



## Populist Communication on Social Media

Samuel Bennett, Artur Lipiński, Agnieszka Stepińska, David Abadi, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, Nicolas Hubé, Martin Baloge, Giuliano Bobba, Eglė Butkevičienė, Charlotte Brands, et al.

### ► To cite this version:

Samuel Bennett, Artur Lipiński, Agnieszka Stepińska, David Abadi, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, et al.. Populist Communication on Social Media. [Research Report] Centre for Social Sciences, Centre of Excellence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Hungary). 2020. halshs-02735283

**HAL Id: halshs-02735283**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02735283>**

Submitted on 2 Jun 2020

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Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe

## WORKING PAPER

# Populist Communication on Social Media

April 2020

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DOI: 10.17203/KDK420



This publication was conducted within the scope of the H2020 project Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe (DEMOS) and was funded by the European Commission under the Grant agreement number 822590. Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the authors' view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

## Abstract

This working paper presents the findings of quantitative and qualitative research into populist communication on Facebook. Specifically, we look at how populist politicians from all across Europe used Facebook in their campaigns for the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019 and compared this with a posts from July 2019. We start the paper with sections on research design and then outline the importance of social media for populist political communication. From here, we present the findings of our comparative research.

We found that the use of Facebook varied widely around the bloc. Some countries – Spain, Italy, the UK, France, and Poland – display a more widespread use of social media and with more complex usage, whilst others, such as Lithuania, have a low usage level. As a result, we maintain that there is no, one online populist strategy currently in use. Instead, the frequency, tone and topic of social media usage by populist actors differs from country to country, actor to actor, and over time, with specific national contexts playing an important role.

The findings point to a ‘weak’ Europeanisation, with European elections acting as second order elections, and politicians acting nationally rather than as Europeans. As both a symptom and a cause of this, there is a strong current of Euroscepticism and anti-European sentiment, with a growing network of right-wing, nativist, populist actors, who share policies and discourses. This is proven in the emergence of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group in the EP.

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## **1. The phenomenon of populism: ideational and communicative approaches combined**

The aim of WP 2.3 is to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse the social media communication of selected populist actors. Consequently, the analysis is based on the communicative approach to populism which, ontologically speaking, considers populism as a discourse rather than any form of ideology.

In this paper, we take an essentially deductive approach to the analysis of populist communication. That is, we work from an *a priori* framework of assumptions and categories inspired by the literature (see: deliverable 2.1, section 2.1.2; see also: Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Engesser et al 2017; Ernst et al. 2017; Esser et al 2017). This then influenced a codebook (see below) for analysis of the data. The qualitative analysis of posts also takes a deductive approach as it follows the same broad definitions, but it also implies an element of inductive research as it attempts to ‘fill-out’ and ascertain the textual content of these categories, i.e. how they are discursively manifested.

However, it is necessary to emphasize two issues here. First, although it is the ideational approach which “has recently won ground in the definitional debate” (Pauwels 2011: 99), even the scholars representing this paradigm tend to use terms “ideas” and “discourse” interchangeably. As they claim, discourse can be considered as a term denoting specific aspect of ideas (Hawkins, Kaltwasser 2017: 514). Furthermore, other scholars concur that populism manifests itself through discursive patterns or a political communication style and it is a conception complementary to the definition of populism as ideology (Kriesi, Pappas: 6). Secondly, the distinction is quite artificial because populism as an ideology and populism as a discourse belong to the same domain of cultural phenomena. Moreover, populist discourse is like an ideology because it always conveys some minimal assumptions about the world through a specific linguistic style, own concepts, categories, ways of argumentation or rhetorical figures (Hawkins 2009: 1045).

No matter to what extent these two approaches overlap, it is important to emphasize that the political communication take on populism dovetails better with the aims of this specific DEMOS task focused on social media communication. To be sure, the selection of particular paradigm affects the analytical strategies, type of research questions and type of data used to examine the topic. According to Bonikowski and Gidon, treating populism as an ideology encourages researchers to think about it as an “object of belief” or relatively coherent and stable “driver of behaviour” (Bonikowski, Gidron 2016: 10). However, contrary to the assumptions embedded in the ideational approach, populism should be rather seen as fleeting, “fragmented”, consisting of latent ideas and low on many policy issues (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, Büchel 2017; Hawkins 2009: 1045). Moreover, and again in contrast to ideational approach which perceives populism as a fixed attribute of the political actors, the political communication tradition conceives populism as a property of the message. Thus the focus of two approaches is different. The ideational approach concentrates itself on political actors

classified as populists and scrutinizes how these actors communicate, analysing their tactics, strategies and rhetoric.

The first approach focuses on the political actors which are predefined as populists and then their communication strategies are studied in order to discern the patterns which are then considered as typical for populist actors. The second, a communication-centred approach scrutinizes the presence, intensity and distribution of the specifically populist strategies (Stanyer, Salgado, Strömbäck 2017: 354). As in the second approach, populism is the attribute of the message rather than a speaker politicians, parties, their programmatic statements and speeches cannot be qualified as being either populist or not (Rooduijn, de Lange, van der Brug 2014). Populism is not an either-or phenomenon which is attached to a circumscribed set of actors. In practice, all the political actors employ populist strategies to a different degree. The same applies to newspaper articles or party manifestos, which can exhibit various degrees of populism.

This perspective allows us to go also beyond strictly ideological texts like party manifestos or programmatic speeches and broaden the number of sources consulted to detect populist communication in speech acts of various genres. Additionally, a political communication approach to populism captures the strategic dimension of the phenomenon which can be employed on the basis of context, type of audience, speaker's political background, ideology and position (Bonikowski 2017: 14). In other words, various actors (not only the usual, populist suspects) employ the populist strategies to different degrees, using different channels of communication to reach various audiences, to construct self- and other- identity and/or to promote specific political and policy agenda. Such an approach allows us to not only determine the specificities of a single actor's communication who might employ various degrees of populism according to their target audiences or channels they are communicating through. It also allows us to comparatively study varieties, types and contextual factors shaping populist communication across historical periods and geographical regions.

## 1.1 Research design<sup>1</sup>

The following analysis of social media discourses of 14 countries is based on a combination of two approaches. As we want to determine the similarities and differences between populists discourses in order to reveal the varieties of populisms in the countries under consideration we employed the actor-centered approach to select the two actors from each country which are considered populist according to a number of criteria confirmed by the academic literature. Then, to establish the variations in degree in terms of the usage of the populist communication strategies by all the political actors under investigation we follow communication-centered approach. The latter allows us to measure the appearance and the significance of the specific populist strategies. The selection of these strategies is based on the ideational definitions of populism developed by Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) and Mudde (2004) widely used in academic literature on the topic (see for example: Engesser, Ernst, Esser, Büchel 2017; Zulianello, Albertini, Ceccobelli 2018). According to them, populism should be conceived as an “ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008: 3).

Accordingly, three core elements of this definition can be distinguished: *the people*, *the elites* and *the other*. It is the interrelationship between these three actors which constructs the identities of each of them. Moreover, it constructs the vertical and horizontal dimensions of conflict with popular sovereignty as its stake. Thus, “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” (Reineman et al. 2017). The meaning of the foundational for the populism term “the people” always depends on contrast, at least at the implicit level, with another social group. The significance of this contrast and the specific meaning it is attributed differentiate types of populism in two ways. First, various populism will differ in the level of explicitness of this social contrast as constructed in communication. For example, various exclusionary populisms emphasize the contrast between the people and the dangerous others. On the other hand, different types of populism will select specific types of elites or out-groups. For example, CEE populisms basing their agenda on anti-corruption messages resort to post-communist political and economic elites (Reineman et al. 2017: 20). For a comprehensive overview of different forms of populism (empty, full, anti-elite, exclusionary), see also Section 2.1.2. in Deliverable 2.1.

In line with the current literature emphasizing that populism is about the construction of the specific social identities through communicative strategies and it lies at the intersection of vertical and horizontal axes of conflict (Brubaker 2017: 362) a codebook had been developed which includes three basic elements of populist communication. They had been further broken down into specific populist strategies of communication. The references to the people can be expressed through: (1) references to various identity groups, (2) stressing the people's

<sup>1</sup> Country data was collected by DEMOS consortium members. Raw data was sent for quantitative analysis by the AMU Team in Poland, whilst consortium teams contributed with preliminary qualitative analysis.

achievements, (3) praising the people's virtues, (4) referring to the people as victims, and (5) demanding sovereignty of the people. Among them the least typical and rarely found in the academic literature is the strategy of victimization. Although the definition of populism implies the victimhood status of the people in comparison to the privileged elites, the existing operationalizations of populism rarely take this into account. However, due to historical reasons, victimization strongly affects the construction of national identity and shape of the public discourse in many countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Grišinas 2017; Vermeersch 2019). “We” in such a discourse is never only the “we” praised for achievements but also the “we” threatened or mistreated (actually, potentially or retrospectively) by the external enemies. The latter ones are represented in the populist discourse by the elites or the others. We distinguished three strategies of criticism toward the elites: (1) blaming the elite, (2) discrediting the elite, and (3) denying the elite legitimacy to represent the people. As regards the others, we distinguished three main strategies of expressing a negative attitude toward them: (1) an exclusion of the others, (2) discrediting the others, and (3) blaming the others.

Additionally, assuming that populist discourse is always about the construction of specific claims to representation by the leaders, and henceforth, specific discursive manifestations of the relationship between the people and the leader we’ve introduced the indicators resorting to representative claims. We transform N. Urbinati’s claim that the core of the opposition between populist and liberal democracy is the populist’s “proclamation of representation as embodiment over mandate representation” into empirical question (Urbinati 2019: 115). We ask to what extent the communication of the populist actors promotes the vision of the paternalistic, equal or service relationship between the political actor and the people. We also attempted to problematize the dichotomy between charismatic and non-charismatic leadership widely present in the literature on populism (Mudde, Rowira Kaltwasser 2014). Inspired by the R. Mumford’s typology of leadership models, we checked the distribution of three specific models of leadership constructed in discourse: charismatic, ideological and pragmatic (Mumford 2006).

Finally, we will analyse the distribution of the specific topics employed by populist actors and the references to policy areas in their communication. At the national level (see: national reports) we will also analyse three most popular posts published by populist actors to inquire into their strategies to attract the attention of the citizens.

Our analysis went through a few stages. First, the national teams coded their empirical data using the codebook to detect the presence and degree of the selected strategies of populist communication at the national level and determine the differences between two populist actors selected for each country. National teams were also asked to use particular indicators of populist strategies contained in the codebook as elements of the coding frame to be used as a conceptual scheme necessary to select, organize and hermeneutically interpret relevant text passages. Accordingly, the coding sheet contained the space to note down the relevant passages of the empirical data. As the DEMOS consortium is interested in varieties of populism, the national teams were also encouraged to note down all the examples of national



specificities, expression, topics, ideas, references etc. which are typical for the given political culture and “thicken” the populist strategies with the highly contextual element.

Secondly, on the basis of the national data the comparative content analysis was conducted to determine the presence of three main elements of populist discourse, that is a reference to “the people”, critical attitude toward “the elite”, and critical attitude toward “the out-groups”, as well as combinations of these elements that constitute four main types of populism according to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), that is: *empty populism* (only a reference to the people), *anti-elitist populism* (a combination of the reference to the people with critical approach to “the elite”), *excluding populism* (a combination of the reference to the people and an exclusion of “the others”), and *complete populism* (a combination of the reference to the people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of “the others”). Although these three elements of populist communication yield seven combinations, mere references to the elites, the others or combination of this two strategies do not constitute instances of populism. We concur with their claim that: “appealing to the people forms the essential core of populism. Without reference to the people, populism is simply unthinkable” (Jagers, Walgrave 2007: 323). The advantage of this approach lies in its ability to record the nuances of communication and to detect the differences between various populisms at the communicative level. Moreover, it allows for capturing the elements of populist style (ie. anti-elitism or exclusion of “the others”) when they appear alone in the discourse without any reference to the people. Thus one can draw precise line between these actors which consistently combine people-centrism with other elements of populis style from actors only occasionally people-centric but predominantly focused on anti-elitism or exclusion of various out-groups. It was also useful for the comparative purposes as it allowed to determine the saturation of FB communication with populist strategies (or styles according to Jagers and Walgrave) and differences in this respect across countries under scrutiny. The differences in distribution of the specific strategies of populist communication were also investigated as well as the distribution of specific leadership constructions, representative claims, topics and the references to policy areas.

Thirdly, the qualitative analysis of the patterns of communication was conveyed to determine the differences in the ways basic categories of the populist communication were decontested at the national level. Moreover, the qualitative comparative research juxtaposed the results of the analysis of national specificities to trace the similarities and differences across countries.

Abovementioned research steps were designed to tackle a few research questions:

Quantitative research:

RQ1: What are the differences in the distribution of specific elements of populist communication characterize communication at the national level between two actors?

RQ2: What are the differences in distribution of specific elements of populist communication characterize communication across countries

RQ3: What are the differences in distribution of the specific topics referred to in the social media communication at the national level?

RQ4: What are the differences in distribution of the references to specific policy areas referred to in the social media communication at the national level?

RQ5: What are the differences in distribution of the specific leadership claims to representation in the social media communication at the national level?

RQ6: What are the differences in distribution of the specific leadership constructions in the social media communication across countries?

Qualitative research:

RQ1: How are the specific elements of populist communication decontested at the national level ?

RQ2: How different are the meanings of main elements of populist communication across countries?

RQ3: How are the specific leadership claims to representation constructed on social media communication at the national level?

RQ4: How are the specific leadership claims to representation constructed on social media communication across countries?

## **1.2 The Social and Political context of the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections**

The background the 2019 European elections can be divided into the supra-national and national level contexts.

At the European level, EU institutions have had to deal with a number of large scale, almost existential crises since the 2014 elections, including the refugee ‘crisis’; continued economic assistance to member states (primarily Greece); rising populism and rising Euro-scepticism (from both the right and left of the political spectrum), culminating in the UK’s decision to activate Article 50 and leave the bloc; and retrograde steps in some CEE member states away from the democratic, pluralistic norms that the EU expects and promotes.

At the national level, events and processes framed campaigns for the European elections, which was then replicated (at least to some extent) on Facebook. For example, in the UK a vast majority of the posts were about Brexit; in Italy, Salvini zoned in on the SeaWatch migrant rescue ship; Geert Wilders focussed on Moroccans as an Islamic threat to the Netherlands; Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic had just been found guilty by the EU of mishandling EU funds and battled this in his campaign; corruption was also the backdrop to Spain’s elections; in Denmark, with the rise of right-wing parties, parties concentrated on the relationship with Europe; and in Greece, a snap election was called after the European elections, in which Syriza lost.

Thus, although elections were often the key topics in the data, it did not always pertain to European elections. Furthermore, whilst these can be seen as background contexts to the research, they were also present in the findings – as topics of posts and policy/rhetorical responses.

### 1.3 The significance of social media for populist political communication

Contemporary political communication operates within the complex and differentiated field of “hybrid media system” where various channels of communication overlap, strengthen and affect each others influence (Chadwick 2013). Among them one has to distinguish social media providing particularly convenient discursive opportunity structures for the populist actors (Gerbaudo 2018). We decided to select our empirical data from Facebook. It is one of the most widespread medium in the world which provides extremely important channel for communication for all the political actors. Moreover, in most of the countries participating in the DEMOS consortium at least 46% of the citizens are using Facebook in the their communication. Although the percentages in the table below relate to the entire population, without excluding the citizens below 13 years old (the minimum age threshold to set up the FB account), nevertheless it still provides reflection of the general proportions of the FB users versus non-users within the country and across them. Further, Facebook provides more popular channel through which political actors can spread their message than party websites what makes it important source of information about all their activities and political statements. Additionally, it provides space for more elaborated messages unlimited by number of characters (Twitter’s case) and a has a longer timespan, making it particularly useful for the analysis of the details of political communication (Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, Esser 2017: 1352).

Figure 1. Number of FB users in the analyzed countries

Country	Facebook users	% of the population
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1 632 000	46.8
Czech Republic	5 580 000	52.5
Denmark	4 060 000	70.1
France	37 870 000	57.6
Greece	6 039 000	54.4
Hungary	5 963 000	61.9

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Italy	34 850 000	58.9
Lithuania	1 758 000	61.7
Netherlands	11 070 000	64.5
Poland	18 350 000	48.3
Slovakia	2 664 000	48.8
Spain	28 510 000	61.4
Turkey	52 000 000	61.9
United Kingdom	44 450 000	66.1

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Source: own elaboration on the basis of the <http://www.napoleoncat.com> database.

Moreover, Facebook can play a few important functions for the political actors employing populist communication. First, the „elective affinity” between social media and populism can be regarded as a flip side of alleged disaffinity with mainstream media. The mere usage of the social media serves as a meta-function signalling their willingness and necessity to circumvent the traditional media (Krämer 2017: 1303). It also allows populists to strengthen their credentials as being outside the system. Moreover, populist parties and movements resort to three types of arguments in their criticism of mainstream media. The most typical argument claims that mainstream media do not cover issues which are critical of the establishment because they are representing its interests. Additionally, they are driven by alleged political correctness and, thus, hide important information which, if revealed, would support the populist portrayal of the media as incredible. Finally, media are frequently accused of deliberately lying to the public (Haller, Holt 2018: 1669).

Secondly, the architecture of social media allow for more direct and unmediated communication which allows to avoid the gatekeeping and framing activities of professional media and their criticism. It is particularly important for the populist actors, who self-

professingly portray themselves as the voice of the people. Thirdly, according to Moffitt (2016: 89), “such sites and platforms allow populist leaders and parties not only to distribute their messages more easily and freely but also to portray a sense of immediacy, closeness and intimacy with their followers, giving the appearance of direct accountability and representation”. The opportunity to interact creates the potential to establish strong ties between politicians and their followers. Moreover, the digital media logics promoting like-minded peer networks allows to create a sense of belongingness to the community what is one of the important aims of populist identity politics (Klinger & Svensson 2015). Fourthly, as being free from the mediating strategies of mainstream media, they allow for even more antagonistic, negative or “uncivil” discourse including wordplay, sarcasm, criticism, labelling, slurs, personal insults and group insults. As scholars noticed the social media discourse contains a lot of critical comments and enemy constructions (Gonawela, Pal, Thawani, van der Vlugt, Out 2018). Importantly, it provides a space where politicians can enjoy more freedom to express their ideas and to employ more bad mannered style of communication (Moffitt 2016).

## 2. Quantitative Comparative Analysis Report

### 2.1 Sampling

We decided to study the content of Facebook (FB) profiles of the political leaders. We agreed to survey two populist actors per country: at least one of them should be selected based on the criteria provided below and another, who also frequently resorts to populists strategies, but not necessarily fulfilling the criteria. As the entire work package clearly represents a combination of the actor-driven approach to populism with a communication-driven approach, we decided to focus on populist actors only and examine communication strategies they employ in two different contexts: a pre-election period and non-election (or post-elections) one.

In categorizing parties, the task followed the analytical dimensions of (a) the establishment vs. anti-establishment dichotomy; (b) the illiberal content of populist ideology; and (c) populism as formal logic and political style. Political parties which may be classified as populist have exhibited one or more of these three analytical dimensions or categories in the way they have constructed their profile and discourse and in the manner they have competed with other parties. The following case studies were examples of these manifestations and analytical dimensions: (1) Populist radical right – combining populism with nativism – (Germany: AfD; France: FN; Italy: LN); (2) New anti-austerity “left-populist” parties in Southern Europe (Greece: Syriza; Spain: Podemos); (3) Post-communist, illiberal mainstream parties in Central East Europe (Hungary: Fidesz; Poland: PiS); (4) Various populist narratives as a part of the new wave of anti-establishment political projects around Europe (Czech Republic: ANO; Italy: M5S).

Based on these criteria, national teams selected two political actors per country for the international comparative analysis (see Table 1). If the leader of populist political party owned an active public Facebook profile, we collected the posts from that profile. If the leader has no his/her own public Facebook profile, we collected the posts from the official public Facebook profile of the political party.

Table 1. Political actors in the sample

Country	Political actor (1)	Political actor (2)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Milorad Dodik	Bakir Izetbegović
Czech Republic	Andrej Babiš	Tomio Okamura
Denmark	Dansk Folkeparti	'Nye Borgerlige'
France	Marine Le Pen	Jean-Luc Melenchon
Greece	Alexis Tsipras	Panos Kammenos
Hungary	Viktor Orbán	Zsolt Semjén

Italy	Matteo Salvini	Luigi Di Maio
Lithuania	Antanas Guoga	Vytautas Radžvilas
Netherlands	Thierry Baudet	Geert Wilders
Poland	Jarosław Kaczyński	Paweł Kukiz
Slovakia	Boris Kollár	OLANO
Spain	Pablo Iglesias	Santiago Abascal
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdogan	Justice and Development Party (AKP)
UK	UKIP	Nigel Farage

In order to be able to compare the communication strategies employed by populist political actors across 14 countries in the electoral context we took the opportunity provided by the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019. We collected posts from 14 days prior to the election days in May 2019 in each country, and (2) a non-election period (July 2019). Since the elections days differed in the countries under study we collected posts as following: in the Netherlands on 8-21 May, 2019 in Slovakia on 10-23 May 10-23, 2019, in Czech Republic on May 9-22, 2019, and in Italy, France, Lithuania, Poland, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Denmark, Romania, Spain, Turkey, UK, and Bosnia and Herzegovina on May 11-24, 2019.

For a selection of research material from the non-election period we first checked schedules of national elections in the 14 countries. We agreed that July 2019 would meet the ‘non-election’ criterion in most of the countries (although in some of the countries, elections were scheduled for Autumn 2019, i.e. Poland – in October 2019). We used a constructed week method and as a result, a stratified-systematic sample of Facebook posts was selected from that period. We randomly selected a starting date (July 17, Wednesday). Then, using a 3-week interval, we selected the next day, which was the following day of the week, three weeks later. Once we employed that procedure we came up with 14 days (that is 2 Mondays, 2 Tuesdays, etc.) and following dates in July: 4, 5, 7, 8, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, and 31.

Due to the significant differences in numbers of posts published in these periods by political actors under the study (from 5 to 380 in the election period, for example), we calculated the median numbers of posts across all political actors in both periods. For the election period the median was 44 and for the non-election period the median was 38. The difference in means reveals the fact than in general there were more posts published by the selected political actors in the election periods than in the non-election period.

We used means to select posts in cases where there were high numbers of posts published by a political actor. Namely, in cases where the number of the FB posts published by a particular political actor was lower or equal to 44 or 38, respectively, all the posts were coded. And in cases where the number of the FB posts published by a particular political actor was higher



than 44 or 38, respectively, the first post from each day of a 14-day period was selected. Then, the second post from each day starting from the first day was selected, and the procedure was continued until 44 or 38 posts were collected, respectively. If there was no second post on a particular day, we moved to the next day and selected a second post from that day, and then continued the procedure. Such a procedure of selection (instead of random selection) allowed us to include posts from all 14 days prior to elections day so we were able to trace topics and events from each day of the electoral period.

The national teams then provided their data from the election (May 2019) and non-election (July 2019) periods. Table 1 presents a size of the sample used for the international comparative quantitative analysis. The total number per country should not be higher than 164 (that is maximum 2x44 and 2x38 per country). The numbers used for the comparative study may differ from these used in national reports since some national teams coded more items than required (posts published in a longer period than 14 days prior to the elections day). For the purpose of the international comparative analysis we used a cleaned master file collecting all the data from 14 countries from the two requested periods.

The unit of analysis is a single post (text, picture, movie, or a link to text, picture and movie) presented on the FB account. We coded each post separately. If the post contained a link to a text, picture or video, coders were asked to follow the link and code the content of the material presented there only if: (a) the content referred to the particular political leader by: quoting his/her statements or/and covering his/her statements or any activities, (b) the content referred to the political party of the leader by presenting the political agenda or the activities of the members of the party.

Table 2. Number of posts in samples across periods

Country	Elections period (May 2019)		Non-election period (July 2019)		TOTAL (country)	
	N	% (country)	n	% (country)	n	% (country)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	62	44.9	76	55.1	138	100
Czech Republic	88	53.7	76	46.3	164	100
Denmark	47	59.5	32	40.5	79	100
France	88	57.5	65	42.5	153	100
Greece	44	54.3	37	45.7	81	100
Hungary	48	51.6	45	48.4	93	100
Italy	88	53.7	76	46.3	164	100
Lithuania	52	61.9	32	38.1	84	100

Netherlands	44	43.6	57	56.4	101	100
Poland	79	62.7	47	37.3	126	100
Slovakia	75	49.7	76	50.3	151	100
Spain	62	73.5	21	26.5	83	100
Turkey	68	57.1	51	42.9	119	100
UK	87	59.6	59	40.4	146	100
TOTAL (sample)	931	55.3	751	44.7	1682	100

Source: own elaboration.

Due to the sampling criteria used in the project (calculation of median of numbers of posts), it can be observed that differences in numbers (and thus percentages) per country and in total (sample) are rather small. Still, more posts were published in the elections period and non-election period in most of the cases (the exceptions were populist actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Netherlands, and Slovakia).

## **2.2 Codebook: variables and operationalization**

This study used methods of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The quantitative approach was used to extract components of populist discourse in the statements of select political actors, as well as the topics discussed in their statements. It allowed for determination of the frequency of appearance of specific themes and populist strategies. For the purpose of quantitative research, a codebook was developed. The codebook consists of three main sections. The first contains information describing a given object of analysis (a Facebook post), such as: post ID, country, political actor, date of publishing, format, and topic.

The second section of the codebook contains categories of the key populist aspects identified in the material: references to the people, anti-elitism, and/or exclusion of ‘out-groups’. In our study ‘the people’ are defined as a homogeneous and virtuous community. ‘The people’ are said to be united (with divisions dismissed by populists as the creations of political, intellectual and media elites) and sovereign. As such, politics should be a direct and non-mediated expression of the general ‘will’ of the people. In the category ‘the people’ we thus placed references to the ‘common man’, the ‘population’, the ‘citizens’/‘voters’, the ‘taxpayers’ / ‘consumers’, etc., but also references to the ‘nation’, and ‘national identities’ Those who constitute some specific sub-groups within the community (like men, women, children, teachers, etc.) are not counted as the people.

‘The elites’ are likewise understood as a homogenous entity, that are enemies of ‘the people’. They comprise political, media, financial, judicial and intellectual elites as a whole; they are accused of being incompetent and self-interested, when not actually conspiring against ‘the people’ and seeking to undermine democracy. In this category, we classified criticism and blame attributions to politics (the political class, governments, parliaments, political parties, etc.), financial system (banks, big corporations, financial authorities, etc.), the media (journalists, publishers, media organizations), the judicial system (courts, judges, legal organizations, etc.), supranational institutions (EU, WTO, IMF, ECB, etc.), and individual supranational elites (e.g. Macron, Merkel, Obama, etc.).

Some other groups are also excluded from ‘the people’. These groups are characterized as ‘others’ or ‘out-groups’ - as not belonging to ‘the people’ or not sharing their virtues. They are said to endanger ‘the people’s’ values, identities and rights. In this category we thus coded references to groups such as immigrants, religious or ethnic minorities, LGBT community, feminists, Roma communities, welfare recipients, and other specific social categories who are held to be not of ‘the people’.

In addition, the main indicators of populist discourse can be represented by the use of specific communication strategies (Blassnig et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016). Thus, references to ‘the people’ can take, for example, the form of referring to the “identity group”. The identity group is a collective group to which an individual feels they belong. Collective identity can be understood as “shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier, 1992). To qualify as an identity group, a

named group has to be described either as sharing (1) a common fate/history, (2) as being similar to each other, or (3) as being closely connected, (4) sharing an idea of heartland.

Furthermore, reference to the people can be expressed by demanding popular sovereignty, praising 'the people's' virtues or praising 'the people's' achievements, as well as referring to 'the people' as victims. In other words, 'the people' may be described either by (1) the attribution and emphasis of positive traits and attributes to 'the people' and being responsible for a positive development or success, or by (2) a shared (past or current) negative experience that resulted in 'the people' being victims. While the first approach conveys positive characteristics and images of 'the people', the second emphasizes that 'the people' may suffer because of some activities or omissions of given individuals or groups (political actors, foreign nations), historical circumstances, economic crisis, etc.

Strategies for expressing anti-elitism include: (1) discrediting 'the elite', (2) blaming 'the elite', or (3) denying 'the elite' legitimacy to represent 'the people'. Discrediting the elite can be traced when the post contains a negative characteristics (attributes) ascribed to 'general elite' or to particular politician/political party presented as a representation of 'the elite'. For example, the representatives of 'the elite' may be portrayed as corrupt, evil, criminal, incapable, stupid, and undemocratic. Blaming 'the elite' means that the elites are portrayed as responsible or accountable for an undesirable or harmful situation. This strategy refers to a concrete deficit or grievance 'the elite' is responsible to 'the people'. Additionally, the speaker may argue in favor of granting less power to 'the elite' within the context of a specific issue or of general institutional reforms to confine the power of 'the elite'. As such, the speaker argues against the right for 'the elite' to represent 'the people'.

Finally, the strategies used to refer to 'out-groups' consist of (1) excluding, (2) blaming specific groups, or (3) discrediting 'others' (Blassnig et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016). Specific groups may be discredited, denounced, criticized or stigmatized by the use of negative traits, mistakes, unlawful or immoral behavior. Specific groups may be also held responsibility or to be blamed for an undesirable or harmful situation for 'the people'.

In order to capture contextual and situational factors affecting a perception of the elites and the others across countries under the study, we decided to provide an opportunity to code a broad spectrum of types of 'the elite' or 'out-groups'. Namely, the following types of 'the elite' could be recognized: (a) a general, unspecific elite (system, politicians, oligarchy, caste), (b) national political (political party or parties, political leader(s), government), (c) national economic (corporations, rich people, banks), (d) legal (courts, judges), (e) media (established press), (f) intellectual authorities (experts, academics), (g) supranational political institutions (EU, UNO), (h) supranational economic institutions (IMF), or (i) any other specific institutions.

While studying references to 'others', we could trace the presence of several types of out-groups mentioned by the populist political actors. In order to capture the issue of immigration, we decided to recognize three sub-categories of 'geographical others': those already staying in the country (asylum seekers, immigrants), those staying outside the country (foreigners), and others staying outside the country who are (potentially or in fact) approaching the country

(refugees, immigrants). Additionally, we recognize two sub-categories of ‘economic others’, that is the poor (losers, the unemployed) and the rich (wealthy people, the winners). The other types of ‘the out-groups’ in our study are: political/ideological (political opponents: liberals, fascists, conservatives, or supporters of other political parties), legal (criminals, pedophiles), cultural/ethnic (other cultural values or patterns), religious, gender, on any other specific out-group.

Furthermore, we also examined leadership style, that is, the relationship between a political leader and the people, i.e., the type of claims to representation/models of representation, such as (1) a paternalistic approach of the leader towards the people (trustee model of representation), (2) service approach of the leader towards the people (mandate model of representation), and (3) the equality of the leader and the people (model of substantial representation). That part of the codebook was completed with questions regarding a visionary political leadership in populism. In particular, we examined the presence of such elements as: (a) a long term vision of the leader, (b) unconventional or risk-taking behavior of the leader, (c) articulation about the need of reconstructing the past of the Europe/European Union/country/party/ideology, (d) articulation which says that the leader is remaining faithful to a specific set of ideas, ideologies, beliefs that founded in party/country/European tradition or any of his/her past declaration, and (e) articulation about the pragmatic solution (e.g. setting up new institutions, changing the regulation, new laws) of existing problems. It is worth mentioning that although the research was in large part quantitative, we wanted to deepen our understanding of country cases and we asked coders to provide quotations that illustrated all the above-mentioned indicators of the populism (in native languages for the purpose of national studies).

Finally, as we were very much interested in the local variations/manifestations of populism, we also asked coders to pay particular attention to some local content features, characteristic to populism in a given political culture. Hence, the third part of the codebook included a call for description of some national particularities (a qualitative analysis only).

### 2.3 Intercoder reliability test

The collected material was coded by coders from their respective countries in their native languages. In order to ensure inter-coder reliability we organized coder training sessions prior to the coding process (in June 2019) and collected all the comments and suggestions. Then, we formally tested the inter-coder reliability based on material (10 items) taken from the UK sample, collected from FB profiles of both political actors under the study on May 8-10, 2019. 15 coders from 11 countries (France, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, UK, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania, and Romania<sup>2</sup>) participated in the test<sup>3</sup>.

We followed K. de Swert (2012), who suggested that Krippendorff's alpha (KALPHA) should be the basic measure to apply for researchers conducting a content analysis. Sample size, multiple (more than 2) coders or missing data are not problematic for calculating KALPHA, and all measurement levels can be tested. For running KALPHA tests we used a macro developed by Hayes (2005) that makes KALPHA calculation possible in SPSS.

Overall scores were satisfactory, with an average of 0.68. In fact, most of the variables achieved satisfactory inter-coder reliability scores. Only the scores for the "leadership styles" were significantly lower (around 0.27-0.32). That was somewhat to be expected due to their evaluative character. Once we removed these variables from the inter-coder reliability test, the average KALPHA increased to 0.74. Therefore, we decided to keep the aforementioned categories in the codebook, but use the data on these variables for qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis. With regard to the substantive variables to measure populism (reference to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of the others), the results were slightly lower than officially acceptable: the average for that group of variables was 0.63. For the group of variables on topic (main categories) the average was 0.67.

It should be emphasized, however, that the KALPHA is seen as a very conservative measure, because occasional differences in coding cause a sharp decline in alpha scores (e.g. Lombard et al., 2002). Furthermore, the material used for the reliability testing was in English, which was not the native language for all the coders, except one (representing the UK in the project). The actual coding of the material was completed in the coders' native languages. The choice of English-language material was necessary to compare reliability across all countries. Previous studies showed that reliability tests in project language typically result in lower reliability scores (Blassnig et al., 2019; Hopmann et al., 2017; Rössler, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> In the first stage of the project Romania was involved in the content-analysis but it was withdrawn from the later stage of the study.

<sup>3</sup> Data was not included in the calculations of the inter-coder reliability for Netherlands, Spain (both non-submission), Turkey and Denmark (both late submission)

## 2.4 Findings

The adopted research procedure assumed encoding of three indicators of populist discourse: “a reference to the people”, “the negative attitude towards the elite”, and “exclusion of the others”. From here, it was possible to identify seven different types of statements; those containing (1) only a reference to “the people”; (2) only a criticism of “the elite”; (3) only the exclusion of “out-groups” (negative relation to others); (4) a reference to “the people” and anti-elitist populism; (5) a reference to “the people” and excluding “out-groups”; and (6) those that include a combination of the critical approach to the elite and exclusion of the other, and (7) those containing all three indicators of populism (reference to “the people”, anti-elitism and exclusion of “out-groups”).

However, as mentioned in section 1.1, only four of these types of statements meet Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) definition of particular type of populism. Specifically, only a reference to “the people” indicates an *empty populism*, a reference to “the people” combined with an anti-elitist attitude indicates an *anti-elitist populism*, a combination of a reference to “the people” and excluding “out-groups” indicates an *excluding populism*, and a combination of all three aforementioned indicators of populism, that is the reference to “the people”, anti-elitism and exclusion of “out-groups” is regarded as a *complete populism*.

While analyzing a content of the political actors' statements published on Facebook, we will be able to recognize statements that contained any of the three indicators (the people, the elite, the others). Then, we could trace statements that included only references to “the elite” or “out-groups” or a combination of these two, but are not populist statements according to the aforementioned definition by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) due to a lack of a constitutive element of populism, i.e. a reference to the people. Finally, we could recognize statements that represented a populist style, i.e. those that included only a reference to the people or a reference to the people and other elements of the populist discourse (anti-elitism and/or exclusion of “out-groups”).

In the figures and tables provided in this section we will use the aforementioned distinction in order to show how many of the statements were indeed *populist* (according to Jagers and Walgrave's concept), and how many of the statements just included some of the elements of populist style, while not, in fact, met the criteria of “populist style”. In other words, a criticism towards “the elite” or “the others” (or both these categories together) does not constitute a *populist* style of the statement. Still, it is worth recognizing such statements because they illustrate a political actors' negative attitude towards these two groups.

Furthermore, we will provide findings on the strategies employed by populist actors in their messages posted on the Facebook (see CODEBOOK description above). We also provide initial comparison of the presence of populist discourse in posts covering different topics and referring to different public policy areas.

Comparative analyses were conducted at the country level. We also, distinguish and compare between elections and non-election period to examine an impact of contextual factors (the European Parliamentary elections) on the discourse used by populist political actors.

### **2.4.1 Overall presence of indicators of populist discourse**

Let us first look at the overall distribution of key indicators (elements) of populist discourse in all the investigated posts (the whole sample) in both periods: the elections one and non-election one. For each post a maximum index was calculated, where 0 means that no indicators of populist discourse was present, 1 means that one (any) indicator was included (i.e. a reference to ‘the people’, a critical attitude toward ‘the elite’, or negative approach toward any ‘out-group’), 2 – that two (any) indicators were present in the post, and 3 – all three indicators were present. A presence of just one element may either indicate an empty populism (if a reference to ‘the people’ is made) or just a critical approach toward ‘the elite’ or the ‘out-groups’. The presence of two elements may constitute two types of populism: an anti-elitist populism or excluding populism, and three – complete populism.

In the elections sample (N=931) 54% (n=500) of the posts published on Facebook by populist actors did not contain any indicator of populist discourse, while almost half of the items (46%, n=431) included at least one indicator of populist discourse. Most of these posts included only one indicator, that is a reference to ‘the people’, a critical attitude toward ‘the elite’, or exclusion of ‘others’ (28% of all the posts, n=264), while 13% of all posts included any combination of two indicators. A minority (5% of all the posts, n=45) included three indicators. In the non-election sample (N=751) populist discourse was less frequently used by the populist actors under study: as many as 63% of the posts (n=472) did not include any indicator of the populist discourse, while 27% (n=202) of all the posts included only one indicator and 9% (n=66) – any two indicators. Posts including three indicators of the populist discourse were hardly ever published in the non-election period (1%, n=11).

In order to check whether these differences were significant, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare means of number of populist indicators in posts published in the elections and non-election period. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the means for elections period (M=0.69, SD=0.87) and non-election period (M=0.49, SD=0.71),  $t(1680)=5.09$ ,  $p=0.0$ .

We then examined the relationship between the three main elements of populist discourse (reference to ‘the people’, criticism of ‘the elite’, and exclusion of ‘others’) by calculating Pearson correlation coefficients in the total sample (N=1682). Positive and statistically significant correlations were identified between all three elements, that is: (a) a reference to ‘the people’ and anti-elitism, (b) a reference to ‘the people’ and exclusion of ‘the out-group’, as well as (c) anti-elitism and exclusion of ‘others’. According to the data (Table 3) the greater the number of posts containing empty populism, the more statements containing anti-elitist populism, and excluding populism, and the other way round.



Table 3. Correlation in pairs of three basic dimensions of the populist style: references to people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of ‘others’

	Reference to ‘the people’	Anti-elitism	Exclusion of ‘others’
Reference to ‘the people’	1	.218*	.121*
Anti-elitism	.218*	1	.222*
Exclusion of ‘others’	.121*	.222*	1

\* Correlation significant at 0.01 (two-tailed). Source: own elaboration.

Following Jager and Walgrave’s concept (2007), we also measured the presence of particular combinations of indicators of populist discourse that constitute particular types of populism. Figure 1 presents the percentage of presence of single indicators (reference to ‘the people’, critical approach toward ‘the elite’, and negative attitude toward ‘others’) and their combinations (as described above) in two samples: election and non-election one.

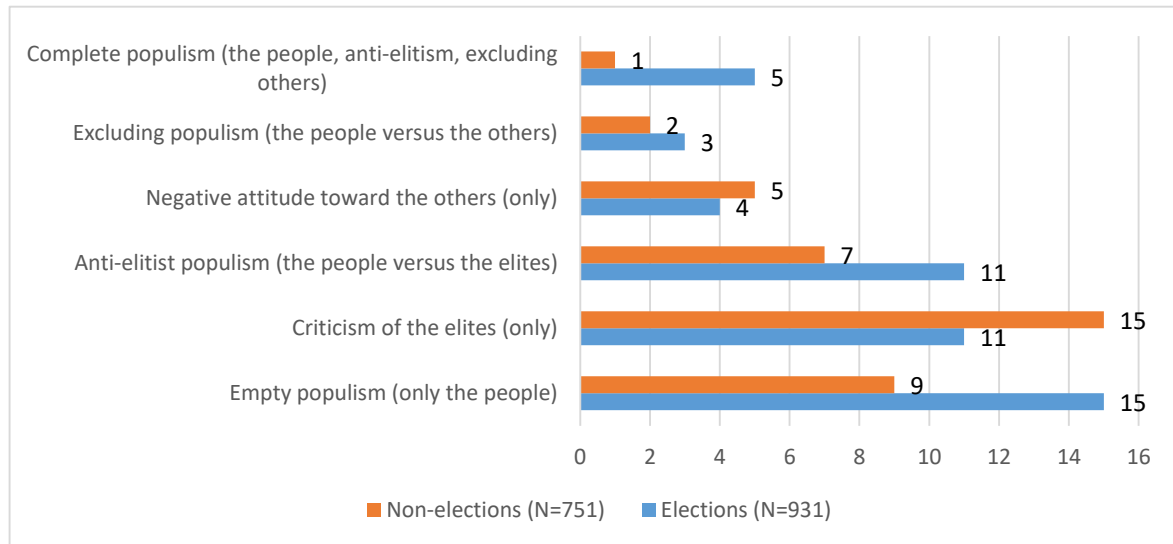
The findings show that all types of populism (empty, anti-elitist, excluding, and complete) were more frequently present in posts published on Facebook during the election period than in non-election period. On the other hand, during the non-election period political actors more often expressed a criticism toward ‘the elite’ and negative attitude toward the out-groups without any reference to ‘the people’ than during the election period.

The most common type of populism in the posts published before the European Parliamentary elections was an empty populism (15%), that means messages that included just a reference to ‘the people’, followed by anti-elitist populism (11%), exploiting a dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. Complete populism and excluding populism were less frequently present in the posts in that period (5% and 3%, respectively). In the non-election period (July 2019) a ‘pure’ criticism toward ‘the elite’ was the most common strategy in the posts (15%), followed by empty populism (9%) and anti-elitist populism (7%). A tendency to refer more often to ‘the people’ and contrast ‘the people’ to ‘the elite’ or ‘others’ may be seen as a strategy of gaining electoral support by approaching ‘the people’ and strengthening a bond (at least verbally) between the (populist) political actors and the society (voters). One type of populism that almost disappears during the non-election period, in comparison to the election period is that of complete populism.

In a second step we compared a presence of populist discourse across countries in two samples (elections and non-election period). We calculated the means of numbers of indicators per post and compared them for each country to check for the differences in levels of populism in FB messages. Table 4 provides an overview of frequency of key indicators of

populist discourse expressed as mean of maximum indexes calculated for each post in the particular sample.

Figure 1. Key elements of populist discourse and types of populism in election and non-election periods in 14 countries (%)



In all countries, except Denmark, the Netherlands, and Slovakia, posts published by populist actors during the election period included, on average, more indicators of populist discourse than posts published in the non-election period. In Greece, Hungary, Poland and Turkey differences between means are statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), as well in Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovakia ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Table 4. Key indicators of populist discourse in election and non-election periods, expressed as mean value

Country	Election period (May 2019)		Non-election period (July 2019)		Difference in means between both periods
	M	SD	M	SD	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.27	0.48	0.05	0.22	-0.22
Czech Republic	0.64	0.94	0.51	0.90	-0.13
Denmark	0.34	0.76	0.59	0.87	+0.25
France	0.86	0.99	0.69	0.83	-0.17
Greece	0.63	0.86	0.16	0.37	-0.47

Hungary	1.13	0.81	0.58	0.62	-0.55
Italy	0.72	0.69	0.50	0.64	-0.08
Lithuania	0.04	0.19	0.00	0.00	-0.04
Netherlands	0.43	0.66	0.46	0.63	+0.20
Poland	0.84	0.94	0.34	0.63	-0.21
Slovakia	0.61	0.71	0.92	0.86	+0.31
Spain	0.72	0.84	0.50	0.51	-0.21
Turkey	1.19	1.10	0.43	0.73	-0.46
UK	0.86	0.95	0.76	0.62	-0.24
TOTAL	0.69	0.87	0.49	0.71	-0.20

Source: own elaboration. Scale: 0-3, where 0 means that none indicator of the populist discourse was present, 1 means that one (any) indicator was included (i.e. a reference to the people, a critical attitude toward the elites, or negative approach toward any out-group), 2 – that two (any) indicators were present in the post, and 3 – all three indicators were present.

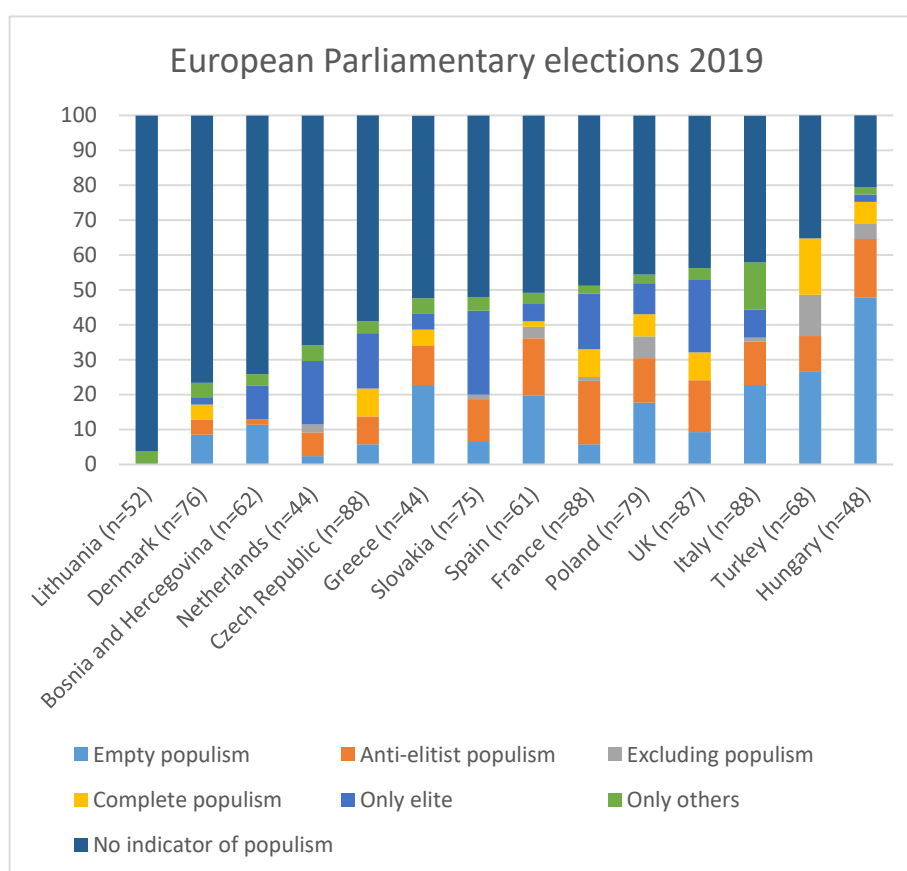
Figure 2 and Figure 3 provide more details on which indicators and combinations of indicators of populist discourse were found in the posts published either pre- or post-election. The findings reveal that in 8 out 14 countries (Lithuania, Denmark, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Greece, Slovakia, and Spain) more than half of the posts published by populist actors during the elections period did not include any element of populist discourse. The countries with the highest percentage of posts including any indicators of populist discourse were Hungary, Turkey, and Italy, followed by the UK, Poland, and France.

One can trace several patterns across the countries regarding types of populism present in the posts. First, we may recognize countries where populist political actors under study predominantly focused on approaching ‘the people’ (Hungary, Turkey, Italy, Greece, and Spain). In some cases a relatively high level of employing empty populism in the messages was followed by a frequent use of the anti-elitist populism (Hungary, Spain, Greece, Italy, and Poland). Second, we may distinguish countries where anti-elitist populism, followed by the criticism toward ‘the elite’ without any reference to ‘the people’, was the primary type (France and the UK). Third, some countries share a relatively high level of complete populism (Turkey, Hungary, and Poland). Finally, excluding populism was used most frequently (in comparison to other countries) in Turkey, Poland, and Hungary). While in most of the countries a critical approach towards ‘others’ (with Turkey, Poland, and Hungary as exceptions), Italy makes an interesting case with as many as 13.6% of posts including a critical reference to ‘others’ and only 1% of posts including and excluding populism. The opposite pattern can be found in Turkey where there were no posts containing a critical

approach toward ‘the out-groups’, but as many as 12% posts contained excluding populism (see Figure 2).

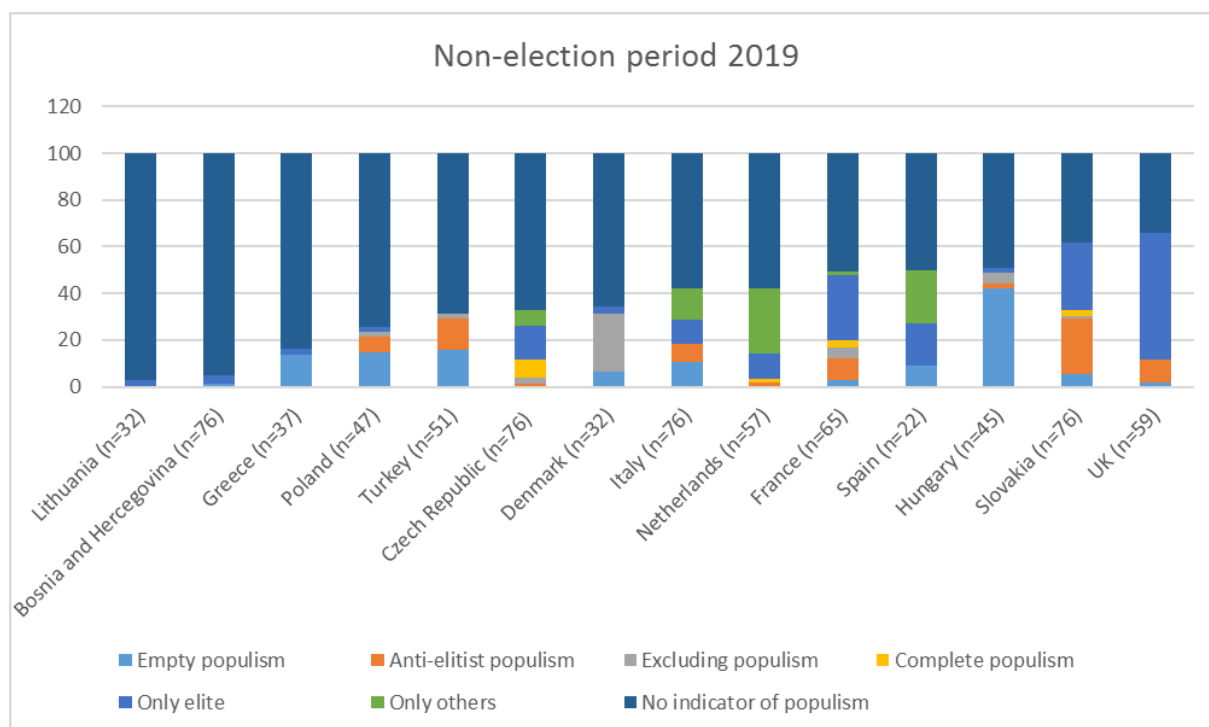
In the non-election period there is a clear tendency across the countries to focus more on just the people, or elites and the out-groups without any reference ‘to the people’. Still, in Slovakia, Turkey, and the UK one can trace a relatively high percentage of posts containing anti-elitist populism (in Slovakia and Turkey it was actually higher than during the election period). Complete populism is all but absent in nearly all countries: only in four countries (Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France and Slovakia) were posts found that contained reference to ‘the people’, accompanied by anti-elitism and exclusion of ‘others’ (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Populism indicators and types of populism in elections period per country (% , N=931)



Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3. Populism indicators and types of populism in non-election period per country (% , N=751)



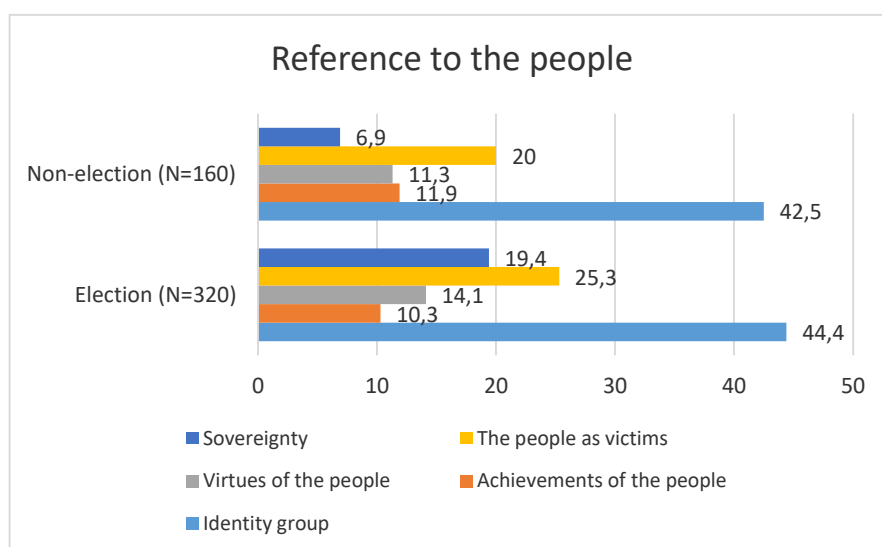
## 2.4.2 Elements of populist discourse: the people, the elite, the others

In next step of analysis we focused on the posts that included at least one element of populist discourse (reference to ‘the people’, a critical reference to ‘the elite’, or a negative approach toward ‘others’). The goals were two-fold here. First, we aimed to identify particular populist strategies employed by populist political actors under analysis. Then, we examined the types of elites attacked in the messages as well the out-groups that were targets of negative approach in the posts.

### *The people*

In our codebook we distinguish five strategies that may be used by a speaker in order to refer to the people: (1) making reference to the identity group, (2) praising ‘the people’s’ achievements, (3) praising ‘the people’s’ virtues, (4) referring to ‘the people’ as victims, and (5) demanding sovereignty of ‘the people’. Figure 4 displays the distribution of these five strategies in the two sample periods: election (N=320) and non-election (N=160) in the posts referring to ‘the people’. Since one post could include more than one strategy, the percentages do not sum to 100.

Figure 4. Strategies of referring ‘the people’ (%)



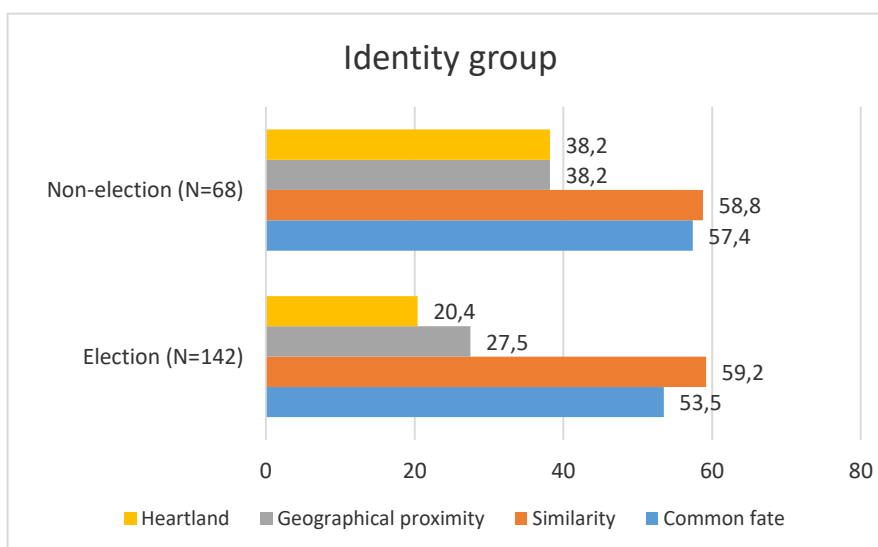
The findings presented in Figure 4 reveal that in both samples references to ‘the people’ were most frequently through making reference to a shared identity. The second most popular strategy was a victimisation, that is, defining ‘the people’ by a shared (past or current) negative experience that resulted in ‘the people’ being victims. In such messages, the speaker emphasizes that ‘the people’ suffer (or suffered) because of some activities or omissions of some individuals or groups (political actors, foreign nations), historical circumstances, economic crisis, etc. While the other strategies were less frequently employed by populist

actors, it is worth mentioning that demanding sovereignty of ‘the people’ was used more often in the elections context (19.4%) than in the non-election period (6.9%) – see Figure 4. Interestingly, populist actors clearly tend to state that citizens (‘the people’) should be able to decide on an issue without any elite representation in the moment of voting for that representation. Since demanding sovereignty may be expressed either by argumentation for general institutional reforms to grant ‘the people’ more power or argumentation in favor of implementing ‘the people’s’ will, populist actors may encourage ‘the people’ to support those who declare such approach (i.e. the populist political actors themselves).

It is worth mentioning that the identity group could be defined either as sharing (a) a common fate/history, (b) as being similar to each other, or (c) as being closely connected, (d) sharing the idea of a heartland. Figure 5 shows the frequency of these four elements of the identity group in posts referring ‘the people’ published during the pre- (N=142) and post-election (N=68) period. Since one post could include more than just one strategy, the percentages do not sum to 100.

While referring to the identity group, populist actors defined it most frequently by emphasising a similarity (similar traits, similar behaviors, similar characteristics of the group members, shared cultural values, social, emotional or attributes) among the people and a common fate or history (a common past or future, similar outcomes of some past events, historical experience) they share. A comparison between the two samples also revealed that emphasizing the geographical proximity (a close distance and high interdependence between individuals in the group), and the idea of a heartland (idealized version of ‘the people’, nation, country), as well as a common fate or history were employed more often in messages published in the non-election period than in the election period. The similarity was the only strategy that was (slightly) more often used in the pre-elections period (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Strategies of defining the identity group (%)



Calculations of the presence of strategies of referring to the people provide much more complex picture (see Table 5). In fact, there is no one clear pattern across the countries, neither in the use of the strategies or their use in the elections and non-election period of the study. In some countries there is a clear tendency to employ just one or two strategies (see: Denmark or Bosnia and Herzegovina), in other all five strategies are used by the populist actors (e.g. Poland, Greece, and Hungary). In some countries, particular strategies of referencing ‘the people’ were used only in one period (election), while absent in the other (non-election) – see for example Italy, the Netherlands, or Spain. However, in some cases particular strategies were used more often in the non-election than in the election period (e.g.: Hungary – the identity group, achievements of the people, and virtues of the people). In order to be able to explain that diversity, we would need to conduct in-depth, nation-based analysis (see also national reports attached to that report).

Table 5. Strategies of referring to ‘the people’ per country (%)

Country	Identity group		Achievements of the people		Virtues of the people		The people as victims		Sovereignty	
	E	NE	E	NE	E	NE	E	NE	E	NE
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	12.5	0.0
Czech Republic	52.4	88.9	9.5	0.0	9.5	0.0	52.4	0.0	42.9	33.3
Denmark	54.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.2	0.0
France	13.3	6.7	3.3	0.0	10.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	10.0	0.0
Greece	14.3	0.0	28.6	25.0	42.9	12.5	19.0	12.5	38.1	25.0
Hungary	89.2	91.7	13.5	29.2	13.5	20.8	13.5	8.3	40.5	12.5
Italy	8.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.9	0.0	20.6	21.4	2.9	0.0
Lithuania	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Netherlands	100	66.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	33.3	0.0
Poland	28.6	36.4	8.6	18.2	8.6	18.2	48.6	54.5	5.7	27.3
Slovakia	16.7	44.7	5.6	7.9	16.7	7.9	27.8	23.7	11.1	0.0
Spain	40.0	50.0	4.0	0.0	4.0	0.0	44.0	0.0	24.0	0.0
Turkey	76.1	62.5	19.6	31.3	26.1	43.8	10.9	12.5	13.0	0.0
UK	50.0	22.2	17.9	0.0	21.4	0.0	35.7	11.1	21.4	0.0
TOTAL	44.4	42.5	10.3	11.9	14.1	11.3	25.3	20.0	19.4	6.9

Source: own elaboration. E=elections period, NE=non-election period.



### *The elites*

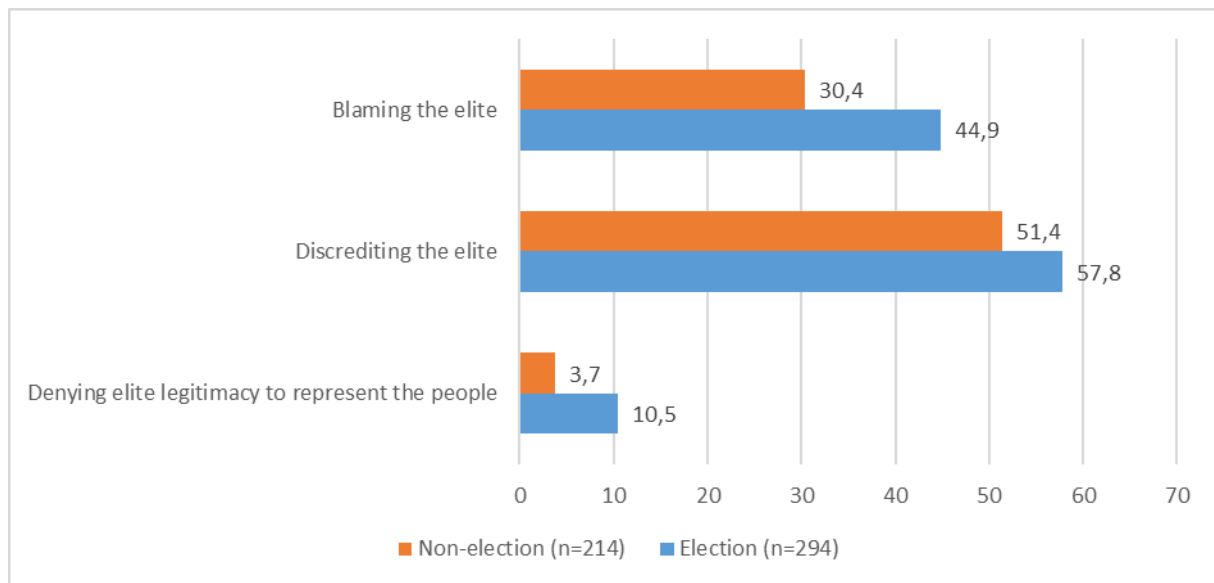
The second element of populist discourse is the Manichean vision of society as divided into two completely separate, internally homogeneous groups and antagonistic camps: ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004). This dichotomous division valorizes the category “us”, i.e. ‘the people’, as positive, and the category ‘them’ (elite) as negative. In other words, the essence of populism is anti-elitism – an attitude of opposition to all those in power (political parties, officials, but also supranational institutions and organizations). Although the presence of ‘the people’ is crucial to establish such a dichotomy, in our study we decided to also analyze those posts that included only a negative reference to ‘the elite’. In this part of the descriptive analysis we included all the posts that included any critical reference to ‘the elite’, regardless of whether it accompanied a presence of ‘the people’, or not.

In our codebook, we distinguished three strategies of criticism toward ‘the elite’: (1) blaming ‘the elite’, (2) discrediting ‘the elite’, and (3) denying ‘the elite’ legitimacy to represent ‘the people’. Figure 6 presents the findings on frequency of these three strategies across two samples (elections and non-election period). Figure 6 reveals a distribution of these three above-mentioned strategies in the posts referring to ‘the elite’ published during the pre-elections period (N=294) and after the EP elections (N=214). Since one post could include more than just one strategy, the percentages do not sum to 100.

In both samples, discrediting ‘the elite’ was the most commonly used strategy (see Figure 6). It means that populist political actors’ posts more frequently contained negative characteristics (attributes) ascribed to a general elite or to particular politician/political party presented as a representation of ‘the elite’ than ones that referred to a concrete deficit or grievance the elite was responsible for towards ‘the people’. In other words, populist actors more often portrayed ‘the elite’ as corrupt, evil, criminal, incapable, stupid, undemocratic, than as responsible or accountable for an undesirable or harmful situation. Denying ‘the elite’ legitimacy to represent the ‘people’ was the least frequently used strategy in both periods.

All three strategies were more often used during the election period than the non-election period, but in the case of blaming ‘the elite’, the difference in percentage between two samples was the biggest (-14.5% in the non-election period in comparison to the elections one). Hence, we may argue that despite a tendency to evaluate attributes rather than performance, in the electoral context populist actors tend to be more focused on ‘the elites’ actions (and their negative consequences) than in the non-election period.

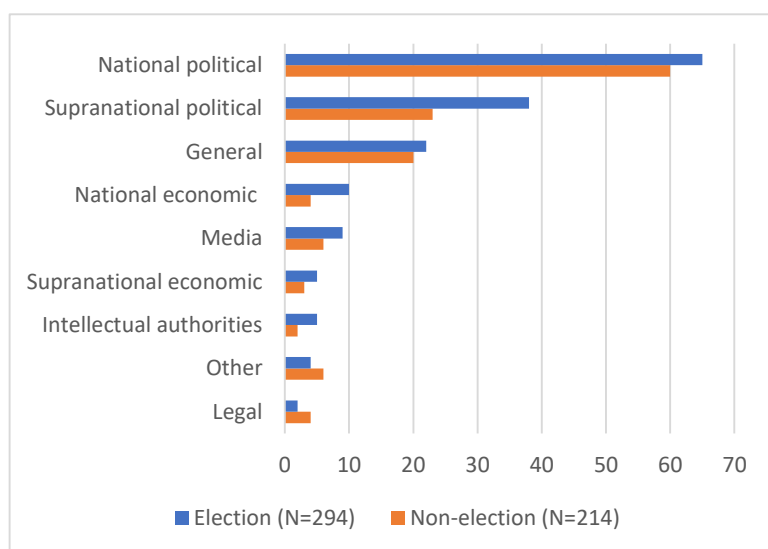
Figure 6. Strategies of criticizing ‘the elite’ in election and non-election periods (%)



Source: own elaboration. Percentages were calculated for posts including a reference to the elites. Percentages do not sum to 100 because one post could include more than just one strategy.

We also examined what types of ‘the elite’ are the most frequent target of populist actors’ criticism. Figure 7 collects percentages of presence of particular types of ‘the elite’ (national political, national economic, legal, media, intellectual authority, supranational political, supranational economic, and any other) in posts including references to ‘the elite’ in the election (N=294) and non-election sample (N=214). Since one post could include more than one type of ‘the elite’, the percentages do not sum to 100.

Figure 7. Types of ‘the elite’ in posts (%)



Source: own elaboration. Percentages were calculated for posts including reference to ‘the elite’.

In both samples a national political elite was the most frequently mentioned type of ‘the elite’. Still, the percentage difference between the two samples was just 5%. The biggest difference (15%) was spotted in case of supranational political elite (such as the European Union). Not surprisingly, that type of ‘the elite’ was mentioned more often in the European Parliamentary context in May 2019 than it was two months later, in July 2019. Five more types of ‘the elite’, that is: general elite, media, national and supranational economic elites, and intellectual authorities were more frequently targeted in the election period than the non-election period. Only two (legal and other) were slightly more often mentioned in the non-election period.

Once we examine the distribution of the strategies of anti-elitism across the countries under analysis (see Table 6), we can notice a huge diversity among them. Similar to the case of making references ‘the people’, one can recognize countries with a very clear preference of just one strategy used only during the elections period (e.g.: Denmark), and countries where all strategies were used in both periods (e.g.: Poland, UK, and France). In order to explain these differences, we need more contextual information about each country (see national reports attached to this report).

Table 6. Strategies of anti-elitism per country (%)

Country	Blaming the elites		Discrediting the elites		Denying elite legitimacy to represent the people	
	E	NE	E	NE	E	NE

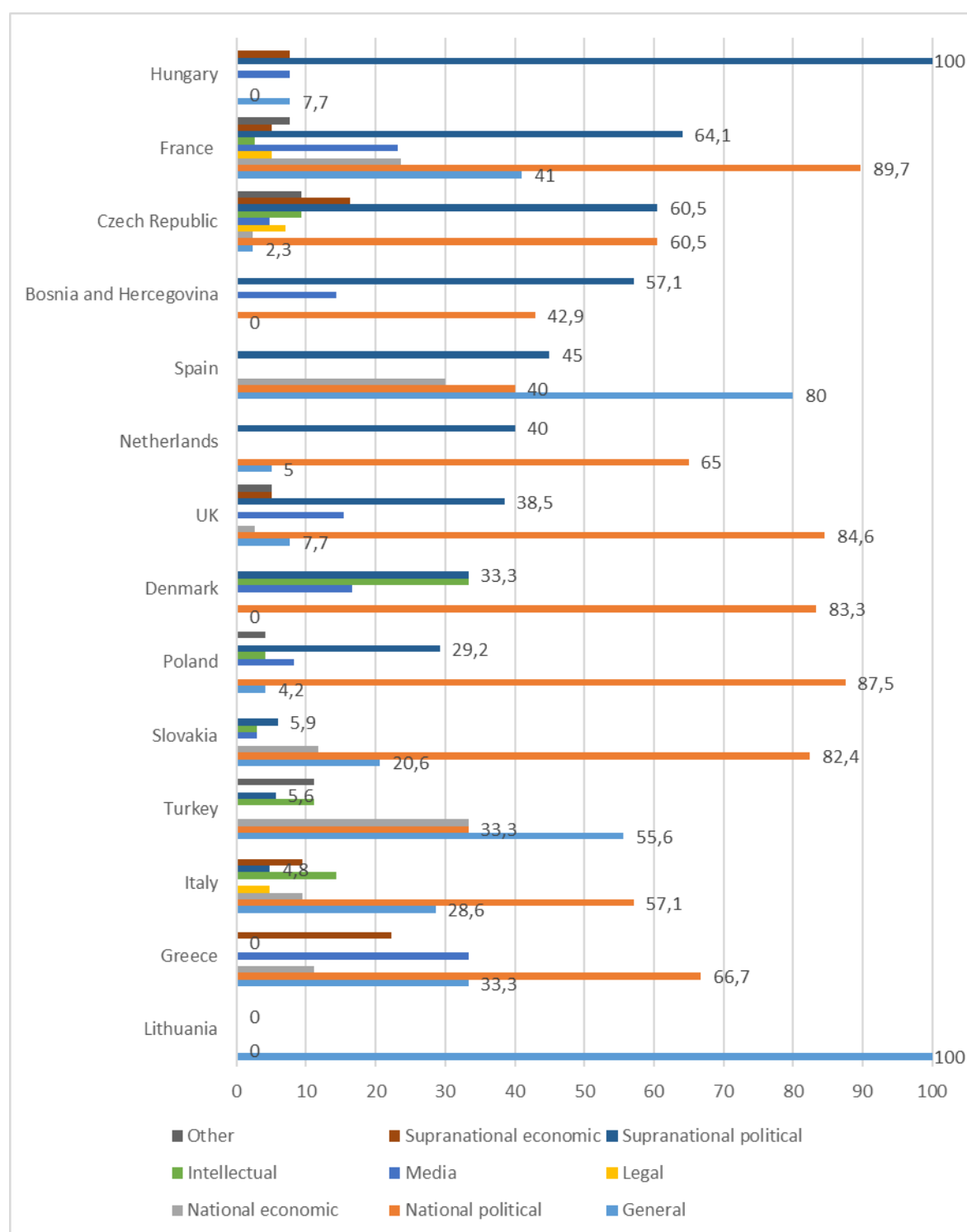
Bosnia and Herzegovina	57.1	33.3	28.6	33.3	0.0	0.0
Czech Republic	88.2	14.7	53.5	55.9	4.7	0.0
Denmark	100	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
France	51.3	28.1	34.6	9.4	5.1	3.1
Greece	22.2	100	66.7	100	0.0	0.0
Hungary	46.2	66.7	30.8	33.3	30.8	0.0
Italy	9.5	10.5	52.4	42.1	0.0	0.0
Lithuania	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Netherlands	45.0	85.0	65.0	90.0	0.0	5.0
Poland	54.2	50.0	58.3	75.0	20.8	25.0
Slovakia	0.0	44.4	52.9	51.1	20.6	6.7
Spain	80.0	50.0	70.0	0.0	35.0	0.0
Turkey	5.6	28.6	88.9	85.7	16.7	0.0
UK	30.8	5.0	79.5	67.5	2.6	5.0
TOTAL	44.9	30.4	57.8	51.4	10.5	3.7

Source: own elaboration. E=elections period, NE=non-election period. Percentages for each country were calculated for posts including reference to ‘the elite’. A total percentage exceeds 100 because one post could include more than one strategy.

Interestingly, one may observe a huge diversity in the types of ‘the elite’ criticized by populist actors right before the EP elections across the countries (see Figure 8). Despite the international (European) context of these elections, in most countries it was a national political elite that was the main target of critical messages published on Facebook. On the other hand, in Hungary, and Denmark it was a supranational political elite that was more frequently mentioned in the posts than national one (in fact, in Hungary no single post included criticism toward the national political elite, while all posts targeted the supranational political elite). In some cases (Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Spain), the percentage frequency of both aforementioned types of ‘the elite’ was (almost) equal. The general category of the elite seemed to be targeted most frequently in Lithuania (100% of the posts), Spain, France, and Turkey. At the same time, in some countries the category of a general elite was absent (see: Denmark and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Economic elites (both national and supranational) were less frequently mentioned by populist political actors than political ones. Still, in Turkey and Spain one third of all posts referring to ‘the elite’ included criticism toward national economic elite, while in Greece around 20% of posts referred to supranational economic elite.

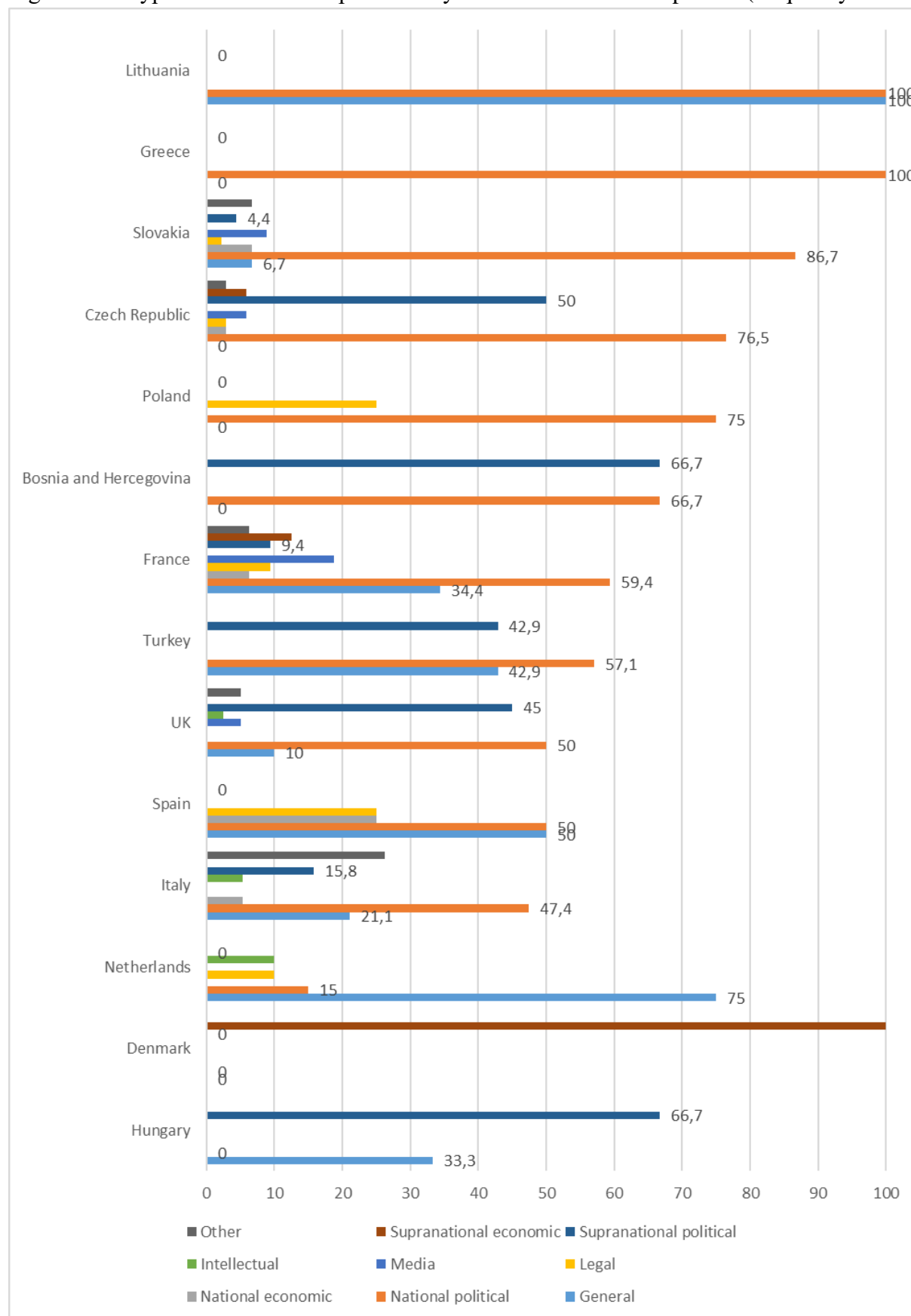
In the non-election period it was a national political elite with the highest percentages of mentions (over 60%) in Greece, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Poland (see Figure 9). Lithuania provides an interesting case, with 100% of posts including references to both national and general elite. In the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and UK there is also still a clear presence of criticism toward the supranational political elite (EU). In the Netherlands one can spot a tendency to target a general elite rather than any other type of 'the elite'. France, the Czech Republic, and Denmark share the presence of criticism toward supranational economic elites.

Figure 8. Types of “the elite” per country in the election period (frequency in %)



Source: own elaboration. Percentages for each country were calculated for posts including reference to ‘the elite’. The total percentage exceeds 100 because one post could include more than one type of ‘the elite’.

Figure 9. Types of ‘the elite’ per country in the non-election period (frequency in %)

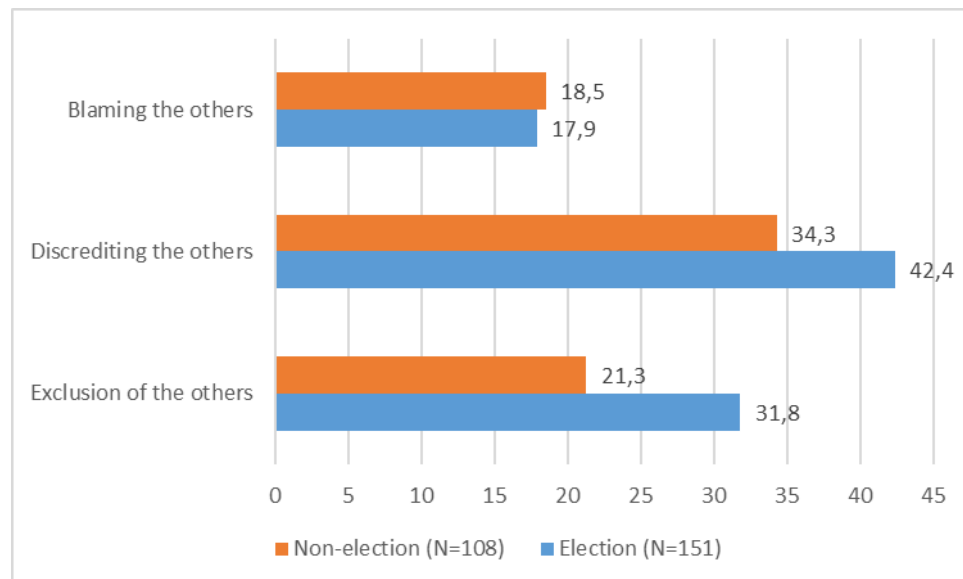


Source: own elaboration. Percentages for each country were calculated for posts including reference to ‘the elite’. The total percentage does not sum to 100 because one post could include more than one type of ‘the elite’.

### *The others*

The third of the main constitutive elements of populism is the exclusion of “out-groups”. These groups are characterized as ‘others’ – as not belonging to ‘the people’ or not sharing their virtues. They are said to endanger ‘the people’s’ values, identities and rights. In this category we thus coded references to groups such as immigrants, religious or ethnic minorities, LGBT communities, feminists, Roma communities, welfare recipients, and other specific social categories who are held to be not ‘of the people’. In our codebook we distinguished three main strategies of expressing a negative attitude toward ‘others’, namely: (1) an exclusion of ‘others’, (2) discrediting ‘others’, and (3) blaming ‘others’. In this part of the descriptive analysis we took into account all posts that included any critical reference to ‘others’, regardless of whether it accompanied a presence of ‘the people’, or not. Figure 10 reveals a distribution of these three above-mentioned strategies in the posts referring to ‘others’ published during the pre-election period (N=151) and post-election (N=108) periods. Since one post could include more than just one strategy, the percentages do not sum to 100.

Figure 10. Strategies of referring to ‘others’ (%)



Source: own elaboration. The total percentage does not sum to 100 because one post could include more than one type of strategy.

The findings collected in Figure 10 show that discrediting ‘the out-groups’ was the most common strategy employed by the populist discourse (both in the elections and non-election

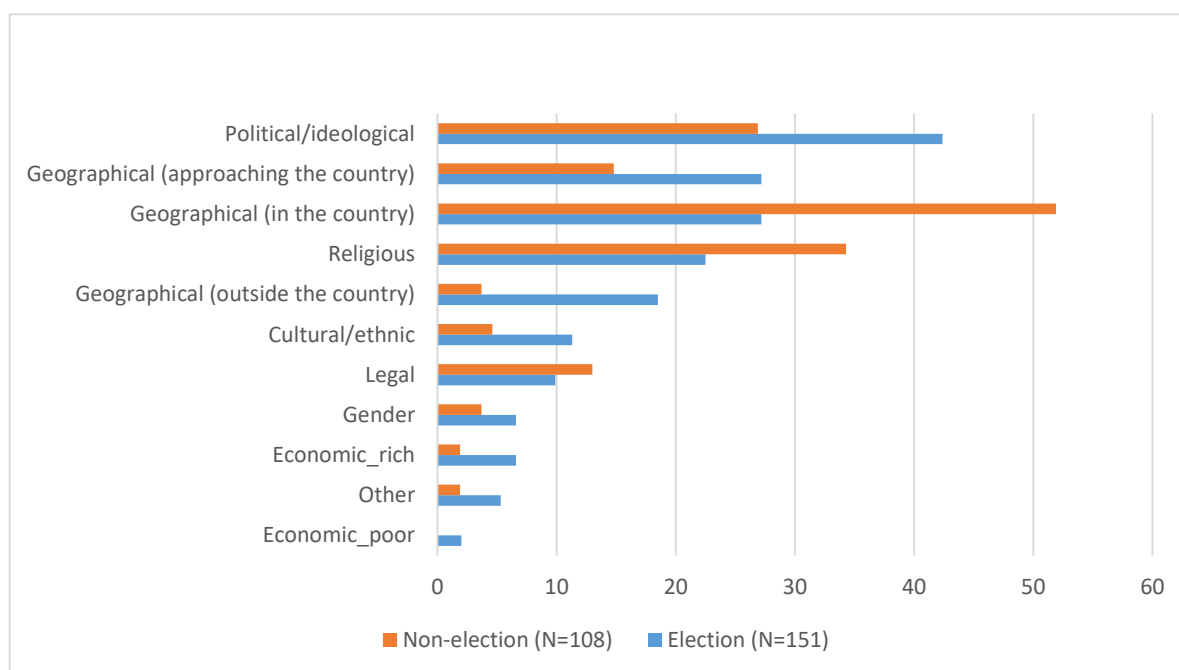


period). It means that populist actors are quite eager to discredit, denounce, criticize or stigmatize ‘others’ by the use of negative traits, mistakes, unlawful or immoral behavior. However, it was the exclusion of ‘others’ that was affected the most by the context: a tendency to use this strategy was stronger during the election period than the non-election one

We also examined what types of ‘others’ are the most frequent target of populist actors’ negative attitude. We coded the presence of the following types of ‘others’: (a) geographical others already staying in the country (asylum seekers, immigrants), (b) geographical others staying outside the country (foreigners), (c) geographical others outside the country who are (potentially or in fact) approaching the country (refugees, immigrants), (d) political/ideological, (e) legal (criminals, paedophiles), (f) cultural/ethnic (other cultural values or patterns), (g) religious, (h) gender, (i) economic: the poor (losers, the unemployed) (j) economic: the rich (wealthy people, the winners), or (k) any other specific out-group.

Figure 11 presents the frequency of presence of different types of ‘others’ in both sample periods. The findings show that there were differences between the election and non-election periods in terms of the targets of a negative approach of populist political actors. The European Parliamentary elections context clearly triggered a negative attitude toward political/ideological ‘others’ (political rivals and those who do not share the same political orientation), and immigrants or refugees approaching the country, as well as foreigners and those who do not share the cultural values and ethnic roots of ‘the people’. In the non-election period, on the other hand, there was a stronger tendency to perceive immigrants already staying in the country and those who do not share a religion with ‘the people’ as the main targets. Some categories, although less frequent in the messages, were still more common in the election context as opposed the non-election one (economic and gender).

Figure 11. Types of ‘others’ (%)



Source: own evaluation. The total percentage does not sum to 100 because one post could include more than one type of ‘others’.

Table 7 collects the findings across countries (percentages per country were calculated based on the number of posts referring to ‘others’) in the two samples: the election period and the non-election one. A few key patterns can be seen here. First, we can distinguish countries where all strategies were employed exclusively (Poland) or more frequently (Italy, Hungary, Spain, and Lithuania) in the pre-election period than non-election period. The opposite tendency can be spotted in Slovakia and France where all three strategies were employed by populist politicians in the non-election more than during the election period. In other countries the use of strategies expressing a negative attitude toward ‘others’ is much more complex.

Table 7. Strategies of expressing negative attitude toward ‘others’ per country (%)

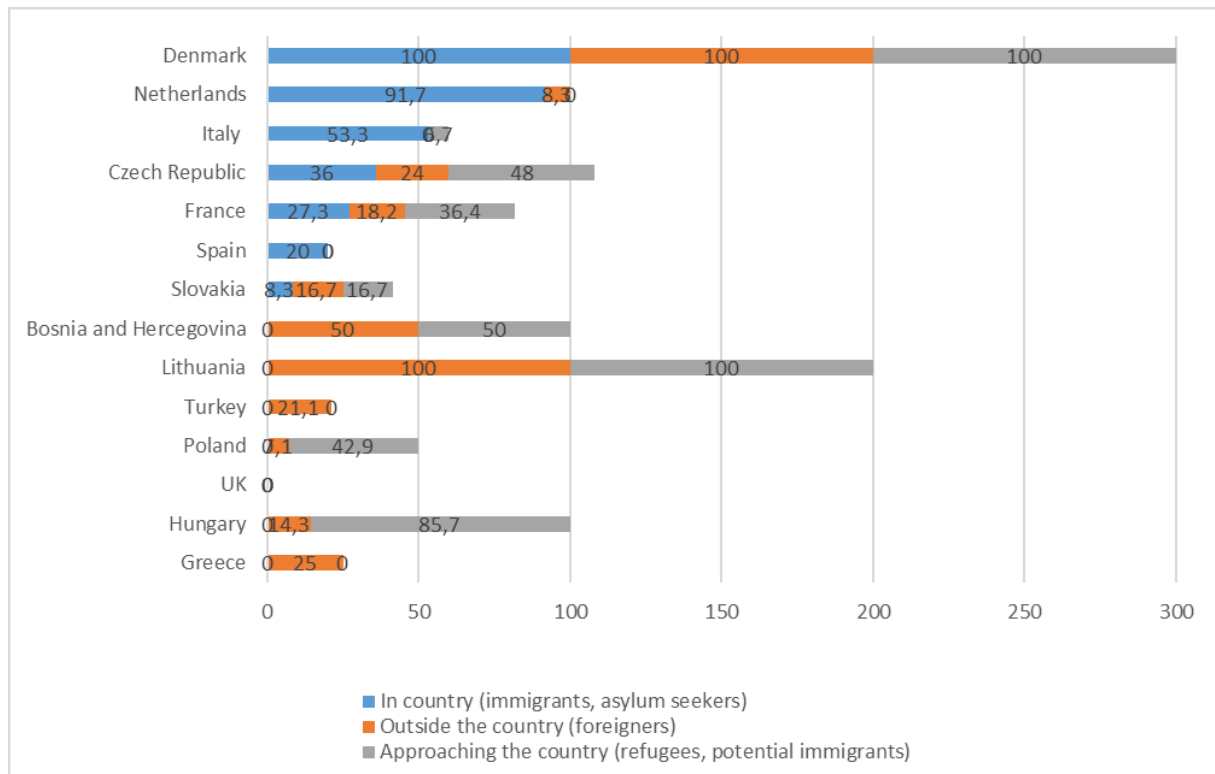
Country	Excluding the others		Discrediting the others		Blaming the others	
	E	NE	E	NE	E	NE
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Czech Republic	8.0	7.1	32.0	42.9	12.0	10.7
Denmark	57.1	0.0	57.1	100	0.0	0.0

France	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0
Greece	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hungary	85.7	0.0	14.3	0.0	0.0	100
Italy	46.7	21.4	46.7	7.1	0.0	0.0
Lithuania	100.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Netherlands	25.0	48.3	58.3	37.9	33.3	31.0
Poland	50.0	0.0	35.7	0.0	42.9	0.0
Slovakia	8.3	42.9	8.3	28.6	0.0	28.6
Spain	30.0	0.0	70.0	20.0	80.0	20.0
Turkey	63.2	0.0	89.5	100	31.6	0.0
UK	9.1	0.0	54.5	100	0.0	0.0
TOTAL	31.8	21.3	42.4	34.3	17.9	18.5

Source: own elaboration. E=elections period, NE=non-election period. The total percentage does not sum to 100 because one post could include more than one strategy.

We then checked which types of ‘out-groups’ were the most frequently targeted in the messages published by populist actors in countries in the study. We decided to pay special attention to three categories of ‘geographical others’, namely: (1) those who have been already staying in the country (immigrants and asylum-seekers), (2) those who are living outside the country (foreigners), and (3) those who are approaching the country (immigrants or refugees who seem to be willing to move to the country). Figure 12 and Figure 13 present findings from each sample period.. Interestingly, in the election period sample at least one of these three categories was used in thirteen out of fourteen countries (the outlier was the UK), while in the non-election sample we traced at least one of these categories of the others in only five countries (Slovakia, the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, and Italy). Furthermore, in the non-election period foreigners as a target of populist communication were present only in two countries (the Czech Republic and the Netherlands), while in the election period they were relatively frequently mentioned.

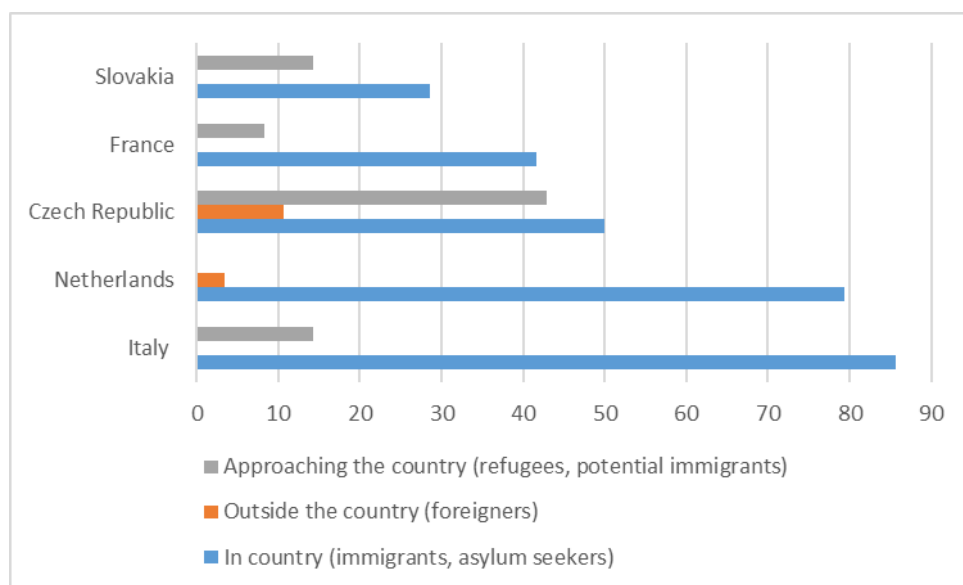
Figure 12. Types of ‘geographical others’ per country in the election period (%)



Source: own elaboration. Percentages for each country were calculated for posts including a reference to ‘others’. The total percentage may exceed 100 because one post could include more than one type of ‘others’.

Some significant differences can also be noticed between countries regarding the presence of particular types of the ‘geographical others’ that were mentioned in the messages. For example, in Denmark all posts included references to all three types. In the Netherlands and Italy, immigrants and asylum seekers who have been living in the country were more often targeted than foreigners and potential immigrants. In Spain so called ‘in-country immigrants’ were the only type of ‘geographical others’ mentioned in the messages, while in France and the Czech Republic they were also mentioned but less frequently than those who may potentially enter the country. In six out of fourteen countries populist actors focused only on foreigners and refugees and potential immigrants. In Poland and Hungary those who may approach the country seem to be the main target of populist actors, while in Turkey and Greece – foreigners. In Lithuania and Bosnia and Herzegovina both these categories of ‘geographical others’ were equally frequent in the messages published on Facebook (see Figure 12). In the non-election period the main focus seemed to be on ‘in-country’ immigrants in all five countries (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Types of the ‘geographical others’ per country in the non- election period (%)



Source: own elaboration. Percentages for each country were calculated for posts including a reference to the others. The total percentage may exceed 100 because one post could include more than one type of the others.

### 2.4.3 Populist discourse on topics and public policy areas

#### *Topics*

Our content analysis also provided us an opportunity to examine which topics have been covered most frequently by the populist political actors during the European Parliamentary elections campaign and after that period in their posts published at the Facebook. For the purpose of this part of the study we included a category of topics in our codebook. Up to three topics per post could be coded. Table 8 and Table 9 present the five most frequently addressed topics (frequencies were summed up and the percentage presented in the tables was calculated based on the total number of posts) from all the posts and posts including at least one element of populist discourse in the two samples. For those five topics we calculated the mean number of populist discourse indicators to check the level of “populism saturation” of these messages.

In the election period sample, the set of five top topics among all posts is equal to the set distinguished among posts that included at least one indicator of populist discourse (see Table 8). Not surprisingly, among the five mostly covered and discussed topics in posts published by populist actors in the election period sample, the topic of elections was the most common. This was followed by statements made by national politicians and activities of the European Union as an international political organization. Interestingly, in May 2019 the topic of immigration was relatively heavily covered and saturated with indicators of populist discourse.

Table 8. Frequency of topics in the elections sample (TOP 5)

Topic	Topics in all posts (N=894)*			Topics in posts with at least one indicator of populist discourse (N=425)*	
	Number of appearances	% of the posts	Indicator of populist discourse (M)	Number of appearances	% of the posts
Elections	383	21.5	0.86	209	23.1
Statements and activities of national individual politicians	151	8.5	0.66	65	7.5
Activities of international political organizations	90	5.1	0.80	43	4.8

(e.g. EU)					
Inter-party relations	84	4.7	0.73	41	4.5
Immigration	76	4.3	0.91	40	4.4
Activities of individual foreign politicians	76	4.3	0.30	18	2.0

Source: own elaboration. \* Missing data was out of calculations.

What is noteworthy is the fact that two months later (in July 2019) the same topics were still important to the populist actors (see Table 9), and although there are some differences in percentages, the same topics constitute the top 5 topics discussed in posts published.

Table 9. Frequency of topics in the non-election sample (TOP 5)

Topic	Topics in all posts (N=693)*			Topics in posts with at least one indicator of populist discourse (N=274)*	
	Number of appearances	% of the posts	Indicator of populist discourse (M)	Number of appearances	% of the posts
Statements and activities of national individual politicians	182	13.9	0.46	62	10.9
Elections	69	5.3	0.46	24	3.0
Activities of individual foreign politicians	69	5.3	0.49	29	4.3
Immigration	62	4.7	1.0	39	6.8
Activities of international political	43	3.3	0.95	29	5.1

organizations (e.g. EU)					
Diplomatic visits	43	3.3	0.23	7	1.2
Legislative activities	35	2.7	0.23	22	3.9

Source: own elaboration. \* Missing data was out of calculations.

### *Public policy areas*

Finally, we examined which areas of public policy were covered in the two sample periods. Up to three areas of public policy per post could be coded. Table 10 and Table 11 present the five most frequently addressed areas of public policy (frequencies were summed up and the percentage presented in the tables is calculated based on the total number of posts) from all the posts and posts including at least one element of populist discourse in the two samples (elections and non-election). For those five areas we calculated the mean number of populist discourse' indicators to check the level of "populism saturation" of these messages.

Table 10. Frequency of public policy areas in the elections sample (TOP 5)

Public policy areas	Areas in all posts (N=537)*			Areas in posts with at least one indicator of populist discourse (N=293)*	
	Number of appearances	% of the posts	Indicator of populist discourse (M)	Number of appearances	% of the posts
European policies	143	16.4	0.88	75	15.6
Migration	84	9.6	0.90	43	9.0
Law and criminal justice policy	65	7.5	0.98	40	8.3
Social policy, welfare policy	56	6.4	0.96	33	6.9
Culture, religion	48	5.5	0.79	25	5.2
Macroeconomics (economic policy)	43	4.9	1.16	28	5.8



Source: own elaboration. \* Missing data was out of calculations.

In the election period a European policy areas was the most prevalent issue raised in the posts. It was followed by policies on migration, and on culture/religion. Besides these three international-oriented areas, three more, national-based areas were relatively heavily discussed, namely: law and criminal justice policy, social policy, and economic policy.

Table 11. Frequency of public policy areas in the non-election sample (TOP 5)

Public policy areas	Areas in all posts (N=496)*			Areas in posts with at least one indicator of populist discourse (N=201)*	
	Number of appearances	% of the posts	Indicator of populist discourse (M)	Number of appearances	% of the posts
Culture, religion	71	10.1	0.38	23	7.5
Public administration	61	8.7	0.25	9	3.0
Law and criminal justice policy	59	8.4	0.67	32	10.5
Migration	56	8.0	0.96	32	10.5
European policies	51	7.3	0.82	29	9.5
Social policy, welfare policy	34	4.9	0.79	19	3.2

Source: own elaboration. \* Missing data was out of calculations.

Two months later, similar issues were discussed most frequently in the posts on Facebook by populist actors across 14 countries. What changed – in comparison to the election period – was the level of ‘populism saturation’ of messages on culture/religion (- 0.41), law and criminal justice policy (-0.31), and social policy (-0.17).

## 2.5 Conclusions

Based on the findings of the international comparative quantitative analysis of the content of posts published on Facebook by populist political actors in 14 countries in two periods – prior to the European Parliamentary elections (May 2019) and after the European Parliamentary elections (July 2019) – we can forward the following conclusions.

(1) Overall, the countries with the highest percentage of posts including any indicators of populist discourse were Hungary, Turkey, and Italy, followed by the UK, Poland, and France.

(2) More posts published by populist political actors in the election period included at least one indicator of the populist discourse, than posts published in the non-election period. Furthermore, a higher percentage of the pre-election posts included more than one indicator than those in non-election posts. In all countries, except Denmark, the Netherlands, and Slovakia, posts published by populist actors during the election period included, on average, more indicators of populist discourse than posts published in the non-election period. In most of them (Greece, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovakia) these differences were statistically significant.

(3) Correlations between all three main indicators of the populist discourse (a reference to ‘the people’, anti-elitism, and exclusion of ‘others’) were positive and statistically significant (two-way). In other words, the greater number of posts containing empty populism was accompanied by more statements containing anti-elitist populism or excluding populism, and the other way round.

(4) The context (the European Parliamentary elections) affected not only the presence of elements of populist discourse, but also the use of types of populism (empty, anti-elitist, excluding, and complete). While in the non-election period there was a stronger tendency to express negative (critical) attitudes and opinions towards ‘the elite’ and ‘others’ without any reference to ‘the people’, in the election period populist political actors tended to frequently reference ‘the people’ in their messages. Such a tendency led to a higher percentage of not only empty populism, but also other types of populism in the posts.

(5) With regards to the use of populist strategies, the descriptive results show similarities as well as notable differences across countries. While in some countries (Turkey and Spain) it was empty populism that prevailed, in others, the main focus was on a critical attitude toward the elites (France and the UK). Still, there was a group of countries with a clear tendency towards a dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ (Hungary, Greece, Italy, and Poland). Although the excluding form of populism was less common across the countries under analysis, we can still trace that type of populism in Poland and Turkey during the election period, and in Denmark in the non-election period. It is worth mentioning that complete populism occurred in nine out of fourteen countries in the election period and only in four countries in the non-election period.

(6) While addressing ‘the people’, populist political actors in our study employed group identity most frequently. Group identity was constructed by emphasizing a common fate and similarity. Interestingly, it was not through reference to achievements or values but to

negative experiences ('victimization') that was another important component of populist messages. That strategy was common across our sample, from Central and Eastern European countries to Italy and the UK.

(7) While addressing 'the elite' and 'others' populist political actors employed a discrediting strategy rather than blaming strategy. In other words, populist politicians paid more attention to the attributes than to the actions of their targets. However, criticism over the performance and its (negative) consequences was more common in posts published in the election period than in the non-election period.

(8) The analysis of types of 'the elite' targeted in both samples (elections and non-election) revealed a high level of domestication in campaign discourse: despite the European context of these elections, in most countries it was a national political elite that was the main target of critical messages published on Facebook by populist political actors. That observation was supported by the fact that populist political actors conceptualized not only 'the elite' but also 'others' most often in political terms (a high percentage of presence of 'political/ideological others' in the posts published in the elections period).

(9) With regard to the target groups of populist communication, a first descriptive glance showed that populist political actors conceptualized 'others' frequently in a geographical manner. However, we identified certain differences that may be explained by the EU-related context. While in the election period much more attention was paid to foreigners, refugees and potential immigrants (the EU policy on migration), in the non-election context the main attention in many countries was focused on immigrants who had been already living in the country (domestication).

(10) Against the aforementioned observations on the impact of the context on populist communication, only small differences were spotted in topics and public policy areas covered and discussed in the posts published on Facebook in the election and non-election samples. Not surprisingly, most of the election posts covered the elections. However, immigration and EU activities were two topics with higher populism indices (mean number of indicators of populist discourse) than the elections. In the non-election period immigration was still relatively heavily covered and still highly saturated with indicators of populist discourse. Finally, in the election period, a European policy area was the most prevalent issue raised in the posts. Two months later, European policies were still among the five most frequently discussed public policies.

As with any investigation, this quantitative portion of the study has certain limitations. First, while we conducted a comparative analysis in fourteen countries in different regions, our country selection is limited. Secondly, within these fourteen countries, we only analyzed a limited sample of post published by selected populist political actors. We designed the country samples in order to achieve similar sizes. Nevertheless, our sampling strategies may have led to some bias due to the large differences in the population sizes between countries. Finally, this study provides the basis for qualitative study and in-depth analysis of findings correlated with country-level systemic and contextual factors (e.g., GDP per capita,

unemployment rates, immigration rates, political party system, populist party ideological placement, party age, government vs. opposition status of the populist party).

### **3. Qualitative Comparative Analysis Report**

#### **3.1 An overview of Social Media usage in surveyed countries**

The frequency of use of Facebook as a tool of communication differs greatly from country to country. Italy is at the high end of the scale, with 803 messages by just 2 actors, 582 of these by Matteo Salvini alone, whilst at the lower end, the four chosen populist actors in Lithuania posted just 111 times between them and Thierry Buadet of FvD in the Netherlands posted just 6 times over the two sample periods.

The use of Facebook as tool of populist communication differed from state to state. Some countries – Spain, Italy, the UK, France, Turkey and Poland – display a more widespread use of social media, across more platforms, and with more complex usage. We can speak here of Podemos (SP) and M5S' (IT) use of web 2.0 and digital democracy in their movement (Deseriis 2017), PiS' (PL) use of Facebook in parliamentary and European elections, and the use of outside big data consultants in the Brexit campaigns (UK). By comparison, the use of social media by populist actors in other states is less systematic and advanced and simply replicated material from other sources, such as TV. In Bosnia, for example, a vast majority of posts were simply links to other forms of campaign material (videos of rallies, billboards etc.), Turkey provided similar cases – posts would sometimes merely be unedited videos of Erdogan's campaign speeches, often running to over an hour. Likewise, in Lithuania, there is a digital divide in which rural, older, less educated and more disadvantaged groups are less likely to use social media. Yet, these are the groups who are more inclined to vote for populist parties, and so such parties by and large shy eschew social media and instead focus on TV and face-to-face communication to reach their target groups.

As well as differences in the use of Facebook between the countries, there were also differences between the pre- and post- election period. The use of populist frames was more common in election periods than it was in non-election periods. This finding is in line with Weyland's (2017) claim that populists are defined by vote-maximization strategies aimed at maintaining or gaining power. In the non-election periods sampled, in most national case studies the chosen politicians no longer had to compete for the support of the electorate. This also seems to support the characterisation of populism as a thin, additive, ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) or a discursive repertoire (Bennett 2019).

However, this finding comes with the important caveat that in Slovakia and France this trend is reversed, i.e. populist rhetoric was more frequently used in the post-election sample period. The French example could be seen as particularly surprising - Le Pen is an archetypal far-right, nativist populist actor and yet during her use of populist frames actually drops in the post-election period.

### 3.2 Elements of populist communication

The following data excerpts are all taken from Facebook posts of political parties in the period of the data gathering (see section 2.1, above for sampling details). For each post we indicate the owner of the FB account.

#### *The People*

Three patterns can be identified in the discursive construction of “the people” in the data.

The first is a focus on the positive characteristics of the people. This came in many guises. For Vox in Spain, and PiS in Poland, it was farmers as the archetypal representatives of the nation and heartland, and for OlaNO (SK) Slovaks are a “proud nation” full of “good and decent people”. Similarly, in Turkey, the Czech Republic, Bosnia, Poland and the UK, the virtue of the people is foregrounded:

- (1) “I am happy that you will be a proud Czech! Because our country is indeed marvellous and strong in Europe and it will be even stronger” - Andrej Babiš, CZ
- (2) “we are patriotic without disliking anybody”, “we are a great nation” – Nigel Farage, UK
- (3) “Here, great workers, great warriors, good Bosniacs and humble Muslims live in Zenica” - Bakir Izetbegovic, BO
- (4) “Polishness is freedom, Polishness is solidarity and Polishness is normality” – PiS, PL
- (5) “Thank God, we are the members and sons of a nation with grandiose richness in spirit and in heart” – Recep Tayyip Erdogan, TU

The second pattern of use is a formation of the people based on cultural or ethnic commonalities. This was especially common in the posts by nativist, right-wing populist actors:

- (6) “Denmark belongs to the Danes and its citizens must be able to live in a secure community founded on the rule of law, which develops along the lines of Danish culture” – DPP, DK

Elsewhere, in Poland, Slovakia and France the frame of common fate was often used, whereas common geographical proximity was used by Vox (SP) and Andrej Babiš (CZ). Religious or ethnic similarity was present in both populist actors in Bosnia, as well as in Poland.

There were some surprises in the data for this type of frame, though. For example LePen’s usage of a nativist construction of the people actually declined post-election, whilst UKIP (now a nativist, anti-muslim party) were less likely to use identity than Farage. The only place where nationalist ideology was not present in any actor’s posts was Lithuania, which is characterised by centrist populism.

The final pattern was that of the people as victims. For Nigel Farage (UK), the people had been betrayed by the Brexit vote:

(7) "Despite all the threats, we voted to leave" – Nigel Farage, UK

In Italy and the Netherlands, the people were constructed victims of immigration by Salvini (IT) and Wilders (NE), whilst in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary they were potential victims of immigration. Andrej Babiš (CZ) also portrayed the people as victims of worse conditions:

(8) "Why do our people buy fish fillets that contain less meat than in Germany? Unacceptable!" - Andrej Babiš, CZ

By contrast, left-wing populists – including Jean-Luc Mélenchon (FR), Tsipras (Syriza, GR), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos, SP), and Luigi Di Maio (M5S, IT) – constructed the people as victims of corrupt elites and/or financial systems.

It should be noted, however, that although 'the people' is commonly accepted as a key element of populist politics, it was not always present in the data. For example, in Spain, "the people" was an important part of wider campaigns in local and general elections, but was not as present as could have been expected in the sampled periods. In France, on the other hand, whilst both LePen and Mélenchon used the concept, neither defined beyond vague mention of sovereignty :

(9) "In the end, CETA therefore raises the question of the model of society we want - a highly political question - and the freedom left to the people to decide whether or not to impose their own model of society" – Marine Le Pen, FR

(10) "It is the people who make history" – Jean-Luc Mélenchon, FR

### *Elites*

Reference to elites differed from country to country and actor to actor, but unlike references to "the people" and "Others", some frames were common to left- and right-wing populists.

For example, national political elites (specifically traditional parties, and in some places individual MPs) were mentioned in right wing Facebook posts in the Czech Republic (Babiš), Slovakia (OLaNO), Bosnia (Dodik) and Spain (Abascal, Vox).

(11) "Although representatives of the European Coalition and Law and Justice declare that they are fighting for the affairs of Poles, in fact these declarations are full of hypocrisy" - Paweł Kukiz, PL

But they were likewise discredited and blamed by left-wing populists in Greece and France:

(12) "Well, that's the classic answer of the elites who despise people" - Jean-Luc Mélenchon, FR

(13) "WE'LL STOP THEM. Renzi's and Boschi's PD [Partito democratico] approved the 'Jobs Act' and failed the depositors... Zingaretti's new PD – with the support of Cirino Pomicino –

proposes the restoration of annuities and public funding for political parties. These people should not come back in government...we go forward with Minimum Income, cutting the MPs and their salary” – Luigi Di Maio

- (14) “Thanks to the open borders of the VVD [Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, the largest party in government]: 4600 incidents of shoplifting, pickpocketing, mistreatment, threats and destruction by asylum criminals” – Geert Wilders, NE

Centralist populists in Lithuania also blamed elites:

- (15) “The more the so-called political elite talks about national security and integration to the West, the less it is done in reality to strengthen the state of Lithuania, its economic and social resilience, civic institutions and self-government” - Rolandas Paskas, LT

In the UK, Farage presented and blamed a more general, less defined political elite:

- (16) “The political elite said there would be no second vote. They said your decision would be final. They lied to you” – Nigel Farage, UK

In the Netherlands, Wilders blamed institutional actors, such as local government and the public prosecutor’s office as being unable and too weak to deal with immigration.

On the left of the political spectrum, perhaps unsurprisingly, economic elites were the focus of attention and were mainly blamed or discredited. This was visible in posts by Mélenchon (FR), Di Maio (IT), and Iglesias (SP)

Media elites were targets in Italy (Salvini), the Czech republic (Babiš, although only that media not owned by him), France (both LePen and Mélenchon), Slovakia (Kollár), and the UK (Farage)

- (17) “We are not just fighting the political class. We are fighting the entire BBC too” – Nigel Farage, UK

Intellectual elites, seen as progressive and overly liberal, were discredited and blamed in The Czech Republic (Okamura) Poland (PiS), and Spain (Abascal).

Another elite target was European institutions and actors, references to which were more frequently found in right-wing, nativist Facebook posts in, for example, Denmark, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Hungary and Poland, albeit in the latter case to a lesser extent that might have been expected given its discourse over the previous five years.

- (18) “The EU makes it impossible to deport criminal asylum seekers, including rapists, child pornography enthusiasts and murderers. Unacceptable. That is why #NEXIT” – Geert Wilders, NE



European institutions and actors are most often presented as the supra national elites whose actions and goals run counter to the putative “people’s”. In the Czech Republic and Poland, this also manifested in anti-German rhetoric.

- (19) “We only want to end the current European Union and dissolve it, since it supports migration, Islamization, destroys European nations and families by supporting sunshine-neo-Marxist ideologies and gender...Do you want to be ruled by Merkel, Juncker forcing immigrants onto us?” – Tomio Okamura, SK

Finally, it should be mentioned that sometimes the elites were left undefined and were only generally referenced. This was present in ‘anti-system’ actors on the right, for example Paweł Kukiz in Poland, who constructed as a unified cartel consisting of all the parties which operates in their own, not the people’s interests, and also Erdogan in Turkey.

- (20) “[The EU is an] aristocratic republic governed by the two biggest states” - Paweł Kukiz, PL

But it was also present in the pronouncements of Mélenchon in France, who conceived of the elites as:

- (21) “The powerful who give orders to the others”, “The people and the oligarchy !”, “those at the top are those who think they are invested to think for the others ”, “the whole system is about preventing people from thinking” – Jean-Luc Mélenchon, FR

### *Others*

Compared to the height of the refugee ‘crisis’ in 2015, overall migrants were not particularly salient ‘others’ in the data. In Slovenia the fact that the importance of migration as national topic had declined was possibly part of the reason that Okamura fared relatively badly in the European elections (Volby 2019). By contrast though, in Denmark the memory of the 2015 crisis was present in both the Dansk Folkeparti and Nye Borgerlige parties and one of the most shared posts was about border control.

That said, migrant outsiders were present in nativist populist rhetoric, and it was largely Muslims who were the key non-national others – either having already entered the deictic centre or were presented as(potentially) moving towards it and damaging it. As well as being defined in opposition to a national people, they were also defined against ‘European’, Christian, or ‘Judeo-Christian’ heritage.

- (22) “Denmark belongs to the Danes and its citizens must be able to live in a secure community founded on the rule of law, which develops along the lines of Danish culture” – DPP, DK
- (23) “Islam is in contradiction with the values of our Christian-Jewish civilisation, democracy, civil freedoms and the constitutional order of our country. Hateful Islamic ideology considers the non-believers (kufar) to be inferior beings. Women are treated as inferior as well by Islam [...] Those are all things that have nothing to do in our society” Tomio Okamura, SK

Whilst this is especially strong in Central and Eastern European countries – e.g. PiS (PL), Tomio Okamura (CZ), and Viktor Orbán (HU) – it is also deeply entrenched in the discourses of established right-wing nativist actors. For example, 80% of Geert Wilders’ posts were about Moroccans and many of his posts contained no more than one or stop words, such as “stop Islam” and “Burkastop”. In Italy, Matteo Salvini used criticism of migrants as key rhetorical device, both pre- and post-election, largely in reference to his banning of migrant rescue boats docking in Italian ports.

- (24) “This is insane. Since yesterday morning, at the Centro di Permanenza per i Rimpatri di Pian del Lago (Caltanissetta) [migrant detention centre], 72 “guests” (of which 18 are from Tunisia and they will be sent back home today) have been staging a hunger strike in protest against their detention at the facility...Too bad for them if they refuse the food, it means that we’ll save some money before deporting them!” – Matteo Salvini, IT

Such anti-Muslim rhetoric was also present in Centralist populists in Lithuania:

- (25) “We, the Center Party, will do everything to prevent Muslim immigrants in Lithuania... [The Center Party] has zero tolerance for Islamist refugees in Lithuania...We are against and will do our best to prevent them” – Antanas Guoga, LT

Other minorities were less present as “Others” in the Facebook samples for the national reports in most countries, but other research from across the region clearly indicates that they are present in right-wing populist discourse in general and, importantly, were also present in other campaign material for the European elections in some states. In Hungary migrants and LGBTQI minorities were the subjects of billboard advertising campaigns by Fidesz. This points to the deployment of different online and offline strategies of communication by the same actors – a decision likely based upon target audiences. This is further indication of populism as malleable, ad hoc, and opportunistic political strategy. Another example of this phenomenon is that of Jews as others. Anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe, and yet it was not particularly salient in the data – only present in the posts of Paweł Kukiz in Poland.

Sexual minorities were less present in the sample, but where they were visible, their representation differed. In Poland, LGBTQI minorities were present in 70% of all posts that mentioned Others. They were presented on PiS’ Facebook account as harbingers of depravation, sexualisation of children and the decline of traditional families. It should be noted, though, that as with anti-Muslim rhetoric, exclusionary themes towards LGBTQI minorities all but disappeared in the post-election period. Elsewhere, for example in Spain and Greece, left-wing populists both advanced an inclusive populism that encompasses minorities.

Finally, intellectual or ideological Others were a further group who were framed as threatening the people – generally these were left-wing, middle-class, urban voters who were (too) tolerant of sexual and ethnic minorities.

- (26) “She breaks the laws, she attacks the Italian Navy and then she sues me 😊😊😊 I am not scared of Mafia, much less of a rich, spoiled, communist German girl! Big kisses 😊” - Matteo Salvini, IT

- (27) “The communists, the liberals and the generation of ’68 are those who attack Christianity”- Zsolt Sjemén, HU

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, mention was made of ‘sunshiners’ (CZ: “sluníčkáři”, SK: “slniečkári”), a catch-all term for such people, whilst in the UK, ‘remainers’ became a loaded term, and in Turkey, it was anti-government protestors such as those in Gezi Park.

### *Relationship between the leader and the people*

Indications of the type of relationship between the leader and the people were not present on a lot of the Facebook accounts surveyed for the research. Where present, three tentative patterns can be pointed to. The first is that of the leader serving the people:

- (28) “The Government of Law and Justice listens to the voice of citizens” – PiS, PL
- (29) “We will always act to serve the best interest of the country and its inhabitants” – Viktor Orbán, HU
- (30) “We are not masters of this nation. We are their servants” - Recep Tayyip Erdogan, TU

Interestingly, this ‘serving’ strategy was sometimes used in conjunction with a second, paternalistic approach, albeit to different extents and in different periods. For example, the ‘serving’ relationship was foregrounded pre-election in Turkey and the UK and the paternalistic one was found after, whilst in Poland, PiS used the opposite strategy. The third leader-people strategy present in the data was that of an equal relationship.

Whilst it would be wrong to over-interpret such limited data, the findings suggest that there is not left-right split in patterns of usage. A ‘serving’ approach was present in Greece (left-wing) and Slovakia (right-wing). Similarly, the equality frame was used by Tsipras (GR) and Babiš (CZ).

### *Leadership style*

Three types of leadership style emerged from the findings. The presentation of a long-term vision was most commonly found and was present in nearly all datasets, but was more present in the posts of right-wing populists. Indeed, on the right-wing, this was often blended with a reconstructive strategy, harking back to, and predicting better days for the nation.

- (31) “We never forget the legacy of Ottó Habsburg. (...) Ottó Habsburg believed that the European Union is deeply rooted in Christianity and we share the idea that the EU cannot reject that root”  
- Zsolt Sejmén, HU

Other examples include in the UK, where Nigel Farage spoke of Britain’s Imperial past and the UK as a historical democracy, whilst Boris Kollár (SK) spoke of remaking Europe in cooperation with other far-right populist actors like Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen.

Others linked this reconstruction to the people’s sovereignty:

- (32) “It is necessary to return the power into the hands of the people and take it away from the treacherous politicians! Our country has to be ours again! Our country has to be yours again, of you, the normal people. Do not let our country be taken by the Brussels and its collaborators!” –  
Tomio Okamura, CZ

The other leadership style – present across the data – was that of pragmatism, again often mixed with a long-term vision (for example in Greece, France and Poland).

### 3.3 Final remarks

European elections are still second order elections and national elections taking place in the same period take precedence. To a great extent they set the agenda for European elections as well as the discursive topics and use or non-use of populist repertoires. For example, in Poland the opposition united to turn the European elections into a plebiscite on PiS' time in office. This points, then, to the continued lack of a functioning strong European public sphere in which politicians and citizens act as Europeans. At best, there exists only a weak Europeanisation.

Whilst the sample periods tried to gauge whether differences existed in Facebook usage over time, in nearly all countries surveyed there were other political processes and events occurring that likely influenced the frequency, topic and tone of populist communication. As such, European election campaigns became superseded by national elections. In Lithuania, the 2nd round of presidential elections occurred on the same day as the European elections; in Spain coalition talks were still on-going and coincided with local elections.

However, this is not to say that Europe is not present in populist discourse during the two sample periods. In fact, despite a lot of anti-European rhetoric, Europe is becoming as a space for cooperation between right-wing populist, nativist parties. This is borne out in the proposed creation of the European Alliance of People and Nations (EAPN) in the European Parliament, as well as reference to it in the Facebook posts in a number of countries (DK, SK, IT). But, importantly, this new coalescing of right-wing parties is also present in each other's discursive repertoire on Facebook. For example Boris Kollár's (SK) most 'liked' post was that of an African migrant praising Matteo Salvini.

This report sits within the context of a growing awareness of the global rise of populism as a political phenomenon. Such an awareness is present in academia – where there is a proliferation of research on populism – and in wider national and supra-national public spheres.

Because of national specificities in political tradition, campaigning norms, and social media usage (as a percentage of total population, and demographic breakdown), the use of, and efficacy of social media as a tool of populist communication also differs in the sampled countries. As such, we need to countenance against grand pronouncements of an one-size-fits-all approach to theorising online populism, and instead move decisively towards understanding nationally-specific, online populist strategies.

Likewise, what the findings of this European-wide research indicate is that populism is highly variegated. Whilst there is a relatively stable 'set' of elements of populist rhetoric, the degree to which they are deployed (frequency) and combined (i.e. empty or total populism) vary greatly from country to country and actor to actor, as do the subjects and objects of these discursive strategies, none more so than the differences between left, and right-wing populist actors.

It would maybe be best, then, to talk about the rise populisms in Europe, rather than populism per se.

### **3.4 Key findings**

- (1) There is no, one online populist strategy. The frequency, tone and topic of social media (Facebook) usage by populist actors differs from country to country, actor to actor, and over time.
- (2) National contexts (elections, campaign traditions, social media usage) impact upon these strategies.
- (3) In right-wing populist discourses on Facebook, the people are generally constructed as victims (e.g. of corruption, immigration, outside control from Brussels), whilst left-wing populists portray the people as the victims of corrupt elites and financial interests.
- (4) National elites are more frequently mentioned than supranational elites, despite the first sample period being constructed around the European elections.
- (5) However, there is a strong current of Euroscepticism and anti-European sentiment in populist. There is a growing network of right-wing, nativist, populist actors, who share policies and discourses. This is proven in the emergence of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group in the EP.
- (6) Othering strategies focus mainly on migrant outsiders, especially Muslims, who are constructed as a threat to 'our' culture, be this national e.g Czech or Danish or European (e.g Judeo-Christian).
- (7) There was relatively little data on leader-people relationships and leadership style. There was no right-left split in patterns of usage.
- (8) The findings point to a 'weak' Europeanisation, with European elections acting as second order elections, and politicians acting nationally rather than as Europeans.

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