Populist landscapes

The European political landscape of the last decade has been home to numerous political figures that have stood out by virtue of their personality and their voicing of popular discontent. These include the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen, Jörg Haider, Christoph Blocher, Pim Fortuyn and Silvio Berlusconi, all of whom are among the more recent manifestations of the populist political climate affecting much of contemporary Europe, as discussed in the introduction to this volume.

Independent of their ideology, the leaders of populist movements and parties often have features in common that clearly contribute to their popularity and political appeal: in most cases, they are charismatic figures and possess a great deal of media savvy. Furthermore, as Gianfranco Pasquino notes in his chapter, ‘Populist leaders do not represent the people, rather they consider themselves – and succeed in being considered – an integral part of the people. They are of the people’.

These features usually combine to assure a lasting public notoriety and intense media visibility that leaders use as political capital in the pursuit of their goals in their domestic arenas. This has certainly been the case with Le Pen, who has succeeded in attracting (and deploying to his advantage) the criticism of the press, while Austria’s Jörg Haider’s personal glamour and controversial stances have brought him public attention both at home and abroad. A somewhat similar communications strategy was employed by Pim Fortuyn in striking sensitive chords of popular concern (for example, in relation to Muslim immigration) and exhibiting a glitzy outspokenness that assured him constant media interest. In fact, we can say that almost all populist leaders display flamboyant personalities and pursue highly contentious agendas that attract media scrutiny.

Personal charisma and media savvy have thus played a significant part in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements. Surprisingly, most recent political science research has largely disregarded them both on
the grounds that charisma is not measurable, while media scholarship implements analytical categories that do not easily marry with the systemic approach of most political science work. An examination of the existing literature on populism confirms that ‘little has been written on how the media work as the initiators or catalysts of public sentiments, how media content may voice sectional populist claims’ and on how the media can be turned into powerful, if unwitting, allies of populist leaders (Mazzoleni, 2003: 2).

Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?

Looking at the most well-known cases of populist phenomena in Europe, we can see that leaders and movements often seem to rely on some sort of ‘media complicity’. In many instances, the European media appear to have contributed to a legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders. ‘Underdog’ leaders who strive to gain public attention have regularly proved able to exploit the media’s proclivity towards anything that ‘breaks the routine’ in political arenas, by resorting to communication strategies that ensure media coverage. The result of this ‘supply and demand’ relationship is an increased visibility and significant reverberation of the populist message among a wide audience. In other words, the media, intentionally or not, may serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes.

Clearly, no assumption is made here of causal links between the media and the spread of populism. Nonetheless, if we examine the processes of media-driven representation and the symbolic construction of favourable opinion climates – and of populist leadership, credo and action – we find that the media provide a significant degree of support for the rise of populist phenomena. The media factor, of course, is by no means the only independent variable here. That is to say, media action cannot be separated from the other structural factors considered in this volume, such as the nature of the political system and the specific features of the social and cultural political climates.

The example of social and political malaise – a common precondition for the growth of anti-political sentiments – shows that both political and media factors form a unique alliance, whose catalyst may be found in the country’s political culture at a given time. This malaise is certainly not provoked by the media, but the media do play a role in disseminating it, either by simply keeping it on a country’s public agenda, or by spreading political mistrust and a mood of fatalistic disengagement – all elements that can be easily and promptly exploited by populist politicians.

Furthermore, systemic phenomena such as the decline of a mass party interact to a very significant extent with media-driven processes, yielding new realities such as ‘media parties’ and, in our case, populist movements.