

The Political and Media Landscape in Greece and Italy: Populism and the Public Sphere

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The goal of the current study is to explore how media experts and members of the general public view the level of inclusion of populist discourse in public sphere. After all, if certain segments of the public feel that they have no access to the expression of their views, it could lead only to their further radicalization. Greece and Italy were selected for this study as these countries both had Right-wing and Left-wing populist movements. Neglecting either of the extremes may allow for making the picture of populist landscape less complete and balanced. Two methods were used: qualitative interviews with communications experts, and focus group discussions with randomly selected participants. There were three specific questions asked to both the experts and focus group participants. The preliminary results indicate that experts agree that there are some limitations on the freedom of speech related to populist movements, but these limitations are due more to the provisions of the hate speech law than to deliberate stifling of undesirable views. The focus group discussion concurred with experts on the broad latitude of acceptance of what and how ordinary people are able to express their views, however, the participants pointed at doubts on their behalf about actual possibilities that these expressions may lead to any change in political life and legislation related to the concerns of ordinary citizens. They also think that in regards to populism, younger populations are more concerned with their economic status while older populations worry more about threats to cultural identity.

Keywords: *populism, the public sphere, mainstream media, democracy*

Introduction

The growth of social movements broadly addressed as populist has led to multiple efforts in understanding it both as a phenomenon and a potential threat to democracy (Betz 2004). Populism is at the intersection course with the public sphere mediated by the general and social media. Populism, especially right-wing populism, is considered to be the Revolt against Liberal Democracy (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

It seems as though an ideal solution for any frictions inside society could be the idea of “the public sphere” proposed by Habermas (1989). The public may be able to have their voice heard through different modes of communications creating a communicative space. New political transnational institutions may meet the public through the networks. This may allow for a transnational discourse in new communicative spaces (Volkmer 2014). Public space as it was understood by Habermas must be consensus-oriented and rational (Habermas 2001). Populist

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movements and their discourse often do not possess these characteristics. Media often either ignore or negatively cover populist leaders and their ideology (Aalberg et al. 2016). However, some scholars believe that these attitudes only invigorate populist adherents, and that “...both exclusion and inclusion of right-wing populist voices wield counter-productive effects” (Korstenbroek 2022, p. 68).

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Italy and Greece were selected for this study as these countries both had Right-wing and Left-wing populist movements. Not giving special attention to either of the extremes may allow for the picture of the populist landscape to become less complete and balanced.

There are three specific questions:

- 1) Do the media treat populist movements and their sympathisers negatively and or/ignore them?
- 2) Is there a difference in media coverage of Right-wing and Left-wing populist movements?
- 3) Do ordinary people think that those with populist views may have a limited access to express their views, especially in social media?

Populism

Populism has become a buzzword over the last decades (Rooduijn 2019). The number of scholarly articles and books dedicated to this phenomenon is increasing (Aalberg et al. 2016). Its definitions vary, and many researchers disagree over how broadly this term may apply to the phenomenon. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) gave a description of the populism types that are often used in literature: 1) Complete populism appeals to the people, it is directed against elites and excludes out-groups. 2) Excluding populism appeals to the people and excludes out-groups. 3) Anti-elitism populism appeals to the people and anti-elitism, and 4) Empty populism appeals to the people only.

Despite the main focus being on the right-wing populism, the left-wing populism not only has a strong presence in some countries (Aalberg et al. 2016), but both right and left-wing branches also can have a unified impact on the democracies during crises (Podobnik et al. 2019).

When it comes to covering populism, the media face two problems: covering populist movements too much or trying to ignore them. Even negative coverage of the populist stances, players, and events puts populists in the spotlight of attention. “Right-wing populists receive more attention and voter support if the issues they are strongly associated with receive a lot of coverage” (Krämer and Langmann 2020, p. 5645).

Public Sphere

The public sphere creates space and opportunities to express the views circulating in society and to form what is called public opinion (Habermas 1991). Rational debate is the format that could lead to a consensus in a society. However, in the public sphere mediated by media and institutions there may be limited space for a debate. “Publicity is not about debate but about public relations to win the public *acquiescence*” (Perez 2013, p. 17). It is also far from being rational, especially when we evaluate discussions happening in social media. “The Habermasian model... disallows emotions a place within the political. Yet, this distinction hinges on a rather narrow and ultimately exclusive understanding of the political as a realm of merely purposeful, rational and public deliberation.

“And this becomes problematic when confronted with the nature of contemporary public and political life that (increasingly) contains a private and emotional dimension.” (Korstenbroek 2022, pp. 76–77). The same author also suggests that the disfranchisement of right-populism followers should be considered seriously, and warns against completely shutting them out from the public sphere and debate.

In Europe, the public space issue is complicated because it comprises both national states and transnational agencies and institutions embodied in the European Union. Wessels (2009) states that the public sphere is shaped by people’s participation, the state and communications’ outlets of different types. However, the author laments a lack of European identity in all three components. It is even more pronounced at the level of populist movements and individuals. Populists are often critical of any European institutions or media. It is not surprising that populists are limited in their participation in the public sphere. “The idea of publicity’ underpinned the public sphere and pointed to the public use of reason, free of manipulation and coercion” (Wessels 2009, p. 154). Those who have difficulties with entering the public sphere may feel alienated, but this alienation becomes part of a broader process in which citizens feel distrust in their nation states and transnational institutions (Wessels 2009). However, both distrust and alienation contradict the very principle the public sphere is based on. “The concept of the public sphere would thus be inclusive, as everyone should be able to participate and interact together in a debate (Bee and Bello 2009, p.131).

Schlesinger (2002) noted that populists’ sentiments are fed by groups losing their social weight reflected in lost self-esteem and “a corresponding lack of voice” (p. 1551). Although the author considers right-wing populism as a dominant form, he also mentions left-wing populism sharing some characteristics of the former. The deep structure that leads left-wing populism to radically distinguish between friends and enemies is shared with that of right-wing populism (p. 1551). Populism’s place in the Internet age is not only leads to important consequences for the public sphere. The current societal instability makes the question what kind of the public sphere we have: the public sphere referred to as either “disrupted public sphere” (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018) or a “post-public sphere” (Schlesinger 2020). “The idea of a post-public sphere designates the breakdown of an existing

model, signalling uncertainty about how long it will take for another ensemble to develop.” (Schlesinger 2020, p. 1554).

Populism and the Public Sphere: Research Problem

Democracy is interrelated with the public sphere. To participate in any democratic process means to have an access to the public sphere for expressing citizens’ views and being exposed to the views of the others. The mainstream media and the political establishment in many European countries either ignore or criticize rising populism movements and their adherents. The question is whether it also affects access to the public sphere for the ordinary people who may share some of the views supported by the populist parties and their leaders.

Methods

The current study relied on qualitative methods – focus groups and in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews method involved open-ended questions and were done face-to-face. In-depth interviews were conducted with the researchers who deal with the issues of political populism and the public sphere.

A focus group discussion was conducted to assess the participants’ views on 1) how the political processes related to populist movements were covered by the media, and 2) whether they are able to express their views openly in the public sphere including social media.

The Case of Greece

Two mainstream parties, the center-left PASOK and the center-right New Democracy party, determined the political landscape of Greece for nearly 40 years (Nevradakis 2018). However, the unabated economic crisis which started in 2008 led to the crumbling of the influence on behalf of the established parties. The general population was unhappy with a series of austerity measures and protested a long-term fall in living standards. This mainly economic discontent pre-empted the rise of the left-wing populist movement called Syriza. The party won the elections in 2014 promising to reject austerity measures implemented under pressure from lending institutions of the European Union. However, the coalition led by Syriza failed to materialize its promises to the Greek society. The key demands on behalf of the lenders were fulfilled. A failure to deliver unrealistic promises backfired, and Syriza lost to the New Democracy in 2019 (Mavrozacharakis 2019). Recent legislative elections in 2023 demonstrated a resurgence of the right populism as well. Spartans and Greek Solution, which were relatively new political parties, won about 9% of the popular vote and are presented in the Greek parliament (Reuters 2023).

The mainstream media and social networks are well developed in Greece, and they both reflect the variety of opinions and give the expression platform for people to participate in the public sphere. However, social media broadened the access to the public sphere and opened the channels for marginalized groups including those who share the views of populism movements (Nevradakis 2018).

Results

Interview

The interview was conducted with Gregory T. Papanikos, a well-known expert in the field of media and communication, the President of Athens Institute for Education and Research in Greece, Honorary Professor of Economics, University of Stirling, UK; and Professor, MLC Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Dr. Papanikos considered the connection between populism and the public sphere in a broader context. The notion of freedom of expression in a democratic society permeates this connection. He revoked the terms of “*isegoria*” and “*parrhesia*” from the Greek intellectual tradition.

Isegoria evolved over the centuries, but in its essence, this term denotes an equality to speak for all people publicly. That act encompasses the right to speak at the assemblies, but also the media expression falls under this definition. According to Pananikos, both the general media and alternative and social media in Greece enjoy a substantive level of freedom of expression. Not only mainstream views could be expressed. In addition, the views of fringe groups could be covered by the media and people may share them in social media. However, there is a noticeable restriction to such a right. This restriction makes freedom of speech qualified by Greece’s legislation that criminalizes “hate speech” leading to the incitement of violence or hatred. These incitements are prohibited if they lead to violations of public order and endanger freedom and the lives of other people. Another term, “*parrhesia*”, also deals with freedom of speech. It is about the freedom to speak anything, especially honestly and even critically about different aspects of public life. Populist movements often criticize different policies and those who are in power. Criticism is the core of politically engaged journalism. The left-wing populist movement Syriza benefitted from this type of freedom of speech in 2014 when Greece lived through enormous political and economic crises in 2014. The party had more electoral success than mainstream or right wing parties. One of the reasons for the party’s success lay in the fact that the crises had mostly economic roots, and left-wing populists make economy and equal distribution their main tenets.

Dr. Pananikos stressed that it is not only large political parties that enjoy a relatively broad freedoms of speech in both the media and in their public campaigns. Smaller parties and fringe parties enjoy a similar level of freedom. There is no legal suppression for fringe parties in terms of their access to the public space and freedom to speak freely about their positions. The followers of such parties have similar freedoms in expressing their views in social media.

Large parties have more mainstream media coverage. This happens in part because they usually command more public interest and their views may seem to be more acceptable for the established media. However, smaller parties still have their share of media attention. Nevertheless, social media is the main place for small parties. It is relatively easy and fast for such parties to set up their presence, to mobilize supporters and sympathizers, and to react immediately to breaking news and important events.

Dr. Pananikos concluded that populist movements emerged when mainstream parties did not manage economic, social and political challenges in a timely manner. The populist movements offer rather easy fixes and simplistic solutions which helps them attract certain segments of population. However, when in power, the populist movements may fail to deliver their promises, demonstrating that such simplistic solutions could not resolve complex issues in practice. Such failures lead to losses of support and power. That what happened with the Syriza-led government.

Focus Group Discussion

Five participants took part in a focus group discussion. They were recruited through newspaper advertisements. However, due to the COVID limitations, the discussion was conducted via zoom. All participants were under the age of 40. It was not an intentional choice. Only participants in this age group responded. The main issues they face were the current state of economy and living costs. They believed that they mostly had free speech when they wanted to express their views. They mostly express their views on social media. They felt limited only by the criminal laws. They considered the media to be mostly free and often partisan in their political views. Participants do not feel that political parties are genuine in their promise to protect the social and economic interests of the populace. They often used a general term “politicians” to refer to those in power with the disconnect between words and deeds. The media in general are characterised as serving political interests with social media as the key entry point into the public sphere for most of the people.

In terms of populism, none of the participants claimed their adherence to either right-wing or left-wing populism. They are aware of their existence, but not certain that these parties have either leverage or will to change things for the better. In terms of their political views, participants seem to be more on the Left, and they were mainly concerned with economic issues. All participants claimed that cost of living was high, education was expensive and did not necessarily led to decent jobs. Some complained that their salaries are low and stagnant. Some participants characterised economic problems as the key issue in the country even if they did not complain about their personal situation. One person raised an immigration issue. This issue is one of the most dominant issues in the right-wing populism discourse. The participant listed potential consequences of the uncontrolled immigration: fear increases in crime rate and the possibility of “stealing jobs” by immigrants. However, none of them was considering joining extreme left-wing or

right-wing movements. Nevertheless, they may join one of these movements if the situation will worsen. This thought was expressed when the participants considered a scenario of worsening economic condition would worsen.

The participants think that they are not barred from the public sphere. They do not think that there is no freedom of speech for any political group or ordinary citizens. They think that political parties and the general media are able to address any issues facing the country freely. The participants believe that they may express their views as well using social media.

On the other hand, the participants doubted that whatever they think or express in the public may change or influence the current situation. Their message could be expressed simply: they can speak what they think, but the elites don't listen and do not care. It means that at some point these people may become radicalized.

The Case of Italy

Political and Media Landscape

Political parties in Italy have experienced a significant shift from a more or less predictable competition between mainstream established parties ranging from left-of-center, social democratic to right-of-center, business oriented sides of a continuum. This process is common to most of the Western European countries. However, it was especially characteristic for Italy by the time that this study was conducted. The 2018 elections led to a unique situation where the most successful parties - MP5, more on the left, and Lega, firmly on the right - could be legitimately classified as populist. They pushed back more established parties such as the Democratic Party and Forza Italia. This dramatic shift gave a chance for the general public to observe how the populist rhetoric could translate into actions.

Mainstream media in Italy traditionally had their preferences in politics based on the political divisions and representations over the decades. The private empire led by Sylvio Berlusconi consisted of a set of broadcasting companies, and supported their boss and broader right leaning forces. The leading national dailies *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* criticized right wing parties and governments, and expressed support to left-of-center established political parties (D'Arma 2015).

The government formed after the elections was dominated by populists Di Maio and Salvini. Aside from being populists, these politicians differed mostly in their political program and aspirations. However, these populist movements had another common feature: they did not rely on the established media in their communications with potential electorate. They preferred to appeal to their constituencies directly through public gatherings, and relied heavily on the social media based on the interactive platforms. If the mainstream parties still heavily relied on the mediating role of the established media in their interactions with the citizens, the populist movements and their leaders relied more on decentralized dialogue with their followers in social media. The logic behind this strategy is based on seeking popularity not among journalistic establishment, but among like-

minded supporters. The populist discourse is also not modified by journalistic gatekeepers (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). Moreover, this discourse allows for populist leaders to claim to be the only democratic discourse including voices that are not heard by the elites including the media.

Interview

Gianpietro Mazzoleni has been a professor of sociology of communication and of political communication at the University of Milan (Italy) until his retirement. He is a prominent researcher in the field of political communication. The interview took place in Milan at the end of 2018.

Dr. Mazzoleni stressed the fact that populist parties, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Lega have risen to prominence recently spurred by the deep disappointment in mainstream parties on behalf of a large segment of Italian society. M5S was a new party with many populist features, some of which could be characterized as left-leaning. The Lega was not strictly new. But it turned into a national party before the elections. It had been a regional party for most of its history.

The mainstream left-wing and center media initially tried to either ignore or criticize both movements. The media depicted them as dangerous forces threatening a democratic setup of the country. The mainstream right-wing media which was mainly controlled by a former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, also attacked the M5S, however, it did not spare the Lega from criticism as well. The reason was that the populist party led by Salvini threatened to sway some supporters of the established Forza Italia to their side. When both populist parties entered the government, they both toned down their criticism of the parties which were closer to them on political spectrum.

Dr. Mazzoleni also noted that the populist narrative about the irreconcilable schism between political elites and ordinary people nearly disappeared from their discourse as these parties themselves became political elites. The populist parties had some support from a few sources aligned with mainstream media, but in general they continue to rely on the direct contact with the supporters in gathering and, most of all, in social media.

Dr. Mazzoleni also expressed an interesting thought that these populist parties are limited by the constitution and the existing laws in what they can do. They can still keep their revolutionary rhetoric, but they cannot act as radical as they claim during the electoral campaign.

Dr. Mazzoleni also emphasized relative freedom of speech entertained both by the media and the population entering the public sphere in their gathering and social media expressions. These expressions are limited by criminal laws, but if the expressions in the public sphere are within the constitutional rights, these views are not prohibited even if they are in support of populist parties.

Focus Group Discussion

Four participants took part in focus group discussion. They were recruited through newspaper advertisements. The discussion was conducted in November, 2018 in person. This discussion took place several months after general elections in Italy. All participants were under the age of 40. Again, only participants at this age group responded.

The participants characterized mainstream media as mostly partisan. The main national newspapers and RAI which is the public broadcasting company in Italy, gravitated to the left politically. Key television stations owned by Silvio Berlusconi (Mediaset) have right-wing political leanings. However, the participants thought that the general media is mostly free in expressing its political and cultural positions.

The participants also generally agree that the established media both on the right and on the left has been mostly critical of the populist movements both before elections and after those parties formed the government.

They point at the seriousness of the issues which propelled both branches of populism in power. The M5S focuses more on economic and social problems, and Lega concentrated on the illegal immigration. The discussants agree that these issues are very prominent, and the general public was concerned about them. The actions of the populist government obviously had more coverage than before, but the tone is still mostly negative. Populist parties relied more on the social media than on the mainstream media in promoting their message both before and after the elections.

Although admitting that previous mainstream governments failed to meaningfully address these issues, the participants stress that populist parties mostly promised to solve many of these problems, but they didn't offer clear and coherent solutions. The populist government consisted of people who don't have any experience in governing the country.

Responding to the question whether ordinary people have access to the public sphere and freedom of expression of their views, the participants confirm that they are not only able to access the public space, but also have enough freedom to express their thoughts in the social media. Their main concern is that the governments do not fulfill their obligations, and the elites including the mainstream media do not treat the concerns of the ordinary people seriously.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study looked at whether the political crises in Greece and Italy had an impact on the populist movements in terms of the limitations on freedom of speech. It also explored whether the general public enjoyed unhampered access to the public sphere, especially to the social media, and whether the ordinary people had sufficient freedoms in expressing their views on social media.

This study explored how the media and general population treat the rise of populism in Greece and Italy, two Southern European countries having both left-

and right-wing populist parties. These parties were successful in the general elections in 2010s, and were the main forces in the governments of these countries. Another question investigated whether ordinary people have free access to the public sphere, especially whether they can freely express their political views on social media.

To answer these questions, leading experts from the scientific community of these countries were interviewed, and the focus group discussions with randomly selected participants were conducted.

The experts maintained that the mainstream media tended to be more supportive of more established parties, depending on their political stance: the media leaning right tended to support the parties right of center, and the media leaning left gravitated more to the left-wing parties. However, the mainstream media usually either ignored or covered the populist parties negatively regardless of their own political leaning. When the populist parties came to power, the media couldn't ignore them, but still criticized them, especially if the populist parties were with opposite political leanings.

Interestingly, both experts were sceptical about real achievements of the governments with dominant populist influence. They come to power making multiple promises and offering easy solutions, and they fail to materialize their promises because the problems they face are extremely complex and difficult for them to solve to the same extent as they were difficult to solve by the established parties.

Both experts agree that the ordinary people in general have broad access to the public sphere and they are mostly free in expressing their political views regardless whether they support established or populist parties. The key restriction they face is when certain speech falls within the criminal law.

The participants of focus groups in both countries singled out the key public issues - economic downturn and immigration. The cost of living, low salaries, unemployment and other issues belonging to the economic realm, are even more important for them. The reason for this could be their young age and personal experience in struggling with economic problems.

The participants think that the mainstream media cover populist parties more negatively than the established parties, but they also stress the gap between any politicians and the electorate. In general, the participants are sceptical about politicians' ability and desire to really change lives of the ordinary people for the best. None of the participants said that they belong to any populist movements, but they also claim that the longer the societal problems persist, the longer the established parties demonstrate their helplessness in solving them the more people will turn to populists.

As for their own access to the public sphere, they contend that they feel free to express their views in public and on social media. However, they also claim that the political elites, media and other institutions do not care about their concerns and ignore what people think. As one of the participants put it, 'we can say, but nobody listens to us'. This perceived helplessness is a worrying sign because democracy is not only about access to the public sphere, to the public debate, but

also a form of governance where people feel that their participation leads to positive changes for them.

This study has certain limitations, related to the selection of the participants. First of all, there were only nine of them, four in Italy and five- in Greece. These numbers are marginally acceptable for focus groups, but generalizations based on these numbers may be limited. Another limitation is the participants' age. They all were under the age of 40, meaning that a very large portion of the older population is not included in the study. The older people could have different points of views, and have more diverse experiences with the media and the public sphere.

One of the implications of the study could be another investigation with larger numbers of participants. Similar studies may include surveys as a methodological tool which may strengthen its generalisability. It could be illuminating to see how people evaluate whether the populist parties are successful in delivering their promises, whether their messages change and whether the media cover them in different ways. It could also be interesting to see whether being in power makes populist parties more moderate and more acceptable.

It could be concluded that the world experiences growing complexity and faces multiple challenges. Failures to address them in a satisfactory manner lead to multiple political crises. These failures may also breed such political phenomena forms as populism. As Pananikos (2022) stated, "Despite the differences in the practice of democracy it seems that populism cannot be avoided" (p. 90). Democracy will continue to evolve and its success to a substantial degree will depend on the honest and representative role of the media and broad access of the citizens to the public sphere.

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