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# Is populism really represented as a threat?

## An analysis of media discourse on populism in Belgium, France and Spain

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### Abstract:

This article examines whether populism is depicted as a threat by news media in Dutch-speaking Belgium, French-speaking Belgium, France and Spain. It studies how “populism(s)” and “populist(s)” (hereafter *populis\**) are used in 2019 news media content. In relation to scholarship focusing on media uses of *populis\**, the paper argues that the examined news media content does not systematically depict populism or populists as a threat. While the media sometimes exhibit anti-populist stances—whether adversarial or accommodative/banal—the term *populis\** is often employed in media content in a non-critical and purely descriptive manner. It typically alludes to an elusive phenomenon without providing any subjective indication of whether it signifies something detrimental towards politics or democracy.

Keywords: populism, antipopulism, French, Spain, Belgium, trivialization

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## **1. Introduction**

This article examines whether populism is depicted as a threat by news media in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgium, France and Spain. This question fits into the debate over whether the media are pro-or anti-populist. On the one hand, studies demonstrate that the media play an active role in amplifying the visibility of populism (e. g.: Manucci, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014). On the other hand, research underscores the media's opposition to populism, which paradoxically contributes to making it visible (e. g.: Brown & Mondon, 2021; de Jonge, 2019; Glynos & Mondon, 2016).

This article seeks to advance this debate, by examining how the media in Belgium, France, and Spain use the terms “populism(s)” and “populist(s)” (hereafter referred to as populis\*) in their content. This approach aligns with the perspective advocated by various authors (De Cleen et al., 2018) and implemented in studies (since at least Bale et al., 2011; see section 2. 2.) examining the use of populis\* within media discourses, rather than the discourses or styles held by politicians whom scholars have labeled as populist (e. g.: Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2014; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

The remainder of the article is as follows. The first section reviews the literature on populism (2.1.), the relationship between populism and the media (2.2.) and on media’s uses of populis\* (2. 3). The second section is methodological, introducing our design research and the data (3.). The following section presents our results (4.). The last section explains our findings and provides a conclusion mentioning the limits of our study (5.)

## **2. Literature review: populism studies, relations between media and populism, and media uses of populis\***

## 2. 1. *Is populism an ideology, a discourse or a style?*

The definitions of populism varied over time. Earlier studies note its elusive character and imprecise definition (Laclau, 1979: 143). Since populism is a concept marked by ongoing definitional struggles, several schools of thought offer varying definitions of populism. A first defines populism from an ideological perspective, since it refers to a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Mudde, 2004: 573) However, this definition has been contested, as populism can be combined with a too diverse ideologies to constitute a singular and coherent ideology (Aalberg et al., 2016; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007).

In contrast to the ideological approach, a significant body of research views populism as either a discourse or a style. This perspective originates from the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005: 33), who highlighted that:

[...] its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political or ideological contents.

Populism, understood as a discourse, focuses on a minimal definition of the concept, which is not tied to the ideology of the speaker but rather to the way the latter construct their discourse. To be considered as such, it must feature people-centrism (Laclau, 2005: 40; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 322) combined with anti-elitism (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 424). Some scholars also include the defense of popular sovereignty as a key element (Pauwels, 2014: 49).

Other scholars concur with this view but argue that populism extends beyond mere discourse. It is also a style, marked by distinct “manners,” including the use of “slang, swearing, political incorrectness and being overly demonstrative and ‘colorful’, as opposed to the ‘high’ behaviors of rigidity, rationality, composure and technocratic language” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 392). In a less normative sense, populism as a style refers not only to a transgressive form of speech (Aiolfi, 2022) but also to the use of the body and interaction norms (Aiolfi, 2022: 7; Hamdaoui, 2022a: 438). Although not identical, the discourse and style approaches

to populism often rely on the analysis of various sources, including party manifestos (Pauwels, 2014), broadcasts featuring political leaders and parties (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), politicians' statements in traditional media (Elmgren, 2018), and on social media (Hamdaoui, 2022a).

In this paper, we adopt another perspective of populism, studying how populis\* (as tokens) is used in media discourses.

## 2. 2. *The populist hype*

As key connector between political actors and the public in democratic contexts (Schudson, 1995; Van Dalen, 2021), media are considered by some authors to have brought visibility of populism, to the point that the expression “populist hype” has emerged (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Glynos & Mondon, 2016).

A first strand of literature demonstrates how the media voluntarily contribute to the spread of populism. For instance, Mazzoleni (2014) highlights direct and intentional participation of the media in the electoral success of politicians identified as populists. We can also point to studies showing how certain media outlets portray populism in a positive light (Demata et al., 2020; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Herkman, 2016). This corresponds to what Stavrakakis et al. (2017) describe as “pro-populist media,” in contrast to “anti-populist media”. Furthermore, some authors illustrate how certain media outlets play a role in normalizing populism by euphemizing far-right rhetoric, trivializing it, and amplifying its messages. (Brown & Mondon, 2021; de Jonge, 2019).

Other scholarship considers there are instances in which the media inadvertently give visibility to populism, without actively supporting it (e. g.: Mazzoleni, 2014: 52), *i. e.* even media outlets critical of populism (antipopulist) can end up amplifying it. Antipopulism can be understood as a “demonization of populism” (Stavrakakis, 2014: 506) and a way of portraying populism as a threat to democracy (Goyvaerts, 2021: 4). According to Hamdaoui (2022a: 437), anti-populism refers to a style that represents populism as dangerous due to its political extremism and its rejection of the idea that politics should be managed by political professionals rather than through more direct forms of popular sovereignty. Although

increasingly studied, anti-populism is clearly under-researched compared to populism (Hamdaoui, 2022b; Moffitt, 2018). Nevertheless, as noted by Hamdaoui (2022b: 493), “anti-populists can be found among various sectors: politics, the media, business, trade unions, academia, and even the entertainment industry.” Anti-academic anti-populism has been well-studied (e.g., Elmgren, 2022; Jager, 2016), and similarly, there is a substantial body of work on media anti-populism (Bale et al., 2011; Borriello, 2022; Demata et al., 2020; Goyvaerts, 2021; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023).

Regarding media anti-populism, we know there are various nuances in academic anti-populism (Goyvaerts, 2021). To that extent, the media labelled as anti-populist do not exhibit the same approach toward opposing what they consider as populism\*. For example, Hamdaoui (2022b) differentiates between adversarial anti-populism, which is openly critical, and more indirect and accommodating forms of anti-populism; as seen in the way En Marche leaders in France address the Rassemblement National (adversarial) and the Yellow Vest movement (accommodative). In a similar vein, de Jonge (2019), in her study of how far-right political parties are covered in the Benelux, identifies different media approaches to populism: a highly negative portrayal (“confrontation”), a more accommodative stance, and complete avoidance of the topic.

This raises perhaps an intriguing question for studies of media and populism: Are the media predominantly explicitly anti-populist (adversarial)? Some compelling research highlights the concept of “banal anti-populism” (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020: 92) in the media, based on a study of Flemish media in Belgium. According to Goyvaerts & De Cleen, anti-populism has become commonplace in the media under their scrutiny, through narratives that frame populism as inherently problematic (2020: 87), often equating it with “many (bad) things” (2020: 89).

The distinction between banal anti-populism (or “accommodative anti-populism”) and adversarial anti-populism (Hamdaoui, 2022b examples could be cited from Demata et al., 2020; or Ronderos & Glynos, 2023) is that in the former the media are not seen as delivering an explicitly ideological critique of populism<sup>1</sup>. Instead, media discourse often fails to clearly define the populism it implicitly criticizes, relying on casual references (what Bale et al., 2011

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<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Collovald referred to the overly expansive use of the term populism in the French public debate as a “polite insult” (2004: 33).

call “thrown around with abandon”.) In this vein, some studies highlight the mechanisms of trivialization, often unconscious, used by the media when discussing populism (Brown & Mondon, 2021).

Building on the work of Brown & Mondon (2021), De Jonge (2019), Goyvaerts & De Cleen (2020), and Hamdaoui (2022b), we will show that the media content under scrutiny in Belgium (French-speaking Belgium and Dutch-speaking Belgium), France, and Spain reflects not only adversarial and banal anti-populism(s) but also, to a greater extent, indifference toward populism.

### *2.3 (Media) discourses on populism: how media talk about populis\**

Significant scholarship has already been devoted to exploring the uses of populis\*, with a focus on how populis\* is employed in the Parliaments (Bailly et al., 2025; Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023), by academics in the media (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Goyvaerts, 2021; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022), by politicians on Twitter (Schwörer, 2021) or in media outlets (Elmgren, 2018), as well as in political manifestos (Zicman de Barros et al., 2022).

Scholarship on the media's uses of populism is the most extensive. Existing case studies include: the United Kingdom (Bale et al., 2011; Brown & Mondon, 2021; Degano & Cicurella 2019; Demata et al., 2020; Kranert, 2020), Belgium (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020), France (Borriello, 2022), Italy (Degano & Cicurella 2019), Germany (Kranert, 2020), Spain (Santiago-Guervós, 2015), Brazil (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022) ; Israel (Hamo et al., 2018), European Nordic countries (Herkman, 2016), the USA and Australia (Brookes, 2018). From a comparative perspective, Hatakka and Herkman's (2022) notably conducted a study of newspapers in Finland, Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Turkey over nearly two decades (2000–2018).

These studies concur that the media use of populis\* often carries a pejorative connotation (Bale et al., 2011; Brookes, 2018; Borriello, 2022; Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Kranert, 2020; Hamo et al., 2018; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022). For instance, Bale et al. (2011) found that political opponents (the Tories for left-leaning newspapers, the Labour Party for more

conservative newspapers) might be labelled as populists because of the stance they adopt to discuss particular issues in UK media outlets, a trend thus not confined to traditionally populist figures or parties. Kranert (2020), whose study compares the use of populis\* in the German and the British press between 2012 and 2017, highlights that populis\* is often used as a means to discredit those it is attributed to. He suggests that populis\* is used by the media as a “stigma term” (2020:49). When investigating media content in Israel, Hamo et al. (2018) express the use of populism as an “accusatory device.” (2018: 7) Nevertheless, Herkman (2016) and Degano & Cicurella (2019) point out a few exceptions, revealing instances where the media occasionally employs populis\* in a neutral or positive manner. This is also the case with Hatakka & Herkman, who demonstrate that certain English and American media outlets discuss populism\* in a more balanced manner (with both neutral and negative tones) (2022: 1532).

More specifically, scholarship indicates that the use of populis\* in the media is associated with a growing phenomenon – as an omnipotent and threatening force or disease: Borriello, 2022 ; Demata et al., 2020 ; Hamo et al., 2018; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022 – intertwined with elements of nativism/xenophobia (Degano & Cicurella, 2019 ; Kranert, 2020 ; Santiago-Guervós, 2015); demagoguery/empty rhetoric (Borriello, 2022; Demata et al., 2020; Herkman, 2016; Santiago-Guervós, 2015), nationalism (Borriello, 2022 ; Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Demata et al., 2020 ; Elmgren, 2018; Herkman, 2016 ; Kranert, 2020), euroscepticism (Borriello, 2022; Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Demata et al., 2020); and emotion (Borriello, 2022; Demata et al., 2020), manipulation/irrationality (Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Santiago-Guervós, 2015), extremism (Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022) or corruption (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023). Moreover, populism is widely described as threatening democracy (Borriello, 2022; Brookes, 2018; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Santiago-Guervós, 2015).

Ultimately, research indicates that populism is employed in conflicting ways, described at times as a “lack of substance” (Hamo et al., 2018:4) or referring to very heterogeneous things (Bale et al., 2011; Brookes, 2018; Herkmann, 2016; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022). Goyvaerts & De Cleen go so far as to assert that “what makes a political act populist is not always clear” (2020:90), Brown & Mondon argue media content highlights “careless and uncritical use of the term or concept” (2021: 292), and other talk about the “ubiquitous character of the words ‘populis\*’ in the corpus” (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023: 633). Conversely, Hatakka & Herkman

(2022) demonstrate that a significant use of populis\* in the media is associated with topics dominated by the far-right (as Kranert, 2020: 49), and to a much lesser extent, occasionally with left-wing populism topics (anti-capitalism and/or opposition to economic globalization<sup>2</sup>).

Given these findings, we may inquire whether media content from French-speaking Belgium, Dutch-speaking Belgium, France, and Spain associates populism with a threat. Our case studies include the extensively studied Dutch-speaking Belgium (de Jonge, 2019; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020), as well as the less-explored contexts of Francophone Belgium, Spain, and France.

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<sup>2</sup> The association of populis\* with the left is more prevalent in the analysis of parliamentary uses of populis\* according to Casiraghi & Bordignon (2023).

### 3. Data and method: the uses of populis\* in Belgian, French and Spanish media contents

#### 3. 1. Case selection and data

This comparative analysis is part of an interdisciplinary research project (political science, linguistics and communication studies), entitled “Tracking the uses of *populism* in media and political discourse” (Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve). We study and compare how populis\* is used in news media in three Western European countries (Belgium, France and Spain) in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Each of the focal countries in our study, sharing their common status as members of the European Union and being considered established democracies, hosts political parties known for their characterization as radical right populist or left-wing populist. In these three countries, we have parties that are regarded in the literature as right-wing populist and are electorally strong in Flemish Belgium and France (Aalberg et al., 2016), while populism is more accurately used to refer to Podemos and autonomist parties in Spain (Santiago-Guervós, 2015). Finally, the interest in considering French-speaking Belgium is that it would be in a political context of a “cordon sanitaire” against any form of populism (De Jonge, 2019).

Some studies on the media's uses of populism focus on a single newspaper (Borriello, 2022; Brown & Mondon, 2021; Demata et al., 2020; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023), a specific country (Bale et al., 2011; Hamo et al., 2018; Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022), or a particular region within a country (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). For our part, we are focusing on three countries and analyzing four newspapers from each country (eight for Belgium, which we break down into Dutch-speaking Belgium and Francophone Belgium.)

The data of this study date from 2019, a strategic year due to the multitude of elections that took place in the three countries. As it represents the pinnacle of political competition within a democracy, a large variety of discourses is generated, potentially encompassing the use of populis\*. Concretely, regional, federal and European elections took place in Belgium on 26 May 2019. National elections happened in Spain on 28 April and 10 November, and

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<sup>3</sup> In Belgian Dutch-speaking newspapers media: *populisme, populismes, populismen, populist, populisten, populistisch and populistische*; in the Belgian French-speaking and French media: *populisme(s) and populiste(s)*; in the Spanish media: *populismo(s) and populistas(s)*.

municipal and European elections took place on 26 May 2019. In 2019, the only elections held in France were the European Parliament elections.

For each case (French-speaking Belgium, Dutch-speaking Belgium, France and Spain), we selected four different types of media:

- one “quality” newspaper (Dematala et al., 2020), defined as “high-brow end of print media” (Bale et al., 2011), regarded as targeting an audience from the social elite interested in politics
- one serious-popular newspaper, that refers to newspapers which are more focused on entertainment than on politics (Demata et al., 2020)
- one state-funded media, *i. e.* the public broadcasting service
- one free newspaper.

Comparing four different types of media enables us to wonder whether populis\* is treated differently according to the news media type. We did not want to limit ourselves to quality newspapers, as they have already been described as particularly anti-populist (Borriello, 2022; Demata et al., 2020; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023). Obviously, we do not wish to claim that there is no editorial diversity across different types of media (as Peeters & Maesele, 2024, have clearly demonstrated). However, here we are focusing on general trends, beyond the specific cases of individual journalists or columnists.

*Table 1: Selected media in each country under study*

Type of media/Countries	Belgium	France	Spain
<b>Quality newspaper</b>	French-Speaking: <i>Le Soir</i> Dutch-Speaking: <i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>El País</i>
<b>Serious-popular newspaper</b>	French-Speaking: <i>La Dernière Heure (DH)</i> Dutch-Speaking: <i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Le Parisien</i>	<i>El Español</i>
<b>Free newspaper</b>	French-Speaking: <i>Métro</i> Dutch-Speaking: <i>Metro</i>	<i>20 minutes</i>	<i>20 minutos</i>
<b>Public-owned media</b>	French-Speaking: <i>RTBF</i> Dutch-Speaking: <i>VRT</i>	<i>France Info</i>	<i>RTVE</i>

Most of the quality media in the sample are positioned fairly centrally (center-left for *Le Monde* or *El País*, and center-right for *De Standaard*). The serious-popular media do not convey a clear political orientation, except for labels like “liberal” (*Het Laatste Nieuws*), “centrist” (*El Español*), or “liberal centrist” (*La Dernière Heure*). Public media are not expected to have a publicly stated ideological stance, while free newspapers claim to be apolitical. One limitation of our study is the absence of polarized media in relation to one another (see Demata et al., 2020), or “ideological crystallization” (Peeters & Maesele, 2024). We should also point out that we only have legacy newspapers, and no alternative media.

The datasets for our analysis contain articles with *populis\** produced in 2019, which were extracted from the online outlets. In France, a total of 1,045 online articles were collected (2015 occurrences of *populis\**). Considering Belgium, 1 127 articles were collected for the French-speaking media corpus (with 1,825 occurrences), 1 182 for the Dutch-speaking media corpus (2,133 occurrences), and 2,130 for the Spanish media corpus (3,934 occurrences).

We then selected a (total) random sample of occurrences for Belgium (for both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking outlets), France and Spain. Our aim was to have around 500 occurrences for each case. Consequently, the corpora across the case studies are comparable, enabling the identification of trends with a consistent degree of reliability, albeit with a margin of error due to random selection.

*Table 2: Number of uses of *populis\** in selected Belgian, Spanish and French Mass Medias in 2019*

Case study	Dutch-speaking media (Belgium)	French-speaking media (Belgium)	French media	Spanish media
Number of uses of <i>populis*</i> (N=2069)	488 (23,5%)	522 (25%)	538 (26%)	521 (25%)

### 3. 2. Codebook

Each mention of *populis\** in our database has been coded according to several categories, which will be used throughout the article. The categories mentioned, excluding the “function” category, are commonly employed in the literature examining the use of *populis\** in media discourse (e.g., Bale et al., 2011; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022). Each occurrence was analyzed qualitatively, and the findings were used to categorize the use of *populis\** within the broader

statement across various coding categories. The initial coding was then verified by other scholars.

Keeping in mind that the coding categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., from category A to category D), we employed the following coding categories to conduct our analysis:

- a. Which types of medias (quality newspapers, serious-popular newspapers, free newspapers or state-funded media) used the most populis\* in their content?
- b. Tone of populis\*: Is populis\* used to designate something or someone negatively, positively, or in a neutral way? To quote Casiraghi (2021: 562), “positive references highlight, for instance, populism’s attention to citizens’ needs, negative references may underline the racist posture of populist parties, and neutral references do not express a clear judgement”. Value-based coding is employed in other studies as well (Bale et al., 2011: 123; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022: 1531; Kranert, 2020: 39; Schwörer, 2021: 6).
- c. Function of populis\*: What purpose, either intentional or unintentional, is achieved by using the term *populism* in the context of the statement? There are several possibilities:
  - Description (using populis\* simply identifies what we are talking about)
  - Preoccupation refers to banal anti-populism, *i.e.* a non-explicit form of opposition to populism (when media, using populis\* through casual references, are not seen as delivering an explicitly ideological criticism of populism)
  - Criticism is related to more adversarial uses of populis\* (explicitly anti-populist, *i.e.* when populis\* is used by the media as an explicit vehicle for clearly anti-populist judgments)
  - Denial (this involves suggesting or asserting that a potentially populis\* object is not populist)
  - Legitimization by opposition (when the message aims to legitimize a person/group by contrasting it with populism)
  - (Self)legitimization/(Self)promotion of a person/group/party (when the association with populis\* serves to legitimize/promote the person/group/act associated with this term.
- d. Who is populis\* targeting? An action, a defined group, an undefined group, individuals in particular, or something very elusive?

Our research question is the following: Does the content of the media studied support the assertion that populism is portrayed as a threat?

**4. Findings: Is populism really (re)presented as a treat?**

*4. 1. Who is talking populism?*

First and foremost, Table 3 illustrates that quality newspapers in all three countries use a significantly higher number of occurrences of populis\* (928 out our 2069 media instances of populis\*, accounting for 45% of the total) in their content in 2019, surpassing serious-popular newspapers (560 out of 2069, 27% of the total), state-funded media (359 out of 2069, 17%), and free newspapers (222 out of 2069, 11%). This can be attributed to the tendency of quality newspapers to cover politics more extensively compared to the other types of media examined (Goyvaerts, 2021: 12).

*Table 3: types of newspapers and their uses of populis\**

Kind of media outlets	Serious-popular newspapers	Free newspapers	Quality newspapers	State-funded medias
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Furthermore, our dataset reveals cross-country variations. For example, the Spanish quality newspaper *El País* accounts for 59% of Spanish uses of populis\* (307 instances out of 521 in the Spanish Belgium media), compared with 52% for *Le Soir* in French-speaking Belgium (270 instances out of 522 in the French-Speaking Belgium media), 37% for *Le Monde* in France (198 instances out of 538 in the French media total instances of populis\*) and 31% for *De Standaard* in Dutch-speaking Belgium (153 instances out of 488 in the Dutch-Speaking Belgium media). Similarly, there are wide variations between countries for state-funded media: in France, *France info* uses 29% of populis\* of all French media occurrences (156 out of 538), compared with just 15% for *VRT* in Dutch-speaking Belgium (75 out of 488), 21% for *RTBF* in French-speaking Belgium (109 out of 522), and 3% for *RTVE* in Spain (19 out of 521). The same applies to serious-popular media, which account for 37% of populis\* use in Dutch-speaking Belgium’s media content (179 out of 488), 31% in Spain (163 out of 521), 27% in France (143 out of 538) and 14% in French-speaking Belgium’s media content (75 out of 522). There is little variation for free newspapers (around 6 to 10%; see appendix 1).

These data provide evidence that in France, Spain, and French-speaking Belgium, quality newspapers are the primary users of populis\*, whereas in Dutch-speaking Belgium, the serious-popular media predominantly employs populis\*.

In addition, while examining which type of media uses populis\* the most, we should also consider what value is associated with populis\*. Many studies on the media's uses of populism have shown that the media use the term populism negatively (see section 2.3). Our results are not particularly surprising in this regard. Encompassing all types of media, 65% of the uses are negative, out of 2069 instances; quality media use populism negatively 72% of the times (667 negative instances out of 928 populis\* instances for all quality newspapers, see appendix 2) compared to 67% for serious-popular newspapers (374 out of 560 populis\* instances for all serious-popular newspapers), 56% for state-funded media (198 out of 359), and 45% for free newspapers (101 out of 222). However, we would like to emphasize that when our data were coded, the coders repeatedly struggled to determine the positive or negative value of populism (which does not necessarily mean that these uses are neutral). This “NA” category still accounts for 32% of the uses in our dataset (665 out of 2069 instances). The significant frequency of occurrences in this category highlights the challenges associated with interpreting populism in media contexts. Yet, existing studies do not refer to this indeterminate category when they analyze the value/tone of populism (Bale et al., 2011; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020).

Instead of focusing solely on negativity to substantiate the media's anti-populism, we aim to examine the coding results for the “function” category.

4. 2. *Nearly half descriptive, half anti-populist (be it banal or adversarial)*

Table 4: *the function associated to the use of populis\* in all type of media (Belgium, France, Spain)*

Function	Description	Preoccupation	Criticizing (a specific act or event/a defined person/group)	Legitimation	Autolegitimation	Denegation
Value N=2069; including 6	933 (45%)	640 (31%)	414 (20%)	48 (2%)	14 (-1%)	14 (-1%)

NA (%)						
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In our sample, the description category fits 45% of the total (933 out of 2069 media uses of populis\*). To that extent, media content uses populis\* for descriptive purposes rather than explicitly critical ones. It frequently occurs when the media content provides commentary on election outcomes:

Johnson's victory was all the stronger for the fact that he also managed to inflict a crushing defeat on Nigel Farage, the Europhobic populist leader, whose Brexit Party failed to win a single seat (2% of the vote) (*Le Parisien*, 13/12/2019).

It will be difficult for Pedro Sánchez to please an electorate that does not want a social democratic party but a left-wing populist party, but one that is in the majority. In other words, a party with the PSOE logo that wins elections like the PSOE but applies the policies of Unidas Podemos (*El Español*, 29/04/2019).

the campaign in the Netherlands was rather tame and turned into a duel between Thierry Baudet's right-wing populist Forum for Democracy, which advocates an exit from the European Union, and liberal VVD prime minister Mark Rutte, who bills himself as an EU advocate. Both are not themselves candidates in the European elections (*VRT*, 23/05/2019).

A surge in nationalist and populist movements is expected in the elections, which should see the two largest groups in the European Parliament lose ground, the European People's Party, the group of the pro-European right, and the Party of European Socialists (*RTBF*, 24/05/2019).

This adds nuances to the negativity highlighted in studies on the uses of populism (see section 2. 2.) In many cases our sample show media content use populis\* to is convey information (for instance: “Eurosceptic populists won the elections”) rather than condemning (explicitly or non-explicitly) populis\*. Furthermore, among the 933 occurrences categorized as “description,” 607 are labelled as “indeterminate” (NA; in the “tone” coding category; see codebook, section 3.2.) and 284 are associated with negative terms.

In relation to the occurrences categorized as both “description” and “negative” – constitute 14% of the total in our media content dataset (284 out of 2069 total instances) s—, numerous examples involve political personalities (who do not speak on behalf of the media) attributing negative traits to populis\*. These comments are therefore quoted rather than directly employed by journalists. For example, a Belgian scholar comments on the 2018 municipal

elections in Belgium, saying: “It is about crisis, fake news, populist movements on the rise” (*RTBF*, 09/01/2019). Other examples were issues by politicians themselves, such as the following statement attributed to the Brazilian President at the time, Jair Bolsonaro:

On the concern expressed by the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Rodrigo Maia, about the return of poverty and hunger [in Brazil], Bolsonaro replied that this was a populist assessment. ‘To say that there is hunger in Brazil is a big lie,’ said the president, in a phrase that became the headline of Brazilian newspapers when the news agencies present at the meeting published their first notes (*El País*, 19/07/2019).

So far, the descriptive uses of populism (45% of our sample) do not reveal an explicit hostility expressed against populis\*, nor a banal anti-populism, but a form of trivialization towards populism (Brown & Mondon, 2021), and which we will refer to as a form of indifference. This contrasts with the banal anti-populism of the media (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). The latter is not absent from our corpus, albeit in a minority: the function of preoccupation relates to this way of discussing populism (see also: Hamdaoui, 2022b).

This function related to use of populis\* as expressing preoccupation occurs 31% in our corpus (640 out of 2069 total instances). Here are a few examples:

Will COP25, which kicks off in Madrid on Monday, be the long-awaited turning point? In any case, it is taking place in a strange global climate, with the rise of populism, to help build this open Europe, this Europe of sharing, where life is still good (*Le Parisien*, 01/12/2019).

Threats in the form of nationalism, populism and anti-Europeanism have emerged from the economic crisis and inequality that are spreading like leprosy throughout Europe (*El País*, 03/05/2019).

While banal anti-populism refers to a non-explicit form of opposition to populism, there are more adversarial uses (what we call the “criticizing” function). These account for 20% of our corpus (414 instances out of 2069), such as the following cases. In the first example, Catalan leaders in favour of independence are criticized, while in the second example, politicians who have taken a stand in favour of Brexit are denounced:

Pro-independence is a pioneer in Spain in the creation of fake news, right-wing populism, the empty and narcissistic rebelliousness of some politicians and the victimhood of the privileged, aspects that now abound in national politics (*El País*, 25/03/2019)

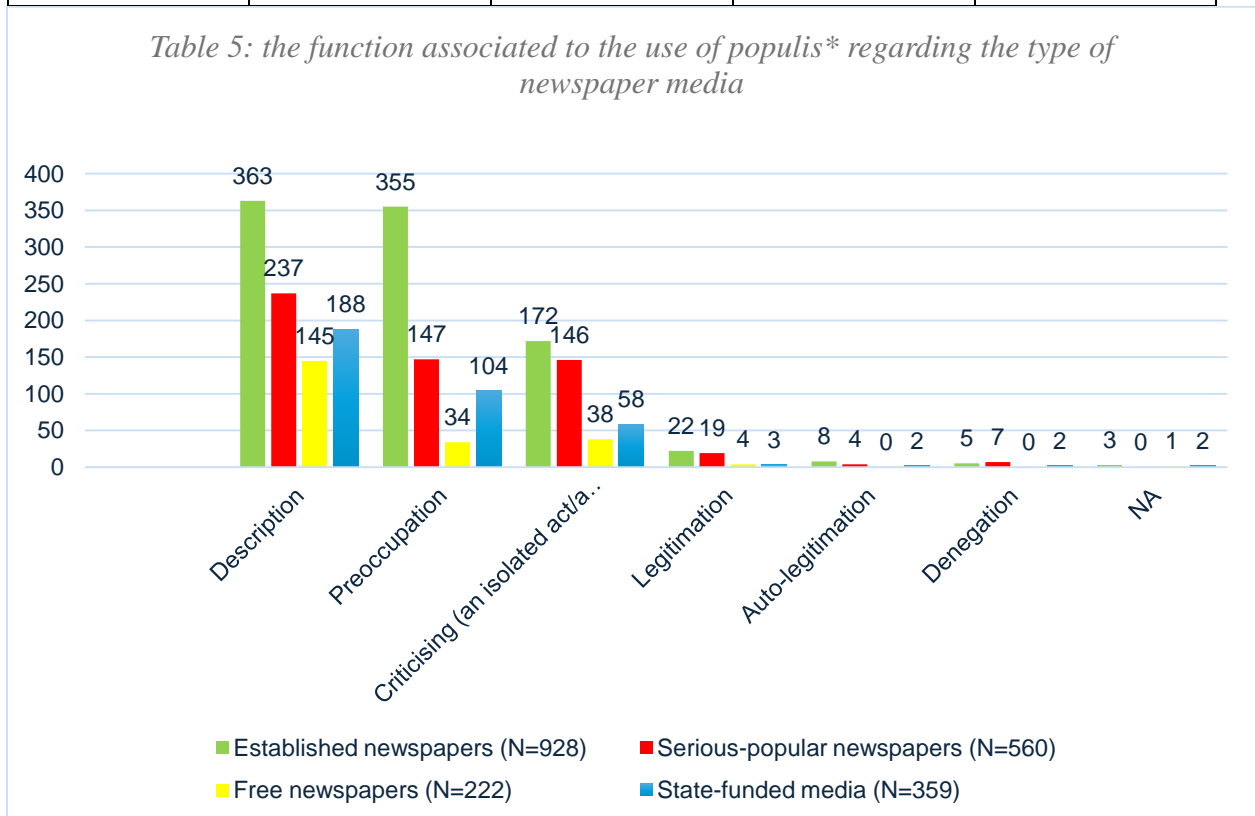
The Brexit is creating a radical uncertainty that is plunging the United Kingdom into a never-ending crisis. Three years after the referendum that launched the populist shockwave that is

ravaging democracies, the Brexit has spiralled out of control, forcing Theresa May to accept a conditional postponement of its implementation date to 22 April (*Le Soir*, 24/03/2019).

When we combine the coded data for “preoccupation” and “criticism,” nearly half of the instances where populis\* appears in the media content we scrutinized convey a soft (banal anti-populism) or explicit critical stance (adversarial anti-populism) towards populis\* (1054 out of 2069 total instances, 51%). However, we are far from a hegemony of disqualifying uses of populis\* by the media, as postulated in the literature. The “description” function makes up 45% (933 media instances of populis\* out of 2069). Therefore, it clearly nuances the prevalence of media antipopulism, be it banal (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020) or adversarial (as in the following studies: Demata et al., 2020; or Ronderos & Glynos, 2023).

<b>Number of uses of populis*, N=2069 (%)</b>	560 (27%)	222 (11%)	928 (45%)	359 (17%)
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*Table 5: the function associated to the use of populis\* regarding the type of newspaper media*



To return to the explicitly critical uses (which are in the minority), these instances involve criticisms that are commonly linked to populis\* in the literature on media discourses on

populism. For instance, we observe its association with ideologies opposing European integration. This framing is particularly noteworthy given that 2019 marks a European Parliament election year. For example: ‘Populist governments such as Matteo Salvini's Italy and Viktor Orbán's Hungary want Europe to stop moving forward’ (*Le Parisien*, 31/03/2019). In this instance, two governments characterized as populist are depicted as obstructive due to their opposition to European integration. This critical association of populis\* with euroscepticism appears in Dutch-speaking Belgium but also in the Spanish press:

European parliamentary elections will be held on 26 May [2019]. [...] The return of decision-making power from Brussels [to national capitals] [i]s desired by many populist parties. It is to be feared that the forthcoming European parliamentary elections will be the start of the dismantling of the EU. (*VRT*, 13/01/2019, our addition in brackets).

the growing risk of Euroscepticism, which is already taking root in Spain, fuelled by populism (*El Español*, 30/03/2019).

In these examples, populis\* in media content is portrayed as in opposition to the European Union. This finding aligns with prior research (Borriello, 2022; Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Demata et al., 2020). Given the tone of articles published across various media outlets, euroscepticism is perceived as an unwelcome stance. There are also instances of the media criticizing the nativist, “xenophobic” and “racist” vision associated with populis\*:

Everywhere else, there is a section of the electorate that, since the banking crisis and migration issues, no longer feels respected, economically or in terms of identity. With a populist or extremist voter who sometimes very consciously votes for racist projects (*Le Soir*, 07/02/2019).

the former Vlaams Blok remains openly xenophobic and populist (*DH*, 27/05/2019).

The first example, sourced from the Belgian French-speaking quality media, links populis\* with “racism,” the latter being a clearly condemning term. Meanwhile, the second example (extract from the Belgian French-speaking serious popular newspaper’s content) associates the Vlaams Belang, a Flemish far-right party, with “openly xenophobic” stances, a characterization that remains critical (Vlaams Belang does not self-identify as “racist” or “xenophobic”). In Dutch-speaking Belgium, populis\* is associated with “hatred.”

Populism, fake news and hatred of others have no place in the European People's Party, say [two EPP leaders supporting the expulsion of Viktor Orbán's party]. (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 04/03/2019)

The same applies to *Le Monde* (quality media) and *20 minutes* (free newspaper) in France:  
the populist tendency, reactionary and hostile to immigration (*Le Monde*, 18/09/2019)  
populist discourse, often permeable to white supremacy (*20 minutes*, 21/03/2019).

This criticism echoes what the existing research already highlights on the association of populism\* and nativism/anti-immigration stances (Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). We can also cite the rationale for disqualifying populism\* (as adversarial and explicitly critical uses) due to its purported association with an economic agenda that challenges the principles of the market economy, as illustrated in the following example:

The multilateral order is sufficiently institutionalised today to be resilient to the global wave of unilateralist populism (*Le Monde*, 26/06/2019).

Here, the ascent of “populism” is linked with “unilateralism” (which refers to a form of protectionism), which is opposed to the “multilateral order”; the latter is deemed imperative to resist against “unilateralism” (perceived here as regressive). Another observation is the depiction of populism\* as irresponsible in handling the economy in Belgium:

At the end of January [2019], it emerged that Italy had slipped into recession at the end of last year. The populist government that took office in Italy on 1<sup>st</sup> June [2018] is pursuing an expansionary spending policy. In particular, it is releasing extra funds for the most disadvantaged and lowering the retirement age (*Metro NL*, 24/02/2019).

“[As a Parliament] we are not going to accept populist decisions that would cause the budget to go off track.” In the firing line: the packages of measures costing more than €1.4 billion proposed by the PS and, among others, Ecolo-Groen's major insulation plan. (*DH*, quote from a MP from the Mouvement Réformateur, a French-speaking centre-right party, 04/01/2019).

In these two examples, populism\* is associated with an expansive budget (whereas the reasonable course would seem to be to moderate public spending). This finding is less commonly emphasized in the literature (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023).

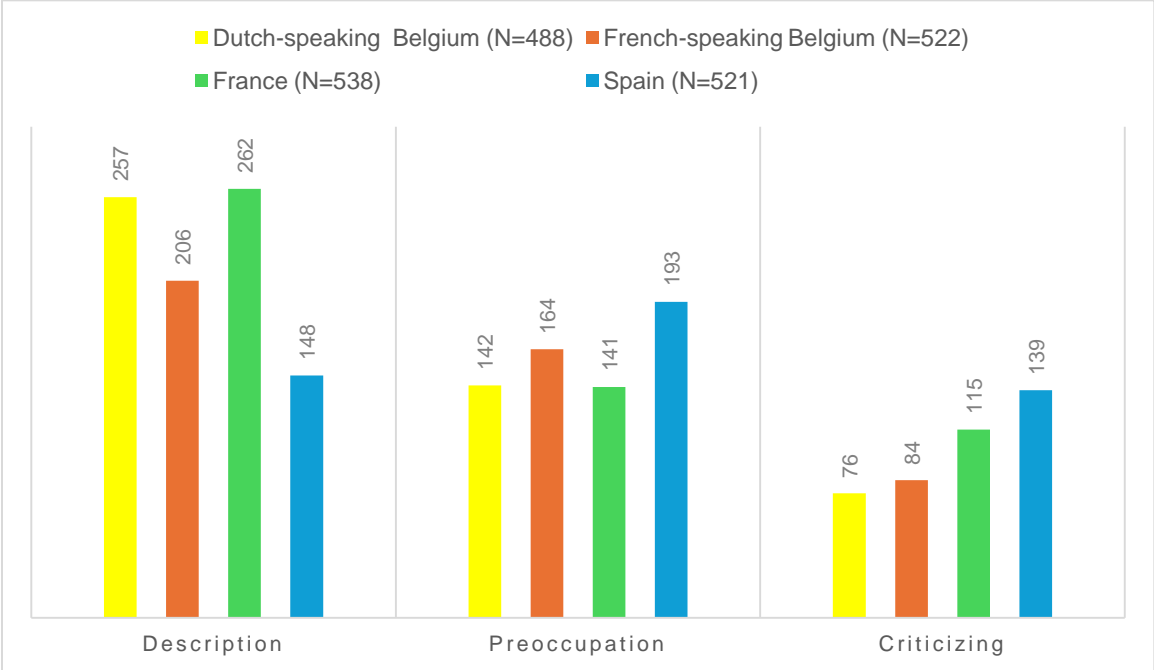
Beyond the widespread descriptive use of populism\* in our dataset, we can cross-reference functions and types of media. Since it is reasonable to consider quality media exhibit more adversarial anti-populism (Bale et al., 2011; Borriello, 2022; Demata et al., 2020; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023), our sample shows that quality media outlets largely employ populism\* to convey a preoccupation/banal anti-populism (38%, 355 out of 928 total instances for quality

newspapers). The same holds true for 29% of the uses of populis\* in state-funded media (104 out of 359 total instances for state-funded media), 26% for serious-popular newspapers (147 out of 560 total instances for serious-popular newspapers), and 15% for free newspapers (34 out of 222 total instances for free newspapers). In terms of relative use, serious-popular newspapers exhibit more than other types of media the “criticizing” function/adversarial anti-populism (26%, 146 out of 560), followed by quality media (19%, 172 out of 928), free newspapers (17%, 38 out of 222), and state-funded media (16%, 58 out of 359).

When examining the “description” function, the quality media are the least concerned, even if 39% of their uses of populis\* is considered descriptive (363 out of 928), comparing with the serious-popular newspapers (42%, 237 out of 560). Conversely, for free newspapers and state-funded media, the majority of populis\* occurrences serve descriptive purposes: 65% for free newspapers (145 out of 222) and 52% for state-funded media (188 out of 359).

Furthermore, our sample can specify trends by country. If the most recurrent function in our sample is “description” for French-speaking Belgium, Dutch-speaking Belgium (which qualifies the case study by Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020, also covering Dutch-speaking Belgium), and France; in Spanish media, the dominant function is “preoccupation.”

Table 6: the three most redundant functions associated to the use of populis\* in our dataset



If we take the data by country, Spain seems to have the media most likely to express anti-populism (“preoccupation” + “criticizing”: 63% out of the total of Spanish media occurrences). It could be explained since in Spain, the media refer to populism when discussing proponents of autonomy (including Podemos), especially in Catalonia (Santiago-Guervós, 2015), and since the media in our study are not known for being pro-independence or pro-autonomy. In France and Dutch-speaking Belgium, descriptive uses account for almost half of the uses of populis\*.

4.3. Populis\* as an elusive signifier

Finally, analyzing the target of populis\* when used in media contents could help to refine the scholar assumption that media stands against populism.

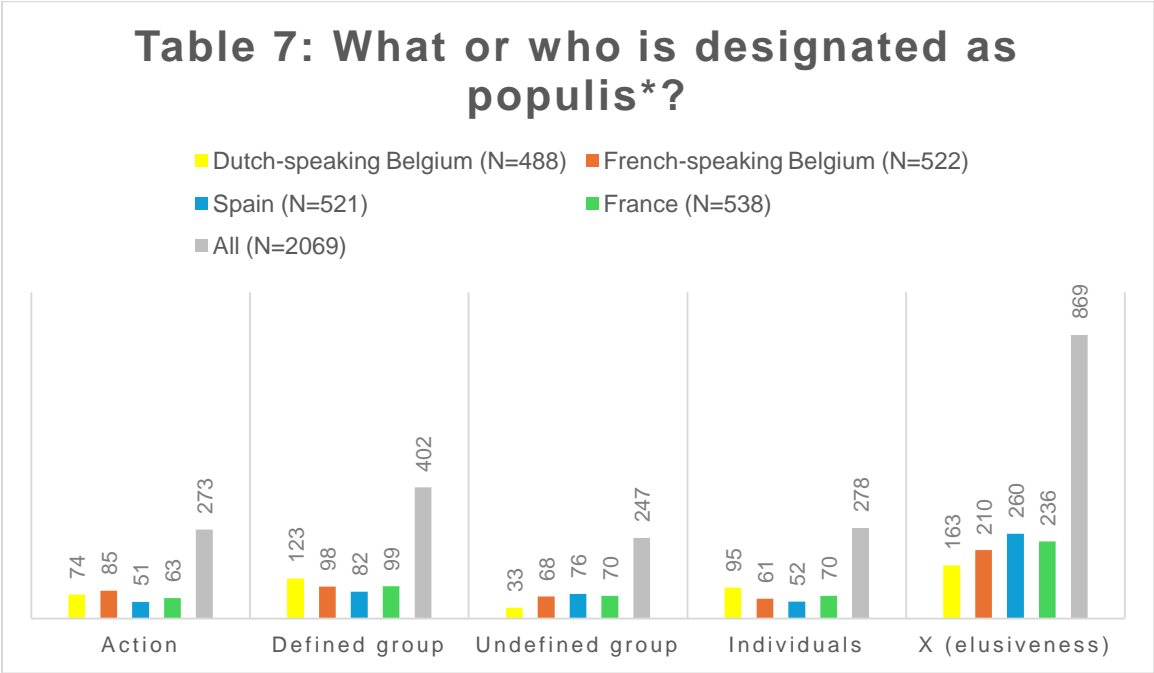


Table 7 shows that most uses of populis\* refer to an elusive entity/phenomenon (i.e. the word and does not refer, explicitly and in an assertive way, to anyone or anything in particular; 869/2069), indefinite groups (247/2069) or actions (273/2069), as in the following instances:

Michel De Maegd [MP for the Mouvement réformateur, French-speaking Belgian centre right-wing] believes that 'populism dominates at election time, with the rise of the extremes, and then a sort of zapping takes place after the elections, with people moving on to other things and losing interest in the political situation' (*Le Soir*; 23/10/2019).

[Talking about the state of the financial markets in 2018]: equities suffered sharp falls due to concerns about the possible economic recession, monetary policy and, above all, populism, where he included the trade war, Brexit, the situation in Italy and the protests of the 'yellow vests' in France (*El Español*, 06/02/2019).

[on S. Bannon's European Tour]: Bannon has found a new challenge: to influence and consolidate the union of populists around the world, and particularly in Europe (*Le Parisien*, 20/06/2019).

Overall, 67% of media uses of populis\* do not explicitly refer to any specific individual or party. This is consistent with existing work on media uses of populis\* (Bale et al., 2011; Brookes, 2018; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Herkmann, 2016; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022). Thus, media use of populis\* does not refer solely to designated enemies (Schwörer, 2021), often assimilated with far-right (Glynos & Mondon, 2016; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020).

Instead of viewing this elusive signifier as a tool to criticize political views that diverge from those endorsed by the media (which may reflect an elitist perspective on democracy: Goyvaerts, 2021; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020: 92-93), we argue that it contributes to normalizing (or trivializing) populism by highlighting its omnipresence in media content.

When individuals or groups are explicitly identified (a minority of occurrences; see appendix 3), the designation tends to align more with extreme right-wing actors rather than those associated with the extreme left (in Belgium and France; which is in line with Hatakka & Herkman's study on ten countries, 2022), with the exception of Spain where Unidas Podemos is the political force most linked with populis\*.

## **5. Discussion & conclusion**

Our article refines the understanding of media anti-populism by examining four cases (French-speaking Belgium, Dutch-speaking Belgium, France, and Spain) across four types of news media (quality, serious-popular, free newspapers, state-funded media).

We demonstrated that the four types of media in France, French-speaking Belgium, Dutch-speaking Belgium, and Spain refer to populis\* in a significant manner for descriptive purposes, rather than only for criticism (adversarial anti-populism) or expressing preoccupation (banal anti-populism). Indeed, our sample indicates that approximately 45% of the media uses (under scrutiny) of populis\* are descriptive. We observed variations: quality media and serious-popular media tend to be more anti-populist (be it adversarial or banal) rather than free newspapers and public-owned media.

In relation to the existing literature on media uses of populis\*, our article confirms several results of existing research: within media content, what is designated as populis\* is highly diverse, and undefined (Bale et al., 2011: 127; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020: 90; Stavrakakis, 2014: 509), revealing, elusive uses that are “careless and uncritical” (Brown & Mondon, 2021: 292; see also Brookes, 2018; Hamo et al., 2018: 4; Herkman, 2016; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023: 633; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022).

The originality of our article lies in its nuanced critique of Goyvaerts & De Cleen (2020), who assert that banal anti-populism is the hegemonic stance within (legacy) media. We did not claim that banal anti-populism is absent from the media content we studied—we illustrated this through the function of “preoccupation”—nor did we argue that media adversarial anti-populism does not exist, as demonstrated by the examples illustrating the “criticizing” function. As “populism has become part of the standard vocabulary of journalists” (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020: 92), we emphasized the significance of media indifference (or “trivialization”) towards populism. Although our random sample may present non-representative biases (which is one of our paper’s limitations,) all the media under scrutiny reveal numerous uses of populis\* for descriptive purposes, particularly among free newspapers and state-owned media, but also in significant proportions for quality media and serious popular newspapers. This notable trend of indifference among these media aligns with the findings of previous studies, such as those by De Jonge (2019; when analyzing the Flemish media) and Brown & Mondon (2021). To that extent, our article demonstrates how populis\* has become ingrained in media culture (Schudson, 1995), with media content often

describing it without explicit or implicit criticism. This descriptive function, which does not invalidate the theory of banal anti-populism but rather relativizes its significance, could be explained by the fact that media content is written by journalists who value objectivity, particularly as a professional criterion (De Jonge, 2019; Panievsky, 2022; Van Dalen, 2021). Thus, to answer the title of the article: populism is sometimes – but not systematically – represented as a threat by the media (as also found by Brookes, 2018; Borriello, 2022; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Santiago-Guervós, 2015). When media's depiction of populism as a threat occurs, it is more often in the form of banal anti-populism rather than adversarial populism.

This study has limitations. Firstly, it certainly focuses on a plurality of media, but these are mostly politically centrist, and there are no highly polarized media in relation to one another. The analysis of so-called alternative media, characterized by more pronounced forms of subjective expression (Peeters & Maesele, 2024), could yield different results. Furthermore, longitudinal studies on the uses of populism (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; or Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023) need to be further developed to assess how the so-called descriptive and non-critical uses of populism have evolved, in comparison with 2019.

Future research on (anti)media populism could involve conducting interviews with journalists (from various countries and media types) to inquire about their use of populis\* both personally and within the media organizations they work for, aiming to prompt their reflexivity, similar to the approach taken by Panievsky in Israel (2022).

## **6. Funding and/or Conflicts of interests/Competing interests**

### *6.1. Declarations*

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review elsewhere.

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## 8. Appendixes

### Appendix 1:

*Which media most use populis\* in French, Belgium and Spanish media outlets (2019)?*

<b>In France: Media outlets using populis*</b>	<b>How many times in 2019? (N=538)</b>
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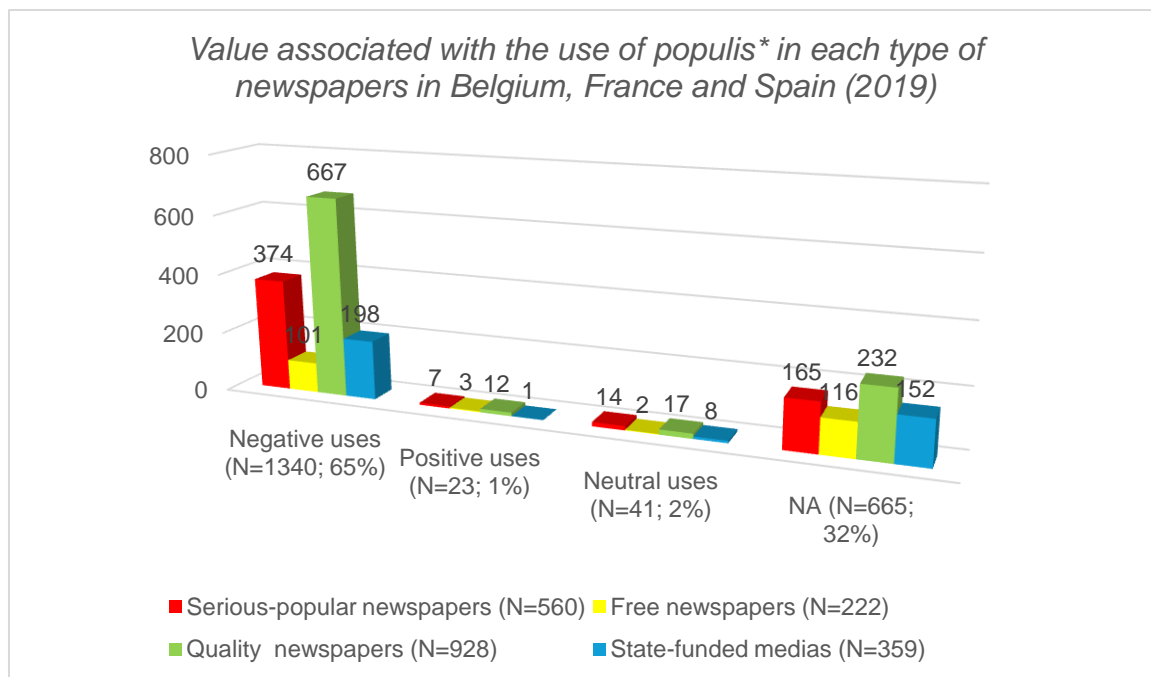
Le Monde (quality newspaper)	198 (37%)
Le Parisien (serious-popular newspaper)	143 (27%)
20 minutes (free newspaper)	41 (7%)
France Info (state-funded media)	156 (29%)

<b>In Dutch-speaking Belgium: Media outlets using populis*</b>	<b>How many times in 2019? (N=488)</b>
De Standaard (Dutch-speaking quality newspaper)	153 (31%)
Het Laatste Nieuws (Dutch-speaking serious-popular newspaper)	179 (37%)
Metro (Dutch-speaking free newspaper)	81 (17%)
VRT (Dutch-speaking state-funded media)	75 (15%)

<b>In French-speaking Belgium: Media outlets using populis*</b>	<b>How many times in 2019? (N=522)</b>
Le Soir (French-speaking quality newspaper)	270 (52%)
DH (French-speaking serious-popular newspaper)	75 (14%)
Métro (French-speaking free newspaper)	68 (13%)
RTBF (French-speaking state-funded media)	109 (21%)

<b>In Spain: Media outlets using populis*</b>	<b>How many times in 2019? (N=521)</b>
El País (quality newspaper)	307 (59%)
El Español (serious-popular newspaper)	163 (31%)
20minutos (free newspaper)	32 (7%)
RTVE (state-funded media)	19 (3%)

Appendix 2:



*Appendix 3: Political figures associated with populis\* in the media on more than five occasions (per country)*

	<b>In Belgian medias</b>	<b>In French medias</b>	<b>In Spanish medias</b>
1.	Lega/Matteo Salvini (Italy): 53	Lega/Matteo Salvini (Italy): 31	Unidas Podemos: 31
2.	Movimento 5 Stelle (Italy): 31	Front National/Rassemblement National: 23	Vox: 26
3.	Alternative für Deutschland (Germany): 29	La France Insoumise: 14	Donald Trump (USA): 13
4.	Vlaams Belang: 25	Movimento 5 Stelle (Italy): 10	Lega/Matteo Salvini (Italia): 13
5.	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA) : 22	Viktor Orbán (Hungary): 6	Jair Bolsonaro (Brasil) : 9
6.	Thierry Baudet/ Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands): 16	Alternative für Deutschland (Germany): 5	Partido Socialista Obrero Español/Pedro Sánchez's government: 7

7.	Donald Trump (USA): 14		
8.	Nigel Farage/UKIP (UK): 13		
9.	Parti du Travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB/PVDA): 12		
10.	Front National (France): 11		