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Transforming Fears into the Populist Communication

Book Review: Agnieszka Stępińska, Artur Lipiński, Dorota Piontek, Agnieszka Hess, *Populist Political Communication in Poland. Political Actors – Media – Citizens*, **Logos Verlag, pp. 243.**

Political communication mirrors essential features of a nation's political culture, constructing a battlefield for competing identities and narratives. Therefore, democracies require independent media and alternative information flows to endure stability and effectiveness. On the other hand, electoral campaigns promote imaginations of conflicts, frontiers, and differences as voters seek trustworthy representatives of their interests. There is no identification without communication, and – as a result – there is no chance for electoral success. Communication cultivates the political landscape for social mobilization and defines conditions of democratic competition. Alongside the rise of social media and ongoing deep mediatization of politics, it is why populism has become that powerful instrument of political engagement (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020; Wawrzyński, 2017; Wojczewski, 2020).

The populist turn empowered suppressed conflicts and canceled ideas, as well as it has introduced new right-wing movements to an existing battlefield of identities. Unlimited access to social media opened a platform to transform individual hidden fears into collective political emotions controlled by a new wave of populists. While Western democracies balanced it with deep-rooted constitutionalism, civic traditions, and media pluralism, Eastern European countries struggled with their unrecovered burden of transformations, intense polarization, and anti-elite sentiments. Discussing the roots of populism in Poland, Stuart Shields (2012, p. 376) wrote, "the populist backlash to neoliberalism utilizes a traditional conservative mind-set by turning against any form of socio-political order that is not considered a substantial enough contrast to liberal democracy, or indeed to neoliberalism

itself, as it was this combination that formulated the basis of the current post-communist order". Therefore, the populists used empowerment of suppressed fears to present themselves as representatives of a pure rule by the people and as "being more (truly) democratic than the (liberal) democrat" (Vincent, 2011, p. 13).

This context of fragile social conditions explains why investigations of populism in Poland are important. In their book, Agnieszka Stępińska, Artur Lipiński, Dorota Piontek, and Agnieszka Hess present a multi-dimensional approach toward its impact on Polish politics, political discourses, and public opinion. The authors claimed that "looking at populism from a communication and media perspective offers unique insights into the functioning of populism, and contribute to the growing literature that tries to explain the mechanism and circumstances fostering populism, in particular, social, cultural, political, and media environments" (Stępińska et al., 2020, p. 50). While they focus on practices of populist communication and its direct influence on ongoing political processes, we may apply their observations to assume future results of populist campaigning, as one-sided and emotional messages have rather long-term than immediate effect on voters' preferences or attitudes (Jäger, 2020, p. 849). Moreover, populist movements may reshape the landscape of political communication as they proliferate simplified explanations and open society for future biased arguments (Petersen & Arceneaux, 2020).

The book discusses three major fields of Poland's populism – right-wing political parties, distribution of populist narratives in media, and social reception of populist ideas. This comprehensive approach results in seven chapters that follow the opening description of the theoretical frameworks. In each chapter, the authors address new research questions, and their answers lead them to a conclusion on deep populist features of Polish political culture. Stępińska and colleagues (2020, pp. 211-212) claim that "although there is no one universal set of socio-demographic determinants of populism in Poland, one may observe a relatively high level of support for anti-establishment political actors since early 1990s. The anti-elitist postulates, expansive social welfare state, and a desire to defend a national identity based on Catholicism seem to resonate well with sociopolitical sentiments stemming from systemic transformation, historical, and religious experiences of Poles. The reasons behind the electoral success of populist political actors are rooted in long-term social, economic, and political issues, resulting in a low level of trust in public institutions and mainstream political organizations".

The study explains why populist right-wing movements have become leading forces in Poland's politics and how they changed political communication. The authors used their detailed investigation of "refugee crisis" narratives to portray relationships between 'the people', 'the elites' and 'the others' – as a result, they explain how political phobias have become a core of 2015 electoral campaigns and how it enabled populists to pray on people's fears. Afterward, Stępińska and fellows consider media transmission of populist narratives and the role of journalists in the interpretation of their claims, explaining how electoral campaigning promoted populist messages in Poland. Therefore, the authors notice that

media played a crucial role in promoting an emotional narrative on the clash between the people and the privileged elites. Finally, they focused on the social reception of populism – Stępińska and colleagues (2020, pp. 194-195) stated that "modern populism in Poland is fostered by social demands, discontent and protest against the establishment. (…) populist attitudes are most strongly determined by levels of education. Those better educated tend to have lowest populist tendencies, however, there has been a significant rise of populism in that group in the last decade".

The emergence of a new wave of Polish right-wing populism cannot be discussed without a comparative context – the authors considered features shared with other European populist movements and national characteristics which mark the Polish case as unique. Stępińska and colleagues (2020, p. 207) emphasized that "In Poland, right-wing populism stimuli strengthen anti-rich and pro-ordinary people attitudes. This is particularly interesting because anti-immigrant cues worked in a country where there is not much of an immigration issue". Therefore, it suggests that Polish populism reflects narrative experiences of the international movement, where reluctance to immigrants is one of the politically incorrect ideas – conservative Poles have internalized rejection of post-colonial negative memories. They introduced it into the nation's political culture. As a result, in Poland, the Western populist empowerment of new-type racism and supremacism raised above a renouncement of the 'pedagogics of shame' (Schmelz, 2008, pp. 26-27).

Yet, populist revisionism fuels shared fears and biased explanations of politics as it confronts the empowerment of suppressed ideas with a 'repressive' nature of political correctness and a 'restricted' language of inclusion. Moreover, it benefits from challenged oligopolies of political story-telling and simplified access to (social) media, as populists have modified meanings of sharing and telling as acts of broader restorative truth (Hoskins, 2010, pp. 271-272). Populist communication strategy copies and imitates patterns of post-trauma narrative activization as it aims at storytellers' empowerment and reduction of their isolation (Kahana, Harel & Kahana, 2005, p. 143). However, for new-wave populists being a survivor means to cultivate suppressed or canceled political ideas and to oppose against limitations of free speech – their narratives seize control of democratic promotion of civic role-models as they distort codes of national heroism in divided societies (Wawrzyński & Marszałek-Kawa, 2018, p. 108). This strategy depends on effective political communication, in which a critical factor is the repetition of the message and habituation of so far suppressed ideas, even if it targets only a part of the society (Stępińska et al., 2020, p. 208).

The power of right-wing populism comes from a severe redefinition of violence and trauma – populists offer their voters a perspective in which any limitation of their opinion is pictured as critical, anti-democratic repression. In populist narratives, the empowerment of minorities or the language of inclusion traumatizes those who are not eager to deal with their privileged identities. Their fears and sentiments transform into the power of (politicized) trauma that craves justice, and empowerment like other repressed groups expressed a need for healing in the past (Kulska, 2017, pp. 32-33). The rise of social media helped populists

with a proliferation of this perspective as they could challenge elites as gatekeepers of ideas and representations (Griffin & Bolen, 2009, p. 594). However, traditional media adapted to these changes – Stępińska and colleagues (2020, p. 211) concluded that the "2015 double election, or double election campaign seemed to add fuel to the media coverage of populist political communication. Nevertheless, we may find more statements targeting the elites than anti-elitist populism across the media and across time (election and non-election period) in Poland".

Agnieszka Stępińska, Artur Lipiński, Dorota Piontek, and Agnieszka Hess enable the Reader to understand how right-wing populism had made its way to Poland's political mainstream and how it transformed media communication to highlight its strengths. Their book is an outstanding lecture on Polish political culture that explains the emergence of new-wave populist movements and discusses its impact on citizens. Finally, it is a complex study on weaknesses of unconsolidated democracies which lack institutional traditions and an attachment to constitutional rules. The authors unveil few soft spots of post-communist identity politics in Poland, and as a result, they show the Reader some possible explanations why Poles cannot escape a pitfall of populism. Moreover, the book considers processes that have made Poland's populism even stronger after 2015 (Niebylski, 2020, p. 178) and may affect Polish politics in the future as it sensitizes citizens for simplified understandings or biased arguments.

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