

True to its moniker, this little over 100-pages “long” *Very short introduction* aims at unravelling the concept of populism to the literate public (particularly non-specialist in the field), while arguing for a balanced evaluation of this phenomenon as part of democratic societies. However, being “short” doesn’t make Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s book less complex. On the contrary, the book raises fundamental claims about the core concepts of populism, about populism’s implications for democracy, as well as about strategies to cope with populist politics.

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Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömback, Claes H. de Vreese (Eds.) (2017). *Populist political communication in Europe*. New York-London: Routledge, pp. 402, ISBN 9781138614826, 9781138654792.

It is rather uncommon in the social sciences for research and associated publications to be carried out precisely at the moment when Europe is on the brink of falling into the “eye of the storm” of the phenomenon which is being studied. This is due both to objective factors, such as researchers’ limited interest in the rapidly evolving world, and to organizational impediments, such as lengthy editorial procedures. This might actually be one of the reasons for the decreasing prestige of academia and academic knowledge in many European countries; whereas the media analyze the situation within minutes, the results of academic studies are usually several years in the making. This is why it should be appreciated that the book being reviewed here hits the mark in terms of its timing and content, defining populism with respect to the three essential elements of political communication: political actors, society and the media.¹

Populism the subject of research for the authors of the book *Populist political communication in Europe* which, even by Western European standards, has coincided exceptionally well with the time of electoral transformations of many countries of the Old Continent, anti-immigrant movements, Brexit, Donald Trump’s success

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in the US and the dynamic media transformations accompanying these events. The book offers a kind of a response to the challenges Europe is facing, helping to better understand the nature and local peculiarities of these challenges (the authors openly declare on page 8 that their book is the answer to the current “populist times”). In this respect, this book should attract the attention of researchers on communication, as well as those dealing with the European Union, political systems and the psychology of politics.

The authors of *Populist political communication in Europe* choose a few challenges they examine in relative detail in the first chapter, namely to characterize (1) populism as a political style/strategy; (2) populism and its ideological associations (right-wing vs. left-wing); (3) the media as a marketing tool for populists, and (4) the influence of political communication on society. All of them are significant and well embedded in the three elements of the system that the authors have placed at the core of their considerations, that is, the media, political actors and society. Given the current situation, several equally important issues could probably be added to those that the authors have decided to tackle (e.g., populism and post-truth, or its influence on the philosophy and political practices of different movements²). Since reality is way ahead of the imagination of many scholars, though, this task does not seem feasible. These additional issues are more than likely to arise when the authors of this research project actually implement it; after all, their book is a theoretical foundation for such a project, a compilation of sources and a prelude of sorts. The publication reviews studies on populism and populist communication in European countries after 1995, and is a starting point for further research.

The book encompasses six parts: The first, which consists of two chapters is a theoretical introduction. In the four successive sections the specific nature of populist phenomena is analyzed in different parts of the Old Continent, followed by conclusions based on studies carried out in almost two dozen European countries. At the end the cross-national findings can be found in two additional chapters.

The first two chapters present a standpoint in a long-standing discussion on what populism actually is, its nature and sources, the attitudes it produces and, in light of the above, how this field of politics can be examined in academic terms. We have walked a long path from the self-determination of the populist movements in the United States and Russian Empire in the 19th century, through an abundant selection of studies carried out in the 20th century (including the most renowned and popular of these, authored by the late Margaret Canovan), to the most frequently quoted concepts proposed at the turn of the millennium when “populist times” gained impetus practically throughout the world (Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Daniele Albertazzi, Duncan McDonnell, Ben Stanley, Ernesto Laclau, Jan Jagers & Stefaan Walgrave). The authors draw from these sources abundantly to form a theoretical concept for studies that have already been carried out, and those

² This topic is addressed by Chantal Mouffe in her recent book entitled *For a left populism* (2018).

which are still being developed. They have clearly adopted the research perspective characteristic of media studies/communication studies, thereby developing an original concept which makes a novel qualitative contribution to studies on populism. It can therefore provide a significant component of further analysis in the area of political communication and the media.

The attempt to grasp the peculiar nature of populism at the level of each country was a logistically impressive task, which was successfully accomplished. Much is owed in this respect to the intergovernmental COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) program, which facilitates the integration of academic circles from 36 countries in Europe. A number of meetings and consultations held by the partners within the “populist faction” of the undertaking (COST Action IS1308) have resulted in a comprehensive research project, one of the first outcomes of which is the publication discussed here.

The remaining chapters are a conclusion and collation of the last two decades of research on populism in every country, yielding a diverse and extremely comprehensive picture of populism across the continent. Without a doubt, this is the largest compendium of knowledge on definitions and studies of populism in Europe. It can offer a guideline pointing readers to different concepts, publications and researchers dealing with detailed matters in a given area/country/part of Europe. In every chapter, the authors try to identify the gaps in research so far, indicating the existing empirical deficiencies and encouraging readers to fill them in. This is a highly valuable feature of this publication and a kind of stimulus, or inspiration, for broadly understood academic circles, which frequently lack a thorough review of literature which would allow them to identify what they already know, and what else they should examine. This book is a satisfactory response to such needs and, more importantly, does so on a European scale.

The matter of how conscientious the authors were in painting the picture and the background of local political arenas and their populist context is of course debatable. Nevertheless, the principal goal of the publication, namely presenting a picture of European populism and embracing country-specific angles and features, has been accomplished in a manner commanding respect for its methodological order and conscientiousness.

It is worth asking the question of whether or not the simple, geographical division of successive chapters into the North, South, East and West of Europe was the most appropriate in this case. This is not to deny the fact that one can see the specific nature of populist phenomena painted by individual chapters in the framework of the four presentations of the issue. The authors write about the identified common denominators of right-wing populism in the North (four countries), left-wing populism in the South (six countries), the anti-elitist and anti-party aspect of West European populism (seven countries) and its issue-specific variations in the East (seven countries). The question remains of whether or not the broadly understood specific character of political life in Scandinavia, the Mediterranean, or the

post-communist East restrains possible conclusion-making which could actually break through certain mental barriers here. Similar concerns pertain also to the specific character of political arenas in individual countries, which cannot always possibly be “pigeonholed” in the contexts of broader regions. All these facts, factors and contexts make this publication recommended reading for researchers studying politics and the media; it is worth taking a look at, or even becoming thoroughly familiar with it in the case of those with similar research interests, all the more so in view of the several years of “populist times.” The future will bring more arguments in favor of reading this book.

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