

Breaking Down the Walls: Redefining Populism in the Age of Algorithms

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Abstract: Populism has emerged as a key notion in understanding modern politics because of its versatility across ideologies and geographical areas. Digital populism represents a paradigm shift in politics, reshaping how politicians engage with and mobilize support. Although it democratizes political speech, it also brings up issues like polarization and a decline in institutional trust. Addressing the effects of digital populism on democratic processes requires a more sophisticated knowledge of the phenomenon. By analyzing its emergence, evolution, and distinction from traditional populism, this article explores the developing idea of digital populism. The object of the research is populism in digital environments, and the subject is its distinguishing traits and identification criteria.

Across the research a model of digital populism as a unique phenomenon that can be identified by its characteristics, modes of communication, and reliance on technology has been developed. The methodology consists of desk research, comparative analysis and case studies. The goal of the article is to explore and answer three main questions: What distinguishes digital populism from traditional populism, what characteristics set it apart from the latter, and what indicators point to its existence? The paper adds to the theoretical framework of digital populism by providing markers for recognizing it and implications for addressing the related issues. In order to balance the advantages and risks of digital populism in contemporary democratic debate, it emphasizes the necessity of more research into regulatory measures, digital literacy, and algorithmic transparency.

Keywords: populism, digital populism, social media, algorithms, echo chambers

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Introduction

In recent years, populism has significantly increased in popularity and influence throughout Europe. Populist movements on the far right and far left have both gained ground and changed the political landscape across the continent. Over the years, far-right parties have become more and more prominent, using anti-immigration sentiments, nationalism, and Euroskepticism as their platforms.

The British decision to leave the European Union in 2016 is a prominent example of how populist rhetoric has successfully entered mainstream politics. The Leave campaign was driven by narratives of anti-immigration and anti-globalization, led by figures like Nigel Farage. Viktor Orbán's Hungary and a PiS-led Polish government are institutionalizing populist agendas that clash with EU standards on independence of the judiciary and freedom of the press. The Italian case stands in for a coalition between the far-right League and the Five Star Move in 2018 that underscores the rise of both right- and left-wing populist forces. In 2022, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Brothers of Italy, became Italy's first female prime minister, continuing the populist influence with a nationalist platform. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) have gained strength in local elections by emphasizing anti-immigration and Euroskeptic policies. In France, Marine Le Pen has continuously reached the second round in presidential elections, signifying the continuing resonance of far-right populism.

2024 has been a pivotal year for populism in Europe. Anti-establishment parties now hold about 32 percent of the vote in Europe¹. Such a populist wave was visible in the European Parliament elections held in June, during which 60 populist parties from 26 EU member states gained representation. That marks a rise from the 40 populist parties in 22 countries fielded in the 2019 elections². More often, populism rise is perceived due to economic ills, immigration and a sense of loss of national sovereignty. Scapegoating and identity-based politics play a crucial role, and this is aggravated by the populist leaders' direct line of communication with the public made possible through the skilful use of social media. Romania's elections in 2024 provide an example of this trend. The independent far-right candidate Călin Georgescu surprised by receiving 22.95% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election on November 24³. Georgescu's surprise win has largely been credited to his impressive presence on TikTok, where he was able to connect with and galvanize a younger audience. There is a

¹ <https://www.solaceglobal.com/report/populism-europe-2024/>

² <https://www.populismstudies.org/ecps-report-2024-european-parliament-elections-under-the-shadow-of-rising-populism/>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/08198098-6b08-459d-b9e5-afd6410bc4dd?>

concern about growing populist and nationalist parties in Romania that threaten a pro-western direction as well as commitments to the European Union and NATO. The developments in Romania are part of an image of a growing fatigue on the whole continent where populist-driven parties have been building on widespread discontent, effectively using social media as well as standing up to longstanding political establishments.

Eurosceptic parties pose a threat to European integration, with populists often portraying the EU as an elite-driven project that fails to serve national interests. Populist governments have often been opposed at international institutions, as they favour national sovereignty over multilateral agreements. Populism, as a rising force in European politics, shows enduring anxieties about identity, governance, and globalization. Its ongoing evolution will factor into the politics of Europe in the years ahead. This text delves into the historical strands of populism, its conceptual multiformity, and establishes, through commonalities, a typology, and also an analysis of its interrelationship with digital communication. The phenomenon of digital populism has revolutionized the political landscape, changing the way leaders interact and rally support from their followers. It democratizes the political discussion, but it also brings issues of polarization, as well as the weakening of trust in institutions. Digital populism requires a more nuanced approach to its potential effects on democratic processes. The text analyses definitions and perceptions of digital populism, to emphasize that not only the rhetoric and tactics employed by populist, but also the use of digital tools have become fundamental to the populist project, showing how conceptions of populism have developed alongside technological progress and the ubiquity of communication on digital platforms.

Methodology and Research Questions

This article aims at reviewing how populism definitions evolve over time and across studies and how digital populism emerges as a concept and transforms traditional populism perception. Methodologically, desk research is used based on literature review and comparative analysis of academic papers and case studies. Sources are chosen from an extensive period of time to trail the evolvement of concepts from their early mentions and shapes throughout recent contributions. No regional limitations were applied in the review, as populism is a global phenomenon, and this article does not focus on regional traits. The research design provides for analysis of sources content, reviewing main conclusions, stating similarities and establishing differences to intersect concepts for shaping a concise perception of populism and digital

populism. A hypothesis that digital populism is a separate phenomenon differentiating from traditional populism in terms of features and manifestation is examined and tested in this paper.

The article goal is unfolded examining three research questions. The first one is to explore whether and how digital populism distinguishes from traditional populism. The second one is to establish what the features of digital populism are compared to the traditional populism ones. And the third question is what the key indicators for digital populism presence are.

The first part of the article includes a review of populism as phenomenon and evolvement of its definitions. The second part of the article is centred on digital populism as a concept and how it resonates with traditional populism. The final part of the articles is research-based conclusions and implications for further explorations.

Conceptualization of populism

Many researchers have been devoted to an extensive analysis of what populism is trying to define a concept embracing all its peculiarities. Early research on populism is region-specific, focusing on case studies like the U.S. Populist Party or Latin American movements. Not all researchers are unanimous with their definitions and there is a large dispute whether populism is a movement, an ideology, a political strategy, a political movement or what is it. There are definitions of great research impact challenged by newly posed viewpoints and perspectives.

Margaret Cannovan's well known definition of populism is it is a political appeal to "the people" opposing existing elites and structures, often emphasizing the simplicity of the people's virtue versus the complexity and corruption of elites⁴. Cas Mudde echoes this definition referring to populism as to a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" with "moral virtue" attributed to the former and "evil" to the latter⁵. The people versus the elite perspective is elaborated also by Ernesto Laclau who sees populism as a political logic, rather than an ideology, constructing a collective identity of "the people" in opposition to "the others" such as elites and external threats⁶. In his contribution to the Bulgarian academic debate Svetoslav Malinov first defines what populism is not to build-up to a concise definition. The author claims populism is not an ideology, it is not left or right nor is

⁴ Margaret Cannovan. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16.

⁵ Cas Mudde. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563.

⁶Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.

it a sign of political immaturity⁷. Rather, it is a “modular political form of thinking and speaking, a set of rhetorical figures with a simple leading feature – the permanent appeal to people’s collective image”⁸. Likewise, Georgi Karasimeonov sees populism as a public movement that capitalizes on popular discontent, employing anti-elite and anti-institutional rhetoric to call for drastic changes⁹. This malleability makes populism able to cleave to different kinds of ideology, albeit context-dependent and fluid.

It is interesting to note that according to Malinov, populist messages can be found in the rhetoric of almost all parties and leaders¹⁰. This statement is also supported by Stefan Popov, claiming that, although populism is characteristic mainly of parties with right-wing nationalist views, it is a standard behaviour of any larger party¹¹. Popov does not perceive it as a transformation of democracy, but rather as a trend related to the change in the logic of public communication, related to digital communication, exploiting mass fears, the feeling of corruption, and distrust in institutions.

Recent scholarship, influenced by Mudde and others, conceptualizes populism as a tool or "corrective" mechanism within democracies, enabling marginalized voices to challenge elite dominance while simultaneously posing risks to democratic norms¹². Marked by social and political dynamics, new ideas and perspectives with regards to populism emerge, as it is Nadia Urbinati’s description of it as a political framework that directly engages the public and seeks to bypass institutional intermediaries¹³. Brubaker designs populism as a repertoire of rhetorical, stylistic and strategic tools that can be used by political actors in a variety of political and temporary contexts¹⁴. Such an understanding is redolent of the pervasive malleability of populism making it susceptible to different contextual and audience configurations. This marks populism’s flexibility differentiating it by traditional ideology. Some essential features of populism as a repertoire, elaborated by various researchers, are:

⁷ Светослав Малинов. “Размисли за българския популизъм.” *Критика и хуманизъм*, no. 23_BG (2007): 71–84.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Георги Карасимеонов. “Има ли понятието популизъм научна стойност?” *Политически изследвания*, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁰ Светослав Малинов, “Размисли за българския популизъм.”, 74.

¹¹ Стефан Попов. *Популизъм и политически анализ*. RiskMonitor. Retrieved from <https://riskmonitor.bg/spopov/популизъм-и-политически-анализ-2/>.

¹² Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹³ Nadia Urbinati. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ Rogers Brubaker, “Why Populism?”, 360-367.

1. Discursive Resources: Populism employs a shared repertoire of rhetorical devices such as anti-elitism, emotional appeals and narratives of moral purity. They are tools that act on a plethora of audiences, used in a diversity of political contexts¹⁵.
2. Rhetoric of Populist Forms: Populist forms of movements are often a "low" style of rhetoric, full of crude and direct grammar. This discovery is in marked contrast with the "high" style of politics of more traditional sectors, which makes populism more attractive to the audience feeling excluded¹⁶.
3. Contextual Deployment: Populism deploys its repertoire unevenly – based on the political, cultural, and economic context. Populism on economic inequality is deployed in Latin America while nationalism and anti-immigration feelings are more prominent in Europe¹⁷.

The nature of populism is a disparate phenomenon but appears to be composed of certain recurring themes that define it. One of the populism's features shared by most researchers is anti-elitism, followed by moral dualism, characterizing the political debate as a struggle between "the good ones" and "the corrupt elite". Next commonly acknowledged feature is charismatic authority. The preoccupation with the numerical majority of the people at the expense of minority interests or institutional constraints marks majoritarianism as another feature of populism shared by most definitions.¹⁸

The ambivalence of populism makes it difficult to assess its functions and consequences. On the one hand, it functions as a corrective, seeking to address democratic deficits and to give voice to the marginalized¹⁹. On the other, its anti-institutional and majoritarian impulses threaten pluralism and democratic norms²⁰. It is worth noting Fournier's definition of populism as a parasite of constitutional democracies, because populist leaders use constitutional rights in the spread of their speech, pluralistic values such as freedom of assembly

¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason, 85-113

¹⁶ Pierre Ostiguy. "The High-Low Political Divide: Rethinking Populism and Anti-Populism," *Working Paper Series on Political Concepts*, no. 35, 2009, pp. 6–7.

¹⁷ Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction, 3-4

¹⁸ Nadia Urbinati, Political Theory of Populism, 111-127

¹⁹ Margaret Canovan, "Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy". *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (eds. Yves Mény and Yves Surel), London: Palgrave Macmillan (2002), pp. 25-44.

²⁰ Nadia Urbinati, Political Theory of Populism, 111-127

and association, and all this – against the values of liberal democracy²¹. Takis Papas sees populism as a democratic illiberalism stating it puts pressure on liberal democracy²²

Once in power, populist can pose a real threat to liberal democracy. Populist leaders tend to centralize power in the executive, circumventing institutional norms in order to implement their agenda. These issues have implications for accountability, and the sustainability of democratic systems in the long term. Although in some cases populist governments have produced real benefits, such as higher social spending and economic reform, such gains tend to be more than offset by institutional decay and political polarization²³. Populism in power is a concept highly researched in recent years highlighting important features and peculiarities and an implication of this article is to be further exploited in terms of its relations to digital technologies.

Digital Populism Conceptual Development

As digitalization and digitally related phenomena change the way economic, social and political processes occur, in recent years researchers have been trying to define populism manifested in digital environment elaborating on a concept separate from traditional populism. Early definitions come from the beginning of the 2000s. Researching the South Korean Internet culture, Dr. Youngmi Kim discovers when populism meets digital technology, three politically relevant effect take place²⁴. First, politicians gain low-cost access to their supporters. Second, supporters can engage in instant and emotional responses which corresponds to Mudde’s vision that the media focus on “the more extreme and scandalous aspects of politics”. And third, “immediacy and the lack of mediation,, allow verbal violence and witch-hunting” (Ibid.). Kim concludes the decline of the traditional organizations that have historically served as intermediaries between citizens and the institutions of government, along with the advent of popular, direct, instantaneous, and unmediated platforms for public speech, are a most profound challenge for representative democracy.

²¹ Théo Fournier. “From Rhetoric to Action: A Constitutional Analysis of Populism.” In *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies*, edited by Catherine Barnard and Okeoghene Odudu. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2019), 21–40.

²² Атанас Ждребев, "Концепцията на Такис Папас за популизма като демократичен илиберализъм," *Реторика и комуникации*, no. 59 (Apr. 2024): 85–106.

²³ Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction, 95-96

²⁴ Youngmi Kim. “Digital Populism in South Korea? Internet Culture and the Trouble with Direct Participation.” *East Asia Forum*, 2008.

In 2011, in the article *The New Face of Populism*, Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler explored how populism evolved during the digital age and how advances in technology and online access are changing the tools and effectiveness of populist movements²⁵. Based on these instabilities, the authors propose that the interaction between populism and digital tools is radically changing political communication, mobilization, and governance in ways that would have been unimaginable in previous decades. Their key findings are that social media and other digital platforms help politicians to navigate around mainstream media, enabling a leader's image to be built as a relatable, authentic voice of the regular people and that their ability to mobilize support is further enhanced by social media algorithms' personalization. The authors devise a new understanding of how algorithms on social media facilitate echo chambers, generating posts and videos that conform to users' preexisting views, which not only validates populist narratives, but further segregates people from viewpoints that challenge their beliefs. The mentioning of echo chambers in digital populism context is important for the further development of the concept. According to this article digital communication is risk free and cheap, making it an effective channel for populists to spread false information, which is especially effective in political campaigns, where populists leverage these tactics to attack opponents and shape public opinion. At this point researchers are unified around the challenge of digital populism lying in its threat to representative democracy as traditionally conceived, valorizing direct participation over intermediation by institutions. The challenge is seen as a displacement of the important role of representative groups and a distortion of conventional political systems²⁶.

In 2012 in his book "Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age" Manuel Castells writes about the decentralized networks created as the Internet helps people mobilize fast, avoiding traditional power concentrations. He notes how digital modes of communication help give power to mass feelings of outrage and hope, which are crucial to populist urges, and how digital tools have transformed the terrain of political activism, to give it immediacy and reach²⁷.

Up to this point digital populism is defined as a communication paradigm, opening questions to how populism is influenced by digitalization and how it influences digital communication. As researches go on, Benjamin Moffitt emphasizes the performance-based

²⁵ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Mark Littler. *The New Face of Populism*. London: Demos, 2011.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Manuel Castells. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

nature of populism in the digital age, with leaders leveraging social media to craft a sense of authenticity and have the capability to respond immediately to any crisis. He sees digital populism as the next chapter in the performance art of populism, made possible by the speed and immediacy of online platforms²⁸.

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Cas Mudde do not exploit “digital populism” concept per sé, but still note the malleability of populism for digital realms, arguing that the central features of populism — anti-elitism and appeals to “the people” — are particularly well-suited to flourish in the participatory and fragmented digital environment²⁹.

Bart Cammaerts states digital populism is the translation of traditional populist rhetoric into the digital age³⁰. He speaks about how populists exploit the decentralized, participatory logic of digital channels, to circumvent mainstream media, connect more directly with their audience and magnify anti-elite discourse³¹. He also highlights the use of algorithms to build echo chambers that promote populist narratives while shutting out other opinions aligning with previous studies and elaborating on this important topic.

Paolo Gerbaudo stresses the phenomenon of a “digital crowd” as a new type of mass mobilization made possible by social media³². He describes digital populism as a political style, one in which populist leaders are able to use the interactive and personalized capacities of digital platforms to establish a direct relationship to “the people.”³³ It is another reference to social media algorithms as an important factor in digital populism deployment.

In 2021 Giuliano Bobba³⁴ makes a comprehensive analysis of digital populism theoretical framework and composes a multi-faced definition, explaining how populism is reconfiguring on digital platforms in Western democracies. His exact definition of digital populism is “the outcome of the effect of the Web, in general, and of social media, in particular, on the populist practices by politicians, the media and citizens”³⁵. Boba considers it from three point of view in the context of the traditional actors interacting in democratic systems:

²⁸ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 189–217.

²⁹ Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 42-43.

³⁰ Bart Cammaerts. “The Mainstreaming of Extreme Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: What Is to Be Done?” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 11, no. 1 (2018), 7–20.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Paolo Gerbaudo. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. Pluto Press, 2012, 109–110.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Giuliano Bobba. “Digital Populism: How the Web and Social Media Are Shaping Populism in Western Democracies.” In *Political Populism: Handbook of Concepts, Questions and Strategies of Research*, eds. Reinhard Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha, and Oscar Mazzoleni, Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verlag, 2021, 471–481.

³⁵ Ibid.

politicians, journalists and citizens, to elaborate on previous studies and attempts of definitions. He sees digital populism as a strategy for populist actors to be more seen and heard by their supporters. He then sees digital media role for false news and disinformation dissemination weakening citizens' trust in the functioning and promoting populism. And finally, he sees digital citizens as contributors to populist messages amplification in social media³⁶.

Researchers' attempts of definition of digital populism position it through a diverse line of concepts as being a style, rhetorical approach, communication strategy, social media effect. For this article purpose and as combination and extrapolation of previous definitions, digital populism can be considered as a political strategy and style employing populist rhetoric in digital communication to leverage digital platforms features and tools as communication immediacy and low cost, high digital citizen participation, echo chambers effect and social media algorithmic amplification of populist messages.

Virtual communication, Echo Chambers and Polarization

There is a complex interplay between virtual communication, echo chambers, polarization, and social media algorithms, stressing their compound impacts on political and social behavioral patterns. Virtual communication transforms the way people interact facilitating multimodal exchanges (visual, textual, sound) with the potential for more participants and more interactions with no direct contact³⁷. While these platforms democratize information generation, they may generate the risk of misinformation and polarization^{38 39}. In virtual communication echo chambers form primarily within groups of similar ideologies and resistant to exposure to opposing views. They are generated by various mechanisms of homophily, selective exposure and confirmation bias.^{40 41} Thus, by designing algorithms based on user 'likes', the effects are amplified by filtering content in accordance with personal

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ivanka Mavrodiya "Virtual Political Communication in Bulgaria." *Journalism and Mass Communication* 4, no. 12 (2014): 756–765. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2160-6579/2014.12.003>.

³⁸ Manuel Castells. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

³⁹ Васил Проданов. *Комуникационни технологии и общество*. София: Издателство на БАН, 2012, стр. 112–115.

⁴⁰ C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles", *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2018): 141–161.

⁴¹ Pablo Barbera, "How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization: Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the U.S.", *Proceedings of Political Studies Society* (2014).

behaviours or characteristics which only serves to polarise beliefs and ideologies⁴² ⁴³. Polarization becomes more severe as opinions move toward ideological extremes, led by compromise⁴⁴. Individuals have become more aligned with partisan identities in a process called partisan sorting, which has driven these divides further⁴⁵. Meanwhile, social media platforms play their part by amplifying emotionally laden content that exacerbates polarization⁴⁶.

Social media algorithms prioritize engagement, often favoring divisive and emotionally charged content, leading to the reinforcement of echo chambers and polarization. As such, personalized feeds make it possible for users to consume exclusively content ideologically aligned with their views. This process of curation feeds on cognitive biases feeding on confirmation bias, which allows them to keep people engaged⁴⁷. The interaction of these influences creates a feedback loop: polarization leads to echo chambers, which are then amplified by algorithmically-driven content curation. It can be concluded political polarization is based on partisan sorting and performed in echo chambers by virtual communication as mutually dependent phenomena determined exclusively as a result of social algorithms activity.

Digital Populism in Contemporary Politics

Giorgia Meloni's rise in Italy in 2022 exemplifies how populist leaders use TikTok and Instagram to personalize nationalist messages. Her short, emotional videos reframed traditional far-right themes into mainstream appeal. Analysts link her digital popularity to widespread distrust in parties and institutions, which Meloni exploited using direct communication and anti-EU sentiment⁴⁸ (Martella & Roncarolo, 2022).

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) generates far more digital engagement than vote share, especially via TikTok. AfD content thrives on provocative narratives about immigration

⁴² Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 9–11.

⁴³ Ludovic Terren and Rosa Borge-Bravo, "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Review of Communication Research* 9 (2021): 102–104.

⁴⁴ Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, "Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 3 (1996): 690–755.

⁴⁵ Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 563–588.

⁴⁶ Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 1–34.

⁴⁷ Nir Grinberg et al., "Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Science* 363, no. 6425 (2019): 374–378.

⁴⁸ Martella, A. & Roncarolo, F. (2022). Contemporary Italian Politics, 15(1), 1–15.

and crime. Researchers note this increases affective polarization and erodes trust in government among younger users⁴⁹ (klicksafe, 2024).

Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government has fused digital populism with authoritarian governance. Social media disinformation supports narratives about Brussels and Hungarian elites, justifying legal restrictions and deepening public mistrust. Digital tools amplify state-aligned conspiracy theories that delegitimize opposition⁵⁰.

In Romania's 2024 presidential elections, independent far-right candidate Călin Georgescu leveraged TikTok to reach disillusioned voters, particularly youth. With over 22% in the first-round vote, his campaign's digital reach outpaced traditional party mechanisms. Analysts highlight how populist narratives on TikTok—anti-globalist, anti-EU, and conspiratorial—resonated in a context of political fatigue and distrust, positioning Georgescu as a relatable alternative to establishment figures⁵¹.

In the 2024 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump reemerged with a campaign built on social media-driven grievance politics. His digital messaging, especially on platforms like Truth Social and X (formerly Twitter), continued to question election legitimacy, accuse institutions of bias, and frame the political system as rigged. Following his defeat, unrest escalated online and offline in early 2025, with disinformation campaigns aimed at state legislatures and local election officials. This marked a continuation of populist rhetoric undermining democratic norms and public trust, demonstrating the enduring effects of digitally amplified populism⁵².

Prerequisites for Digital Populism

A specific set of social, technological and political conditions can prevail for digital populism to thrive.

Firstly, there is extensive social media presence. A large number of people are active on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. This gives populist leaders

⁴⁹ klicksafe (2024). *Why right-wing populist parties dominate social media*.

[online at <https://www.klicksafe.eu/en/news/warum-rechtspopulisten-reichweitenstaerker-sind>]

⁵⁰ Reisher, J. (2022). *CES Working Papers*, 14(4), 823–839.

⁵¹ Koleva, E. (2024). Digital Populism and Electoral Fatigue in Romania. *New Eastern Europe*.

⁵² Thompson, L. (2025). After the Vote: Digital Populism and the U.S. 2024 Election Fallout. *Journal of Democracy*, 36(2), 45–59.

an effective medium to reach out to millions of people at once. Digital populism is more likely in areas with extensive internet and social media exposure⁵³.

Secondly, distrust of established institutions means that audiences are more open to anti-establishment messages and populist directness⁵⁴.

Third, economic, social, or political crisis provide fertile ground for populist narratives. In these conditions, populists can position themselves as the answer to growing disaffection, using social media to drive their rhetoric⁵⁵.

Successful digital populism is often centred on a charismatic leader who knows how to leverage social media to build a personal following and attract support, as a fourth factor for digital populism presence. Central to their appeal is their capacity to connect directly and brand themselves as ‘authentic’⁵⁶.

Fifth, cultural and identity-based issues are needed as digital populism is often based on cultural and identity-based grievances, pitting “the people” against perceived threats like immigration or globalization. Such stories appeal to the politically engaged public living in a polarized society, where identity politics abound⁵⁷.

Six, algorithms on social media platforms are a major factor by promoting content that garners likes, shares, and other forms of engagement, often at the expense of more balanced discourse favouring sensational or emotional posts. This magnification allows populists to hijack the digital landscape and appeal to a wider audience.^{58 59} Echo chambers and polarization form and interact as a continuous loop in this environment making use of and amplifying populist messages.

Seven, and especially relevant, are poor regulatory frameworks. Social media platforms have been fairly difficult to be regulated, which gives populists unrestricted arena to operate on. Populist rhetoric also spreads due to unchecked false news, misinformation, and hate

⁵³ Giuliano Bobba, “Digital Populism: How the Web and Social Media Are Shaping Populism in Western Democracies, 471-481.

⁵⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–7.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation, 189–217.

⁵⁶ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (Pluto Press, 2018), 166–168.

⁵⁷ Nadia Urbinati. “Political Theory of Populism.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 111–127.

⁵⁸ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Mark Littler, The New Face of Populism.

⁵⁹ Bart Cammaerts, The Mainstreaming of Extreme Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: What Is to Be Done?, 7–20.

speech⁶⁰. Moreover, social media have private and commercial interests, and their self-regulation promote provocative and enticing content for the purposes of the platform which is often related to ads distribution and profits.⁶¹

Key Indicators of Digital Populism

Being the transformation of offline populism in the digital era, digital populism is based on behavior patterns, form of communication, and technology dependencies. Not all political virtual communication is digital populism, so criteria is needed to define when it takes places. Based on the present research some key indicators are drawn up as a non-exhaustive base. If one or two of them are present, this does not mean that said virtual communication can be classified as digital populism. A combination of these indicator is needed to set apart the communication as populist.

1. Direct, unmediated communication: To bypass mainstream media is one of the characteristics of digital populism which establishes a direct connection with the citizens⁶² and avoids journalists' prerogative to ask questions and seek accountability. Populist leaders or movements use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok, or their own media instead of traditional media to reach their audience. They create an unmediated dialogue that bolsters the populist claim of being the "real" voice of "the people." It disintermediates traditional journalism, enabling populists to set the narrative to their own advantage. Bypassing mainstream media and using direct digital communication is one of the indicators needed to classify a communication as populist, as is more and more the case with parties across Europe that have not been heard of but gain enough electoral support to become part of the government.
2. Emotional rhetoric: The overuse of emotionally charged language that appeals to a broad class of followers, tailoring issues in black-and-white "us versus them" narratives is an indicator of populist rhetoric. Moreover, social media algorithms prioritize emotional language which contributes to echo chambers and polarization fostering where the populist messaging thrives. So, virality of emotional messages, that demonize elites,

⁶⁰ Youngmi Kim. "Digital Populism in South Korea? Internet Culture and the Trouble with Direct Participation." *East Asia Forum*, 2008.

⁶¹ Константин Павлов, "Шок! Бомба! Граната! Фейсбук взе страната на разума," ТерминалНО, 10 август 2016 г., <https://terminalno.bg/shok-bomba-granata-fejsbuk-vze-stranata-na-razuma/>.

⁶² Bart Cammaerts, *The Mainstreaming of Extreme Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: What Is to Be Done?*, 7–20.

dramatize crises or position the leader as the saviour, is a searched effect. This moral dichotomy that populism is centred around, resulting in outrage and moral indignation, is amplified by social media and is a trait of digital populism.^{63 64}

3. Leadership personalization: According to Moffitt, digital populism is based on performance of leaders utilizing social media to project authenticity and accessibility⁶⁵. Populist leaders frequently use social media to build personal brands cultivating an image of battlers against “the others”, the non-justice for the people and the enemy chosen within the rhetoric. In this context, emphasis on the personal appeal is a sign of digital populism.
4. Crisis framing and scapegoating: Repeated framing of political, economic, or cultural issues as existential crises demanding immediate action is a populist strategy, mobilizing support by exaggerating threats and presenting the leader or movement as the only solution⁶⁶. Rovira Kaltwasser states that populists paint dire pictures of the consequences of not listening to them⁶⁷. This narrative is often accompanied by scapegoating of “elites” or minority groups. Examples are assertions that immigrants, global institutions or political rivals cause societal ills.
5. Anti-elite and anti-institutional discourse: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser describe anti-elitism as a core feature of populism, amplified in the digital realm.⁶⁸ Denunciation of established institutions, elites and experts as corrupt, incompetent or out of touch with “the people” is part of the populist promise to return power to “the people” and when present in virtual communication is a sign of digital populism.
6. Politics of culture and identity: Focus on issues of national identity, cultural preservation, and sentiment against globalization or immigration to divide the audience, paint a picture of “us against them”, drive polarization and present the leader or the party as saviours is a sign of populist rhetoric.
7. Use of echo chambers: Echo chambers are a part of mutually enhanced processes of amplification between them, social media algorithms and polarization of society. They are the digital place where people can be isolated from opposing views, where statements and messages are implied and reinforced and where masses, followers can

⁶³ Cas Mudde. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563.

⁶⁴ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Mark Littler, *The New Face of Populism*.

⁶⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, 189–217.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 98–99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

be mobilized during significant political events, like elections. Formation and fostering of echo chambers by a political party, its leader, significant representatives, or other forms of digitally connected users, is part of the indicators digital populism is used.

8. Algorithm-based structure of the content: This indicator means that digital populism is present there where an advantage of the way algorithms work is taken. It is important to note that all social media users aim to utilize their content at the best. So, leverage of algorithms per sé is not a proof for digital populism in presence, it needs to be combined with other indicators. Algorithm-based structure of the content is rhetorics that is favoured by algorithms (emotionally charged, polarizing), usage of digital formats that become viral (memes, youtube videos, reels and shorts), ads of content emphasizing virality and not political principles or ideology, trolls and hostile reports of content, and others.

Conclusion and implications

For years, there has been no universally agreed-upon definition of populism, given its multifaceted features and varied uses. Although there is a dispute whether digital communication gives rise to it in global context, social media role cannot be overlooked in the process. This article provides a definition of digital populism based on comparison between theoretical approaches and case studies made by researchers to identify it as a political strategy using populist rhetoric within digital environment making use of technical advantages such as social media algorithms. Although populism and digital populism differ, they are not inherently different. The distinction can be made in terms of manifestation in the following directions: digital populism bypasses mainstream media, eliminating one-sided communication and allowing for more interactivity. Audience active participation is key as opposed to traditional populism where engagement was more passive and mediated. Speed is a key differentiator as virality of social media disseminates messages, false news and disinformation with no concern of time and physical limits. The interactive communication of digital populism both depends on and fosters echo chambers manifestations as a specific feature. While traditional populism emphasized formal, charismatic leadership, digital populism adopts informal, emotionally charged rhetoric that resonates in the participatory, algorithm-driven digital environment.

A difference is made between features of digital populism and indicators of its presence. Although, they can overlap and it is hard to establish the line between them, differentiation is important given the dynamic and complex nature of digital communication. The eight indicators

drawn from the present research are not exhaustive but seem to be the key ones making note that identifying one or some of them in communication does not necessarily make it digital populism. Further research is needed to establish what combination of these indicators is necessary and enough to firmly conclude the presence of digital populism in digital communication.

As populism is perceived both as the best form of representative democracy and a great threat to it, ways to contain its destructive power need to be addressed. These include fostering digital literacy, social media regulation and more algorithm transparency, combining users preference-based content with exposure to variety of viewpoints and information.

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