PERCEPTIONS OF POPULISM:
ANALYSIS OF MEDIA DISCOURSE IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to analyze how the term 'populism' is used in the Latvian public discourse, by examining the content of the largest daily newspaper "Diena" in three different time periods. As it emerges from the analysis, populism has gained a different meaning in the daily usage in contrast with the more established understanding conveyed by the academic literature. In the media, populism is used to a refer to wide range of politicians, different parties and policy initiatives from diverse ideological spectra. Most often, however, populism is employed to describe rhetorics or communication style whose primary goal is to attract public attention.

INTRODUCTION

Populism today is one of the most challenging concepts on the agenda of comparative politics; however, its scientific validity has been periodically questioned. So far, sporadic observations have led to highlight the existence of two distinct understandings of the term, employed by academics and the media or the public discourse. In the political science, there seems to be a consensus seeking to conceptualize populism as a thin centered ideology that contrasts the 'bad elite' against the 'good people' (Mudde 2004, 2013; Canovan 2002). If the academic field has been able (to a definite extent) to come to an agreement about the constitutive features of populism, then the public discourse seems to be less monolithic in this regard. In the public domain (as far as Latvia is concerned), populism appears to a be attached to variety of phenomena ranging from specific politicians, political parties and up to policy proposals and initiatives whose realization in the current reality has been questioned (for example, duplication of minimum wage or introduction of state-funded higher education). This sporadic conclusion has recently been confirmed also by empirical evidence.

This article has been inspired by the study conducted by Tim Bale, Stijn van Kessel, and Paul Taggart (2011) – the first systematic attempt to measure the usage of populism in the public discourse, based on a case analysis of print media in the United Kingdom. Their findings indicate that "populism is used for a wide range of seemingly unrelated actors across the world, that it is hard to find any logic in the set of policies that are associated with the term, and that populism is, more or less explicitly, regularly used in a pejorative way" (Bale, van Kessel, Taggart 2011: 1). Authors also conclude that, in order to research the different

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usages of populism in the media, more studies should be carried out, including different case analyses. One of the limitations of the mentioned study is the time-span. The analysis covers only three months in two consecutive years – 2007 and 2008. Secondly, the study particularly examines the situation only in the UK, and thus the generalization and application of its results is limited. In order to provide more grounded conclusions, more research is needed to trace the problem also in very different political systems and contexts. This article is a first attempt to expand the research on different meanings of populism and to examine the situation within the Latvian media discourse. There are several important reasons why the Latvian case could be an attractive example to study. First, although we experience a gradual change, the research agenda on populism (for example, the rise and success of radical right-wing populist parties) in general is still dominated by case studies of Western European countries. We still have very little data on the appearance of populism in Eastern European political systems. Second, former post-communist states offer a fertile ground for populism to emerge, mostly because of the economic backsliding, high levels of corruption, and a constant public distrust towards representative institutions.

The main goal of this article is to answer the question; how does the Latvian mass media employ the concepts of 'populism' and 'populist'? To answer this question, I analyze the content of the Latvian print media. The time span covered is from 1994[1] till 2012. In order to eliminate the possibility of a bias that might occur if the years are chosen purposefully, a simple random sampling method is used to select three different years for the analysis. The article proceeds as follow. The first part outlines the usage of populism in the academic discipline in relation with the currently emerging consensus about what features are central to this concept. Further, the article proceeds to introduce the methodological framework. And finally, the third section is empirical and analyzes the results by showing that the usage of populism in the media is highly diverse and inconsistent. The article ends with a broader discussion about the conflicting usages of populism and the effects that this inconsistency may further cause to the overall validity of the concept. Without escaping the possible answer, the article provocatively asks whether we need to call for a revision of the usage of populism in academia in order to adjust to the public practice.

1. THE USAGE OF POPULISM IN THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

More than forty years ago, Peter Wiles (1969: 166) wrote: "To each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds". The relevance of this claim is still topical. Even today "scholars have questioned whether the alleged populist movements and parties throughout time and across the world really do have much in common" (Bale, van Kessel, Taggart 2011: 3–4). The academic interest in the concept of populism originated with the emergence of radical right-wing parties in the Western European democracies in the 1990s. Since then, the academic literature has experienced reluctance to offer clear definitions

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[1]   The database used for the analysis provides access to articles starting from 1994.

because there were lively debates about the necessary and sufficient features that should be met in order to classify a political party or other actors as populist or not. However, the recent decade has shown considerable progress. The literature on populism has literally exploded with empirical as well as theoretically justifiable definitional attempts to clarify this contested concept. Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart (2011: 4) have observed that "there is no agreement on defining populism, but there are attempts at definition and there appears to be a proliferation of this sort of work and general debate about populism in recent years".

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013: 149) further emphasize that "populism is usually defined on the basis of quite incongruous and even opposite attributes. Moreover, the very notion of populism tends to receive a negative connotation in both the scholarly and public debate, since it is commonly analyzed as a pathological phenomenon." Thus, in the common usage, populism is very often employed in a pejorative manner (Bale, van Kessel, Taggart 2011: 5). Seeking to overcome this confusion about what populism *is,* this study seeks inspiration from scholarly contributions that have been able to provide encompassing and influential definitions of populism that have been acknowledged by the academic community.

According to the scholarly literature, it is possible to distinguish among three major understandings of populism. It can be defined as a particular organizational form, political style or strategy, and a thin-centered ideology. Those who conceptualize populism as a specific model of party organization, usually emphasize the importance of "a strong leader who seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Kurt Weyland 2001: 14; see also Di Tella 1997). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013: 154) have criticized this definition, pointing out that "many phenomena that are broadly considered populist either lack a charismatic leader (for example, the original US Populists) or are organized in well-established parties (such as populist radical right parties in Europe)". Thus, this approach puts too much emphasis on the role of leader and a loose organizational structure, which is not fully consistent with the empirical reality.

Populism can be defined also as a particular style of "doing politics". This approach mainly sees populism as an attempt to propose simple solutions to complex problems (see, for example, Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Taguieff, 1995). Although this understanding dominates the public consciousness, yet it is challenged by a number of scholars. Paul Taggart (2000) has argued that the populist style is often confused with attempts to simply be popular and to approach a large proportion of society. Dan Hough and Michael Koß (2009) have tried to draw a borderline between populism and opportunism, arguing that one thing that populism is not is the articulation of popular but impractical policies aiming to mobilize electoral support. They argue that this is nothing but opportunism.

Populism can be defined also as a thin-centered ideology. Considering the most recent contributions in the study of populism, this approach has gained the most notable attention (see, for example, Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013; Bale, van Kessel, Taggart 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange, van der Brug, 2012; Stanley 2008). Also this article relies on the definition elaborated by

Cas Mudde (2004; 2013) who considers populism as *"a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale (*general will*) *of the people"* (italics in original).

The notion of the thin-centered ideology was originally developed by Michael Freeden (1996). Ideologies, such as nationalism or feminism, that fall in the category of "thin-centered" ideologies, "habitually appear in combination with very different concepts and ideological traditions that are key to their capacity to make sense to larger constituencies" (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013: 150). "This, however, means that populism in itself does not provide an all-encompassing agenda of how society should be governed" (van Kessel 2013: 177). On the contrary, thick-centered ideologies "have dense morphology that has several core and adjunct concepts that are crucial for developing an overarching network of ideas that offers answers to all the political issues confronting society" (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013: 150). Previously cited Mudde's definition includes the minimal number of attributes that are necessary and sufficient (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013: 149) to define some phenomena as populist. According to the proposed definition, populism has two central characteristics. Namely, "all manifestations of populism are based on the moral distinction between 'the pure people" and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013: 151). More importantly, these two features should always be viewed in tandem. "They both must be met in order to classify a particular phenomenon as populist. Hence, actors or parties that employ only an anti-elitist rhetoric should not be categorized as populist" (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013: 151). Although Mudde's definition is continuing to have a prominent impact on the research on populism, it is not entirely without problems. The major challenge continuing to preoccupy scholars is the operationalization of the abstract concept 'the people'. Who are those 'people' and how to measure their presence in the discourse of populist or potentially populist parties? Van Kessel (2013: 177), among others, has emphasized that "it is not self-evident who belongs to these 'ordinary people', and populist parties are often not very specific about their target audience".

Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008: 3) have proposed a similar definition, claiming that the core of populism consists of a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. Albertazzi and Mueller (2013: 348), who use this definition in their study, further emphasize that "foreigners, those perceived to be on the margins of society (such as homosexuals) and those who are not 'common people' are seen as 'others' since they do not belong to the community on either ethnic or cultural grounds, or due to their status as members of the elite". Yet, some scholars have argued that, although dislike towards immigrants and various minority groups is a definitive feature of radical right-wing populist parties, it cannot be considered a 'constitutive component of populism' (Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug 2012, p. 3), because populism can be practiced by parties from different ideological spectrum (this is were the notion of 'thin-centered' is relevant).

Thus, in spite of various competing conceptualizations, the last decade has showed a gradually emerging consensus that populism is a thin-centered ideology that glorifies the people and despises elites. Before I turn to examine how populism is used in the Latvian mass media, the next section will outline the methodological framework.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article examines how the terms 'populism' and 'populist' are used in the Latvian print media, particularly considering the content of the largest national daily newspaper 'Diena'. I consider this media outlet to be a representative source to trace the different usages of populism within the overall Latvian public discourse. A simple random sampling method was used to select three different years in the period from 1994 to 2012. By randomly selecting years for analysis I try to escape the possible bias that might appear if the periods are chosen purposefully. Asa result, the three years selected for the analysis are 1998 (January 1 – December 31), 2003 (January 1 – December 31), and 2010 (January 1 – December 31). In order to analyze the usage of populism in the media, the local database "Lursoft" was used. This newspaper library is the most voluminous collection of Latvian newspaper publications providing access to national as well as regional press outlets. I am interested to find all articles in the respective periods that have mentioned the term 'populism' or 'populist' in their content. Taking into account the language aspects, I used the term 'populis' as a search keyword that allowed finding articles where the concept is used in various folding (for example, 'populistic').

There are several questions (or analytical categories) that the empirical analysis should reveal. *What is being described as populist*? Four possible options are relevant. First, populism can be employed to describe some particular individual actor (for example, a member of the parliament, a minister, the prime minister, or a other public figure) or group of individuals (for example, deputies in general). Second, it can be used also to refer to an organization (for example, a political party or a set of parties, a ministry, the parliament, as well as a social group). The third possible category is a particular policy or initiative (for example, the decision to introduce a progressive tax system or a proposal to reform the higher education). Namely, I expect that the policy proposals that will be described as populist will come from different political actors from widely diverse ideological angles. Finally, the fourth possible category that I have selected is rhetoric or style. Populism can be applied to describe a particular rhetoric, including a speech act or the manner of communication. In order to classify the usage of the term within this category, it should be used in a much broader sense than to describe only a particular policy or decision. Hence, it should reflect some general manner or style of communication that in a particular article is described as populist. In parallel with quantitative estimates which of these categories prevail, I also aim to provide a brief qualitative analysis, for example, indicating which particular actors are at a given time accused of populism. The second question asks: *In what context the term is used?* Three possibilities are considered – positive, negative, or neutral. According to the academic literature, I expect that populism mostly will be used in a negative and prejudicial manner. I am also interested

to measure *in what scope the term is used.* Here, I distinguish between domestic matters (namely, populism can be used to refer to a particular internal issue, including a political party or a policy decision) or it can be employed to describe an international matter, actor or event. Finally, the last category, I am interested in measuring, whether there is a *contrast between political versus apolitical*, namely, whether populism is more often used to refer to a particular political or apolitical event. Although this category might seem rather obvious, I am particularly interested to spotlight the cases when populism is attached to an issue not connected with politics (such as sport or culture), because, if the term spillovers into different spheres, its meaning becomes even more diffused and inconsistent. After having outlined the methodological aspects and the categories I am interested to examine, the next section introduces the results.

3. RESULTS: THE USAGE OF POPULISM IN THE LATVIAN PRINT MEDIA

Populism is considered to be a scientifically contested concept with manifold meanings. Although it is important to analyze the theoretical debates from the academic angle, it is also vital to look beyond the scientific community and to understand how this term is used in the public discourse. This article has picked to analyze three different time periods in the largest and most widely read Latvian daily newspaper "Diena". If we look at the results, it can be estimated that on average the terms 'populism' and 'populist' have been mentioned in 134 articles, the largest frequency rising to almost 160 articles in 2010. The data are illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Number of articles in "Diena" containing a reference to populism

Year	Articles
1998	142
2003	103
2010	157
Total:	402

Source: data collected by author.

It is problematic to assess these raw numbers empirically, mainly because of the small number of cases; however, some minor conclusions can be made. It seems that populism has a tendency to be used more frequently when there are elections on the agenda. Parliamentary elections in Latvia took place in 1998 and 2010, both years being marked by an increase usage of the term within the media as compared with 2003. This could potentially mean that the presence of national elections might serve as a catalyst. As discussed further in the article, populism is extensively used in the pre-election periods when political opponents accuse each other of populism and the journalists employ the term to describe the ongoing election struggle as simply 'pre-election populism'. On the other hand, in 2003, Latvia had a

referendum on the accession to the European Union, but it was not followed by an extensive split of opinions of the political elite, since there was a general consensus and only marginal political establishments tried to challenge the referendum and encourage to vote against it. On the contrary, national elections are more prone to be politically sensitive, and the fight for parliamentary seats are always subject to an extensive struggle. Surely, the frequency of articles containing references to populism does not tell much of the story.

Table 2 includes the list of categories with which populism is being associated, namely a particular individual or a group of individuals, an organization or institutional arrangement, policy initiative or rhetoric, or style in general. Analysis has revealed that it is possible to come across manifold different meanings of populism employed by the media. The coexistence of various usages contributes to the diffusion of this concept.

TABLE 2. Categories to which populism is attached

Year	Categories			
	Individual	Organization	Initiative	Rhetoric or style
1998	18	39	38	47
2003	17	15	15	56
2010	20	13	37	87
Total:	55	67	90	190

Source: data collected by author.

Data in Table 2 prove that populism in the media is used to describe different categories. Most rarely it is used to describe some particular individual or a group of individuals (in 55 out of 402 articles), such as deputies or members of the cabinet. Instead, most often the term is employed within the public discourse to refer to a more general category, namely to describe the rhetoric or style of communication (in 190 out of 402 articles). This category prevails in each of the analyzed years. Thus, if there is any consistency or pattern in the usage of populism by the media, then it is the notion that populism in its essence is a style or rhetoric used (usually by political opponents) to propose the decisions that will please the electorate but will eventually be irresponsible and unrealistic. It is not the case that the academic understandings of populism have been completely ignorant of this kind of conceptualization, however, this has never been of considerable importance. It was already mentioned in the theoretical section that one of the possible conceptual approaches is to define populism as a specific style of doing politics and offering simple solutions to complex problems. However, this approach has not gained much attention from the scholars, mostly because of the apparent empirical problems associated with the question how to define what kind of components exactly these 'simple solutions' should include.

Populism has also been used to describe particular policy initiatives (in 90 out of 402 articles). As the further discussion shows, very different political initiatives from a wide range of sectors have been labeled as populist in the articles published in "Diena". As

indicated in the theoretical section, in the academic field populism is mostly understood as a set of ideas or a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be separated into two distinct groups – 'the bad elite' and 'the good people'. Thus, the antagonism between elites and people is central to all forms of populism. In the media, on the other hand, the concept of populism has never been associated or used in relation with the conflict between the two groups. In other words, the usage of the term does no correspond to the conventional definition of populism conveyed by the academic research.

I am also interested in capturing the scale of populism by looking whether it is used to describe domestic or international matters. The media analysis reveals that populism is mostly attached to domestic issues, namely to describing local politicians, parties or their behavior and rhetoric. The results are presented in Table 3. As is evident, the media are less inclined to use the term while elaborating on international matters. For example, in 2010, altogether 136 articles used populism to refer to local aspects, while only 21 publications employed the term to describe international issues.

TABLE 3. The scale of the usage of populism

Year	Domestic matters	International matters
1998	120	22
2003	65	38
2010	136	21
Total:	321	81

Source: data collected by author.

The proportion of the domestic versus the international issues can partly be explained by the fact that the local media mainly cover the internal issues, and proportionally less attention is paid to international developments. One of the aspects this analysis aimed to shed light on was the question of the possible spillover in the daily usage of the concept of populism, namely how often the term is used outside the political realm. The results clearly show that populism is mostly employed when referring to exclusively political matters (ranging from particular politicians to policy initiatives); there is no reason to claim that the usage of the term has a spillover into other domains as well. The results are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Populism in the usage of political versus non-political matters

Year	Political matters	Non-political matters
1998	134	8
2003	93	10
2010	146	11
Total:	373	29

Source: data collected by author.

Outside the political realm, populism is most frequently applied to describe cultural matters, for example, in movie reviews, in order to refer on a particular story line or the performance of actors. In some instances (mostly in 1998), populism was also used in relation with religious issues. In this particular context, the term was employed to disassociate the church from populism. In other cases, populism has been used to refer to press, television, and sport as well. Yet, as the data point out, 93 per cent of all articles containing a reference to populism have dealt exclusively with political matters.

A number of scholars (for example, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Bale, van Kessel, Taggart 2011) have pointed out that in the daily usage populism is employed in a highly negative and prejudicial manner. The Latvian case study further proves the validity of this claim. Table 5 indicates the different contexts in which populism has been used in the daily newspaper "Diena".

TABLE 5. The context of the usage of populism

Year	Context		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral
1998	2	100	40
2003	0	69	34
2010	2	138	17
Total:	4	307	91

Source: data collected by author.

From the data in Table 5 it is evident that the media usage of populism is consistent with the academic perception, as the largest part of articles use the term in the negative sense. Most of the articles (307 out of 402) use the concept of populism as something unwanted, considering it to be a rather negative externality of political processes, which should be avoided. Analysis suggests that, in a public debate, populism is almost always contrasted with such terms as pragmatism, constructivism, deliberation, and rationality. Thus, most often populism is considered to encompass the sense of simplicity, irresponsibility, inconsistency, and unrealistic appeals largely made by politicians. From this it follows that the media discourse treats populism as something that one should avoid, that populism is equal with vote seeking, namely willingness to propose a policy, implement a decision or use the rhetoric that is ultimately vote seeking not related with socioeconomic realities.

In the rare cases (in 1998 and 2010) when the term was used in a rather positive manner, populism was described as something necessary and even legitimate in reasonable proportions for the health of the democratic process. The neutral usage in most cases was simply not accompanied by any terms that would include judgment. For example, by saying that a particular party is populist, it is not enough to understand whether the author himself evaluates this designation as a bad or good thing. So far, I have concluded that in the public discourse populism is used in a variety of meanings – to describe an individual, organization,

initiative or decisions, but mostly in order to refer to a particular style or rhetoric. I have also shown that in the daily usage populism is employed to describe domestic matters and is less often used to refer to international aspects. The media analysis has also revealed that the term has mostly been used in a negative manner. In the remainder of this section, I would like to pay more attention to particular individuals, organizations, initiatives and rhetoric that have been described as populist in the Latvian media discourse.

Considering the individual level or particular actors, it is evident that in different time periods (taking into account the respective political environment or who is in power) different actors from opposite ideological backgrounds have been called populist in the media. In 1998, populism was not widely used to associate it with any particular figure, hence in 1998 it is rather problematic to indicate any specific actor labeled as a populist. Instead, articles included broader references mostly calling politicians, party members and deputies as such to be populists. The year 2003, however, marked another interesting trend. In most instances, if the populism was used to refer to or describe some particular actor, it was associated with foreign politicians. Thus, 10 out of 17 cases (see Table 2) were articles that employed the term to refer to a particular foreign political figure. Two actors dominated, namely the former Lithuanian president Rolandas Paksas and the former leader of the Dutch radical-right wing party Pim Fortuyn. In fact, they both were labeled as populists by various scholars as well (for example, Vossen 2010 (in case of Pim Fortuyn); Laurenas 2006 (in case of Rolandas Paksas)). Thus, if in 1998 and 2003 it was problematic to mark any local politician or actor that have been described in the media as populists, then in 2010 the situation was different. Articles using the term have started to attach it also to particular local politicians and other public figures (references to particular domestic actors appeared in 11 out of 20 articles), yet with a questionable ideological consistency. For example, in various articles populism is ascribed to such different politicians as Andris Šķēle, Ainārs Šlesers, Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis, and Joahims Zīgerists. Each of them (at a given time period) represented a different political force from a different ideological spectrum, except for Joahims Zīgerists who was not an active politician at that time.

Although it is relevant to differentiate among the analyzed time periods, one common tendency should be stressed. The particular figures named as populists generally were also those that in a given period of time were active politicians and leaders of their respective political parties. Thus, it could be claimed that being a visible political figure that attracts a constant media coverage is a necessary but not always sufficient condition to be named a populist in the public discourse.

A similar situation appears on the organizational level. Most often populism is ascribed to different political institutions, such as political parties, the parliament or government. Concerning the political parties, in general terms, the public discourse does not tend to specify what particular parties are populist. Instead, the media content is dominated by the general notion that all parties are populist at some level, thus further expanding the usage of this concept. Yet, in those instances where particular political forces are named, those

are the parties who had a prominent standing in the political system. For example, in 1998, most often mentioned populist parties were the right-wing conservative "For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK" (*Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK,* TB/LNNK), the non-ideological political "Zigerist party" (*Zīgerista partija,* ZP), the centrist 'Democratic party "Master" (*Demokrātiskā partija 'Saimnieks',* DPS) and the right wing People's party (*Tautas partija*, TP). Thus, in the media populism is used inconsistently, ascribing it to parties representing different ideological wings.

The absence of consistency is also evident in instances where the term is ascribed to a particular initiative or decision. For example, in 2010, diverse policy proposals from different ideological spheres were labeled as populist by political opponents, including the proposal to increase state donation for health, the idea to introduce biblical teaching in secondary schools, the proposal to decrease taxes, the reformation of history teaching in secondary schools, the idea to introduce only the Latvian language in higher education, as the well as decision to postpone the introduction of the gas tax, etc. However, as it was previously stated, the majority of articles published in the three analyzed years mention populism in relation with a particular style or rhetoric. It seems that the term is used by both politicians to attack their opponents, especially during the pre-election period, accusing them of 'cheap', 'arrogant' populism, as well as by journalists themselves in order to elaborate on any action of politicians that a particular commentator or expert himself finds incorrect and contradictory.

CONCLUSION: EXISTENCE OF TWO UNDERSTANDINGS

The concept of populism has gained prominent attention within the scientific community. While the first researchers have analyzed populism in relation with particular parties, mostly radical right-wing, in the recent years a number of scholars have switched attention and examined the character of populism also in the mass media (for example, Rooduijn 2013). In spite of the growing body of research, populism is still considered to be a contested concept. Today, the usage of populism has stepped outside the academic debate and is extensively used also in the public discourse. However, little is known about the ways the media use the concept of populism. If we have a more or less coherent understanding of how populism is defined in the academic field, we still have only an approximate perception about its usage in the mass media. This article defends the position that it is important to step out of the academic realm and to understand what shape has this concept gained in the public discourse, namely in the media. The only systematic attempt to compare the different meanings this concept has gained in the daily usage was offered by Time Bale, Stijn van Kessel, and Paul Taggart (2011). This article follows the argument of these authors that there should be more case studies in order to further shape our understanding of how the public perceives and uses this concept.

The analysis of the media discourse in Latvia has further helped to prove the existence of a contrast between the academic and daily understanding of populism, thus producing two distinct perceptions. The emerging consensus within the academic community has produced the definition in which populism is conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology that positions the 'arrogant and evil elite' against the 'good and virtuous people'. This approach centers on

the implacable conflict between the two groups as the core message of populism. The Latvian media discourse analysis, on the other hand, has showed the absence of any conventional meaning and used the concept to refer to politicians (frequently from very different ideological camps), organizations, different policy initiatives, as well as to describe a particular rhetoric or style. Despite the apparently chaotic application, most often populism was ascribed to the latter category, namely in references to a specific style or rhetoric. Hence, in the media, populism has gained a shape of an adjective that is used when the author (journalist, politician, expert, etc.) intends to describe something (speech, particular decision or policy proposal) that, according to his view, lacks any link with reality, i.e. the respective political and socioeconomic environment. In the Latvian media environment, populism is usually contrasted with pragmatism, deliberation and rationality whose main task is to magnetize the public attention without considering the possible consequences. This, however, indicates an important contrast with the academic discourse.

One may ask a legitimate question: "So what?" It could really be argued that there is nothing wrong with this bipolar understanding of populism and that these different perceptions can coexist peacefully. After all, there surely are other concepts that have gained a fundamentally different meaning in the public discourse than they have been used in the academia. However, for such a contested and diffused concept as populism, this might be an unwanted shortcoming. If we intend to use the concept of populism as a scientific concept which could be empirically employed in order to explain the political and societal processes, then the development of a unitary understanding would be highly valuable and desirable.

Two possible scenarios in the context of public versus academic discourse could be distinguished. First, the two competitive discourses continue to evolve. Second, scholars adopt the understanding of populism according to the perception conveyed by the mass media and begin to conceptualize it as "a rhetoric or style whose primary goal is to magnetize voters with simple policy proposals whose implementation is questionable considering the respective political and socioeconomic environment". This approach, however, inevitably would involve a discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions that should be met in order to categorize some particular initiative as unrealistic. This discussion organically exceeds the boundaries of populism (and eventually the content of this article) and leads to a wider debate about the way social sciences can approach not just the narrow bunch of experts, but find its relevance in a much broader public. This is a question that still waits to be answered.

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