Similarities and Differences in the Right-wing Populists’ Video Campaigns

Ján Demčišák, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia
Simona Frašťíková, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Right-wing populist parties attempt to influence their voters in different ways. While previous analysis of right-wing populist language and rhetoric has concentrated more on texts and posters, and less on the audio-visual aspects, this article seeks to specifically address right-wing populist videos appearing on the internet and in social media and examine how these channels are used strategically. It analyses some case studies from Europe, especially Austria, Germany and Slovakia, and compares them. The contrast is intended to highlight specific strategies right-wing populists use for communication among the individual parties. Similarities and differences between the countries and strategies are also discussed.

Keywords: Populism, Political Campaign, Manipulation Strategies
Introduction

The database for analysing populist campaigns consists of YouTube videos from official right-wing populist parties and politicians: in Germany, AfD TV (operated by the Alternative for Germany), with 91,300 subscribers and 602 videos, the AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag (AFD Representatives in the German Federal Parliament) with 109,000 subscribers and 2,713 videos and Dr. Frauke Petry’s channel with 693 subscribers and 200 videos; in Austria, FPÖ TV (operated by the Freedom Party of Austria) with 63,000 subscribers and 3,111 videos, Österreich zuerst (Austria First) with no data on the number of subscribers and 4,843 videos, Manfred Haimbuchner’s private channel with 1,390 subscribers and 96 videos and Team HC Strache with 1,220 subscribers and 60 videos; and, in Slovakia, the channel operated by representatives of the People’s Party Our Slovakia in the National Council (ĽS Naše Slovensko v NR SR) with 13,600 subscribers and 200 videos, Štefan Harabin’s private channel with 25,800 subscribers and 194 videos and Sme rodina - Boris Kollár with 2,680 subscribers and 286 videos.

All the data listed above is current as of 12 October 2020. Comparing the subscribership among the video channels in the three countries, it demonstrates that even a smaller county like Slovakia may have channels covering a wider circle of subscribers than its counterparts operated by larger and historically longer established right-wing parties. In general, parties represented in the countries’ parliaments have a greater audience and encountered more success compared to non-parliamentary parties, with the exception of Štefan Harabin’s channel, while parties or politicians that have split from their original parties have a much smaller impact, such as Frauke Petry and Team HC Strache, although even in this case they can very quickly achieve a level of subscribership and influence comparable to another political competitor, such as between Haimbuchner and Strache. A well-chosen communication strategy also seems to play a crucial role. The analysed videos illustrate several basic strategies to be addressed here in greater detail, particularly identity politics, humour, irritation, intimidation and “fake facts” alongside polarisation and stratification. These strategies will be demonstrated with specific examples, taking a comparative perspective and looking for similarities and differences between the examples both at the level of individual countries and between strategies. Proceeding methodologically and inductively, there is no attempt here to put these results into other theoretical contexts.

Identity strategy

Identity is one of the fundamental elements for addressing recipients of a message and gaining their confidence. It can take two forms, either an instrument to enable people to identify with a particular politician or leadership candidate (most often the party leader), or to unify them into a collective consciousness. The first case is illustrated in a video from Ľuboš Krajčír’s candidacy for Slovakia’s National Council [URL 1]. Campaigning on the We Are Family party list, he sought to present himself as an ordinary person – a tough, athletic type working hard at his job. His declaration of being “ready to work in high-level politics for the people” underscored a contradictory aspect of the little man in high-level politics, indirectly pointing to himself as “the man in the street” like you and me. Simultaneously, this aspect of humanity is a foundation building block for the central concept of populism, namely that it stands behind the people. Party leader Boris Kollár emphasises the candidate’s quality, calling Krajčír
both a successful local politician and a fine man (1:06). Kollár’s description of him packs moral qualities and characteristics such as perseverance, discipline, boldness, commitment, diligence and a fighting spirit that separates him from others and especially Krajčír’s political opponents.

Notwithstanding, the building of a collective consciousness is much more strongly evident, whose aspects were noted in the first example of candidates working side by side, together as a team. An interesting technique used in this respect is rhythmic melodies and songs reflecting a common spirit. To some degree, they are reminiscent of traditional folk songs, although more from their character than the particular genre to which they have been assigned. The video produced by People’s Party Our Slovakia [URL 2] starts with a lone figure leaning over a bridge railing and staring into space. As he starts walking across the bridge in tune to dynamic background music, he is joined by children and then other women and men sympathising with the party. The imperative “Rise Up!” repeated in the song seeks to rouse collective action by intoning viewers to break bread with them, to unite for the sake of their children and not let the “third” win (0:37). Besides the powerful rhythm heard throughout the video, there are a number of symbolic and stirring references to “feeling your heart beating in your chest”, to willpower, self-sacrifice and fighting with your body and soul. The song additionally makes intertextual references to Slovakia’s national anthem, especially alluding to the nation having been asleep and the need for the people to wake up and confront the past and present. Awareness of the nation is visually strengthened by the national flags the marchers are carrying.

Pointing to national symbols, the FPÖ likewise seeks to evoke a feeling of unity [URL 3], visually dominated in the video by Austria’s landscape, the Alps, the Danube and major cities in the country. The induced national identity is complemented by generally human aspects like closeness to others, the desire to communicate and staying together, feelings critical at time of crisis. National identity becomes part of a stronger collective identity, implied with the words “Long live our country! Long live our Austria! Only together are we strong enough to overcome the crisis.” (0:43 – 0:47)

In the spirit of a common goal, a collective identity can even be transnational in nature. This is evident in a video of Marine Le Pen expressing her support for “Sme Rodina” and calling upon Slovaks to vote for it in European Parliament elections. The message she broadcasts is for a Europe of nations and for European countries to be finally heard (0:18 – 0:23) [URL 4]. A recurring element is the “vox populi” tone of voice as the central theme of populism), also expressed non-verbally at the close of Kotlebist candidate Ondrej Ďurica’s video [URL 2] to be a strong voice for Slovakia (Figure 1).
While the previous videos are accompanied by unequivocal gravity and pathos, targeted relief characterises the video where former Austrian FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache emphatically raps [URL 5] about people desiring for Austria to continue existing, to get out and vote for freedom. [...] In the video, he urges patriotic Austrians to vote for Austria to remain free and neutral, to end the misery of the red-black coalition and to vote for freedom. The introduction to the video shows archival footage which, besides the main idea behind it, makes an intertextual and historical connection to Leopold Figl, Austria’s first post-war Federal Chancellor and a major personality deeply involved in the restoration of Austrian sovereignty in 1955.

Humour

The previous video suggests a strategy of comic relief, exaggeration and humour in general as methods for reaching out to supporters and identifying with them. Another musical example is a video where Slovak rapper Mišel and “Sme Rodina” chairman Boris Kollár urge people to vote in the 2020 general election [URL 6]. The video’s main element ironically points out what We Are Family seeks to change: Playing on the Slovak words for “citizens” and “regular people” (občania) and sheep (ovca), they address anybody unable to comprehend or unaware of the ruling political elites as “ovčania” for letting the elites “herd” them.

A similar focus can be found in appeals to voters from the FPÖ in several videos the party produced for the 2019 European parliamentary election. The first video [URL 7] shows an ordinary man waking up to discover the EU election won by his political opponents and them keeping all the horrible promises they made. Such news leaves him terrified and frightened. But everything ends on a happy note when he wakes up and learns that it was all a nightmare, and so hurries off to vote. The next video features a similar constellation of political rivals. When an FPÖ supporter decides to walk his dog instead of going to vote, his neighbours from rival political parties celebrate. But fortunately for the FPÖ, its leader Strache and one of the party’s members in the European Parliament, Harald Vilimsky, confront the supporter, explain why he should go to the polls instead and even offer to watch his dog [URL 8]. Besides directly addressing the party’s faithful, the video suggests general identifying values such as commitment, community, assistance in need and solidarity, all of which appeal to viewers even more.

Slovak politician Štefan Harabin, chairman of the non-parliamentary VLASTŤ party, chose to joke as part of his advertising strategy. In his humour laden videos, he hyperbolically stylises himself as a judge convicting and sentencing different political rivals for crimes such as corruption, misappropriation and tax fraud [URL 9] and, in the first three seconds of another short clip, wielding a gavel (Figure 2) to rap the fingers of a hand sneaking onto his desk to steal something [URL 10].

![Figure 2](image-url)
As the gavel rhythmic raps the hand’s knuckles, he over-enunciates the words “You should not be stealing; but, Andrej”. His enunciation of the Slovak equivalent of “you should not be stealing” and calling specific politicians he encounters by their first names opens up a polyvalent meaning in the context of two different examples of major political figures. Meanwhile, spontaneous laughter can be heard behind the camera. His videos have a common feature of turning the emotion of laughter into an instrument he intends to wield in order to reinforce the relationship between the political party and its voters, as they reinforce the party’s platform among potential voters.

**Irritation and intimidation**

There is a tendency far more often to instrumentalise emotions generated from uncertainty, irritation or fear. To a large degree, the decision whether intimidation is present in the direct contact a political party or its personalities make with its (potential) voters, such as in panel discussions and campaign rallies, or only indirectly communicated in the party’s presentations and direct action, in the end lies in the audiovisual resources analysed here.

The first example in this section is a video produced by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), *The numbers are exploding: every other unemployed person has a migration background!* [URL 11]. The title both reinforces and evokes an atmosphere of fear through verbal lexemes, generating a strong negativism that retains its force, even though spoken only figuratively. If a bomb explodes, it has fatal consequences for anybody that happens to be near it. When numbers “explode”, thus increasing sharply, it can have fatal consequences for both individuals and the entire society.

The video runs a minute and five seconds and can be divided into two larger parts. The first half (0:00 - 0.29) identifies a political opponent as the culprit responsible for everything that has gone wrong (Figure 3-4) and explicitly lists the negative effects of her decisions (Figures 5-7). The opening images provide evidence of the sophisticated way the opponent, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is identified when she first appears with her notorious motto “Wir schaffen das!” (We can do it!), whose meaning is transformed, however, by the video creator’s comment of the social system becoming ever more burdened. The second statement transforms the target of the denotation, indicated by the pronoun “das” (it), from a positive connotation to a negative fact.

Yet it is the other half of the video that turns into a springboard for depicting negative information and arousing among viewers a feeling of distrust toward a political rival, either inducing or further strengthening the atmosphere of concern. Along these lines, there is also a need to glimpse the political opponent’s repeated promise of enrichment and skilled workers immigrating into Germany (Figure 5). Broken promises are
normally associated with a loss of confidence when there is already a sense of having been double crossed, and this type video only reinforces it further. This claim additionally contrasts with the statements in Figures 6-8, pointing out how the narrator interconnects them to form a line of information with a rising degree of seriousness.

The claim shown in Figure 5 is then set off against the assertion in Figure 6 of immigration contributing to Germany’s higher unemployment instead. Whereas immigration is connoted positively in Figure 5 and interpreted as necessarily strengthening Germany’s skilled workforce, Figure 6 twists the argument for it to acquire a negative connotation by referencing the origin of a problem or negative consequence (“But the truth is that immigration has led to even higher unemployment in Germany”). The next two assertions made in Figures 7 and 8 below use statistical data from the Federal Labour Office to back Figure 6’s claim and the source to make the claim credible.

Following this sequence of negative information, the leader of the Alternative for Germany in the German Bundestag enters the scene in the second half of the video and explains that the federal government acts as if Germany has infinite reserves (Figure 9) and migration into the “Promised Land” at any price seems to be the goal (Figure 10). Standing as “one of the ordinary people”, she draws attention to honestly working people already living in the country, either self-employed or employed by others, that have been injured, put at a disadvantage or endangered by the condition created; in her words “that have paid the price” (Figure 11) and who have to support the growing army of social cases (Figure 12). Viewers may feel concerned about the length of time the situation has persisted and angry about specific social cases, but they will accordingly become upset with everybody that has allowed people from outside Germany to have profited from the German social system.

The final demand, in opposition to Chancellor Merkel’s statement at the introduction to the video, expresses the need to stop immigration into the country’s social system (Figure 13), whereby the AfD makes clear its dual position, placing itself among
ordinary people on one hand and protecting ordinary, honest workers on the other. It also indicates how the AfD’s views are the polar opposite of those expressed by its political opponents.

Another example is a video by the same party about the new migration wave sweeping Germany [URL 12]. In this case, too, the title combines negatively connotated “migration wave” (Migrationswelle) and “sweeping” (zurollen) to raise concerns about the possible consequences. The strategically chosen visual elements seen in the first part of the video are especially worth noting. These are camera shot of the “hordes” of migrants travelling toward the viewer’s homeland. The large groups of migrants walking steadily forward and the long lines of them standing reflect the theme of the video (Figures 14-16), while in the background the narrator intones that “internal evaluations by the Ministry of Interior indicate that illegal border crossings and asylum applications in all of the Balkan countries are at an even higher level than they were in 2017 and 2018”. It can be added the visual elements found in Figures 15 and 16 multiply the negativism associated with the migrants.

Nevertheless, what makes the video partially paradoxical is the relatively neutral, calm voice of the narrator accompanying it. He sounds professional and provides the video with a documentary character somewhat at odds with the objective pursued by the strategy, yet it is very closely related to the strategy discussed in the next section.

“Pseudo” facts

The emotional strategies selected for the videos are frequently covered over by rationalised elements. In this spirit, an almost documentary narrative can be perceived in the videos discussed in the previous section. In addition, various statistical surveys and data have appeared in the previous examples. This strategy is not necessarily politically motivated and has actually been a tendentiously chosen tool in the media world.
Štefan Harabin’s VLASŤ in Slovakia provides another example. In a video produced in January 2020, the party points to the “purchase” of truth mediated by the media [URL 13]. It is clear from the video that the focus is on popularising the party, and yet it zeroes in on faults in the system and the inability of average people not always to defend themselves. In terms of composition, the video is relatively simple, presenting mostly slides of white text on a black background. The first slide, shown in Figure 17, blazes in upper-case letters, “THEY WANT TO STOP HARABIN AND HIS VLASŤ PARTY” and below them in lower-case “Don’t trust the media and the polls; they’re lying to you!”. This is followed by a series of slides statistically assessing the party’s and its leader’s popularity as “facts” underscored by their growth, while also perceived concurrently as a trigger for media ignorance (Figure 18). The next slides to appear in the video are well-known examples of purchased public opinion based on evidence (recordings of conversations by political rivals about buying a research agency or newspaper to conduct their own opinion polls), which seek to reinforce the credibility of objective statistical surveys and let viewers verify the information presented by the media. Ultimately, viewers are strongly encouraged not to be deceived. They are urged not to believe the corrupt media or the survey they have purchased. Finally, in Figure 19, the words “lies and manipulation” close out the slides.

Pseudo facts are also a favourite instrument employed both to demonise refugees and castigate political opponents to induce the desired atmosphere among viewers. They provide misleading or distorted figures, exaggerated attributes and high-sounding scenarios to back their claims. These “facts” are packaged so viewers are barely able to withstand the onslaught of information and are frequently overwhelmed, even as they are increasingly called upon to take precautions and verify what they have been told. Receiving such information, viewers find themselves in an atmosphere of fear and put their trust into the hands of those protecting them from it. A similar strategy is evident in another video produced by the AfD [URL 14], where they report on the case of a man called Allasa M. He had applied for asylum and then illegally moved to Germany. After committing a crime there, he was deported from the country, but still managed to return after another application for asylum. This demonstration serves to argue for legitimising the party’s own political candidates because they offer solutions for combating such cases.

**Polarisation and stratification**

Against the background of the migration crisis (and similar to the videos produced by the FPÖ, People’s Party Our Slovakia and VLASŤ), the videos start feeding off polarised opinions, which often goes hand in hand with the strategies of presenting the “facts” and of irritation and intimidation. Polarisation usually concerns attitudes, problem-solving approaches and accepted decisions, ultimately leading to viewers
becoming politically polarised. The earlier videos from the AfD demonstrate how opinions have become polarised at the state level, where their very structure reflects the two political poles that have developed. However, polarisation can also be seen horizontally in the country’s relationship with supranational institutions, with the EU the most often mentioned.

In a video produced by VLAS [URL 15], it is possible after the opening minutes to notice a comment by leader Štefan Harabin of him learning about the European Parliament’s decision to set up a European fund for migration and Asia and appropriating 10 billion euros for it. He calls it essentially a scheme to redistribute migrants across Eastern Europe, most likely through mandatory quotas and was something he had forewarned long ago when everybody was laughing at him. Furthermore, he complains about having been mocked by Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová or EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič and other members of the Slovakia’s parliament. He closes by saying “I think Slovakia can and must never allow it [for him to be ridiculed]”.

Where Harabin dissociates himself from the EU’s position while in the same breath points out his disagreement with other parliamentary parties, a similar direction is taken by People’s Party Our Slovakia in its video “We filmed the dark side of Brussels; what the media doesn’t want you to see!”, criticising the EU in order to express its own disagreement with the EU’s opinion and decisions [URL 16].

The video itself is a series of slow-motion panning and images shot in Brussels, the centre of the EU, with background music playing in a slow, minor key to accompany comments from different members of the party. The main thematic aspects seen in the video are associating the migration crisis with the idea of a multicultural Europe, the EU’s support of “non-traditional” social groups and the EU operating as a supranational body. The comments themselves progress toward outlining the predominately negative consequences of the strategy the EU has chosen for itself. Examples are narrated by several People’s Party Our Slovakia candidates for the European Parliament and they include an introduction from the capital of the European Union filmed at one of Brussels’ largest markets, where a member of the party comments about the difficulty finding any of the original European population; narration from another member in a neighbourhood where his guide once lived, and being told by him that there was only one Muslim family at his school when he attended it and remarking that practically no original Belgians live in that section of the city now because they had fled in fear. He further comments that Brussels had once opened its borders to immigrants and now police officers and soldiers, some with machine guns, stand at every corner. Finally, a third member talks about the Islam in Europe being more than mosques with minarets and the call to prayers, as is presented by the media, but also terrorist attacks, “no-go zones”, and a never-ending fear among families of their children ever returning home alive and healthy. He continues to talk about the propaganda of multiculturalism in Brussels he sees at every step, of pictures of smiling black people and Africans, and how a multicultural society should look (Figure 20 – 22).
The three candidates also point out, in contrast, the differences between the EU’s attitudes and the platform of People’s Party Our Slovakia. Examples here include Brussels’ and the European Union’s current push for gay rights and permitting homosexual couples to adopt children, as opposed to the party's own defence of the traditional family and how it has been marginalised. They also rail against Brussels spending millions of euros on LGBTI propaganda and not appropriating a single euro to supporting and protecting traditional families. They claim that anyone daring to criticise or question the EU’s LGBTI policy is automatically labelled an extremist and fascist (Figures 23-25).

Their comments likewise indicate their political opposition to the influence of the European Union’s liberal policies, where open borders have changed everything. The intensity of their intimidation escalates again in a statement reminiscent of the direct impact of laws and regulations adopted by the EU, where they stress the supremacy of laws adopted by the European Parliament over Slovakia’s laws and express their fear that all they have seen in Brussels will come to Slovakia, too.

But there is similar polarisation and stratification taking place among people living inside a country, too, and not just externally toward other countries and institutions. We are Family's video “Aggressive Slovakia” seeks to portray their opponents as vulgar, primitive demonstrators, against whom the party sees its own members as tolerant and seeking dialogue. In a twist on the Bible, the video exhorts “to give bread to whoever comes at you with a stone”. We Are Family party leader Boris Kollár carries croissants to an ignoring crowd that tramples them at 0:55 in the video (Figure 26). The clip seeks to define Kollár as decent and morally superior in a polarised scene where an amoral onlooker simultaneously acts as a magnet in the spirit of a positive identity.
Conclusion

The videos analysed here display striking similarities across geographical aspects, with rather minimal characteristic variances that mostly result from the country’s own political and social context and events. Perhaps the most striking difference is the narrative provided by German and Slovak populists. While the German right-wing populist parties opt for a mostly moderate tone approaching a documentary, Slovak parties bring much more emotion to a seemingly substantive approach, pointing out supposed facts on their merits. In contrast to the other two countries, the FPÖ’s style lies on the border between these two political spectra, although the boundaries between them tend to be thin, blurry and intersecting. These differences may result from each nation’s own mentality and nature, while the assumption that because populist parties in Slovakia are much younger and less able to mask their emotionally targeted strategies seems likewise more plausible an explanation.

The emotional aspect is the most significant element uniting these campaigns, not only in a transnational context, but also cutting across the range of all these strategies. Here the difference is only in the degree of transparency and subterfuge. Humans are the most emotional of living things. They tend to look at the world around themselves, objects and events through emotions. Emotion is a person’s first reaction to outside stimuli, which can be so intense in some cases that what is evoked can lead to persistent and even unpredictable actions. Therefore, it is not surprising for the potential of people’s emotions to be exploited as a tool to induce or influence actions from others in various areas, including the political sphere.

When considering populist political parties, fear is the primary emotion they employ, whose presence can also be analysed audio-visually. The effectiveness of building, maintaining and reinforcing the atmosphere of fear, at the level of a larger group of viewers or a nationality can be expressed in the collective fear aroused. The videos analysed here purposefully apply a wide range of elements that can intimidate a potential viewer verbally, nonverbally, visually, through musical elements or by spouting misleading statistics. People normally encounter impulses that generate fear. These impulses concurrently generate defence mechanisms against the envisaged and yet unwanted danger. The defensive reaction can be an attempt to avoid danger, to escape from it or to eliminate it. But the danger where the response is collective fear, whatever specific stimulus generated it, is so wide and deep that no individual is able
to limit or eliminate it, so people place their trust in whatever can protect them and whoever wishes to resolve the issue.

It is political parties that have taken over the role of “protector”. Taking the opposite perspective, building and maintaining an atmosphere of fear definitely guarantees an expression of confidence in political parties able to demonstrate that they have been caught in the same situation, while expressing their own lack of confidence in the parties they portray as having secondarily perpetrated the danger in the first place. An alternative to this dominant concept is the endeavour to build an identity through positive identification, often associated with a significant degree of impassioned behaviour. Accordingly, it is much more interwoven with various symbolism and intertextual links to the past.

Acknowledgements

The study is part of the project APVV-17-0128 Language strategies of right-wing populists in comparison (Germany – Austria – Czech Republic – Slovakia): lexis – texts – discourses founded by The Slovak Research and Development Agency.
References


Es lebe unsere Heimat, es lebe unser Österreich! https://youtu.be/ATqYIgoCZ0o [21. 3. 2020]


Raper Mišel a Boris Podľa voleť! https://youtu.be/3K1cvot-q5I [1. 5. 2017]

Am 26. Mai – Aufstehen für Österreich, damit es kein böses Erwachen gibt! https://youtu.be/cBg26260gFg [12. 5. 2019]

Wenn DU nicht wählen gehst, wählen andere Zuwanderungschaos und EU-Zentralismus! https://youtu.be/nKbl5Oyodus [2. 5. 2019]

Zlodeji do basy https://youtu.be/xHSdb0k9bpM [24. 2. 2020]


Contact email: jan.demcisak@ucm.sk