Communication Strategies and the Rise of Populist Discourse during the European Parliament Elections of May 2019

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to highlight communication strategies used in populist politicians' discourse during the campaign for the European elections in May 2019. The methods of research include primary source analysis (political statements and interviews), secondary source analysis (political theory related to populism) and the comparative study of different instances of populist discourse across the European political environment. Although there is no universally acknowledged definition of populism, this political phenomenon has affected European politics to a large extent in the recent years. Right-wing political parties throughout Europe have taken advantage of populist communication strategies in order to attract the support of the voters by exploiting sensitive topics such as the refugee crisis, financial disaster (in the case of Greece), migration and workforce, Brexit, and terrorist attacks in combination with a certain dose of anti-European rhetoric. Many political commentators have noticed that, given the constant rise of support for populism in recent years, this type of approach could destabilize the European Union as populist parties might have gained legitimacy and might have become important political actors in the European political milieu after the elections.*

Keywords: *populism, European elections, May 2019, communication strategies, crises*

A spectre is haunting the world: populism.
(Ionescu and Gellner 1)

Introduction

In the contemporary media it is widely acknowledged and warned that the rise of populism represents one of the negative phenomena of the European political milieu. For example, Human Rights Watch informs that the populist ethos is opposed to the values of human rights, because while

> Claiming to speak for "the people," they [populists] treat rights as an impediment to their conception of the majority will, a needless obstacle to defending the nation from perceived threats and evils. Instead of accepting rights as protecting everyone, they privilege the declared interests of the majority, encouraging people to adopt the dangerous belief that they will never themselves need to assert rights against an overreaching government claiming to act in their name. (Roth)

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Similarly, former U.S. President Barrack Obama had warned in the summer of 2018 that the rise of populist movements is leading to a worldwide escalation of "politics of fear and resentment and retrenchment" (qtd. in Baker).

On the other hand, the large number of op-eds and NGO reports dealing with the populist threat have also created the feeling that, just as in the case of an "imagined threat", populism would not really exist as a real political phenomenon, but only as a set of political practices, movements and attitudes that political centrists fear may oust them out of power, and therefore the centrist establishment want the citizens to fear and reject populism (Baker).

Europe, just like the rest of the world, is facing a crisis of democracy (Munteanu) exacerbated by the rise of nationalism and populism. Under such circumstances and given the importance of the European Parliament elections (whose decisions have direct legal effect in 28 sovereign nations), important problems for the future of the European construction stand in the balance: Will the European Parliament continue to function as a defender of liberal and democratic values in Europe? Will campaigns based on spreading fear and exploiting social tensions reward politicians with high offices (as in the case of Viktor Orbán in Hungary), and will the European Union be politically able to deny funding to "rogue" governments who have a bad record as regards the rule of law and human rights (Open Society Foundations).

The Political Context

The results of the European Parliament elections make it difficult to provide clear answer as liberals and the greens have also gained ground following the May 2019 elections (which had the highest turnout in the last 20 years). Populists political parties have obtained the highest votes in the country in France (Marine Le Pen's National Rally 23.3%, 22 EMP seats), Italy (League-Salvini Premier 34.3%, 28 EMP seats), and the United Kingdom (Brexit Party 30.7%, 29 EMP seats).

Figure 1: Seats won by populists in the European Parliament. ENF = Europe of Nations and Freedom (Le Pen, Salvini); EFDD = Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (N. Farage, U.K.); ECR = European Conservatives and Reformists (Law and Justice, Poland). Source: Wisniewska and Ehrenberg-Shannon.

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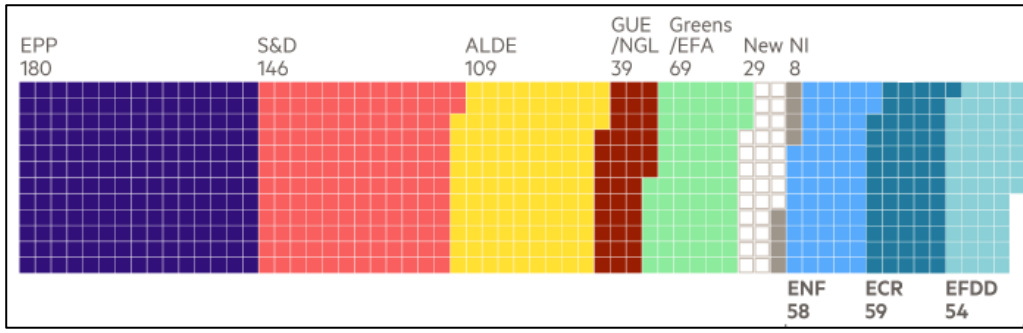

To be more precise, the results of the polls show that about one quarter of the electors voted for populism (up from one fifth in the previous legislature), while before the elections many political commentators were deploring a situation where one third of the votes would have been earned by Eurosceptic populists. According to Vox.com, Mabel Berzin, Professor of Sociology at Cornell University, commented that "They're neither a tidal wave of taking over nor have they gone away" (Kirby). The same publication warns about the disparaging agenda of the populists in the European Parliament: "these parties can agree on what they want to destroy — but not what they want to build" (Kirby).

Types of Populist Communication Strategies

Before moving on to communication strategies that capitalize on crises used by populists during the electoral campaign and their importance, a few considerations should be provided on what it means to be a populist and which political parties or groups belong to this category. According to Jan-Werner Müller's seminal monograph, *What is Populism*? it is easier to define what populist are not according to which groups they declare themselves against. Thus, populists are necessarily but not exclusively *anti-elitist*, they consider that the establishment is working against the people and that anyone who criticizes the status quo can be counted as one of their own (e.g. Syriza in Greece, Bernie Sanders in the U.S.A.). Another feature of populism is *antipluralism*, a form of identity politics where it is believed that only a populist can truly represent the people and that their political enemies are morally corrupted. (For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asked his fellow Turk critics during a rally: "Who are you? We are the people.")

In their political fantasy, populists consider that their voters represent the "true", "authentic" people. Whoever is not for them is against them and is excluded from this "community of the elect". As such, populists pose as being the only moral politicians and manifest *antidemocratic* tendencies, they do not seek to promote diversity and living together but foster division, conflict and polarization. Last, another feature of populist groups is their *inability to govern* because, by being anti-establishment, populists cancel themselves by default as soon as they are in power, and most of their initiatives can blocked by democratic checks and balances in countries where the rule of law is strong (in Hungary a new constitution

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was drafted by Fidesz in order to bypass the old checks and balances). Usually, populists will try to hijack the "corrupt" state apparatus through mass clientelism and corruption (Müller 2-10).

Returning to the topic of this article, an important question is how do populists take advantages of crises in their communication strategies and what such strategies were used during the May 2019 European Parliament elections and how could their impact be limited in the context of a desirable mediatic "ecology" in which citizens are best informed about the consequences of their vote, or of the implications of their abstention from voting.

The communication strategies used by populist politicians and political parties stem from the characteristics of populism that have been presented above. Most scholars, such as Müller, treat populism as a political ideology, while some other view it entirely as a communication style (Aalberg, Esser and Reinemann). This proves that, for populists, communication strategies and campaigns are quintessential for their mode of engaging in politics. Therefore, populism turns into "a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name […] a conspicuous exhibition of closeness to (ordinary) citizens" (Jagers, Walgrave 32, qtd. in Nai 4).

Paul Taggart introduces the concept of "unpolitics" to explain how populism is different from a standard political ideology in the way it interacts with political power:

> underlying populism as an ideology is a very profound and fundamental ambivalence about politics such that it implicitly celebrates or is drawn to unpolitics. In practice this means that populists will often, but not always, be pulled into narratives and ways of thinking associated with activities divergent from politics, namely war, religion and conspiracy theories […]. Populism tends to relish unsettling politics. Populism seeks unsettlements. (Taggart 85)

We have seen how the populist ideology, which represents the base of their communication strategy, is centered on three main issues: the people, the elites and restoring the sovereignty of the state, which according to them has been hijacked by the elites, back to the people (Müller). Wettstein et al. have categorized populist communication strategies based on these three main problems and according to whether the discourse is conflictive or advocative (see Figure 2). The same authors have made the observation that populist discourse tends to be conflictive towards the elites, which populists blame as being usurpers of state power, and advocative towards the people as a kind of "people-centrism" (Wettstein et al 47). Regarding the populists' desire to restore sovereignty to what they consider as the "true people", this entails both advocative ("more power to the people" demands) and conflictive (such as "take down the corrupt elites") discourse. The two mentioned

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examples represent two communication strategies used by populists (Wettstein et al 49).

The elite, in the two cases presented above, may refer to the justice system, established politicians or intellectuals, or international or supranational organizations, and by extension to anyone who would deny sovereignty to the people. As regards their opposition to the elites, populists manifest it by blaming the elite, by discrediting them and by saying that a large distance exists between the elite and the people (who, in the populist understanding of politics, cannot be truly represented by elected dignitaries although many populists themselves are elected representatives such as MPs). Thus, a populist commentator will attribute the blame for an unwanted event (e.g. the immigration crisis) to an elite actor (which could even be an occult organization) and accuse him/her of following a secret agenda. They would also accuse established politicians of incompetence, corruption, irresponsibility and would highlight their negative character traits in what is called "mudslinging" or "schlammschacht" (Wettstein et al 51).

In people-centrism, a common communication strategy, according to Wettstein et al. is the exclusion of certain actors from the group of "the true people". For example, those who, in populist ideology, are not considered part of the people could be immigrants taking advantage of social welfare or CEOs of multinational companies which have political interests which oppose those of the public. Conversely, those who they consider to be "the real people" are always virtuous, good and blameless. They are superior, of unstained reputation and are always guided by a moral common sense.

A strategy of the populists is to reassert and attest their closeness to the people. That is why populist political actors strive to appear to be part of the ordinary people and to appear to work as close to the public as possible. For populist leaders it is quintessential that they are perceived as hailing from the ordinary folk, therefore this is their greatest political challenge (Wettstein et al 49), given the fact that most of them like, for instance, Viktor Orbán, are actually career politicians.

Emphasizing the people's virtues and achievements represents another populist communication strategy. More so, as part of their people-centrism, populist politicians will exclude as well as include different actors from the body of the people in their discourse (Wettstein et al 50).

To sum up, the populist communication strategies identified by Wettstein et al. in their seminal study consist in: asking for more power for the people, claiming that the corrupt elite should be deposed from power, blaming the elite for any negative occurrences or events, discrediting the elite (mudslinging), claiming there is a great distance between the elite and the people, claiming to belong to the ordinary folk, praising the people's common sense, merits and accomplishments, and excluding/including actors from/in the "true people".

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Figure 2: Categorization of populist communication strategies and attitudes according to its conflictive or advocative character. Source: Wettstein et al. 52.

		Communication	Attitude
Conflictive	Anti-Elitism	• Discrediting the Elite • Blaming the Elite • Excluding the Elite from the People	• Negative Attitude toward the Elite • Blaming the Elite
	Restoring Sovereignty	• Denying Power to the Elite	• Desire for More Power for the People at the Expense of the Elite
Advocative		• Demanding Power for the People	
	People-Centrism	• Stressing Virtues of the People • Praising Achievements of the People • Stating a Monolithic People • Demonstrating Closeness to the People	• Positive Attitude toward the People • Perception of a Homogeneous / Monolithic People

The Negativity of Populist Discourse

After reviewing the types of communication strategies used by populists, it is important to refer to a general feature of their actions, which consists in breaking the rules and ignoring moral standards, through aggressive and negative comments. According to Alessandro Nai, "there seems to be a shared opinion that populists have a political style based on provocations, offensive language, aggressiveness, and negative emotionality" (2018). This negativistic approach to communication comes from their interest in grabbing the attention of the voters in political settings where the public is usually bored by conventional politics. Therefore, populist candidates would use a theatrical, bombastic style, and would not shy away from launching aggressive and harsh campaigns. According to several scholars, such an approach to politics does not only increase their public notoriety but it also provokes apathy and disinterest towards politics among the population. The more segments of the populace lose interest in politics and abstain from voting, the greater the success of the populists (Nai 4).

The aggressive and harsh communication campaigns of the populists include, on the one hand, policy (or issue-based) attacks and on the other hand, character (person-based) attacks. The former refers to attacks on an opponent's policy or plan, while the latter consists in pointing out flaws in the opponent's character, behavior or personality. Personal attacks are more controversial than policy attacks; they bring more electoral advantages but at the same time carry a

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greater risk of backlash compared to policy criticism, while leading to more political nonparticipation and apathy among voters (Nai 5). It seems that candidates who have a little to lose, or are already facing the prospect of political defeat, are more inclined to negative communication strategies, which carry the greatest risk of backlash (Nai 6).

According to previous research, there is a stark difference in terms of the negativity of discourse between populists and their non-populist political competitors. Nai points out that "populist communicate through campaigns that are 15% more negative, and contain 11% more character attacks and 8% more fear messages than campaigns of non-populist "mainstream" candidates" (Nai 22).

The reasoning behind this negativism is that scandalous information, personal attacks and panic inducing theories have more attention-grabbing power compared to positive or neutral campaigning. Hugely controversial topics such as immigration issues or national debt are discussed almost exclusively in an irrational, emotional manner. Accordin to Haller, "Populists often pursue the communicative strategy to scandalize such political conflicts" (2016). The same political commentator categorizes the types of scandal employed in populist communicational strategies into three types: original scandals, the use of a scandal atmosphere and intentional self-scandalization. First, in the case of original scandals, populists take advantage of existing scandals in which politicians who are in power are involved in order to draw attention to the weakness and corruption of the established political system. Second, during crisis situations, populists exploit any grievance towards those in power and seek to construct an atmosphere in which they can use their "us versus them" rhetoric. A communicative situation in which there are two opposing "groups" or "camps" can be very vulnerable to an emotional discourse, which is an advantage for populist politicians (Haller). An example of crisis situation is the debate regarding immigration in Germany; one side claims that the government is harming the country through its immigration policies, while the rest points to the advantages provided by immigration and to the responsibility to offer humanitarian aid to those in need (Spiegel Online). Third, intentional self-scandalization refers to the repeated or reinforced breaking of moral rules/taboos by political actors in order to attract the attention of the media and the public in order to obtain popularity (Haller).

This intentional fabrication of scandals appears to be one of the favourite strategies used by populist politicians on social media. Some examples consisting in Facebook posts of Italian politicians are revelatory. For example, Matteo Salvini, currently Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior in Italy, wrote a post on 1 March 2017 supporting "chemical castration for paedophiles and rapists, whether Italian or foreign, as in many civilised countries: you do it once and you'll never do it again!", or declared "abolish the offence of excessive self-defence: if you come into my house, I will kill you before you can attack me!". He also used the occasion of Women's Day to say that "Women's Day is only a manifestation of

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hypocrisy if SERIOUS LAWS are not enacted; certain BEASTS have to go to PRISON (and throw away the key!)" (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 6).

The mechanism of this communication strategy relies on a vicious circle which eventually monopolizes the agenda of public debate: a politician or a group makes a highly controversial statement, which is immediately picked up and propagated by the media. If the statement has been "scandalous" enough then a public debate ensues between opponents and supporters of the "self-scandalizer." The issue becomes more and more accessible to the public and, consequently, the originator of the issue wins in terms of popularity (Haller). A practical issue related to the vicious circle of "self-scandalization" described above is how should journalists deal with such provocations, considering that any mentioning of the scandal only contributes to its success (Haller).

The Electoral Campaign in Germany, France and Italy

Turning now to the analysis of some prevalent communication strategies during the European Parliament Elections of May 2019, a comparative method will be used. Discourse is used by political actors in order to challenge, approve, legitimize and reproduce power relations in society (Tocia 127), as well as in the purpose of influencing voters during political campaigns. We propose a qualitative study of press releases and of the media coverage of political statements issued by populist actors in European countries where populists have gained the most EMP seats. The exclusive investigation of social media data is currently not included in our analysis but remains a possible project for further study. One reason for this is that, according to some commentators, social media campaigns have a limited effect on electoral campaigns. Populists are generally present on social media platforms such a Facebook and Twitter and one of the reasons why they prefer digital communication is because it allows them to bypass the filter of traditional media. For example, in Germany the press officer of Alternative for Germany stated that for them "social media are important, however, their influence on the elections is not measurable" (Grieshaber).

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) was from its early stages a Eurosceptic party. It has promoted stricter anti-immigration policies, taking advantage of the voters' anxieties over the influence of Islam and even ignored decades-old anti-Nazi taboos. It enjoyed an increase in popularity as Germany allowed in over a million undocumented migrants to settle in the country (BBC News). At a party congress held between 12-13 January 2019 the leaders of AfD have made statements that set the tone for their electoral campaign. The party's co-chair, Alexander Galand, stated that his party does not intend to clearly support a "Dexit" as it could have unpredictable consequences but maintained it as a threat if the EU is not reformed according to their vision: "Whoever toys with the idea of a Dexit, also needs to ask themselves if this not a utopia and should we be more realistic" (DW). Nevertheless, AfD's leader criticized the EU as a "corrupt,

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bloated, undemocratic and latently totalitarian apparatus", calling for a "new European economic community and community of interests" (Schulz).

On the same tone, AfD leaders called for the dissolution of the European Parliament based on their opinion that since the EU is not a state it should not need a legislative body: "We see nation-states as having the exclusive competence to make laws" (DW). It was also added that "This means the natural decision maker in the European Union that we have in mind is the Council and not the Parliament" (Schulz) with the clarification that "We don't need to abolish the EU, but bring it back to its sensible core" (DW). Several politicians have commented on the irony of the situation where the AfD proposed candidates for the same European Parliament whose dissolution they were calling for. Bundestag vice-president Alexander Lambsdorff said that "The AfD wants to abolish the European Parliament — completely! But they still want to put forward candidates. For a parliament that you want to abolish?" (DW). Judging by these examples it seems that the communication strategy of the German AfD has shifted from the "exclude immigrants" type that they preponderantly used in the past to a new, anti-elitist "bring down the corrupt and dictatorial EU" type. This does not mean that Germany's populist party has given up trying to put an end to mass immigration as it remains one of their core demands (MacGregor), but it is clear that a different type of populist communication strategy has overtaken it as a priority. In the AfD's Manichean (good vs. evil) system of thought, the EU is identified with the corrupt elite supranational organization which is responsible for all of Germany's political problems and the only solutions are either its dismantling through the abolition of the European Parliament or a "Dexit".

In France, the EU is likewise blamed for immigration by the National Rally (NR, Rassemblement National), which opposes the political establishment in Brussels for the sake of, what they consider, a stronger France. Marine Le Pen, the leader of this party, is also keen on establishing political alliances with other populists such as the Dutch Geert Wilders (anti-Eu and anti-Islam), or with the Italian populists (BBC News). She considers the EU a failure in every way and told reporters that "I think Europe is moving toward a return of nation-states, and we're part of this great political movement supporting this shift" adding that "Our goal is to turn the EU into a cooperation among nations, and not this kind of European super state" (DW) since "One sees that the EU is adrift, that it has distanced itself from people, that it now works against people, after ignoring them in the past" (Marlowe). Furthermore, she attempted to reconcile and co-opt France's disgruntled protesters into the NR by saying "I don't consider the yellow vests a threat" (DW), as the popular movement is rooted in the same ideas as her party: "When I said there was great suffering in the country, that many people could not live decently even though they were working, that it was unjust, that whole swathes of the country were abandoned, that the state did not care about them, I was foretelling this gilets jaunes movement" (Marlowe). Still, Marine Le Pen is

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cautious and she considers the gilets jaunes to be radical leftists: "For years and years, every time a social movement has emerged the extreme left has infiltrated it and brought violence" (Marlowe). The ambiguous relation of the NR vis-à-vis the yellow vests movements gives specificity to the communication strategies of the National Rally in France. Compared to the strategies deployed in the electoral campaigns in Germany or Italy, the French populists have awarded greater importance to a strategy of including a group (the yellow vests) into the people, possibly out of concern that if the gilets jaunes would run in the elections they would have to share the same electorate. Le Pen also refers to the yellow vests in most of her policy attacks and personal criticism of President Macron: "In the context of the healthy popular revolt of the yellow vests, this election offers a chance to end this crisis born of the intransigence and contempt ... of an incompetent president whose behavior is disturbing" (De Clercq).

The National Rally, through its leader, are staunch opponents of the Islamization as well as globalization, which they consider to be at war with their ideal of France: "The battle is now between nationalists and globalists" (De Clercq). According to Le Pen, "The threat is extremely grave in France, because radical Islam prospered here," and "It's an octopus with tentacles everywhere, in the [immigrant] neighbourhoods, the associations, the sports clubs. They're still financed from abroad, because no one has decided to eradicate radical Islam in this country" (Marlowe). French populists do not only oppose immigrants and the EU as an obsolete and oppressive institution, but in the same way as the AfD attacks Angela Merkel, Marine Le Pen says that President Emanuel Macron is out-of-touch with the people: "I told him that he cannot pretend to be a new and different president, that he cannot claim to represent a new world, if he reacts exactly like the old one" (Marlowe). The strategy of making the President, a political actor of the establishment, appear distanced from the ordinary folk is repeatedly used: "If Macron does not have the wisdom to go back to the people by dissolving parliament, then let the political arbitrage come from European elections" (De Clercq). More so, the leader of the NR attacks Macron's policies and uses generalizations to disguise personal attacks "in 18 months he has brought total chaos to France. He has brought violence and division, and he's sown chaos and division in Europe too. This man takes chaos everywhere he goes" (Marlowe). This kind of personal criticism seems civilized compared a comment from Manlio Di Stefano, Italian foreign affairs official and member of the Five Star Movement who asserted that Macron "suffers from small penis syndrome" (Marlowe).

In Italy the main populist formations are the Northern League (LN, Lega Nord) of Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and the Five Star Movement (M5S, MoVimento Cinque Stelle), which boasts a Eurosceptic reputation, has been at the forefront of attempts of unifying Europe's populist parties. Matteo Salvini has found common ground with Germany's AfD and France's National Rally, as well as with other populist groups such as the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party,

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Austria's Freedom Party and other similar political groups (BBC News). M5S came third in the elections (17%), blaming broad abstention compared with previous elections, and LN came first (34%), making Italy one of the few European countries where two populist parties are in competition. It is interesting to note that Matteo Salvini's is considered more hardline than M5S's Luigi di Maio. The leader of M5S expressed a kind of restrained populism by advocating for reforms at the level of EU institutions, more "solidarity and protection" as regards immigration, solutions for less corruption, more respect for a Europe of national identities and has called for direct democracy, which in his opinion is only possible at national level, and added that "We do not believe in the division into left and right. We believe in projects that we propose that will improve the quality of life of European citizens" (Kaczyński). Also, Francesco D'Uva, the leader of M5S deputies in the Italian parliament said that "We have no intention to exit the EU, and for this reason it would be best to avoid making statements that put at risk investor confidence" (Smith). Compared to these communication strategies, Salvini's are more radical and negativistic, and surprisingly loaded with religious references in an attempt to attract the large number of non-practicing Roman-Catholics in Italy. The League's leader considers that "For many Europeans, the EU (European Union) is a nightmare" and that, like a Saviour, he has the duty to "free the continent from the illegal occupation orchestrated in Brussels" (Gostoli). Regarding immigration, that "The goal is not to redistribute those who enter Europe clandestinely," but "to protect our borders and national identities" (Messia and Latza Nadeau). Salvini sees his movement as the only one that benefits from political vision, and claims that promoting fascist rhetoric is just a proof that they do not fear the past: "The difference is between those who look ahead, who talk about future and jobs and those who put the past on trial: They are afraid of the past because they don't have an idea for the future. We're building the future" (Gostoli). To sum up, the electoral campaign in Italy has shown that more radical communication strategies, based mainly on the exclusion of immigrants and on demonizing the EU attracted more voters, given the result of the elections.

Among other EU countries, Hungary, which is often seen as a hotbed of populism and anti-EU rhetoric by the media, has remained one of the greatest critics of Brussels through it prime-minister, Viktor Orbán, and through its second populist party, Jobbik. Hungarian populists have continued to openly disapprove of Europe's current liberal policies towards immigration, Muslims, and they have voiced support for preserving the Christians roots of Europe (BBC News). A special case is Austria, where the populist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ, established by an ex-Nazi and SS officer after World War 2) has been weakened by the Ibiza affair and has been forced out of the government coalition following public scandalization. Both the FPÖ and its ally, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), have expressed support for anti-Muslim policies and, a weeks before the European Parliament elections, have voted legislation

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banning religious symbols (headscarves) for young Muslim girls in primary school (BBC News).

Conclusion

This article has presented the theory behind the communication strategies used by populists, followed by relevant examples of different types of strategies from the campaign for the European Parliament elections of May 2019. The necessity for our approach is given by the current political context in Europe, where there is increasing concern that the rise of populism is dominant in the narrative about the crisis of democracy. Our analysis of selected examples has confirmed that populist candidates tend to ignore manners, politeness or any rules of dialogue and use offensive and aggressive communication strategies more often than not. When populists use an advocative approach, they do not back up their assertions using facts or palpable arguments but they rely on emotional discourse and generalizations.

Alessandro Nai suggests that this negativity of populists' campaigns is likely to play a role in the evolution of modern democracies, so it would be useful to extend our study in order to understand whether there is a logic in the way populist communication strategies have been used in recent years across the globe. According to Mazzoleni, the importance of the hybrid media context and hyper-mediatized environment in which populists deploy their strategies cannot be overstated, therefore the study of socially mediated populist communication can help us better understand its social and political implications. In the case of Europe, we can probably expect populism to continue to thrive in countries where they have obtained the best results following the elections, namely in France and Italy, if active measures are not taken in the media sector to limit their influence.

It is generally thought that the greater exposure of ordinary citizens to political news and rational political discussions could limit the influence of populist ideas. In this respect, the democratizing role of public media becomes extremely important (Petre 124). Finally, even though the political campaigns of European populists have not resulted in a massive shift of the preference of the public towards their undemocratic and irrational political logic, the fact that in the May 2019 European Parliament elections one quarter of the electors were attracted by populism should be taken as a serious alarm signal that a liberal and democratic Europe requires a healthier media environment.

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