

## **Media populism in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

The rise of populism in contemporary societies could be understood within the framework of media landscapes (Moffit, 2016). Specifically, during crises – such as the corona virus pandemic- the role of news media, who provide valuable sources for information, is even more critical for the diffusion (or not) of populism in the public sphere. In this vein, this paper focuses on how the pandemic's outbreak and management in Greece, specifically during its 1st year, affected media populism.

By adopting the political communication approach of populism (Reinemann et al., 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018) and by using a relevant operationalisation to identify populist communication, the paper analyzes the presence and the different patterns of media populism in online news media in Greece. More specifically it examines: (a) the type of populist communication in the online news media coverage of the Covid-19, (b) the origin of the relevant populist communication (populism through the media / populism by the media), (c) the factors that could explain the different patterns of media populism.

Through the sampling method of constructed weeks and by focusing on the 1st year of the pandemic (divided into two phases), 1.112 news items, from 8 news websites, were selected and content analyzed, in order to identify different types and patterns of media populism (people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusion of “others”, populism through the media, populism by the media).

Findings reveal that the amount and the type of media populism in the news coverage of Covid-19 remained stable during the 1st year of the pandemic. However, towards the end of the 1st year (re-escalation phase) populism produced by the media increased significantly (as opposed to populism through the media). Thus, findings suggest that, after the initial phase (outbreak) of the Covid-19, news media emerged as independent actors that produced significantly more populism themselves, while at the same time narrowed down the presence (through their gatekeeping role) of populist actors.

Context sensitive and macro-societal factors related to the populist newsroom logic, the role of the media as fourth estate, profit – oriented dimensions, as well as media dependency on institutional and political sources, are taken into consideration in order to explain the aforementioned findings.

## **Introduction.**

The rise of populism in contemporary societies could also be understood within the framework of media landscapes (Moffit, 2016). During the last decades, the relevant research is focusing on the study of the relationship between the media and populism, with the dominant view arguing that the global rise of populism since the mid-1990s is due, among to other structural social, political and economic factors, to the important role that the media play in contemporary societies. In this context, the different aspects that have been studied are related to the media coverage of populist actors and to the extent this coverage contributes to their electoral success, to the communication strategies of populist actors, to the relationship of populist actors with new media (internet and social media), to the presence of populist communication in the news content, to the role of the media as producers of populist communication or simply as its mediators, to the factors that shape the production (or not) of populist content in the media, and to the relevant effects that populist media content has on the public.

This paper, by acknowledging the constant presence of populism in the news media, and by focusing on the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, aims to examine (1) the type of populist communication (populism, anti-elitism, exclusion of “others”) in the news coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the Covid-19 pandemic (outbreak & re-escalation phases), in the Greek media, (2) its origin (populism through the media / populism by the media), (3) and the factors that could possibly explain the different patterns of the relevant populist communication.

By addressing the aforementioned issues, the paper attempts to explore the role of the Greek media in the dissemination of different types of populist communication during the first year of the pandemic, as well as the role of the media as producers or gatekeepers of populist communication during the specific period. At the same time, it will investigate whether the evolution of the pandemic, during the first year, also affected the role of the media as producers or mediators of populist communication.

The findings of the study reveal that during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece, the media actively contributed to the visibility of populist communication in the public sphere, through the diffusion and the production of populist communication. In addition, it is evident that as the pandemic progressed from the first phase of the outbreak towards its re-escalation phase at the end of the first year, the role of the media as producers of populist communication was significantly strengthened.

## **Literature Review**

### **Political communication approach of populism**

Since the late 1990s onwards, there is a steady rise in the electoral support and the appeal of populist parties and populist actors throughout the world. In some countries, populist actors have formed government, in other countries they are part of the governing coalition, while in most countries they have managed to enter national parliaments. Populists perceive that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”, while at the same time they argue that politics should be an expression of the “general will” of the people. Thus, there is a “construction” of a dichotomy, on their part, which is constituted on the one hand by the amorphous concept of the “people” (considered as virtuous and hardworking), and on the other hand by a threatening elite or / and a marginal group (out-group) whose interests and actions harm the “people”. In this logic, populist actors argue that the sovereignty of the “people” has been undermined and betrayed by the elites who are often presented as acting at their expense. Thus, the invocation, support and representation of the pure “people”, on their part, as well as the opposition against corrupt and immoral “elites” or “others” who are considered responsible for the problems of the ordinary people, constitute the basic core of the populist discourse (Heinisch et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Populism has been studied through different theoretical approaches. It has been conceptualized as a form of discourse (Laclau, 1977, 1983), as a style of politics (Moffit, 2016), as a thin -center ideology (Mudde, 2004, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Muller, 2017) or even as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001, 2017). Each of these conceptualizations offers a specific understanding of populism, reflecting the different ways in which populism has existed in various historical, political and social contexts (Heinisch et al., 2017), and at the same time suggests different ways to conduct empirical research on this phenomenon.

However, In the last decades scholars who want to understand to what extent political communication can be linked to the diffusion and rise of populism in contemporary societies tend to adopt the political communication approach to the study of populism (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Stanyer et al., 2017). The specific approach shifts the emphasis from what populism is, to what it says. That is, to how populism is communicated, to the role of the media, to the extent to which this is achieved and to the conditions under which this occurs or not (Sorensen, 2017). According to the communication approach, populism is a form of political communication which is reflected in the oral, written and visual communication of politicians, political parties, social movements or any other actors entering the public sphere (including the media and the public) (Reinemann et al., 2017, 2019). In this context, populism can be better understood as a set of characteristics inherent in communication messages, which are directly related to the goals, motivations and

attitudes of political actors, the media and/or citizens (Reinemann et al., 2017, 2019; De Vreese et al., 2018).

As far as the 3 basic elements of the populist communication messages are concerned (i.e. the set of characteristics inherent in messages that make them populist), the communicative construction of the "people", the reference to the "people", the invocation of the "people", the symbolic and rhetorical unification with the "people" by speaking about "we" and "us", constitute the undisputed core of populist communication. In these cases, the "people" is most often conceptualized as the sovereign people, the common people, or the people as a nation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), while at the same time, they are differentiated, from the "elites" in terms of their right to political power, their socioeconomic status, and their nationality (Reinemann et al. 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018). The second element of populist communication is anti-elitism, which takes the form of direct attacks and/or criticism against any kind of elite (internal or external), institutions and the establishment (Reinemann et al., 2017; Muller, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In this logic, the elite is conceptualized in terms of power, including e.g. the people who hold leadership positions in politics, foreign actors or institutions (e.g. the European Union), the business elite, the media and the arts (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanyer et al., 2017). The third element of populist communication is the negative reference to out-groups (marginal , minority social groups), through verbal attacks against these groups of people who do not consider to be legitimate to belong to the true "people" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Reinemann et al., 2017; De Vreese et al. 2018; Muller, 2017; Stanyer et al., 2017). The exclusion of these out-groups is a key feature of right-wing populism which attacks immigrants and domestic minorities. In the messages and rhetoric of populist actors it is emphasized that the members of these marginal social groups do not belong to the "people" as they differ greatly from the individuals who belong to it, in terms, for example, of nationality, origin, sexual orientation, religious belief, or belief in other values (Stanyer et al., 2017).

The aforementioned basic elements of populist communication can be empirically identified (individually or in combination with each other) in messages, indicating in this way, 4 different types of populist political communication (Reinemann et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007): (a) Empty populism, where the reference or the appeal to the people is the only element identified in the message, (b) exclusionary populism, which combines the appeal to the people with a reference to the exclusion of groups that do not have the right to be part of the "people" (i.e. the out-groups), (c) anti-elitist populism, which combines the appeal to the people along with an attack to the elites (this type of populism is usually associated with left-wing populist parties), and (d) complete populism, which simultaneously combines all 3 aforementioned elements in the message.

Thus, since populism, as a communicative phenomenon, can be operationalized through the frequent or infrequent use of characteristic content and style, then it is

possible to measure degrees of populism. In this way, populism becomes a gradual phenomenon where the question of who is or is not a populist will be addressed by the empirical measurement of the produced content of a political actor or even of a media outlet (De Vreese et al., 2018).

### **Media populism.**

Within the framework of the populist political communication approach the debate revolves around the 3 main pillars that constitute the discipline of political communication, namely: (a) political actors (e.g. politicians, political parties, movements), (b) the public, and (c) the media. Thus, the relevant discussion deals, for example, with: (a) the communication elements of populist actors' messages (in terms of both content and style) or the use of new media and their communication strategies in general (Esser et al., 2017; Atton, 2006; Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2011; Mazzoleni et al., 2003), and (b) the effects of the media content on the attitude, opinion, and ultimately the behavior of citizens regarding populism (Wirz et al., 2018; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2006, 2009; Gerstlé, 2003; Hameleers et al., 2016).

As far as the role of the media in the news coverage of populist actors is concerned, relevant studies show that populist actors receive negative (critical) coverage from the "elite"-systemic media, and positive coverage in the popular (tabloid) press (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Stanyer, 2007; Wettstein et al., 2018), while in general the news coverage of populists has increased in recent years (Esser et al., 2017). In this logic, the elite media tend to adopt a discourse based on the rational development of arguments, while the tabloid media tend to adopt a discourse that expresses the feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment, which is in fact the discourse of populist supporters (Stewart et al., 2003). Although populism is quite common, but not dominant, in political journalism in Western democracies (Engesser et al., 2020), the media coverage of populists is quite more complex and there is not simply a dichotomy (negative coverage, positive coverage) between elite and tabloid media (Akkerman, 2011).

In addition, other studies show that several media present themselves as the "voice" of the people while simultaneously they cover politicians and political parties with anti-institutional tones (Wettstein et al., 2018), and by "constructing" a competition between different groups (in-groups, out-groups) (Blassnig et al., 2019). In many cases, especially tabloid media, reconstruct issues in terms of attribution of responsibilities and moral opposition between moral "people" and immoral elites, thus acquiring an active role as producers of populist interpretive frameworks (Hameleers et al., 2019).

This active role of the media, in the diffusion and production of populist communication in the public sphere, has led several scholars to speak of **media populism**, as an independent phenomenon to be studied (Mazzoleni, 2008; Kramer, 2014, 2017; Esser et al., 2017). Media populism could be defined as the highly

commercialized process of news production and/or news coverage that seeks to respond to popular sentiment and opinions (Mazzoleni, 2008). In this sense, media populism is characterized by the use, by the media, of stylistic and ideological elements such as the construction and favoritism of specific groups (in-groups), hostility towards elites and the institutions of representative democracy, appeal to the common sense of in-group, or even appeal to moral emotions (Kramer, 2014, 2017). According to Esser et al. (2017) 3 types of media populism can be distinguished: (a) populism by the media, in which the media produce their own populist discourse, by claiming to be the representatives/ defenders of the people while simultaneously having a critical view of those in power and the system, (b) populism through the media, which results from the fact that the media give coverage and space to populist actors, contributing to the dissemination, visibility and legitimization of these actors in the public sphere, and (c) populist citizen journalism, which considers the media as platforms / means for the expression of populist discourse by citizens, usually through commenting in the comments section of online media.

Thus, in this context, the media perform three main roles: (a) gatekeepers for populist actors and populist communication in general, as they can open or close the news gates to populist actors and therefore facilitate or restrict their visibility into the public sphere), (b) interpreters and analysts of populist actors and populist communication, and (c) initiators of populist communication, by producing people-centered populism or anti-elitist populism motivated by their role as the voice of the “people” or as the countervailing power against governments, political parties and the system in general (Wettstein et al., 2018; Kramer, 2017; Esser et al, 2017; Mellado et al.,2017).

### **Populism and the media during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented health crisis with political, economic and social impact on a global level. After the initial outbreak shock, governments around the world, adopted different management strategies in order to respond to the crisis, while relevant political confrontations regarding the handling of the pandemic were also raised. In this context, the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically after the initial outbreak phase, offered the opportunity for the production of populist communication, adapted to the context of the specific health crisis (Bobba & Hube, 2021a).

Since there was no political intention, or even political responsibility for the outbreak of the pandemic it was very difficult for the political actors (and mainly populists) to politicize the issue and formulate relevant populist communication. Thus, there was a significant decrease in populist rhetoric across all political parties and political actors in many countries during the initial phase of the pandemic (Bobba & Hube, 2021b ; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020; Järvinemi, 2024). Only after the first few

weeks and the normalization of the pandemic did populist actors begin to formulate their classic argumentation against national and supranational elites, and, in some countries, even against immigrants (Bobba & Hube, 2021b).

In this context, right-wing populists, in opposition, during the pandemic, tried to frame COVID-19 via nativism (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022) or by articulating Sinophobic sentiments in some cases (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis, 2020) and by giving emphasis on stronger border closures and more controls on immigration (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis, 2020; Ringe and Rennó, 2023). In addition, there was relevant populist communication and criticism against the EU and the relevant mismanagement of the health crisis (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Bobba & Hube, 2021b; Ringe and Rennó, 2023; Císař and Kubát, 2021), while in other cases many right-wing populist opposition parties framed government activities as authoritarian and as a threat to democracy (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022).

On the other hand, left-wing opposition populists after the initial phase of the COVID-19, focused on framing the social, economic, and political consequences of the pandemic as indicative of the more general systemic failures they have been identifying and decrying all along' (Ringe and Rennó, 2023). They also expressed complaints about the lack of public investment in national health systems, the destructive consequences of European neoliberalism in all the previous years (Bobba & Hube, 2021b) and the economic and social consequences of the health crisis especially its impact on the most vulnerable groups in society (Zulianello & Guasti P, 2025; Galanapoulos, 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis, 2020; de Lange, 2022).

Right – wing populists in office, initially engaged in denial, tending to downplay the pandemic for as long as possible (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022). However, after the initial phase of the pandemic they produced populist communication by showing distrust for experts (rejecting expert advice), contempt for institutions, and suspicion of “others” (scapegoats), aggravating in this way, social polarization and forging divisions (Imran & Javed, 2023 ; Ringe and Rennó, 2023; Falkenbach, 2022) with some scholars identifying these elements as features of medical populism (Lasco, 2020). In other cases, populism was detectable in the continuing narrative of defending ‘the people’ from the ill-will of global liberal elites, and the claim not only to speak for ‘the people’ but to make policies that were merely the expression of the popular will. In addition, ‘migrants’ and those alleged to orchestrate migration (as the “other”) were blamed for the spread of the virus, while Brussels’ was portrayed as a hindrance at best and to be in the pay of the enemies of the country at worst (Batory, 2022).

As far as the relevant **media coverage** is concerned, early studies of COVID-19 coverage suggest a high level of politicization and polarization of news coverage of the COVID-19, focusing mainly on economic and social consequences and political responses (Basch, Kecojevic, & Wagner, 2020; Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020; Tejedor, Cervi, Tusa, Portales, & Zobotina, 2020) with politicians being featured more often than scientists in news coverage (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020; Motta, Stecula, and

Farhart 2020; Litvinenko, Borissova & Smoliarova, 2022; Hubner, 2021). At the early stage of the pandemic, media coverage was primarily concerned with the national government's political actions to contain the disease, while metaphors of war, journeys, and natural disasters were used to conceptualize the coronavirus pandemic. The media framing was clearly aimed at passing on information and conveying a sense of urgency while at the same time trying to avoid scare tactics (Schätz & Kirchhoff, 2024).

Other studies dealing specifically with the issue of **media populism during the pandemic**, focus on alternative media, and show that alternative news media on the Internet had a certain populist spin in their relevant posts, that is, an anti-establishment tone, critical of public institutions and political actions of the administration, evoking strong emotions. Their coverage of the COVID-19 was biased focusing on criticism regarding the communication and management of politicians and mainstream media, often by changing the framing of the news to fit their generally "anti-establishment" perspective. As such, the alternative news media used COVID19-related information to foster their critical stance toward established politicians, refugees and immigration (Boberg et al., 2020; Frischlich et al., 2023; Kant and Varea, 2021; Rae, 2021).

However, research regarding populist communication in the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in mainstream online news media and the relevant role of media (as producers or as mediators of populist communication) is rather scarce.

### **Methodology of the study**

My paper aims to address the following questions:

Research question 1: What kind of populist communication (people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusion of "others") is visible in the online news media coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece?

Research question 2: What is the origin of the populist communication in the online news media coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece? (populism through the media / populism by the media)

In order to explore the different patterns of media populism during the pandemic's initial year in Greece, and since the pandemic unfolded in waves, with fluctuating infection rates and corresponding changes in the relevant management, the 1<sup>st</sup> year is divided into two phases, each highlighting the progression and management of the pandemic.



Phase A: Outbreak of the pandemic - 1st national lockdown in Greece (10/03/2020 - 10/05/2020):

During this period, the first case of COVID-19 infection was confirmed in Greece, while a set of measures was imposed for the prevention of the spread of the corona virus, such as mobility restrictions, local lockdowns, or suspension of business operations in several economic sectors. At the end of March 2020, the 1<sup>st</sup> national lockdown was imposed, while the several restrictive measures were gradually lifted until middle May, due to declining infection rates. During the 1<sup>st</sup> period, 554 news items (N=554) were collected and content analyzed.

Phase B: Second wave of the pandemic (re-escalation phase) & 2nd national lockdown (09/10/2020 – 09/12/2020):

During this period as the autumn season arrived, a second wave of the pandemic hit the country, causing a rapid surge in infection rates, while a set of relevant prevention measures were again imposed. In early November 2020, the 2<sup>nd</sup> national lockdown was imposed in Greece, while the second wave of the pandemic lasted until the middle of December. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> period, 558 news items (N=558) were collected and content analyzed.

Totally 1.112 (N=1.112) news items were collected and analyzed from the following online news media: [www.efsyn.gr](http://www.efsyn.gr), [www.kathimerini.gr](http://www.kathimerini.gr), [www.rizospastis.gr](http://www.rizospastis.gr), [www.tanea.gr](http://www.tanea.gr), [www.newsbeast.gr](http://www.newsbeast.gr), [www.newsbomb.gr](http://www.newsbomb.gr), [www.protothema.gr](http://www.protothema.gr), [www.zougla.gr](http://www.zougla.gr).

These Greek media outlets meet the following criteria: (a) they have a broad audience, (b) they have the power to set the agenda in public discourse (agenda setting power), (c) they are of different political orientation, and (d) they represent different types of journalism (up-market journalism and mass-market journalism).

The sampling of the news items was conducted by via the constructed weeks method in order to limit, as far as possible, the number of news items to be analyzed, but at the same time not changing the representativeness of the sample (Blassnig et al., 2019).

Finally, for the sampling of the specific news items for the analysis, keywords such as "pandemic", "coronavirus", "COVID-19" were used.

As far as the measurement (operationalization) of the populist communication in the relevant news content is concerned, the methodology that has been used here- it has been previously used by other scholars as well (Blassnig et al., 2019; Esser et al., 2019)- includes a list of ten (10) populist communication messages as measurement indicators, in order to trace relevant populist communication (people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusion of "others") in news content.

More specifically, the list includes:

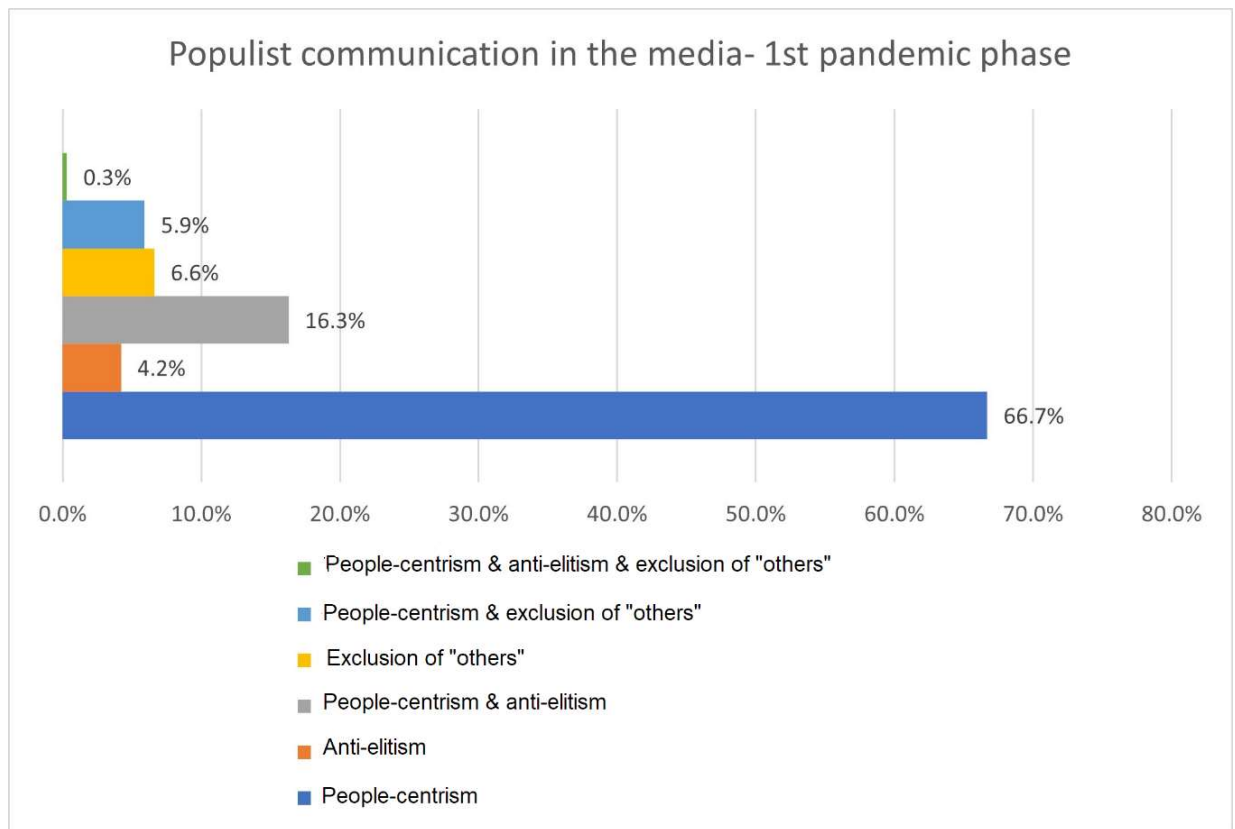
- (1) For the people-centrism element, messages (a) that approach the people (by showing their affinity and proximity to the people), (b) that praise the virtues, abilities or even the morality of the people, (c) that praise the achievements of the people, (d) that present the people as a homogeneous entity.
- (2) For the anti-elitism component, messages (a) that denigrate the elite and focus on their negative characteristics and immorality, (b) that blame the elite by focusing on their specific activities, (c) that reflect the detachment and distance of the elite from the ordinary people.
- (3) For the exclusion of “others” component, messages (a) that denigrate and stigmatize specific groups (e.g. minorities, marginalized groups), (b) that accuse and assign responsibilities to specific groups for some bad situation/ predicament, (c) that exclude specific groups from the concept of the people.

## **Findings**

### ***The type of populist communication in the online news media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic during its 1<sup>st</sup> year***

During the first phase of the pandemic, 44.6% of the news items under analysis contained populist communication messages, as opposed to 55.4% of the news items that did not contain any populist communication messages.

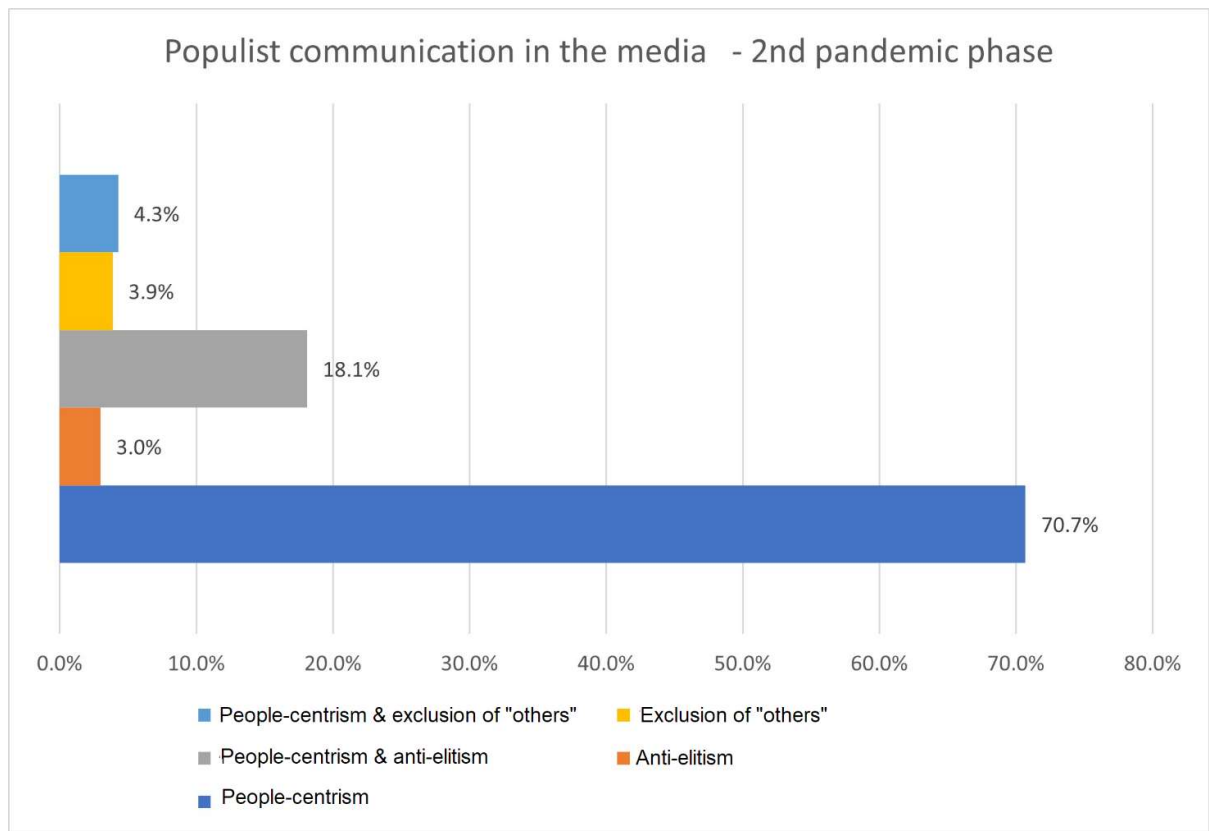
Further analysis of populist communication messages (N=288) shows that populist communication with only the element of people-centrism (empty populism) is dominant (66.7%, N=192), followed by populist communication containing elements of anti-elitism (20.5% in total, N=59), while in a smaller extent there is also populist communication containing elements of the exclusion of "others" (12.5% in total, N=36). Finally, there is a very small percentage of populist communication (0.3%, N=1) that includes elements of populism, anti-elitism and exclusion of "others" (complete populism) (Graph 1).



*Graph 1: Populist communication in the online news media coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece.*

During the second phase of the pandemic 47.9% of the news items under analysis contained populist communication messages, as opposed to 52.1% of the news items that did not contain any elements of populist communication.

Further analysis of populist communication messages (N=267) shows that populist communication with only the element of populism (empty populism) remains dominant (70.7%, N=215), followed by populist communication containing elements of anti-elitism (21.1% in total, N=64), while in a smaller extent there is also populist communication containing elements of the exclusion of the "others" (8.2%, N=25) (Graph 2)



*Graph 2: Populist communication in the online news media coverage of the 2st phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece.*

Thus, populist communication is quite visible in the public sphere during the news coverage of the 1st year of the Covid-19 pandemic, since in both phases under analysis (Phase A, Phase B) the number of news items containing populist communication messages reaches almost 50% of the sample. These findings are in accordance with other relevant research showing that populist communication is generally notable in Western democracies (Blassnig et al., 2019b; Engesser et al., 2020).

In this vein, the media seem to be important actors which contribute (both as gatekeepers and producers) to the diffusion and production of populism in the public sphere. More specifically, media populism in the news coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece is characterized in a dominant extent, by people-centrism; that is to say by messages which (a) present/conceptualize the “people” as a homogeneous entity, (b) approach the “people” (expressing their affinity and proximity to them), (c) praise the virtues, abilities, morality of the “people” and (d) praise the achievements of the “people”. In addition, media populism is also characterized, to a quite remarkable extent, by anti-elitism, thus, by messages (a) that denigrate the elite and focus on its negative characteristics and immorality, (b) that assign responsibilities and blame the elite by focusing on its specific actions, (c)

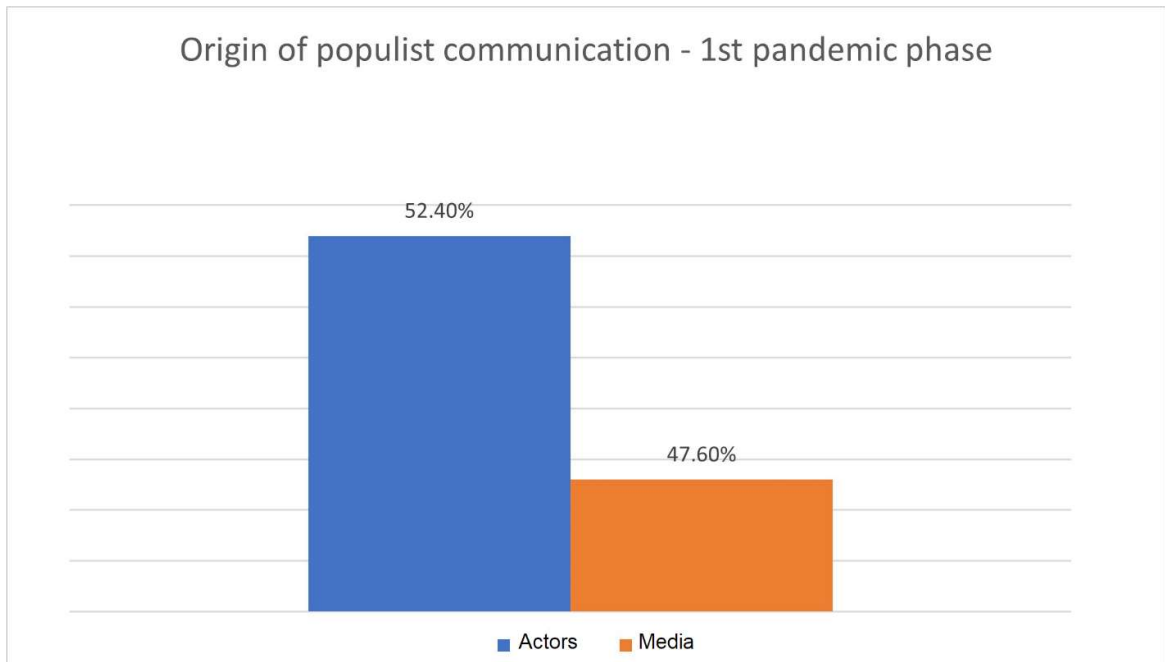
that depict the elite's disconnection and removal from ordinary "people". Last, but not least, media populism is also characterized to a lesser extent, by (a) messages that denigrate and stigmatize specific groups (e.g. minorities, marginalized groups), (b) messages that accuse and assign responsibilities to specific groups for societal problems, (c) messages that exclude specific groups from the concept of the "people" (exclusion of the "others").

In accordance with the communication-centered approach, the basic characteristics of populist communication, found here, reflect, different types and different degrees of populism (Reinemann et al., 2017;2019). Thus, by understanding populism as a communicative phenomenon that can be measured through the frequent or infrequent use of characteristic content, we are led to different aspects of media populism (e.g. people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusion of "others"), thereby confirming the communicative nature of populism as a gradual phenomenon (Stanyer et al., 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2019).

These different types of populism usually coincide with different types of populism identified in the relevant literature (Reinemann et al., 2017). For example, people-centrism (empty-populism) is very common even for actors who are not considered to be populists, since references to the "people" (as part of a communication strategy) attract and mobilize voters and the public in general. On the other hand, anti-elitism is closer to left-wing populism, while exclusionary populism (exclusion of the "others") is usually associated with right-wing populist parties / actors.

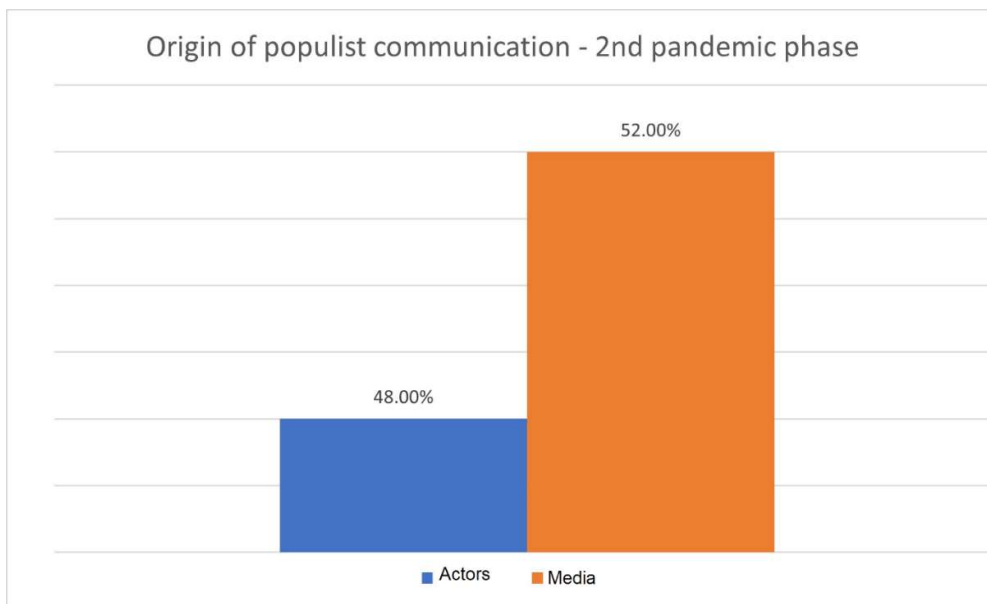
### ***The origin of populist communication in the online news media coverage of the Covid-19 during the 1st year of the pandemic***

Findings also show that during the first phase of the pandemic, 52.4% of populist communication messages, in the news items under analysis, originated from political and social actors covered in the media (populism through the media), while 47.6% of populist communication messages originated from media themselves (populism by the media) (Graph 3).



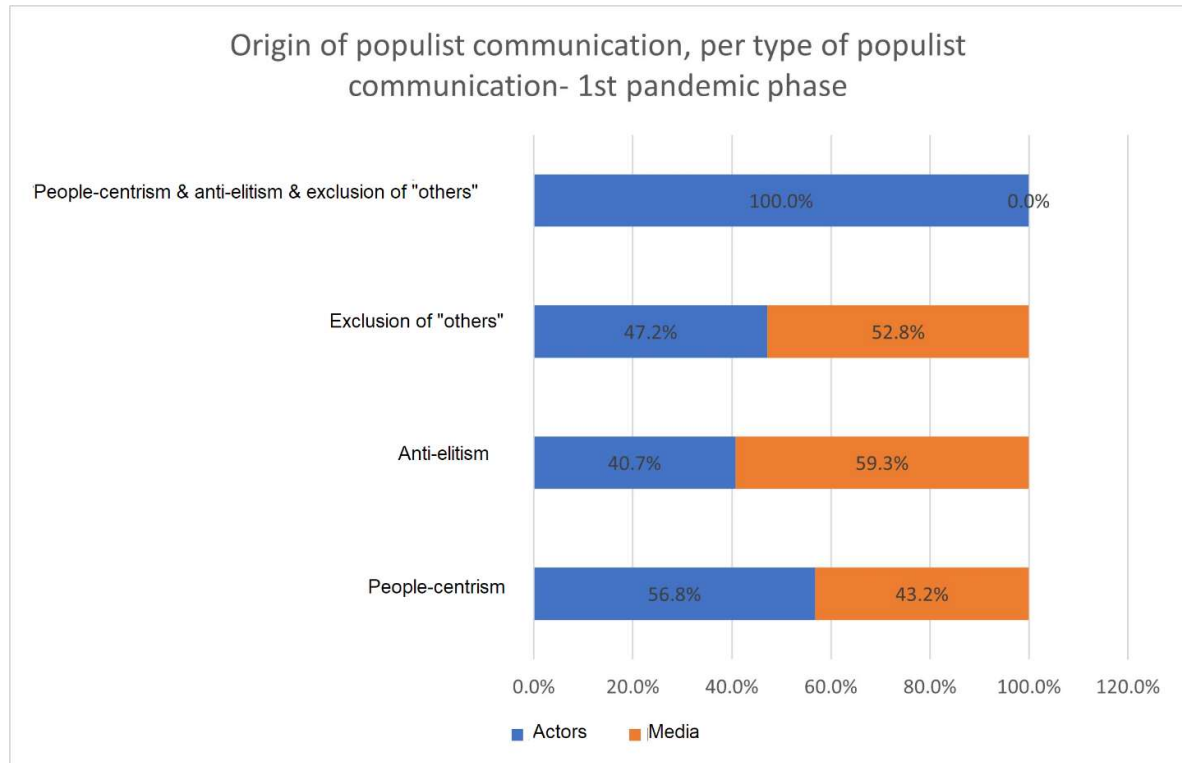
*Graph 3: Origin of populist communication in the online news media coverage of the 1st phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece.*

On the contrary, in the second phase of the pandemic, 48% of populist communication messages, in the news items under analysis, originated from political and social actors covered in the media (populism through the media), while 52% of populist communication messages originated from media themselves (populism by the media) (Graph 4).



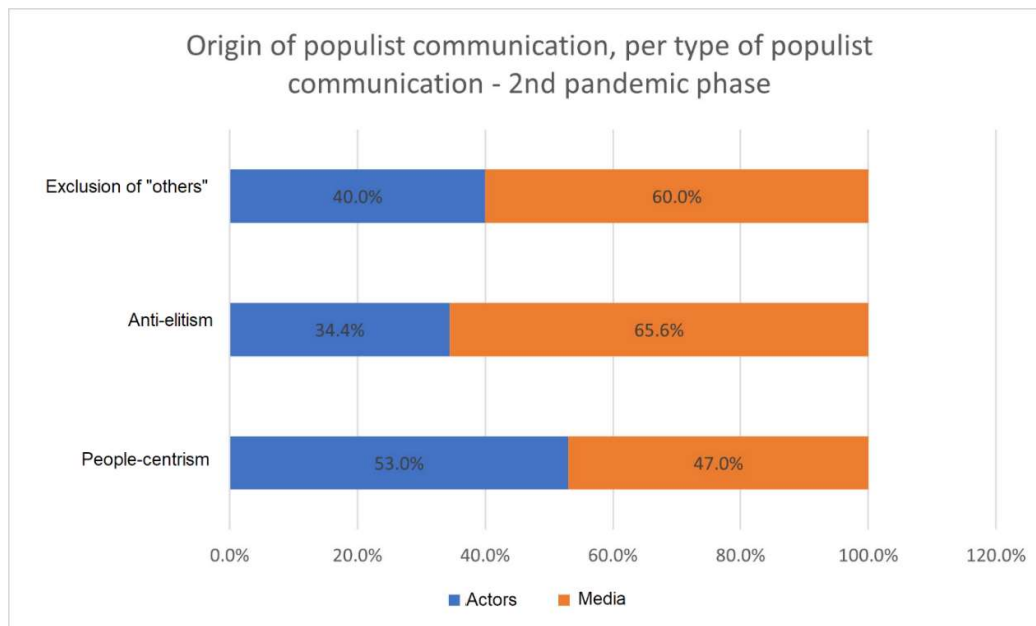
*Graph 4: Origin of populist communication in the online news media coverage of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece*

Further analysis reveals that populist communication messages with only the element of people-centrism (empty populism), in the news coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, originated from the political and social actors covered in the media (populism through the media) (56.8%), while anti-elitist populist communication messages (59.3%) and populist communication messages of the exclusion of "others" (52.8%) originate from the media (populism by the media) (Graph 5).



*Graph 5: Origin of populist communication, per type of populist communication, in the online news media coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece*

As far as the 2nd phase of the pandemic is concerned, populist communication messages with only the element of people-centrism (empty populism) still continue to originate from political and social actors who are covered in the media (53%), while anti-elitist populist communication messages (65.6%) and populist communication messages of the exclusion of "others"(60%) still continue to originate from the media – in a considerably greater extent compared to the first phase though (Graph 6).



*Graph 6: Origin of populist communication, per type of populist communication, in the online news media coverage of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece*

Thus, in the online news media coverage of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece, people-centrism (empty populism) is spread into the public sphere as populism through the media. The media, through their gatekeeping role, "allow", in a significant extent, political and social actors to express this type of communication, which is characterized by the invocation of the "people", the presentation of the "people" as a homogeneous entity, and to a lesser extent by approaching the "people" through the expression of proximity and affinity with them. On the contrary, anti-elitist populism and exclusionary populism are disseminated in the public sphere, in a quite remarkable extent, as populism by the media, since in this case the media are initiators of the specific types of populist communication.

However, it should be noticed that in second phase of the pandemic (re-escalation phase), the media acquire a more active role as initiators (producers) of populist communication (all 3 types) in the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (populism by the media), while at the same time populist communication that comes from political/social actors through the media (populism through the media) is correspondingly decreased.

The media have a more active role in producing populist communication which denigrates the elite, and focuses on its negative characteristics and immorality and blames it for social problems and difficulties. This anti-elitist populist communication originates from media outlets of specific political / ideological orientation (left-wing, oppositional media) (e.g. [www.efsyn.gr](http://www.efsyn.gr), [www.rizospastis.gr](http://www.rizospastis.gr), [www.zougla.gr](http://www.zougla.gr)), while these media outlets, for the most part, also allow relevant actors to express anti-



elitist populist communication (populism through the media). In the same vein the media also have a more active role in producing populist communication which excludes specific groups from the concept of the “people” and/or denigrate and stigmatize specific groups, blaming them for social problems and difficulties. This type of populist communication is found in the majority of the media under analysis.

As far as **the initial phase** of the pandemic (outbreak and 1<sup>st</sup> national lockdown) is regarded, where there is not yet any intense politicization of the pandemic, nor the political, social and economic impact has been strongly manifested, it could be argued that, these findings reflect the pre-existing anti-elitist / anti-systemic character of specific media outlets (due to ideological / political orientation), which is simply manifested here in the context of the pandemic. In addition, findings reveal media’s strong need (in an effort to politicize the issue of the pandemic and for profit-oriented purposes) to “construct” in-groups and out-groups and blame “others” for societal difficulties and problems.

However, in the **2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the pandemic** (re-escalation and 2nd national lockdown) the role of the media as producers of populist communication in general is strengthened, since media produce, in a significantly greater extent than the 1<sup>st</sup> phase, populist communication messages with elements of people-centrism or anti-elitism or exclusion of “others” (populism by the media). It could be argued that during this phase media’s dependency on political and institutional actors (who are used as news sources) is slightly decreasing, while at the same time there is also a strong need by the media to emerge as representatives and /or supporters of the “people”. However, the fact that people-centrist populist communication still originates, in a greater extent, from the political and social actors covered in the media implies that, in most cases, empty populism as part of a communication strategy is successfully used, by actors, to attract and mobilize voters and the public in general. The enhanced anti-elitist populist communication still originates from media outlets of specific political/ ideological orientation (left-wing, oppositional media) (eg. [www.efsyn.gr](http://www.efsyn.gr) , [www.rizospastis.gr](http://www.rizospastis.gr) , [www.zougla.gr](http://www.zougla.gr)). Therefore, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the pandemic, the anti-elitist / anti-systemic character of specific media outlets is significantly enhanced, probably due to the intense politicization of the pandemic, along with its political, social and economic impact. In the same vein, the production of exclusionary populism by the media (populism by the media) is also significantly strengthened. This type of populist communication is found in the majority of the media under analysis. It could be argued that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the pandemic, media have a stronger need, compared to the initial phase, to “construct” in-groups and out-groups and blame “others” for societal difficulties and problems, probably in the context of the more intense politicization of the pandemic and also for profit-oriented purposes.

Thus, as the Covid-19 pandemic progresses, media emerged as independent populist actors who invoke and represent the “people”, discredit the elite, but also discredit

and stigmatize specific social groups, in a significantly greater extent than in the initial phase of the pandemic.

### **Discussion of the results.**

The paper examined the visibility and the different patterns (type of populist communication and the origin of populist communication) of media populism in the online news media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic during its 1st year in Greece.

The findings of the study showed that media populism in general remained quite visible and stable during the 1st year of the pandemic, while anti-elitist populist communication and exclusionary populist communication originated, in a significantly greater extent in comparison to populism through media, from the media who were direct producers of these specific types of populist communication.

The fact that anti-elitist populist communication originated from media outlets of specific political / ideological orientation (left-wing, oppositional media) reveals that the media's political orientation and the nature of the relationship between the media system and the political system, in Greece, affects in a significant extent the type and the degree of populist communication in the news media content (e.g. it affects the way that media report on issues that are socially and politically controversial) (Stewart et al., 2003; Esser et al., 2017; Maurer et al., 2019). At the same time, it could also be argued that, along with their political orientation, the enhanced role of the specific media as the "fourth estate" against the government and the establishment predisposed them and enhanced them to produce anti-systemic and anti-elitist communication (Kramer, 2014; Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018). In the same vein, the discursive construction of "in-groups" and "out-groups" along with the blaming of "others" for societal difficulties and problems (exclusionary populism), found in the majority of more commercial media under analysis, seems to be the result of economic and professional motives that are embedded in the media business operation (Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018). In this context, more commercial media tend to produce more populist communication in order to attract readers and viewers (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Wettstein et al., 2018), while a key factor here is the dependence on advertising revenue. Last but not least, the difficulty of the political actors (and mainly populists) to politicize the issue and formulate relevant populist communication, specifically in the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, (Bobbà & Hube, 2021b ; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020; Järvinen, 2024) should also be taken into consideration in order to understand the more active role of the media as producers of populist communication.

The findings of the study also revealed that as the Covid-19 pandemic progressed, media enhanced their role as independent populist actors who invoked and represented the "people", discredited the elite, but also discredited and stigmatized specific social groups, in a significantly greater extent than in the initial phase of the

pandemic. It could be argued here that, along with the aforementioned factors, the media logic of the news production also affected in a significant extent the production of populism by the media. The media logic of news production is based on the use of specific criteria for assessing the news value of an event. In this framework, different events and framings, selected by the media, such as (a) conflict, (b) strategic framing, (c) and personalization tend to be compatible with populist communication (Esser et al., 2017). In this vein, the Covid-19 pandemic as an “event” with an extremely high news value led, especially in the 2nd phase where there was more intense politicization and the political, economic and social impact became more evident, to significantly increased populism by the media (Mazzoleni, 2003; Kramer, 2014; Esser et al., 2017). This media populism aimed to respond to popular sentiment and opinions (Mazzoleni, 2008) along with the construction and favoritism of specific groups (in-groups), hostility towards elites and hostility towards out-groups (Kramer, 2014, 2017). Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic has also been a critical situational factor (Reinemann et al., 2017; Esser et al., 2019) that enhanced, through its evolution during its 1st year, the role of the media as producers of different types of populist communication.

By acknowledging that the interplay between the media and populism cannot be interpreted by a single causal relationship (Krämer, 2017) a series of factors have been taken into consideration in order to explain the visibility and the different patterns of media populism in the online news media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic during its 1st year in Greece. These context sensitive and macro-societal factors are related, inter alia, to the relationship of the media with the political system, the role of the media as fourth estate, profit – oriented dimensions, and the inherent populist media logic in the majority of newsrooms. Last but not least, the Covid-19 pandemic has also been identified as a situational factor that enhanced media populism, specifically in the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> year. However, further studies could also explore deeper the role of other factors (eg. public opinion, populist actors, populist parties) that could affect the quantity and the type of populist communication in the public sphere during a health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

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