencies and a clear superiority of the European level above the national level.

The Media Freedom Act does contain certain positive solutions for regulating the media landscape. These include a European database on media ownership, which should ensure transparency of media ownership in the European Union. The Act also requires the establishment of appeal periods for major service providers against any heavy-handed interventions (e.g. deleting profiles on the grounds of ideology) and encourages diversification as state spending is limited to 15 per cent of the budget per media outlet.

Unfortunately, the Act contains several specific provisions that raise concerns. An example is the envisaged creation of the new European Board for Media Services. This will be a Eurocratic body, albeit composed of representatives of Member States who will delegate members from their 'competent' authorities (national regulators) to represent the interests of the rulers who put them there. This is pure politics.

The problem in Europe is that the majority of the media space is left-leaning, i.e. asymmetrical, perhaps most evidently so in Slovenia, where more than 80 per cent of the media sympathise with the political left. This is a real problem that the proposed Act fails to address. The Act does not guarantee individuals the ability to freely choose politically informative content because there is simply not enough of it yet. Therefore, the legislators at the European level should pay more attention to ways to eliminate the asymmetry in Member States. As a result, the media system could garner the satisfaction of even the representatives of—let us call it—the neglected 'political minority', particularly in certain post-communist countries where the old nomenclature has retained the levers of power in the media system.

The aforementioned European Board will set up a so-called expert group comprised of representatives of civil society in addition to experts and media representatives from self-regulatory or co-regulatory organisations, such as journalists' associations and media or press councils, etc.

The Board and its expert bodies will draft opinions on national measures. These opinions will influence the EC's decisions and form the basis for the Rule of Law Report. EMFA has heavily subjugated the national regulatory authorities. This was one of the main contentious issues in the trilogue.

It is quite utopian to believe that Member States will ensure that national regulatory authorities are systemically separate from governments and functionally independent from their governments and certain centres of interest. The EMFA even envisages the creation of a special media ombudsman or body to, for example, check the financing of the media, etc. This is just another paper tiger that means further bureaucratisation. The Slovenian example of changes to media legislation clearly shows the authorities' desire to subordinate the media system also through a regulatory body, if we only look at the composition, method of establishment and powers of said body.

The EU's instruction to Member States appears no more than a paper tiger as it requires them to ensure by national legislation that the media remain fully autonomous and editorially independent of governmental, political, economic or private vested interests so that they might provide their audiences with a wide variety of information and opinions impartially and independently in the provision of their public service. It should also be ensured that governance structures are designed in a transparent and non-discriminatory manner, respecting the principles of independence, accountability, efficiency, transparency and openness. But this is just wishful thinking, even before attempting any implementation.

The EMFA cannot—despite my principal position that culture, including the media, should not be regulated in such a strict manner—be assessed as completely useless. Particularly, countries in transition have much to gain from adopting certain patterns and structures that can have a positive impact on the further development of the media landscape. However, such a reform, for example, in Slovenia, should be comprehensive and involve as many different stakeholders as possible, including political stakeholders, especially when it comes to politically informative programmes, which are the most sensitive part of the media-communication process. However, this

has not been the case because the aim of the reform is not media freedom in general but rather freedom of controlled media.

The Upcoming New Slovenian Mass Media Act

The profound European regulation of the media subsystem is to be followed by its national counterpart. Last December, the Slovenian government quietly published a proposal for a new Media Act for public debate, partly already influenced by the above-mentioned EMFA. The existing law has been amended several times and is more than two decades old, rendering it no longer relevant due to technological and other changes. The main objectives highlighted in the proposal are the assurance of the right to comprehensive media information and the assurance of media pluralism, which is the main Slovenian problem alongside content bias (asymmetry) and non-transparent concentration of owners.

The government intends to solve the issues of the media space by regulating the landscape with a 'carrot and stick'. Over the past 20 years, the state (or, more accurately, various governments) has financially intervened in the media market, often in a non-transparent way, at a total cost of some 50 million Euros, which is substantial for Slovenian circumstances. And we should add to that also the direct and indirect government interventions in advertising services. In short, politics is deeply embedded in the Slovenian media space. With the classical dominant media in permanent crisis, the government wants to provide additional resources to help the media, particularly the left-leaning ones. This will, of course, do nothing to increase media pluralism. The all-present asymmetry will only strengthen, and the bright objectives of the new legislation will remain a mere letter on paper.

The new register that is being established should help to increase transparency and, as a result, reduce concentration, which is especially important for media diversity. Despite their apparent diversity, different media outlets can speak with one voice if they have the same owner. This is one of the great challenges of the new law. The new regulator will, therefore, take on a lot of work and responsibility. Allow me to mention here the German model of limiting media ownership that is based on television audience share. The competent commission intervenes whenever required, for example, if a TV network wants to exceed a 30 per cent audience share through a merger.

The law also specifically addresses the role of artificial intelligence in the media. In this case, proper regulation is important, especially in terms of ensuring reliable information, maintaining ethical standards and safety from disinformation. The recipient of a media message must be able to know which part of the information is the product of a journalist's work and which part is the product of artificial intelligence.

When the state, or rather the government, or the ruling political option, wants to bring a social subsystem under control, it searches it for the so-called public interest. Article 14 broadly defines it as the state's concern for comprehensive information and media pluralism. This reads well at first sight. It is right for the state to ensure transparent media ownership and funding, to promote media pluralism and to support journalistic autonomy. However, the problems start when the authorities reserve the right to judge what constitutes quality journalism, or when they attempt to protect citizens from 'harmful media practices' such as disinformation, propaganda and hate speech. Independent guilds that decide on these matters beyond the interests of the authorities do not exist in practice, especially not in democracies that are not sufficiently mature and vital. It is these very guilds, of which more below, that can have a significant impact on the state of the media. Meanwhile, political power can, through its bodies and under the guise of public interest, influence the structure and, indirectly, the content of media reporting.

The Mass Media Act pays particular attention to the autonomy of the journalist (especially those working in mainstream media). The right of a journalist to refuse to produce a story if it contradicts his or her convictions is quite telling (Article 5). This is fine, but imagine a situation where more than 90 per cent of the journalists working in a daily news programme at a national TV channel are left-leaning. This right of denial alone makes biased reporting a systemic feature. This is the case with the state-owned RTV Slovenia. No one cares about the right of the recipient to be objectively informed. When I complained a few years ago about the biased reporting of a journalist from a mainstream media outlet, a fellow Member from the left said to me, 'Do you actually expect him to report contrary to his convictions?' And so we end up in a vicious circle.

We should pay particular attention, as noted above, to the new composition and method of appointment of the Media Council, which is set to replace the Broadcasting Council after the adoption of the Act (SRDF, Article 31).

Until now, the Council was appointed by the National Assembly. The new Mass Media Act transfers this power to the Government, meaning that the Media Council, a supposedly autonomous regulatory body, becomes a transmission of the Government since it performs certain tasks in its stead. The Media Council will naturally be depoliticised, composed of the professional public and civil society, if we allow ourselves a little joke.[8] By analogy with the European regulator, the Media Council will have considerable power as it will monitor, supervise, analyse, issue opinions, draw up annual reports, etc.

Freelance journalists who do not normally work for mainstream media have less autonomy. The erasure of a freelance journalist is regulated by Article 10 of the proposed Act. In the mainstream media, journalists are strongly protected, both normatively and politically, either through the political parties they serve or through powerful trade unions. The proposed Act defines, among other things, the conditions for erasure. The government has thus shown the 'stick' it will use when a journalist or media outlet simply has to be erased. In contrast to the main message of the new Slovenian Mass Media Act, the rights of users are therefore not at the forefront. The proposal also mentions the right of correction that was already established as a supra-standard right by the government in 2006, but the latest amendment gives extensive powers to the editor who can easily refuse a request for correction (Article 54).

The most feared and controversial proposal among the Slovenian public is Article 34, which prohibits media activity, mainly in cases of incitement to inequality and violence. The inspector can temporarily prohibit the dissemination of 'controversial' content.

The sincerity of the proposer's intentions has been called into question by the Catholic media in particular, most notably by Radio Ognjišče, a non-profit radio station of special interest. The Coordination of Catholic Media

---

[8] In the early 1990s, myself and Dr. Jože Pučnik, then Deputy Prime Minister, opposed the dictum that civil society should form the RTV Council when the first Radiotelevizija Slovenije Act the first Law on RTV was being drafted. We were already aware at the time that this was a Trojan horse of the political left. Paracivil NGOs were even then already indentured to the old nomenclature. We emphasised that NGOs were a collection of private and collective interests and could in no way be representative of a genuine civil society. The same deception is being used by the left now, more than three decades later, even at EU level.

even considers the proposed Act to be contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia and international treaties, as it restricts guaranteed freedoms. Particularly problematic for them are Article 34, which allows arbitrary censorship under the pretext of persecuting hate speech, and Article 48, which interferes with religious freedom by restricting advertising by religious communities.

Another provision of major importance for Slovenian culture is the share of domestic audiovisual content. Article 22 sets the necessary share of Slovenian content at only 5 per cent, which is unacceptable from a national and cultural point of view.

Media pluralism also entails plurality of owners, editorial offices, journalists and, last but not least, sources of funding. This ensures that different voices and points of view are heard, including those who have hitherto been discriminated against. Most of the major international media lean left of centre, and in Slovenia, over 80 per cent of the media favour the political left. As far as the new Mass Media Act is concerned, this issue is not being addressed.

The fact that the centre of powers wants to instrumentalise the media field was first demonstrated by the fact that the wider professional public, not even experts from the SRDF, let alone other professional associations, were invited to participate in the drafting of the Act. The Broadcasting Council therefore drew up its comments and proposals and did not consent to the draft.[9] In the opinion of the Broadcasting Council, the Act is overly focused on control, even on the controlled elimination of nuisance media, rather than on encouraging the development of new media. It is too focused on restrictions and even censorship, something rarely seen in developed democracies.

Conclusion

The European Union has recently been usurping more and more competencies that in the past fell in the domain of Member States, such as in the field of culture. The latest legislative Act (EMFA) is a typical example of radical regulation that is pushing the once autonomous media space at the national and European level into a fully dependent position, governed by

[9] Assessment of the proposal of the Mass Media Act MMed-1 and Council's Proposals for Amendments to the Act (30 January 2024).

rules, obligations and sanctions in violation of the principle of subsidiarity on which the European Union is founded. It is not good that the European Union has embarked upon this hard approach to regulation. It could have adopted an act based largely on recommendations. We understand that some things need to be regulated—for technical reasons alone, but regulation is restrictive, and it only benefits political forces with an undemocratic reflex in Member States such as Slovenia.

What both laws have in common (the European one has already been adopted, the Slovenian one is in the process of being adopted) is that they do not focus on what is good for the citizen, the actual party for whom the messages are intended. The logic of this intervention is upside down. You could say that the tail is wagging the dog. Instead of a free media space, with full and fair information at its heart, we will have a highly bureaucratised media system that will protect the interests of a particular political group. A political group that does not like freedom, market laws, but a rigid set-in-stone system of rules.

The fact that control over the media space means a great deal to the European left is also demonstrated by the unusual political proactivity of the Vice-President of the EC and Commissioner for Values and Transparency, Vera Jourova. When the EMFA was being adopted, she felt the need to explicitly confirm that the regulation was an instrument of pressure on Hungary and Poland. Earlier still, she intervened illegally in Slovenia during the adoption of an amendment to the Radiotelevizija Slovenije Act, the implementation of which was initially suspended by the Constitutional Court (CC). After she visited the CC, the Court changed its opinion. Once the law entered into force, the government uncompromisingly replaced the management of the national television institution. A part of the staff was later subjected to further violence, humiliation, slander, lies and, finally, dismissal from their jobs (the Panorama program, for example, which never identified as leaning towards one or another political option). All this is the result of a 'media putsch' by the far-left authorities at the national broadcaster and a decisive intervention in the legislative process, almost certainly on the part of the above-mentioned Commissioner. When the author of this article demanded the publication of documents pertaining to her visit in order to prove the illegal political intervention—not insignificantly, Jourova belongs to the same political group as the ruling party in Slovenia—she refused to disclose them,

even though European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly expressly urged her to do so. In short, the Commissioner for Values and Transparency is violating her own legislation and working against the values that she represents. She has, in fact, fallen into institutional conflict with European institutions.

The left, therefore, does not hesitate when taking up its means of controlling the media. First, they have subjugated the mainstream media (e.g. RTV), which are financed with taxpayers' money. Disobedient media will face the stick, erasure and other restrictions, which were now given a legal basis in the new Mass Media Act.

> *It is no small fact that there is much less freedom in the media in Slovenia when left-wing political parties are in power. This is clearly shown by media freedom indexes. In the latest analysis of last year by Reporters Without Borders, Slovenia was ranked a disastrous 50th, falling behind even Gambia. Under the previous centre-right government (in 2021), it placed fourteen places higher.*

In short, we can conclude that this kind of etatisation/subjugation of a space that should be as free as possible is completely inappropriate. The government has no right to selectively allocate taxpayers' money to pro-establishment media. After 35 years of transition, it would be difficult to say that Slovenia still suffers from an inherited cultural problem and that the public still thinks that the media serve the authorities and that autonomy, with professional, honest and responsible work at the forefront, is not yet dominant in people's thought structure. We also cannot say that we do not have a cultural problem manifested in 'democratic laziness'. We come closer to the truth if we find that the Slovenian political scene has again been 'surprised' by the left-wing radicalism that was at least partially marginalised in the last three decades.

But time does not work for extremes or for over-regulation in any social field, least of all in the field of the media, which was in Slovenia hit with a one-two punch combination of Brussels and Slovenia. More and more recipients are obtaining information from multiple and differently oriented sources. The public is increasingly educated and skilled and reasonably selective in obtaining and understanding the information available. And this is the only natural obstacle standing in the way of left-wing radicals in their way to penetrate society and its most vital part—the media—in a more lasting way.

References

Giddens, A. (1998). *Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keane, J. (2009). *The Life And Death of Democracy*, London: Simon & Schuster.

European Media Freedom Act, adopted at trialog (15. 12. 2023).

EU's Media Freedom Law Targets Poland and Hungary. <https://european-conservative.com/articles/news/eus-media-freedom>

Deal on the EU Media Freedom Act: <https://www.europa.eu/news/en/>.

Zakon o medijih, predlog, Ministrstvo za kulturo: <https://www.gov.si/novice/2023-12-12-predlog-zakona-o-medijih-v-javni-obravnavi/>

Media/Digital Literacy, Access to Information and European Democracy in the Light of Information and Communication Technology Adaptation

Alenka Pandiloska Jurak

ABSTRACT
Access to information is strongly related to forming personal/social opinions, one of the critical building blocks of democratic governance, while access to information is also crucially linked to media literacy, which affects the separation between quality, reliable information and misleading information. In the dissemination of information and communication with state authorities and other stakeholders, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is also essential. However, the availability and usage of those technologies differ among the EU macro-regions. This article shows the foundations of adopting ICT technologies in European macro-regions. It reviews data on how many people do not use a computer and how much they use ICT to communicate with public authorities. The data used in the research covers the years between 2008 and 2021, with which we will try to determine if there are changes in this topic.

Keywords: Technology adaptation, ICT, macro-regions, European Union, democracy

Introduction

Despite the prevalence of digital content consumption and production in today's society, citizens continue to encounter the danger of misinformation and exposure to radicalised and antisocial content, highlighting the importance of media literacy and developed digital literacy and ICT skills (Bădescu et al. 2024). Furthermore, access to information plays a vital role in forming personal and social opinions, serving as a cornerstone for democratic governance. In contemporary society, the landscape of information access is intricately linked to media literacy, influencing the ability to discern between credible, high-quality information and potentially misleading content. This intricate relationship is essential for fostering informed citizenry, capable of making deliberate decisions in a democratic framework.

Media literacy empowers individuals by enabling them to critically evaluate sources, identify biases and separate fact from fiction. In the digital age, where information is abundant and easily disseminated, media literacy becomes paramount for fostering a society capable of making well-informed decisions. It contributes significantly to the overall strength of democratic

processes by ensuring citizens are equipped with the tools to engage with information responsibly.

The role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in disseminating information cannot be overstated. ICT facilitates efficient communication with state authorities and other stakeholders, fostering transparency and accountability. ICT plays a crucial role in modern governance structures, from online platforms for civic engagement to electronic communication with government entities.

However, the adoption and utilisation of ICT vary across the EU's macro-regions. The article in question delves into the foundations of adopting ICT technologies in these regions, shedding light on the disparities in access and usage. Understanding these differences is vital for crafting policies addressing each macro-region's needs and challenges. The research presented in this chapter examines data on computer usage and the extent to which ICT is employed for communication with public authorities in the EU macro-regions. The study aims to identify trends and changes in adopting these technologies by analysing data between 2008 and 2021. This longitudinal approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how technological access and utilisation evolve over time, providing insights into the dynamic nature of digital engagement within different EU macro-regions.

Media Literacy and Democracy

Democratic polities depend on free, independent, and professional media (Tomšič 2023). New media based on digital technologies support democratic processes by providing greater opportunities for deliberation, discussion, communication, justice and participation. People can create free communication that is free from censorship and has a wider reach. Social networking sites can be used not only to keep in touch with relatives but also to create political and social organisations, publish news, market products and more. As a result, today's citizens have access to new media and a digital presence that enhances the representation of their opinions and participation in decision-making. As seen in contemporary social movements around the world, social media has become a driver of mass public action. There is evidence that social media provides new sources of information and channels of interpersonal communication that are critical in shaping citizen engagement behaviour (Tufekci 2017). The path to a vibrant participatory democracy now depends on working with

the media to promote participation in civic life. In today's hypermedia age, participating citizens must be guided to understand the relationship between personal and social identity and media, that is, a sense of place, community and democracy. This necessarily includes not only a strong critical and analytical approach to media literacy but also a fundamental understanding of media literacy as a collaborative and participatory movement that aims to empower individuals to have a voice and use it (Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013).

Despite the long history, the democracy has become more developable and diffusible by means of new media (Nilsson and Carlsson 2014). By interacting with social, political and cultural dynamics, new technologies play an important role in defending democracy and human rights by making it easier for people to access information and connect with others. Social media facilitates participation and shapes public opinion by serving as a forum for gathering information, providing mobile network connectivity to diverse groups, and observing peer behaviour (Boulianne 2015). The use of social media has been proven to promote political and civic engagement by encouraging social interaction and information sharing among individuals (Tugtekin and Koc 2020).

It appears that, in an increasingly mediated world, citizens with the ability to participate, collaborate and express themselves online have a greater opportunity to become critical thinkers, creators and communicators and agents of social change, thereby helping to provide society with the benefits of citizenship, the future of sustainability, tolerance and participatory democracy in the digital age (Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013).

Digital and Media Literacy Skills

Technological skills are central to many communicative processes. Media and digital literacy require a broad range of competencies in new and traditional media that allow all citizens to play a part in today's society. Failure to do so, it is argued, will mean an increasingly atomised society and a growing digital divide between those who are skilled or digitally literate and those who fall behind (European Commission 2007).

The multidisciplinary topic of digital literacy encompasses a wide range of subjects, including literacy, ICT, the Internet, computer skill proficiency, science, nursing, health and language education (Park, Kim and Park 2021). Digital literacy is the recognition of the information learners obtain through a networked medium, in which they are exposed to network computers and

experience cognitive information processing similar to reading newspapers and watching television. It is the ability to use the technology to read, write and function in the digital age (Bawden 2008). Digital literacy includes more than the ability to use software or operate a digital device. It encompasses a wide range of complex cognitive, motor, sociological and emotional skills that users need to function effectively in digital environments (Eshet 2004). Learners cultivate their understanding of the social impact of exploiting technology and their computational thinking, which is required in the maker movement and software education (Dougherty 2012). According to Martin and Grudziecki (2006), digital literacy has three levels, namely (1) digital competence, (2) digital usage and (3) digital transformation. Digital competence includes both lower and higher-order thinking skills, from basic skills to analytical skills. Digital usage relates to the application of digital competency to domain-specific areas, and digital transformation occurs when digital usage transforms the domain-specific areas using creativity (ibid.)

The European Commission recognises media literacy as the ability to access the media, understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content, and create communications in a variety of contexts. It relates to any media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and many other emerging digital communication technologies. It is a fundamental competence not only for the young generation but also for adults and elderly people, parents, teachers and media professionals (European Commission 2009). Age and education influence media preferences and determine how often a person is exposed to specific types of media. Young people, women and those with higher education have greater metareflexivity, which helps them respond positively to false information. The conclusion is that meta-reflexivity, although important, is not sufficient to elicit positive personal responses to disinformation (Golob, Makarovič and Rek 2021).

The Commission considers media literacy to be an important factor for active citizenship in today's information society (European Commission 2009). The prevailing discourse of media literacy policy promotes ethical individualism in the context of the digital media environment, where the source of moral values and principles and the basis of ethical evaluation is the individual. The individual is deemed responsible for choosing effectively and appropriately from an ever-increasing range of audiovisual services and is required to develop responsible modes of conduct and behaviour in the digital world (O'Neill 2010). The knowledge and skills that media literacy provides prominently

in EU policies that promote an open and competitive digital economy are regarded as key to improving social inclusion, public services and quality of life for European citizens (O'Neill 2010). Along with media literacy, computer literacy and e-literacy are skill-based literacies that have been developed with the emerging technology, which helped propose the need for improving information literacy that assesses and uses the content of information (Bawden 2001). Furthermore, Lankshear and Knobel (2007) stressed the use of the plural term 'digital literacies' when discussing various policies of digital literacy. They are viewed from many different sociocultural angles (Gee 1996) as 'new literacies' similarly do (Knobel and Lankshear 2007), expanding the overall views towards digital literacy with its educational significance.

Though not necessarily identical in application or purpose, the similarities between media literacy and digital literacy are striking. Digital literacy and media literacy educators view media and multimodal texts as valid sources of study and information gathering, seek to teach students to question the information and messages received from others, encourage students to be responsible, ethical users of technology and value consumption and production as responses to media and information (Kymes 2011).

Technology Adaptation

The dissemination of information by state services and agencies and the search for information involve regulating complex situations, such as acquiring rights and fulfiling duties towards state authorities. A crucial precondition for this process is the utilisation of ICTs and citizens' Internet access. The principal reservoir of information is the World Wide Web, underscoring the critical importance of media literacy. This proficiency is indispensable for discerning disinformation and hate speech and accessing relevant and credible information. Media literacy not only facilitates the reception and sharing of information but also plays a regulatory role in defining the rights and obligations of individuals vis-à-vis the state and its entities.

Technology is an essential driver of the global economy (Morrison 2006). Further, innovation is crucial for the EU's global competitiveness (Besednjak Valič 2019; Besednjak Valič et al. 2020; Besednjak Valič et al. 2021; Pandiloska Jurak 2021). Nevertheless, the technology adaptation is not a self-understood notion. When many digital breakthroughs come together, new actors, structures, practices, values and beliefs are introduced into organisations, ecosystems,

industries or sectors. These innovations might alter, threaten, replace or enhance the current rules of the game. This is known as digital transformation (Hinings, Gegenhuber and Greenwood 2018). Namely, it not only produces changes in an industry but also impacts societies as well (Kraus et al. 2021).

Changing and contested definitions of development seek to encompass and reflect the geographical variation and uneven economic, social, political, cultural and environmental conditions and legacies in different places across the world (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney 2011). Cultural norms play an important part in interpersonal relationships at work. When you grow up in a certain culture, you take the behavioural norms of your society for granted (Hofstede, Geert and Hofstede, Gert Jan and Minkov, Michael 2010). Disparities exist among countries regarding providing media literacy education, with some nations offering comprehensive programmes while others still need to. Moreover, certain citizens may still need the requisite knowledge to navigate and utilise these services effectively. An investigation into the frequency of citizens utilising these options is of particular interest, as it indicates their potential and the state's investment in foreign technologies. Such investments aim to provide citizens with more access to state services while simultaneously compelling them to acquire technological skills and adapt to the evolving digital landscape. This process, in turn, facilitates citizens' familiarity with new environments, including informational resources, reports from state authorities, news and educational content available online. Integrating these aspects into the digital realm is intricately connected to the principles of European democracy.

Methodology

The list of regions was compiled based on the EU macro-regional strategies (European Commission 2023) and Eurostat's NUTS 2 nomenclature (European Commission 2021) for each of the macro-regional strategies. Data on Individuals who have never used a computer and individuals who used the internet for interaction with public authorities were extracted from the Eurostat database (Eurostat, 2023) for each region in each macro-regional strategy that is part of the EU member states. Data for non-member states were not selected as we are interested in the impact on EU regions. The data cover several years, depending on the available data (from 2006 to 2017 for individuals who have never used a computer and from 2008 to 2021 for individuals who used the internet for interaction with public authorities), which

allows us to take a longitudinal view. After the data extraction, it was evident that much data were missing; namely, data for several regions were unavailable. Due to that, data on countries as units were used in the calculations.

Firstly, the average for the macro-region was calculated as one unit. All available years were included in the calculation. Secondly, the average was calculated for each region. The results are percentages. All available years were included in the calculation. The starting year lines up with the first year, and the data are available (2006 for individuals who have never used a computer and 2008 for individuals who used the internet for interaction with public authorities). The first year is a starting year or a year 0. The formula used is a standard formula for growth.

Using the results for the countries, the next step was to calculate the average growth of a macro-region under consideration.

Individuals Who Have Never Used a Computer

The data in Figure 1 represent the percentage of individuals who had never used a computer in various European countries in 2017, the most recent year for which data are available. These percentages reflect the varying levels of computer usage and digital literacy across European countries in 2017. Countries with higher percentages had a more significant proportion of individuals who had not yet used a computer, while lower percentages indicated a higher level of computer adoption.

Approximately 9.00 per cent of the population in Austria had not used a computer in 2017. A relatively high percentage indicates that around 30.97 per cent of individuals in Bulgaria had never used a computer. Croatia had a substantial portion of its population (28.91 per cent) who had not engaged with computers then. About 11.14 per cent of individuals in Czechia had yet to use a computer. Denmark had a low percentage, suggesting that only 2.78 per cent of individuals in the country had never used a computer. Estonia had around 8.91 per cent of its population without a computer. A relatively low percentage indicates that 4.29 per cent of individuals in Finland had never used a computer. About 9.90 per cent of individuals in France had yet to use a computer. Germany had a relatively low percentage, suggesting that 6.43 per cent of its population had never used a computer. A higher percentage (27.44 per cent) in Greece indicated that a significant portion of the population had not used computers. Around 17.07 per cent of individuals

in Hungary had yet to use a computer. Italy had a relatively high percentage, suggesting that 32.09 per cent of individuals had never used a computer.

State/Time	2017
Austria	9,00
Bulgaria	30,97
Croatia	28,91
Czechia	11,14
Denmark	2,78
Estonia	8,91
Finland	4,29
France	9,90
Germany	6,43
Greece	27,44
Hungary	17,07
Italy	32,09
Latvia	15,93
Lithuania	19,32
Poland	19,50
Romania	27,47
Slovakia	13,09
Slovenia	17,34
Sweden	2,12

Figure 1: Individuals who have never used a computer, EU and macro-region member states, 2017.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

Latvia had approximately 15.93 per cent of its population who had yet to use a computer. Lithuania had around 19.32 per cent of individuals who had yet to use a computer. About 19.50 per cent of individuals in Poland had yet to use a computer. Romania had a higher percentage, with 27.47 per cent of individuals who had never used a computer. Approximately 13.09 per cent of individuals in Slovakia had yet to use a computer. Around 17.34 per cent of individuals in Slovenia had yet to use a computer. Sweden had a deficient percentage, indicating that only 2.12 per cent of individuals in the country had never used a computer.

Cumulating the data, 20–30 per cent of people have yet to use a computer in five countries (out of 19). In seven countries, 10–20 per cent of people have yet to use a computer.

These percentages provide insights into the digital literacy and computer usage patterns across these European countries in the specified year. Further, we look into grouped data for the EU macro-regions from 2006 to 2017 to see the progress or the decline in the number of people who do not use computers.

Macro-regional average

The data in Table 1 shows the percentage of individuals who have never used a computer in different macro-regions of the European Union (EU) from 2006 to 2017.

Table 1: Individuals who have never used a computer, macro-regional average, from 2006 to 2017

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2017
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	47,69	44,84	43,31	40,06	36,88	34,62	33,02	28,82	28,46	26,87	26,45
Baltic Sea	25,73	24,43	21,74	20,49	18,16	17,20	15,98	14,53	12,85	11,90	9,91
Alpine Space	32,12	28,28	25,65	24,50	21,50	20,45	19,69	17,95	17,56	16,28	14,95
Danube Region	38,90	36,85	33,42	31,92	28,72	27,33	24,56	22,63	21,48	19,71	17,94

Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

In 2006, in the Adriatic Ionian Sea macro-region, 47.69 per cent of individuals in this region had never used a computer. This percentage gradually decreased over the years, reaching 26.45 per cent in 2017. The percentage of individuals who never used a computer in the Baltic Sea region was 25.73 per cent in 2006. This percentage declined consistently over the years, reaching 9.91 per cent in 2017. In 2006, 32.12 per cent of individuals in the Alpine Space had never used a computer. This percentage decreased over time, reaching 14.95 per cent in 2017. The Danube Region started with a percentage of 38.90 in 2006 and experienced a gradual decline, reaching 17.94 per cent in 2017.

The data suggest a general trend of decreasing percentages, indicating that over the specified years, there has been a reduction in the proportion of individuals in these macro-regions who have never used a computer. The data show an even decrease among the respected macro-regions (see Figure 2). Regardless, the differences in the shares of use between macro-regions are considerable, especially between the Adriatic, Ionian Sea and Baltic Sea. In 2017, the former had a 26.45 per cent non-use rate, while the Baltic Sea had a 9.91 per cent rate, which is 16.54 per cent less. Or else, it is a 2.7 times difference between the two regions.

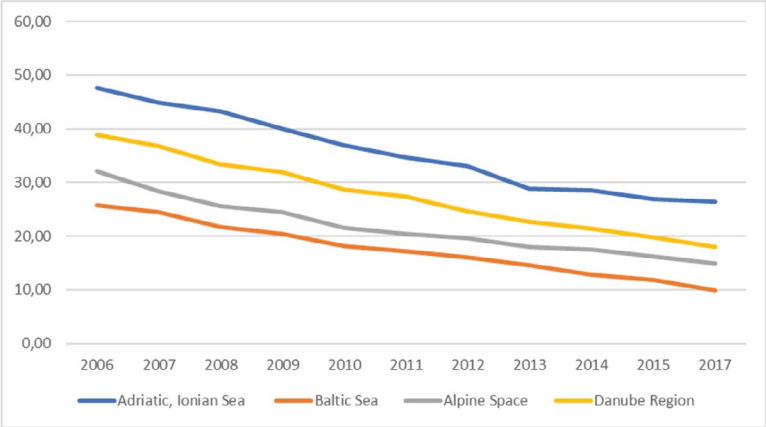

Figure 2: Individuals who have never used a computer, macro-regional average, from 2006 to 2017.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The data in Table 2 displays the percentage change in the number of individuals who have never used a computer in various EU Macro-regions from 2006 to 2017. The values are negative, indicating a decrease in the percentage of individuals who have never used a computer during this period.

Table 2: Individuals who have never used a computer, macro-regional growth/decline, from 2006 to 2017

Region	Growth/Decline
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	−5,22
Baltic Sea	−8,31
Alpine Space	−6,72
Danube Region	−6,80

Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The percentage of individuals who have never used a computer in the Adriatic and Ionian Sea region decreased by 5.22 per cent from 2006 to 2017. The percentage of individuals who have never used a computer in the Baltic Sea region decreased by 8.31 per cent during the specified period. The Alpine Space region experienced a 6.72 per cent reduction in individuals who have

never used a computer from 2006 to 2017. In the Danube Region, there was a 6.80 per cent decrease in the percentage of individuals who have never used a computer over the given timeframe.

Internet Use: Interaction with Public Authorities

The data in Figure 3 represents the percentage of individuals in various European countries who used the Internet to interact with public authorities in 2021. The data indicates varying levels of internet usage for such purposes across different European countries in 2021. Higher percentages indicate a greater reliance on online channels for accessing government services or interacting with public institutions, while lower percentages suggest a lesser degree of such digital interactions.

State/Time	2021
Austria	72,97
Bulgaria	26,6
Croatia	45,05
Czechia	68,24
Denmark	92,25
Estonia	81,93
Finland	89,39
France	80,66
Germany	50,3
Greece	55,0
Hungary	72,61
Italy	33,91
Latvia	77,43
Lithuania	61,62
Poland	47,5
Romania	14,65
Slovakia	55,95
Slovenia	69,1
Sweden	90,63

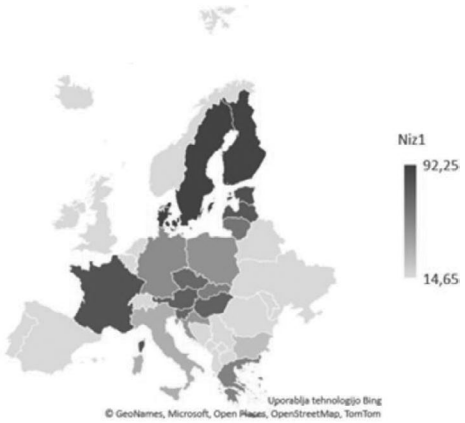

Figure 3: Internet use: interaction with public authorities, EU and macro-region member states, 2021.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

Approximately 72.97 per cent of Austria's individuals used the Internet to interact with public authorities in 2021. Only about 26.60 per cent of individuals in Bulgaria engaged in online interactions with public authorities. Around 45.05 per cent of Croatian individuals use the Internet to interact

with public authorities. In Czechia, a significant majority, approximately 68.24 per cent, used the Internet for interactions with public authorities. Denmark had a high percentage of individuals (92.25 per cent) using the Internet for interactions with public authorities. A substantial proportion, about 81.93 per cent, of individuals in Estonia engaged in online interactions with public authorities. Finland had a high percentage (89.39 per cent) of individuals using the Internet for interactions with public authorities. Approximately 80.66 per cent of individuals in France used the Internet for interactions with public authorities. In Germany, around 50.30 per cent of individuals interact online with public authorities. About 55 per cent of Greeks in Greece used the Internet to interact with public authorities.

In six out of nineteen countries, less than 50 per cent of people use the Internet to interact with public authorities. In five, more than 80 per cent of people did use it.

Macro-regional Average

The data in Table 3 represents the percentage of individuals in different EU macro-regions who used the Internet to interact with public authorities from 2008 to 2021. These percentages show the evolution of internet usage for interactions with public authorities in different macro-regions of the European Union over the specified years. Generally, most regions have an increasing trend, indicating a growing reliance on the Internet for engaging with public services. The data provides insights into the digitalisation of public interactions across these macro-regions over the years.

Table 3: Internet use: interaction with public authorities, macro-regional average, from 2008 to 2021

Region	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	20,67	21,93	25,56	28,01	31,79	33,15	38,25	37,67	38,63	38,49	41,09	40,40	47,70	50,77
Baltic Sea	39,61	46,50	50,79	52,96	56,34	52,73	58,86	62,05	65,48	66,94	68,10	71,10	73,34	73,88
Alpine Space	39,65	40,11	45,05	45,19	46,51	47,02	50,20	48,40	49,97	51,56	54,43	56,00	58,61	61,39
Danube Region	30,33	29,13	33,88	36,12	38,95	33,97	41,14	38,24	39,53	40,79	44,69	46,39	51,74	52,83

Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The percentage of individuals in the Adriatic Ionian Sea region using the Internet for interaction with public authorities has increased steadily over the years. It started at 20.67 per cent in 2008 and has reached 50.77 per cent in 2021. The region has experienced significant growth in the use of the Internet for engaging with public services. The Baltic Sea region has seen consistent growth in internet usage for interactions with public authorities. Starting at 39.61 per cent in 2008, it has increased to 73.88 per cent in 2021. This region has one of the highest percentages, indicating a high level of digital engagement. The Alpine Space region also consistently increases internet usage for interactions with public authorities. Beginning at 39.65 per cent in 2008, it has reached 61.39 per cent in 2021. The growth suggests an increasing reliance on online channels for public service interactions. The Danube Region has experienced growth in internet usage for interactions with public authorities, though with some fluctuations. Starting at 30.33 per cent in 2008, it reached 52.83 per cent in 2021. The region has shown a significant increase over the years, indicating a rising trend in digital engagement.

All four macro-regions have witnessed an increase in the percentage of individuals using the Internet for interactions with public authorities. This trend suggests a broader shift towards digitalisation in public services, with more people relying on online platforms to engage with government institutions and access public services.

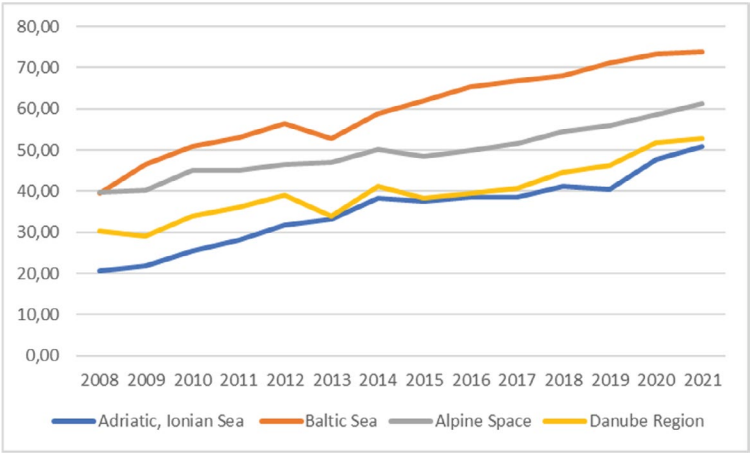

Figure 4: Internet use: interaction with public authorities, macro-regional average, from 2008 to 2021.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

Table 4 shows growth rate data for individuals using the Internet for interaction with public authorities in various EU Macro-regions from 2008 to 2021. The growth rates are calculated using the standard formula.

Table 4: Internet use: interaction with public authorities, macro-regional growth/decline, from 2008 to 2021

Region	Growth
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	6,63
Baltic Sea	4,55
Alpine Space	3,24
Danube Region	4,04

Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The Adriatic, Ioninan Sea macro-region has experienced a relatively high growth rate of 6.63 per cent over the specified period. This suggests an increasing trend in internet use for interaction with public authorities among individuals. The Baltic Sea macro-region has seen a growth rate of 4.55 per cent. While slightly lower than the Adriatic and Ionian Sea, it still indicates a significant rise in the adoption of online interactions with public authorities in this region. The Alpine Space macro-region has a growth rate of 3.24 per cent, which is the lowest among the regions. While the growth rate is lower, it still suggests a positive trend in using the Internet to engage with public authorities in this area. The Danube Region has experienced a growth rate of 4.04 per cent, falling between the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic and Ionian Sea. This indicates a moderate but steady increase in the use of online platforms for interaction with public authorities in the Danube Region.

All the macro-regions have shown favourable growth rates, signifying a broader trend of increasing reliance on the Internet for communication with public authorities across the EU. The differences in growth rates might be influenced by infrastructure development, technological adoption, and regional policies. Compared to the even decline of people who never used a computer over the years, the interaction curves among macro-regions are not so even. Their curves have several drops and inclines; namely, the rise is not shown as a steady growth.

Overall, the data suggests a positive trend across all macro-regions, indicating a shift towards using the Internet to interact with public authorities. The growth rates provide insights into the varying degrees of adoption across these regions, with factors like technological infrastructure, policies, and local preferences likely influencing the observed differences.

Internet Use: Submitting Completed Forms

The data in Figure 5 show the percentage of Internet users in various European countries who submit completed forms online, measured in 2021. The values represent the proportion of Internet users engaging in the specified activity. Countries with higher percentages generally have a more significant portion of their internet users actively using online forms, while lower percentages indicate less participation in this online activity.

In Austria, over half of internet users are actively involved in the submission of completed forms online. Contrastingly, only about 15 per cent of Bulgarian internet users participate in this online activity. Approximately a quarter of Croatian internet users engage in the submission of completed forms online. Czechia shows a similar trend, with more than half of its internet users actively participating in this process. Denmark stands out with a significant majority, as over two-thirds of its internet users submit completed forms online. Estonia also boasts a high percentage, with almost three-quarters of its internet users actively engaged in form submissions.

Finland mirrors Estonia's trend, with a substantial percentage, almost three-quarters, of internet users involved in submitting completed forms online. In France, over 70 per cent of internet users actively participate in this activity. However, the scenario differs in Germany, where less than one-third of internet users are involved in form submissions. More than one-third of Greek internet users engage in submitting completed forms online. Hungary, on the other hand, demonstrates a significant majority, with over two-thirds of its internet users participating in this online activity. In Italy, only about 23 per cent of internet users are actively involved in form submissions.

Latvia showcases a high percentage, with almost two-thirds of its internet users actively participating in submitting completed forms online. Lithuania follows suit, with more than half of its internet users involved in this process.

Poland, with just under 40 per cent of internet users, participates in form submissions. Romania, in contrast, has a low percentage, with less than 9 per cent of internet users engaging in this online activity. About a quarter of Slovakian internet users are involved in submitting completed forms online. Slovenia, with more than one-third of internet users, actively participates in this online activity. Sweden stands out with a very high percentage, as almost 80 per cent of its internet users are actively involved in submitting completed forms online. Less than 50 per cent of people in nine out of nineteen countries submitted the forms. Only one country reached almost 80 per cent, but none more than that.

State/Time	2021
Austria	53,54
Bulgaria	15,47
Croatia	24,43
Czechia	51,86
Denmark	68,38
Estonia	75,90
Finland	73,77
France	71,13
Germany	27,35
Greece	36,64
Hungary	66,29
Italy	22,97
Latvia	64,94
Lithuania	51,63
Poland	39,86
Romania	8,98
Slovakia	25,17
Slovenia	38,14
Sweden	79,50

Figure 5: Internet use: submitting completed forms, EU and macro-region member states, 2021.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

Macro-regional Average

The data in Table 5 describe the percentage of internet users in four different European Union macro-regions and their engagement in submitting completed forms online from 2008 to 2021.

Table 5: Internet use: submitting completed forms, macro-regional average, from 2008 to 2021

Region	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	6,39	8,00	8,11	10,12	12,59	15,31	17,45	17,69	17,99	17,63	18,46	20,34	25,02	30,55
Baltic Sea	21,28	25,51	29,66	31,41	32,93	31,56	35,71	41,94	43,32	49,11	52,19	56,03	57,31	60,17
Alpine Space	17,51	17,88	20,44	19,39	20,80	20,99	19,70	24,11	25,50	27,84	31,24	33,40	31,04	42,63
Danube Region	11,25	11,96	13,05	14,96	14,55	13,79	15,82	15,83	16,24	17,52	21,21	22,82	26,64	34,58

Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The percentage of internet users in the Adriatic Ionian Sea region involved in submitting completed forms has steadily increased. Starting at 6.39 per cent in 2008, it has consistently risen, reaching 30.55 per cent in 2021. This suggests a growing trend of internet users in the region actively participating in online form submissions. The Baltic Sea region has experienced a notable upward trend in online form submissions. Starting at 21.28 per cent in 2008, the percentage has consistently increased, reaching 60.17 per cent in 2021. This indicates a substantial growth in adopting online form submission among internet users in the Baltic Sea region. The Alpine Space region has shown some fluctuations in the percentage of internet users engaging in online form submissions. There was a significant increase from 17.51 per cent in 2008 to 31.24 per cent in 2018, followed by a decrease in 2019 and 2020. However, it saw a notable increase to 42.63 per cent in 2021. The overall trend suggests a growing interest in online form submission in this region. The Danube Region has experienced a consistent rise in internet users submitting completed forms online. Starting at 11.25 per cent in 2008, it has steadily risen, reaching 34.58 per cent in 2021. This indicates a positive trend in adopting online form submission among internet users in the region. The Baltic Sea region consistently shows a strong upward trend, while the other regions also demonstrate positive growth with some fluctuations. These trends reflect the increasing reliance on online platforms for form submissions across the specified macro-regions in the given period (see Figure 6).

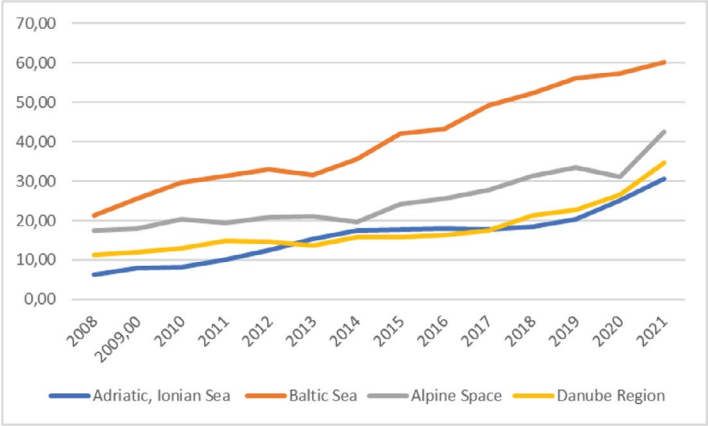

Figure 6: Internet use: submitting completed forms, macro-regional average, from 2008 to 2021.
Source: (Eurostat 2023), Author's own display

The provided growth rates (see Table 6) for Internet use in submitting completed forms across EU Macro-regions from 2008 to 2021 offer insights into the pace of development in each region over this period.

Table 6: Internet use: submitting completed forms, macro-regional growth/decline, from 2008 to 2021

Region	Growth
Adriatic, Ionian Sea	11,82
Baltic Sea	7,71
Alpine Space	7,09
Danube Region	9,01

Source: Author's own display

Adriatic, Ionian Sea region experienced a substantial annual growth rate of 11.82 per cent. This suggests a significant increase in the number of completed forms submitted over the years, indicating a robust and accelerating adoption of Internet-based form submissions. The Baltic Sea region had a growth rate of 7.71 per cent. While lower than the Adriatic and Ionian Sea region, this still indicates a healthy and consistent growth in Internet use for form

submissions over the specified period. The Alpine Space region had a growth rate of 7.09 per cent. This suggests a solid increase in the adoption of online form submissions, although slightly lower than in the Baltic Sea region. The Danube Region grew 9.01 per cent, indicating a strong and accelerating trend in using the Internet to submit completed forms. This region experienced a higher growth rate than the Baltic Sea and Alpine Space regions. All the EU Macro-regions experienced favourable growth rates, indicating a general trend of increasing reliance on the Internet for submitting completed forms. The variations in growth rates among regions may be influenced by regional economic development, technological infrastructure, and government initiatives promoting digitalisation. The higher growth rates suggest more rapid adoption or expansion of online form submission practices in those regions.

Conclusion

The data suggests a general trend of decreasing percentages of computer users, indicating that over the specified years, there has been a reduction in the proportion of individuals in these macro-regions who have never used a computer. The data shows an even decrease among the respected macro-regions. Nevertheless, it is essential to know that in five out of nineteen countries, 20–30 per cent of people have yet to use a computer.

In six out of nineteen countries, less than 50 per cent of people use the Internet to interact with public authorities. In five, more than 80 per cent of people did use it. Overall, the data suggests a positive trend across all macro-regions, indicating a shift towards using the Internet to interact with public authorities.

All the EU macro-regions experienced favourable growth rates, indicating a general trend of increasing reliance on the Internet for submitting completed forms. The variations in growth rates among regions may be influenced by regional economic development, technological infrastructure, and government initiatives promoting digitalisation. The higher growth rates suggest more rapid adoption or expansion of online form submission practices in those regions.

It can be assumed that the adaptation to a newly developing technology and the adaptation technology that is already in full bloom can have a very different sociological effect. This means that in stagnating countries, it will

be necessary to pay special attention to the intensity of the impact of the Internet, online media, and general access to information, especially on children and youth. However, it is true, which we consider a shortcoming of this article, that the presented data do not offer us information about the age division of non/users. Namely, it might be that most nonusers are elderly or people over 60 who are now either finishing their active years or have no need to use the computer and internet for job purposes.

After the initial data extraction phase, it became apparent that a comprehensive dataset was crucial for the accuracy and reliability of the subsequent calculations. However, a notable challenge arose as certain regions needed more available data. This limitation posed a potential obstacle to conducting a thorough analysis using regional distinctions. In response to this data gap, a strategic decision was made to employ a country-centric approach in the calculations. This adjustment in methodology aimed to ensure the completeness of the dataset, allowing for a more inclusive and robust analysis despite the unavailability of regional-specific information. It's important to acknowledge that this adaptation introduces abstraction and simplification, as the nuances and variations within regions might need to be fully captured.

References

Bădescu, G., Radu, Mihai, B. and Tomšič, M. (2024). *Media Literacy, Media Education and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Bawden, D. (2001). 'Information and Digital Literacies: A Review of Concepts', *Journal of Documentation*, 57(2), 218–259.

—. (2008). 'Origins and Concepts of Digital Literacy', *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*, 30(2008), 17–32.

Besednjak Valič, T. (2019). 'Innovation, Digitalisation, and the HPC in the Danube Region' In Rončević, B. and Fric, U. (eds) *Go with the Flow: High-Performance Computing and iInovations in the Danube Region*, pp. 22–46. London: Vega Press.

Besednjak Valič, T. Kolar, J. and Lamut, U. (2020). 'Three Scenarios of Innovation and Technology Transfer: The Case of Key Enabling Technologies in the Danube Region', *Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences*, 15(2020), 3619–3623.

—. (2021). 'Fighting the Big Bad Wolf of Global Trends: Technology Transfer between HPC Centres and SMEs', *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance*, 24(6), 498–512.

Boulianne, S. (2015). 'Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research', *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524–538.

Dougherty, D. (2012). 'The Maker Movement', *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization*, 7(3), 11–14.

Eshet, Y. (2004). 'Digital Literacy: A Conceptual Framework for Survival Skills in the Digital Era', *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 13(1), 93–106.

European Commission (2021). 'Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1130 of 5 July 2021 Setting out the List of Regions Eligible for Funding from the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus and of Member States Eligible for Funding from the Cohesion Fund for the Period 2021-2027 (Notified under Document C(2021) 4894)', 2021 <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2021/1130/oj/eng>, accessed 5 July 2023.

—. (2007). 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A European Approach to Media Literacy in the Digital Environment', <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52007DC0833>, accessed 24 April 2024.

—. (2023). 'Inforegio - Macro-Regional Strategies', <https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies_en>, accessed 7 September 2023.

—. (2009). 'Media Literacy in the Digital Environment | EUR-Lex', <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SL/ALL/?uri=uriserv%3Aam0004>, accessed 24 April 2024.

Eurostat (2023). 'Individuals Who Have Never Used a Computer', <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_CUX_I/default/table?lang=en>, accessed 5 October 2023.

—. (2023). 'Individuals Who Used the Internet for Interaction with Public Authorities', <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_GOV_I/default/table?lang=en>, accessed 5 October 2023.

Golob, T., Makarovič, M., and Rek, M. (2021). 'Meta-reflexividad para la resiliencia contra la desinformación', *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 29(66), 107–118.

Hinings, B., Gegenhuber, T, and Greenwood, R. (2018). 'Digital Innovation and Transformation: An Institutional Perspective', *Information and Organization*, 28(1), 52–61.

Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, G. J., and Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. Revised and Expanded 3rd Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill Professional.

Kraus, S., Jones, P., Kailer, N., Weinmann, A., Chaparro-Banegas, N., and Roig-Tierno, N. (2021). 'Digital Transformation: An Overview of the Current State of the Art of Research', *SAGE Open*, 11 (3).

Kymes, A. (2011). 'Media Literacy and Information Literacy: A Need for Collaboration and Communication', *Action in Teacher Education*, 33(2), 184–193.

Mihailidis, P., and Thevenin, B. (2013). 'Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(11), 1611–1622.

Morrison, J. (2006). *The International Business Environment*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Nilsson, B., and Carlsson, E. (2014). 'Swedish Politicians and New Media: Democracy, Identity and Populism in a Digital Discourse', *New Media & Society*, 16(4) 655–671.

O'Neill, B. (2010). 'Media Literacy and Communication Rights', *International Communication Gazette*, 72(4–5), 323–338.

Pandiloska, Jurak, A. (2021). 'The Importance of High – Tech Companies for EU Economy – Overview and the EU Grand Strategies Perspective', *Research in Social Change*, 12(3), 32–52.

Park, Hyejin, K., Han S., and Park, H. W. (2021). 'A Scientometric Study of Digital Literacy, ICT Literacy, Information Literacy, and Media Literacy', *Journal of Data and Information Science*, 6(2), 116–138.

Pike, A., Rodríguez-Pose, A., and Tomaney, J. (eds) (2011). *Handbook of Local and Regional Development*. London, New York: Routledge.

Tomšič, M. (2023). 'Populism, Media Messaging, and Media Literacy', *Politics in Central Europe*, 19(1), 455–470.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tugtekin, E. B., and Koc, M. (2020). 'Understanding the Relationship between New Media Literacy, Communication Skills, and Democratic Tendency: Model Development and Testing', *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1922–1941.

The Synergy of Industrial Symbiosis, Social Media, and Sustainable Development: Shaping a Circular Future

Erika Džajić Uršič

ABSTRACT
This chapter explores the dynamic interplay between industrial symbiosis and social media as catalysts for sustainable development. Industrial symbiosis as a circular economy approach and digital innovation are now tangible and unstoppable realities that profoundly affect every sector of our society, while social media and the web serve as crucial and indispensable platforms for dissemination. This is like a stage and a privileged forum from which to observe, understand and attempt to change the complexity of reality. This combination is particularly relevant for the new generations. Social networks are integral to companies' and brands' new communication and sustainable development models. This chapter discusses industrial symbiosis, a collaborative concept where industries share resources and waste. Simultaneously, it explores how the changing role of social media aligns with these principles, promoting a more responsible and aware approach to development and communication.

Keywords: industrial symbiosis, social media, sustainable development, social networks

Introduction

The year 2018 marked a pivotal moment in the European Union's acknowledgement and response to the escalating threats posed by climate change and environmental deterioration. Central to this paradigm shift was the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) ground-breaking special report on the repercussions of global warming, explicitly focusing on the impact of surpassing 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, commonly known as the SR1.5 (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018; 'Global Warming of 1.5°C —' 2023).

This report underscored the primary objective of the Paris Agreement (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018), emphasising the imperative to 'hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels'. The genesis of this report can be traced back to the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2015, a crucial juncture where the Paris Agreement was forged (Wallace-Wells 2018).

Following the release of the SR1.5, mainstream social media outlets played a pivotal role in disseminating information about the dire consequences of surpassing the 1.5°C target (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018; 'Global Warming of 1.5°C —' 2023).

This convergence of scientific findings and social media coverage heightened public awareness and underscored the urgency of collective action. The media's role in amplifying the severity of climate change impacts propelled the discourse from scientific circles into the mainstream, fostering a broader understanding of the immediate need for mitigation and adaptation measures.

The events of 2018 catalysed a transformative shift in the EU's perception of climate change threats, with the IPCC's report and subsequent social media coverage acting as catalysts for heightened awareness, policy revaluation and a renewed commitment to address the pressing challenges posed by a rapidly changing climate (Bolton et al. 2020).

The apparent inconsistency between the urgent scientific findings and the inactive global progress in aligning with the Paris Agreement commitments is compounded by inadequate and tardy policy responses (Trippel 2020). Present realities unequivocally dictate that to ensure the sustained growth and prosperity of global economies, it is imperative to take climate change and environmental degradation seriously and instigate fundamental reforms in the operational framework of our economies. Despite the availability of some of this evidence for decades, policymakers have only recently begun addressing it urgently and directly (Özuyar 2019). The perceived absence of ready-made solutions may have led to a reflexive turn towards ignorance and surrender (Kompas, Pham and Che 2018).

In this case, policymakers have historically adopted a non-systemic approach, narrowly prioritising issues like jobs and growth while detached from the broader context of impending biodiversity loss and climate tipping points. This compartmentalised perspective may have contributed to the previously tepid policy responses outlined in the subsequent section, potentially fuelling climate scepticism among European citizens (Gasparrini et al. 2017).

Until 2018, sustainability was often viewed as a 'nice to have' rather than a necessity for the long-term functioning of economic systems (Meadowcroft and Steurer 2018). Policymakers erroneously dichotomising sustainability against jobs and growth may have influenced lukewarm policy responses

(Gunningham and Sinclair 2002). However, there has been a perceptible shift in the last decade, with policymakers recognising sustainability as indispensable for the endurance of economic systems (European Parliament and Council, 2018). This shift aligns with a growing awareness among EU citizens regarding sustainability's vital role in shaping their future. As citizens increasingly prioritise environmentally responsible practices, there is a heightened demand for policies that promote economic growth and address the imperative of sustainability (Sachs et al. 2019). The changing perspective among EU citizens serves as a driving force behind policymakers' newfound commitment to integrating sustainability into the core fabric of economic systems. This evolving sentiment underscores the imperative for comprehensive and sustainable policies that resonate with the values and expectations of the European populace (Acemoglu et al. 2019). The European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), unveiled on 11 December 2019, represented a paradigm shift by adopting a comprehensive and radical approach. The European Green Deal is integral to the European Commission's strategy to implement the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Commission has focused on delivering concrete actions that will bring tangible progress in the areas of the 17 SDGs.

The European Green Deal aimed to restructure the European Union into a just and prosperous society, fostering a modern, resource-efficient, competitive economy. The overarching goal was to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, decoupling economic growth from resource consumption. This imperative was further underscored in the European Green Deal Investment Plan, the investment arm of the broader initiative, published shortly thereafter. The plan outlined a commitment to mobilise a minimum of 1 trillion EUR in sustainable investments over the next decade through the EU budget. To create an enabling framework for both private investors and the public sector, there was a crucial need for clarity on what constitutes a sustainable investment. Recognising this, the European Green Deal Investment Plan explicitly identified the EU Taxonomy as one of the primary tools to achieve the outlined sustainability goals.

The European Green Deal is a cornerstone in the EU's ecological transition plan, influencing the NextGenerationEU and, consequently, the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) (*Recovery and Resilience Facility*, 2021).

Implementing the European Green Deal necessitates considerable resources, requiring initiatives to reactivate economic frameworks and stimulate growth in underprivileged areas.

European policies increasingly recognise the potential role of industrial symbiosis in transitioning to industrial circularity and efficiency among EU citizens, especially within the framework of the European Green Deal. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the capabilities outlined in the NRRP present a unique opportunity for accelerated industrial symbiosis growth. However, financial considerations remain a significant challenge. Member States of the European Union must strive to create more flexible funding structures and garner political support, establish competent regulatory bodies at all levels and centralise legal and relief taxes to maximise the benefits of the industrial symbiosis approach (EU Cohesion Policy implementation in Slovenia 2020). This comprehensive approach is crucial for overcoming financial hurdles and ensuring the success of sustainable initiatives in the EU (Fric et al. 2023). Amidst these structural considerations, social media plays a pivotal role.

This chapter integrates social media into the social discourse, emphasising its power to amplify industrial symbiosis into the lives of EU citizens. As industries collaborate in resource exchange, social media platforms become conduits for disseminating information, fostering public awareness, and securing public support. Documentaries, news features and strategic social media platforms and campaigns emerge as instruments for shaping a positive narrative around sustainable practices.

While acknowledging the environmental challenges, this chapter posits that a synergistic relationship between industrial symbiosis and social media can enhance the visibility of sustainable initiatives and contribute to overcoming sustainable barriers (ibid.).

The research question of this chapter, 'How does the interplay between industrial symbiosis and social media contribute to shaping environmental, sustainable development models and fostering a responsible approach to communication?' will provide a little more enlightenment on the vision of a future where media, policy and industrial practices converge. Creating a narrative, media, policy and industrial practices supports the transition to circular/industrial symbiotic economies and inspires a collective commitment to sustainable development in the European Union.

In line with the wider themes explored in this volume, which interrogate the evolving dynamics of media, populism, and European democratic values, this chapter situates environmental sustainability and industrial transformation within the realm of digital communication. While other chapters investigate political narratives, identity-making and populist mobilisation via media, this chapter extends the analysis by exploring how media, especially social platforms, also serve as agents for environmental awareness, citizen engagement and corporate accountability. This chapter thereby adds a crucial sustainability and policy-focused dimension to the media-democracy interface under discussion throughout this book.

Industrial Symbiosis and Media: Catalysts for Change

Initially introduced in 1947 by George Thomas Renner, industrial symbiosis is 'the set of exchanges of resources between two or more dissimilar industries' (Renner 1947: 187–189). Various authors offer diverse definitions of industrial symbiosis, considering it an approach to Industrial Ecology (Džajić Uršič 2020), a synonym for IE (Phillips et al. 2006), a subset of IE (Chertow and Lombardi, 2005), an activity within IE (Rui and Heijungs, 2010) or an Eco-IS representing local or regional circular economy and environmental approaches (Chertow 2007; Howard-Grenville and Paquin 2008; Gingrich 2012; Hartard 2014).

Industrial symbiosis represents a paradigm centred on linking the exchange of services, resources, by-products and waste. It originated as a framework for facilitating a transition to a more environmentally efficient industrial system by creating inter-organisational networks that enable the exchange of waste materials and energy. The exploration of industrial symbiosis gained prominence concurrently with the growing interest in industrial ecology. The relationship between industrial symbiosis and industrial ecology is intricate and has been conceptualised in various ways. According to particular perspectives, industrial symbiosis stands out as one of the most successful manifestations of industrial ecology. This new interdisciplinary paradigm introduces sustainable industrial ecosystems by fostering interaction between industrial symbiotic networks and their surroundings. Industrial symbiosis is often viewed as an integral aspect of Industrial Ecology (Chertow 2007; Rui and Heijungs 2010; Howard-Grenville and Paquin 2008; Rončević and

Fric 2015) or a potential approach within the realm of IE. A potential distinction between industrial ecology and industrial symbiosis lies in their focus; starting with fundamental concepts, industrial ecology serves as a scientific discipline delving into the interconnections among companies, termed 'the industrial metabolism', and the broader environment, encompassing social productivity and cultural dimensions of the human system (Ayres et al. 1989).

While literature often employs the Eco-Industrial Park or Eco-Industrial Park network interchangeably with industrial symbiosis, a distinction persists due to variations in objectives, involved players and practices (Winans et al. 2017). The crucial factor lies in the distance between industries and the flows of energy and materials among entities. Initiatives under the Eco-Industrial Park involve water, energy, information and materials exchanges, aligning with the shared commitment to use less energy and raw materials while reducing waste to develop sustainable economic, ecological and social relationships.

The notion that 'industrial symbiosis is an essential concept for the circular economy' is frequently cited in both academic and policy discourse. This perspective is widely supported by experts, researchers and advocates of industrial symbiosis as well as the circular economy. However, it's important to note that the specific attribution of this statement may vary, and it is a reaction shared by many within the fields of industrial ecology, sustainable development and circular economy advocacy.

The idea is that industrial symbiosis, emphasising exchanging resources, minimising waste and creating more efficient and sustainable industrial systems, aligns well with the circular economy principles. The circular economy aims to minimise waste and maximise resources by promoting the main: recycling, reusing and reducing environmental impact (triple 'R') (Džajić Uršič 2020). In this context, industrial symbiosis is crucial in fostering the circular economy by facilitating the exchange and reuse of materials and by-products among industrial entities on a more abstract level (Džajić Uršič 2020). Efforts are underway to recognise industrial symbiosis actors as environmentally conscious and socially aware of their surroundings.

However, the intersection of industrial symbiosis and social media refers to the point at which these two components converge and interact, and the professional and scientific literature needs more basics. Industrial symbiosis includes industries working together to share resources and manage waste

more effectively. When this notion crosses with the media, it means that how industrial symbiosis practices are portrayed, covered and communicated impacts public perception and awareness (Costa and Ferrão 2010; Costa, Massard, and Agarwal 2010; Eilering and Vermeulen 2004).

The media, both conventional and social, play a vital role in conveying information to a large audience. Coverage of successful industrial symbiosis efforts may emphasise the positive impact of industry collaboration on resource sharing and waste reduction. By highlighting these initiatives, social media may inspire companies to embrace environmentally friendly and socially responsible activities.

The Intersection of Data, Technology and Sustainability: Shaping the Future of Society in Urban Environments

In the last two decades, society has undergone a profound transformation driven by the confluence of two pivotal factors: the exponential growth of data and technological advancements for its processing. Data have garnered immense value, partly due to the heightened awareness of their economic implications, both in the present and the short term, among significant organisations.

The web has emerged as the primary catalyst for recent social and economic shifts. It has altered how we interact and conduct shopping and, more importantly, revolutionised how we consume information. With their user-friendly interfaces, the widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets has facilitated this transformation even among segments less inclined towards technology. This ongoing shift has significantly influenced the job market, with data scientists becoming the most sought-after professionals adept at comprehending data and translating it into understandable and actionable knowledge.

The impact of data and their dissemination extends beyond job creation to encompass novel forms of work. The notion of a 'smart' job, conducted remotely and outside traditional office hours, has become almost commonplace, departing from the conventional 8-hour workday recorded by time clock punching, as was the norm in the 1970s. Smart working is a burgeoning phenomenon poised to profoundly impact mobility and lifestyles in the years to come. This approach not only saves resources and reduces pollution

by minimising travel but also affords more time for personal well-being and family, along with cost savings associated with office rentals and related consumptions, all without compromising productivity, which stands to benefit.

The theme of digitisation has intricately woven itself, particularly in recent years, with the discourse on the environmental sustainability of cities. While sustainable and smart cities were once viewed as distinct strategies, the technological dimension is now considered to be in strict coherence with the future needs of citizens. These technologies must effectively support the sustainability journey of urban areas, focusing on the interplay between lifestyles, basic needs, an economy grounded in local resources and a cohesive blend of technology and social organisation to mitigate negative environmental impacts.

Through the Internet of Things (IoT), the prospect of virtually changing one's residential location becomes plausible, facilitated by a network of sensors scattered throughout the city. The primary objective of IoT implementation in cities is the ability to design, intercept and transform data into information, knowledge and decisions, aligned with a strategy fostering efficient solutions for data governance and sustainable urban development. Various experimental solutions are underway, including volumetric sensors in waste bins communicating fill levels, cameras and intrusion sensors enhancing city security, and traffic telecontrol, traffic light optimisation and thermostat control. In this context, social media plays a crucial role as an amplifier of industrial symbiosis, utilising its reach to disseminate information and highlight the symbiotic relationships within evolving urban ecosystems. The media's influence can raise awareness, promote sustainable practices and encourage collaboration among various stakeholders to pursue a circular and interconnected urban landscape (Quirico 2023; Richini 2017).

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing wave of communications regarding companies' environmental commitment and performance. This trend, which might seem like a positive step towards sustainability, is sometimes overshadowed by the 'greenwashing' phenomenon, where only partially sustainable behaviours are emphasised, hiding the unsustainability still present in production processes and production chains. Instead, we should focus on measuring how 'unsustainable' our way of producing, consuming and behaving is. Therefore, we should avoid glorifying what are, in reality, timid steps towards the ecological transition and pay more attention to

the negative impacts and consequences of the 'unsustainability' of production chains. From knowledge comes awareness, which can generate change (Quirico 2023; Richini 2017).

This growing awareness pushes us to carefully examine virtuous initiatives at macro, meso and micro levels. When we address the topic of industrial symbiosis/circular economy, the current situation can be seen as both a glass half full and half empty. Virtuous individual and micro-level initiatives represent an essential step towards a more sustainable future, but their impact may be limited. Real substantive change will occur when we develop and consolidate circular models on a systemic and integrated scale. This means promoting a circular approach at an individual or production level and an institutional level is necessary.

While it is encouraging to witness a rapid proliferation of green industries and circular initiatives, it should be noted that more than virtuous initiatives at an individual level may be required. It is essential to promote and consolidate green approaches on a larger scale, encourage collaboration and symbiosis, and consider flows of resources and materials in a broader and more integrated way.

To address the ecological crisis, we must rethink our lifestyles, which contribute to climate change due to the thoughtless use of natural resources. This challenge requires widespread collaboration, which is only possible by increasing awareness at all levels of society. The concrete implementation of policies to reduce waste and emissions requires coordinated and conscious actions. Collective and supportive action is essential, but a decisive change in thinking and acting is needed at the public and private levels (Quirico 2023).

However, as citizens become increasingly informed about environmental issues and the benefits of adopting circular economy practices, they will likely demand specific action from the European Union (Nebbia 2014). This, in turn, should gradually stimulate the evolution of laws and regulations to address these new needs. By perceiving the increasing regulatory pressure and the growing number of informed citizens who are also consumers, businesses will be compelled to incorporate circular practices into their operations. This drive can arise from the need to comply with stricter regulations or the attractiveness of incentives and facilitations. Furthermore, the shift in citizen-consumer attitudes will encourage businesses to steer their production towards more sustainable and responsible models. It is crucial to act

swiftly because acquiring awareness only sometimes translates into more sustainable behaviours (Nebbia 2014). Promoting new, creative, innovative and regenerative economies makes supporting and encouraging virtuous initiatives at the micro level possible. Creating the conditions for the circular approach to become a best practice rather than an exception is equally crucial (Quirico 2023). In navigating these complexities, it is essential to recognise the interconnectedness of citizen awareness, the demand for sustainable practices and the influence of social media on public discourse.

The assumption that sustainable development, particularly concerning the European Green Deal, is widely accepted as a priority among citizens must be critically examined. Recently, there has been a significant surge in opposition to environmental measures. Farmers, who have been particularly vocal in their protests across Europe, are supported by a sizable portion (if not the majority) of citizens. Moreover, an increasing number of political actors align themselves with this opposition, as evidenced by election outcomes such as those in the Netherlands (Dirkx 2023; Henley and correspondent 2024).

This challenges the notion of a consensus surrounding sustainability, suggesting that it may not be as universally accepted as previously assumed. With their ability to amplify voices and facilitate discourse, social media platforms can be utilised to promote sustainability initiatives. However, they are equally adept at disseminating opposing viewpoints and mobilising resistance against environmental policies (O'Neill and Day 2009).

In light of these developments, it becomes essential to recognise the dual nature of social media as both a platform for promotion and opposition. While it can be a catalyst for positive change, it also has the potential to fuel scepticism and resistance towards sustainability efforts. Understanding this duality is crucial for navigating the complexities of public opinion and shaping effective communication strategies in sustainability (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002).

The Effectiveness of 'green' Communication on Social Media: Communicating Industrial Symbiosis

Companies actively pursue industrial symbiosis not as a passing trend but in response to growing user demand, concurrently aligning with increasingly specific norms. Before delving into communication strategies within

companies that promote 'green', it is crucial to refer to the concept of a sustainable company.

The Green Paper of the European Community promotes a framework for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), asserting that CSR involves voluntarily integrating social and environmental concerns into business operations and stakeholder relationships (Besednjak Valič et al. 2021). This goes beyond fulfilling legal obligations, extending to additional investments in human capital, the environment, and stakeholder relations (European Commission, 2011). Moving beyond the concept of economic value, 'well-being' is viewed in its broader sense. For instance, companies combine profitability with impactful environmental and social goals, incorporating business ethics, responsibility and transparency.

Marketing or institutional procedures can drive 'green' communication (see communication) strategies in companies emphasising industrial symbiosis. In the former case, the goal is to promote and enhance the brand or products, always considering industrial symbiosis and employing strategies that amplify sustainability principles and success stories.

A strategy is termed 'green' when communication and marketing aim to enhance the principles and success stories of industrial symbiosis adopted by the company, utilising transparency, consistency and CSR. Transparency implies supporting positive aspects without exaggeration, maintaining credibility and not concealing existing deficiencies (Grayson and Hodges 2017). Coherence stresses that all communication messages must align with the company's ethics and philosophy. For example, if a company communicates its CSR commitment to environmental conservation through industrial symbiosis, it must refrain from engaging in practices that contradict it (Carroll 1999).

Companies emphasising industrial symbiosis should focus on enhancing reputation, projecting a positive image and raising awareness while respecting environmental and social regulations. The communication strategy should emphasise the collaborative sharing of resources and waste among industries, highlighting industrial symbiosis's principles and success stories. Key benefits of communicating about industrial symbiosis by a company usually include external transparency, improved reputation, enhanced risk management, organisational culture growth, internal transparency, strengthened social key, increased awareness of industrial symbiosis issues, a competitive advantage,

external transparency for investors, legal compliance and alignment with competitors (Joseph et al. 2016; Solovjova and Sivolapova 2022).

Dismissing misconceptions, the industrial symbiosis approach and communication are not spin-offs or evolutions of traditional commercial communication. The primary difference lies in the objectives: commercial communication aims to facilitate economic exchange by convincing or, in some cases, misleading the target audience about the high quality of a product/company compared to the competition. In contrast, industrial symbiosis communication aims at information as cultural dissemination and the development of a new consumerist mode and lifestyle, with the ultimate goal of creating an authentic union between stakeholders and companies that emphasises their commitment to industrial symbiosis principles and success stories.

Industrial symbiosis communication must be disseminated and understood by various targets. For companies, this type of communication is adopted not only as a moral obligation but, increasingly, also as an excellent source of profit, given that industrial symbiosis is enhancing competitive advantages. The goal is to develop activities to help the market reward companies and brands that demonstrate their commitment to industrial symbiosis. The main communication channels for companies emphasising industrial symbiosis are self-referential; information about industrial symbiosis is conveyed primarily through corporate channels. These include internal and external communication, websites and social media, which play a crucial role as the new means of communication within the business environment. Social media are essential in this context, serving as a key player in the business, given their role as a new communication medium (Quirico 2023).

Communicating industrial symbiosis differs significantly from commercial communication, and the same applies to social networks. This communication through social networks aims to actively engage recipients (usually consumers), provide practical information and raise awareness, eliciting a conscious response from users. Key players include companies, associations, organisations, public entities and influencers, acting as primary disseminators of environmental communication in the social domain. Their message encompasses practices integral to our industrial symbiosis, establishing a stable connection with recipients and fostering connections and relationships. The emphasis remains on environmental protection, avoiding deceptive advertising or greenwashing.

In recent years, green communication on social platforms has undergone significant evolution (Balzaretti and Gargiulo 2011). Engagement and shared motivation must be created; social media and the digital world can and should play a key role. Regarding communicating industrial symbiosis on social media, users tend to favour Instagram, where posts and interactions hold greater significance. YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, X and others also maintain relevance (Cosenza 2022).

In this context, strategies have emerged to promote sustainable consumer behaviours, including green marketing approaches, which have evolved into more structured concepts. Recipients are attracted to 'social action', following and interacting with profiles knowledgeable about environmental issues and adhering to social communication. Individuals with a higher level of reliability, such as those possessing a degree in the field, tend to draw in recipients seeking accurate and informed responses to their uncertainties arising from limited information (Quirico 2023).

Green marketing motivates consumers towards sustainable behaviours, leading to more effective communication strategies and environmentally friendly product development (Dangelico and Vocalelli 2017). Discussions on green marketing also highlight its role in enhancing competitive advantage by increasing perceived consumer benefits and improving company performance (Ottman et al. 2006; Walker and Wan 2012; Dangelico and Pontrandolfo 2015). CSR, particularly through green communication, is crucial for building stakeholder trust and reputation, revealing the values embedded within the organisational culture (Brown and Starkey 1994; Banerjee 2002; Bellucci and Manetti 2018; Giacomini et al. 2022). Social media platforms have become pivotal for CSR communication, facilitating two-way interactions between companies and stakeholders (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). This includes promoting green initiatives and sustainable consumption practices, which is called green communication (Reilly and Hynan 2014; Rocca et al. 2020; Giacomini et al. 2021).

Given the growing influence of social media and the escalating concern for industrial symbiosis, understanding user engagement with green against non-green content across different social media platforms and content formats is imperative for marketers seeking to promote environmental issues and achieve favourable outcomes. These disparities profoundly shape the social context, influencing user perceptions and preferences for green content.

Recognising how users respond within different social media environments and to various content formats is pivotal for companies to enhance corporate image and profitability, facilitating resource allocation, platform selection and content optimisation for industrial symbiosis (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012; Voorveld et al. 2012; Gensler et al. 2013).

As discussed by Crapa, Latino, and Roma (2024), there are obvious disparities among various social media platforms, for example, Facebook, X and Instagram, regarding user engagement and motivations (Whiting and Williams 2013; Hollenbaugh and Ferris 2014; Chen 2015; Pourazad et al. 2023).

The user base of these platforms, numbering in the hundreds of millions, fluctuates over time. For instance, while X held significant popularity a few years ago, newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok have recently surged (Alhabash and Ma 2017; Wong 2023). Facebook remains popular among young adults, yet most teenagers have shifted to Instagram (Mackson et al. 2019; Dibb and Foster 2021) and/or TikTok (*US Social Media Usage 2022*, 2022; *35 Instagram Statistics That Matter to Marketers in 2024*, 2023; Lloyd, 2023). Instagram is a preferred platform among the younger generation, notably surpassing TikTok (*35 Instagram Statistics That Matter to Marketers in 2024*, 2023). On LinkedIn, organisations can communicate directly with their stakeholders, present topical matters and engage with customers in real-time, thus garnering loyalty. While X, for instance, is used for personal branding, LinkedIn is used as an online profile. About 70 per cent of LinkedIn users are professionals and sustainability-themed content on LinkedIn is cost-effective and reaches a professional audience (Alenius 2021). LinkedIn is one of the leading figures in global job advertising, serving a wide spectrum of companies and businesses, nations and job categories. Established in 2003, it boasts a membership base exceeding 706 million individuals, with listings from 50 million companies. The platform operates in 24 languages, spanning 200 countries. Additionally, gender distribution on LinkedIn reveals that 43.4 per cent of users identify as female, while 56.6 per cent identify as male (Tsironis et al. 2022; *Linkedin Users By Country (2024) | Linkedin Statistics*, 2022).

Moreover, different social media platforms accentuate distinct social norms, rules and functionalities, shaping users' responses to companies' communications (Roma and Aloini 2019).

While prior studies have explored social media adoption in general or focused on specific platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X or Pinterest, there

has been a notable lack of cross-platform analysis regarding the efficacy of green content in stimulating consumer response (Muntinga et al. 2011; Liu-Thompkins 2012; Nelson-Field et al. 2012; Belk 2013; Colleoni 2013; Alhabash et al. 2014; Ceron et al. 2014; Hollenbaugh and Ferris 2014; Phillips et al. 2014; Bellucci and Manetti 2017; Etter et al. 2018; Rocca et al 2020; Giacomini, Paredi and Sancino 2022; Pourazad et al. 2023). Notably, social media have been crucial in fostering consumer industrial symbiosis awareness, influencing their purchasing behaviour (Kleinrichert et al. 2012; Reilly and Hynan 2014; Zahid et al. 2018).

Taking a cross-platform perspective, Crapa, Latino and Roma (2024) posited that the choice of social media platform significantly impacts the performance of green content. Instagram and Facebook have emerged as leading platforms for green advertising and sustainable communication (Šikić 2021). With its visual-centric interface and storytelling capabilities, Instagram, in particular, facilitates emotional engagement and has become a hub for green communication (Herman 2014; Rietveld *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, the limited emotional content on X, primarily textual content, may hinder users' response to green communication efforts (Bigné et al. 2019).

Media richness plays a critical role in engaging consumers, with formats like videos more effectively eliciting responses than plain text (Rosenkrans 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Sabate et al. 2014). Richer content, such as videos and images, is pivotal for environmental activism, as it evokes emotions and enhances engagement (Kao and Du, 2020; Jones, 2022). However, the impact of media richness on green communication may vary across different social media platforms due to distinct community norms and technological features (Hughes et al. 2012; Petrocchi et al. 2015). For instance, Instagram's visual culture may favour images over videos despite the latter's richer format, while X's emphasis on textual communication may limit the efficacy of richer content (Bigné et al. 2019).

In contrast to traditional media, characterised by centralised control over mass cultural production and passive audience reception, virtual communities serve as distinct platforms enabling direct or indirect communication on climate change, environmental perceptions and nature interactions. Through discussions or sharing multimedia content, individuals within these communities collectively construct meanings and attribute value to nature (Al-Quran 2022).

Through traditional media channels, such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines, efforts are made to address environmental challenges (Liu and Liu 2020). In this context, media initiatives like the 'Love Our River' campaign, recycling campaigns and promotion of green consumption are pivotal in raising awareness and fostering proactive environmental stewardship. These campaigns disseminate information to the public, shaping attitudes and behaviours towards environmental conservation (Pittman et al. 2021). Traditional media outlets remain a trusted source of information, providing factual and balanced coverage (Trivedi, Teichert and Hardeck 2019). Despite the shift towards mobile news consumption, traditional media outlets continue to capture audience attention (Schouten et al. 2021).

Considering the concept of industrial symbiosis, traditional media coverage could further be enhanced by spotlighting instances where industries collaborate to reduce waste and resource consumption, promoting a more sustainable approach to production. Additionally, highlighting success stories of industrial symbiosis initiatives could inspire other businesses and communities to adopt similar practices, contributing to broader environmental conservation efforts.

In industrial symbiosis, media serves as both a catalyst and conduit for promoting environmentally conscious practices among companies, portraying them positively to underscore their efficacy in environmental preservation. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, LinkedIn and Instagram serve as potent channels for disseminating information to potential consumers/users, capitalising on the rapid communication capabilities of contemporary technological advancements. In the contemporary landscape, society is deeply entrenched in social media environments, where access to timely information is facilitated through sophisticated digital tools (Sun and Wang 2019). Complete with visually captivating graphics, dynamic audio and engaging video content, social media platforms have emerged as ubiquitous fixtures in everyday life, offering a prime avenue for raising awareness about green products and industrial symbiosis initiatives (Kyu Kim et al. 2020).

Among the various social media platforms available to green marketers, including Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube, social media marketing is increasingly lauded as the preferred approach due to its ability to enable swift and widespread dissemination of information (Kyu Kim et al. 2020). Leveraging the expansive reach of social media, marketers can

effectively engage a broader audience and cultivate interest in environmentally sustainable products and services (Gupta and Syed 2021). Social media offers more dynamic and impactful communication than traditional media, with inherent technological constraints. Beyond delivering compelling content and maintaining consistency, social media is pivotal in fostering direct connections between green marketers and consumers (Kyu Kim et al. 2020).

Companies can promptly solicit and receive customer feedback through social media platforms, leveraging positive reviews to generate interest in their offerings while utilising constructive criticism to enhance the quality of green products and services (Pittman et al. 2022). Thus, social media is an indispensable tool for bridging the gap between green marketers and consumers, facilitating dialogue, and driving continuous improvement in sustainable practices. Social media's immediacy, interactivity and wide reach make it a potent tool for promoting green practices and products, surpassing the limitations of traditional media channels in the context of industrial symbiosis.

Greenwashing

Within the intricate landscape of industrial symbiosis, 'greenwashing' takes centre stage as a strategic communication approach among collaborative entities. This practice strategically projects a positive environmental image, often facilitated through social media platforms. In this context, the authenticity of industrial symbiosis initiatives becomes obscured, necessitating a critical examination of practices that compromise transparency and credibility. A recent comprehensive study by *TerraChoice* outlines seven key deceptive strategies, ranging from concealing critical information to unsubstantiated sustainability claims, posing challenges in discerning the true environmental impact of collaborative processes (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020).

Stakeholders must be vigilant in comprehending and confronting greenwashing practices, ensuring that collaborative endeavours genuinely align with the principles of industrial symbiosis. This necessitates a proactive approach to scrutinise claims, promote transparency and foster a culture of authenticity within collaborative ecosystems. Addressing greenwashing within the industrial symbiosis framework is essential for upholding the integrity of sustainability initiatives and fostering a resilient and genuinely sustainable industrial landscape.

The intricate web of unreliable strategies underscores the need for vigilant examination within collaborative networks. By fostering awareness and discernment, stakeholders contribute to fortifying the authenticity of industrial symbiosis initiatives and ensuring that sustainability claims align with transparent and genuine collaborative efforts. This ongoing discourse becomes pivotal in steering industrial symbiosis toward its true potential as a catalyst for sustainable and resilient industrial ecosystems.

Topics Related to Target Industrial Symbiosis

Specific topics tend to generate higher engagement rates among 'green influencers'. The analysed green influencers predominantly focus on lifestyle-related themes. Lifestyle, encompassing the (first) 'life acts' undertaken in daily routines, is a key area that resonates with users, resulting in increased engagement rates. Users are particularly drawn to content that provides insights into (second) 'how to do' aspects, learning to make their actions more meaningful through the examples set by their influential figures.

Through social media networks, especially Instagram and YouTube, individuals and small companies have started sharing their lifestyles or waste collection practices everywhere they visit. Thanks to these social platforms, they can share the world's beauty with their followers and highlight behaviours that contribute to keeping the Earth as healthy as possible. Another (the third) theme spins around chemistry/science applied to household products. While the most discussed topics, followed by their target type, are often 'women's topics': sustainable fashion, lifestyle, and eco-friendly home products.

In this case, the female identity is closely linked to motherhood, leading to a focus on the filial aspect and the maintenance of a healthy life for their children. The predominance of the female target audience is likely attributed to the dimension of motherhood and the desire for a less harmful world. Recently, the male population has increasingly embraced the green movement, and the gap with the female audience has significantly narrowed. In recent years, men, with a renewed emphasis on fatherhood and caring for their domestic space, have shown more significant concern for everything healthy for themselves and their environment. Nevertheless, sustainable mobility and technology remain prominent themes in the male world. Influencers could incorporate topics such as sustainable mobility and technology into their content to attract a more masculine target audience (Quirico 2023b).

Towards Synergies for a Symbiotic Future

Sustainability has become a fundamental pillar in global political, economic, and social strategies, essential for addressing the challenges posed by global warming. Traditional financial systems, reliant on natural resource exploitation, have been a primary contributor to escalating environmental crises. The remarkable technological and economic progress witnessed in the 'short century' has improved living conditions, alleviated global hunger and generated wealth. However, with predictions of an expanding population by 2050, demographic growth has intensified the linear consumption of natural resources, pushing traditional economic systems to their limits.

The surge in industrialisation has further exacerbated resource consumption and carbon dioxide emissions, significantly contributing to the rise in greenhouse gas emissions. Recent advances in knowledge and technology have paved the way for transformative shifts in production paradigms. Sustainable development structures have revolutionised processes, substantially reducing raw material, water, and energy costs.

In guiding companies and industries toward environmental efficiency, the European Union recognises excellent corporate renewal and development opportunities through environmental communication on social media platforms in the current scenario. The framework we have focused on underscores a more thoughtful and respectful approach to sustainability. An essential observation derived from the analysis and evaluation of this work is that, historically, environmental communication often induced feelings of guilt for both the communicators and the audience. In contrast, contemporary green communication has evolved to instil a sense of responsibility/awareness and CSR, aiming to translate these sentiments into actionable initiatives.

As Masson-Delmotte et al. (2018) outlined, the interplay between industrial symbiosis and social media catalyses change in sustainable development. The pivotal turning point in 2018, triggered by the IPCC's report (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018; 'Global Warming of 1.5°C —' 2023), brought climate change to the forefront of public discourse. The subsequent social media coverage, aligned with scientific findings, acted as a powerful agent in intensifying public awareness. This heightened awareness marked a transformative shift in the EU perception of climate change threats, leading to a renewed commitment exemplified by the European Green Deal, which signifies a paradigm shift in policy-making.

Industrial symbiosis is central to this paradigm shift, seamlessly aligning with circular economy principles. The shared utilisation of resources and waste among industries, a key tenet of industrial symbiosis, fosters sustainable industrial ecosystems. Social media platforms are pivotal in disseminating information, fostering public awareness and securing public support for such symbiotic initiatives. Social media acts as a bridge, elevating the discourse from scientific circles to mainstream public awareness, amplifying industrial symbiosis's transformative power. Furthermore, integrating digitalisation, such as the IoT, introduces novel avenues for sustainable urban development (Caragliu et al. 2011). The interconnectedness of sensors and data, when disseminated through social media channels, optimises resource usage and promotes eco-friendly practices. This illustrates how social media is a crucial amplifier, contributing to the vision of a symbiotic urban landscape.

The research question delves into the intersection of industrial symbiosis, social media, and sustainability communication strategies, focusing on how companies can effectively promote industrial symbiosis principles and success stories through green communication on various social media platforms. It explores how the convergence of industrial symbiosis and social media impacts public perception and awareness, emphasising the role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour towards sustainable practices. Our findings underscore the significance of social media platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn) as potent channels for disseminating green communication and fostering engagement with environmentally conscious content. The dynamic nature of these platforms enables swift and widespread dissemination of information, facilitating direct connections between green marketers and consumers and driving continuous improvement in sustainable practices.

Amidst the proliferation of green communication efforts, the spectre of greenwashing looms large, necessitating vigilance and discernment within collaborative ecosystems. By fostering awareness and transparency and confronting deceptive practices head-on, stakeholders can uphold the integrity of sustainability initiatives and steer industrial symbiosis towards its true potential as a catalyst for sustainable and resilient industrial ecosystems.

Furthermore, the chapter analysis revealed themes that resonate with users and drive higher engagement rates within 'green influencers', highlighting the importance of tailoring communication strategies to meet target audiences'

diverse interests and preferences. While the predominance of the female target audience in green communication is notable, the growing interest among men, particularly in topics such as sustainable mobility and technology, underscores the evolving landscape of sustainability discourse. Moving forward, several avenues for improvement and further research emerge from this study. Firstly, conducting longitudinal studies to track the evolution of public perception and behaviour towards sustainability communication on social media platforms would provide valuable insights into trends and patterns over time.

Exploring the efficacy of different communication formats across various social media platforms, such as videos, images, and text, could offer deeper insights into user engagement and preferences. Understanding how media richness influences consumer response within different social media environments would enable marketers to optimise their communication strategies for maximum impact. Investigating the effectiveness of specific communication techniques, such as storytelling and user-generated content, in fostering engagement and driving behaviour change could provide actionable insights for green marketers. Also, exploring the role of influencers in shaping public discourse on sustainability and industrial symbiosis on social media platforms warrants further investigation. Analysing the characteristics and strategies of influential figures and their impact on user engagement and behaviour will surely offer valuable insights into effective communication approaches. Addressing these areas of inquiry, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of sustainability communication on social media platforms and inform the development of more effective strategies for promoting industrial symbiosis and sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the chapter underscores the critical importance of transparent and authentic communication strategies, the transformative power of social media platforms in promoting sustainability, and the imperative of addressing greenwashing practices to foster genuine sustainability initiatives within collaborative ecosystems. The intertwining of these elements, as evidenced by policy shifts, public awareness and digital innovations, is integral to shaping a circular future. The collaborative efforts of industries, policymakers, and social media platforms emerge as catalysts for a sustainable and responsible approach to development, highlighting the potential for a harmonious relationship between ecological progress and social media communication. In

this way, the chapter complements broader discussions within this volume by demonstrating that the transformative power of media extends beyond political mobilisation into ecological and industrial reform. Just as media shape democratic discourse and political identity—as other chapters in this collection show—they also mould collective responses to climate change, industrial accountability, and sustainability. This chapter enriches the volume's multidisciplinary inquiry into the media's evolving role in shaping European futures by bridging environmental communication and digital engagement.

References

35 Instagram Statistics That Matter to Marketers in 2024. (2023). <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Acemoglu *et al.* (2019). *Climate Change, Directed Innovation, and Energy Transition: The Long-Run Consequences of the Shale Gas Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Economics.

Alenius, U. (2021). *Sustainable business and marketing: sustainable marketing communication on LinkedIn*. fi=Ylempi AMK-opinnäytetyö|sv=Högre YH-examensarbete|en=Master's thesis|, <http://www.theseus.fi/handle/10024/511458>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Alhabash, S., Chiang, Y. and Huang, K. (2014). 'MAM & U&G in Taiwan: Differences in the uses and gratifications of Facebook as a function of motivational reactivity', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 35, 423–430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.03.033>.

Alhabash, S., and Ma, M. (2017). 'A tale of four platforms: Motivations and uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat among college students?', *Social media+ society*, 3(1), 2056305117691544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117691544>.

Al-Quran, M.W.M. (2022). 'Traditional media versus social media: challenges and opportunities'.

Ayres, R.U. *et al.* (1989). 'Industrial Metabolism, the Environment, and Application of Materials-Balance. Principles for Selected Chemicals'.

Balzaretti, E. and Gargiulo, B. (2011). *La comunicazione ambientale: sistemi, scenari e prospettive. Buone pratiche per una comunicazione efficace*. 1A edizione. Franco Angeli.

Banerjee, S.B. (2002). 'Corporate environmentalism: the construct and its measurement', *Journal of Business Research*, 55(3), 177–191.

Belk, R.W. (2013). 'Extended Self in a Digital World', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3), 477–500.

Bellucci, M. and Manetti, G. (2017). 'Facebook as a tool for supporting dialogic accounting? Evidence from large philanthropic foundations in the United States', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 30(4), 874–905.

Bellucci, M., and Manetti, G. (2018). *Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability Reporting*. London: Routledge.

Besednjak Valič, T., Kolar, J., and Lamut, U. (2021). 'Fighting the big bad wolf of global trends: technology transfer between HPC centres and SMEs', *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance* [Preprint]. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-11-2020-0162>.

Bigné, E., Oltra, E. and Andreu, L. (2019). 'Harnessing stakeholder input on Twitter: A case study of short breaks in Spanish tourist cities', *Tourism Management*, 71, 490–503.

Bolton, P. *et al.* (2020). *The green swan Central banking and financial stability in the age of climate change*.

Brown, A.D. and Starkey, K. (1994). 'The effect of organizational culture on communication and information', *Journal of Management studies*, 31(6), 807–828.

Caragliu, A., Del Bo, C., and Nijkamp, P. (2011). 'Smart Cities in Europe', *Journal of Urban Technology*, 18(2), 65–82.

Carroll, A.B. (1999). 'Corporate social responsibility: Evolution of a definitional construct', *Business & society*, 38(3), 268–295.

Ceron, A. *et al.* (2014). 'Every tweet counts? How sentiment analysis of social media can improve our knowledge of citizens' political preferences with an application to Italy and France', *New media & society*, 16(2), 340–358.

Chen, G.M. (2015). 'Why do women bloggers use social media? Recreation and information motivations outweigh engagement motivations', *New Media & Society*, 17(1), 24–40.

Chertow, M.R. (2007). '"Uncovering" industrial symbiosis'. <https://doi.org/10.1162/jiec.2007.1110>.

Chertow, M.R., and Lombardi, D.R. (2005). 'Quantifying Economic and Environmental Benefits of Co-Located Firms'. <https://doi.org/10.1021/es050050+>.

Colleoni, E. (2013). 'CSR communication strategies for organizational legitimacy in social media', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 18(2), 228–248.

Cosenza, V. (2022). 'Influencer Marketing Trends in 2022', *Buzzoole*, 25 January., <https://blog.buzzoole.com/osservatorio-influencer-marketing/influencer-marketing-trends-2022/>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Costa, I,. and Ferrão, P. (2010). 'A case study of industrial symbiosis development using a middle-out approach', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18(10), 984–992.

Costa, I., Massard, G., and Agarwal, A. (2010). 'Waste management policies for industrial symbiosis development: case studies in European countries'.

Crapa, G., Latino, M.E., and Roma, P. (2024). 'The performance of green communication across social media: Evidence from large-scale retail industry in Italy', *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 31(1), 493–513.

Dangelico, R.M., and Pontrandolfo, P. (2015). 'Being "green and competitive": The impact of environmental actions and collaborations on firm performance', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 24(6), 413–430.

Dangelico, R.M., and Vocalelli, D. (2017). '"Green Marketing": An analysis of definitions, strategy steps, and tools through a systematic review of the literature', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 165, 1263–1279.

Dibb, B. and Foster, M. (2021). 'Loneliness and Facebook use: the role of social comparison and rumination', *Heliyon*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e05999>.

Dirkx, M. (2023). 'Netherlands' future climate policy unclear after far-right's shock election win', *Clean Energy Wire*, 9 November. <https://www.cleanenergywire.org/factsheets/wide-open-dutch-elections-shape-transition-key-agriculture-exporter>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Džajić Uršič, E. (2020). *Morphogenesis of Industrial Symbiotic Networks*. Peter Lang Verlag.

Eilering, J.A., and Vermeulen, W.J. (2004). 'Eco-industrial parks: toward industrial symbiosis and utility sharing in practice', *Progress in Industrial Ecology, an International Journal*, *1*(1–3), 245–270.

Etter, M. *et al.* (2018). 'Measuring organizational legitimacy in social media: Assessing citizens' judgments with sentiment analysis', *Business & Society*, 57(1), 60–97.

EU Cohesion Policy implementation in Slovenia (2020). *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, *Recovery and Resilience Plan*. <https://www.eu-skladi.si/en/post-2020-1/recovery-and-resilience-plan>, accessed 19 July 2022.

European Commission (2019). 'COM/2019/640 final. The European Green Deal'. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN>, accessed 13 July 2022.

European Commission (2022). *Recovery plan for Europe*. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en>, accessed 18 July 2022.

European Commission, P.O. of the E. (2011). 'GREEN PAPER The EU corporate governance framework, CELEX1, /* COM/2011/0164 final */'. Publications Office of the European Union, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3eed7997-d40b-4984-8080-31d7c4e91fb2/language-en>, accessed 19 December 2023.

European Parliament and Council (2018). 'Directive (EU) 2018/851 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste (Text with EEA relevance)', <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/851/oj/eng>, accessed 6 April 2023.

de Freitas Netto, S.V. *et al.* (2020). 'Concepts and forms of greenwashing: a systematic review', *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 32(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-0300-3>.

Fric, U. *et al.* (2023). *Development and implementation of the EU grand strategies: sociological, policy, and regional considerations of Agenda 2030*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b20448>.

Gasparrini, A. *et al.* (2017). 'Projections of temperature-related excess mortality under climate change scenarios', *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 1(9), e360–e367.

Gensler, S. *et al.* (2013). 'Managing brands in the social media environment', *Journal of interactive marketing*, 27(4), 242–256.

Giacomini, D. *et al.* (2021). 'Corporate social responsibility actions and organizational legitimacy at the peak of COVID-19: a sentiment analysis', *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*, 21(6), 1043–1058.

Giacomini, D., Paredi, D. and Sancino, A. (2022). 'Stakeholder interactions as sources for organisational learning: insights from the water sector', *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 30(7), 1–25.

Gingrich, C. (2012). 'Industrial Symbiosis: Current understanding and needed ecology and economics influences', *Policy Engagement. Toronto: Centre for Engineering and Public Policy*, 44–49.

'Global Warming of 1.5°C —' (2018). <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>, accessed 20 December 2023.

Grayson, D. and Hodges, A. (2017). *Corporate Social Opportunity!: Seven Steps to Make Corporate Social Responsibility Work for your Business*. Routledge.

Gunningham, N. and Sinclair, D. (2002). 'Partnerships, management systems and the search for innovative regulation in the vehicle body shop industry', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 11(4), 236–253.

Gupta, M. and Syed, A.A. (2021). 'Impact of online social media activities on marketing of green products', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 30(3), 679–698.

Hartard, S. (2014). 'Industrial Ecology - ein neues Leitbild für Unternehmen'. In: Ökologisches Wirtschaften Jg. 29, Nr. 3 (2014) S. 18–19, *Ökologisches Wirtschaften*, Jg. 29, 18–19.

Henley, J. (2024). 'Why are farmers protesting across the EU and what can the bloc do about it?', *The Guardian, 1* February, 2, 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/02/why-are-farmers-protesting-across-the-eu-and-what-can-the-bloc-do-about-it>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Herman, J. (2014). The ultimate beginner's guide to Instagram, Erişim Tarihi, 25, <https://jennstrends. com>, accessed 10 April 2024.

Hollenbaugh, E.E. and Ferris, A.L. (2014). 'Facebook self-disclosure: Examining the role of traits, social cohesion, and motives', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 30, 50–58.

Howard-Grenville, J., and Paquin, R. (2008). 'Organizational dynamics in industrial ecosystems: Insights from organizational theory', *Changing stocks, flows and behaviors in industrial ecosystems*, 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781848445130.00021>.

Hughes, D.J. *et al.* (2012). 'A tale of two sites: Twitter vs. Facebook and the personality predictors of social media usage', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 561–569.

Jones, S. (2022). 'Climate activists throw mashed potatoes at Monet work in Germany', *The Guardian*, 23 October, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/23/climate-activists-mashed-potato-monet-potsdam-germany>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Joseph, C. *et al.* (2016). 'A comparative study of anti-corruption practice disclosure among Malaysian and Indonesian Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) best practice companies', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 112, 2896–2906.

Kao, T.-F., and Du, Y.-Z. (2020). 'A study on the influence of green advertising design and environmental emotion on advertising effect', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 242, 118294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.118294>.

Kaplan, A.M., and Haenlein, M. (2010). 'Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media', *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68.

Kleinrichert, D. *et al.* (2012). 'Boutique hotels: technology, social media and green practices', *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 3(3), 211–225.

Kollmuss, A., and Agyeman, J. (2002). 'Mind the Gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior?', *Environmental Education Research*, 8(3), 239–260.

Kompas, T., Pham, V.H., and Che, T.N. (2018). 'The effects of climate change on GDP by country and the global economic gains from complying with the Paris climate accord', *Earth's Future*, 6(8), 1153–1173.

Kyu Kim, Y. *et al.* (2020). 'Exploring the optimized social advertising strategy that can generate consumer engagement with green messages on social media', *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 15(1), 30–48.

Linkedin Users By Country (2024). Linkedin Statistics (2022) *Apollo Technical LLC*, <https://www.apollotechnical.com/linkedin-users-by-country/>, accessed 12 April 2024.

Liu, S., and Liu, X. (2020). 'Culture and Green Advertising Preference: A Comparative and Critical Discursive Analysis', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01944>.

Liu-Thompkins, Y. (2012). 'Seeding Viral Content: The Role of Message and Network Factors', *Journal of Advertising Research*, 52(4), 465–478.

Lloyd, C.C., Andrew (2023). *Inside the rise of the top 25 most followed TikTok accounts of 2023, from Hollywood stars to lip-sync sensations*, *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/most-followed-tiktok-creators-2023-3>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Mackson, S.B., Brochu, P.M., and Schneider, B.A. (2019). 'Instagram: Friend or foe? The application's association with psychological well-being', *New Media & Society*, 21(10), 2160–2182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819840021>.

Masson-Delmotte, V. *et al.* (2018). 'IPCC, 2018: summary for policymakers, global warming of 1.5° C', *An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of*, 1.

Meadowcroft, J., and Steurer, R. (2018). 'Assessment practices in the policy and politics cycles: a contribution to reflexive governance for sustainable development?', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 20(6), 734–751.

Muntinga, D.G., Moorman, M,. and Smit, E.G. (2011). 'Introducing COBRAs: Exploring motivations for brand-related social media use', *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 13–46.

Nebbia, G. (2014). *Scritti di storia dell'ambiente e dell'ambientalismo 1970–2013*. Fondazione Luigi Micheletti.

Nelson-Field, K., Riebe, E., and Sharp, B. (2012). 'What's not to "like?": can a Facebook fan base give a brand the advertising reach it needs?', *Journal of Advertising Research*, 52(2), 262.

O'Neill, S., and Day, S. (2009). '"Fear Won't Do It": Promoting Positive Engagement With Climate Change Through Visual and Iconic Representations', *Science Communication - SCI COMMUN*, 30, 355–379.

Ottman, J.A., Stafford, E.R., and Hartman, C.L. (2006). 'Avoiding Green Marketing Myopia: Ways to Improve Consumer Appeal for Environmentally Preferable Products', *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* [Preprint]. <https://doi.org/10.3200/ENVT.48.5.22-36>.

Özuyar, P.G. (2019). 'Lessons Learned About the Hindering Factors for Regional Cooperation Towards the Mitigation of Climate Change'. In W. Leal Filho, B. Lackner, and H. McGhie (eds) *Addressing the Challenges in Communicating Climate Change Across Various Audiences*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Climate Change Management), 101–114.

Petrocchi, N. *et al.* (2015). 'Differences Between People Who Use Only Facebook and Those Who Use Facebook Plus Twitter', *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction*, 31(2), 157–165.

Phillips, B.J., Miller, J., and McQuarrie, E.F. (2014). 'Dreaming out loud on Pinterest: New forms of indirect persuasion', *International Journal of Advertising*, 33(4), 633–655.

Phillips, P.S. *et al.* (2006). 'A critical appraisal of an UK county waste minimisation programme: The requirement for regional facilitated development of industrial symbiosis/ecology'. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2005.07.004>.

Pittman, M., Oeldorf-Hirsch, A,. and Brannan, A. (2022). 'Green Advertising on Social Media: Brand Authenticity Mediates the Effect of Different Appeals on Purchase Intent and Digital Engagement', *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 43(1), 106–121.

Pittman, M., Read, G.L., and Chen, J. (2021). 'Changing Attitudes on Social Media: Effects of Fear and Information in Green Advertising on Non-Green Consumers', *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 42(2), 175–196.

Pourazad, N., Stocchi, L., and Narsey, S. (2023). 'A Comparison of Social Media Influencers' KPI Patterns across Platforms: Exploring Differences in Followers and Engagement On Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter', *Journal of Advertising Research*, 63(2), 139–159.

Quirico, B. (2023). *Social media e sostenibilità= Social media and sustainability* (Doctoral dissertation, Politecnico di Torino). <https://webthesis.biblio.polito.it/25911/>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021). <https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en>, Accessed 17 November 2023).

Reilly, A.H., and Hynan, K.A. (2014). 'Corporate communication, sustainability, and social media: It's not easy (really) being green', *Business Horizons*, 57(6), 747–758.

Renner, G.T. (1947). 'Geography of industrial localization'. <https://doi.org/10.2307/141510>.

Richini, P. (2017). 'Professioni per una Strategia di sviluppo sostenibile in Italia. Ricadute su quantità e qualità dell'occupazione', <https://www.academia.edu/35379251/Professioni_per_una_Strategia_di_

sviluppo_sostenibile_in_Italia_Ricadute_su_quantit%C3%A0_e_qualit%C3%A0_delloccupazione>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Rietveld, R. *et al.* (2020). 'What you feel, is what you like influence of message appeals on customer engagement on Instagram', *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 49(1), 20–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2019.06.003>.

Rocca, L., Giacomini, D., and Zola, P. (2020). 'Environmental disclosure and sentiment analysis: state of the art and opportunities for public-sector organisations', *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 29(3), 617–646.

Roma, P., and Aloini, D. (2019). 'How does brand-related user-generated content differ across social media? Evidence reloaded', *Journal of Business Research*, *96*, 322–339.

Rončević, B. and Fric, U. (2015). 'Researching industrial Symbiosis: challenges and dilemmas', *Applied Modelling and Computing in Social Science*, 35–50.

Rosenkrans, G. (2009). 'The Creativeness and Effectiveness of Online Interactive Rich Media Advertising', *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 9(2), 18–31.

Rui, J., and Heijungs, R. (2010). Industrial ecosystems as a social network. In *Knowledge Collaboration & Learning for Sustainable Innovation: 14th European Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production (ERSCP) conference and the 6th Environmental Management for Sustainable Universities (EMSU) conference, Delft, The Netherlands, October 25–29, 2010*. Delft University of Technology; The Hague University of Applied Sciences; TNO. <https://repository.tudelft.nl/view/conferencepapers/uuid:d93296a0-fd72-4f22-b3a2-1a8e0d80f003>, accessed 18 July 2022.

Sabate, F. *et al.* (2014). 'Factors influencing popularity of branded content in Facebook fan pages', *European Management Journal*, 32(6), 1001–1011.

Sachs, J.D. *et al.* (2019). 'Six Transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals', *Nature Sustainability*, 2(9), 805–814.

Schouten, A.P., Janssen, L., and Verspaget, M. (2021). 'Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: the role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. In *Leveraged marketing communications* (208–231). Routledge.

Šikić, F. (2021). 'Using Instagram as a Communication Channel in Green Marketing Digital Mix: A Case Study of bio&bio Organic Food Chain

in Croatia'. In M. Topić and G. Lodorfos (eds) *The Sustainability Debate*. Emerald Publishing Limited (Critical Studies on Corporate Responsibility, Governance and Sustainability), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2043-905920210000015013>.

Smith, A.N., Fischer, E., and Yongjian, C. (2012). 'How does brand-related user-generated content differ across YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter?', *Journal of interactive marketing*, 26(2), 102–113.

Solovjova, J., and Sivolapova, E. (2022). 'Corporate social responsibility in transport and logistics sector', *Transportation Research Procedia*, 63, 2039–2046. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trpro.2022.06.227>.

Sun, Y., and Wang, S. (2019). 'Understanding consumers' intentions to purchase green products in the social media marketing context', *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 32(4), 860–878.

Trippel, E. (2020). 'How green is green enough? The changing landscape of financing a sustainable European economy', *ERA Forum*, 21(2), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12027-020-00611-z>.

Trivedi, R., Teichert, T., and Hardeck, D. (2019). 'Effectiveness of pull-based print advertising with QR codes: Role of consumer involvement and advertisement appeal', *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(1), 145–167.

Tsironis, G., Daglis, T., and Tsagarakis, K.P. (2022). 'Social media and EU companies' engagement in circular economy: A LinkedIn approach', *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 32, 802–816.

US Social Media Usage 2022 (2022). *EMARKETER*, <https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-social-media-usage-2022>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Voorveld, H.A.M., Neijens, P.C., and Smit, E.G. (2012). 'The interacting role of media sequence and product involvement in cross-media campaigns', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 18(3), 203–216.

Walker, K., and Wan, F. (2012). 'The Harm of Symbolic Actions and Green-Washing: Corporate Actions and Communications on Environmental Performance and Their Financial Implications', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 109(2), 227–242.

Wallace-Wells, D. (2018). 'The uninhabitable earth', in *The Best American Magazine Writing 2018*. Columbia University Press, 271–294.

Whiting, A., and Williams, D. (2013). 'Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach', *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(4), 362–369.

Winans, K., Kendall, A. and Deng, H. (2017). 'The history and current applications of the circular economy concept'. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2016.09.123>.

Wong, B. (2023). *Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024 – Forbes Advisor, Top social media statistics and trends of 2023. Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/social-media-statistics/>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Zahid, M.M. *et al.* (2018). 'Factors affecting purchase intention and social media publicity of green products: The mediating role of concern for consequences', *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 25(3), 225–236.

Conclusion

Matevž Tomšič

Europe faces many challenges concerning its economic and technological development, political stability and cultural identity. The success of dealing with them will largely depend on people's well-being, in terms of the standard of living, the quality of democracy, and the level of rights and freedoms enjoyed by citizens. The European Union, as the central institutional entity of the 'old continent', plays a key role in this. A lot depends on the performance of political decision-makers in the institutions of the Union and at the level of the member states, especially on their ability to constructively participate in the design and implementation of such development policies in key social areas, which will be based on realistic assessments of the situation and will consider as much as possible the wishes and the needs of citizens.

It would be hard to say that the mandate of the European Commission in the years 2019–2024 was very successful. During this time, the European Union lost its global power and influence. Its economy has languished in comparison to the United States and China, to which excessive burdens and often excessive, not to say pointless, regulations have contributed to a very significant extent. Even some large projects, such as the so-called 'green transition', were carried out with insufficient thought, as they were often too ideologically motivated and took insufficient account of the real situation and the effects that the changes bring. This led to measures that threatened the potential of European industry (mainly the automotive sector), as well as agriculture and thus the ability of Europeans to provide themselves with food. The geopolitical weight of the European Union is also decreasing, despite some positive developments, especially the unity in condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine and, thus, the commitment to help the attacked country. The main reason lies in the weakness of the military capacities at the disposal of European countries (due to this, their defence potential still rests on the support of the US armed forces).

The report *The Future of European Competitiveness – A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe* from 2024, authored by former European Central Bank's Chief Mario Draghi (the so-called Draghi report), also notes that one of the main problems of the Union is the lack of competitiveness. In doing so, he

considers extensive bureaucracy and regulations to be one of the main obstacles. Another critical reason for insufficient competitiveness is the lack of implementation capacity due to inadequate coordination at the Union level. He sees the solution as increasing the scope of innovations and, therefore, proposes a marked increase in investments in developing new advanced technologies at the level of the European Union. However, implementing this will be very demanding, as it will be necessary to reach the consensus of the member states, which often have different views on development priorities.

Challenging tasks also await the European Union in the political field. Satisfaction with the functioning of institutions at both the European and national levels is not high. Although the elections to the European Parliament did not bring a significant change, the parties that were critical of the state of European politics have achieved significant success. Populism, which is one of the main themes of the present book, has still not lost its potential. On the contrary, populist political forces are reaping success first, as was shown in the last parliamentary elections in Austria, which were relatively victorious for the Freedom Party.

However, as we note in our book, populism is not the cause of the crisis of democracy but a symptom of its problems. And these problems are not negligible. The gap between political elites and citizens is becoming more and more pronounced. This is not only about dissatisfaction with the performance of political decision-makers, that is, their (in)ability to solve key social problems, but also about differences in values. This is very evident in the attitude towards migration, where the elites (both political and other, i.e. business, academic, media, etc.) are in many places relatively in favour of the policy of 'open borders', i.e. the relatively unimpeded immigration of people (including those from the so-called Third World), while most ordinary citizens oppose it. Populists take advantage of these differences to appeal to those citizens who are disillusioned with 'alienated' elites. Therefore, the established elites bear the main responsibility for the appeal of these messages. Thus, no anti-populist 'moral panic' in the sense of scaring people before the populists come to power will bring results. It will be necessary to reflect on the traditional political parties thoroughly. They will have to find out why trust in them is declining and, based on this, transform themselves internally.

European political decision-makers are therefore faced with a series of very demanding tasks and challenges, which the authors of the present

edited volume convincingly analyse. It will be necessary to take adequate measures to increase the competitiveness of European economies and accelerate technological development while maintaining a high level of environmental protection. It primarily focuses on innovations in environmentally friendly technologies and industrial production methods (industrial symbiosis). An appropriate balance between economic growth and environmental sustainability needs to be achieved, and this is not something that has been established once and for all but is constantly being adapted to specific circumstances.

No less essential is maintaining a high level of democracy and protecting human rights and freedoms. This is not something to be taken for granted in today's world. Indeed, there are global authoritarian powers, especially China and Russia, which strive to expand their influence—also in the European area (the first in a more indirect way, and the second also more directly and crudely, including through military aggression, as we have witnessed in Ukraine). These global power centres support non-democratic forces within Europe and seek to further undermine people's trust in European institutions through their propaganda activities. The media are susceptible in this regard. The paradox is that non-democratic regimes that suppress freedom of expression at home use media freedom in Europe to spread their autocratic agenda. The European Union seeks to counter this in various ways, including through regulation, as exemplified by the *European Media Freedom Act* of 2024. This act is supposed to protect the freedom of journalistic activity and prevent media abuse and political and other particularistic purposes. Still, it has also been criticised for allegedly regulating this area excessively. Political decision-makers must, therefore, be cautious when taking measures. With the undoubted need to define the "rules of the game" in various fields, care must be taken to ensure that excessive regulation does not stifle the freedom and creativity of those who work in these fields.

"European Policy"

"European Policy" is an interdisciplinary series devoted to the study of European integration in a broad sense. Although mostly focusing on the European Union, it also encourages the publication of books addressing the wider, pan-European context, as well as comparative work, including other forms of regional integration on the world scene. The core disciplines are politics, economics, law, and history. While being committed to high academic standards, "European Policy" seeks to be accessible to a wide readership, including policymakers and practitioners, and to stimulate a debate on European issues. Submissions will normally undergo a thorough peer-review process. The series publishes both in English and in French.

Series Editor: Pascaline WINAND,

College of Europe (Warsaw, Poland)

Recent Titles

No. 55: Media, Populism and European Democracy. Matevž TOMŠIČ (ed.) 2026, 216 pp., ISBN 9783034356121

No. 54: La UE y Cuba en el siglo XXI. Cambios, Logros y Retos. Alexis BERG-RODRíGUEZ, 2022, 218 pp., ISBN 9781433197857

No. 53: Did European Construction Contribute to Peace?, René SCHWOK, 2018, 174 pp., ISBN 9782807605602

No. 52: The External Relations of the European Union, Pascaline WINAND, Andrea BENVENUTI & Max GUDERZO (eds.), 2015, 404 pp., ISBN 9782875742308

No. 51: The EU and the Political Economy of Transatlantic Relations, Finn LAURSEN (ed.), 2012, 321 p., ISBN 9789052019000

No. 50: Obama, US Politics, and Transatlantic Relations. Change or Continuity?, Giles SCOTT-SMITH (ed.), 2012, 332 p., ISBN 9789052018768

No. 49: The Making of the EU's Lisbon Treaty. The Role of Member states, Finn LAURSEN (ed.), 2012, 324 p., ISBN 9789052018126

No. 48: Energy and the Environmental Challenge. Lessons from the European Union and Australia, Lillian WYLIE and Pascaline WINAND (eds.), 2011, 415 p., ISBN 9789052017655

No. 47: New Europe, New World? The European Union, Europe and the Challenges of the 21st Century, Alfonso MARTÍNEZ ARRANZ, Natalie J. DOYLE & Pascaline WINAND (eds.), 2010, 283 p., ISBN 9789052016047

No. 46: Switzerland – European Union. An Impossible Membership?, René SCHWOK, 2009, 155 p., ISBN 9789052015767

No. 45: The EU in the Global Political Economy, Finn LAURSEN, 2009, 352 p., ISBN 9789052015545

No. 44: America, Europe, Africa / L'Amérique, l'Europe, l'Afrique. 1945-1973, Éric REMACLE & Pascaline WINAND (eds./dir.), 2009, 329 p., ISBN 978-90-5201-529-3 N° 43: Le paysage européen de la sécurité intérieure, Pierre BERTHELET, 2009, 573 p., ISBN 9789052014739

No. 42: In Pursuit of Influence. The Netherlands' European Policy during the Formative Years of the European Union, 1952-1973, Anjo G. HARRYVAN, 2009, 284 p., ISBN 9789052014975

N° 41: Les États-Unis et l'unification monétaire de l'Europe, Dimitri GRYGOWSKI, 2009, 472 p., ISBN 9789052014890

N° 40: Le Traité de Rome histoires pluridisciplinaires. L'apport du Traité de Rome instituant la Communauté économique européenne, Sandrine DEVAUX, René LEBOUTTE & Philippe POIRIER (dir.), 2009, 210 p., ISBN 9789052015002

No. 39: European Integration from Rome to Berlin 1957-2007. History, Law and Politics, Julio BAQUERO CRUZ & Carlos CLOSA MONTERO (eds.), 2009, 286 p., ISBN 9789052014647

No. 38: European and Turkish Voices in Favour and Against Turkish Accession to the European Union, Christiane TIMMERMAN, Dirk ROCHTUS & Sara MELS (eds.), 2008, 149 p., ISBN 9789052014289

N° 37: Centre et centrisme en Europe aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Regards croisés, Sylvie GUILLAUME et Jean GARRIGUES (dir.), 2006, 288 p., ISBN 9789052013176

N° 36: Vers une Europe fédérale ? Les espoirs et les actions fédéralistes au sortir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Bertrand VAYSSIÈRE, 2006 (2nd printing 2007), 416 p., ISBN 9789052013534

N° 35: Institutionnaliser l'évaluation des politiques publiques. Étude comparée des dispositifs en Belgique, en France, en Suisse et aux Pays-Bas, Steve JACOB, 2005, 271 p., ISBN 9789052010786

No. 34: Visions, Votes and Vetoes. The Empty Chair Crisis and the Luxembourg Compromise Forty Years On, Jean-Marie PALAYRET, Helen WALLACE & Pascaline WINAND (eds.), 2006, 344 p., ISBN 9789052010311

www.peterlang.com