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Context and content of populist political communication: The conference on “Populist political communication” at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland (April 10–11, 2018)



Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (University of Milan) and prof. Agnieszka Stępińska (Adam Mickiewicz University). Photo by: Bartłomiej Secler

the conference was rather seminar-like, with brief presentations of the recently conducted studies (theoretical background, methods, and findings) followed by long discussions in each session.

From 10 to 11 April 2018, a conference on “Populist political communication” was organized at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The conference was organized by a research team that has been studying Polish populist political communication since 2016 (www.populizm.amu.edu.pl). The main purpose of the conference was to provide an opportunity for Polish scholars not only to present findings of their studies, but also discuss the main methodological challenges related to designing and conducting studies on populist political communication. Furthermore, the participants of that two-day event had a chance to discuss their ideas on further projects with their peers who have been studying the same phenomenon for years now. Hence, the structure of the

Scholars from several Polish universities, including Warsaw universities, University of Silesia, Wrocław University, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Economic University in Kraków, Collegium Da Vinci, and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań were invited to participate in the event. Since they represented different approaches to populism and employed different methods in their studies on this phenomenon, they all provided very interesting and valuable knowledge for each other. In particular, the aim of the conference was to recognize advantages and disadvantages, the potential and shortcomings of particular perspectives used in the studies on populism and populist political communication.

Although most attention was paid to the context and content of the Polish populist political communication, some of the presentations covered foreign countries' experience of populism. The conference started with a lecture given by the keynote speaker — prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni from the University of Milan on “Populist communication in the age of hybrid media,” who presented findings of his study on the Italian populist politicians' use of social media. His presentation introduced one of the main themes of the conference, that is, the use of new media in spreading populist messages and gaining support by populist actors.

During the conference several scholars focused on this issue while presenting either quantitative or qualitative analysis of the content of Facebook and Twitter. For example, Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska (Adam Mickiewicz University) studied the use of social media by the Polish populist political actor Paweł Kukiz and his supporters. Their study revealed a high level of interactivity between Kukiz (a high number of messages posted every day) and his followers on Facebook (likes, shares, and comments). A similar study on Kukiz's supporters was discussed by Paweł Matuszewski (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University). In fact, a skillful usage of Facebook and Twitter seemed to be one of the factors that fostered electoral success of two Polish political actors: Paweł Kukiz and his political organization Kukiz'15 as well as Janusz Korwin-Mikke, according to Artur Lipiński's (Adam Mickiewicz University) study. He also distinguished a few more factors, such as: (1) a political and social context (expectations and political preferences), (2) a visibility provided by the traditional media (intensive TV coverage), and (3) content of the messages that corresponded with expectations and political preferences (political discourse).

The factors increasing populist tendencies in Polish society were discussed by Joanna Dzwonczyk (Economic University in Kraków) who recognized the main schemes of Polish politicians' populist communication and studied such phenomena as protest populism and identity populism, and by Natalia Stręk (Jagiellonian University in Kraków) who focused on the national aspects of populism. Finally, the contextual factors, such as elections, were considered: Szymon Ossowski (Adam Mickiewicz University) focused on traced elements of populist communication in

the content of electoral messages distributed by the Polish political actors during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The social, cultural, and political background was also discussed during a session on penal populism in Poland. Katarzyna Witkowska-Rozpara (Warsaw University) emphasized the role of the media in creating a social atmosphere fostering populist changes in the law. Michalina Szafrńska (Jagiellonian University) analyzed the role of populist rhetoric in creating a public perception of courts and a reform of the juridical system. Finally, Natalia Daško (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń) discussed the record of sexual perpetrators as an element of penal populism.

One of the main themes of the conference was the populist discourse in political communication. The discursive perspective on populism was used in several presentations. For example, Agnieszka Walecka-Rynduch (Pedagogical University in Kraków) analyzed populism as a strategy of political communication, Kaja Kiełpińska (Warsaw University) presented linguistic and stylistic aspects of populism in Polish political communication of the 1990s, and Mateusz Bartoszewicz (Wrocław University) and Dariusz Jakubowski (University of Silesia) shared the findings of their quantitative or qualitative analyses of the linguistic mechanisms used in populist political communication. The same approach was used by Bohdan Szklarski (Warsaw University) who provided findings of his comparative analysis of political slogans in the US in the 20th and 21st century.

The content analysis of political messages was one of the methods heavily discussed during the conference. The issue was initiated by the presentation given by Agnieszka Stępińska, who presented methodology and preliminary findings of the Polish study conducted under the framework of the COST Action IS1308 "Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics." The results showed that the most frequent types of populism in the Polish news media are anti-elitist and exclusion populism. However, there are significant differences between the media organizations in regards to the amount of populist strategies in the content that might be explained by a type of a media organization and its political orientation. The role of the media in the populist political communication was also analyzed by Andrzej Ranke (Collegium Da Vinci).

While discussing populist political communication, participants of the conference referred to the definitions of populism. Although the definition of populism and populist is diverse and vague in Polish and foreign literature, the scholars mostly referred to classic elements, such as the existence of two homogenous groups — "the people" and "elites." However, in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of political actors' communication, one must recognize the ideology behind the communication acts. The example of such a study was presented by Piotr Andrzejewski (Polish Academy of Science) who has been conducting research on the radical right in Austria.

Finally, one of the concerns raised by the participants of the conference were the consequences of populism. The discussion on that theme was fueled by a presentation given by Adam Jaskulski (Adam Mickiewicz University) who raised the question about the impact of increasing support for populist political actors on the European Union as an international organization, and European public sphere.

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