

Book Review

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Populist discourse in the Polish media

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The book *Populist discourse in the Polish media* is the result of a common research project called “Populist political discourse in the Polish public sphere” conducted by a team of researchers from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, representing two faculties: Faculty of Political Science and Journalism and Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology. The project aimed to draw the complex picture of populist political communication by and through the Polish media from an interdisciplinary perspective. The authors successfully combined several aspects of populist research and draw a „multifaceted view of Polish right-wing populism in an attempt to capture its specificity.”

The volume starts with the theoretical and methodological framework of analyzing populist communication presented by Agnieszka Stępińska, Marta Wrześniewska – Pietrzak and Jacek Wyszynski. Under populism the authors understand a “discourse practice” (Laclau, 2005), a “communication style” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018), a “a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name” (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, 322), and “a communication framework which



includes references to the people, identification with the people and aspirations to speak for the people” (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, 322).

The project was developed in line with the existing literature in the field having the main objective “to analyze linguistic manifestations of populism in the public statements of Polish political actors and journalists.” Sociologists, political scientists, and linguists conducted previous researches on populism in Poland. Yet, little systematic empirical research has been conducted to analyze the populist political discourse in the statements of various political entities. Furthermore, in previous populist studies, little attention has been paid to media as a mobilization tool for populist discourses.

The analysis was conducted following four directions: (1) the characteristics, repeatable elements, forming a relatively permanent pattern of populist discourse, (2) the components of the populist narrative in the statements of select political actors and journalists in Poland, (3) the differences in the functioning of populist content in the statements of particular political actors and journalists resulting from different political orientations, attitudes, and social and linguistic behaviors; and, (4) the socio-political effects of political statements and linguistic interactions between political actors and journalists. The study focused on traditional media outlets print (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Fakt*, *Nasz Dziennik*, *Polityka*, *Newsweek*, *Do Rzeczy* and, *W sieci*) and, television (three television news programs: *Wiadomości* by TVP1, *Fakty* by TVN, and *Wydarzenia* by Polsat, as well as journalistic programs broadcast in both public (*Tomasz Lis live* on TVP2; *Salon dziennikarski* on TVP Info) and commercial media (*Kropka nad i* on TVN24 and *Łoża prasowa* on TVN24) from the years 2015-2017, and therefore covered both the presidential and parliamentary election periods in Poland in 2015 and the post-election period. In addition, a part of the volume focused on the online political communication. The research method was content analysis, the research team developed specific codebooks for the purpose of their research.

After a general presentation of the research in chapter 1, chapters 2, 3, 4, and 10 are dealing with the analysis of print media. Kinga Adamczewska and Agnieszka Stępińska addressed in chapter 2 the types of populism in the content of the print media and reached two main results based on their two hypotheses. The first hypothesis that Polish tabloids would publish more frequently statements containing elements of populist discourse than the serious broadsheet newspapers was only partially confirmed. The second hypothesis that the Polish press is dominated by criticism of “the elite”, which is not accompanied by any reference to “the people” was confirmed.

The issue of political actors and journalists’ populist discourse was the subject of chapter 3 under the authorship of Agnieszka Stępińska and Maria Wąsicka – Sroczyńska. The value of the present analysis is that it succeeds in distinguished populism by the media and populism through the media. Although political “actors

were “usual suspects” (populism through the media) journalists appeared to be the main source of statements referring to “the people”, criticizing “the elite”, or excluding “the out-groups” (populism through the media). Political actors were the source of almost one-third of all such statements covered by the media. According to the findings, of the present research project, the Polish media actively participated in populist political communication. Journalists not only played the role of gatekeepers but were also originators and interpreters of populist messages.

Jakub Jakubowski, Denis Halagiera and Agnieszka Stępińska analyzed in chapter 4 the topics identified in the populist discourse on the Polish print media. They developed a map that considers contextual and situational factors influencing the presence of the populist discourse in the Polish printed press in the analyzed period and confirmed, in line with previous scholarship in the field, the high level of parallelism in Polish newspapers.

Chapter 10 contributes to the analysis of the Polish newspapers by focusing on a particular topic that is very relevant to the populist political communication: The case of the “refugee crisis” in the discourse of the Polish press. Artur Lipiński concludes that concerning the presentation of the refugee crisis the leading theme was the exclusion of “the other”, related to the rhetoric of fear of “the other”. Culturalized Islam was framed as a threat to Christianity.

Chapters 5 and 6 focused on television. Marcin Piechocki and Jacek Wyszynski analyzed a news show of the Polish public television: *Wiadomości TVP1* in search of elements of the populist political communication. The authors concluded that: “*Wiadomości*’s reporting is biased and there are no visible attempts to cover it in any way”. A significant part of the news show contains at least one element of populist discourse.

Chapter 6 focuses on two formats of TV opinion programs; interviews and discussions selected from a public and a private TV station to “determine whether journalists, acting as hosts or guests in TV opinion programs used a populist style or they could be defined as populist actors”. The authors, Dorota Piontek and Małgorzata Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk stated no clear answer to such complex research questions. The populist discourse was present to some extent in the analyzed materials. Journalists used expressions characteristic for the populist style, but they didn’t indicate any specific political or media actors as populist.

Chapters 7 by Jakub Jakubowski addressed the challenges of the research of populist political communication on the Internet and social media in general. He concluded that in the time frame 2015-2019, “the Internet has failed to stand up to the hopes that it could improve politics.” Social media was a channel that supported populism. From the methodological point of view drawing a picture of online populist political communication in Poland was impossible.

Populist political communication on social media was analyzed in chapter 8 and from the perspective of a single political actor: *Paweł Kukiz* presence on Facebook

during the 2015 electoral campaigns. The role of social media for populist political communication has to be considered as an important topic for future research taking into consideration the implications of this type of media for populism. Nevertheless, Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska's underlined the challenges of doing research on social media where a researcher has "to take a more comprehensive view of the study material, taking into account the self-referential and mutually complementary character of the social media posts."

Chapter 9 addressed the theoretical and methodological challenges of the studies on populist discourse from the linguistic perspective. The authors, Marta Wrześniewska-Pietrzak and Małgorzata Kołodziejczak pointed on the functions of the "us-them" antinomy for the populist discourse in Poland emphasizing the difficulties of considering this an indicator of populist political communication since this antinomy is a common feature of political communication in general.

The present book is an important contribution to the development of the research of the populist political communication in Poland and the Eastern and Central Europe in general. The value of the present work lies in both theoretical and empirical aspects that have been presented. It is a book worthy to be read by students, scholars and by everybody interested to understand the contemporary development of the current Polish political communication from the perspective of populism.

Reviewed by

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