27. Populist Actors as Communicators or Political Actors as Populist Communicators. 
Cross-National Findings and Perspectives

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Introduction
Across Western countries, democracies seem to be increasingly haunted by the specter of political populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). In some countries, populist parties are a more recent phenomena, in others the historical roots go deeper; but regardless of cross-national differences, political populism appears to be on the rise across Europe. Mudde (2004), for example, has argued that we are experiencing a “populist zeitgeist,” whereas others see our times as “populist times” (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

In this context, communication is crucial. Not only is communication an integral part of all political processes, successful communication is a prerequisite for all political success. To understand political populism, we therefore need to understand populist political communication.

Here, two approaches are possible. One begins by identifying who the populist political actors are and proceeds by investigating factors that might explain their presence and clout as well as their communication strategies, tactics, and styles. Another approach first identifies the key characteristics of populist political communication and then investigates the extent to which different political actors make use of populist communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric. The first approach focuses on those political actors that are classified as populist and draws conclusions about populist communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric based on how these actors communicate. The second focuses instead on the communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric that are classified as populist. It draws conclusions about the presence and ubiquity of populist political communication and about which political actors are populist, based on the extent to which they engage in populist communication. Whereas the first approach understands populism as an ideology that, in principle, is decoupled from how populists communicate, the second approach primarily understands populism as a particular communication style (see, e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Chapter 2 in this volume).

Albeit simplified, the first approach can be characterized as actor-centered, whereas the second can be characterized as communication-centered. Both approaches are valid, but it is important to note that they might lead to different conclusions about the characteristics and prevalence of populist political communication.

Against this background, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the chapters in this book and to analyze the state of knowledge about populist actors as communicators and political actors as populist communicators. The analysis will proceed in six steps. As a first step, we will review research on populist political communication across Europe and provide the background and foundation for subsequent sections. As a second step, we will provide an overview of populism types and populist actors across Europe, followed by a third step that
provides a brief review of their success. The reasons for the presence of populist political actors, as outlined in Parts II–IV, will be discussed in the fourth section. The fifth section will focus on populist communication strategies, tactics, styles and rhetoric. Finally, we will offer some conclusions.

Table 27.1: Two approaches to studying populist political communication

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Reviewing Research on Populist Political Communication

Based on the distinction between an actor-centered versus communication-centered approach, let us begin by analyzing the scope and character of research on populist political communication in terms of whether the research is quantitative or qualitative, theory-driven or descriptive, systematic and empirical or analytical and essayistic, comparative across parties or case-study oriented, and whether the main object of study was specific political actors or how political actors communicate.

Such an analysis reveals several patterns. First, it is evident that while publications on populism are numerous, in most countries there is limited research on populist actors as communicators and on political actors as populist communicators. Exceptions include Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway (see, e.g., Bos & Brants, 2014; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014), but in most countries, the number of systematic empirical studies is small. Second, overall research is characterized by an actor-centered rather than a communication-centered approach. Third, and related, most case studies focus on political actors deemed as populist; comparative studies—where various political actors and how they communicate are compared—are far fewer in number. Fourth, analytical or essayistic studies dominate over systematic, empirical studies, as do descriptive over theory-driven ones. For example, very few systematic studies make use of theories on political marketing (Lees-Marshalment, 2012), political public relations (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011), political management (Johnson, 2009), and political campaigning (Plasser & Plasser, 2002) to investigate populist communication strategies, tactics, and styles.

Without wishing to be too critical of previous research, the end result is that our systematic knowledge of populist actors as communicators or political actors as populist communicators is scant. Remedying this lack should be a key priority for scholars seeking to understand populist political communication in contemporary democracies. That said, limited does not mean non-existent, and taken together, the chapters in this volume have expanded our knowledge of this field while also helping to identify key areas for future research.
Types of Populism and Populist Parties Across Europe

In keeping with the introductory chapters to this volume, Chapters 1 and 2, the starting point for our analysis is the understanding of political populism as a “thin” ideology, defined by three elements: references to the people, anti-elitism, and anti-out-group messages (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Chapter 2 in this volume). The most important element of these is references to the people, although different populists might define “the people” differently. As noted by Jagers and Walgrave, “thin populism is a minimal precondition for thick populism. If the discourse does not refer to the population yet fiercely criticizes the establishment and at the same time stigmatizes popular categories, it cannot be considered as populism, since the required appeal to the people is missing” (2007, pp. 334–335).

Based on this minimal understanding, populism is by no means a new feature of politics. At least in its lighter forms, it is rather an inherent part of democratic politics. What is more interesting is how often references to the people are made (empty populism) and when such references are combined with anti-elitism (anti-elitist populism) or exclusion of out-groups (excluding populism), or both (complete populism) (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Complete populism is usually associated with extreme right-wing populist actors, whereas anti-elitist populism is usually associated with left-wing populist actors. Empty populism is at the core of any kind of populism but may also be part of mainstream political discourse. Islamophobic and nationalist parties and movements best represent excluding populism.

In Europe, populist actors are often equated with extreme-right, anti-immigration attitudes and nationalism. Examples include the Austrian Freedom Party (Austria), Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Front National (France), the Progress Party (Norway), Wilders’ Freedom Party (the Netherlands), National Renewal Party (Portugal), the Sweden Democrats (Sweden) and Golden Dawn (Greece). Some, such as Lega Nord (Italy) and Platform for Catalonia (Spain), are regionalist as well. Although these parties are readily identifiable as populist in Europe, they are not the only political actors to be labeled this way. Several parties and movements have capitalized on the popular discontent that has resulted from corruption scandals and the implementation of unpopular policies, such as the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens in the Czech Republic, Podemos in Spain, the 5 Star movement in Italy, and the 12 March Movement in Portugal. Often, these parties and movements lay claim to a renewal of political processes and more direct forms of democracy.

A clear, specific ideology is therefore not a distinctive feature of populist political actors across Europe. Some are far right, others are left wing, and some position themselves at the center of the political spectrum (e.g., Yesh Atid in Israel). Several populist actors also mix right- and left-wing characteristics in their discourses and policies (e.g., by being more leftist on economic matters and more rightist on cultural matters). There are also those, such as Podemos in Spain, that claim to be ideologically “empty”—like an empty shell to be filled with whatever may be the needs of the people.

Political Populism on the Rise

Populism is nothing new in Europe. It varies across countries with respect to its historical trajectories as well as the characters and dominance of populist political actors, but an overall assessment of the countries that have been included in this book is that the 21st century seems to have become fertile ground for populist actors.
Since the turn of the century, several populist actors have been successful in the European Parliament elections. Examples include the Danish People’s Party, Front National in France, and Podemos in Spain. The same holds true of local elections, where examples include Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats. In these elections—usually considered second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980)—voters are in general more likely to vote for protest parties and candidates.

The success of populist actors, however, is not limited to these elections. Many have managed to achieve representation in national parliaments. Examples include the Austrian Freedom Party, the Dutch Freedom Party, the Swiss People’s Party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats in Bosnia. Other examples include the True Finns in Finland and the Progress Party in Norway, both part of current coalition governments, and Fidesz in Hungary, whose leader, Viktor Orban, is the current prime minister.

In many countries, scholars acknowledge that populism—at least in the form of empty populism—has become part of mainstream political rhetoric. Features of political discourse usually attributed to populism and the populist political style have become a more or less constant feature in many countries’ politics. Examples include Croatia, Romania, and Greece (see also Rooduijn, 2014).

Except for mentions and appeals to “the people,” not a single distinctive feature could be seen as common to all the different European populist political actors. In fact, many different elements are subsumed under the populist label: nationalism, regionalism, Euroskepticism, opposition to immigration, anti-multiculturalism, anti-establishmentarianism, anti-corruptionism, and anti-elitism as well as demands for increased citizen participation and more direct forms of democracy.

Factors Influencing the Presence of Populist Political Actors

Given that political populism is on the rise across Europe but that the success of populist actors differs across countries, one key question is how the presence or absence of populism and populist political communication can be explained. While this issue is undoubtedly complex, a number of contextual factors operating at different levels of analysis are identified in Parts II–IV. Following Mudde (2007), these contextual factors can be classified as external demand-side conditions and internal and external supply-side conditions.

The main external demand-side conditions identified in Parts II–IV are a series of real-world events (see also Figure 2.2, Chapter 2 in this volume). They have had an impact on all countries to a greater or lesser extent. Key among them is the European economic crisis, the subsequent austerity policies pursued by many governments, and the subsequent recession. This last factor is acknowledged as an especially important one in explaining the rising support for populist parties in Southern European countries. Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece have suffered particularly harsh recessions with high levels of unemployment.

In Western and Northern European countries, a driving force of support for populist parties has been immigration from within and outside the European Union. Of course, immigration does not mean that unemployment is not an issue in these countries but rather that unemployment appears to be trumped by hostility toward, or anxieties about, increasing immigration. Fear of immigration has been partly buttressed by high-profile Islamic terrorist acts, such as the London bombings or the murderous attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.
Several chapters point to the importance of economic and political processes, such as the continuing globalization and integration of EU member states. These processes have in turn triggered a series of subsidiary factors—such as cuts to welfare provision and loss of national sovereignty—which might help explain the appeal of some kinds of populism.

These external demand-side factors are layered upon existing divisions between majorities and immigrants and indigenous minorities. Majority fears about ethnic and religious minorities are exploited in most countries where right-wing populism is established. In many Western and Northern European countries, Muslim minority communities are thus the targets of populist campaigning.

In Eastern European countries, concerns revolve around other ethnic and religious minorities, such as ethnic Hungarians in Romania or Roma minorities in the Czech Republic, and Romania. Political actors looking for electoral support among minority ethnic and religious communities have also exploited such tensions. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Respect Party was successful for a time by appealing to the minority Muslim population.

To this mix can be added voter disenchantment with the political class and the political system more generally. This disillusionment is a product of the perceived incompetence and unresponsiveness of the main political parties to public concerns, based in no small part on their past performances, a subsequent loss of trust, and cynicism about their activities. In some countries, dissatisfaction has been fanned by large-scale scandals.

Of the internal and external supply-side factors, the most important are the populist parties themselves (Mudde, 2007). They need to be perceived as legitimate (although the basis for their legitimacy might differ from more mainstream parties), and they need to have a certain amount of financial resources. In general, the more successful populist parties seem to be those that are successful at raising funds. Some populist parties are helped by being led and funded directly by businessmen. Examples are not limited to Silvio Berlusconi and Forza Italia; in several Eastern European countries, businessmen have followed this model by directly funding their own populist parties. Examples include Andrej Babiš and ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic, and Dan Diaconescu and the People’s Party Dan Diaconescu in Romania.

With respect to external supply-side factors, some chapters note that populist actors may be either aided or impeded by the media environment (see Chapter 28 in this volume). A hostile media environment can undermine populist parties’ successes just as a supportive media climate can help populist parties get their message across. Indeed, populist parties in some countries are aided by close relations with the media. For example, in Romania, television channels owned by populist politicians have been used to promote the party message and candidates. Electoral systems can function as enablers or barriers to the presence and success of populist parties; proportional electoral systems and low electoral thresholds are more conducive to new political actors entering parliaments. Another factor, mentioned in some chapters, is the decreasing relevance of the left-right ideological divide in many countries. As traditional left-right conflicts have lost some of their old importance, new windows of opportunity have opened up, allowing populist parties to exploit other areas.

In sum, contextual factors that underlie the presence or absence of populist political actors are complex, as are the combinations of factors that might facilitate or hinder the emergence or
growth of populist parties. What is clear from Parts II–IV is that recognizing the particular circumstances in each case is necessary to fully understand the political populism in the relevant country.

**Populist Political Communication Strategies, Tactics, Styles, and Rhetoric**

Regardless of how impressive political actors’ ideas or proposals are, communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric are essential for their success. That said, a key question is whether there is anything unique about the communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric of populist political actors. To be more specific, can a specific and unique style of communication be defined as populist? Do leaders of parties identified as populist differ in terms of charisma and communication skills from leaders of other parties? Do populist and non-populist political actors use different styles, strategies, and language when approaching different media? Do particular communication strategies and tactics distinguish populist parties from other parties?

Answers to these questions would require studies that compare the strategies, tactics, styles, communication skills, and charisma across political parties and leaders that are deemed populist and non-populist. Such studies are rare, meaning that knowledge about the unique features of how populist actors communicate is scant. Nevertheless, Parts II–IV suggest some recurring characteristics of populist political communication. The most important characteristics mirror the core definitions of political populism; namely, populist actors frequently refer to “the people” and position themselves on the side of “the people,” they criticize and attack “the elites,” and they often explicitly exclude certain groups from “the people.” These elements are reflected in populist rhetoric and language.

At the very heart of populist political communication are references to the people. Theoretically, these references could be either direct or indirect. They are direct to the extent that political actors use words such as “the people,” “we” (“we the people”), “citizens,” or “ordinary people.” It should be noted, however, that oftentimes it might be unclear who belongs to “the people” that the political actors are talking about. This obscurity might be an example of “strategic ambiguity,” where speakers are intentionally vague in order to allow multiple interpretations (Eisenberg, 1984).

When “the people” are explicitly defined, we see in Parts II–IV that populists often point to commonalities—for example, shared membership of the nation, region, race, or faith. The Austrian Freedom Party, for example, regularly seeks to generate a sense of belonging to the Austrian homeland. To this end, populists may draw on narratives that are part of an “imagined community” or seek to strengthen the “imagined community” that they wish to endorse (Anderson, 1991). In some instances, “the people” are seen to be sharing particular virtues—such as honesty, hard work, respect for the law, or being authentic—or particular fundamental values, such as freedom of expression or the importance of laïcité (French secularism). Finally, “the people” are often portrayed as those who lose out to, or are the victims of, out-groups and out-group-focused policies.

References to the people can also be indirect, as when political actors define “the people” by virtue of not being members of an out-group. In these cases, the focus is on “them” rather than on “us,” but by emphasizing who “they” are, political actors are also sending messages about who belongs to “us” or “the people.”
Moving toward anti-elitist populism, one key feature of populist rhetoric is attacks on the political establishment or various elites. *The establishment* often refers to politicians from mainstream parties but can also include a wider set of groups, including news media, intellectuals, business elites, and external actors such as the EU. These elites are variously labeled as incompetent, ineffectual, licentious, politically correct, corrupt, and self-serving, putting their own, special, or foreign interests before those of the people. There are often clear efforts to depict elites as untrustworthy and as either having betrayed the people or being capable of doing so.

In many countries, elites are simultaneously blamed and seen as a threat. They and their policies are blamed in populist rhetoric for a host of social ills, from unemployment to social problems, resulting from their incompetence or their collusion. In some countries, it is also common to see various conspiracy theories involving elites. For similar reasons, elites might also be depicted as a threat. For example, many chapters identify clear anti-EU themes that label Brussels as working against the people’s interests, helped by craven, established political parties working in the interests of Brussels.

Linking anti-elitism to references to the people, one general feature of anti-elitist populism is that the relationship between “the people” and various elites is depicted as deeply antagonistic. In such cases, “we”—the virtuous and innocent people—are depicted as distinct from “them,” the untrustworthy and more or less corrupt elites.

Another key feature of populism—in particular, radical right populism—is the exclusion of out-groups. Throughout Europe, the two main outgroups are immigrants and indigenous minorities. Populist rhetoric emphasizes that these out-groups do not belong to the people, with members of out-groups being different to those of the people. Differences may be related to ethnicity, sexuality, religious affiliation, or values. In other words, out-groups are marked as different from the in-group in terms of who they are or what they believe. Many of the chapters in Parts II–IV note examples of racist, xenophobic, and homophobic language directed at specific out-groups, as well as routine stereotyping of such groups. The same holds for the use of controversial similes and negative traits attached to out-group members. Deprived immigrant communities, for example, are often linked to crime in populist rhetoric, and in some countries, Muslim communities are connected to terrorism. Indigenous minority Roma communities are regularly stigmatized as untrustworthy and criminal in many Eastern European democracies. Such rhetoric is often justified as “straight talking”—stating what the people think and what politically correct elites are afraid to admit. The strategy is to generate negative emotions toward the minority out-groups.

In populist rhetoric, out-groups are not only blamed for a host of ills, from unemployment to social problems, but might also be framed as threats to the security and well-being of the people. In countries recovering from civil conflict, like Bosnia, populist political actors point to constant existential danger posed by various out-groups. In many West European democracies, immigrant communities are likewise held up as a source of social problems or portrayed as threats to national security. For example, right-wing populists often point to Islamist extremists as suggestive evidence that Muslims in general pose a security threat that needs to be addressed.

Altogether then, a key feature of populist political communication is the antagonistic relationship depicted between “we, the people” and the elites and out-groups, which are seen as threats against “us, the people” or as responsible for the problems that affect “us, the
people.” As noted in chapter 2 in this volume, anti-elitism and the exclusion of out-groups “are not just additional features of populism but instead integral parts already implicit in any construction and mention of “the people.”” Returning to the distinction between actor-centered and communication-centered approaches, it is important to reiterate that most studies are actor centered and that we lack systematic empirical studies. Consequently, our knowledge is poor about how frequently both populist and non-populist mainstream political actors refer to the people, express anti-elitism, and exclude various out-groups in their communication.

Another aspect of populist political communication is related to the communication skills and the charisma of populist political leaders. It is often claimed that populists have greater communication skills and more charisma than other leaders. Several of chapters in Parts II–IV (e.g., those addressing Austria, France, Italy, Greece, Switzerland, and Norway) suggest that this is the case. Others, however, fail to demonstrate the same, including Sweden, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Portugal. The overall evidence thus suggests that charisma and communication skills are not defining or essential features of populist political leaders, be they successful or not, although both are beneficial to any political leader (Chapter 2 in this volume).

Hardly any systematic research is available to date on whether populist and non-populist actors use different strategies, styles, and language when approaching different media, and whether any communication strategies and tactics are unique to populist parties, distinguishing them from other parties. What might be said is that digital media appear to be especially important for parties outside of the political mainstream. A striking example is Beppe Grillo and his 5 Star Movement in Italy. Although many populists show distrust of mainstream media, most still attempt to be in the news. In contrast, Beppe Grillo has actively shunned the mainstream media, instead focusing exclusively on digital and social media—a development that has even spurred a discussion about “web-populism.”

In the absence of more systematic, communication-centered, theory-driven studies that compare populist and non-populist actors, both within and across countries, any assessments of populist political communication should however be understood as tentative. To reach a comprehensive understanding of populist actors as communicators and political actors as populist communicators, more research is clearly needed.

Summary and Directions Ahead
As testified to in Parts II–IV of this volume, a wide variety of populist political parties and actors have established themselves as significant political players throughout Europe, altering the dynamics of both domestic and European politics. In some countries, they have become part of coalition governments, and in others they form an essential part of the parliamentary support for minority governments. In most countries, they remain in strong opposition, forcing more established parties to find ways both to contain them and to address the concerns that they have managed to mobilize among voters.

The factors that might help explain the presence and strength of populist political parties are many and complex. Here, drawing on Mudde (2007), we have suggested that these factors could be divided into external demand-side factors and internal and external supply-side factors. Among key external demand-side factors are real-world events, such as economic crises and immigration as well as globalization and integration within the EU. Among key
internal supply-side factors are the populist parties themselves and their abilities to exploit people’s fears and concerns, antagonisms between groups, and people’s disillusionment with established politics. Additionally, each country has its own particular circumstances that are relevant for a full understanding of political populism in that country.

Turning to the character of populist political communication, many chapters emphasize that populist rhetoric is often emotional, includes blame attribution and scapegoats, uses straightforward and sometimes violent language, and presents simplistic solutions to problems. But the essence of populist communication consists of references to the people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of various out-groups, depending on the type of populism. Such an understanding of populist political communication is not merely theoretically derived; as shown in Parts II–IV, this characteristic of populist communication is supported empirically.

Nonetheless, a key emphasis of this chapter is that systematic empirical research on populist political communication in European countries is limited. This paucity applies in particular to communication-centered approaches, where the main focus is on communication that is defined as populist and where the communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric of a larger set of political actors—populist as well as non-populist—are analyzed.

This lack of research is unfortunate since it is only through systematic research comparing non-populist and populist political actors that we can identify the unique features of populist political communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric—a reminder of the more general rule that “every observation is without significance if it is not compared with other observations” (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004, p. 7).

The development of systematic empirical research aimed at comparing the political communication strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric of populist with non-populist actors should therefore be a priority in future research on populist communication. Given the diversity of populist actors and means of communication, it is essential to develop approaches that encompass different dimensions of populism and different means of communication in various countries (e.g., traditional versus digital media).

Another priority in future research on populist political communication should be more theory-driven studies. A whole range of theories on political marketing, on political public relations, on political management, and on strategic communication could inform research on the strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric of populist political actors, when comparing them with those of non-populist political actors. Such research would contribute not only to the study of populist political communication but also to further theory building within these research areas.

The more prominent political populism and populist actors become across Europe, the more important it is to understand not only contextual factors that help explain populism’s presence and influence across countries but also the strategies, tactics, styles, and rhetoric of populist political communication. Much research has been done—as testified by the chapters in this book—but much remains to be done. We hope that this chapter has provided inspiration and a fruitful starting point for future empirical research on both populist actors as communicators and political actors as populist communicators.
References