Introduction to the Special Issue

This special volume explores media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and the FB networks of selected populist leaders and populist parties in Europe. The seven case studies focus on France, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Poland, Turkey and United Kingdom. The comparative research perspective is based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of data sources (URLs) and network analysis. The methodology is explained in the chapter Media Sources Shared and Networking on Facebook. A Comparative Perspective. This chapter mainly summarises key findings from a comparative perspective.

Theory is discussed in four clusters in the chapter Populism and Social Media: An Introduction into Meta-Theory. The four clusters present: a) a brief review of the definition of populism; b) an overview of the role of social media, and in particular that of FB in the communication of populist political parties and politicians; c) a research overview of theories on media links or content populists sharing or referring to on FB or elsewhere on social media; and finally, d) a research overview of networks and networking theories.

In addition to this content, the issue dedicates a special Policy Discussion Sectionto issues that stress the need to regulate social media in light of a blueprint regulation (Digital Services Act) proposed by the European Commission in December 2020. Experts from the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland and Slovakia present interesting perspectives on the new legislative package. This section was co-edited by Dr Bissera Zankova from the M21 Foundation in Bulgaria. Ultimately, can regulation of social media as suggested by the European Commission help in limiting the most negative aspects of populist discourses in general and spread of misinformation in particular? What are the challenges of this regulatory proposal?

Finally, the special issue contains five reviews, including three local reviews not related to the topic. The first review discusses theoretical-methodological issues related to research on populist communication (not only) in Poland. The second text is a review of a global comparative study that concentrates on the political communication in East and Central Europe. What do these publications tell us with respect to the most recent findings? What are their strong and weak arguments?

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