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Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe

Working Paper

Populism and Social Media

A comparative analysis of populists' shared content and networks on Facebook

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Abstract

Populist politicians and political parties often prefer social media, especially Facebook, for their communication with the public. Populists, as well as radical left and right leaders and parties, especially those on the margins of the mainstream political system and with less access to traditional media, have seen in platforms like Facebook a gateway to direct communication with their audiences, in the wake of elections as well as in non-electoral periods. Despite this, comparative or in some cases, country-specific populist communication on social media remains rather under-studied. To fill this empirical gap, the study explores contemporary populist politicians' use of various media sources in their Facebook communication strategy, as well as the legacy and alternative media networks that disseminate and amplify their messages.

The analysis is carried out at two levels: a) a classification of the media sources that are shared by 17 official Facebook pages of main populist leaders/parties in eight national contexts in Europe, by means of content analysis; b) a network analysis of the social media networks around the 17 populist actors, that share their posts. Facebook was selected for the study because it remains the leading social media platform in all eight countries. The unit of analysis is the URL in each post shared by the 17 populists during three different time-intervals: before and after the European Parliament elections in 2019 (April – June 2019), during regular reporting (July 2019–February 2020), and at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (March-April 2020). This inquiry aims to uncover the types of media and connections between different (social) media sources in propagating populists and the role that traditional versus alternative sources play in this process in different national contexts.

The study results contradict some of the assumptions or expectations connected to populist communication and media strategy. For one, we found no prevailing preference for 'alternative' media sources that commonly disseminate hyper-partisan news or hoaxes and disinformation. Populists are more prone to creating and disseminating their own political content or even drawing on the legitimacy of legacy media. However, their choice of media sources reflects their political orientation and ideology, which serves to create an echo-chamber that can reinforce political beliefs. Left-wing media is scarce among most populists in our study, while centre-right and even far-right sources are dominant. This reflects not only the predominance of right-wing populism in Europe, but also how some populist leaders' social media pages can be seen as places of radicalisation, most commonly towards the far right. This tendency is reinforced by populists' networks that distribute and amplify their messages. The main disseminators in their networks are their party and party colleagues, as well as different political fan groups that support them or oppose their political rivals.

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1 Introduction: Populism and Social Media

Conceptualisations of populism leave a lot of room for debate and are still lacking consensus on definitions and approaches. Though these may vary, from seeing populism as a political ideology within the ideational approach (Mudde, 2004; 2017), to discursive approaches that conceptualise it as a rhetoric (Laclau, 2005), style (Taguieff, 1997) or to ones that define populism in terms of macroeconomic policies (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990), most conceptualisations associate it with negative connotations, whether articulated by scholars, journalists or politicians themselves. In current media or political discourse, populism is most commonly associated with demagogy (which can also be present in the rhetoric of not typically populist parties), manipulative appeal to emotions or right-wing nationalism, and less often with positive aspects like direct democracy or people's participation in politics – a perspective more often shared by populist leaders themselves (Salgado et al. 2019).

Authoritarian regimes are increasingly embracing social media, creating virtual armies that engage in 'patriotic trolling', propaganda, disinformation and smear campaigns (Akgül, 2019). Some scholars (Ernst et al. 2017; Tufekci, 2018) are now arguing that it is the nature of these social media, especially Facebook, that gives populists and, often at the same time, anti-democratic leaders an advantage over their opponents, providing the opportunity structures that make these platforms compatible with populist communication (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Bobba, 2019): direct, unmediated and personal/intimate connection to *the people*, which bypasses traditional gatekeepers (Kriesi, 2014; Esser et al. 2016; Salgado et al. 2019), an emotional, personalized style that focuses on the leader (Bobba, 2019; Ernst et al. 2019) and is often considered a "populist style" (Engesser et al. 2017; Kriesi, 2018; Wettstein et al. 2019).

The alarming rise of populist parties and leaders in the EU and European Parliament has been associated with the spread of 'fake news' or mis/dis-information sources. This phenomenon is arguably caused by failures in mainstream media and in mainstream policies, facilitated by social media, as they manage to circumvent traditional gatekeepers (journalist organisations, institutions and official sources), which benefit of more institutionalised settings, codes of practice and legal safeguards to define, monitor or sanction deviations from the norm.

Despite the frequent connection of populists' online success and alternative news sources, this connection remains little investigated and there are few studies aimed at identifying the media outlets connected with populist leaders or attitudes (like Newman et al. 2019). Nonetheless, there is a clear consensus among scholars that social media, especially Facebook, are a breeding ground for populists and for populist attitudes (Bengtsson, 2018; Bobba & Legnante, 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2020; Lee, 2019; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

Several other factors have contributed to the rise of populism. Among them are the decline or disappearance of the traditional press, the increase of media ownership concentration and of the dependence on advertising. As well as the resulting stronger focus towards tabloid news values, and the rise of clickbait content. Together with broader social and economic challenges, these have worked in favour of a growing populist discourse in many European and non-European countries (Esser, Stępińska, Hopmann, 2016).

There are three recently established distinct perspectives on populism and the media: *populism by the media*, *populism through the media*, and *populist citizen journalism* (Esser, Stępińska and Hopmann, 2016). Our study focuses primarily on populist politicians' communication through social media, as a subcategory of *populism through the media*. This perspective has been gaining ground both in political communication and in empirical research. Our comparative approach draws from eight national case studies of the Facebook communication of populist leaders and parties in the following countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. These case studies can be accessed here.

2 Methodology

Our study focuses on Facebook because, as literature shows (Esser et al. 2016; Salgado et al. 2019), populists prefer to bypass traditional media gatekeepers whom they might not have access to. This is also because they want to create an image of the leader who is close to the people. Social media design and algorithms have been shown to favour populist communication (Bobba, 2019; Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2019) and we have been seeing a rise of news consumption via social media over the past years (Newman et al. 2020).

At the same time, there is a significant gap in the use of Twitter in Western and Mediterranean countries, where this social media channel is more popular as a source of news, compared to Central and Eastern Europe, where Twitter has very little usage [1] (Newman et al. 2020). Facebook remains by far the main social media platform provider of news all over Europe.

For this reason, in order to have a coherent sample, populists' Facebook pages were selected for analysis, rather than other social media channel. In addition, Facebook has been shown to be preferred by people with populist attitudes, while Twitter is associated more with non-populists (Newman et al. 2019). As the Reuters Digital News Report shows (2019), Facebook is the leading platform for populists in Europe and the US, followed by preference for YouTube, at a significant distance.

For downloading the data, we used the CrowdTangle[2] app developed by Facebook. After several tests to check for the differences between using the dashboards and downloading via the API, we opted for the latter approach. The Dashboard presented several limitations in the search results and capacity to download data, as well as in customisation, while the API was more flexible for our needs.

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[1]The usage of Twitter in this part of Europe is so low and therefore irrelevant that the Reuters Digital News Report does not include data for the region (Newman et al. 2020).

[2]Data were gathered using CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned tool that tracks interactions on public content from Facebook pages and groups, verified profiles, Instagram accounts, and subreddits. It does not include paid ads unless those ads began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently 'boosted' using Facebook's advertising tools. It also does not include activity on private accounts, or posts made visible only to specific groups of followers.

The data were used to map the wider **network of interconnections** around populist communication on Facebook. More specifically, we aimed towards two research objectives:

(1) To identify the information sources that a) populists draw on and that b) populists promote, and to categorise them. The research questions that guided this enquiry were:

RQ1. Do populists in different national contexts rely more on mainstream, traditional/established media sources, or do they prefer alternative news sources and social media, including citizen journalism?

(2) To provide an overview of the interconnections between populist actors and other relevant individual or collective public actors (i.e. media, politicians, celebrities, etc.). Mapping the populist networks allows us to see who are the main promoters of populist messages on social media, who are the amplifiers of populist messages, and to what extent the networks of different populist parties or leaders overlap. Hence, the research question driving the network analysis is:

RQ2. Who are the main disseminators of populists' messages on social media and what degree of reciprocity is there between them and the populists they share?

As the literature review shows, the relation between media and populism is a bidirectional one: not only does the media help populists gain visibility, but populists themselves, as agenda-setters, can also reinforce populist discourse by promoting media sources driven by a populist logic. We aim to uncover here the main actors that drive the mechanisms of '(socially) mediated populism' (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018) at the national level and potentially identify connections with mis-/dis-information or highly biased information sources.

The corpus for the analysis consists of Facebook posts of populist leaders and parties in eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. This sample includes both EU and non-EU members – candidates for membership like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Turkey (whose accession negotiations are currently suspended), as well as different regions in terms of socio-economic, political and historical development – South-eastern Europe, Central Europe, Southern and Western Europe.

The national case studies focused on these eight countries, and the current working paper provides a comparative overview of the empirical results. The selection of parties and leaders took into account their specific role in local politics as reflected in the 'power' or 'intensity' of populism measured among these populist subjects in the *2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey* (POPPA), as reflected in Table 1 (based on data from Meijers & Zaslove, 2020).

Table 1: The Level of Populism Based on POPPA Data Set (2018)

Country	Political Party /Political Leader	Level of Populism
Bosnia Herzegovina	SDA - Stranka demokratske akcije BiH (Party of Democratic Action) / Bakir Izetbegović / SNSD – СНСД (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats)	Not included

France	Front National /National Front/ *Rassemblement national / RN, National Rally /Marine Le Pen*	9.07
France	*La France Insoumise* (Rebellious France or Unbowed France /LFI / Jean-Luc Mélenchon	8.45
Greece	Syriza /Alexis Tsipras	7.63
Italy	M5S /Five Stars Movement/ Luigi di Maio	9.46
Italy	Lega /The League / Matteo Salvini	8.60
Poland	Law and Justice Party/ PiS /Jaroslaw Kaczynski	9.20
Poland	Konfederacja (Confederation)	Not included (9.31 under old name)
Slovakia	Sme rodina /We are a Family / Boris Kollár	7.83
Slovakia	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities / OĽaNO / Igor Matovič	7.01
Turkey	The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) / Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Not included
UK	United Kingdom Independence Party /UKIP//Nigel Farage	6.99
	Average Populism Score of selected sample:	**8.36**
	Average Populism Score of entire 28 countries dataset	4.39

Source: Own compilation and summary calculation based on POPPA dataset (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020)

As can be seen in Table 1, all selected populist parties in our sample showed rather high levels of populism, well above the dataset average: 8.36 on a 10 points scale, compared to 4.39 for all 28 countries. The parties and leaders in our eight-country sample were selected by local experts, taking into consideration participation in the European Parliament elections in 2019.

Although our comparative approach does not focus on causes of populism, nonetheless, some of the case studies compared here revealed possible deeper salient issues or metapolitical questions causing populism to flourish. It is worthy to mention them here too – keeping in mind that these are advanced or referenced by the authors of the national case studies that this comparative review is based on. Thus, in case of Poland (Lipiński, 2021), politics seems to be dominated by the question of who has the moral right to govern Poland, an issue most openly advocated by *PiS*. For Turkey (Sahin, 2021), it is the socio-cultural divide from the past that pitted the ruling elites of the 'centre' against a culturally heterogeneous 'periphery' or vice-versa. In other words, it is about feeling abandoned or ignored by the elite.

In the case of the UK (Karamanidou & Sahin, 2021), the populist upsurge then represented by *UKIP* reflected issues of sovereignty at the national level boosted by a key political decision on immigration. In other words, the metapolitical question was sovereignty as contemplated primarily, but not exclusively, over the issue of migration. In the case of France (Baloge & Hubé, 2021), the leftist *LFI* is probably an attempt to use an agonistic cleavage between 'the people' and 'the elite' in a radical individualised form of the French left. In contrast, for the right *FN/RN*, the hatred of foreigners and immigrants is the main motivation. This can be

translated as a protectionist vision of society in both cases. For Slovakia (Marincea & Školkay, 2021), while *OĽaNO* can be seen as an anti-corruption movement, tolerant of minorities and to a large degree benevolent towards migrants, the right-wing movement *We are a Family (WAF)* is claiming to protect the local population against potential migrants and other perceived threats or against omissions (a lack of action or policy) committed by the (then or previous) ruling elite. Yet the metapolitical question connecting both cases resides in the juxtaposition of a corrupt (in broad terms) versus a fair and just society.

In the case of Greece (Tsatsanis & Sotiropoulos, 2021), while long-term causes of populism were deeply rooted in poorly performing institutions at all levels, the rise of *Syriza* could be seen as a mirroring crisis of political representation (specifically, pro- and anti-austerity/memorandum policies), enhanced by the salience of the materialist cleavage. For Italy (Bertero, 2021), the 'refugee crisis' marks a crucial point in contemporary politics, giving rise to the *Lega* and Salvini at a national level, while *M5S* voiced primarily overall distrust towards political elites. Indeed, Italy is well-known for the instability of its governments, thus showing a long-term crisis of representation of traditional parties.

However, it should be mentioned again that populism in the majority of these case studies has a longer history – meaning also deeper roots. It appears that behind the rise of populism in all above-mentioned cases lies a lack of ability or interest of mainstream actors in addressing timely and successfully national and/or supranational societal challenges (Kriesi 2015).

2.1 Research design

The analysis employed a dual approach, in order to uncover the types of information sources that were linked with populists – either because populists shared them, or because they shared the populist profiles. The analysis was carried out on Facebook data (Mancosu et al. 2020; Marincea, 2020) from 17 Facebook public pages of populist leaders and parties from the eight European countries. We selected three different time intervals totalling 13 months, with and without major events: before and after the European Parliament elections in 2019 (April – June 2019), during regular reporting (July 2019–February 2020), and at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (March-April 2020).

The analysis was carried out at the following two levels:

(1) *Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of data sources* (URLs). Using the CrowdTangle API (CrowdTangle Team, 2020), we downloaded all posts that shared a URL (news website or other types of websites, other Facebook pages, Twitter, YouTube etc.) from an average of two populist profiles per country, from the eight countries analysed: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey and UK. A simple codebook was elaborated for the classification of the extracted media sources (URLs) based on their type, ownership or political/ideological orientation. Based on this, we carried out content analysis of the links extracted from the Facebook posts shared by the 17 populist profiles during the analysed time intervals.

(2) *Network analysis.*[3] Using the CrowdTangle API, we tracked the public pages that shared the posts published by the 17 populist profiles and that were previously downloaded at step (1) of the analysis. This resulted in a dataset with 193,910 unique posts representing re-shares of the populists' posts. These were then mapped using the NodeXL software package developed by Microsoft Excel. For each country, the network contained one (Greece), two (most other countries) and up to three (Slovakia) different populist pages that the national experts considered most relevant to include. In many cases, these were political rivals, which made it all the more interesting to explore the degree of overlap or isolation of their respective individual networks. This step of the analysis is complementary to the classification of sources shared by populists carried out at level (1) of the study and aims to reveal the networks around populist leaders, degree of reciprocity, the role of mainstream versus more alternative media sources, the density of connections, overlaps and differences.

The two-steps analysis is needed in order to capture a comprehensive picture of populists' connections on Facebook. When choosing this approach, several arguments have been considered. Due to the access gained to the CrowdTangle tool developed by Facebook, we opted to use it because it allowed us to extract big data on both the links shared by populist profiles, as well as the profiles distributing these links and posts via the populist profiles. For step (1) of the analysis, we aimed for a more descriptive dimension of these sources and their categorisation. The unit of analysis, therefore, was the *URL domain*. We developed a codebook (available in Annex section) including categories such as: source type (i.e., digital sources, newspapers/magazines, radio, TV); type of source ownership – whether it is public (PSM) or non-public; scope of publishing (European/international, national or mixed, regional or local); type of printed or digital sources; political orientation of sources; whether the source is formally registered as media or not; and transparency of ownership. We decided to drop an initial variable related to the trustworthiness of the sources because of the difficulty in assessing it reliably.

After centralising and aggregating the sources shared in each country by unique web domains or Facebook pages, the national experts proceeded to categorise them using the codebook. For this categorisation existing secondary data was also used (reliable data concerning the bias or political positioning of different news outlets – e.g. Reuters Institute Digital News Report). We decided to include as media sources Facebook, YouTube or other social media pages, considering that many posts on Facebook share other social media pages. Leaving them out of the analysis would have given a very incomplete picture. In addition, this tendency in itself gives us a sense of the extent to which social media is becoming a source of information and a competing news provider.

Another way to establish the level of respectability and trust was considered to be through the creation of a new category: registered/unregistered media. In each country there are media outlets that are registered as such by the profession. The use of another possible category was discussed – 'controversial coverage/non-controversial' source, but was dropped because of the difficulty to operationalise it reliably.

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[3] The detailed, country-specific results of the network analysis can be found in the eight national case studies referenced in this paper. The current study gives only a general overview of the results of the network analysis.

The nodes in the network were represented by individual public Facebook pages or groups, and the edges – the connections between them. In order to have a manageable dimension of the network, we mapped only the connections of the 17 populist pages from the eight countries analysed. Or simply put, the networks in our study show only which pages and groups shared posts from the 17 populist profiles. Whether the former also shared each other's posts or not, is not the object of the present study. However, we did measure the reciprocity between the populist pages and those who shared them. This was done using the data from phase (1) – what populists shared. We also used the data from this first step when qualitatively looking into the sources that were most central in the network and those who were the main promoters of the populist profiles.

This dual approach allowed us to have more insight into the online sources that are close to populists in different countries and that may play a key role in reinforcing populist discourse and attitudes.

Our research approach also has some important limitations. Among the most significant is that we were only able to track those media sources which contained an identifiable name in the URL (e.g. https://www.theguardian.com/ is easily identified as The Guardian). We considered as media sources URLs – e.g. news websites or blogs, as well as other social media (YouTube or Twitter links or other Facebook pages shared). However, populists can sometimes share videos made by themselves or from YouTube, which are in fact recordings of public or commercial TV channels. There is no way to identify these original sources of the recordings other than to go manually through each of these videos, which was not feasible in our current study.

Second, for many sources there is no information available on their registration status, ownership or political orientation, which limits the insights that we can have. And third, our analysis does not assess how the respective source is contextualised, if it is placed in a positive, neutral or critical context. For example, some pages may share the posts of populist leaders to criticise them. Such a positioning can only be identified either by manual coding – which was not feasible for thousands of posts, or through other automatic means, such as sentiment analysis – whose reliability is a matter of discussion. Our research does not cover these assessments. However, it is reasonable to assume that people generally tend to share posts and sources that confirm and align with their beliefs, values and affinities, more than those that they oppose or are critical of. As the analysis also shows, those who promote and give high visibility to the populist pages are usually supporters of the respective populist leaders or parties.

3   Comparative Overview of the Research Findings from the National Case Studies

First, in terms of frequency of posting different media sources/channels by populists, the lead (in absolute numbers) was taken up by Slovakia, Italy, the UK and France, while the least activity on Facebook was registered in Greece and Turkey. Poland and Bosnia Herzegovina are placed in the middle between the two. However, the two extremes – Greece and Slovakia, are

influenced by the fact that in the case of the former, only one profile was analysed, and in the case of the latter – three profiles (like in Bosnia Herzegovina's case as well), while the rest of the cases include two populist profiles each. This is reflected in Table 2, with the caveat that the absolute values reflect how many times different channels (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, other platforms or websites) were shared by the populists in these countries.

The number of media sources shared, in Table 2, refers to the total number of unique sources shared by each populist profile. For example, if a populist page shared The Guardian five times, meaning in five different posts, and YouTube in three posts, the N of unique media sources shared will be two (The Guardian and YouTube), while the total number of references (N total references) will be eight – the sum of all occurrences or the total number of times when links from the Guardian and YouTube were shared. When calculating the number of unique sources shared, different pages from social platforms like YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have been counted as one single individual source each. So unlike different websites, which were counted separately, we considered that the social platform is in itself a media conglomerate. Hence, Table 2 displays two measures: the different unique media sources shared by populists and how many times they shared them (e.g. the three Slovak populists shared 307 different media sources 1440 times, which means that on average each source was shared in five different posts).

The following tables and charts are based on the numbers in the last column – the number of times the different unique media sources (N unique sources) were shared.

Table 2: Number of sources shared in populists' posts and total number of times they were shared

Country	N populist profiles	N unique sources (e.g. websites, FB or YouTube)	N times unique sources were shared
Slovakia	3	307	1440
Italy	2	279	1205
UK	2	185	1318
France	2	197	749
Bosnia Herzegovina	3	119	1759
Poland	2	109	940
Turkey	2	18	233
Greece	1	14	62
TOTAL	**17**	**1228**	**7706**

In order to analyse the diversity of sources in each country and for each profile, we checked the Facebook pages, YouTube and Twitter accounts in greater depth, as well as links that were shortened (e.g. bit.ly) – which in many cases were those of the political party. Figure 1 shows that the least diversity among the sources shared by populist leaders was identified, unsurprisingly, in Turkey – where AKP and Erdoğan shared almost entirely information produced by themselves either via Facebook and YouTube or, to a lesser extent, via Twitter.

This implies that in Turkey's case, social media reflects the state capture of media and the information environment is lacking diversity, at least in the social media communication sphere created by the governing party and leader.

A similarly low diversity of sources was registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the party website or pages, as well as the public television – though to a lesser extent, were the main sources shared. Despite there being a somewhat larger number of other sources as well, they were much less shared compared to official party channels.

In Poland, a surprising but understandable difference was observed between the communication strategy of Konfederacja compared to PiS. The latter registered among the lowest diversity in the entire sample. Similarly to Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Poland also the social media strategy of PiS – the governing party that has captured the media system, especially public service media – reflects this political control of the media channels. When posting on Facebook, PiS shares almost entirely own content from the party's different social media channels (mostly Facebook and YouTube), governmental sources or public media. This creates an echo chamber where the only voices heard and constantly amplified are those of the party in power.

On the other hand, the marginal status of the far-right political party Konfederacja is also reflected in its communication strategy. Having much less access to the mainstream media channels captured by the PiS-controlled majority, Konfederacja draws on a wider diversity of media sources.

Similarly, in Slovakia also there is a significant difference between the two parties under study – OĽaNO and Sme Rodina, where the former is less concerned with the diversity of sources.
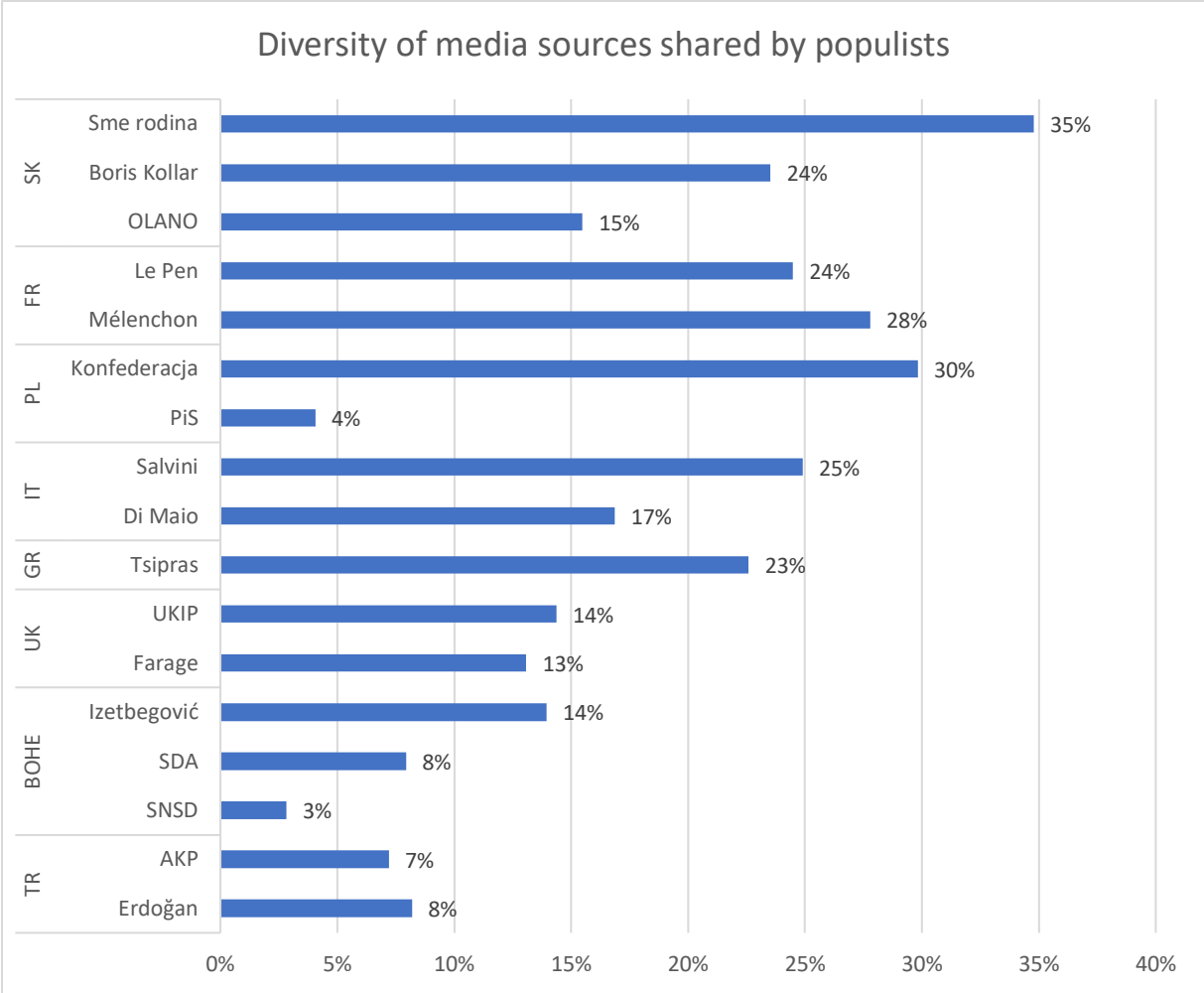
Figure 1 Diversity of unique sources – calculated as percentage of N media sources shared from N total references (see Table 2)

Next, we tested if populist reference to different media sources intensifies during election campaigns or other event-driven periods, or during normal periods. To this aim we chose to compare three different time intervals: one that represents regular long-term coverage, and two event-related periods – the EP elections and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to see if during non-regular coverage, populists draw more or less on different media sources, and if events influence this behaviour, is it a specific type of events (e.g. political, crisis)?

When calculating monthly averages per populist profile (Fig. 2), we observe the following: overall, the most frequent use of media sources – whichever type they may be – is found in the UK, Bosnia Herzegovina and Italy. At the opposite end are Greece and Turkey, which have an overall low social media activity and usage of sources. Some patterns are also observable: the time period that tends to increase the sharing of different sources – either own political content or other sources, is in most cases the time period before, during and after the EP elections. This is most evident in the UK, Italy and Turkey. While the UK revived the debates around populism with the Brexit campaign, Italy and Turkey are also countries with high populism scores (see Table 2) and / or highly authoritarian and conservative political regimes (Turkey). One can

argue that the political propaganda intensifies the most during times with electoral stakes, which is how political control is captured and/or maintained. Slovakia and Greece are the only cases where sources are more often shared during regular coverage, but the difference is not necessarily very big or relevant – Greece has an overall low posting activity, and in Slovakia the sharing of posts from different sources is rather balanced in all three periods.
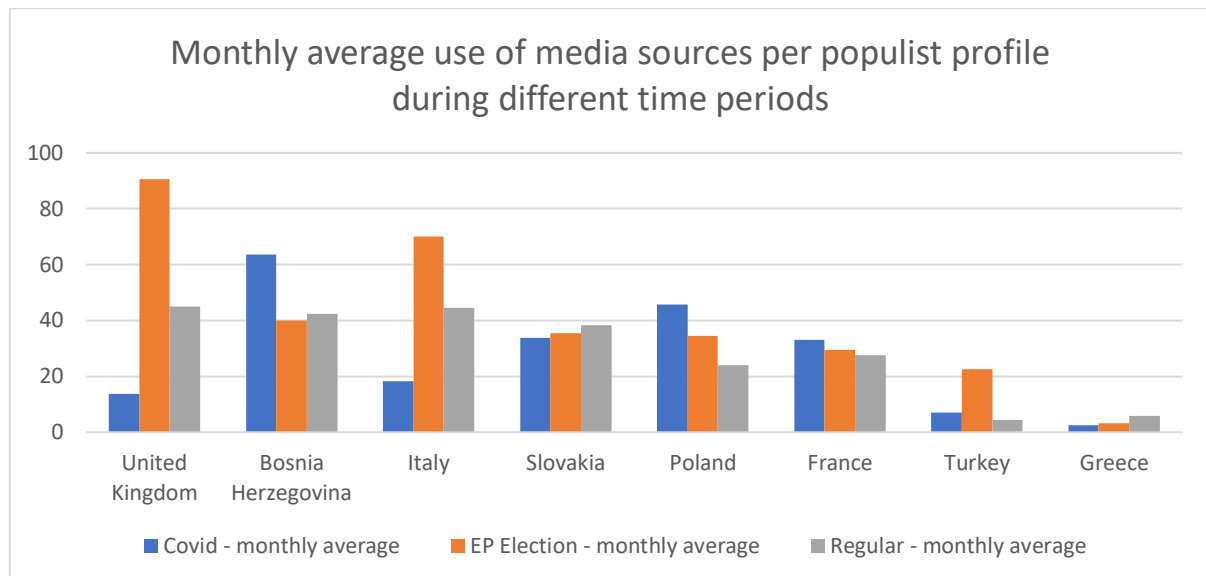

Figure 2 Monthly average of posts with a URL (e.g. news website, YouTube, other Facebook page etc.) in each time interval. Example: in the UK, populists shared, on average, 14 posts per month sharing a media source URL during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 91 posts during EP elections and 45 such posts/URLs during regular months.

Interestingly, populists in some countries have posted more media sources during the COVID-19 pandemic than in other periods, most notably in Bosnia Herzegovina, Poland and to a lesser extent France. In the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, this may also be due to the fact that there were no EP elections there, as it is not a member of the EU so interest in this topic is lower than in EU countries. At the opposite end, populists in UK, Italy and Turkey drew on media sources – either produced by themselves or their party, or from other sources, most often during EP elections, which might show a higher interest in this political event. This may seem odd in the case of Turkey which is also not a member of the EU. An explanation for this is found in the national case study (Sahin, 2021), which highlights that the EP elections period overlapped with snap elections in Istanbul after the governing party AKP contested the local election results.

3.1 Types of sources preferred by populists on social media

Next, we present the basic types of media sources preferred or ignored by the populist parties and leaders. A very clear tendency dominates most countries under study: populists on Facebook share mostly digital sources – websites, own content or others' content from different social media platforms. This is most obvious in Turkey, Greece and Slovakia. TV channels – mostly public TV, are shared often only in Bosnia Herzegovina, while newspapers and magazines (including their websites) are an important source for populists only in the UK, Italy

and France – all Western democracies with a well-established media-system characterised by a developed newspaper market with historically higher circulation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Unlike Italy and France, the POPPA scores (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020) classified the UK as lower on the populist scale, which could indicate that the media system may shape or moderate the populist discourse due to higher gatekeeping or more established professional norms in the media industry. Even so, populists managed to bypass these norms and gain support for Brexit and other views on their agenda. Furthermore, in Italy or France the fact that newspapers are more often cited by populists also does not seem to reduce the overall level of populism, if we consider the POPPA scores.

Radio is very marginal or even entirely absent in some countries. The only significant presence of (public) radio can be observed in Poland – where it represents the second most often shared source, and to a much lower extent – the UK and France.
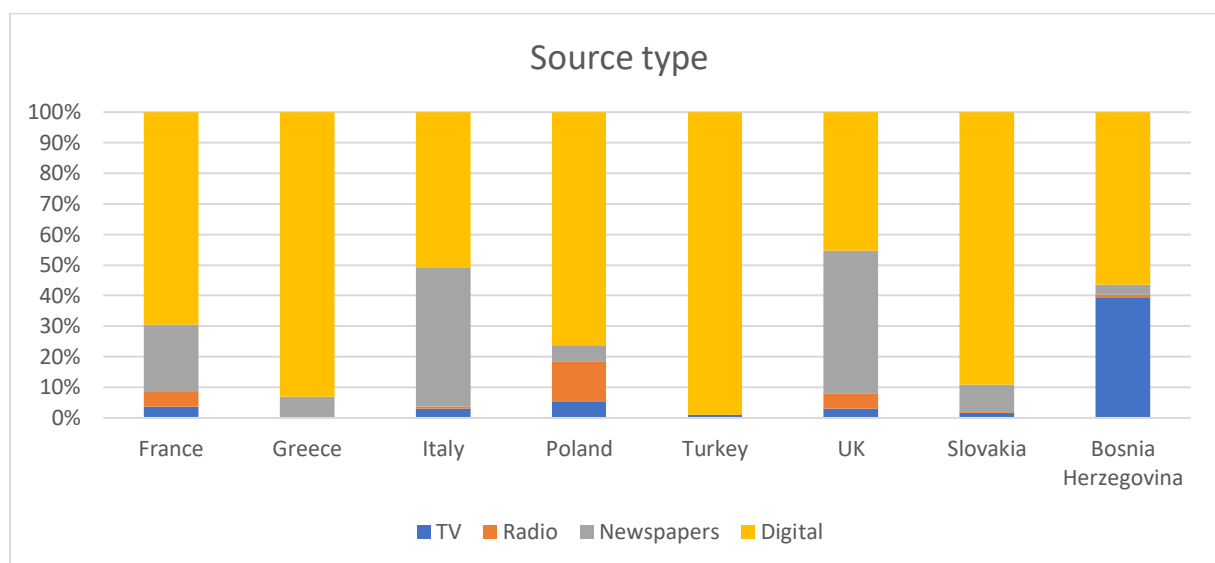

Figure 3 Types of sources shared by populists[4]. Digital sources considered are social media links, as well as news portals and other websites that do not have print editions. They do not include websites/online editions of newspapers or TV/radio channels, which are coded as TV/Radio/Newspapers. More details in the annexed codebook

However, there are also important in-country differences (Table 3). For example, in Italy Luigi di Maio gives almost absolute attention to digital sources (96%), Salvini seems to actually prefer newspapers, magazines and their online versions as his main source of reference (57%), followed by other digital sources (39%). Nonetheless, as the author of the national case study observes (Bertero, 2021), in the case of the two Italian populists the sources they share are not as relevant as the interpretation they give to the content. Both di Maio and Salvini tend to often share information from news agencies and newspapers considered quality media, like ANSA

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[4]The calculations are made based on the relation to all the references – namely to the total number of times that different unique sources were shared, not to the number of unique sources. Some of the national case studies use the Number of unique sources as reference (e.g. the UK), but for coherence of the comparative results, we have chosen the total number of references, which reflects the overall visibility of different types of sources.

and Corriere della Sera, but the news selection and spin that they give aligns with their political agenda.

In Poland, both right-wing populist parties prefer digital sources, but while PiS's second most shared option is (public) radio, Konfederacja prefers newspapers and magazines. Similarly, while UKIP favours newspapers over digital sources, probably in a quest for legitimacy, Nigel Farage shares digital sources slightly more often.[5] And in Turkey, the state monopoly of the media is quite obvious, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and AKP sharing just a very limited sample of sources which were mostly pro-governmental.

Table 3: Types of media sources shared by populist leaders[6]

Party/Leader	The most often shared	The second most often shared	The third most often shared
Bakir Izetbegović	Digital 87%	TV 7%	Newspapers 6%
SDA - Stranka demokratske akcije BiH	Digital 90%	TV 5%	Newspapers 4%
SNSD - СНСД	TV 91%	Digital 7%	Newspapers 2%
Marine Le Pen	Digital 54%	Newspapers 33%	Radio 7%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	Digital 81%	Newspapers 13%	Radio 3%
Alexis Tsipras	Digital 92%	Newspapers 8%	
Luigi di Maio	Digital 96%	Newspapers 3%	Radio (1 single reference)
Matteo Salvini	Newspapers 57%	Digital 39%	TV 4%
PiS	Digital 77%	Radio 17%	TV 6%
Konfederacja	Digital 77%	Newspapers 19%	TV 3%
Boris Kollár	Digital 89%	Newspapers 8%	TV 2%

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[5]However, the national case study (Karamanidou & Sahin, 2021) looks at the types of media sources by unique links shared and paints another picture: both UKIP and Farage tend to share more digital sources than newspaper links – the diversity being bigger for the former. However, newspaper links – though less varied, are oftentimes shared more times than digital ones – especially in the case of UKIP (e.g. The Guardian, The Independent, Daily Mail etc.)

[6]The calculations are made based on the relation to all the references – namely to the total number of times that different unique sources were shared. The results are based on the coding data provided in the eight national case studies referenced in this paper.

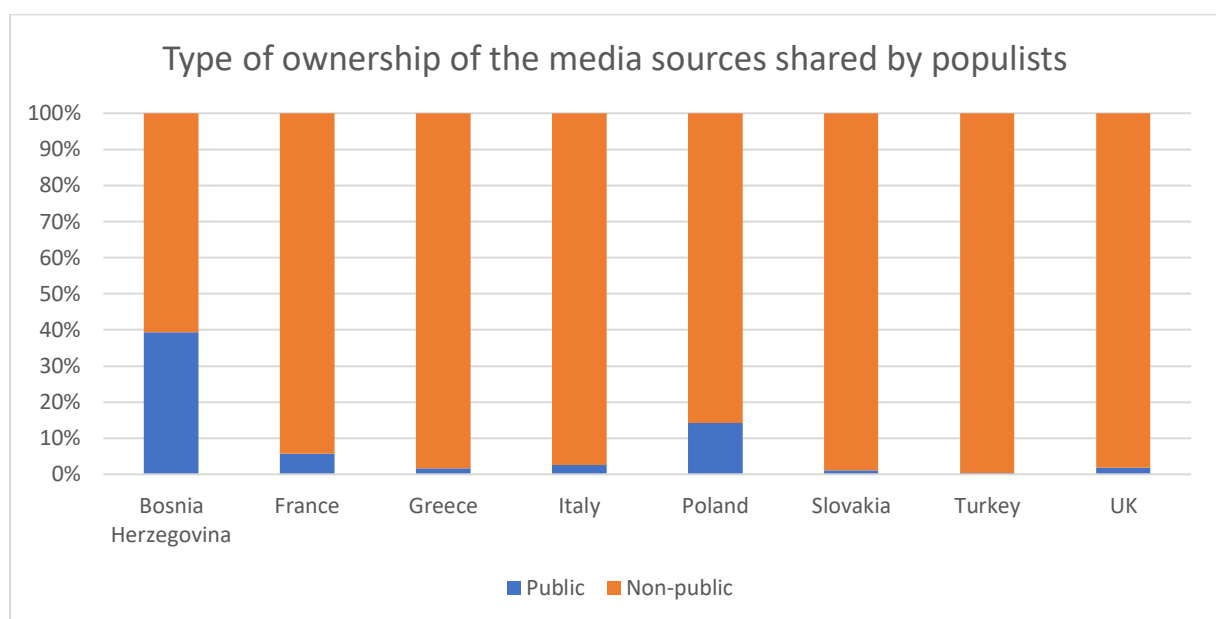| Sme Rodina	Digital 83%	Newspapers 13%	TV 4%
OĽaNO	Digital 91%	Newspapers 8%	TV 1%
AKP	Digital 100%		
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Digital 98%	TV 2%	
UKIP	Newspapers 49%	Digital 47%	TV 3%
Nigel Farage	Digital 40%	Newspapers 39%	Radio 19%

Figure 4 Public vs. non-public ownership of media.

In most cases, the sources shared were not public service media (PSM). The only countries where PSM played a somewhat relevant role in populists' communication on Facebook were Bosnia Herzegovina and Poland, and less so in France. However, it is important to mention that in Turkey and Greece also public television was shared – but in the form of recordings made by the leader or party, which were not coded as PSM. And in the case of Turkey as well as other countries, the social media accounts of the party or leader were also not coded as public sources. It is very clear from these results that populists do not like PSM too much – or that they only refer to them when they are in power and have the public media on their side.
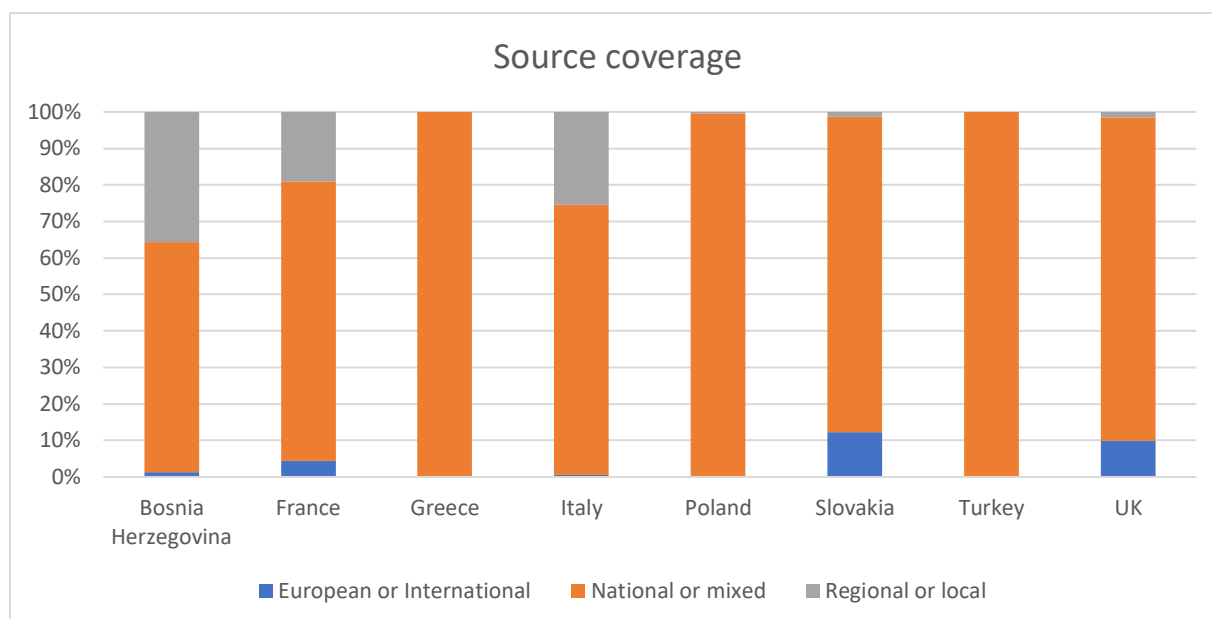
Figure 5 Scope or coverage of the media sources shared by populists. European or International refers to outlets that have a predominant transnational focus (e.g. Euractiv.com, Yahoo News, Politico), while National or mixed includes outlets with mostly national coverage or those that also have international audiences and news, but only as a secondary focus (e.g. The Guardian)

As expected, in all cases the sources shared are predominantly or entirely national (Fig. 5). Regional or local news are favoured in Bosnia Herzegovina, Italy and France, while interest for more Europeanised or globalised coverage can be found with populists from Slovakia, UK and, to a small extent, France. These results are in line with the news values theory, which places proximity as an important factor in the selection of news and in this case, news sources as well.

Interestingly, the most international sources were shared by Slovak populists OĽaNO (15% of all sources) and Sme Rodina (14%), followed by UKIP (14%) and the Italian populist leader Luigi di Maio (13%). The latter is also among the populists who shared the most regional and local sources (19%) and, along with populists from Bosnia Herzegovina, appealed the least to national-wide sources. A clear outlier is Bakir Izetbegović from Bosnia Herzegovina who predominantly shared regional and local media sources (76%), followed by SDA – Stranka demokratske akcije BiH (41%). Both French and Italian populist leaders are also to some extent preoccupied with the local level: Salvini – 26% of the sources shared, compared to 19% Di Maio, and Le Pen – 23% compared to Mélenchon 13%. Strangely enough, Turkish, Polish and Greek populists show no interest in either local or international news sources – focusing only on the national level. Slovak populists also show little interest in local sources, but they pay more attention to foreign media channels.

3.2 Non-tabloids and digital political content favoured over tabloid newspapers

Second, we were interested in the qualitative types of print media sources by and large preferred or ignored by the populist parties/leaders on FB. The results presented in (Fig. 6) below show

that surprisingly, available data suggest that populist parties and populist leaders actually prefer non-tabloid (more or less mainstream) media sources, which predominate in all cases. Only in the UK and Slovakia does the tabloid press play a significant role in populist communication on Facebook, while niche or other categories of newspapers / magazines are sometimes shared in Slovakia, Italy, France and to a small extent – Poland.
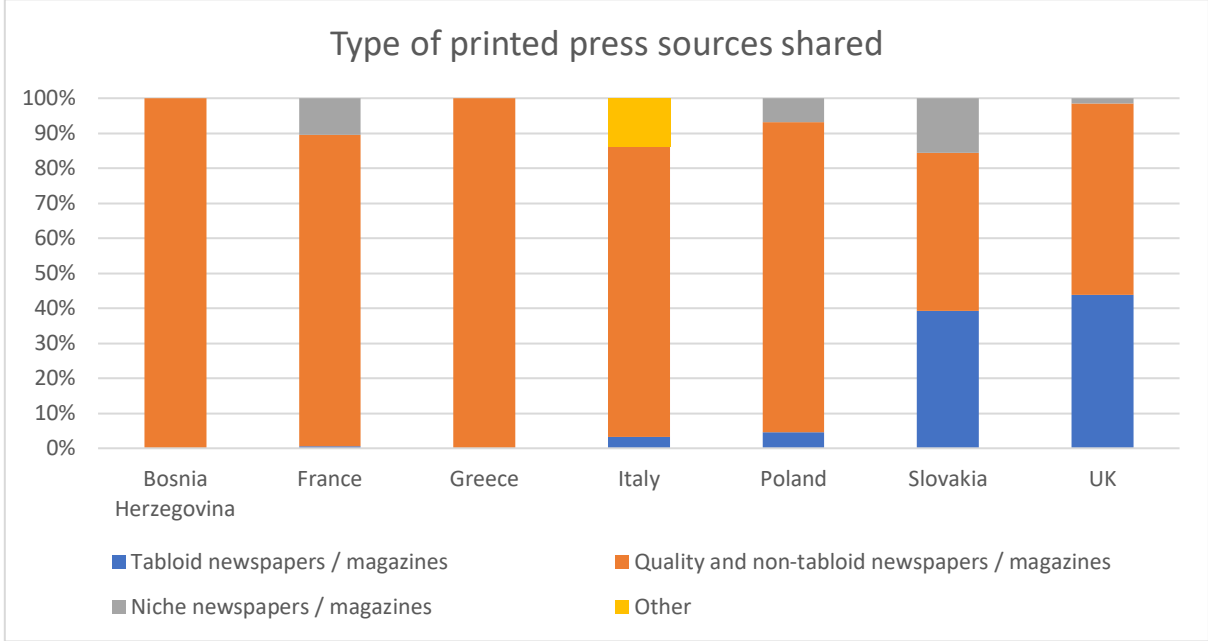

Figure 6 Tabloid, quality and niche newspapers and magazines, including their digital versions. Printed press is understood as websites of newspapers and magazines that have a print version, as well as photos or images from the printed press

In addition, when looking at in-country differences (Table 4), some peculiarities emerge. Only Italian populists Luigi di Maio and Matteo Salvini share newspapers and magazines that could not be categorised in any of the three labels. Similarly, a preference for digital versions of the niche printed press was given by the Slovak party Sme Rodina and its leader Boris Kollar as well as the competitor party OĽaNO. The two French populists Mélenchon and Le Pen and the Polish far-right Konfederacja have also given attention to niche media that cannot be qualified as either tabloid or broadsheet. And against expectations, tabloid coverage was favoured entirely by Bosnia and Herzegovina populists, and partly by the Slovak OĽaNO – 63% of all newspaper sources. It also received a significant share of attention from UKIP – 45%, Farage – 41% and to a lesser extent the other Slovak populists, the Polish Konfederacja, Italy's Salvini and almost negligibly – from France's Le Pen.

Table 4. Tabloid, Quality and Niche Print Media Preferences

Party/Leader	Tabloid	Non-tabloid	Niche	Other
Bakir Izetbegović	**100%**	0%	0%	0%

SDA - Stranka demokratske akcije BiH	**100%**	0%	0%	0%
SNSD - СНСД	**100%**	0%	0%	0%
Marine Le Pen	1%	**90%**	9%	0%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	0%	**86%**	14%	0%
Alexis Tsipras	0%	**100%**	0%	0%
Luigi di Maio	0%	**67%**	0%	33%
Matteo Salvini	3%	**83%**	0%	14%
PiS	0%	0%	0%	0%
Konfederacja	5%	**89%**	7%	0%
Boris Kollár	13%	**74%**	13%	0%
Sme Rodina	14%	**57%**	29%	0%
OĽaNO	**63%**	25%	11%	0%
AKP	0%	0%	0%	0%
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	0%	0%	0%	0%
UKIP	45%	**54%**	1%	0%
Nigel Farage	39%	**58%**	4%	0%

As Table 3 showed, populists in most countries clearly prefer digital media sources – for 13 of them these are shared with priority, while in the rest of 4 cases they fall on the second place. Next, we wanted to see what type of digital sources are preferred (Fig. 7). A very clear pattern emerged: in all eight countries, populists prioritised content related to political leaders/parties – usually their own parties (websites, social media pages), or content produced by themselves (live videos with themselves or photos with different captions) or by their party colleagues. This was most obvious in Poland, Turkey (92% of the posts sharing digital sources), Greece (91%), France (84%), Slovakia (73%) and UK (65%). Less dominant but still prioritised were political sources in Italy (54%) and Bosnia Herzegovina (50%). This is partly because of in-country differences. In Bosnia Herzegovina, SNSD and Bakir Izetbegović preferred news websites over own political content, as did Salvini in Italy.

Less frequently but still somewhat often, populists share news websites. This is most often the case in Bosnia Herzegovina (50%), Italy (33%), the UK (11%), Slovakia (11%) and Poland (7%). Sharing content from social media platforms – either sharing posts from other Facebook

pages/groups, or content from YouTube or Twitter, was a common practice for UK populists (10%) and, to a lesser extent, for Turkish (8%), Italian (6%) or Greek populists (4%). On the other hand, more credible sources like websites of public institutions, official or expert sources were completely marginalised, with a very low presence – if any – in all countries. Slovak populists shared other types of websites or blogs that did not fit in our predefined categories (8%).
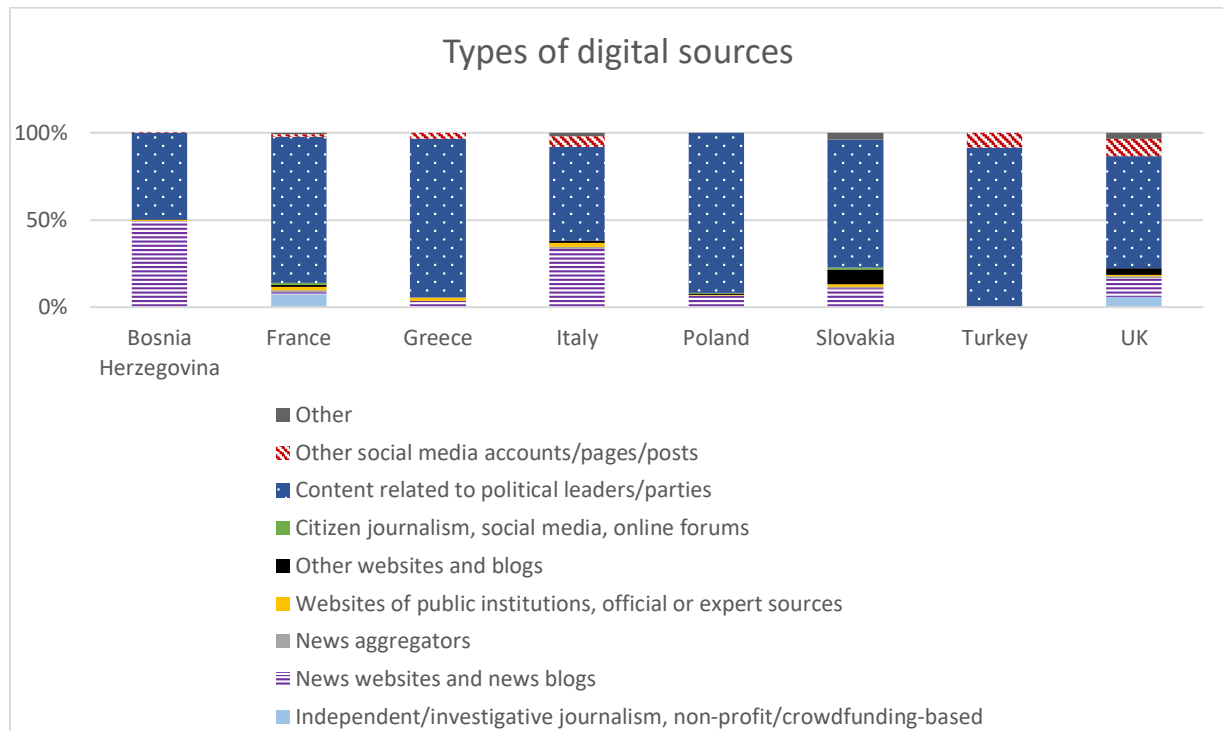

Figure 7 Types of digital sources shared by populists

What is remarkable is that sources that we might have expected to have more popularity among populists – like citizen journalism (including through online forums and social media) are almost entirely lacking, with the exception of France – Jean-Luc Mélenchon (2%) or Slovakia – Boris Kollar (2%) and Sme rodina (3%). At the same time, also missing are independent or investigative journalism sources, non-profit or crowdfunding-based initiatives, which are shared only by populists in France (7%) and the UK (6%) – both countries with rather developed media systems and higher levels of quality press and professional norms.

3.3   Political orientation and transparency of ownership

When analysing the political orientation of the media sources shared (Fig. 8), it becomes clear that most populists preferred either centre-right or even radical-right sources. This is true for six out of the eight countries analysed. It can also be observed in most cases that the political orientation of the sources shared is aligned with that of the populist party or leader sharing it, which points to the creation of an echo chamber where political beliefs are being reconfirmed. An almost entire right-wing leaning is found in Turkey (99.5%) and Poland (96%), with the difference that while the AKP and Erdoğan in Turkey and the Polish PiS predominantly share centre-right sources, the Polish Konfederacja prioritised radical-right media (74%). Other

breeding grounds for far-right media content are found in Bosnia Herzegovina - Bakir Izetbegović (59%) and his party SDA (36%), Marine Le Pen in France (53%), Nigel Farage (35%) and UKIP (39%) in the UK and Matteo Salvini in Italy (26%). At the other end – the extreme left, there are only Alexis Tsipras in Greece (90%) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France (81%), while centre-left sources are much less frequent than those on the right, or even entirely missing in several cases.
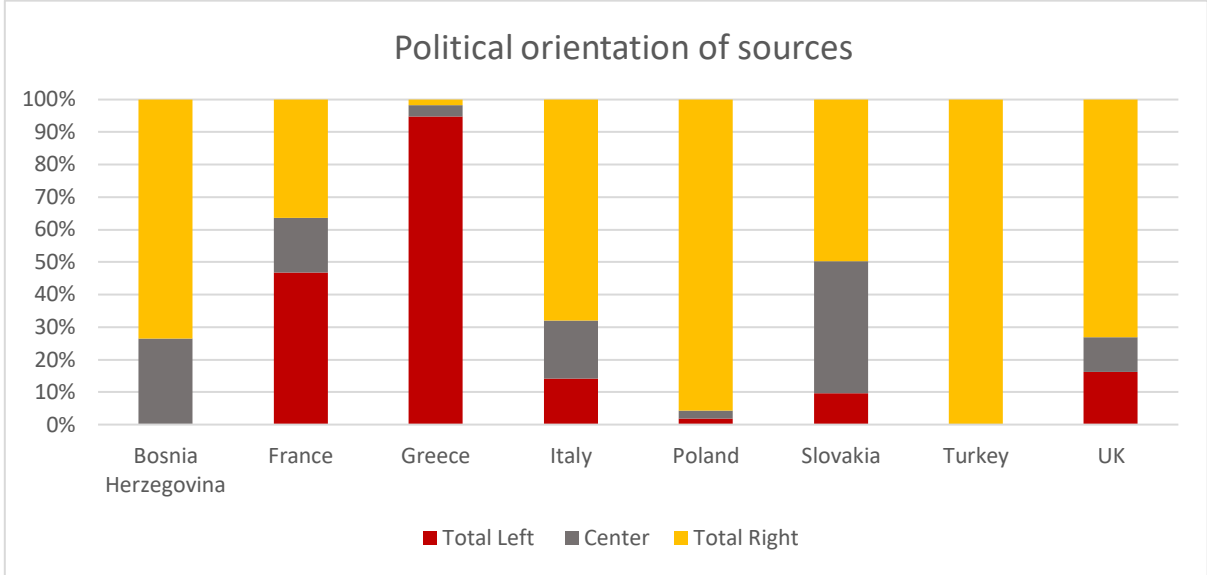

Figure 8 Political orientation of sources shared by populists

Centrist sources are also not dominant. Where they appear, they tend to come together with radical-right sources: the case of SDA and its leader Bakir Izetbegović, Le Pen, Salvini, Konfederacja and UKIP. An interesting case is also that of Slovak sources which were coded mainly as 'Other', signifying a mixed ideological positioning that cannot easily fit into the traditional left-right spectrum – containing elements of both, an orientation that is frequently seen in populist parties/movements (e.g. M5S). 80% of the sources shared by Boris Kollár, 60% of those shared by his movement Sme Rodina and 17% for OĽaNO were coded as 'other political orientation'. Similarly, some populists shared sources from both the right and the left – Salvini, OĽaNO, Farage and UKIP most notably (Table 5). Overall, as shown in the Bosnia and Herzegovina case study (Dejan, 2021) as well as the other country cases, the networks that are formed around populist leaders tend to accurately reflect their ideological orientation, strengthening the connections with party colleagues or elected officials.

Table 5: Political-Ideological Orientation of Sources on FB (in %)

Party/Leader	Radical-Left	Center-Left	Center	Center-Right	Radical-Right	Other/NA
Bakir Izetbegović	0%	0%	21%	20%	**59%**	0%

SDA - Stranka demokratske akcije BiH	0%	0%	**52%**	12%	**36%**	0%
SNSD - СНСД	0%	0%	1%	**98%**	0%	0%
Marine Le Pen	0%	2%	26%	19%	**53%**	1%
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	**81%**	6%	9%	3%	0%	1%
Alexis Tsipras	**90%**	5%	3%	2%	0%	0%
Luigi di Maio	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	**97%**
Matteo Salvini	0%	14%	17%	**41%**	**26%**	3%
PiS	0%	2%	0%	**94%**	4%	0%
Konfederacja	0%	1%	10%	15%	**74%**	0%
Boris Kollár	0%	4%	9%	7%	0%	**80%**
Sme Rodina	0%	7%	21%	12%	0%	**60%**
OĽaNO	0%	6%	**32%**	**45%**	0%	17%
AKP	0%	0%	0%	**100%**	0%	0%
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	0%	0%	0%	**99%**	1%	0%
UKIP	0%	**20%**	12%	**29%**	**39%**	0%
Nigel Farage	0%	5%	7%	**52%**	**35%**	0%

When it comes to the registration status of the sources shared by populists, this indicator is not always relevant or easy to measure, depending on the procedures in different countries or the availability of data (Fig. 9).
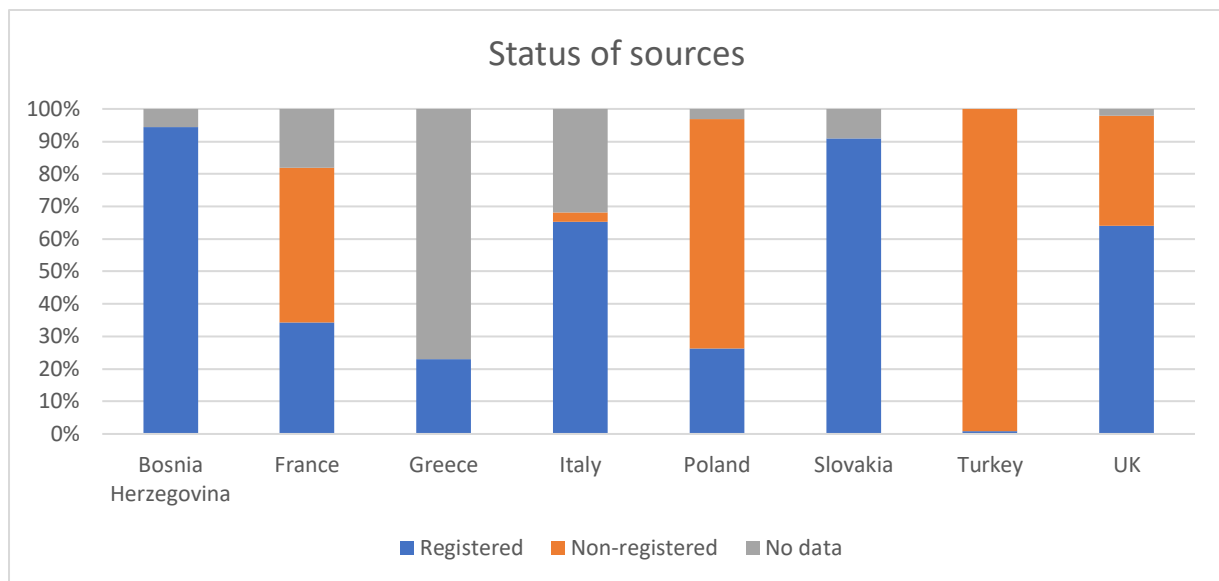
Figure 9 Registered and unregistered media sources

Another interesting result concerns who owns the sources shared by populists and the transparency of this information. It can seem puzzling that in most cases – six out of seven[7] countries, the ownership was identified as fully transparent (Fig. 10). However, one important reason for this result is that, as shown in Fig. 7, most sources shared either belong to the respective populist leader or party, or they are mainstream news platforms – so transparency is not an issue. The most not-transparent sources in terms of who they belong to can be identified in Slovakia – Boris Kollar (24%), Sme Rodina (20%) and OĽaNO (2%), as well as Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France (10%). Populists in Slovakia and Bosnia Herzegovina also share many links from partly (not-)transparent sources, usually different Facebook pages where it is hard to tell who really manages them. However, we cannot say much about the credibility, accuracy or general quality of information from these sources simply by this measure alone. This would need further qualitative analysis. Instead, these results only show the propensity of these populists to share media sources whose precise ownership is unknown.

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[7] For this chart, Italy was not included, as the national coders had a different understandings of the transparency of different sources' ownership, which made it difficult to compare with the other codings.
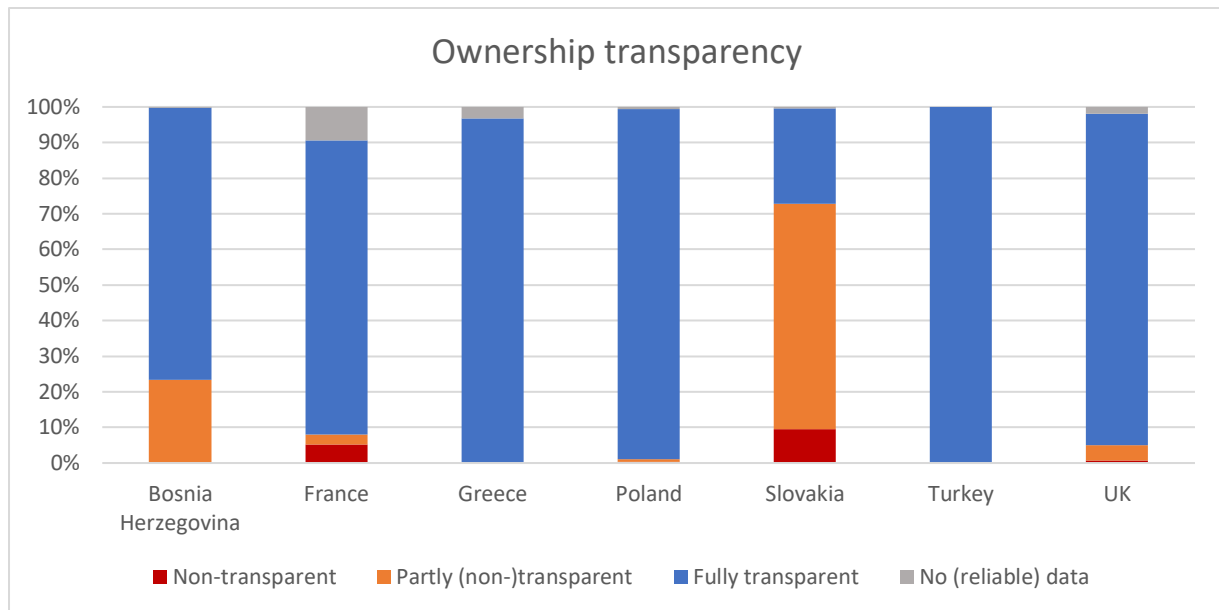
Figure 10 Transparency of media source ownership

4 Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis, the research questions advanced in our study can be answered as follows:

RQ1. *Do populists in different national contexts rely more on mainstream, traditional/established media sources, or do they prefer alternative news sources and social media, including citizen journalism?*

Contrary to the expectation, there was no prevailing preference for alternative sources, understood either as non-mainstream, less institutionalised or professionalised media like citizen journalism, or in their negative connotation – as sources disseminating hyper-partisan or fake news and hoaxes, often associated with populist parties. Although there were some occasional cases when populist leaders or populist parties shared or liked some not-mainstream publications (e.g. in the case of Kollár in Slovakia, or Le Pen in France), these were exceptions rather than the norm.

The connection of populists with alternative media sources, including citizen journalism, is therefore lower than expected. Rather, a cause for concern might be that populists sometimes draw on the legitimacy of established / mainstream media sources to further their agenda. However, most often it is the case that populists produce their own content (e.g. videos, photos with text), or share the party's communication channels. This is the primary way that they bypass traditional media and can also entertain their 'anti-system', anti-elitist, people-centred and leader-centred image.

In addition, populists on social media create echo-chambers that serve to reinforce existing beliefs. This is done not only by the political content that they or their party produce, but also through the media sources they share, which broadly reflect their own political orientation. A clear predominance of media sources with a right-wing political orientation was identified in six out of the eight countries under study, which shows that populists' social media pages can be a place of radicalisation mostly towards the far right. While populists in Greece and France show some preference for what was considered as radical-left content, centre-left media sources are very rare or entirely missing in most countries, unlike centre-right ones.

RQ2. Who are the main disseminators of populists' messages on social media and what degree of reciprocity is there between them and the populists they share?

Most commonly, the main disseminators of populists' social media posts were other political actors: their own party, party leader or colleagues, as well as political 'fan groups' or groups attacking competing political parties or politicians. This shows that the networks formed around populists tend to reflect their ideological orientation well, strengthening the connections with party colleagues or other populists outside the country, while marginalising or even attacking their opponents. For this reason, these networks take the shape of political echo-chambers that have very little diversity in the information presented, being hyper-politicised and unidimensional.

Among the main disseminators of populists' messages are different Facebook groups that seem to be set up by citizens and/or are related to different social movements, but it is unclear who controls them. A more in-depth qualitative analysis would be required to study these groups and the relations between them.

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Annex: Codebook for the analysis of links from posts

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Moreno Mancosu, Antonella Seddone, Federico Vegetti

Unit of analysis: link domain

example: https://www.theguardian.com/ or, for shared Facebook pages:
https://www.facebook.com/BorisKollarOfficial/

VARIABLES

Source_link:

Examples:
a) www.theguardian.com/
b) or, for shared Facebook pages:www.facebook.com/BorisKollarOfficial/

Source_name:

Examples:
a) The Guardian
b) Boris Kollar

Source_Type:

1. TV channels (including recordings, social media accounts and their websites).
2. Radio (including recordings, social media accounts and their websites).
3. Newspapers, magazines (including print screens of their pages, their social media accounts and websites).
4. Digital sources (including social media). It does not include websites of newspapers or TV/radio channels.

Ownership (this is meant especially for distinguishing between Public or Commercial TV/Radio channels or news agencies. So the idea is not to research the owners behind the different media, just to differentiate between public and non-public media):

1. Public
2. Non-public

Coverage:

1. European or International (e.g. Euractiv.com, Yahoo News, Buzzfeed, BusinessInsider, Politico)
2. National or mixed (The Guardian)
3. Regional or local (including community media)
99. Not applicable

If **Source_Type=3** code **Printed_type**

Printed_type

1. Tabloid newspapers / magazines, e.g. The Sun
2. Quality and non-tabloid newspapers / magazines e.g. The Guardian
3. Niche newspapers / magazines (e.g. business magazines, satirical magazines like Charlie Hebdo, community media like religious newspapers or newspapers with a clearly defined public, e.g. business newspapers)
4. Other (string variable – please write which other type)

If **Media_Type=4** code **Digital_type:**

Digital_type

1. Independent journalism, investigative journalism or non-profit / crowdfunding-based initiatives that are not part of traditional / mainstream media and ONLY available ONLINE! (e.g. Bivol.bg)
2. News websites and news blogs (other than the ones previously coded): example news agencies, including public ones, that publish only online
3. News aggregators (e.g. Yahoo News, Google News, WikiNews)
4. Websites of public institutions, authorities (official sources) or expert sources (e.g. Think-Tanks and Research institutions)
5. Other websites and blogs (excluding those specialized in news, coded previously; example: blogs of celebrities)
6. Citizen journalism websites / social media accounts and online forums
7. Content related to political leaders/parties: website of politicians/political parties, blogs, social media accounts (FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM, YOUTUBE, TWITTER, LINKEDIN) and videos or photos uploaded by politicians, their colleagues or parties on social media.
8. Social media accounts/pages/posts **that do not fit any of the previous categories**! (FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM, YOUTUBE, TWITTER, LINKEDIN) then
9. Other

If Digital_type=9 code Other_digital (string variable – write which other type)

To code for all types of media types: TV, Radio, 'Printed' and 'digital'

Left_right: *(please report political/ideological orientation only when national or internationl data or literature clearly define it – e.g. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, EUROPEAN MEDIA SYSTEMS SURVEY, national or local sources/literature, providing references. When data or literature are not available or the political orientation is unsure, please report it as 'not available')*

1. Radical Left
2. Centre-Left
3. Centre
4. Centre-Right

5. Radical Right
6. Other
99. not available

If Left_Right is coded as 6 (Other), code LR_other: (STRING variable)

> – insert the reference for the data/info on political/ideological orientation and any relevant comments or observations about the source **in ENGLISH (e.g. author X / study Y classifies this source as ...)**

Registered *(is the media source officially registered as such?)*

1. Registered

2. Unregistered

99. No data.

Ownership_transparency

1. *Not-transparent:* unknown ownership, owned by company with anonymous ownership structure.

2. *Partly (not-)transparent*: It is possible to find real owners, but this information is not transparent for common users without additional effort.

3. *Fully transparent:* information about ownership is easily accessible and correct.

99. No (reliable) data.