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Journalism and Populism: The Attitudes Editors-in-chief Have Towards Populist Rhetoric Vary Depending on the Audience Structure of the Publications They Oversee

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Abstract. Populism is defined by its perception and is used by discussants in political debates, and by commentators and academic observers when they intend to unmask or disqualify certain propositions, political attitudes, campaign platforms or manifestos of political parties. Although Lithuania's media elites' perceptions of populism matter because their filtering of contents impacts on public opinion, research has not investigated the topic. This study is based on the findings of a questionnaire and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected Lithuanian media elites. The study reveals a pronounced divergence from the negative views of populism of large urban and regional newspapers, to the ambivalent views of local newspapers. The study speculates the use of contrasting reader-feedback mechanisms may be the cause of the divide. The study places the findings within the broader context of information methodology practices in the press in both Lithuania and other countries.

Keywords: populism, journalism, editors-in-chief, regional press, local press.

INTRODUCTION

Populism is defined by its users' perceptions be they discussants in political debates, commentators, or academic observers particularly when they intend to discredit, disqualify or „unmask” certain propositions, political attitudes, campaign platforms or manifestos of political parties. Researchers investigating the phenomenon of populism often target these perceptions, focusing on certain

socio-demographic groups: politicians, political commentators, various segments of the electorate and researchers.

A certain set of perceptions of populism are characteristic of the members of newsrooms at the local, national and regional newspapers as a distinctive demographic group. Members of the editorial teams may use the notion of populism in their textual production (editorial articles, opinion pieces etc.), when participating in (broadcast) discussions on television or talk radio. Crucially, these perceptions may inform their decisions when selecting or rejecting op-eds for publication, inviting authors to contribute opinion pieces or commentaries, maintaining a network of contacts and collaborators etc.

The perceptions of populism that are characteristic of „media elites” as a clearly delineated, individuated, separate social, demographic group have never been investigated in a targeted way but they do matter. The editors’ filtering of contents impacts public opinion. Their decisions concerning who can participate in the public discourse have consequences in the context of the distribution of authored opinions and the ensuing competition for domination in the public sphere. Research has shown that the editorial attitudes do indeed have a direct impact on the amount of populist rhetoric in the newspapers: most occurs in op-eds, opinion-oriented news stories and messages originating from politicians, all of which have been through the filtering of the newsrooms (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 1122). The newsrooms’ attitudes may vary like the pre-WWII German editors-in-chief who refused to sell advertising space to the Nazis on principle in an attempt to establish a broad media „cordon sanitaire” (Oja & Mral, 2013, p. 285). Furthermore research indicates that contemporary populist parties, despite initially facing abject disapproval by editors, have eventual acceptance throughout the EU: Sweden (Oja & Mral, 2013); Benelux (Cammaerts, 2018; de Jonge, 2021; Schafrad et al., 2012); and Portugal (Novais, 2022). In other words, the decisions of the editors-in-chief can define the nature and quality of public debate. These perceptions are also formative of the relation between the media channels and their audiences. The audiences also engender a certain perception of the „acceptability standards”, „substantive, informative debate” and „pandering to the lowest common denominator” or engaging in demagoguery, that the „media elites” may choose to subscribe to or to seek to challenge and change.

Numerous studies since 2000 investigate the attitudes of editors-in-chief or leading journalists (Andersson & Wiik, 2013; Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2023; Groenhart & Bardoel, 2012; Ihlebæk & Larsson, 2018; Kitzberger, 2023; Niggermeier & Skóra, 2018; Panievsky, 2022 and von Krogh & Nord, 2010). However, research has never focused on either Baltic realities or the attitudes of editors-in-chief towards populism. The Lithuanian realities will also substantially nuance the picture formed so far for there are no universally recognized purely populist parties in Lithuania, at least not ones that the rest of the political

spectrum in its entirety has openly pledged never to work with. This study, based on a questionnaire and interviews, targets the perceptions of populism held by Lithuania's „media elites”—the editorial staff of newsrooms of various local and small or large regional newspapers.

Some Lithuanian researchers have focused on populism in the Lithuanian media. Matonyte (2009, pp. 172–173), for instance, places the rise in the amount of populist media rhetoric within the general post-Soviet trajectory of media developing commercialism. Likewise, Balcytiene (2012) links the emergence and domination of media commercialism to the rise of populism in the media. But these two studies are alone in targeting the relationship between populism and the Lithuanian media elites.

The target sample of regional newspapers (small and large) and local ones is pertinent since given the economic dynamics, there is a rich spectrum of such publications to investigate. Silva dos Santos and Santos de Miranda (2022) conclude that interviews with the industry representatives is among the most commonly used method for data collection.

The study found an unexpected divergence between the perceptions of populism of the smaller publications (the small local newspapers, the medium-size regional newspapers) and the larger (urban) publications.

The paper explores the setting and subsequent methods of the study, and then presents the results followed by a discussion and the conclusions.

NORMATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS POPULISM

Several conventions impacted the construction of this study. As the key was to explore the understanding of populism in the context of Lithuanian newsrooms, the study could not advocate any particular definition of populist politics, narratives, argumentation, themes etc. Nor would it be feasible. This is a public communication, mass-media study, whereas populism is most often investigated in political science (Hunger & Paxton, 2022, p. 622). Indeed, most of the more recent overviews of the definition of the concept (Benveniste et al., 2016; Gagnon et al., 2018) emphasise Mudde's definition of populism as an „ideology”, indeed a „thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), focusing on the contents of the message, not on the communication practice. Hunger and Paxton (2022), in their survey of definitions, concur that, even if somewhat „deviating”, the attempts to define populism as a „communication phenomenon”, „communication style” are still rather ideational. This discourse-centred strand of research not only distinguishes between political actors, media and citizens as distinct participants in the populist discourse, but also between „populism by the media”, media as activist organizations, „populism through the media”,

and media as platforms for populist actors (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 431). The same team argues that „populism research traditionally paid little attention [...] to the centrality of the media” (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 429). One of the reasons for neither advocating nor relying on any definition of populism during the design stage of the study, was to determine whether or not the representatives of the industry might tend to spontaneously converge on one.

We are aware, however, that there is a tendency to see populism as a rather negatively characterized strategy, capable of „doing damage to” and „perverting” numerous information and communications phenomena such as stories, narratives, frames etc. (Müller, 2023, p. 74). Still, individual authors do sometimes highlight the positive role that populism has played in stabilizing and consolidating countries in periods after political upheavals. Negativity as a preconception was the only one, with which the study challenged the editors-in-chief.

Research has long identified that however difficult it is to define such concepts, and however flexible they may be, the usage of „populism” and „mainstream” is rather consistent and stable across countries, ensuring the range of meanings is always interrelated (Steensen et al., 2023; Thornborrow et al., 2021a). We therefore expected our informants to be consistent in their answers.

When designing the questionnaire, control questions were included in order to ensure the coherence of the collected answer sets. The consistency of the answers was considered when deciding whether to treat a group of answers as a set of data-points for the study. Later during the interview stage, when it was vital to collect reliable information and access the informants’ insights, the 10 interview questions were provided to the management newsrooms well in advance. The aim of this strategy was to indicate the general gist of the interview process, and give free rein to the interviewees to speak at their own pace in their own voice, and choosing whatever they might want to emphasize themselves.

METHODS

The initial stage of the investigation of the pool of the editors-in-chief and deputy editors (henceforth editors) of Lithuania’s local and regional periodical publications’ newsrooms (N=76) was conducted by Lietuvos nacionalinė Martyno Mažvydo biblioteka (LNMMB; Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in March-July 2021. The aim of the LNMMB’s survey was to identify issues concerned with the economics and finances of the publications as business ventures, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the 71 questions concerned content selection, professional standards, relationship with political and administrative authorities, the business owners (the elite power figures) within the publications’ respective locations and regions etc.

The survey comprised mostly closed questions (yes, no, don't know) and only 3 of the 71 questions concerned the editors' relationship with populism.

The editors, two per newsroom, were sent a survey to complete and return. Anonymity was guaranteed because a few questions concerned the sensitive relationships between the newsrooms and the owners and regional public administrators and the latent promotion of political views. The completed surveys were collected between March 10th and April 2nd. The selection of the participants relied on data available in the registries of Lithuania's media outlets. Membership of various NGOs, professional organizations or associations of assorted interest groups did not exclude the editors from being sent the survey. The LNMMB identified 76 newsrooms, of which 47 (61,8 per cent) responded.

However, crucially, the completed surveys allowed the researchers to categorize the newsrooms as being „small” local outlets employing at most five journalists or support staff and „large” more substantive outlets published in cities or in more populous regions employing at least six permanent journalists or support staff.

The data collected at this stage had two shortcomings: (1) it was anonymous; (2) the preponderance of closed questions limited the freedom of the respondents to answer in their own words. The absence of open questions did not allow the respondents to emphasize or disregard certain aspects or areas or state their preference to discuss certain topics that mattered.

In order to gather more detailed, organic data, a selection of the newsrooms were contacted again and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted by video conferencing. Permission to record the interviews was sought from and granted by the interviewees, who were assured any responses would be quoted in strict anonymity.

The newsrooms that participated in the in-depth interviews (mostly involved both editors). To off-set the anonymity that characterized the LNMMB survey, the design of the interviews controlled the demographic characteristics of the newsrooms. This enabled the researchers to ensure the participating newsrooms represented the entire pool in terms of their (1) geographic distribution, (2) number of permanent employees, (3) staff turnover, (4) frequency of publications and (5) the volume of a single issue.

RESULTS

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Three questions addressing the issue of populism were included in the structure of the interviews comprising one open and two closed questions and posed in the following order:

- (Q15) „Even if populism is not a concept that is commonly used in your internal decision making, in your internal deliberations and discussions, how do you define it? What is populism?“
- (Q16) „Do you perceive populism to be something negative?“ („YES“/„NO“)
- (Q17) „How would you characterize your professional experience vis-à-vis populism: are you fighting populism?“ („YES“/„NO“)

The questions were placed in one uninterrupted block at the end of the first quartile of the structure, preceded by questions about (supposed and sought after) political allegiances of the publications and their target audiences, accusations of political „tendentiousness“, and followed by questions about the newsrooms' attitudes towards „fake news“ and their interactions with the manifestations of the „fake news“.

The responses to Q15 were roughly comparable, indicating no divergence between small or large newsrooms. In their answers, the respondents tended to emphasize the context of communicative interaction rather than some inherent information-procedural characteristic producing the identity of populist contents. The most common response to Q15's last question 'What is populism?' followed along the lines of „saying what your audiences want to hear“, „ingratiating oneself with the listener“, „adapting to the expectations of the audience“, „reading the audience“ and so on, and consequently the responses were relatively neutral. A quarter of the responses were more normative, espousing an attitude towards the phenomenon, and then a negative one: „empty promises“, „unfounded promises“, „promises that are motivated solely by seeking to gain political dividends“, „untrustworthy pledges“.

An interesting, but unexpected, case comprised the few responses referring to curiosity, as in populism is the satisfying of: „the audiences' curiosity“ and „the curiosity of society“. We found just one research paper exploring the relationship between curiosity and democracy (Papastephanou, 2023) in which the author opens her argument by stating very little research exists concerning inquisitiveness and politics.. We interpreted these definitions of populism as indicative of a tacit endorsement of the strategy (somewhat positively charged definitions): if it merely addresses the audience's inquisitiveness, the audience's desire to learn something new, yet unheard of, populism might be seen to be something rather „innocent“. As the subsequent interviews later revealed, a small proportion of the editors-in-chief think that a journalist openly disparaging „populism“ might not be doing their job properly.

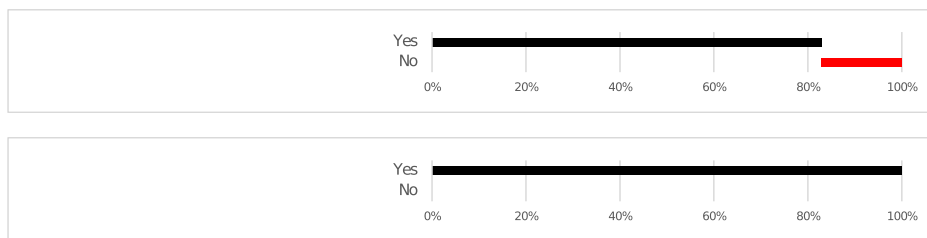
A note from the Lithuanian history of journalism research might be of relevance here. One of the „fathers“ of Lithuanian journalism, Juozas Keliuotis, in his unpublished PhD dissertation „Lectures in journalism“ (2000 [1942]), argues that the entirety of journalistic activities, in both the publication and reading

of news, the phenomenon of news must be investigated under the aegis of the „psychology of curiosity”. The entire enterprise of news gathering, news distribution, news professionalism is an unavoidable byproduct of the interest in the unheard, unseen, and the not yet experienced. Keliuotis argues other frames, such as journalism and its role in democracy and relationship with commerce within the context of advertisement are secondary. As Lithuania’s journalism students have since the early 1990s read Keliuotis’ ‘Lectures’ it is reasonable to believe that the terminology of journalism in Lithuania might reflect the notion of curiosity (it might be more common compared to other traditions). The interviews with the representatives from the industry did not elucidate the link between curiosity and populism. Indeed some interviewees emphasised their use of the word „populism” involves „judgement”, but that „journalists do not judge” although „journalists do report”. Even so, this particular connection between „curiosity” and „populism” seems to call for further investigation.

Overall, the responses to Q15 did not meet expectations in providing either or both a definition and a strong category statement. Instead, they converged around a rather neutral category statement („populism is the saying of what the audiences want to hear”) with some indicating a normative attitude.

The two closed questions, Q16 and Q17, clearly revealed the divergence of opinion with 40 of 47 responses viewing populism negatively and 35 of 47 responses claiming it their duty to „fight populism”.

Figure 1. Perceptions on populism



Source: own elaboration

Upper Graph: Industry representatives (small newsrooms; Q16): “Do you perceive populism to be something negative?”; n = 41

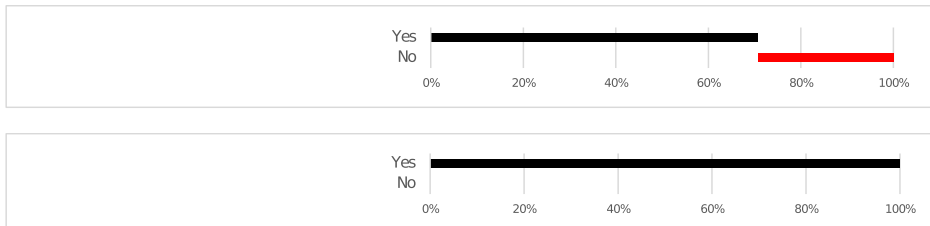
Lower Graph: Industry representatives (large newsrooms; Q16): “Do you perceive populism to be something negative?”; n = 6

This result cannot, due to the small sample size, be statistically significant, but interestingly, there was a clear correlation between newsroom size and response. Editors who view populism „sympathetically” (they do not think it a bad thing, they do not think it their duty to fight it) represent exclusively only the smallest, local publications. By contrast, the large newsrooms, invariably

condemn populism and fight it. A simple frequency distribution here will suffice to reveal the main finding.

The judgement on the part of the large newsrooms is even more pronounced in terms of the action, not just the attitude: 17 per cent of the editors of the small, local ones do not judge populist contents; 29 per cent do not do anything about it, but all of the large newsrooms both condemn and fight populism.

Figure 2. Perception on fighting populism



Source: own elaboration

Upper Graph: Industry representatives (small newsrooms; Q17): “How would you characterize your professional experience vis-à-vis populism: are you fighting populism?”; n = 41

Lower Graph: Industry representatives (large newsrooms; Q17): “How would you characterize your professional experience vis-à-vis populism: are you fighting populism?”; n = 6

Only a few other parameters delivered such a clear distinction, although there were exceptions. For example, all the large outlets have always been accused of „having clear political tendencies or allegiances”, whereas this applied to only about half of the smaller ones. All the large newsrooms feel the competition of the social networks, whereas a quarter of the small ones do not, but as the causes have more to do with the political and economic context, they are somewhat less unexpected.

The attitude towards populism is a „standards, professionalism and ethics” category, and here the researchers expected something more of a universal coherence – which proved not to be the case. A similar, but less pronounced divergence was observed in the case of „fake news”. Again, a small number of the editors at the smaller local publications do not think it their duty to fight fake news, to actively look for and to seek to unmask fake news, whereas all of the editors at the larger publications commit to such efforts. A more pronounced proportion of the editors at the smaller newsrooms, compared to the large ones, sense that their audiences do not engage in fake news. However, this „standards” dichotomy was not universal. For example, when asked whether the newsrooms check the information supplied by outside sources (Q20), the proportions of both the small and large newsrooms’ had the same responses.

Figure 3. Perceptions on efforts to ensure the accuracy of information supplied by outside sources



Source: own elaboration

Upper Graph: Industry representatives (small newsrooms; Q20):
 “Information/content supplied by outside sources: are you organizing and engaging in efforts to ensure the accuracy of it?”; n = 41

Lower Graph: Industry representatives (large newsrooms; Q20):
 “Information/content supplied by outside sources: are you organizing and engaging in efforts to ensure the accuracy of it?”; n = 6

The unexpected divergence in (some instances of) „standards, professionalism and ethics” is surprising. There are only a few institutions licensed to teach journalists at the level of a university in Lithuania, and most of the journalists working in Lithuania have undergone the same kind of professional training. Journalists who eventually enter employment contracts with regional outlets are members of the same professional associations as those working in the capital, and they are offered the same professional development services, they compete for the same awards and prizes in the field of professional distinction.

THE INTERVIEWS

The researchers expected the divergence to form a significant part of the in-depth interviews. Quite a few questions concerned the issues of „standards, professionalism and ethics”. The researchers also expected the issue of the trust in media to feature heavily. Lithuania is characterized by the significant distrust the audiences have towards the media. In 2000–2001, Vaisnys and Kevisas (2024) argue the Lithuanian media was the most trusted public institution in the country, topping the levels of confidence that the population usually reserves for the first responders; but now in the 2020s it is one of the most distrusted. However, overall, the interviewees placed a greater emphasis on the discussion of their

economic predicament¹ and the contentions and issues arising from their interactions with the political and business establishment.

None of the newsrooms voluntarily brought up the issue of populism during the interviews, even when close to the end of the interview the researchers asked whether there was an important, relevant or urgent issue that the discussion had omitted. This would suggest the issues the interviewees emphasized, such as the economics of newspaper publishing, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the occasionally tense relationship between outlets, political administration, and administrative authorities at the local level overshadowed the issues of professional standards, journalism ethics, content selection criteria, relationships with the contributors and the audiences.

The most discussed issue of the „standards, professionalism and ethics” category was the question of trust. The conclusion of that discussion has already been summarized elsewhere (Vaisnys & Kevisas, 2024; see also Kevisas et al., 2020). In brief, the editors maintained they (1) understood the hazardous implications of the high distrust that the audiences have towards the media outlets, and that they deplored the situation. But they also declared that it was (2) „not their issue”, „not their problem”, „they have nothing to do with it”. The editors said they were small regional media, and knew their readers „not just well, but personally” and vice-versa so there was no foundation for any distrust, indeed „their readers do trust them”. The distrust that sociologists highlight that does, indeed, give cause for alarm, is the „issue of „big press”, the national broadcasters and the large daily newspapers, of the main Internet news sites”.

In the context of any divergence in attitude towards populist rhetoric, the newsrooms all shared a similar response: the small regional, local newsroom „feels the pulse of community”, following actual developments closely because the staff regularly engage in actual conversations with their subscribers. More often than not, the staff actually „write about their subscribers, report from their lives”. The audiences feel free to contact the journalists, authors of individual articles, to express their appreciation, and occasional disapproval of, the contents published. This holistic interaction infrastructure reduces the need for the newsroom to develop an „abstract”, „theoretical”, „inorganic”, „inauthentic” outlook or adopt the role of an „educator”, „teacher” or a „moral authority”. The editors of local and regional newspapers are neither incapable nor stopped from acting in a capacity of a moral and ethical arbiter. There is no need as the circumstances do not occasion such practices. They are not a part of the „big press”. The position of capillary, local media channels forces them to be platforms

¹ There was the hope that Lithuania’s government might provide support measures against financial losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic

for populist contents, making unavoidable „populism through the media”, but there is nothing regrettable about this tendency.

It is worth highlighting that these responses do indicate a rather high level of mature reflexivity. Here the editors' replies engender a certain distancing from the object under discussion, a capability to „abstract”, „theorize”, and adopt an „inorganic”, an „academic” outlook. But this might be an artifact of the authors of the study having asked the interviewees to pre-reflect their answers to the questions under discussion.

Overall, the answers seem to indicate that the editors of local and regional newspapers in Lithuania claim to have access to a more advanced reader-feedback mechanism than that available for „big press” (the national media). The publishers and editors of national media, the supervisors of the outlets, do also base their decisions on the wealth of information about the behaviour of their readers. The subscription numbers and their dynamics and the website readership data do reflect the preferences, attitudes and reactions of the audiences. However F2F conversations with the members of the community are more beneficial, because despite being regarded as more “primitive”, are less modulated and detached, and more direct and „honest”.

DISCUSSION

From a certain point of view, the findings were rather contextual. Interestingly, the self-reflection offered by the interviewees matches the conclusions drawn by published research, though there are only a few studies where the authors actively investigate the relationship between populism and media regionalism. There is a tendency within the pool of the editors managing the smallest local publications to downgrade the question of populism to a second-tier problem. As a result, only a few researchers interpret populism as a mere procedural issue as opposed to a conceptual category. The setup of local news gathering and distribution, in particular the peculiarities of its reader feedback loop, makes it advantageous compared to larger news operations. In this context, the issue of populism is secondary.

For example, Meryl Aldridge in a study of city evening papers in the UK concurs that any attempt to simultaneously reach socially, demographically and culturally diverging audience segments results in the observed pattern of interpreting, framing issues in simplistic seemingly „common-sense” populist terms (Aldridge, 2003, p. 497). Müller (2017, p. 75) makes a similar argument using an economic interpretation in that part of the blame is due to the pressure to consolidate a highly competitive market. The logical course of this argument is that media outlets that target diverse demographics, i.e., large national rather than the small

local news outlets, are more prone to giving voice to populist rhetoric or space to populist contents. Yet, researchers still characterize populism as inherently negative. Although, the issue does not emerge in the context of a narrow, well-defined, targeted audience. Anecdotally, this echoes Fiorello LaGuardia, then the mayor of New York City, who in a discussion about classical politics argued the whole government should occur at the level of a mayor – „there is no Democratic or Republican way of fixing a sewer” (The Economist 2013). In other words, populism is, indeed, undesirable; the suggested replacement is „news minimalism”.

These suggestions are also contextual within the more general discussion of the vital role played by local news in a democracy. This discussion views local news sympathetically not only as a bulwark against „news deserts” but as Ritter & Standridge (2019) argue also has the qualities of the most robust segment within the news industry. Indeed, local news is capable of preserving a high level of direct interactivity between audiences and outlets forming the bonds of trust between them (Ritter & Standridge, 2019). This argument allows Moore to grimly describe the closure of US local and regional newspapers over the past few decades as the „most alarming”, „grimmiest statistic in all [...] journalism” (2021, p. 15).

However, the idea that local and regional news are somehow „immune” to populist rhetoric is also challenged and this could be considered as the prevailing tendency. The case of Germany’s media is a fitting example. In Germany where the media structure of the country is decentralized, regional newspapers are a strong social institution and „national” outlets are mostly federalized public service broadcasting channels (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, p. 3293). However, a representative computer-assisted telephone survey among Germans over the age 18 years has revealed that the regional newspapers are a target of populist attitudes (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, p. 3308). In other words, populist content not only involves an anti-political and anti-establishment sentiment (the disappointment with politics), but also an anti-media attitude (the disappointment with media), and the trend is as strong in the media-wise decentralized Germany as anywhere else (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, p. 3308). The authors suggest that the most effective countermeasure is not „news minimalism”, but the opposite, an increase in the demographics represented, which generates „transparency”, a more apt coverage of populism as a phenomenon for the elites (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, p. 3308). By contrast, Krämer and Langmann (2020, p. 5656), having investigated meta-journalistic narratives in Germany’s national and regional press, argue that „professionalism” is the main countermeasure against the spread of populist contents in the news. Professionalism is possible as long as there is, indeed, a coherent profession (though the results of our study indicate that this coherence is not always real (see also below)).

Niggermeier and Skóra (2018, p. 49) researched the regionalism of populism and conclude the German media market is, indeed, characterized by pronounced regionalization and regional fragmentation, and maintain that the increasing fragmentation exacerbates populism. The authors interviewed representatives of Germany's media industry and conclude that the audience being „regionally limited” without any alternatives or room for diversification leads to the outlets gradually „adapt” to the viewpoints not only of the readership, but that of the majority of the audience, eventually producing „mainstreamization” (Niggermeier & Skóra 2018, p. 58). If the „mainstreamization” is the primary target of populism, then regionalization is hardly the solution.

More generally, in the context of the newsrooms' overall attitudes towards populism, the tendency to avoid the issue, observed during the in-depth interviews, is unsurprising. Léonie de Jonge (2019) researched the populist radical right in the Benelux countries. She argues members maintain close personal contacts with politicians, but refuse to exclude or to judge any of them, and are gradually becoming more „accommodating” of their attitudes particularly those initially judged as too extreme to voice (de Jonge, 2019, p. 195, pp. 201–202). For example, media coverage of „Vlaams Belang”, a Flemish right-wing populist political party, was initially hostile but over time became more nuanced (de Jonge, 2021, p. 608; de Jonge & Gaufran, 2022, p. 784; Schafrad et al., 2012, pp. 373–374); similar tendencies of a gradual thawing are observed in other countries (see Akkerman et al., 2016; Ekström et al., 2020; Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022; Thornborrow et al., 2021b). However, Farkas (2023, p. 431) argues that what the editors-in-chief say may sometimes just be posturing as distraction from the actual operations of a news outlet (Farkas, 2023, p. 431).

Another point highlighted by our research was that the interviewees were more willing to discuss the trust in media rather than their attitudes towards populism, which indicated their willingness to connect the two. This result echoed in Lithuanian research papers. Matonyte (2008), interestingly, sees the rise in populist rhetoric and the public distrust with the media as closely entwined. The rise begins as the media starts actively „taking sides along the lines of competing political elite and avoiding producing any public-interest related analysis, finally leading to relative disillusionment of the audience vis-à-vis the mass-media” (Matonyte, 2008, p. 140).

Finally, our finding of a divergence within the journalistic profession is not wholly new. For example, Schmidt (2023) argues the amount of politicization has grown more substantial in the US media even in the domain of medical news (during the pandemic), contributing to a spread of polarization, division and „alternatives” (2023, p. 41). However, these findings pertain to the contents. Studies, indicating similar trends to be the case for procedures, are more recent. Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth (2023, pp. 13–14) indicate there is a clear division into

„two journalistic cultures” within the Hungarian media landscape: the state-funded outlets echo the government’s messages („collaborative culture”), while the media system still associates with the function of an independent watchdog („monitorial culture”).

CONCLUSION

The study nuances the current understanding of the relationship between populism and „media elites”. We find that not all editors-in-chief view populism negatively, indeed the smaller newsrooms have a „sympathetic” and „relaxed” viewpoint. We also find that those editors claiming to have a more direct access to their audiences, to interact with them with greater efficiency, claim to make use of a special, privileged feedback-loop, allowing them to have a tendency to disregard populism as a pressing issue.

This indicates a new paradigm of countermeasures against populism is likely to be proposed. Instead of employing training, professionalism and high ethical standards to push back against populism, „news minimalism” should be employed and the development (both conceptually and economically) of small local news outlets as opposed to the hegemony of the „big press” and national broadcasters should be encouraged.

However, evaluating these ideas within a broader context of academic research we find that the self-reflections offered by the representatives of the media industry might not be well founded in scientific, rational reasoning, and that the peculiarities of the relationship between populism in media and media regionalism call for further research.

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