POPULISM: TOWARDS A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Populism has been extensively researched in the last few years due to the resurgence of the phenomenon both in Europe and the USA. Most scholars have followed dualistic approaches focusing on an either/or model of populism as an ideology, a discursive frame, or a political strategy, and very little attention has been paid to the communicative aspects of populism. This paper argues for the need to work towards an integrated model of interpretation that takes into consideration the social, ideological, and political conditions that make populism possible or thriving together with the communicative elements of populist phenomena, as they are expressed in variant forms and duration in specific historical and social contexts. Evidence from existing empirical and analytical work is applied in the framework of a Strategic Communication model in an effort to enhance our understanding through a multidisciplinary perspective. It is shown that contemporary populism as a multifaceted power strategy cannot be sufficiently understood as a “communication style” or reduced to a “discourse analysis”, but it would rather require a full examination and critical evaluation of political party strategies and media tactics, marketing communications, public relations and advertising campaigns designed to influence large audiences, utilizing multiple media platforms.

Keywords: Populism, Strategic communication, Political communication, Campaigns, Framing.

INTRODUCTION

In a comprehensive work that brings together insights from populist political communication in Europe, it was clearly underlined that “it is more important now than ever to map, dissect, and explicate the phenomenon of populist political communication. As populism increases over time and space, we need to understand how communication may be related to populism’s growth.” (Aalberg et al., 2016, p.1) This need is highly substantiated by the fact that populist actors have gained impact and/or office in several European countries, such as the case of Greece in 2014 and 2015 elections, the Italian national elections of 2018, the gains of the National Front in France, the Brexit campaign led by the UKIP in the UK, and the resurgence of right-wing populism in several European countries.

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The election of Donald Trump in the USA has stimulated a new interest in researching populist phenomena. Given the fact that populist actors previously marginalized or being completely outside the political system have increased their electoral successes in many countries, it is important to explore to what extent the emergence of populism is associated with or facilitated by their communication strategies.

The first systematic comparative view brought together by Aalberg et al. (2016) has largely enriched our understanding of populist communication by structuring the key questions of research around the three major components of political communication, which are: the political parties and candidates, the media and the citizens. The country specific accounts included in this work have revealed the areas that have been adequately researched but they have also pointed to a number of research areas that have not been covered.

Although there have been several empirical studies examining populist discursive frames (Aslanidis, 2015) focusing on qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative content analysis of populist rhetoric, it seems there is a gap regarding the analysis and understanding of the overall communication strategy of populist actors. Examining populism at the speech level or as a “communication style” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) is certainly important but a communication strategy is not limited to that; it is rather built on the basis of many contextual macro societal and situational parameters and it includes specific strategic and tactical components that need to be examined. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a strategic communication approach, as a unifying framework that will allow us to shed light to aspects of the populist phenomenon from a communication perspective that has not been studied so far by academic research.

A literature review on populism studies clearly shows that populism has been a contested term which has led to different conceptual definitions and research paths. Bonikowski and Gidron (2013) have provided a systematic review of research in the field discussing three major approaches: the first focuses on “populism as an ideology” (Mudde 2004, 2007; Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2012), the second considers populism as a “discursive style” (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005), and the third proposes an understanding of populism as a mode of “political strategy” (Roberts, 2006; Wayland, 2001; Jansen, 2011). There are many other important works which belong in one of the above categories and several sub-themes under each approach that make the study of populism quite challenging. Since research on populism has been primarily conducted by political scientists and sociologists, much attention has been given to establishing relationships about why and how populist phenomena emerge (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008) and setting the key criteria for populism, while the communication dimension of populism has been limited to the study of “discursive frames”. Discursive frames, important as they are, constitute aspects of a broader communication strategy that needs to be examined.

The thesis of this paper is the following: first, a strategic communication approach, in addition to the message strategy manifested in discursive frames, will allow us to examine in detail all aspects of populist communication and, second it will provide a theoretical framework for a dialogue between the “ideological” and the “discursive” approach enhancing our understanding of populism as “political strategy” implemented through a robust communication strategy. A strategic communication framework will provide a synthesis of concepts and tools to examine communicative parameters not
previously studied but it will also bridge and bring together research from the dominant three academic perspectives in an effort to better understand populist strategies.

**TOWARDS A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF POPULISM**

As Hallahan et al., (2007, p.1) stated, the concept of “strategic communication” can provide an integrating framework for the study of deliberate and purposeful communications: “Six relevant disciplines are involved in the development, implementation and assessment of communications by organizations: management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication and information/social marketing campaigns. ... at the beginning of the 21st century, these disciplines function in a postmodern environment that stresses more holistic approaches to examining organizational phenomena, while having to deal with increasingly fragmented audiences and delivery platforms.”

As “strategic communication” has been an emergent field, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) have formulated a more holistic definition of the term to include the public sphere because every purposive communication is enacted in the public sphere on behalf of a communication agent. Therefore, strategic communication is a multifaceted process not limited to internal stakeholders or organizational communication alone, but it rather encompasses the overall presence and interaction of a communication agent within the micro organizational and the macro societal level of what has been called the “public sphere” as a constantly evolving and dynamic area, influenced by a number of social and technological changes.

While there have been integrating frameworks in the past at the level of campaigning, such as the Integrated Marketing Communication approach, the strategic communication framework allows for further integration and synthesis, first at the level of communication disciplines and second at the level of communication practice. At a time when operational, technological and media convergence and the blurring of disciplinary boundaries is the dominant tendency in communication practice (Jenkins, 2006; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), a strategic communication analysis can offer the much needed multidisciplinary perspective, an integrated approach which has been already practiced by communication professionals. This is not an easy endeavour as there are many methodological and case specific considerations. However, an attempt to offer a preliminary framework for further research will allow us to examine new questions on the overall strategy and effectiveness of communication actors. “As an emergent field of study, strategic communication is unique in that it requires integration of concepts, theories, and methods from diverse disciplinary domains” (Werder, 2015, p.79)

The strategic communication framework proposed here includes the examination of key strategic and tactical aspects through a synthesis of concepts from all communication fields, highlighting the complexity of the analysis together with the challenges of mapping the phenomenon. Because there are many variants of populism that make generalizations difficult, the proposed framework will use examples primarily from Greece during the current financial crisis. Greece has been a fertile ground for many populist actors for a long period of time (Pappas, 2015) and since 2015 it has
been governed by a coalition of two populist parties, the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the right-wing Independent Greeks (ANEL).

A comprehensive literature review of academic research on populism in Greece (Papathanassopoulos et. al, 2016) has pointed to the gaps in research areas concerning populist actors as communicators as well as the need for further research on the relationship between Greek media and populism. This paper proposes a framework which aims to contribute to the study of populist actors as communicators through a strategic communication framework. Communication practitioners know that for a strategic communication strategy to be effective all historical, contextual, situational organizational and competition factors, as well as message strategies and media tactics have to be taken into consideration and carefully designed and implemented. Therefore, a strategic communication approach that is both theory and practice driven may enhance our understanding of populist communication proposing a multi-variable approach for further research. This framework of analysis will also allow for the account of aspects which have been described as “neglected mechanisms” in the study of populism, such as symbolic framing, charismatic leadership, polarization (Pappas, 2016). In fact, these are mostly elements of the overall communication strategy of a populist actor.

**APPLYING THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK TO POPULISM IN GREECE: A RESEARCH AGENDA**

**Historical-Contextual factors**

Cas Mudde, a leading authority in the study of populism, in his analysis of populist radical parties in Europe has identified and analyzed a number of “demand-side”, “external-supply” and “internal-supply” parameters contributing to a positive environment or a “breeding ground” (Mudde, 2007) for the emergence of populist parties. In the case of Greece, there is evidence that several of these conditions have been present for the last forty years, fertilizing the ground for the emergence of populist actors. (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015; Papathanassopoulos et al., 2016)

Many authors have identified key political, social and economic parameters that encourage populist strategies from both right and left of the political spectrum providing thus evidence for the existence of variant forms of populism in the same country. Also, the variation through time of the tone, intensity, and themes of populist rhetoric by the same political parties such as the case of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), and SYRIZA while in opposition and later in office (Pappas & Aslanidis 2015) supports the evidence drawn from empirical research in the US that points to the “dynamic and ideologically variable” nature of populism (Bonikowski, 2017).

Researchers have taken different approaches to studying populism in Greece, reflecting the three key schools of thought previously described, in other words placing emphasis either on ideational, discursive or strategy factors. Regarding the examination of contextual parameters, a large part of the discussion draws from the “cultural dualism” thesis which focuses on the problems and failures of reform and modernization placing “people” in the position of the “underdog” versus “the elite” (Diamandouros, 1994; Kalpadakis & Sotiropoulos, 2007). There is also a strong presence of a nationalist rhetoric combined with an anti-modernization discourse which has been largely influenced by the Greek Orthodox Church (Doxiadis and Matsaganis 2012). The failure of institutional and economic “modernization” as an issue requires
further study as this has been central to the debate regarding the prolonged Greek crisis, in the context of a larger discussion on the Europeanization issue (Featherstone 2007; 2014).

The question of Europeanization and the successful articulation of resentment by populist forces against the European elite, the TROIKA and the European institutions has been a dominant characteristic of populist rhetoric in Greece during the Greek financial crisis. Academic research testing empirically the impact of Euroscepticism on populism in Ireland and Poland has found “that the Europeanization of party competition is just part of the explanation for the emergence of populism and may not necessarily be linked to it. Political culture and the perception of a crisis possibly represent stronger factors, while both studies show that populist rhetoric is not just confined to the fringes but can also become a feature of the mainstream in party politics.” (FitzGibbon & Guerra 2010, p.289). In Greece the crisis and the austerity measures promoted the rhetoric of blame (Vasilopoulou et al., 2014)

While the “crisis” as a parameter has been considered in the analysis of populist parties in Europe (Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015), in the case of Greece the “crises” has largely defined the social and political context for the emergence of new political parties and political coalitions (Pappas, 2014). As Kriesi and Pappas (2015, p.2) explained, “Everywhere, the crisis contributed to the erosion of existing party systems...it caused tectonic changes in the established party system architecture (as, for instance, in Italy and Ireland) and even party system collapse (most obviously in the case of Greece)”. Pappas and Aslanidis have shown (2015, p.195) that political populism has been present in Greece before the crisis but the crisis “facilitated the reconstruction of new categories of the ‘people’ and their ‘foes’.

Furthermore, relevant to this issue is the discussion on globalization “... in particular, the lack of responsiveness of established parties to the plight of the ‘globalization losers’ provided a chance for their mobilization by the new populist right...” (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015, p.3). As a result, new cleavages were created that gave rise to populist parties along the axis of globalization “winners” and “losers”. In the case of Greece anti-globalization was manifested through an anti-European and “anti-bailout front” uniting populists under a nationalist rhetoric. (Tsatsanis, 2011; Pappas, 2014)

**Situation Analysis**

While macro level parameters are important in shaping favourable structural, ideological, and cultural conditions for the emergence of populism in a specific country, the particular situation defined by the national political context in relationship to the larger international context has to be taken into consideration. This level addresses the meso level and “external-supply side” parameters focusing on the political constraints and opportunities present in the political institutional context.

If one studies populism as a “strategic power game aiming to transform potential majorities into real ones by creating novel social cleavages ”(Pappas, 2012, p.2) a situation analysis will allow us to identify the opportunities that will offer the potential advantage to the organization as well as the obstacles that need to be overcome. Even crisis situations and obstacles can be turned into opportunities (Smith, 2013) when an organization takes advantage of the specific situation and handles issue management and risk management in a strategic way. A situation analysis based on strategic
communication planning has also to consider questions of mobilization and how grievances are articulated by the populist parties or movements. A key part of the situation analysis will refer to specific research questions regarding the state of political competition as well as mapping the media environment during the specific historical conjuncture. Therefore, political communication research is vital at this point. Together with the study of how populists successfully mobilize and communicate resentment one has to study how political competitors respond or fail to respond to populists.

Muis and Imerzeel (2017) have summarized key relevant literature on “external supply” and “internal supply side” research regarding populist radical right parties in Europe. While there is a substantial body of research on right wing populism, there is still research to be done on left wing populist parties and their mobilization strategies. The case of Greece offers a unique, in many respects, example of a left-wing and a right-wing governing populist coalition in Europe where party ideology differences have not posed any obstacles or major internal conflicts, creating thus an example of a harmonious collaboration between two seemingly different political actors, as shown by the consensus formed during their first three years in office. This successful coalition has questioned in practice the role played by “thick ideologies” and dominant “discursive frames” and poses many interesting questions for further research on the criteria of convergence among populist parties.

The organization

In the context of strategic planning in political marketing, the SWOT model allows us to examine both the internal Strengths and Weaknesses and external Threats and Opportunities for a populist organization. Majorities are organized by either new or established organizations; therefore a SWOT analysis will help us understand the organizational aspects of populist actors, such as their capacity to mobilize and the leadership characteristics of “the charismatic leader” often cited as a major criterion of populist strategies (Weyland, 2001; Pappas, 2012).

The question of organizational strength has been researched and most findings conclude that this is not a crucial factor. Instead, they stress the fact that the luck of funding, the minimal structure or lack of organizational strength forces populists to rely on the media to increase their visibility and their calls of mobilization (Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008, 2014). This suggests that communication strategy plays a more critical role for the emergence of populist actors compared to traditional or established political parties. Leveraging the power of social media then could be another parameter to investigate in terms of its organizational and mobilization capacity, balancing the power or lack thereof strong organizational structures. Testing questions raised by “internal political marketing” on resourcing, volunteering and other internal activities will help us to define the organizational strengths and weakness of a populist organization.

Another point that has been stressed by Mazzoleni (2008, pp. 49, 90) is that “personal charisma and media savvy” play a part in the construction of populist movements arguing that in situations of social and political malaise “both political and media factors form a unique alliance”. In the case of Greece one has to examine how the particular media system characterized by clientelism and special relationships with the government (Papathanassopoulos, 2004) has responded to populism and how “media populism” (Krâmer, 2014) correlates to political populism.
Political Branding

Political branding is a key area of political marketing research which can extend our understanding of what makes established political brands effective or ineffective and how populist contenders build successful political party or political leader brands to increase their influence. (Needham, 2006; Consgrove, 2012; Needham & Smith, 2015; Scammell, 2015). As Needham (2006, p. 179) notes “In politics and the marketplace, voters and consumers must negotiate the conflicts between loyalty to trusted brands and the novelty of the new, while making sense of complex and conflicting product information”. Based on the same analysis, which underlines the significance of exploring the relationship between political parties as brands and political loyalty, Needham stresses that this approach will help us to explain voter decision making in “an environment where products (policies) are fairly fluid... (and secondly) in an environment of informational complexity” (Needham 2006, p. 180).

The application of this approach cannot be limited to the study of incumbent strategies or within the context of election campaigning alone. Brand building is a continuous process affecting the entire procedure of relationship marketing, image and reputation management throughout the electoral cycle. For example, drawing from research on the branding of political leaders we can further examine the leadership communication of successful populist leaders, since leadership characteristics feature prominently in a large part of academic research on populism. (Busby, 2009)

It has been shown that effective political branding of well-established mainstream parties can explain their long-term appeal and longevity in power. A study based on cultural branding (Smith and Speed, 2011) has successfully linked cultural brands to political marketing showing the importance of studying political parties or political leaders as examples of successful cultural branding in a specific political market. In the case of Greece, one may argue that the political branding and positioning of SYRIZA as a novel “anti-establishment” political party drawing from and breaking at the same time apart from the political and cultural legacy of PASOK was an attempt to both reposition itself and benefit from themes and messages well established in the Greek political market by the political hegemony of PASOK in the country since it was first elected in 1981.

Publics and Audiences

Understanding the nature of contemporary publics, stakeholders and campaign audiences is a very important aspect of strategic planning. Political marketing practitioners employ political market research methods that include segmentation techniques, polling, voter profiling, experimental research and big data as well as several qualitative methods in the effort to understand public opinion and political behaviour. It is important to note however that political communication research has identified the challenges of “audience fragmentation” which takes place together with “channel multiplication” (Gurevitch et al., 2009).

In studying populism, one has to examine how different audiences are addressed and who are defined as the “people” among the constituents as opposed to the “elite”. This is important not only from a message point of view, but it is also crucial from a policy perspective when populist parties are in office. As Cas Mudde (2015) observes “Populism’s black and white views and uncompromising stand leads to a polarised society – for which, of course, both sides share responsibility – and its majoritarian
extremism denies legitimacy to opponents’ views and weakens the rights of minorities. While left-wing populism is often less exclusionary than right-wing populism, the main difference between them is not whether they exclude, but whom they exclude, which is largely determined by their accompanying ideology (e.g. nationalism or socialism)

Technological advances and big data analysis have been embraced by communication practitioners and researchers. The Internet and social media were heralded as providing a holistic communication framework to the benefit of strategic communication addressing all stakeholders. However, academic studies have also pointed to the possible dangers of “datafication” (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015) and the threats to individual privacy. The current case under investigation regarding the breach of data by Facebook, involving third parties and election campaigns, as revealed through congressional hearings, sheds a dark light on the possible misuses of data mining and profiling on behalf of political parties and organizations. This issue raises serious questions on micro-targeting employing public opinion manipulation techniques but very little is known about which of the mainstream or populist political parties have benefited from such methods. As Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) have pointed out, this method of communication is “private” lacking transparency, threatening at the same time the very notion of the public sphere. Moreover, it is a secret form of communication which may take the form of dark propaganda, fake news, psychological manipulation and misinformation that cannot be publicly debated.

**Action and Response Strategies**

Effective strategic communication involves a number of proactive and reactive strategies (Smith, 2013). While there are many differences between corporate and political public relations (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2013) one can find many successful applications of public relations strategies in political parties and organizations. For example, we need to investigate how populist parties are engaged in activism and symbolic action. Proactive strategies may be commonly used by all political parties, but there are specific strategies such as the use of offensive action, attack and embarrassment against the incumbents, the moral enemies and the “elite” that need to be investigated in the context of populist strategies. Additionally, as it was noted in the case of the SYRIZA rhetoric regarding their negotiation strategy with the “institutions” for the bailout program in 2015, a key question worth investigating is how and to what extent they adopted “strategic ambiguity” as a key strategy in their first year in office.

**Message Strategy**

Following the well-established research tradition of the discursive approach, there are several studies engaging in discourse analysis of both left wing and right-wing rhetoric (Stavrakakis, 2002; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014) that have identified the major message themes and ideological variations of Greek populist actors. Populist discursive frames constitute a major component of analysis revealing the content, ideological influence and moral dichotomies of populism; however, discourse analysis can explain only a part of the overall message strategy of a populist actor.

Drawing from communication theory and public relations research, Hallahan (1999, p.224) rightly emphasizes that “In developing programs, public relations professionals fundamentally operate as frame strategists, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibility should be posed to achieve
favourable outcomes for clients. Framing decisions are perhaps the most important strategic choices made in a public relations effort”. Research on populism will benefit from a broader analysis of framing strategies and how these have been used in populist communication.

For example, the analysis of populist frames can be enhanced when examined in the context of “issue framing” and in connection to “agenda building” processes with the media, which are part of the overall political strategic process. In addition to using populist moralizing frames along the line of “us” versus the “others” and the good “people” versus the bad “elite”, populist language very often uses doublespeak, defamation and propaganda techniques, such as slanting and name calling that need further empirical examination. Using ethical language is a core recommendation in the practice of strategic public relations. As Smith (2013, p. 211) points out “doublespeak is outright dishonest language meant to obscure the real meaning behind the words”. Also, defamatory language in the form of libel and slander should be avoided based on both ethical considerations and effective communication principles. It appears that name calling against the enemies using negative labels such as “traitors”, “terrorists”, “Nazis”, the use of defamation techniques against the opponents and doublespeak in association with adopting strategic ambiguity have been important aspects of populist communication that require further investigation.

Regarding non-verbal and visual communication, the use of symbols, such as displaying the national flag by right wing populist parties and the dress code adopted by party officials based either on nationalist military themes or on popular “plain folks” symbolism (for example refusal to wear a tie signifying an anti-elite stand) together with kinesics and vocalics or paralanguage are elements of the nonverbal message strategy which adds to our understanding of populist manifestations.

In a broader context, if modern populism is a form of “democratic illiberalism” (Pappas, 2016) one can legitimately raise normative questions regarding the communication strategies used by populist actors as they connect to specific outcomes. For example, in a context of liberal democracy the “persuasion model” and the “dialogue” model of communication are both acceptable against the propaganda model which is “associated with half-truths and hidden agendas” (Smith, 2013, p.173). In other words, the empirical research of populist frames may present certain methodological advantages without carrying a normative load as Aslanidis has argued (2015) but the entire communication discipline from Aristotle to date has incorporated normative considerations in communication practice, especially since this practice leads to specific outcomes. This is certainly a long discussion that cannot be addressed within the limits of this paper.

Communication tactics

Populist organizations use interpersonal, organizational, traditional, digital and social media in their communication programs that need to be studied. A recent cross-national study (Engesser et al., 2017) on four European countries (Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and the UK) exploring the relationship between populism and social media has found that populist actors use a “hybrid communication strategy”; they manifest themselves in social media in a “fragmented form; the social media logic allows for the use of strong language and facilitates the application of “personal action frames”. Another interesting study (Krzyżanowski & Ledin 2017) on right wing populist
discourse in Austria and Sweden focuses on what they call an online “uncivil society” being the “essence of populism” and promoting views that undermine the core values of liberal democracy. Zeri (2014) has examined how crisis discourse was framed in the Greek political blogosphere among extreme groups but there is a lot more to be investigated in that area. This is certainly a field of research that requires more attention with the current expansion of online strategies at a time when social media are criticized for allowing or engaging in “post-truth” practices.

CONCLUSIONS
The key aim of this paper was to address a gap in academic research regarding the communication strategies of populist actors. The study of populist phenomena has followed so far, an either/or logic focusing on ideational, discursive or political strategy parameters and has paid little attention to their communication aspects. The argument presented here is that a theory and practice driven strategic communication framework for the study of populism will enhance our understanding of populist phenomena bringing together concepts and insights from all relevant communication fields and advancing an interdisciplinary dialogue in academic research. Strategic communication is an indispensable strategy of populist actors and requires further investigation. The conceptual and theoretical framework this paper proposed and applied to Greek populism provides a solid outline of a new research agenda on interrelated themes and communication variables that can be empirically tested with specific populist actors and in a country specific social and political environment. Because it draws from many disciplines it can utilize the appropriate research and evaluation methods used in all relevant fields and contribute to a better understanding of populist strategies.
REFERENCES


