Agnieszka Stępińska (Ed.):

POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS EUROPE: CONTEXTS AND CONTENTS

Berlin: Peter Lang GmbH. 2020, 230 pages.*

It is a challenging task to review a book that has been edited by one of the key experts on populist political communication in Europe and reviewed by a number of experienced scholars, too.

The 13th volume of *Studies in Communication and Politics* includes ten chapters written by 15 authors – members of the COST Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). Thus, the book is an output of this research project. In COST Action, cooperation is more about work on a common theme rather than the use of a common research methodology, or identical (localised) research subjects. The book and the research project have in common the idea of populist communication developed by Jager and Walgrave (2007). This approach differentiates between four types of populist communication. However, one can and should start this review with a critical assessment of this key concept that consists of the following parameters: complete, exclusionary, anti-elitist, empty.

(1) *complete* (i.e. allegedly includes all key components, thus, perhaps better defined as compact or full-dimensional – comment by the reviewer), understood as a political message directed to 'the People', affirmative of regular citizens and with elements of anti-elitism (criticising political and financial elites) and excluding 'outsiders' or 'foreigners';

(2) *exclusionary*, operationalized as a political message directed to 'the People', affirmative of regular citizens and simultaneously excluding outsiders but not including anti-elitism;

(3) *anti-elitist*, understood as a political message directed to 'the People', affirmative of regular citizens and with anti-elitism (criticizing political and financial elites) but not focusing on 'outsiders' or 'foreigners';

(4) *empty* (or, perhaps, better defined as one-dimensional, since the 'empty' concept is associated with Ernesto Laclau where it has rather different meaning – comment by the reviewer), understood as a political message directed to 'the People', affirmative of regular citizens but ignoring other elements as defined in the complete model.

I would suggest that, perhaps counter-intuitively, but following Laclau, this last 'empty' concept is relatively the most representative of populism (in comparison to the three other partial concepts presented above). As suggested, one can also argue that there is missing an '*inclusionary*' populist communication concept, typical for some populists, but more common among left-leaning movements and parties or leaders. Or, alternatively, do we see all inclusionary but populist parties/movements by definition as (somehow/suddenly) not populist? This issue is raised in one of chapters in the volume that discusses Israeli populism.

It should be also noted that Ernst et al. (2019) differentiate between populist communication *content* and populist communication

style. This is not always clearly differentiated in the reviewed volume.

Content-wise, the book describes the national context and/or performative features of populism (roughly translated as the content of populist communication, e.g. during election campaigns) and/or journalists' and politicians' understandings of populism or the electorate characteristics of populist movements. The countries covered include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, France, Israel, Poland and Romania. In general, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania and Israel are not often seen as countries with typical, fundamentally populist actors but rather as outliers. Therefore, the primary attention of this review will be on these three countries as well as Poland (which is a bigger and currently problematic political actor, with a relatively successful post-socialist transition but still with re-emerging populist voices). Outliers are potentially a good source of knowledge – they can help us to exclude some factors that otherwise could be considered as fundamental for success and dissemination of populism (Osborne & Overbay, 2004; Gibbert, Nair, Weiss, & Hoegl, 2021). This potential new knowledge, however, very much depends on the questions asked and the methodology used.

What kind of populist communication and populist communicators can one find in this book and why? Some of the countries are covered in more than just a single chapter. The edited volume is very well-written and provides a rather informative overview in an introductory chapter.

The key premise of the book is that '...analyzing the relationships between populist political actors, the media (journalists) and society (voters) is key to explaining the success of populist parties and populist discourse in general' (p. 9). Indeed, although there is no doubt that populist communication is both an important and interesting research subject, at the same time, one can assume that the success of populism has more to do with deeper, structural or socio-political factors than just their communication conditions and environments. For example, a 'dysfunctional ethno-national political system' (p. 16), and, perhaps more universally 'the non-functioning of the rule of law, lack of trust in judiciary and police, and conscience of corruption in the institutions' (p. 23) are seen as the key factors of ethnic populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Overall, however, the book, or rather individual chapters in it do not tackle these three identified actors or factors with identical research attention. Some chapters are more focused on political actors, some on the media or journalists, and very rarely is there an in-depth discussion about voters (or society). When there is a discussion about the last actor (the people or voters), it comes to rather puzzling rather than revealing findings (as in the Polish case study, discussed below).

The chapter 'Populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Horizontal Traditions and Vertical Novelties' provides evidence that the term populism is overstretched here. It is actually called either 'ethno-populisms' (plural form) or 'ethnic populism' or 'ethnic nationalism'. Thus, it is basically all about the nationalism found in almost all (or more or less right-wing?) political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the left-wing parties, populism 'is tied to the civil nationalism and patriotism' (p. 20). This statement deserves more explanation. Maybe this civil nationalism and patriotism is close to our debate about inclusionary populism? Not that surprisingly, 'Media are seen as "mere passive carriers of populist messages"' (p. 18). Ironically, the plurality of media sources is not helpful here either – there were 192 broadcast media, including PSM, seven daily newspapers, 184 magazines and journals, and eight (!) news agencies. This all sounds like non-digital media echo chambers.

Indeed, the political parties 'mostly use offline media'. This has to do both with their ability to control messages (or messengers, in this case) and the composition of the electorate (p. 30).

The next chapter, 'Social Factors Conducive to Popularity of Grass Roots Populist Communication Moderators in Poland', written by two authors, attempts to uncover the electorate characteristics of *Samoobrona RP* (Self-Defence of Republic of Poland, no longer politically relevant) – defined as a party of the electorate of protest, and of *Kukiz'15,* seen as an 'anti-party' grass-roots political movement. This is a challenging task considering that typical populist parties – in contrast to right-wing parties – usually have quite standard or average electorate characteristics (see, for example, Chytilek, 2019, for the Czech ANO and Slovak OĽaNO parties). In the Polish case, it is indeed hard to come to reasonable conclusions based on opinion surveys that show high distrust and criticism of political parties among such a diverse social group as 25–44 year-olds, with higher education, and, for example, both those with the highest per-capita earnings and those who had the worst view of their own financial situation (pp. 44–45). What comes out of this analysis is a deep problem with political parties. Nonetheless, the electoral base of *Samoobrona RP* can be easily identified – 'Initially, *Samoobrona* articulated the interests and emotions of the most vocal of Polish farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs' (p. 46), followed by other parts of 'the rural population' (p. 47). However, in total, only about a quarter of its voters represented the rural population in the 2005 elections (p. 48) or identified as 'the electorate of protest' (p. 47). Finally, according to public opinion polls, support came from those 'who felt discontent and socially excluded' (p. 47), and not that surprisingly, the least educated (p. 48). Thus, we can see (a) social structure of supporters, (b) their common form of expression (protest, not revolution),

and (c) their personal-psychological motivation. The two latter characteristics are typical for populist parties in general, while the first one is unique to the country and historical period in question.

In slight contrast to the previous chapter on Bosnia and Herzegovina (where the 'ethnos' is the key constituent of what is seen as populist communication), the authors define populism in Poland as a communication strategy that is, in short, anti-elitist, demophilic (or, in fact, closely related to demophilia – affirmation of the nation – thus, not to the /local/ people in general) and xenophobic. In that sense, this type of populism may be seen as more similar to populist right-wing parties. As put by Rydgren (2017), these latter parties (including the aforementioned Bosniak parties) are mainly defined by ethnic nationalism, and not by a populist ideology. Be that as it may, the authors believe very much in transition path dependency, which involves going into the communist past, as a determining factor for the rise and success of these political movements. It comes out of this great historical narrative that naturally, some analytical assessments or opinions are not supported by any hard evidence. For example, 'Citizens' collective vision and motivation behind building the new public order was greatly influenced by the role and situation of the opposition during the Polish People's Republic years' (p. 40). This may or may not be a correct observation. Or, to put it in an even longer historical perspective, claims such as '... deeply-rooted social rebellion was hard to put behind' could refer to pre-communist times. As such, the analysis takes on perhaps too much of an historical deterministic vision of progress, stagnation or regress. Yet in the immediately following sentences, a more active role of political actors is presented, in contrast to the previous historical determinism: '(they)....failed to create space and opportunities for citizens to express their var-

ious interests in the public sphere' (p. 40) and 'the disillusionment with the social effects of a market economy' (p. 41). Indeed, these factors more likely reflect the deep roots of populism – perceived citizens' political disempowerment, and the injustice or insecurity of the market. Due to space limitations, I will omit discussion about the Kukiz'15 movement.

Let us turn to the presumably populist outliers, starting with the chapter 'Understanding Populism: Views from Romanian Politicians and Journalists'. As expected, no populist party is identified in Romania, although, obviously, 'elements of populist political communication were identified in the discourses of the majority of political parties' (p. 58). The chapter has a very nicely written abstract. The methodology (pre-agreed within the research project) is based on ten in-depth interviews with Romanian politicians, political consultants, and journalists. This highlights the issue of selection criteria – who were these interviewees and why exactly were these ones were selected? The answer to this question is 'four active politicians, two political consultants, and four journalists' (p. 60). Further details are provided, including, with one exception, full names. Such an approach has its obvious and less obvious pros and cons. Although it is possible that an individual can have great knowledge and insight into some niche issue such as populist communication, this is, in fact, a quite rare phenomenon. Thus, the selection criteria for these particular interviewed persons seem to be unclear. I contacted local experts to clarify this issue (Dr. Adina Marincea, Dr. Ioana Avadani and Prof. Mihai Coman), who offered critical comments that I share here in summary: We got a national selection that is actually much too regional. Moreover, the selected respondents do not necessarily represent the official positions of their parties. One journalist is actually a political scientist.

It is possible that for exploratory research it actually does not matter how representative a sample is constructed. Maybe there is no need for exploratory research on this topic at all. Exploratory research makes sense if the author has no clue about the researched topic (e.g. he is new in the field, or a foreign researcher) or the topic is too complicated or rapidly evolving.

The advantage of this methodological approach is that the respondents had time to think about their answers – which were delivered via email. Yet, there are some inconsistencies – on the one hand, it has been mentioned that there was no populist party in Romania, but on the other hand, one respondent claimed that 'populism is the key feature of the current Romanian politics' (p. 62), and another one argued that 'they are all populist' (p. 65). It is true that the author states that the research 'has its limits as a qualitative, exploratory approach' (p. 66). Nonetheless, one can wonder what can we learn from this exploratory research? Maybe, just to get a very rough overview of the local situation: there is no populist party in Romania, but politicians use populist rhetoric or, rather, demagoguery, very much especially in election campaigns? And, moreover, the media like extremes and negative rhetoric since such content increases ratings?

Next, let us explore the chapter 'The Populist Rhetoric of Individual Actors on Social Media: Revealing an Elitist Aspect', focused on Israel. The study aims at analysing actor's status and actor's perceptions regarding political representation, using a sample of 3,024 posts from the Facebook pages of local politicians, through an understanding of populism as rhetoric. However, the authors are not (primarily) interested in 'whether an actor is a populist or not but rather to what extent actors employ populist rhetoric' (p. 154). And, finally, the key research issue is: 'how are individual characteristics of politicians related

to their use of populist rhetoric?' (p. 155). By individual characteristics they mean the following hypotheses: the politician's experience in politics (being a political newcomer gives more impetus to the use of populist rhetoric), the politician's status within the party (the lower a politician's status within the party, the more populist rhetoric they employ), and the politician's social status (the lower a politician's social status, the more populist rhetoric they employ). These key assumed characteristics actually represent the first three research questions and hypotheses. The other two research hypotheses (which, in fact, seem to be the same questions in two different formats) are: 'the more a politician favors responsiveness over responsibility, the more populist rhetoric they employ; and the more a politician favors the role of delegate over the role of trustee, the more populist rhetoric he employs' (p.155).

These latter hypotheses seem to be relevant to populism. However, the research perhaps goes too far – all politicians and almost all political parties may occasionally use, especially during election campaigns and while in opposition, populist rhetoric. This certainly does not make them populists in a narrow sense. Fundamentally, is not this research actually more about demagoguery – i.e. about a political activity or form of communication that appeals to the wishes and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argumentation – than about populism? It is true that the authors 'distinguish between populist rhetoric and "ordinary" political attacks' and also use a narrow definition of populist indicators.

The sampling procedure is not very clear, either. It was based by and large on 'stratified sampling'. Does this mean that the authors selected politicians based on the ratio of the three key research questions, reflected as their individual characteristics? But this seems to contradict the research decision that 'Politi-

cians located in the first two places of their party list in each sampling frame were automatically included in the sample' (p. 160). There are some other methodological inconsistencies, like what was the actual size of sample (80 or 122?) and the number of posts analysed (if, per politician, there are 30 posts, and the total number of posts is 3,024, the result does not correspond either to 80 or 122 politicians sampled). Maybe the explanation can be found in the exclusion of clearly non-populist cases/contributions. Be that as it may, the results are interesting: only 4.8% of the posts contained populist rhetoric and, on average, 4% of the politicians' sampled posts were populist (p. 163). Furthermore, the regression coefficients of both political experience and status within the party in both models turned out to be insignificant (p. 165). Also, contrary to the expectations, the more affluent was a politician's locality, the more populist rhetoric he employed (p. 165). Not that surprisingly, the Facebook posts had a greater chance of containing populism when the actor's party belonged to the opposition (pp. 165–166). Finally, the higher an actor's social status, the more populist rhetoric he employed (p. 165). One can think here immediately about Donald Trump. Fundamentally, 'Populist rhetoric is not confined to political outsiders but is employed by politicians who are positioned in the heart of the establishment and the elite' (p. 169). This may be true in the local context, but modern Italian (M5S) and Spanish (PODEMOS) populist contexts suggest that the opposite experience is also possible.

There are some methodological or cultural caveats such as the 'prevalence and acceptance of offensive discourse might explain why populist rhetoric is ubiquitous among even seasoned Israeli politicians' (p. 170). All in all, although apparently there is not much typical populism in Israel but rather some impolite discourse with some demagoguery combined,

this chapter is well-researched (using many complementary research methods).

It appears that two of the examined cases (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Poland) have in common something deeply emotional. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is a fear of lessons learned from past changes (the violent transition from communism to nationalism) and, consequently, a fear of what change can bring in the future. Yet, arguably, we see in Bosnia more nationalism mixed with demagoguery, or nationalistic demagoguery, rather than populism. An unanswered question remains whether, and why, left-wing political parties are non-nationalist (and/or non-populist)? In Poland, there have been crises 'stemming from rigorous systemic transformations' (p. 39). In other words, again, there were changes, this time not violent but somehow seen as fundamentally unfair processes, or, rather, with flawed results. Within this context, maybe history does not matter as much as some authors seem to believe.

The two outliers – arguably non-populist countries (Israel and Romania) – are actually very interesting cases. It was a smart decision – whether intentionally or by default – to include outliers. The Romanian case study highlights the meaning and importance of methodology as well as questions the purpose of exploratory research. Moreover, one can ask – why there is no strong or relevant populist party in Romania? For Israel, one can ask how local culture or local discourse impacts or intermingles with populism? The Israeli case study also demonstrates a very nice utilisation of different research methods in the study of populism.

Finally, one has to agree with Hess & Kasprowicz (in this volume) that 'Populism as a phenomenon ought to be discussed in a clear political, historical, social, and economic context, taking note of its determining factors and environment' (p. 51). Yet this would require a book devoted to each populist phenomenon – be that a politician, political party or a country.

Overall, this book offers more questions than answers – which is not necessarily a bad result. Yet some of these questions concern perhaps a more acceptable definition of populism (or populist communication) and the proper (another) common methodology for studying such an elusive phenomenon.

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