A BINARY THREAT: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AMPLIFIES THE DANGERS OF POPULISM

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Abstract: *Populism is now internationally recognized as a legitimate threat to the democratic status quo. However, there's still very little research in terms of the way such actors are able to use social media to instantly get their message across to the people. While modern Internet platforms are not the sole privilege of populists, their tendency towards bypassing politics as a whole makes this a very dangerous phenomenon.*
Keywords: *social media populism, threat, neo-populism.*

Introduction

While populism as a whole started to gather status ever since the early 2000s, there is now a category which was not only unexpected, but also surprised many observers with the intensity of its effects: electoral populism, which evolved into year-round social media populism.

At the root of more traditional definitions, populism is seen as the idea that society is separated *"into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'"* , so there's a strong need for a leader that will be able to return politics to being *"an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people"*[1].

Social media populism, on the other hand, does not necessarily refer to actors during an electoral campaign because, through its natural role, populism is born to be a part of the opposition. At a gathering during his campaign for the 2016 elections, Donald Trump brought forward a notion that would, from that moment, become a staple of the new status quo promoted by characters such as Nigel Farage and Viktor Orban: *"The only important thing is the unification of the people, because the other people don't mean anything"*, the future president said[2].

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[1] C. Mudde, "The populist zeitgeist", in *Government and opposition* 39.4 (2004), p. 543.
[2] I. Tharoor,, "Trump's populism is about creating division, not unity", in *The Washington Post*, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/06/trumps-populism-is-about-creating-division-not-unity/, (accessed on 23.09.2021).

Social media populism, even more so than traditional versions of it, has a desperate need of enemies which it can "expose" to the general public as the reason for the actions it seeks to implement. It thrives in an environment based on fear and uncertainty, aiming to throw any and all opposition outside the system. This is true no matter if we're talking about Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, or the former leader of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez[3].

What I aim to do in this article is to conflate two notions that seem to work very well together and both present a danger to the current international political climate: the still on-going support for populist leaders in many parts of the world and the way social media acts as a bridge between such politicians and their audience, providing a way of direct communication unseen since the days of Greek democracy.

Through the online platform, populist leaders now have the ability to talk – albeit in a one-sided manner – directly to millions of followers, which greatly increases the power of their message. As a result, I have identified a double danger which is in need of addressing: first, the "standard" issue of populism being able to shift almost at will through the political landscape and crafting its message depending on where it is located. Second, populism being able to take said message to social media and engage in a call to action that directly reaches the people it's intended for, changing their dynamics and perceived threats.

How established populists can use social media to their advantage

While Donald Trump became notorious for the way he used Twitter during his campaign, he was not the only one implementing this strategy: Social media was also the instrument through which Narendra Modi, the Prime-Minister of India, managed to convince the Indian society to follow him towards a *"developmental sovereignty"*[4]. The Indian politician used

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[3] *Ibidem.*

[4] S.Sinha, "Fragile hegemony: Modi, social media and competitive electoral populism in India", in *Internaţional Journal of Communication* 11, 2017, pp. 4158-4180, available at https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24533/6/sinha-fragile-hegemony-published-version-IJC.pdf, (accessed on 23.09.2021).

modern-day instruments extremely well in order to create an almost mystical presence among his voters, even appearing in an episode of a Discovery channel show in an effort to reach more of his younger audience.
Regardless of the apparent modern approach showed by populist leaders when it comes to technology, we should not make the error of believing that they really have the aim of bringing back an updated version of direct democracy. As it stands, proving this particular fact to the general population could work really well as a way of combating populism in the future.

Jan-Werner Muller, one of the most widely-established figures in all of populist studies, explains this: *"Contrary to what their supporters would like to believe, populists have no interest in going from a representative democracy to a direct one; they simply believe that we have the wrong representatives so long as they are not the ones in power (...) which, by itself, represents a function of the symbolic way in which populists see 'the real people'*[5]*"*.

Also, the success of this type of populism, as it became apparent in both Trump campaigns, brings into fold a relevant question regarding the type of choices citizens make during such times. In many political contexts, including those where elections are free and correctly organized, voters will choose against representatives that seem to suggest quality government. This paradox has everything to do with the low level of confidence that citizens regard their elected leaders with[6].

Having finally broken into the central stage of international politics and free of normative judgements, populism has, with help from relevant leaders of important state actors, solidified itself as a well-established force in the structure of the current geopolitical context. This is what Cas Mudde aptly describes as *"a pathological normalcy"*. The Dutch researcher argues that this new type of populism is of a radical nature, rather than an extremist

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[5] J.W.Muller, "Capitalism in One Family", in *London Review of Books*, 38(23), 2016, pp. 10-14.
[6] P. Keefer, C. Scartascini, R. Vlaicu, "Social Trust and Electoral Populism: Explaining the Quality of Government", 2019, available at http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3460914, accessed on 26.09.2021.

one, the difference being that *"in this definition, radicalism accepts procedural democracy, whereas extremism does not"*[7].

Populists reject politics as a way of resolving conflicts, but we cannot say that they are without involvement in politics or, in other words, "apolitical"[8]. Such a leader's appetite for success is influenced by the ability to convince his followers that only he can save them from the consequences of the selfish actions of the elites. Social media therefore appears as a marvellous tool to skip that "elites" gap and allow populist leaders to directly reach "the people". Since this type of interaction has already become the new normal, the risks we face here are definitely not hard to fathom.

At the same time, social media populism does not simply come alive during necessary times, such as an electoral campaign, for instance. Since its objectives are gathering public support and justifying the need for tough measures, populist involvement in society represents a constant which, due to the 'thinness' of its core, can be "located anywhere along the ideological left-right continuum"[9].

Modern social media populism is the most constant threat to the current status quo because the daily nature of the interactions happening in these environments combined with the constant danger reminders of these leaders serve to breed a constant feeling of crisis into the general population. Therefore, it's safe to say that, from a security point of view, an on-going feeling of danger within one's society is a crisis in its own.

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[7] C. Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy", in *Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations*, 2008, pp. 1168-1169, available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402382.2010.-508901?journalCode=fwep20, accessed on 26.09.2021.

[8] P. Taggart, "Populism and 'Unpolitics'", in G. Fitzi, J. Mackert, B. Turner (eds.), *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, Routledge, 2018, p.81, available at https://sgp1.-digitaloceanspaces.com/proletarian-library/books/032fbdc33b8bc8b1c14543d6e35-29d25.pdf, accessed on 27.09. 2021.

[9] A.L.P. Pirro, M. Portos, "Populism between voting and non-electoral participation", in *West European Politics*, 2020, p.5, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382-.2020.1739451, accessed on 27.09.2021.

Usually, conventional theory shows us that a crisis ends either with a solution or a ceasefire. However, populists have even found a way to adapt a crisis in their favour, a notion which is perfectly explained by noted professor Paul Taggart and exemplified by former U.S. president Donald Trump. Taggart emphasizes that the populist actor focuses *"on wars and not battles. Populism views politics as on-going conflict. For populists, defeat in any one battle does not signify defeat. Indeed, populists can often claim that defeat is evidence of the superior resources of the enemy but this is itself vindication of the populist cause"*[10].

Donald Trump's attitude after the 2020 U.S. presidential election results is clear proof for the affirmations Taggart made only two years before. The republican politician refused to accept his defeat and launched accusations of fraud in all the states where he lost. *"He* (Joseph Biden) *only won in the eyes of the FAKE NEWS MEDIA. I concede NOTHING! We have a long way to go. This was a RIGGED ELECTION!"*[11], tweeted the still-American president at that time.

Representative democracy makes a lot of citizens feel disconnected from the events that are happening at the very top of their society, yet events that are deciding their lives nonetheless. Populist politicians use personal calls to directly reach these people and jump over the usual intermediary institutions such as political parties[12]. Even more, such a leader will automatically mean a higher possibility for crises within the society. A totalitarian regime which is not limited by any political institution will be free to implement government policies as it sees fit, without worrying about state law. Even so, the actions of such a regime are still more predictable than those of a populist status quo since here we can witness either the use of authority through law, or going beyond the law "in the name of the people".

One element not particularly known at this time, but which will probably start becoming more clear as more and more consequences of

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[10] P. Taggart, *op.cit.,* p. 82.
[11] ***, *Donald Trump appears to acknowledge Joe Biden's win, but says won't concede"*, in *Economic Times*, 2020, available at https://m.economictimes.com/news/international-/world-news/trump-cites-biden-victory-on-twitter-still-presses-false-rigging-claims/-articleshow/79234918.cms, accessed on 30.09.2021.
[12] P. Keefer, C. Scartascini, R. Vlaicu,*op.cit.,* p. 8.

Donald Trump's presidential actions unfold is the way in which a populist leader listens to those around him once he is in power. Populists have no use for politics as a way to insert themselves into the system, so social media is the one who gets to play that part in our modern society. Despite performances like those of Recep Erdoğan in Turkey or Viktor Orban in Hungary, Donald Trump is the first populist to have used this tactic in order to establish himself as the leader of a strong western democracy.

Social media also amplifies the populist reach in such a way that this particular type of leaders is bound to find support in more traditional parties even without being a completely integrated member of one. Muller, for instance, had the following thing to say at the moment of Donald Trump's arrival at the White House: *"This is all textbook American political science, and makes one thing clear: Trump would not be in the White House without his enablers – or, to put it less neutrally, collaborators – in the Republican Party. He could not have succeeded as a third-party candidate. (...) Only 37 per cent of voters considered Trump qualified to be president so (...) somebody had to tell Republicans that, although Trump is unqualified, at least he is their unqualified*[13]*"* man. Over the Atlantic, in the United Kingdom, the creator and main promoter of Brexit, Nigel Farage, managed to achieve very much the same. When the Boris Johnson government was formed, it was so stacked with Farage's people that British journalists called him *"the malign spectre (...) haunting every meeting"*[14].

Also, it's definitely worth mentioning that this is a type of social crisis which does not require actual changes in order to cause harm. Simple, constant tensions and the repeated blames of populist actions can lead towards the same result if stretched out over a longer period. For this, social media is invaluable because millions of people use the platforms every day, creating the basis for an on-going populist rhetoric.

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[13] J.W. Muller, *op.cit.*, p. 10-14

[14] N. Cohen,"Nigel Farage is the malign spectre haunting Boris Johnson's new government", in *The Guardian*, 2019, available at https://www.theguardian.com/-commentisfree/2019/jul/28/nigel-farage-malign-spectre-haunting-boris-johnson-new-government-brexit-party, accessed on 30.09.2021.

The term "crisis" has to be carefully approached when used together with the populist ideology. Since this is not yet a fully understood and explored area of study, many aspects of a traditional crisis have not been fully covered here. For instance, the meaning of a crisis is usually generalized, with very little attention shown to the difference between potential "objective" triggers and "socially-constructed" triggers. The later, as it stands, are what populist discourses choose to bring to the fold when trying to exert influence over their citizens[15].

Studying anti-populist discourses seems, in the wake of the ascension of social media populism, extremely important in order to be better able to unravel its rhetoric. Yannis Stavrakakis and his collaborators, without fighting against the populist role in starting a crisis, underline the necessity of comparing modern versions of populism to the words of their opponents. *"It seems equally if not even more important to insist on studying anti-populism together with populism, focusing on their mutual constitution and reproduction. And not only on philosophical grounds (...) but also because populism discourses never operate in a vacuum and need to be situated within the context of political antagonism (...) which is energized more often than not by crisis situations, real or/and imagined"*[16].

While anti-populism rhetoric is not the goal of this paper, I do want to underline that social media is extremely potent when it comes to being a breeding ground for a crisis, regardless of its topic. When it comes to this, no example is more on point than that of Brexit. In the UK, both UKIP and the Brexit party have been more than adept at using social media to spread their political agendas and ideas around[17]. Social media platforms are, therefore, dangerous tools for populists not only because they allow such leaders to directly communicate with their supporters, but also because they

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[15] Y. Stavrakakis ...et al.,"Populism, anti-populism and crisis", in *Contemporary Political Theory,* 17(1), pp. 4-27, available at https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/31995, accessed on 02.10.2021.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 3

[17] T. Davidson, Mabel Berezin, "Britain first and the UK Independence Party: Social media and movement-party dynamics", in *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 23:4, 2018, pp. 485-510, available at https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/bmq5n/, accessed on 02.10.2021.

can disseminate the message and gather new recruits while still avoiding challenges from political opponents[18].

"The People" in the New Age of populism

If there's one characteristic that populists share with the other members of the political realm, is the need for garnering citizens' vote and attention. While social media is indeed a realm of near-infinite potential for populists, we must also keep a close eye on how "the people", the proposed epicenter of the populist ideology, are responding to it.

The widening gap between the people and "the elites" is the main reason why populists claim to be acting the way they do. While, in simple terms, this looks like an economic gap, it would be dangerous to operate on this premise alone. In his 2018 piece, researcher John Postill claims the roots of populism *"are often knotty"* so *"identitarian, existential, and other causes must be considered as well"* when trying to understand it[19].

If nothing else, social media has forever changed the way we perceive our identities, allowing people to connect, but also allowing actors in need of influence unfathomable access to our profiles and the way we can be influenced. While all members of the political world can indeed use this, populists manage to create new worlds by doing so. While, in real life, a mere fragment of a mere corner of the Internet, such actions use social media to make the users see and understand only what the populist leader wants them to. This is what Eli Pariser calls *"The Filter Bubble Effect"*. In the namesake book, Pariser argues that *"The filter bubble will often block out the things in our society that are important, but complex or unpleasant. (...) And it's not just issues that disappear. Increasingly, it's the whole political process"*[20].

The disappearance of the political process as a whole and replacing it with a new platform, one that also ideally allows populists to skip

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[18] *Ibidem.*
[19] J. Postill, "Populism and social media: a global perspective", in *Media, Culture & Society*, 40 (5), pp. 754-765, available at https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772186, accessed on 02.10.2021.
[20] E. Pariser, *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think*, Penguin, 2011.

interactions with fellow politicians and go straight for the masses, is the very real danger that we are facing today. While several authors, Postill included, argue that we still haven't found the link that seems to draw social media and populism together, I argue that, while that might be true, it may be time for a pre-emptive approach.

Fighting off the effects of social media populism today should go hand in hand with the research required to understand the science behind them. In my opinion, this is especially true in countries where "the people", already at odds with the state, were radicalized even further by the restrictive measures required due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Romania, for instance, the populist A.U.R. party, which caused a surprise no more than a year ago winning legislative seats, managed to double its electoral score in just 365 days and become the country's third party in terms of popular support at the moment[21].

This shows quite well that citizens today have a characteristic which sets them apart from their older counterparts. Today, we are dealing with an electorate who is more connected than ever before through the use of digital means. It is still politically unhappy, but social media has brought out the sheer numbers of "the people" by showing them there are other similar citizens sharing the same dissatisfied point of view. While there are authors that argue against separating social media from the rest of the media environment[22], to my mind, it is safe to do so as long as we're only doing it to understand how it changes the citizens' voting habits.

The last hypothesis that I'd like to propose here has to do with a potential long-term effect of social media populism. The disenchantment felt by many citizens of modern-day democracies in regards to their leaders is not something new at this point. What social media is doing is providing a place where this disenchantment can materialize into real-world actions, particularly if populists will have anything to do with it. However, populists or not, we can't hide behind the fact that the online platforms have become the new preferred space when one wants to vent out some political

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[21] National Index of Services and Consumption of the Population (INSCoP), available at https://www.inscop.ro/7-octombrie-2021-rgnpress-surpriza-majora-in-ultimul-sondaj-in-scop-aur-isi-dubleaza-scorul-electoral-si-usr-plus-in-scadere-drastica/, accessed on 09.10.2021.
[22] J. Postill, *op.cit.*, p. 761.

frustration[23]. This has become so true, in fact, that future social media may end up eliminating the need for a populist leader and allowing people to do it themselves, if such a culture were to be created in that country beforehand.

In other words, populists skipping a step now and talking directly to the people through platforms like Twitter and Facebook may, one day, make these platforms so important that states will treat them with much more importance than they do now in terms of them representing the popular opinion. But, alas, this is still a black swan-type scenario at this point.

Conclusions

Populism and social media seem to share one very important characteristic: we're just scratching the surface when it comes to understanding both of them, yet we're already facing very real dangers coming from there. While populists today obviously share in the history of those that came before them, at least from a discourse point of view, social media instruments and platforms allowed them to completely overhaul the game and reach directly for "the people".

It is therefore imperative that we refresh our early warning practices in regards to populist threats. Now given the ability to constantly create a feeling of crisis without even going through official, system-approved channels, these actors have the ability to very quickly rise up in the approval rankings.

What's worse, this isn't even the most worrisome part. Populists are able to use the fact that social media has become the *go-to* place for yelling out political frustration in order to paint their dream world in much more realistic discourses. Donald Trump's ability to instantly react to any events through his Twitter feed is what made people feel he was one of them, even when he wasn't. With social media, populists now have a way of belonging to "the people", even when they're not so different from "the elites" after all. In hindsight, the Internet platforms that people are so enamored with

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[23] J. Bartlett, "Populism, social media and democratic strain", in *European populism and winning the immigration debate*, 2014, pp. 99-116, available at https://eprints.whiterose-.ac.uk/104297/1/Korr%20igen.pdf#page=121, accessed on 09.10.2021.

might just prove to be, due to the general socio-political context, the launching pad for a new wave of populist threats.

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