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Unravelling the Rise of Populism

What are the key factors behind its success in contemporary Europe?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper investigates the key factors behind the rise of populism in contemporary Europe, focusing on both wider populist trends as well as individual national case studies. It does so by reviewing academic literature on populism and relating the core debates in the field to contemporary news and survey findings. To begin with, the paper establishes that populism is not monolithic in Europe, varying on a case-by-case basis across the continent. Nonetheless, it provides evidence that overarching sentiments surrounding "elites", and their perceived negative influence are rising throughout Europe, fuelling the rise of populism.

The paper then analyses the historical narratives underpinning populism and their appeal to voters. It shows that many populist parties in Europe have created a discourse that portrays their nation's native population as members of a superior civilisation which has fallen from its glory, while simultaneously constructing an opposing "other" group that is at least partially responsible for this decline. Populist parties can shift focus from quantifiable factors, such as economic growth, to more abstract perceptions of national identity to increase their popularity, even in times when the liberal status quo appears to be benefiting a country.

This project also explores the centrality of leadership in the success of populist parties, given their "strongman" rhetoric and focus on charismatic political figures. The usage of communication technologies further facilitated their success through strategies such as "microtargeting", wielding a disproportionately strong influence over digital political engagement.

Finally, the paper shows how the Russian state has both influenced and supported this contemporary rise of populism throughout Europe. This was achieved through Russia's "official nationalism" providing an ideological alternative to European populist parties that aren't necessarily in favour of the liberal democratic values espoused by supranational organisations such as the European Union (EU). The case of the German right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party is then discussed to highlight Russia's direct support for populist European parties, given that the AfD received financial support from third-party agents of the Russian state. The paper concludes that this rise of populism can be attributed to the complex interplay between the key factors discussed. Populist theorists have been able to create a narrative that supports their increasingly nationalist and alarmist claims, their politicians have been able to effectively convey this narrative, and digital communication platforms have acted as an extremely effective medium through which this can be achieved; these results were expedited by Russian involvement.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Europe's political landscape has been reshaped by the emergence of populist movements (The Guardian, 2018). Although previously excluded from the political system, or with little influence in domestic decision-making, parties espousing populist ideals gained traction (The Guardian, 2018). By 2018, populist parties on both sides of the spectrum had tripled their votes, entered governments and wielded significant influence in European elections (The Guardian, 2018). The rise of populism is undeniable, begging the question: what are the factors behind its success in Europe? Some recurring themes described as instrumental in its rise include bad economic conditions and external factors such as waves of immigration or war. Using reports and statistics, this paper builds a broader picture of the populist trend in Europe, investigating a wide array of factors ranging from the creation of narratives to the efficient use of communication technologies.

2.0 THE RISE OF POPULISM: REFLECTIONS AND STATISTICS

In his book "Populism", Paul A. Taggart (2000) suggests that populism is a term not fully understood but widely used. Populism is defined as a tool of political categorisation – often with negative connotations. Parties across Europe have been accused of being populist, while some have adopted the term with a favourable attitude. Yet, its definition is of a complex nature. A good description comes from the European Centre for Populism Studies (ECPS), which suggests the following definition: "populism refers to a range of political stances that emphasise the idea of 'the people' and often juxtapose this group against 'the elite'" (ECPS, 2018). The utility of this definition lies in its respect for regional nuances. Populism is perceived, appears and functions differently depending on the country – or region – in which it develops (ECPS, 2018). For instance, the "people" in Poland and their "elite" would differ from their counterparts in the UK. However, despite this regional nuance, there is an undeniable rise of populism globally. This section explores this trend, presenting statistical evidence to demonstrate how populism is growing in Europe.

In 2024, Ipsos produced a report surveyed from 28 different countries across the globe, 11 of them European. To measure the sentiment among the population they availed themselves of the "System is Broken Index", measuring the interviewee's average agreement with these five statements (Ipsos, 2024, p. 21-22):

1. “The [country’s] economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful”
2. “Traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me”
3. “To fix [country], we need a strong leader willing to break the rules”
4. “[Country] needs a strong leader to take the country back from the rich and the powerful”
5. “Experts in this country don’t understand the lives of people like me”

Similar to the report from the ECPS, the statements are focused on “the rich and the powerful”, a representation of the elite (ECPS, 2018; Ipsos, 2024, p. 21). Presumably, the interviewed individuals were thus considered to be opposite to that – the “people” or similar forms. The results of the “System is Broken Index”, showed that (in 2023) the European country where the general agreement with the statements was the highest was Hungary (66%) (Ipsos, 2024, p. 22). The lowest general agreement with the statements were Germany and the Netherlands (48%) (Ipsos, 2024, p. 22). Despite the results showing a minority agreed with the statements in the latter countries, it was a considerable one. Within the same report, two other questions looked at the perception of the elites within the countries (Ipsos, 2024, pp. 37-38):

1. The people who exercise power or influence in politics, business, the media, technology, science, and academia are often called the elite. Which of these two statements is closest to your opinion of the “elite” in [country]?
a. They are a closely connected group of people with similar interests and views on many important issues.
b. They are a loose group of people with different interests and views on many important issues.

2. And which of these three statements is closest to your opinion of the “elite” in [country]?
a. They tend to make decisions that are in the best interest of most people in [country]
b. They sincerely believe their decisions are in the best interest of most people in [country], but that is often not the case
c. They tend to make decisions based on their own interests and the needs of the rest of the people in [country] do not matter

To the first question, 57.3% of the European countries agreed with statement “a.” (Ipsos, 2024, p. 37). To the second question, 41% agreed with statement “c.” (Ipsos, 2024, p. 38). Not only does this show that there is a general sentiment that the “elite” is a faction which shares similar goals and interests, but it also shows a perception that when this group is in power it disregards the population’s best interest (ECPS, 2018; Ipsos, 2024). The result of this report demonstrates that there is substance to the definition of the ECPS (ECPS, 2018). With these results, it is thus evident that a populist attitude is on the rise within Europe.

This trend is also visible in European elections. One party which encapsulates the findings of this report is the Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI). Its party leader, Giorgia Meloni, has since 2014 campaigned on slogans such as "in the name of the sovereign people" (Donà, 2022, p. 781). This slogan is tied to the idea of patriotism, and the defence of the sovereignty of Italy, its culture and its interests (Donà, 2022). The main threats to their sovereignty have been perceived as "global threats", such as increasing EU integration, immigration and other issues that the party has campaigned on (Donà, 2022, pp. 777-780). The EU has been an antagonist for the party as their policy platform is largely based on this "anti-establishment" rhetoric (Donà, 2022, p. 789). As for the results of Fratelli d'Italia in the domestic elections, the party has seen a significant increase in vote share. In the 2013 parliamentary election, the party secured 9 seats (1.9%), while in 2022 they obtained 119 seats (26%) and Meloni was elected as Italian prime minister (Statista, 2023). In the Ipsos report, 57% of Italians answered that they believed the "System is Broken" (Ipsos, 2024, p. 22). The success of Fratelli d'Italia reflects this general sentiment, having campaigned on a strong position against questions encapsulating the five statements of the "System is Broken index" (Ipsos, 2024, p. 21).

Similar parties have experienced significant success within their domestic elections. For instance, the Rassamblement National in France and the Alternativ für Deutschland in Germany, which campaigned on a similar platform as FdI, received significant support in their respective elections (Statista, 2023).. There are many ways to look at the success of populist rhetoric. One is the weaponisation of rhetoric, where a party is accused of exploiting the general sentiment to their benefit – without sincerely believing in it themselves. Another perspective suggests that the spread of this popular opinion is an organic and natural development. As the Ipsos report showed, many citizens of European countries believe their nation and their political system to be in decline (Ipsos, 2024). Consequently, this is blamed on the elected officials, and the establishment that has governed, or overseen, the countries' development in this direction. Thus, this trend of successful populism indicates what the Ipsos report and others have presented: a gravitational shift in peoples' attitude towards their government, but also to society itself.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Some scholars argue that populism itself is a form of political narrative, consisting of narrative patterns and oversimplified and emotionally charged myths of villains, victims, and heroes (Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020). Populist narratives are stories and regimes of metaphors, as Valdivia calls them, that populists construct to mobilise support and justify their policies (2019). Commonly, populist narratives are stories of victimhood, with morally superior, unjustly treated protagonists that fight for their honour and survival against internal, elite, and external antagonists, often personified through the EU and immigrants (Lipińskia & Szabo, 2023).

Populists pick and choose from lived and imagined pasts to construct collective memories and appeal to shared emotions such as nostalgia, humiliation, and a sense of superiority, promoting the creation of "the people". The narratives fill "the people" (the protagonist) and "the other" (the antagonist) with meaning, and the psychological reward of being heroes and part of the collective narrative of revival mobilises ordinary people (Valdivia, 2019, p. 289). Narratives are often constructed as an attempt at identity re-narration and social renewal following challenges experienced as identity crises, for instance, the 2008 financial crisis or the 2015 influx of Syrian refugees which intensified nativism and anti-European sentiments (Akbaba, 2018, p. 200; Valdivia, 2019, pp. 289-290). Through myths and metaphors, populists hyperbolise nations' histories and "the people's" heritage, and construct moralising narratives of lost greatness, of being under constant attack, and of religious purity, inciting cultural superiority and a sense of humiliation and urgency. These narratives underpin what "the people" represent in populist rhetoric.

Loss of greatness is often used in populist narratives and plays on ordinary people's insecurities of destruction of cultural identity, political relevance, and economic security, promoting the creation of a collective "people" mobilised by feelings of nostalgia and humiliation (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021). These narratives are particularly impactful among the white working class in countries such as France and Britain, who experience cultural anxiety and a sense of declining status following globalisation (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021, p. 3). The narratives often suggest that the "greatness" has been forcefully taken from "the people" by antagonists, for instance, immigrants or pro-European-integration organisations and individuals. However, rather than causing "the people" to capitulate to shame, narratives of humiliation and past greatness, constructed using selected lived and mythicised past traumas, "foster identity building processes" and "spark "entitlement ideologies of restoration and revenge" (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021, p. 5). Thus, the narrative constructs a victimised "people" with a shared humiliation whose collective cause is to reclaim self-worth.

In the 2017 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen nostalgically referred to France as "an old and great civilisation" that was once "the symbol of the struggle against tyranny" but is now succumbed to "self-hatred" and "subjected to powers who defile its name" (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021, p. 4). Promising to restore France's greatness, Le Pen presents herself as "the people's" voice (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021, p. 4). Leading up to Brexit, Nigel Farage used the trauma of WWII to promote resistance against the EU as the only means to restoring British sovereignty and greatness and freeing the island from tyranny (Homolar & Lofflmann, 2021, p. 5).

References to mythicised past greatness were likewise used in Poland to ignite a sense of a loss of entitled superiority by the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) party, which was in government 2015-2023. A central trait of their political discourse was claiming the Polish people descend from warrior kings and great knights (Lipińskia & Szabo, 2023, p. 351). Ding, Slater and Zengin, who analyse nations' relations to past empires in populist narratives, argue that in Turkey, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) adopts a restorative nationalist narrative (2021). Focusing on the past glory of the Ottoman Empire and its fall and occupation by Allied forces following WWI, the AKP emphasises Turkey's declining international status, building an image of victimhood (Ding, et al., 2021). According to Erdogan's story, the only way to restore Turkey to their entitled former glory is to purify Turkey through anti-minority and anti-IMF policies (Ding, et al., 2021, p. 159). Mystifying his mission, Erdogan claims that Turkey's "ancestors have laid out the project" for him (Ding, et al., 2021, p. 159), thus playing on Turkey's lived and imagined past to justify his populist policies.

Populists play on ordinary people's security concerns and create a sense of urgency also through mythicised war-like narratives where "the people" is constantly under attack. Fortress Europe, the ethno-pluralist transnational populist movement, relies heavily on war-like metaphors to promote their narrative in which Europe is a fortress that is threatened by forces seeking to wash out "European culture" (Volk, 2019). The movement has gained popularity in Central and Eastern Europe and is a counter-narrative to European integration. War-like rhetorics construct an oversimplified story of a morally superior European civilisation under attack (Volk, 2019). Through allusions to mediaeval warfare, the story portrays the protagonists as rebelling against the elite and at war with the Islamic world (Volk, 2019, p. 131). The PiS in Poland also uses military metaphors, portraying Poland in continuous conflict since the fall of communism in 1989, with post-communist elites and the EU threatening its sovereignty (Lipińskia & Szabo, 2023). The historical framework, bringing past struggles into the present through war metaphors and "call to arms" rhetoric urging Poles to "wake up", allows the party to present itself as the only one fighting for Poles (Lipińskia & Szabo, 2023, p. 352). By linking their ambitions and values to Poland's independence in 1918, the party legitimises their anti-EU and anti-immigration policies and presents themselves as the morally superior political option.

Populist narratives frequently use religious myths to incite feelings of superiority and purity, as religion is intertwined with "the people's" history and collective identity.

The right-wing populist party Vox in Spain uses religion to oversimplify a mythical division of good and evil and justify their policies (Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020). León points out how Vox tries to avoid referring too much to Spain's actual history due to Spain's fascist past, and thus steers away from Franco's "the people" discourse (2025, p. 215). This may explain why Vox emphasises religion and a mythical past in their narrative. Vox's story builds on myths of "national-religious unity and purity" and of the "macho saviour", creating a sense of justified superiority, where the antagonists are immigrants, Muslims, feminists and Catalan separatists (Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020, p. 38). Similarly, the PiS incorporates Catholic messianic myths into its historical narrative, where the PiS defends Christianity, an integral part of Polish identity, which is attacked by Western Europe (Lipińskia & Szabo, 2023, p. 354). Fortress Europe also uses religion in their narrative, in which there is an imagined ongoing battle of civilisations where Christian occidentals, the "true" European citizens, are the only ones who can protect Europe's cultural sovereignty against the "Muslims" that the corrupted elite allowed into their world (Volk, 2019, p. 131).

It is in the enactment of populist narratives that "the people" is constructed (Valdivia, 2019). Metaphors and stories are part of our conceptual system. Populist stories and metaphors shape how we approach the world, ourselves and others, thereby "activating" "the people" through shared suffering and a sense of superiority (Valdivia, 2019). Homolar and Lofflmann further argue that populism is the performance of the security discourse and that "emotions make narratives meaningful" (2021, p. 4). "The people's" sense of their own existence is given meaning and experienced through the performance of narratives (Valdivia, 2019). The narratives therefore allow for a mode of processing meaning and thus also of becoming. Populist leaders construct narratives, using lived and imagined pasts, to justify their policies and mobilise "the people". The narratives fill "the people" with meaning as "the people" come into being through the enactment of the narratives.

4.0 THE INTERACTION BETWEEN GROUP IDENTITY AND POPULIST IDEOLOGY

Although many of the right-wing populist leaders of Europe would be quick to decry identity politics as nothing more than a 'woke virus', as Reform UK leader Nigel Farage recently described it (cited in Craig, 2025), the use of identity-based politics has proven essential to allowing populist groups in Europe to achieve the level of success they have experienced during the 21st century. References to "the People" or the concept of the "silent majority" make up a good portion of populist rhetoric. Yet in order for this to have a significant effect, populists must be able to delineate who belongs in the "people".

In particular, they must be able to demonstrate who makes up their favoured group, and who represents the hostile "other". This section will therefore analyse the interaction between group identity and the rise of populism. In doing so, it will look at the perceived nature of the group to which populist politicians seek to appeal and the populist framing of these group's circumstances.

To begin with, populist rhetoric surrounding the identity of their supporters has always possessed, at a base level, an ontological prioritisation of nationality. This manifests as an insistence on a rigid national definition, followed by a subsequently frequent exaltation of this definition. The "people" come to be seen as a homogeneous representation of the nation's opinion. Far rarer are group definitions based on class or economic status. As Marchlewska et al. (2017, 151) state, populists are confident they 'hold a morally superior vision of what it means to be a true citizen of their nation'. Populists, particularly those from right-wing parties, do this in part because of their vehement anti-globalisation stance. However, it can also be understood as a pragmatic response to gaining votes in a democratic system. By signalling that their supporter identity is rooted in more abstract and malleable concepts of nationality and belonging, rather than more objective subnational divides such as their socioeconomic status, populist groups are casting their net as wide as possible and maximising their appeal to all parts of a nation's society.

This nationality-based group messaging from populists has proven remarkably effective among those who consider their local community an important part of their identity. Perhaps best illustrated by the journalist David Goodhart (2017), who sought to explain unexpected populist victories such as Brexit by illustrating the societal dichotomy between 'Anywheres' and 'Somewheres'. While 'Anywheres' are typically liberal, university-educated professionals who are happy to move to a new city or even country for work, he describes Somewheres as a working-class, traditional group whose identity is based around their local community and who see the world 'from somewhere'. Crucially, these Somewheres, who he argues make up a majority of the population, are much more likely to identify with this nationality-based messaging from populists. Goodhart provides an effective example of this, writing that 'more than 50 per cent' of voters for the British National Party (BNP), a fascist and populist party in Britain, lived within 'fifteen minutes of their mother', compared to only 30 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters (Goodhart 2017, 28). Populist leaders, through their creation of a supporter base rooted in national identity, have therefore demonstrated an ability to both read and exploit a widespread European alienation from an ever more globalised world.

However, it is not enough to simply establish this supporter base. European populists have shown that a consistently successful strategy is to then convince them that they are the victims of some conspiracy or crisis resulting in their disadvantage. In keeping with modern populists' focus on nationality as an identity indicator, a common narrative is that the globalised, corrupt upper classes are enabling the lower-class immigrant "other" to 'live like parasites off the work of others' (Noury and Roland 2020, 423). Furthermore, as both the groups in this narrative share a disregard for the sanctity of the populists' nation, populists are able to portray their opposition, as Michael Follert (2021, 362) summarises, as enemies of the nation 'rather than [a] legitimate competitor in a public debate'. Such an attitude can be seen in Hungary, under the leadership of the populist and authoritarian Viktor Orban, where parts of civil society perceived to support globalisation or immigration are treated as 'enemies', imposing restrictions on their conduct (Witte 2018).

Finally, populist groups have succeeded in convincing their supporters of their victimhood, even when their everyday circumstances seem to be improving. As Frank Mols and Jolanda Jetten point out, populist right-wing parties have been shown to experience 'increasing popularity' during 'times of economic prosperity' (Mols and Jetten 2016). This phenomenon can again be in part explained through the nationality-based identity that populist groups have cultivated among their supporters. When the political spotlight is placed on more abstract concepts such as the erosion of heritage, community, or national identity, it is easier for populist to discount even the most concrete economic success. As Mols and Jetter (2016, 288) continue, right-wing populist leaders will in fact 'divert attention away from the healthy state of the national economy' in order to focus on the struggle between 'different groups' in society. For already aggrieved groups, especially those who Marchlewska et al. (2017, 154) classify as having a 'collective narcissism' about their group's entitlement to control society, this framing has proven effective. It thus appears that populism has been able to exploit the abstract anxiety of much of Europe's population when it comes to their identity. In doing so, it has transformed this abstract anxiety into a powerful political force that can even negate the usual positive political impact of economic growth. In the contemporary world of polarised narratives and online echo-chambers, such an ability proves an ever-increasing danger to the liberal order in Europe and its economic tradition.

5.0 THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE OR THE POWER OF THE LEADER? THE CENTRALITY OF LEADERSHIP IN POPULISM

Leadership is crucial to the success of populism, as an effective leader must be able to embody and channel the discontent that underpins these movements. In populism, leadership offers a face to the frustrations of the electorate, turning abstract dissatisfaction into seemingly tangible solutions. When applied to the success of populism in Europe, it can be argued that the role of leadership has been crucial in achieving this. These elements collectively help shape the narrative and appeal that populist movements rely on for support. Charismatic leaders can articulate the grievances of the public in ways that resonate deeply, often positioning themselves as the only alternative to a discredited political elite.

Rhetoric is crucial in helping to mobilise and unify followers, as compelling language and symbols are essential for strengthening the populist cause. It is a fundamental tool in the success of populist leadership in Europe, shaping how leaders communicate their message and mobilise support. One of the most effective rhetorical strategies employed by populists is the use of slogans and catchphrases. Simple, emotionally charged slogans allow leaders to cultivate a clear and convincing image that is easy for voters to understand. These phrases condense complex political issues into digestible, memorable statements, reinforcing a populist leader's message without necessarily requiring voters to engage with intricate policy details (Klinger, 2015, pp.115-137). Unlike establishment politicians, who often rely on technical language and data-driven arguments, populists reject technocratic rhetoric in favour of emotionally resonant appeals. Their speeches are typically framed in opposition to elite discourse, emphasising direct, relatable language over factual precision. This was crucial to the success of the Brexit campaign in the wake of the 2016 EU independence referendum in the UK, where the idea of "taking back control" over issues like immigration dominated public debate. Statements like these didn't need to be factually accurate to be effective; their power lay in their ability to evoke strong emotional reactions, simplifying the choice for voters and reinforcing the populist message of reclaiming sovereignty from distant elites. Scholars such as Ruth Wodak argue that populist rhetoric often avoids detailed policy discussions, instead relying on exaggerated, emotionally charged language to create a sense of urgency and crisis (Wodak, 2015, pp.12-25). By prioritizing spectacle over substance, populist leaders ensure that their appeal remains broad. Voters do not necessarily need to engage with the feasibility of policies; instead, they respond to the sentiment and identity that the leader constructs.

Populist leaders also frequently borrow rhetorical strategies from one another, demonstrating the transnational nature of populist communication. Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" was adopted by Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who launched a "Make Europe Great Again" campaign (Werner-Müller, 2016, pp.66-79). This rhetorical move highlights how populists repurpose successful slogans to suit their national contexts while maintaining the simplicity and emotional impact that makes such phrases effective (Schmidt, 2023, pp.3-4). By leveraging clear, striking rhetoric, European populist leaders strengthen their appeal, drawing in voters who feel alienated by traditional political discourse. Weber's idea of a "charismatic authority" figure argues that leaders who fit into this category are able to exercise dominance and authority primarily through traits such as charisma and immense confidence (Weber, 1922, pp.19-28). From this, the leader's personal qualities create a devotion in their followers, who become motivated by the leader's vision rather than institutionalised power. In populism, where the foundational basis of the movement relies on the leader challenging the status quo, this kind of authority is essential for mobilising support against the "establishment" (Harvey, 2022, pp.5-9). In Italy, populists such as Silvio Berlusconi have succeeded through a combination of a flamboyant personality, dominance over the Italian media cycle and the ability to portray himself as an outsider fighting against Italy's political establishment. Berlusconi's charisma enabled him to connect with a broad swath of the electorate as his personal brand inseparable from his political movement, illustrating the link between charisma and populist success (Axelson, 2019, pp.12-15).

This links to the idea of the "political strongman", a concept that has gained prominence in discussions of populist leadership. The "strongman" embodies authority, decisiveness, and a willingness to challenge political norms in pursuit of national interests (Allen, 2022, pp.1-4). By projecting strength, these leaders position themselves as defenders of the people against perceived threats. These threats could be external, seen through factors such as immigration or foreign influence, or internal, like the presence of corrupt elites or political adversaries within the domestic system. As such, this persona fosters a sense of security and stability, making the leader an appealing alternative to the traditional political establishment. Vladimir Putin can be considered as a "strongman" as he combines the rhetoric and imagery of traditional forms of masculinity with a strategic vision for restoring the historical Russian Empire. His leadership style emphasises control, national pride, and a rejection of Western liberalism, reinforcing his populist appeal (Bozóki, Hegedüs, 2025, pp.278-298).

Similarly, Viktor Orban is a leader who asserts authority through defending Hungarian “national values” from the purported threats posed to them by external influence, such as the EU’s policies on migration and multiculturalism (Patkós, 2020, pp.4-8). By portraying themselves as the ultimate decision-makers these leaders cultivate loyalty and reinforce the idea that they alone can safeguard their nations. This strongman image is thus crucial in European populism, offering both symbolic and practical advantages in maintaining power (Nowak, 2018, pp.110-112).

Populist leaders also function as role models for voters by embodying qualities that resonate with their aspirations, struggles, and values. For working-class voters, populist leaders often present themselves as relatable figures who understand their hardships and frustrations. These leaders craft their public personas by aligning themselves with the everyday experiences of the working class, portraying themselves as “outsiders” who are not part of the political elite (House, 1977, pp.189-207). This authenticity, even if it could be considered exaggerated at times, creates a sense of connection as the leaders seem to represent the interests and voices of those who feel left behind by traditional political structures. Populists in Europe are effective when they position themselves as role models for working-class or deprived voters. For example, Farage’s Reform UK thrives upon exploiting the weaknesses of the UK’s two-party political system, appealing to those voters that consistently feel their needs are being ignored by those that have dominated the political sphere. (Heath et al, 2024, pp.3-9). Similarly, Orbán’s leadership in Hungary appeals to voters by portraying himself as a defender of Hungarian sovereignty and traditional values against global elites. As such, these leaders succeed through presenting themselves as the figures that will stand against the establishment. In turn, this helps populists in Europe gain power through framing the presence of globalisation as the ultimate evil that should be repelled by the native population (Eatwell, Goodwin, 2018, pp.43-50).

Ultimately, leadership is central to the success of populism in Europe, serving as the primary vehicle through which populist movements articulate grievances, mobilise support, and challenge political establishments. Charismatic leaders craft compelling narratives that resonate with disillusioned voters, employing rhetoric that simplifies complex issues into emotionally charged slogans. The “strongman” person reinforces authority and control, positioning the leader as the only viable alternative to a failing elite. Populism is inherently leader-centric, relying on figures who embody the will of the people. In essence, the success of populism depends not just on the ideological underpinnings of the movements, but on the leaders who drive it.

6.0 COMMUNICATION: POPULISM AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Beyond previously discussed factors, a robust correlation exists between the rise of European populism and the emergence of advanced communication technologies. Today, these advanced technologies manifest primarily as broadband internet facilitating a myriad of digital platforms, including social media networks that transform political communication (Capozzi, 2023). To assess whether communication advances significantly drive populism, it is essential to reconceptualize populism not merely as a set of ideological beliefs, but as a distinct style of political messaging that actively shapes public discourse (Franca & Abreu, 2023). Viewed through this lens, populism emerges as a dynamic interaction between politicians and the public. These politicians claim to represent 'the people' and, in doing so, designate a particular group as the corrupt elite. In communicating the identity of this 'elite', they target emotional responses and seek to simplify real-world issues into populist struggles between 'the people' and 'the elite'. This communication style suits modern digital media, which thrives on short form emotional provocation and relatability. Conversely, populists often struggle to advance their ideology via mainstream media, especially in Europe, as such sources typically avoid provocative or blatantly untrue content (Waisbord, 2018). This relationship emerges in data from a variety of European sources.

The data used in this analysis seeks to correlate the use of internet communication with an increase in European populism. Primarily, this correlation is explored via voting shifts and populist activity or investment into digital spaces. Firstly, a 2019 study by Max Schaub and Davide Morisi found a correlation between broadband access and voting for populist parties in both Italy and Germany. In Italy specifically, the Five Star Movement (M5S) surged in popularity shortly after its founding in 2009, gaining a quarter of the vote in 2013 and rising again to 33 percent of the vote in 2018 (Schaub and Morisi, 2019). While the party claims no left-right affiliation, it seeks to unite the people against political agents it has deemed 'corrupt'. The rapid success of this party is due in large part to their primary method of communication with voters: the incredibly popular internet blog called Beppe Grillo's blog. By circumventing mainstream communication platforms, M5S was able to avoid the influence of and interactions with other political parties, instead aiming to communicate directly with voters.. There is also a correlation between overall digitization and populist rhetoric, as demonstrated in a study by Deniz Güvercin (2021) across European countries as businesses digitized (Güvercin, 2021). Populist Facebook advertising in the 2019 EU elections provides yet another example of this phenomenon.

A 2023 study showed that, while populist parties contributed only 20 percent of political expenditure on Facebook, they received 40 percent of total impressions (Capozzi and De Francisci Morales and Mejova and Monti and Panisson, 2023). This data aligns with the findings on M5S's campaigning strategy and demonstrates that populist movements are very successful on digital outlets. Critically, non-populist parties performed proportionally worse in terms of engagement to expenditure on similar online platforms (Krämer, 2017).

These quantitative insights not only confirm the efficacy of digital platforms for populist communication but also pave the way for a deeper theoretical analysis. Given this data, this paper draws conclusions about populism and digital communication. Namely, that parties with populist rhetoric perform well on and generate engagement from digital platforms, more so than non-populist parties. Furthermore, the data suggests a significant correlation between the success of populist movements and the broader trend of economic digitization, indicating that as economies become more digital, populist messaging gains traction, likely due to increased digital 'traffic' or general social change, two phenomena typically associated with populist growth (Moffit, 2016). The presence of this data could allude to a variety of theoretical models explaining these correlations. Moreover, considering that social media platforms inherently favour short, emotionally charged content while traditional European media tends to avoid overtly radical or unverified narratives, the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier offer compelling explanations for the observed correlations. Beyond this explanation, other theoretical models provide greater insight into specific ways in which populists become successful on digital networks.

The first of these frameworks is context collapse. The concept of context collapse, as articulated by Boyd and Marwick (2011), highlights how the convergence of diverse audiences on a single platform forces populist communicators to simplify their messages, thereby increasing their appeal across a broad demographic. The second theoretical concept is Microtargeting, a marketing strategy that uses detailed data analysis to divide a political audience into subgroups and deliver tailored messages to each one. In politics, this translates into creating individualized or narrowly targeted political messages based on personal data (like demographics, online behaviour, and interests) to influence voter decisions, a process compounded by internet data access (Guerrero-Solé, 2020). These concepts tie into a broader theory of 'data-driven populism', a form of populism where politicians leverage computational tools and social media analytics to identify and respond to the preferences, fears, and behaviours of specific segments of "the people." These theories each align with the data from various studies, and many of their ideas overlap.

In conclusion, the data and theories provided in this section strongly indicate a correlation between digital communication strategies and the modern rise of populism in Europe. The success of parties like the Five Star Movement on digital platforms shows that data driven populism, microtargeting, and context collapse push populist rhetoric farther on advancing, more direct communication networks. As economies digitize and social networks continue to evolve, these methods will likely become even more influential in shaping public discourse and political outcomes. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for further studies on how digital platforms can both empower and challenge democratic processes, setting the stage for a future where the digital realm plays the primary role in political representation.

7.0 RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ON THE RIGHT-WING POPULIST MOVEMENT

One important factor behind the rise of populism in Europe is Russia's influence on the right-wing populist movement. Right-wing populist parties have established themselves successfully in Europe since the start of the 21st century. Parallel to this success, Russia has consistently offered support to such parties, through financial loans, diplomatic aid and communication services. This section will investigate how Russian influence has been an instrumental force in the rise of the right-wing populist movement. Primarily, it investigates the appeal of Russia to the movement. Secondly it introduces a case study, looking at direct evidence as to how the Kremlin has contributed to the success of a major European right-wing populist party: the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD).

7.1 THE APPEAL OF RUSSIA'S "OFFICIAL NATIONALISM"

The 25th of December 1991, Gorbachev said in his resignation speech: "We are the heirs to a great civilization, and its rebirth into a new, up-to-date and fitting life now depends on each and every one of us" (Gorbachev, 1991). Although Gorbachev said this with hope for an instatement of liberal democracy, he described what the Russian attitude towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union would come to be. The first part of his statement emulates the rhetoric that emerged in the newly created Russian Federation, which tried to form a new national identity detached from the multicultural all-Russian Soviet Union, whilst conserving elements of the "great civilization" (Likacheva, et al., 2015). One challenge in this pursuit was to create an identity dealing with both the legacy of this "great civilization" and the empire, whilst simultaneously retaining a form of a new nation-state (Likacheva, et al., 2015, pp. 2-3).

Some have designated the Kremlin's attempt at solving this as rooted in an ecclesiastical vision – a modern form of the "official nationalism" of Nicholas I (1825-1855): "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality" (Caro, 2022; Likacheva, et al., 2015, pp. 2-3). This is at large an accurate description of Russia's current line on domestic policies, favouring collectivism over individualism (Likacheva, et al., 2015, pp. 2-3). This position towards identity also has widespread domestic support (Likacheva, et al., 2015). As of 2015, 54% of Russians favour collectivism over individualism: a striking difference to the Western world, where individualism and liberty are often favoured over the values of community and nationality (Likacheva, et al., 2015, p. 5). This official nationalism has led Russia to put an emphasis on the Orthodox Church as a cornerstone of their legacy and as a leader of Eastern Christianity (Petro, 2015). It also influences Russia's foreign policy, which in recent years has drifted more towards the esoteric Duginist Eurasian doctrine (Caro, 2022). This doctrine deserves its own essay, but the idea revolves around the belief that nations are organic, and ethno-communitarianism is preferred over globalisation, liberalism and its representatives – a stance which Russia has increasingly adopted (Shekhovtsov, 2009).

This position has juxtapositioned Russia to the EU in ideological aspects. The EU emphasises in its "Aims and Values" liberal democracy, individual liberty and civil rights (EU, 2025). Thus, to Russia, the EU is a natural ideological adversary and competitor in the European sphere of influence. As a result, Russia has sought allies in Europe that align at large with their own ideas – and also sees themselves as ideological enemies of increasing European cooperation and integration; as well as liberal democracy itself (Győri, et al., 2015). In this respect, Russia has functioned as a "big brother" of sorts, expressing support and offering a "safe haven" to right-wing populist parties that espouse similar ideas to the official nationalism. One such example is Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary that engages in democratic backsliding, favouring autocracy and promoting hardline Catholic values (Győri, et al., 2015; Zgut-Przybylska, 2024). It is not surprising to find that these parties see an appeal in Russia. It is a serious competitor to their common enemy the EU, that offers support to their aims and functions as a role-model. Yet, evidence suggests that Russia's support is not necessarily of a fraternal nature, but rather transactional. For instance, after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the major right-wing populist parties expressed their support for Russia, the most notable being Le Pen – that still "insists" on the fact that "Crimea is Russian" (Euractiv, 2023). After the annexation, Le Pen received a €9 million loan from a Russian bank and was invited as an "independent" observer to the referendum (Euractiv, 2023).

7.2 THE AfD: A CASE STUDY

In 2024, the Czech Intelligence Services (Bezpečnostní informační služba, BIS) revealed that multiple political parties in Europe had received finances, or been supported, by third-party agents of the Russian state (BBC, 2024). One of these parties was the Alternative for Germany (AfD). AfD, the first right-wing populist party in Germany since it's reunification, recently received 20.8% of the votes in the 2025 election, surpassing the former ruling party Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democrat Party of Germany, SPD) as the second-biggest party in Germany (POLITICO, 2025). Although the AfD is not in power, their result reflects a considerable increase of influence in German society. Their policies, often revolving around civic nationalism and autocratic elements, align with many Russian ideals (AfD, 2017). Consequently, it is not unexpected to see that their significant increase in popularity has been directly supported by the Russian state.

Two state-controlled media outlets, RT and *Rossiya Segodnya* (Russia Today) have established themselves on the German media market. RT entered Germany in 2014, and *Rossiya Segodnya* launched a project called "Sputnik International", aiming to report on the annexation of Crimea and other issues of Kremlin's interest in foreign regions (Spahn, 2021, p. 4). These media networks had a budget of €430 million as of 2020, with considerable presence in Germany (Spahn, 2021, p. 4). They have actively reported on German domestic issues, criticising the ruling Christian Democrat Union of Germany party (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU) as "Russophobes" and reporting positively on the AfD (Spahn, 2021, p. 6). For instance, in the wake of the 2017 Bundestag Elections, a report from LSE states that AfD received media assistance through Russian bots on social-media and RT (LSE, 2017). They claimed that Merkel "freezes out AfD" and created 3,735 messages with "#AfD" alone (LSE, 2017). This significant media coverage came after Frauke Petry, the former co-leader of the AfD, visited Moscow in February 2017.The €25,000 trip[3] was funded entirely by Russian sponsors (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

Senior officials of the AfD have also reverberated Kremlin propaganda. Gauland was interviewed by the pro-Kremlin newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 2019 (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2019). They reported that Alexander Gauland called the fighting in Donbas a "matter for Ukraine and Russia (as the legal successor of the USSR)" (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2019). Gauland also praised Russia's gas exports, claiming that the only reason the EU views Nord-Stream 2 as undesirable is because the "U.S wants to sell its own gas to the Old World [Europe]" (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2019). Despite Gauland being an individual actor, the party-line does not diverge from his pro-Russian sentiment. Tino Chrupalla, the current co-chair of the AfD, has stated that the EU has been "complicit" in recognising Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe (Jasiński, 2022).

AfD has also supported withdrawing all sanctions against Russia; sanctions imposed as a consequence of their invasion in Ukraine (Jasiński, 2022).

AfD is not the only right-wing populist party that receives support from Russia. French, Dutch, and Belgian parties were also mentioned in the Czech intelligence report on Russian influence within the EU (BBC, 2024). Yet, the relationship between AfD and Russia demonstrates an interesting shift in paradigm. The second-biggest party in one of Europe's biggest democracies, with considerable influence in constituencies, is tied directly to representatives of the EU's main adversary – and espouses the fundamental philosophy of its regime. The rise of AfD reflects the trend of the rise of populism, and perhaps more importantly, demonstrates the efficiency of Russian influence in European domestic affairs.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This project set out to investigate the key factors behind the rise of populism in Europe. Primarily, this paper focused on showing that there is proof of the claim that populism is on the rise. Secondly, the paper investigated 5 potential key factors that have been instrumental in this rise: creation of narratives, identity, leadership, communication technologies, as well as Russian support and influence. As the paper has demonstrated, none of these factors are instrumental on their own. Rather, they are components that interweave in a larger political platform. Consequently, this platform has functioned as a foundation for populist parties to lend tactics and aid to one another, in order to alleviate and strengthen their pursuit of political power.

In conclusion, these factors help explain the multifaceted rise of populism in Europe. However, looking at the interplay between these components is equally important. By mobilising the past, populist leaders are successful in creating "a people" and framing that against various opponents – such as the elite, or immigrants. This creation of a narrative interplays with identity, where leaders exploit the anxiety of European people to bolster their political mandate and power. These same leaders avail themselves of a "strongman" tactic, utilising these narratives to resonate with the people of Europe, simplifying political problems into slogans. To spread these narratives, populist parties have also been efficient in creating a strong presence across the digital dimension. By employing social media tactics, such as microtargeting, populist parties can reach audiences with their messages through direct communication networks. This enables the parties to push and adapt their rhetoric to an ever-developing social system in Europe, where societies are consistently becoming more digitised and intertwined. More than the usage of narratives, strong leaders and social media techniques, populist parties have also been successful in securing external alliances.

Russia has been instrumental in helping populist parties successfully enact these tactics, supporting them with funds, publicity, and social media bots, to increase their power and help establish a Russophile populist faction in European politics.

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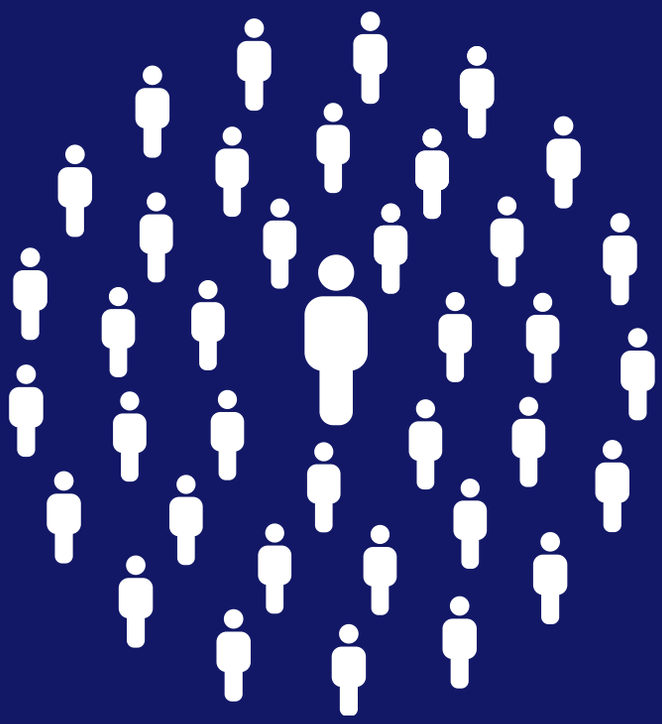

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