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Right-wing populism and the news media: A cross-cultural study of populist performances, journalist practices and news discourse¹

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1. Introduction

The research on the relations between right-wing populism and the media has increased in recent years, moving from general assumptions about the importance of the media to concrete analyses of mediated performances of populism and the media’s role in shaping contexts for populist discourse. Research suggests that the success of populist parties is dependent on their media-savvy rhetoric, styles and repertoires of front stage activities (Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Mudde’s (2007) conclusion that the media tend to be both a “friend and a foe” of populist parties is confirmed in examples from different countries, and the attempts in research to clarify whether (and if so how) the media benefits populist parties show mixed results (Mazzoleni, 2008; Moffitt, 2016; Krämer, 2014; Stanyer et al, 2016). The role of the media involves different aspects. Media (and journalism) for example frame populist activities and provide more or less favorable context (media logics as well as political agendas) for populist parties to exploit. What is more, the mainstream media essentially represents the dominant public political culture that populist leaders like to challenge and deviate from (and are therefore dependent of) in their strategies to perform being non establishment.

To develop our knowledge of the diverse and dynamic relationships between right-wing populism and the media we need theorizing and empirical comparative studies that take the features and strategies of populist parties, media practices and discourses, as well as shifting

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social and political circumstances, into consideration. The modest contribution of this paper is to suggest a conceptual framework that differentiates four features of right-wing populism – *populist discourse; populist style; socio-cultural resonance; nationalist ideologies*. The conceptual framework, I argue, helps to clarify (1) significant differences between populist parties and their public performances; (2) the complex relationships between the media and political populism (and the related challenges that journalism faces in reporting on increasingly prominent right-wing populism across countries). I illustrate the conceptual framework in some analyses based on an ongoing project on the reporting on right-wing populism in four countries (France, Greece, Sweden and the UK).

A central aspect of the shifting forms of contemporary right-wing populism concerns how the different features (in the conceptual framework) are articulated, interrelated, emphasized (or de-emphasized) in public discourse (text and talk). For example, research shows how some political leaders frequently enact a populist style and distance themselves from the political establishment in talking frankly and unpolished, whilst in other performative repertoires politicians rather avoid such a populist style in order to “mainstream”, de-demonize and legitimize the political parties and their ideologies (Akkerman, 2016; Moffitt 2016). Another difference concerns the relationships between populist discourse and nationalist ideologies of right-wing populist parties in Europe. With references to for example the political leaders’ public discourse (Stavrakakis et al 2017) convincingly show that parties such as Front National and Party for Freedom (in the Netherlands) tend to be primarily nationalist. The central discourse of the parties is the antagonism between a “homogenous ethnic community and its ethno-cultural other” (Stavrakakis et al 2017:421) rather than the antagonism between the people and the elite. However, if we consider the public discourse of UKIP and the performances of Nigel Farage in recent election campaigns the opposite seems to apply (and more recently populist discourses are recontextualized in the Brexit rhetoric of the Conservative party in the UK) (references).

Populism is a contested concept, although most scholars share an understanding of populism as essentially related to an appeal to the people and the articulated idea of a fundamental antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’ (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007; Moffitt, 2016). Emphasizing the discursive articulations, Laclau (2005) and others have argued that populism does not refer to a particular (leftist or right-wing) ideology as such. However, to understand the dynamics of right-wing populism, ideologies obviously must be taken into account. Mudde (2007) suggests that the core of populist radical right is

nativism (a combination of nationalism and xenophobia), authoritarianism and populism. Moffitt (2016) is among the scholars who argue that the performative style is a central feature of contemporary populism. Without questioning the importance of style, Stavrakakis et al (2017:424) however argue that “discourse constitutes the core material of analysis”.

The conceptual discussions within the field seem to reflect the diversity and shifting forms of politics labelled as right-wing populism or radical right-wing populism. The features highlighted in the conceptual framework suggested in this paper (*populist discourse; populist style; socio-cultural resonance; nationalist ideologies*) are all discussed in previous research. The conceptualization is not a definition that claims to separate populism from non-populism, but a framework for comparative analyses of right-wing populism and the media. By definition, populism refers to the appeal to the people (Latin *populous*, “people”). This appeal is constructed in discursive practices related to the four aspects.

My empirical examples in this paper will refer to a contrastive comparison of the Sweden Democrats and UKIP in the European parliament election campaign in 2014. The sample includes the main evening news programs, current affairs and election special (party leader interviews, debates and live election night coverage) in the three weeks before and the two days after the Election Day. Elections are critical events in which politics is foregrounded and densified. Competing narratives of politics is played out and negotiated in the media with implications for the framing of future ‘everyday’ politics. Television plays an important role in election campaign. The empirical focus of the paper however means that for example the significant ways in which populism circumvent traditional media in their social media strategies is not related to in this paper.

The study applies a discourse analytical approach. In short, this means, a focus on politics as signifying processes, articulated not least in the language and the acts of performances in mediated talk and interaction. Right-wing populism involves a struggle of meaning, discursive constructions of the relationships between the people and the establishment, articulations of nationalist and anti-immigration discourses. It also means a focus on how politics is represented and framed, and how discourses are recontextualized, in news discourse. News journalism is produced within institutionalized norms and routines, and through established (and changing) media formats, genres, styles of reporting, practices of interviewing etc.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I illustrate how significant differences between right-wing populist parties are related to the four features in the conceptual

framework. The second part focuses on the roles of the media: how political discourses are reported (framed and represented) in the media and how media discourse function as a more or less favourable context for the performances of right-wing populism. The analyses suggest that the four features of right-wing populism are interrelated to (dependent of and negotiated in) different aspects of media discourse.

2. The performances of right-wing populism

Populist discourse

In populism, the claiming of an exclusive representation of the people (Muller, 2016) is interrelated to the blaming of ‘the establishment’ and ‘the political elite’. The populist discourse defines an antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the political elite’. The relationship between the two groups (typically constructed as homogenous) is assumed to be fundamental in society; transcending other social divisions, interests and conflicts between left and right in ‘mainstream’ politics.

Our comparative analyses show how this binary divide was invoked by populist politicians in the context of different political debates and agendas. However, we also found clear differences between for example Nigel Farage’s (the UKIP leader’) emotionalized appeal and demonization of the political elite in UK and EU, articulating a strong Euroscepticism in a somewhat unpolished (populist) language; and the ways in which Åkessons (the leader of The Sweden Democrats) claimed to represent the only party taking people’s concerns about immigration seriously. Åkesson blamed the mainstream parties for ignoring what people are troubled about, however, without departing from the more sophisticated and polished language of mainstream politics. How populist discourses are enacted is dependent of the national political contexts referred to, the policies of the parties, as well as the performative styles of political leaders.

Populist style

Populism is performed in language and style. As Fairclough (2006:89) suggests style can be defined as “identities, or ‘ways of being’, in their semiotic aspects”. In their performances of public identities, politicians make use of language and semiotic resources (clothing, body

language and habits) to adopt certain styles similar and in contrast to others. Moffitt (2016: 44) argues that the “bad manner” (being somewhat unpolished, incorrect, provocative) is a typical populist style. Embodied styles are invoked to perform non-establishment and signify closeness to the people. ‘Doing being’ non-establishment is a main form of the populist appeal to the people. I prefer to see discourse and style as two distinct but interrelated features of populism. (Consider for example Donald Trump’s repeated articulation of “bad manner” and unpolished talk, with a dynamic that clearly exceeds the discursive opposition between the people and the elite.)

Again our study shows significant differences. Farage was seen in the mediated campaign walking around and chatting with people at the street, with his ‘fag’ and a pint at traditional British pubs, ‘talking frankly’ and in general enacting a rather relaxed anti-establishment style. Åkesson, on the contrary, embodied a serious and traditional political style, always dressed in dark suit and tie, speaking in formal political language and campaigning in traditional settings. His style reflects a general strategy to be part of the mainstream (although not ‘the establishment’) and frame the party’s anti-immigration policy as legitimate within the mainstream political agenda. In this respect the Sweden Democrats can thus hardly be recognized as a typical populist party.

The balancing between establishment and anti-establishment styles, the performing within and outside the rules and norms of mainstream politics, might be a dilemma for populist politicians aiming to maximize the voters support in different contexts (Moffitt, 2016). In mediatized politics, style is a significant political resource. A populist anti-establishment style might distract from the consequences of policies and the realities behind the rhetoric of simple solutions (Serazio 2016). Adapting a mainstream performative style is a well-known strategy to legitimize and “de-demonize” the policies of extreme right-wing populism (Akkerman, 2016; Ivaldi, 2016).

Socio-cultural resonance

The meaning and vigor of a particular appeal to ‘the people’ can only be understood if we take the socio-cultural resonance of populist performances into account. Political performances are socio-cultural practices, meaningful to audiences and citizens to the extent that they refer to a background culture, invoke symbols and narratives, and captivate

sentiments and identities (Alexander, 2006, 2011; Wodak, 2015:12). An appeal to the people without such resonances will fail as empty rhetoric. ‘The people’ is an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005). How populist parties refer to narratives and identities across countries and cultural contexts is therefore a central issue.

In the EUP election campaign in 2014, Farage for example invoked idealized narratives of the past and presented Brexit and the re-establishment of borders as a solution to an ongoing social breakdown. He appealed to working class identities in visiting traditional non-metropolitan areas with industries in decline and referred to the people with labels such as “the ordinary families” and “the working people”. Åkesson and the Sweden Democrats have reinterpreted the myth of the Swedish “Folkhemmet” in a narrative of disrupted norms and cultural values and an appeal to the true Swedes (Norocel, 2013). A general pattern in the populist appeal to the people seems to be a nostalgia and nativism evoked with references to the past (Serazio, 2016). In the socio-cultural resonance of right-wing populism, the more specific versions of native groups and identities thus typically relates to a general nationalist ideology and politics of boundaries and fear (Wodak, 2015).

Nationalist ideologies

The research on how nationalist ideologies are articulated in contemporary European right-wing populism (in emotive language, constructions of us and them, evocations of crisis and fear) is rather extensive (Mudde, 2017; Stavrakakis et al, 2017; Wodak, 2015). Populist discourse and populist style are differently enacted in the legitimation of nationalist ideologies and xenophobic policies. Stavrakakis et al (2017) for example shows how the references and appeal to ‘the people’ in the rhetoric of Front National is associated with exaggerated nationalism and anti-immigration policy.

Our contrastive analysis of the Sweden Democrats and UKIP provides an illustrative example of how mediated performances of nationalist ideologies involves both generic strategies and contextual variations related to political circumstances and the politicians leaning towards a populist style. The parties share a nationalist and anti-immigration policy and in the EUP election campaign the political leaders responded to accusations of xenophobia and racism in the similar defensive strategies such as disclaimers, arguments about conspiracy and statements like “there are a few idiots in our party”. However, while UKIP:s origin and main

agenda was the campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union, and the distrust in mainstream politics in the UK provided a favorable context for Farage elaborated populist appeal; the Sweden Democrats has a neo-Nazi background and the mainstreaming of the party has characterized the public discourse and the politicians' way of arguing for reduced immigration. In the public political debate the spokespersons of the Sweden Democrats have balanced a populist blaming of the political establishment and repeated offers to collaborate with the mainstream parties.

3. The role of the media

The overall question most frequently asked in research on media and populism is to what extent the media reporting benefits or detracts the populist parties, and more generally whether the success of populist parties can be explained with references to the media (visibility, framing, logics) (Esser, Stępińska and Hopmann, 2016; Moffitt 2016: 71). This has also raised issues about the responsibilities and the quality of journalism. However, my aim is neither to test hypotheses of media effects nor to evaluate journalism. The aim is instead to discuss and illustrate relationships between news discourse and the above conceptualized features of right-wing populism.

Populist discourse in news media

In one of the most referred analyses of the relationship between media and contemporary political populism, Mazzoleni (2008:50) argues that political populism “rely on some sort of ‘media complicity’”. As Mazzoleni emphasizes it is not that there is a direct causal link between media and the rise of populism, but the media tend to legitimize populist issues, provide favourable contexts for populists to exploit, and thus “serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes”. Mazzoleni's examples relate to two central aspects of media discourse (although he does not use the concept of discourse). First, he suggests that populist politicians exploit the media's penchant for acts that “breaks the routines” in public politics. I will come back to this in discussing the populist style. Second, media have a role in disseminating political mistrust and disengagement exploited by populist politics.

Reformulated in terms of discourse, this suggests a tendency in news media to represent and frame politics in a way that fits a populist discourse (i.e. the idea of a fundamental antagonistic relationship between the political elite and the people).

The focus on problematic relationships between citizens and politicians is almost imprinted in the repertoires of western journalism (and how journalists perceive their mission). This is articulated in the questionings of politicians in power, accountability interviews with political leaders (that sometimes turn into aggressive encounters), the framing of politics as a strategic game and the preferences for public scepticism. Under certain conditions and at particular moment in time, these tendencies can escalate into general narratives of distrust in mainstream politics that neatly fits into a populist discourse. This is what happened in the EUP election campaign in UK (but not in Sweden).

The television news reports (in BBC, ITV and Channel 4) were characterized by the following. Journalists validated the populist discourse in narrative frameworks, mimicked a populist language (referring to e.g. the “political classes”) and made use of a frank and sarcastic tone in talking about politicians in UK and Brussels. The trope of “anti-establishment”, central in the rhetoric of the Populist Party was reproduced in the news discourse. Furthermore, the news prioritized voices from UKIP supporters (66% percent of all vox pops), and vox pops proposing a general distrust in mainstream political leaders. Finally, the general distrust in the political establishment (and not only individual political leaders) was repeatedly articulated in the framing of campaign activities and the interviews with Prime Minister Cameron and other party leaders. In the news narratives Cameron, Clegg and Miliband were almost constructed as a category of politicians and contrasted to the UKIP alternative. The politicians were for example asked about their unpopularity in forms of questioning challenging their credibility in way that we did not see in for example the Swedish data. This news reporting not only validated a populist discourse but provided a point of reference and a general narrative possible for Farage to exploit in media performances and campaign activities.

Populist styles and the destabilization of the mediated politic culture

In previous research, the roles of the media in facilitating and promoting a populist political style have been analyzed primarily with respect to the genres of political entertainment and

political talk shows that developed in the 1990s. In a detail study of popular television in US, Jones (2005) shows how these programs have featured a populist talk about politics in contrast to traditional pundit talk in the media, and as a response to the audiences assumed disinterest in the discourses of the political elite. In the political talk shows, a populist style (a humorous, colloquial and unpolished talk about politics) is thus to some extent fused with a populist discourse, and some formats have been produced as a provocative and entertaining challenging of the boundaries between the politically correct and incorrect.

In the contemporary political culture, populist political talk flourish in broadcast shows, online forums and news sites in some cases affiliated to right-wing populist parties. However, the populist style is also (and perhaps most effectively) performed in the context of more traditional news, media debates, live interviews, press conferences and mediated campaign activities. These are contexts in which the language, style and norms of conduct associated to the mainstream political culture are reproduced and negotiated.

In our cross-national comparative study of the EUP election campaign in 2014, Coleman and Firmstone (2017) show how being ‘mainstream’ is a performative quality shaped in generic settings and genres of mediated communication jointly constructed by journalists and politicians. The challenges that mainstream politicians face within these genres is how to preserve the authority without being regarded as out of the touch and how to connect with the people in performing ordinary qualities without being recognized as a populist. For populist politicians, on the other hand, the accountability interviews and the established genres of mediated election campaigns provide favourable contexts for the flexible breaking of rules and the performances of non-establishment. In the EUP election 2014, Farge’s style of campaigning for example appeared as unconventional (almost as an act of non-campaigning) in contrast to the mainstream style of political campaigning. As such it also received great attention in news media. In other cases the populist style involves not only a destabilization of the norms of conduct in mediated politics, but a radical questioning of the role and legitimacy of professional journalism. (If we broaden the comparative lens we have examples from many European countries of right-wing populist leaders explicitly questioning the claim of mainstream journalism to represent more trustful and reliable sources of information compared to various alternative news outlets.)

Important to note, in the media discourse the populist style of talking frankly (and politically incorrect) is also invoked as a signifier for the telling of the truths that the elite (of journalists

and politicians) refuse to talk about. In the right-wing populists' conspiracy critique the distinctions between political correct and incorrect has significant ideological connotations. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats for example claims to talk frankly (saying the unsayable) about the problems with immigration, problems that political correctness prevents politicians to talk about. The Sweden Democrats have repeatedly criticized the media for not telling the truth about the high crime rate among immigrants.

The populist appeal to stereotype identities and the construction of citizens' voices in the news discourse

The populist appeal to the people typically connects sentiments (and people's interests) to stereotype identities, socio-cultural narratives and nostalgia. Such populist appeals might be more or less frequently (and critically) reported in the news media. However, most important to analyze is also how the socio-cultural myths that populists rely on are represented and how the citizens themselves are present in different roles and identities in the media. In this study we found one distinctive and significant feature of the news reporting across the countries. And this is the marginalization and stereotyping of citizen voices in the news discourse; and the absence of a more diverse discourse of citizens' voices (interest, identities etc.) that potentially counteract the populist stereotype identities and appeal to "the real people".

In news journalism, the vox pop is the primary form of citizen voices. Our study shows how the construction of vox pops is associated with a tendency in journalism to de-emphasize and trivialize citizens' knowledge and engagement in politics. Citizen voices are presented in the form of sound bites; contextualized and edited into news narratives to illustrate categories of opinions and identities. Abstentionism, disillusionment and distrust in mainstream politicians were given priority in vox pops in UK, France and Sweden. In France the news also featured voices of citizens critical and worried about Front National, whilst in the UK the supporters of UKIP dominated. In several news reports, the journalists followed Nigel Farage visits to non-metropolitan (working class) areas, and featured individuals representing a nostalgic, white, working-class culture; expressing opinions of political distrust and support for Farage (Ekström and Tolson, 2017). The news reports in Sweden represent a clear contrast, in which citizens were invited to express opinions on different EU policy issues in the news reports. The voices of supporters of the Sweden Democrats (the populist and nationalist party) were almost non-existent in the news (perhaps as a result of the news journalists being afraid to

give voice to xenophobic opinions). However, similar to what is shown in previous research (references) the vox pops were primarily used as exemplars of opinions or identities, whilst the news more seldom featured citizens as agents with different knowledge and interest. The implications of this have to be analyzed in more details. However, in a public discourse where citizen voices are marginalized and where citizens are provided limited space to articulate their own interests and contribute to the stories about the election we can expect myths about the people to flourish more effectively.

News media and the legitimization of nationalist ideologies and extreme right politics

The rise and parliamentary successes of (radical) right-wing populist parties poses major challenges for news journalism. This relates to at least two overall issues. First, how should news journalism approach the legitimacy of political parties that in some cases have connections to and historical backgrounds in extreme right, Fascist or Nazi movements? Should they be framed within what Hallin (1986) describes as the sphere of deviance, and thus treated as illegitimate and therefore not expected to be reported in an impartial way, or framed within the sphere of legitimate controversies and approached with the similar practices of reporting and journalistic norms as other political parties. This issue, related to the legitimization of extreme right parties within public politics, becomes further complicated by the fact that several parties, as research shows, use the performances in the mainstream media to de-demonize their politics and avoid extremist reputations though without substantially changing their policies and ideologies (Akkerman, 2016; Ivaldi 2016).

Second, it is a challenge for news journalism to report on immigration which has become a main topic on the political and media agenda in Europe (partly due to the refugee crisis), without (unintentionally) reproducing the populist parties' nationalist ideology and anti-immigration discourse. The research on how in particular tabloid news tends to reproduce a nationalist outlook, narratives of us and them and negative stereotyping of immigrants, is widely known.

The Swedish news media coverage of the EUP election campaign in 2014 shows an interesting example of how journalism navigates these challenges and contributes in both questioning and legitimizing the ideology of a political party considered to be so extreme and

toxic that all other parties in the parliament have openly declared a refusal to discuss with them (which is a strong marker of being illegitimate in the Swedish consensual democracy).

During the election campaign, the mainstream television news in Sweden, on the one hand, favoured a positive view of immigration in for example featuring success stories of immigration, and critically questioning the anti-immigration policy of the Sweden Democrats in repeated critical interviews. However, on the other hand, both public service and commercial television contributed in constructing the media debate on immigration as a favourable platform for the Populist Party's performances of their anti-immigration policy. Live debates, basically framed as a dichotomous question about 'more or fewer' immigrants, 'yes or no' to the current level of immigration, were frequently organized, and in almost all cases the spokespersons for the Sweden Democrats stood at one side of the table and debated against various representatives for the mainstream parties. Journalism thus contributed to the simplification of a potentially complex issue, provided considerable space for the Populist Party to discuss their profile issue and perform on their own territory, and what is more supported the party's claim to represent the only alternative to the political establishment (cf. the populist discourse). Whilst the news journalists in some reports almost contributed to a toxifying of the Sweden Democrats, they organized the overall debate on immigration in a way that helped to legitimize the party as representing one of two alternative opinions in an issue that due the presented opinions polls were ranked as among the most important for the voters.

4. Concluding remark

As a concluding remark I would like to highlight three aspects of the analyses illustrated in this paper. First, I believe the conceptual framework helps to clarify the spectrum of political performances, between and within the four suggested features of right-wing populism. The analyses could be further developed with examples from other countries and political contexts. The conceptual framework enables comparisons of political parties across countries at a particular moment in time, analyses of transformations of political parties, as well as research on how right-wing populists more specifically design their front stage activities in various media settings and political circumstances. Second, the analysis illustrates the

multifaceted dynamics between populist discourses and nationalist ideologies. The socio-cultural resonance of the populist appeal to the people appears to be a central connection between the two. In captivating and even embodying myths and stereotypes in specific national contexts, populist politicians appeal to the real and native people and construct versions of nationalistic populism. Finally, I believe the complex relationships between populist discourse and media discourse can be sorted up within the suggested conceptual framework. In this paper this is however mainly illustrated and it remains to develop this into systematic analyses that take the various institutional contexts, formats, genres and practices in media discourse into account.

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