Populist Political Communication in Europe

The volume *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by a group of prominent scholars representing various disciplines, including sociology, political science, media and communication studies, consisting of Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Stromback, and Claes H. de Vreese, is the first one in the newly established series *Routledge Research in Communication Studies*. It comes as no surprise that the first position in this series is dedicated to populism, which has recently become the dominating force in European politics. This collection covers twenty-four countries in case studies, analysing new developments in and contributing to the knowledge about three inter-related areas within populist political communication: populist actors as communicators, the media and populism, and citizens and populism.

Despite a rich interdisciplinary discourse, scholars dealing with populism still disagree not only about how to explain it, but – more fundamentally – about what it is. We seem to be witnessing a conceptual cacophony. The attractiveness of the concept contrasts with its lack of clarity. The most common interpretations of populism contain its minimum components – "the good people" are endangered by "the evil others" – running crosswise of established party lines. This definition of populism correlates with the general everyday usage of this word whenever – usually for journalistic purposes – one refers to a person, party, action or decision that makes claims by appealing to ordinary and non-elite people. In public discourse, populism is often used as a pejorative epithet implying that the accused is corrupt, cynical, opportunistic or undemocratic. The term lacks the necessary precision required in scientific research that would allow capturing the features of this flexible manner of animating politics. The reviewed volume contributes to the body of literature that sees populism predominantly as communicative action.

The first part, "Introduction and Conceptual Challenges", consists of two texts: "Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication" by Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese, as well as "Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects", written by all the editors of the volume. The authors reconstruct the main debates on populism, and position their volume in the broad area of political communication studies. This way, they also position themselves in the academic discourse on the nature and understanding of populism (as ideology, socio-technical system, demagogy, etc.), and define it as a form of
political communication.

The second part ("Populist Political Communication in Northern Europe") covers four Scandinavian case studies and consists of the following chapters: "Denmark: The Rise of the Danish People's Party" by Christian Martin Bachler and David Nicholas Hopmann; "Finland: Populism from Agrarian to Right-Wing Populism" written by Cristian Norocel; "Norway: Populism from Anti-Tax Movement to Government Party" by Anders R. Jupskas, Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, Bente Kalsnes and Toril Aalberg; as well as "Sweden: No Longer a European Exception" by Jesper Stromback, Ann-Cathrine Junger and Stefan Dahlberg. This cluster of countries is very interesting from the perspective of populism studies. First of all, the quality of democracy is rated comparatively high in Scandinavia, yet the Nordic political systems are not free from populism. At the same time, the Northern versions of populism differ from the rest of Europe in many various ways, which the contributing authors elaborate on in their country-by-country case studies.

The third part ("Populist Political Communication in Western Europe") embraces seven Western European cases, namely: "Austria: Candidate-Centered and Anti-Immigrant Right-Wing Populism" by Desiree Schmuck, Jorg Matthes and Hajo Boomgaard; "Belgium: The Rise and Fall of Populism Research" by Benjamin de Cleen and Peter van Aelst; "Germany: Is the Populism Laggard Catching Up?" by Nayla Fawzi, Magdalena Obermeier and Carsten Reinemann; "Ireland: The Rise of Populism on the Left and among Independents" written by Jane Suiter; "The Netherlands: A Heartland Full of Insights into Populist Communication" by Michael Hameleers, Sven Engesser, and Frank Esser; "Switzerland: Favourable conditions for Growing Populism" by Nicole Ernst, Sven Engesser and Frank Esser; and finally "The United Kingdom: Hybrid Populism, Mixed Fortunes, and Unstable Support" by James Stanyer, Cristina Archetti and Lone Sorensen. Despite the fact that it is difficult to find a common denominator among all the Western democracies, they share a common feature in the rise of the populist forces present in their political spheres. Notably, France is not qualified as Western but as a Southern state, which – to a large extent – reflects the recent developments in the political life of Paris.

The fourth part ("Populist Political Communication in Southern Europe") consists of six chapters dedicated to: "France: The Reluctance to Use the Word Populism as a Concept" by Nicolas Hube and Naomi Truan; "Greece: Populism Between Left and Right" by Stylianos Papanassopoulos, Iliana Giannouli and Ioannis Andreadis; "Israel: Right-Wing Populism and Beyond" by Naama Weiss Yaniv and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt; "Italy: A Breeding Ground for Populist Political Communication" by Giuliano Bobba and Guido Legnante; "Portugal: Discreet Populisms Amid Unfavorable Contexts and Stigmatization" by Susana Salgado and Jose Pedro Zuquete; and finally "Spain: Populism From the Far Right to the Emergence of Podemos," written by Karen B. Sanders, Rosa Berganza, and Roberto de Miguel. All Southern European states are included in this chapter with the addition of Israel, which represents an interesting case of right-wing populism. The analysis of the explosion of populism in the Southern peripheries driven by the economic crisis is essential for a proper understanding of the on-going events in Italy and other states.
Part number five ("Populist Political Communication in Eastern Europe") is dedicated to the region of Central and Eastern Europe and consists of the following cases: "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Populism in Transition" by Nedzma Dzananovic and Mia Karamheic; "Croatia: The Rise of Populism on the Path From Communism to European Integration" by Marko Mustapic and Ivan Hrstic; "Czech Republic: The Rise of Populism From the Fringes to the Mainstream" by Ondrej Cisar and Vaclav Stetka; "Hungary: Home of Empty Populism" by Peter Csigo and Norbert Mekovity; "Poland: A Fourth Wave of Populism" by Agnieszka Stepińska, Artur Lipiński, Agnieszka Hess and Dorota Piontek, "Romania: Populist Ideology Without Teeth" by Nocoletta Corbu, Delia Balaban-Balas, and Elena Negrea-Busuioc; as well as "Slovenia: populism as Political Marketing" written by Jernej Amo Prodnik and Boris Mance. This chapter is especially valuable not only from the perspective of a reader from the above-mentioned countries. In comparison to Western Europe, populism in that region is still relatively under-researched. At the same time, it evolves at a dynamic rate and defines the nature of politics in the Eastern peripheries of the European Union.

Finally, the concluding sixth part consists of three chapters: "Populist Actors as Communicators or Political Actors as Populist Communicators: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives" by James Stanyer, Susana Salgado and Jasper Stromback; "Populism and the Media: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives" by Frank Esser, Agnieszka Stepińska and David Nicolas Hopmann; and last but not least, "Citizens and Populist Political Communication: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives" written by Carsten Reinemann, Jorg Matthes and Tamit Shaefer. The cross-case study findings allow the authors to formulate generalisations and contribute to the theory of populism. This is a significant contribution both to political science studies on populism as well as to scholarly investigations dedicated to political communication. Moreover, due to the methodological maturity of the undertaken research, the book (predominantly in its concluding chapters) offers a lot with regards to the research design and model building.

Nonetheless, the groups of countries reflected in the structure of the book require some commenting on. First, France found itself in the chapter dedicated to Southern Europe. In the literature on comparative politics it is usually treated as a Western country, and – certainly – there is no contradiction between being Western and, at the same time, Mediterranean (which France indeed is). However, with regards to populist political communication, the authors and editors classified Paris as having more in common with the South than with the West. The second controversial case is Israel, which is not only part of a publication dedicated to Europe but also positioned in the chapter on the Southern countries. Undoubtedly, Israel is deeply inter-connected with Europe and its culture – however the question is to what extent it also refers to the political culture of Europe. Whether its populist political communication rather resembles Western, Southern or even Central and Eastern European standards is another question entirely.

*Populist Political Communication in Europe* is the result of a research project funded by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). It gathered a group of scholars with diverse academic backgrounds, including anthropologists, political scientists, media/communication scholars and sociologists. This combination resulted in a positive synergy effect allowing for a variety of perspectives. However, it is important
to note that all the chapters are ordered similarly, covering elements such as the reconstruction of academic
discourse about populism in the respective countries, the populist actors as well as media and populism. This
structure facilitated the comparative analysis, and it concludes with the identification of similarities and
differences at the end of the book.

The authors work out a preliminary (heuristic) model for the analysis of populist political communication. It
includes the causes, forms, and effects of populist communication. Focusing on populist political communication
as a process that is embedded in structural and situational macro-levels makes it possible to incorporate some
important contextual factors into the analysis, such as historical experiences and collective memories, the
specificities of media systems or political culture in general. The model thus developed covers four key elements
located on the three levels of social analysis: first, the structural and situational contexts on the macro-level;
secondly, parties, movements, and their representatives on the meso-level, thirdly, journalism and social media,
also on the meso-level, and finally, individual citizens on the micro-level. From this heuristic model many
research questions may be deduced as well as a hypothesis generated, which have not yet been asked and
verified systematically by prior research.

Comparing the national academic discourses on this topic, this volume discusses what we know about populist
political communication across Europe. It allows drawing some conclusions about the role of certain
predispositions as a driving force for the use of populist media and messages, the effects of direct versus
mediated populist communication and the role that contextual factors play therein. This publication proves the
value of cross-national research leading towards an improved knowledge about the effects of populist political
communication.

Zitierweise:

PD Dr. Rafał Riedel: Rezension zu: Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Stromback, Claes De
Vreese (eds.): Populist Political Communication in Europe, 2017, in: https://www.pol-
int.org/de/publications/populist-political-communication-europe#r7678.