

Faces of Populism in Croatia

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Research objectives

Two researches presented here are the first studies on populism in Croatia. Their goal was to identify presence of populism in Croatia and to establish its faces. The first one is *the benchmark study* conducted on the interviews of eleven Croatian politicians in the leading newspapers in the period between two local elections (May 2009 and June 2013); the second one uses the same methodology to examine the interviews of the four candidates in *presidential election in Croatia in 2014/2015*

Conceptualisation of populism

Populism is in these studies conceptualised on two levels:

- as a thin political ideology and
- as a political communication style.

Populism as an ideology is examined through:

1. **the presence of positive references to the people** (coders were asked to register the number of references in each unit and to record exact wording);
2. **relationships to political elites** (interviews were first coded for the presence of negative or positive references to political elite, then for politicians' intention to identify themselves as professional or non-professional politicians (typical of populists), and finally for their view of the relations between different groups in society (e.g. pluralist vs. dual vs. a technocratic view of the political system and processes);
3. **references to 'dangerous others'** ('dangerous media', 'dangerous financial elites', 'dangerous minorities' and the 'dangerous EU').

The presence of references to the people and anti-elitism are here considered a necessary condition for someone to be labelled populist, while the presence of 'dangerous others' is not considered central to populism, but it is quite common and may be useful in defining different types of populism.

The analysis of populism as a political communication style was primarily set to determine efforts of mainstream politicians to use populist cues to resonate with the citizens. Such a tendency is usually recognized in frequent explicit references to the people and display of proximity to the people in a variety of more refined ways than explicit verbal references, from wearing a casual outfit to the use of informal, every-day language. However, mainstream politicians never share populists' resentment towards elites and their dual understanding of politics as a conflict between 'us' (the people) and 'them' (elites). For our purposes here, **the presence of a populist style** is examined through three categories:

1. **politicians' explicit positive referencing to the people**,
2. their attempts of **displaying proximity to the people** by using language that belongs to the private sphere and
3. their **use of empty signifiers** that is typical of populist discourse.

Methodology

Content analysis was used to analyse a) interviews of eleven Croatian politicians that appeared in the country's leading newspapers in the period between two local elections (May 2009 and June 2013) and b) interviews of the four presidential candidates that appeared in the country's leading newspapers during the last presidential election campaign (1/11/ 2014 to 11/11/2015). The first study includes both the 'usual suspects' of populism and mainstream politicians while the second study includes all candidates that participated in the 2014/2015 presidential race. Both studies include all interviews by selected politicians that appeared in the selected newspapers in the designated period that are not focusing on a single issue and that have 20 questions or more (192 interviews in the first study and 35 interviews in the second study). The unit of analysis is a single interview (excluding the words of the journalists and coding only politician's answers/statements). The agreement between coders was strong for all relevant categories, ranging from Cohen's kappa = .792 to 1.00 in the first study and from .739 to 1.00 in the second study.

Analytical requirements

Number of coders: 2

Number of texts : five interviews per politician

Coders: two, PhD students

Hours required to train each coder: six hours, three sessions

Hours required for each coder to code a single text: 30-40 minutes to read and code each interview

Results

Results of the 1st study: Benchmark study

1. The analysis of the two dimensions that are considered central to populism has revealed that four politicians may be identified as populists in Croatia - Bandić, Grubišić, Kerum and Lesar (see Chart 1). They all entered the research as the 'usual suspects' of populism.



Chart 1: Anti-elitism and positive references to the people

2. Intensity of the populist cues among identified populists suggests that we may differentiate between 'strong' populists (Grubišić and Kerum) and 'weak' populists (Bandić and Lesar). Given the nature of the populist cues they use we conditionally labelled their populism(s) as 'moralizing populism', 'entrepreneurial populism' and 'left populism'.
3. Contrary to our initial assumption and predominant trends in Europe, right-wing populism was not detected.
4. Expectedly, the strongest presence of populist style was detected among populist politicians. However, 'empty signifiers' were heavily used by mainstream politicians, particularly by the former President of Croatia Ivo Josipović.

Results of the 2nd study: Populism and populist style in 2014/15 presidential election

1. Milan Kujundžić and Ivan Vilibor Sinčić (perceived as underdogs) were identified as 'strong' populists in terms of political ideology and consequently in terms of political communication style. Given the nature of his references to the people which have a strong nationalist slant, Kujundžić may be conditionally labelled 'national-populist' while Sinčić, given his persistent demonization of financial and banking institutions, may be labelled 'left populist'.
2. The results for the two front-running candidates, incumbent Ivo Josipović and his challenger Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, both perceived as mainstream politicians, point to two important findings. Communication of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, the winner of the election and acting Croatian president was populism-free in terms of ideology and only weak in terms of populist style. To the contrary, Ivo Josipović's reliance on populist style was that heavy that he was almost flirting with populism as political ideology (see Chart 2).

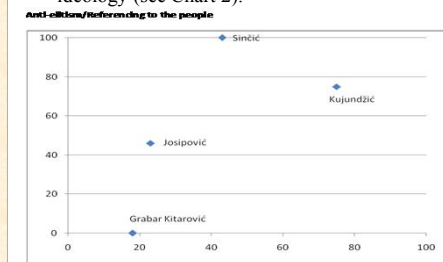


Chart 1: Anti-elitism and positive references to the people

3. Josipović represents the only comparable case between two studies and provides interesting evidence of the immense increase in populist cues in the period of election campaign: he entered the first study as mainstream politician and he ended as a border-line case between a populist-in-style and a true populist.

Conclusion

Both studies established presence of populism in Croatia, both in terms of political ideology and political communication style. Several types of populism were identified. Populist style was popular also with mainstream politicians, especially in terms of the use of empty signifiers.