



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Varieties of Populism and Democratic Efficacy:  
Journalism, Populism, and Democratic Efficacy

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## INTRODUCTION

Populism is a multi-sector policy issue stemming from a divergence between how the polity operates and how citizens want the polity to cover their needs, address their aspirations and understand their identities. Because of this divergence (among other reasons), citizens have resorted to political apathy or turned to populist parties. These have reaped electoral benefits, while populism's influence over setting and shaping public policy agendas has grown over time. The emergence of populist political participation may not be a suitable cure for apathy, as populism thrives on demagoguery, and displays both a tendency to subscribe to conspiracy theories, hostile language and a reluctance to understand policy issues in other than the most simplistic terms.

In order to counter the populist challenge, the DEMOS project endeavoured in the second year of its three-year-long course to understand the relationship between journalism and populism. The task aimed at identifying so-called "media populism" in media outlets, as well as the historical, social, and political factors that prompt journalists to contrast or favour populism. This policy brief suggests ways to reinforce journalism and reconnect journalism to the audience. All efforts focus on the enhancement of democratic efficacy.

Populism is a multi-faceted, diverse, and dynamic phenomenon that adapts to the circumstances, but the electoral success of populist actors is heavily influenced by the media environment and journalistic responses. However, we do not have sufficient empirical evidence yet to draw conclusions on the relationship between populism and the media. Indeed, several questions remain unanswered: **What is the relationship between journalism and populism?** How relevant is it within the media? Which are its elements that are the most prevalent? How do news outlets counter populism, or, to the contrary, favour it? Which are the historical, social, and political factors that help one outcome or the other? This task contributes to filling this knowledge gap through an **original expert survey** aimed at measuring the level of populism in the media in each national context and **in-depth interviews with journalists** about news media perception and reactions to populism in politics.

The study includes six European Union countries: **Czechia, France, Italy, Poland, Spain** and **Slovakia**. Three are West European countries, two are in East Central Europe and one in Southern Europe. We believe that the comparative set allows us to explain commonalities and differences among journalistic practices and the patterns in the way in which media works in different contexts and political cultures. The expert survey questionnaire administered to experts was organised around a set of items focusing on these three dimensions, asking the experts to evaluate the orientation of a given news outlet with regard to people-centrism, anti-elitism and outgroup ostracism. The survey was administered between June and July 2021. We invited selected media and populism experts who are scholars affiliated with universities or academic research centres to take part in the survey. The expert survey resulted in an original comparative dataset on media populism across the main news outlets. In order to dig deeper into the roots of media populism, each national research team conducted in-depth interviews with journalists who have privileged access and valuable first-hand experience in the field of the national media.

## FAÇADES OF MEDIA AND POPULISM

The DEMOS research classifies **four** ideal-typical relationships between news media outlets and populism by combining journalistic role conceptions and performance in approaching populism.

### *Detached observer*

- News outlets in this group perceive the role of journalists as detached observers playing a relevant role in the democratic system and providing the audience with essential political information.
- They are less interested in reaching a large audience at any cost. This makes them to cover populism and populists in a standard “objective” (i.e. “neutral”) way, like any other political phenomenon or actor.

### *Populist facilitator*

- The main characteristic of news outlets in this group is their opportunist view of journalism’s role in society and their pragmatic view about the need for reaching large audiences.
- These journalists consider politics like any other topic to be selected and framed according to their potential to attract the widest possible audience.

- They may be close to populist actors, but their interest in populism is driven not by political proximity but by economic considerations: populism is often popular; therefore its newsworthiness level is high.

#### *Populist disseminator*

- News outlets in this group share a positive assessment of populism and a high level of involvement with populism.
- Journalists here are sources of populist statements and promote statements or campaigns on issues akin to those promoted by populist parties (i.e. framing the entire elite as the caste or the system).

#### *Populist opponent*

- News outlets from this group show a low and discontinuous relevance of populism together with critical attitudes towards populism and are driven by an interventionist orientation.
- Journalists in this cluster emphasise the importance of advocating social change, influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda.
- Journalists consider populism as a threat to democracy and promote forms of countering populism when they deem that necessary.

## **POPULIST CONTAGION AND EMERGING POLARISATION IN JOURNALISM**

The empirical evidence from the expert survey and the in-depth interviews provides some indications of the relationship between journalism and populism that can be summarised as follows:

- Expert survey data suggest that a process of **normalisation** of populism in news coverage is underway in many countries. This occurs mainly through the inclusion of people-centrism and anti-elitism as a simplified way of accomplishing the information and control functions typical of political journalism. Surely, this tendency is observable in the European countries to different degrees, which is in line with the varieties of populism thesis of the project.
- The expert survey data also suggest that a second process – a process of **polarisation** between news outlets – is occurring in media. This polarisation takes place, particularly with respect to outgroup ostracism: some news outlets support this orientation, while others actively act to counter it. Again, the level of media polarisation differs country by country, but the overall trend is clear.
- In-depth interviews show not only that populism is in the eye of the beholder, but also that its meaning can be positive (rarely) or negative (often) and is in any case normative. “Populism” is therefore a typical word and concept in **political competition**, not only for political actors but also for journalists and news outlets.
- The interviews also suggest that **populism should be considered as one of the constitutive elements** of contemporary political journalism. The relationship between journalism and populism is, generally influenced by forms of parallelism, media instrumentalisation, polarisation and normalisation: all these processes lead to the inclusion of populist frames and claims within mainstream media outlets’ political coverage.

These two sources of data together confirm that the relationship between journalism and populism can be usefully described in terms of populist disseminator, populist opponent, populist facilitator and detached observer. Although further studies should be conducted to provide a more nuanced

picture at the level of individual news outlets, this task has revealed important differences between countries. The news outlets of Italy and Spain are best described as examples of “populist facilitators”. Left-wing media in France and pro-opposition media in Poland, on the other hand, are typically cases of “populist opponent”. Poland’s pro-government news outlets and Czechia’s news outlets owned by populists clearly play the role of “populist disseminator” (sometimes fostering forms of disinformation). Finally, Slovak news outlets and Czechia’s public news media are examples of “detached observers”.

The increasing populism, polarisation, and parallelisation in media – as demonstrated especially in Poland, France, Italy and Spain – are extremely relevant for citizens’ **democratic efficacy** as well. DEMOS research has found that democratically efficacious people have a high sense of political efficacy, but also **follow political news regularly, embrace democratic values** such as tolerance, equality, and **autonomy**; have certain political skills; and are non-intensive partisan – i.e. they do not have a strong emotional bond with or hostility towards any of the political parties.

Because of that, we claim that **media-savvy, democratically efficacious citizens are more resistant to populist ideas and appeals**. To empower people and increase the level of their efficacy, we need **journalism with a strong sense and performance of professional ethics, autonomy, and democratic values**.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DEMOS formulates policy recommendations on the development of journalistic practices with the potential to increase democratic efficacy within the context of populism in Europe and beyond.

### PROTECTING JOURNALISTIC INDEPENDENCE

Independent journalism is one of the most important vital sparks of democratic efficacy. It is our common responsibility to protect independent journalism in order to ensure that citizens have balanced, plural, reliable, accurate yet apprehensible information about legislation, policies and their socio-economic consequences. Journalism should be protected from all harmful influences by the government or other power entities like corporations or other influential people, even the owners of the news outlets. In healthy democracies, untainted news needs to be shared with the audience to acquire a certain level of factual, non-partisan political and socio-economic knowledge.

To increase journalistic independence from the viewpoint of democratic efficacy, DEMOS formulates three major policy suggestions:

- Legislative bodies should help journalists develop and subsidise self-regulatory mechanisms to define baselines of journalistic independence, and continuously monitor and raise awareness of acts of pressure and unethical behaviour. All steps should be taken in consultation with professional organisations.
- Research funding bodies should mobilise resources to study journalistic independence from the viewpoint of democratic efficacy. Cross-border and interdisciplinary scientific projects should apply innovative approaches to gain a more nuanced and deeper knowledge of the ever-changing concept of independence, the ways of uncompromised news production and to identify harmful interferences which might have negative consequences on democratic efficacy.

- Discussions between journalists, experts and decision-makers should be initiated to discover the interplay between media ownership, journalistic independence and democratic efficacy. The possible effects of less conventional forms, such as collective editorial ownership need to be investigated.

## **FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTIC IDENTITY**

Journalists with strong democratic identities — i.e. commitment to political equality, tolerance towards dissenting opinions, and individual autonomy — and professional values are the backbone of independent media. Journalists might have different ideological backgrounds, but the idea of pluralism and autonomy need to be the part of the professional standard. Populism, however, denounces the ethos of independent media and fuels hostility towards journalists by undermining their credibility and democratic commitment. If there are deeply rooted professional values and journalistic ethics, media are resilient to politically driven discrediting. However, in the case of high levels of political parallelism with clientelism in the media system, a possible threat of instrumentalised and politicised news making practices emerges. The problem is that instrumentalised journalism leaves little room for professional agency and occupation-based collective identity; rather it creates political hostility among the reporters and makes news media practitioners vulnerable to political manipulations, which seriously jeopardises the quality of news production. The widely shared professional role conceptions and ethical journalistic performances are able to build bridges between rivalries and serve as one of the powerful ingredients in producing professional autonomy and solidarity.

To foster professional journalistic identity, it is advisable that:

- Journalism Studies classes and courses should be strengthened in universities with a special focus on journalism history, ethics, democratic values, and their implementations in processes of news-making. If necessary, curriculum diversification and specification should be introduced. Practical trainings and extracurricular activities in responding to populism, polarisation and politicisation need to be initiated.
- Self-regulation and co-regulation should reinforce the values of journalistic autonomy, agency and solidarity.
- Effective support and cooperation model should be built up at local, national and regional levels, which includes training activities, violation alarms, action plans incl. funds, fellowships and awards.

## **INCREASING JOURNALISTS' ROLE IN EMPOWERING AUDIENCES**

The declining public trust in the news media might have profound effects on democratic efficacy and provide a fertile ground for populist tendencies. One of the most possible ways of reclaiming journalists' legitimacy is to increase professional awareness of helping the member of the audience to become an informed agent in various aspects of life. The journalists should reconnect with citizens and form strong allegiances with the audience to fulfil their social mission. Instead of providing visibility to an undifferentiated flood of rumour, propaganda, gossip and allegations, giving the people sound and practical advice to make their lives easier would put forward the service role in journalism. Democratically engaged service journalism shares the standard of fact-finding, fact-checking and fact-synthesising news production, but it places the audience's perspective in the centre of editorial work. This hybrid form of journalism combines the traditional functions of mass communication (giving reliable information on current affairs) with empowering individuals via media content focusing on guidance in difficult life situations, moral conflicts, and political dilemmas.

Concerning the better service – better empowerment principle in journalism, DEMOS recommends that:

- We should look for an innovative European solution for reinvigorating the network of public broadcasting systems with a special focus on inclusive, pluralistic and proportional media coverage of social and political issues.
- There is a need to promote the idea of democratically engaged service journalism and civic orientation in private media companies as well. Creating informed and empowered citizens should be a joint effort for all journalists regardless the media ownership.
- Audiences should be provided with more and a variety of opportunities to participate in mediated and moderated deliberations incl. digital and face-to-face small-group conversations to develop collective socio-political curiosity, improve reasoning skills and increase the ability of perspective changes. Special attention should be paid to overcoming the echo chamber effects (e.g. inviting the representatives of different social groups) in mediated and non-mediated deliberation.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

**DEMOS** – Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe is a three-year collaborative research project with 15 consortium members across Europe. DEMOS is funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 framework programme. It started in December 2018 with two general objectives:

**DEMOS** aims at better understanding of the populist phenomenon by identifying and filling existing lacunas in the literature. More specifically, the project will study the conditions and contexts of populism with an emphasis on its socio-psychological roots, while concurrently analysing the varieties of populism across Europe – building on the assumption that populism has both generalisable socio-psychological foundations and many context-bound manifestations rooted in history, culture and specific socio-economic conditions. The project will devote attention to ‘populism in action’, that is, exploring the impact and consequences of populist governance and policymaking across several levels – from the individual to the supranational – acknowledging that recently the influence of populism has increased dramatically and gained power in several countries. Last, but not least, the project will shed light on the responses and reactions of social actors to the challenge of populism, identifying coping strategies, good practices, successes and failures, as well as forecast probable scenarios.

**DEMOS** aims at addressing the challenge of populism through the operationalisation of the concept of ‘democratic efficacy’. The project will study the potential of democratic efficacy to counter populism through experiments and action research, devoting special attention to the youth, studying schools and educational measures, and developing educational tools as well as policy recommendations on how to boost civic awareness and reflective engagement through increasing democratic efficacy.

### THE DEMOS RESEARCH

The results and policy formulation presented in this policy brief stem from research conducted in the third year of the DEMOS project under Task 7.3 of work package 7. In particular, Task 7.3 investigates the relationship between the media landscape and populist parties. Task 7.3 assumes that in the scientific literature three distinct aspects of populism have been mainly addressed by

scholars, namely, populism expressed by populist political parties and leaders (studied, for instance, through the analysis of election manifestos), populism among citizens (studied using opinion surveys), and populism within the media (usually investigated through content analysis of media coverage). Task 7.3 intends to focus on this latter dimension in order to shed light on the relationship between journalism and populism.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	'Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe' — 'DEMOS'
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	<b>Centre for Social Sciences (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre of Excellence), Budapest, Hungary.</b> Contact email address: Zsolt BODA, Principal Investigator. Email: <a href="mailto:Boda.Zsolt@tk.mta.hu">Boda.Zsolt@tk.mta.hu</a>
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	<b>TARSADALOMTUDOMANYI KUTATOKOZPONT (Centre for Social Sciences), Budapest, Hungary</b>  UNIVERSITAET HAMBURG (UHAM), established in MITTELWEG 177, HAMBURG 20148, Germany  UNIWERSYTET IM. ADAMA MICKIEWICZA W POZNANIU (AMU), established in ul. Henryka Wieniawskiego 1, POZNAN 61712, Poland  KAUNO TECHNOLOGIJOS UNIVERSITETAS (KTU), established in K DONELAICIO 73, KAUNAS 44249, Lithuania  Elliniko Idryma Evropaikis kai Exoterikis Politikis (HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY) (ELIAMEP), established in VASILISSIS SOFIAS AVENUE 49, ATHENS 106 76, Greece  SKOLA KOMUNIKACIE A MEDII NO (SKAMBA), established in HANDLOVSKA 45, BRATISLAVA 851 01, Slovakia.  UNIVERSITET ZA POSLOVNI INZENJERINGI MENADZMENT (PEM), established in DESPOTA STEFANA LAZAREVICA BB, BANJA LUKA 78000, Bosnia and Herzegovina  UNIVERZITA KARLOVA (CUNI), established in OVOCNY TRH 560/5, PRAHA 1 116 36, Czech Republic  EUROPEAN CITIZEN ACTION SERVICE (ECAS), established in AVENUE DE LA TOISON D OR 77, BRUXELLES 1060, Belgium  UNIVERSITA DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO (UNITO), established in VIA GIUSEPPE VERDI 8, TORINO 10124, Italy  THE GLASGOW CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY (GCU), established in Cowcaddens Road, City Campus 70, GLASGOW G4 0BA, United Kingdom.  UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (UVA), established in SPUI 21, AMSTERDAM 1012WX, Netherlands  KOBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET (UCPH), established in NORREGADE 10, KOBENHAVN 1165, Denmark  UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA (UB), established in GRAN VIA DE LES CORTS CATALANES 585, BARCELONA 08007, Spain and  UNIVERSITE PARIS I PANTHEON-SORBONNE (UP1), established in Place du Pantheon 12, PARIS 75231, France.
<b>FUNDING SCHEME</b>	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – 'Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies', topic GOVERNANCE-03-2018 'Addressing populism and boosting civic and democratic engagement'.
<b>DURATION</b>	December 2018 – November 2021 (36 months).

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**BUDGET**

EU contribution: € 3,037,781.25

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**WEBSITE**

<https://demos-h2020.eu/>

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**FOR MORE  
INFORMATION**

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**FURTHER  
MATERIALS**

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