

Newsletter

No. 1, June 2015

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First year achievements

Toril Aalberg, Action Chair

By the end of our first year, COST Action IS1308 'Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics' has already become an active network, with more than 80 participants from 30 countries. When we started our aim was to create a network of engaged and highly dedicated scholars concerned with populist political communication. Our kick-off meeting in Brussels in April 2014, was very promising in that regard, as all the countries who had signed the MoU attended the meeting. The proposed organizational structure was unanimously agreed upon, and the Management Committee decided that all members should be active in one of our three working groups. In Brussel we decided that the first scientific task was to initiate and complete a literature review of extant research within the participating COST-countries that addressed each of the three key themes of the COST-action: (1) Populist actors as communicators, (2) The media and populism and (3) Citizens and populism.

The results from these reviews were presented at the Actions 2nd joint meetings in Lisbon in November 2014. Susana Salgado, our first local organizer, provided excellent support which gave us two highly efficient days in Portugal. Among other things, we decided that the quality of the country reviews indicated that these, with a bit of extra work, should be the foundation of our first action book. Final chapter drafts were presented at the 3rd joint meetings in Athens in March of 2015. The core group, as well as the WG vice chairs met in Munich in June to do a final round of editing on the country chapters. While in Munich they also discuss the introduction as well as the three concluding chapters. The completed book manuscript will be sent to the publisher in the fall of 2015.



First Meeting in Brussels

Although a lot of time and effort in our first year has been dedicated to these country reviews and the book manuscript, there have also been other exciting events taking place this year. In Athens we hosted our first Action Conference, where participants experienced Keynotes by Cas Mudde, Linda Bos and Frank Esser. Our Local Organizer, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, also put together a great panel consisting of Stakeholders from Greek media. They provided an excellent analysis of populist political communication and the Greek euro-crisis.

In January the Zurich team organized the Action's first Training School, where 20 dedicated young scholars presented their work and discussed new perspectives on Populist Political Communication.

Many action members have also been able to visit other institutions through the use of Short Term Scientific Missions. In our first year, eight scholars from eight different countries were given the opportunity to visit different institutions to expand their international experience and collaboration.

Also important in our first year was the establishment of the Action website (www.populistcommunication.eu), our twitter (@populistcomm) and Facebook account: <http://www.facebook.com/populistcommunication>

All the (past and future) activities and outputs of the Action is or will be presented in more detailed on the Action website, and you are of course encouraged to follow our updates on the webpage via Twitter and Facebook. These platforms are, together with this newsletter, essential means of information, interaction, coordination and dissemination.

A lot of work has already been done, but there are also plenty of upcoming activities and plans for which your contribution will be valuable. I'm looking forwards to it all and to our continued collaboration.



Pictures from Lisbon's (top) and Athen's Meetings

Action website: www.populistcommunication.eu



Popcorn

20 young scholars – 12 countries – 5 days

Nayla Fawzi

The Early Stage Researcher Think Tank had its launch event in January 2015. Sven Engesser and Nayla Fawzi invited young scholars from across Europe to participate in a workshop on “New Perspectives on Populist Political Communication”. The event was hosted by the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research and the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) “Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century” at the University of Zurich. During five days, 20 young scholars from 12 European countries presented papers on populist political communication followed by instructive responses and intensive discussion. The presentations were concerned with topics such as the relation between citizens and populism, the measurement of populism, anti-media populism, and populism in online media. Besides, the participants gained further insights into the COST Action and the NCCR Democracy’s module on populism and the news media. After the workshop, the participants continued their cooperation by forming the “Populist Communication Research Network” (PopCoRN) and establishing a Facebook page. Both will be continuously open to all young scholars working in the field. As one of the major next steps, we will aim at editing a special journal issue dedicated to one of the Action’s special fields of interest.



News from the working groups

WG 1 Report

There is an ongoing discussion about what the next steps should be for WG 1. The members discussed a number of ideas. There was support for some sort of comparative empirical project that included all WG1 member countries. This was highlighted as a key value added of the Action. The main difficulty for this group is caused by the essentially contested nature of populism for comparative research. One option to ensure comparability that emerged, was to focus on 'new' political parties, and/or right wing parties, and/or established parties, and their communication output and communication strategies both internal and externally focused (broadly defined), and then identify a range of populist features of this communication (broadly defined). There is a discussion about what features of populist communication could be examined. There is a need to collapse some of these categories and add further ones, a process which could be done in the lead-up and at the next WG1 Odense meeting.

WG 2 Report

The activities of WG 2 evolve around several research initiatives and funding proposals that members are currently working on. Sven Engesser and Frank Esser (both Switzerland) have submitted a proposal for funding a comparative project on populist media messages in Switzerland, Austria, Great Britain and France. Vaclav Stetka (Czech Republic) has submitted a similar application covering the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Anders Larsson (Norway) and Agnieszka Stepinska (Poland) are working on additional project proposals while John Downey (Great Britain) and Jane Suiter (Ireland) have already received minor grants on online political communication. The next step is to span a network of successful projects and integrate the other WG 2 members for a collaborative, multi-perspectival analysis of populist messages across media platforms and media systems.

WG 3 Report

During the meetings in the first year of the COST action WG3 discussed the possibility of conducting cross-country experimental studies. In the coming period we will explore this possibility further, gathering inspiration from the country chapters. Additionally, we established an online discussion / working platform, on which ideas will be gathered and discussed regarding (1) concepts from communication that might help to understand effects of populist political communication; (2) key aspects of the comparative experiments to be conducted.

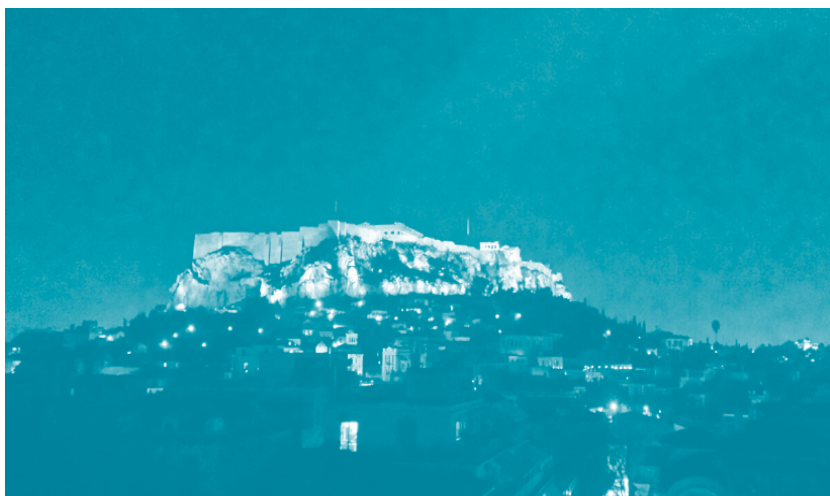


Core Group and WG-Vice Chairs meeting in Munich to discuss final editing of the first Cost-action book – June 12th 2015



First action conference

Athens – March 2015



Keynote Speaker 1: The conceptual development of populism and its use in empirical research – by Václav Štetka

Keynote Speaker 2: Dissecting the role of the media in populist success – by Linda Bos

Keynote Speaker 3: The Appeal of Populist Ideas and Messages – An Ongoing Project – by Frank Esser

Roundtable: The Media and the crisis, by Jane Suiter

Reflections from Athens 2015, by Toril Aalberg

Keynote speaker 1:

The conceptual development of populism and its use in empirical research

Václav Štetka

In his keynote, titled “The conceptual development of populism and its use in empirical research”, Cas Mudde (University of Georgia) outlined his theoretical approach to populism, and elaborated on some of the core elements of this “essentially contested concept”, as he himself put it. According to Mudde, populism is best understood as an ideology – as opposed to discourse, strategy or syndrome – and more particularly as a “thin-centred ideology that divides people into two antagonistic groups”. In practice, however, populism manifests itself often through a “host ideology”, as populist actors combine populism with either socialism or nationalism, making most populist parties effectively a combination of the two.

Apart from sketching his general conceptual framework for the study of populism, Cas Mudde also shared his thoughts on the importance of political communication for populist actors. In his opinion, the newest examples of populism rely on communication even more than the previous ones, which is particularly apparent when observing populists’ use of social media. Bringing up the example of Geert Wilders, he succinctly illustrated how populist actors manage to set the news agenda without ever giving an interview: “He tweets – better than anyone else. Journalists write; he wins. That’s his model!”



Keynote speaker 2:

Dissecting the role of the media in populist success

Linda Bos

In my keynote, I depart from the theoretical idea that populist party success can be explained by demand side factors - voter characteristics - as well as supply side factors - internal (in and of the party) and external, of the electoral system, the political system, and the media. For the conference, I focus on the way in which the media, as part of the supply side, can "help" a populist party, by paying attention to the party, their issues, or using "media populism". I raise the question: "Do we find evidence for the assumption that mass media coverage affects populist party preference at the individual level? And more specifically: what are the mechanisms?" I went on to tell the audience about three Dutch survey experiments myself and several colleagues recently conducted.

In the first study we found that populist cues (an anti-politics cue and an immigrant cue, each combined with a populist party cue) have a direct impact on cynicism and anti-immigrant attitudes, and indirectly increase party preference. However, the mentioning of a party doesn't have an impact.

A second study tried to unravel the exact mechanism behind the impact of the populist discourse by conceptualizing it as "emotionalized blame-shifting". In an experiment in which we manipulate the blaming of two outgroups (EU and the government) and the emotional style (anger and fear), we also test whether identification with the outgroup moderates the effect. The results by and large show that blaming the outgroup results in the perceived responsibility of the outgroup, especially among respondents who only weakly identify with the outgroup, and also specifically when it is combined with a fear appeal. However, populist attitudes are mostly affected by an angry style.

Third and finally, I present a study in which we focus on issue ownership theory to understand whether the media can help a party by broadening its issue repertoire. The study shows that coverage of an own issue positively impacts party support, as coverage of a populist party with an unowned issue does. However, when a populist party is covered with a trespassing issue it has a negative impact on party preference.

Overall, the results of the three studies indicate that media coverage can have an impact on party support, also at the individual level. Direct effects on support are found based on issue ownership theory, and more psychological theories on blame attribution, social identity, and appraisal theory help us understand the impact of the populist discourse on populist attitudes.

My main argument is that political communication scholars should add to the literature on populism, by trying to explain which voters are affected by which media content, using communication theories to explain these effects. In that way they can make an explicit link between the media on the supply side and the voters on the demand side of populist parties. Finally, I make two appeals: one for more research into the media use profiles of populist voters, and the consequences this might have, and one for a more positive view on populism, by also paying attention to the positive frames used by these parties, and the role of positive emotions.



Keynote speaker 3:

The appeal of populist ideas and messages – An ongoing project

Frank Esser

The forgoing presentations by Cas Mudde and Linda Bos ended with open questions and suggestions for future research on populist political communication. My own keynote speech picked up on some of these points by outlining an ongoing research program at the University of Zurich that is devoted to the study of populist actors, populist messages and their effects in eleven countries (for details see <http://www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/research/module2>).

While I was not able to provide findings yet, I opened the curtain and permitted a glimpse into the Zurich workshop with the aim of demonstrating possible approaches as to how these open questions may be translated into empirical designs. For instance, Cas Mudde suggested that future scholarship should turn its attention to questions such as: Does populism also exist outside election periods? Are there populist and non-populist parties? Is there a populist zeitgeist? And: Has the supply of media populism increased?

With regard to the first question I explained that the colleagues from the National Competence Center for Democracy Research ("NCCR Democracy") in Zurich study populism both during election periods and outside election periods to determine whether populism is just a campaign strategy or closer to an ideology.

To answer the second and third question, the Zurich team examines the entire range of political parties and is particularly interested in the extent to which mainstream parties adopt ingredients of the populist tool box. To address Mudde's fourth question the Zurich team content-analyzes media coverage in several countries for the increased use of «people» references, elite criticism, and populist frames over a prolonged period of time. A final suggestion by Linda Bos, namely to combine content and survey data and make more use of time series analysis is also taken up by the NCCR Democracy. On the other hand it has to be admitted that many facets of these broader questions remain unaddressed by the Zurich team, and that other suggestions could not be considered. In sum, the emerging field of populist political communication still offers enormous opportunities for scholarly engagement, particularly for the members of this COST action.

National Center of Competence in Research
Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century

nccr
democracy

Roundtable

The media and the crisis

Jane Suiter

A highlight of our few days in Athens was a session on the media and the crisis with four though provoking and distinguished speakers from the world of Greek journalism. There was consensus that the outside world has framed the Greek crisis and the possibility of a Grexit in a number of problematic ways. Nicos Malkoutzis deputy editor of Kathimerini, blamed “indirect populism” in the international press which was “superficial, ridden with clichés and sometimes guilty of perpetuating stereotypes”.

He identified several fixed narratives over the course of the crisis where few journalists saw through the fog of confusion and were inclined to follow the pack, helped by unprofessional and inexperienced “fixers”. He argued the first dominant narrative appeared in 2009-2010 was the “feckless Greeks”, to be followed in 2011 by “the suffering Greeks” and what he termed “poverty porn”, in 2012 the narrative had changed to “the oligarchs, holding the country to ransom” and in 2013 to the recovery story and of course in 2014 and 2015 to Syriza and the possibility of Grexit.

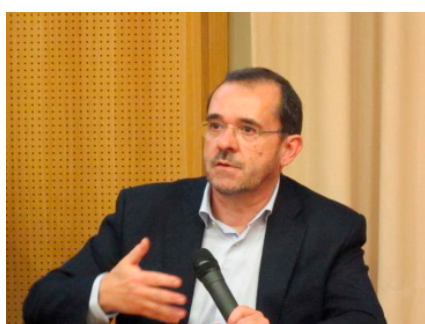
Elias Siakantaris of Alpha TV also blamed populism in the media but with a more domestic focus. The problem, he believes, was the ever present populism in Greek society, the “clientalistic entanglement” between politics and the media, personified by Pasok in government and mirrored

in the media where journalists and editors were overly populist, afraid to tell their readers and viewers the truth as the country rode the wave to bankruptcy. The result was that post crash they suffered a colossal loss of credibility and trust levels in the media fell to all-time lows while journalists were frequently surrounded by aggressive crowds on the streets. The antidote, he believes, is more thorough, accurate and critical information. To tell the truth to the people even if it is not popular.

For Pavlos Tzimas of Skai TV, this was sharply demonstrated in 2008 when no paper or broadcaster had the collapse of Lehman Brothers on its front page, the Irish crisis and arrival of the troika also went unreported as did the crisis in Hungary. Instead the media was consumed with a minister evading tax and no one challenged the belief that Greece was immune from the global crisis.

However, Nicos Konstandaras argued the media narrative in Germany and particular in the tabloid Das Bild which delights in perpetrating dangerous stereotypes is also threatening, this type of populist coverage leads to Greeks believing they are once again a country under occupation.

But other journalists also arrive with stereotypes they need to support their pre-conceived narratives. Nicos Malkoutzis deputy editor of Kathimerini, argued that social media is also leading to fragmentation, where the quest for truth becomes irrelevant and where actors are merely looking for ammunition to fit their preconceived frames.



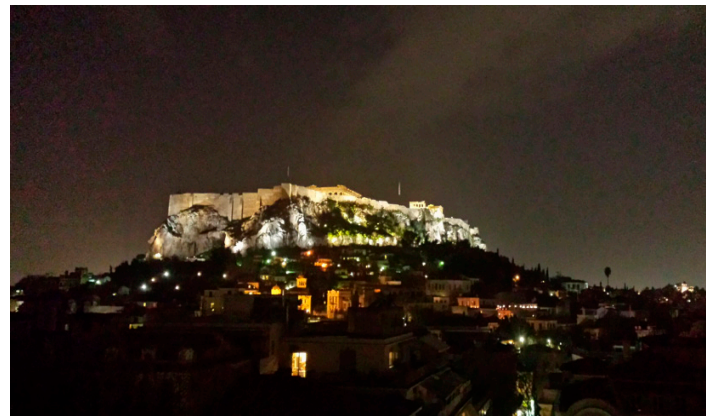
Reflections from Athens 2015

Toril Aalberg, Action Chair

I was excited before our 3rd joint meetings held in Athens from March 26th through March 28th, 2015. I was excited because we were going to review 27 (!) book chapters written and submitted by engaged Action participants shortly before the event. I was excited because we were organizing our first ever Action Conference, open to non-action members and stakeholders. We had a great program ahead of us.

While in Athens some Action Members were particularly happy to meet and listen to our first keynote speaker Dr. Cas Mudde, who rarely travels. Mudde gave us some interesting thoughts on what populism is and is not, and how it may be studied. Others found it very useful to get insight from Linda Bos and Frank Esser on major projects and results on populist political communication. For many of us, the stakeholder roundtable debate on Journalism, politics and populism was another highlight, as Local Organizer Stelios had put together an excellent panel consisting of senior journalists, columnists and editors. They were all refreshingly honest and provided some great analytical perspectives on the current crises hitting media and politics in Greece.

I have to admit that a final reason behind my pre-Athens excitement was due to the amount of planning and organization that is put into an event like this. With limitations and uncertainties related to consequences of the financial crises hitting the Greek society hard, like daily demonstrations and university buildings being occupied, the local organizer and I were mentally prepared to re-arrange on short notice and do the meeting in a park somewhere. But, except for a few challenges, that most of the Action participants never experienced, my impression is that this meeting was a great success. It was my first time ever in Athens, but I will certainly go back.



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