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## Theory, Methodology, and Background Information to the Four-Case Studies<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article presents a common introduction to the four case studies published in this volume. It explains some broader aspects of the methodology used in the four-country case studies and the underlying theory. It is based on the belief that research should be contextualised and founded on in-depth theoretical and empirical knowledge. This contribution explains the methodology used, the sample selection criteria, and the conceptualisation of the alternative media and justifies the focus of research and its importance, especially from a long-term perspective. Furthermore, the study puts the country case studies within a broader comparative international and political communication context, particularly social media. Moreover, there is an explanation of the importance and use of the “like” button on Facebook.

**Key words:** Facebook, “Like” button, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, populism, social media, social network analysis, alternative media, Orbán, Babiš, Morawiecki, Matovič, Kollár, Kaczyński

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**T**his contribution explains broader aspects of the case study selection, the methodology used in the four-country case studies and the underlying theory. It is assumed here that this selection (both of the sample and methodology used) should – theoretically and comparatively – reflect at least partly personal-political-ideological affinity to the specific media sources of a populist leader/party. There is some popular assumption that

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since populists tend to present “alternative” politics, they may also rely on support or, at least, show some affinity to the “alternative” sources. Therefore, it seems to be relevant to explore whether the Facebook (FB) tool (button “like” that transparently allows to show such connections) was at all used by the populist politicians and how many and what types of more permanent FB connections can be found. Do they “like” the alternative media, or do they prefer the mainstream media or no media at all? If they “like” either the alternative or mainstream media, what does it tell us about these politicians? If they do not like or do not use such a tool, what does it tell us about their digital political marketing approach or communication on social media in general? These are all relevant and under-explored research questions since the media (be that understood as the mainstream or alternative media) still play an important role in the public-political sphere as the agenda setters and disseminators (Lipiński, n.d.). A hypothesis can be made that the populist leaders or parties may be especially interested in the alternative media, an interest expressed by “liking” such sources on social media. They may find them useful or interesting for their communication purposes or just appeal to them to find some inspiration and emotional support or to navigate their followers towards suitable media sources. However, as will be shown, there is only rather limited evidence for this assumption, based on our research as presented in the four case studies.

In the theoretical part, we present the key theoretical issues that underpin the countries’ (selected populist leaders) case studies in this volume. All published studies focused on on more permanent “liking”(in contrast to more common research on *ad hoc* “liking”).

In general, the selection of the theoretical and methodological issues discussed in this part reflects the research priorities and goals of the researchers.

First, the common methodology is explained. Second, the general criteria for selecting specific leaders and countries in our comparative sample are explained. It is in no way an unimportant issue. The case selection is a rather complex and often underestimated research step. Third, the relationship between populism and media in general and populism and social media in particular is explained. It is done in a limited way only due to space constraints. Country-specific features related to populism and legacy or social media are then further explored and explained in the country studies. Fourth, the role of the alternative media in politics and its relation to populism in particular is explained. Researchers usually approach this issue mechanically, accepting a consensus that the alternative media are a nega-

tive anomaly. It especially applies in countries with a strong alternative media segment, such as Czechia and Slovakia. It is argued here that there is a conceptual fuzziness of related terminology, which is impacted by a heavily normative approach to the alternative media by the mainstream media, debunking initiatives and some analysts. There may be some logical assumption that the “alternative” media and “alternative” politics may find mutual affinity as presented by the populists. Fundamentally, our research shows that this allegedly logical assumption is incorrect. The specific roles and definitions of the alternative media, especially those found exclusively online, have been further specified in each country’s study.

Furthermore, the importance and utility of the FB “like” button as having the potential to contribute to research on social media are explained. This digital tool fits well into theoretical considerations concerning the transformation of the discursive environment caused by social media. In particular, it is closely aligned to the “social media logic” or, rather, to the algorithms used.

Finally, one can see the country or leaders’ case studies as a way to learn about the personality and ideology or values of the populist leaders as revealed by “liking” certain subjects on FB. If somebody likes – or dislikes – somebody or something, especially some more or less identifiable media sources, their opinion can say something about their ideology and other fundamental values or their personality traits (Paet, Van Aelst, Marten, 2018; Cutler, Kuli, 2018; Kosinski, Stillwell, Graepel, 2013). However, it is necessary to stress that this kind of inference has significant empirical limitations and can raise important ethical questions (Kalimeri et al., 2019). This process can also point to a new bonding of the political parties and leaders or the importance and strength of these bonds. As put by Kňapová (2019, p. 55): “The bond between those who represent and those who are represented is becoming vaguer and based more on the current articulation of this bond than pre-existing political identities”. The “like” button represents this new form of virtual bonding or, at least, emotional-rational interactions. It turns out that just a minor, virtual tool has a great potential to reveal a lot about politicians and political parties.

### **The Social Networks Analysis Methodology**

There are two distinct approaches to social network analysis (Himmelboim, 2017). The first is a socio-centric network approach that quantifies

ties between the users within a defined group or domain. Second, an egocentric (a personal network) approach focused on a node and the relationships surrounding this node. It was called the study of “ego networks” in classical network studies (Prell, 2021). We applied here the second, egocentric (i.e., personal) network approach focused on a node and the relationships surrounding this node. It may be reflected in focus on the assumed affinity among the populist leaders and parties towards alternative, mainly media sources on FB. In general, it also reflects the primary level of connections on FB.

In contrast to quantification used in a socio-centric network, an egocentric network focuses on the qualitative analysis of available data. The research approach (not used this way before) was straightforward – identifying permanent “likes” by the selected populist leaders on their FB official or “personal” pages given to other FB pages.

Ultimately, the scope of the analysis was determined by the research data identified. Moreover, since, in some cases, there were very few or no networks with the media sources suggested, this analysis was expanded at the second or third (sub)level of connections (based on the “liked” status).

The following is understood by the “three-level network analysis”: The first level describes the immediate connections expressed in more permanent “liking” of any other FB page. “Liking” is shown in making connections as “liked”, also called “friends”. It is facilitated by the tools available to FB users. It requires the user’s own initiative. A user can use the button “like” for more or less permanently giving a “like” or “follow” to a certain FB page. It means he can sign up for a specific type of relationship with that FB page. The users who “liked” a FB Page are called Fans/Followers. “Friends” is the term given to a personal profile one follows on Facebook. Of course, it is technically possible to extend the pool of “liked” “friends”. Similarly, it is possible to end “liking” certain pages. However, this does not happen too often as during *ad hoc* “liking” of routine communication threads. It is supposed to present a more permanent positive expression of one’s attitude.

The second level means expansion of “liking” by that particular user. In other words, the question is, what likes a “friend” of the initial user who “liked” that friend?

The third level suggests “friends” or connections based on “liking” of selected FB pages by “friends of a secondary friend”.

It is acknowledged here that these two latter levels of connections are not much relevant for the key analysis at the first level. They may be

seen only as somehow indirect and vague expressions of the values and interests presented at the first level of connections. Yet, they may show a broader context of the values and interests of the actors involved in the public life/politics based on the marked connections. As mentioned, the use of additional levels of “liking” by other actors was primarily motivated by the relative paucity of the media-related sources/connections at the first level of “liking”.

Special charts that illustrate mini-networks of all “liked” connections between the leaders and their parties/movements were created. Specific media-type related “liked” resources were coloured differently. These connections were subject to further analysis. The research questions were: What are these media sources about? What type of media (e.g., local, national, professional journal, television etc.) are they, and what ideology or ideological affiliation do they represent, if any? If there were no or only limited media sources, the analysis was expanded to those available connections (“liked”). Ultimately, the scope of analysis was determined by the research data identified. The selected data followed the general elections in Slovakia in February 2020 to allow regional comparability and compatibility of a sample. In this way, it was possible to cover the populist heads of governments in all four countries throughout 2020. The same methodology was used in all four case studies.

### **The Sample Selection Criteria**

The populist leaders from Central Eastern Europe were selected, namely Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Populism has historical roots in some countries, and it is becoming a significant factor in policy-making in Central Europe. All V4 countries share a long-term presence of populist parties/leaders who played a key role in politics and society in 2020. The selection of the populist leaders and their affiliated parties was based on their key roles in executive politics in 2020. Thus, they were primarily heads of governments (Cabinets). For Hungary, it was Viktor Orbán and Fidesz (The Alliance of Young Democrats – a Hungarian Civic Alliance). For Poland, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Jarosław Kaczyński were selected, both from PiS (The Law and Justice Party). The latter politician has been widely seen as the key figure in Polish politics (more important than the Prime Minister) and the vice-prime minister since October 2020. For Slovakia, we select-

ed Igor Matovič, then the Prime Minister, from The OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) and Boris Kollár, the Speaker of the Parliament from Sme rodina (We are a Family, WAF). For the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, the Prime Minister, was chosen. The justification for including these leaders among populist politicians (except for Morawiecki, who was not listed but was selected primarily as the nominee of his populist political party and its leader Kaczynski) was found in Kyle and Gultchin (2019). These authors mentioned only heads of the governments or presidents, respectively. For Poland, just the Law and Justice Party was mentioned, but no specific name of any prime minister. In other words, the current Polish political party system is rather different – a Prime Minister is not necessarily the head of the coalition party. Consequently, he or she can be replaced by another person, as indeed happened in the past.

Viktor Orbán's and Robert Fico's populisms were defined as "cultural" by Kyle and Gultchin (2018). Robert Fico was no longer the Prime Minister in 2020. Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár came to power in 2020, but, while in opposition, both were widely seen as populist politicians. The former focused more on fighting grand corruption but not using "othering" populist strategies toward minorities, while the latter was more focused on fighting the establishment and drawing on "othering" communication strategies (Marincea, Školkay, 2020).

The level of perceived populism of these leaders and their parties differs, and any attempts at quantifications can only be approximate, but all of them were assessed as having a significant degree of the populist elements in their discourse.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned, we selected the data starting from April to May 2020 (and ending in September 2020 in the case of the Polish P.M.), following the general elections in Slovakia in late February 2020. It can be assumed that once these politicians and political parties took over their government roles, their "liked" pages may evolve. In that sense, an interesting section of the early phase of personalised preferences of these leaders is presented here. Therefore, these case studies can serve as a record for history.

Further on, we turn to the issue of populism and the media. The question arises: What do we know about populism and the media's interaction, especially populism and social media?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>.

## The Approaches to Populism and the Media

Broadly speaking, since party identification has lost importance in voters' decisions and partisan loyalties have declined, the electoral volatility has increased in many European countries. Personalisation of politics (to be discussed further) is a logical consequence (Renwick, Pilet, 2016). This development also highlights the impact of public discourse on political orientation. Furthermore, when voters are dissatisfied with a national government, they do not support opposition parties in Eastern Europe but rather vote for new alternatives (Schakel et al., 2017). It underlines the importance of studying populist movements and their leaders. Specifically, there is growing disappointment with the democratic ideal, its country-specific implementations, a country's political system, and the government (Fabrykant, 2017). In this process, the media, and increasingly social media, play an important role.

There are three recently established distinct approaches to populism and the media: *populism by the media*,<sup>3</sup> *populism through the media*, and *populist citizen journalism* (Esser, Stepinska, Hopmann, 2016).<sup>4</sup> It is argued here that we should add a specific emerging fourth perspective: *direct populist politicians' communication through social media*. This perspective is becoming popular both in empirical communication and in research on populism (Ylä-Anttila, 2020). It is also the primary focus of our research. We accept that arguments can be brought that this is just a sub-category of *populism through the media*. Yet this seems to be rather specific and qualitatively different in style and content of populist communication. Perhaps most importantly, in contrast to *populism through the media*, it is characterised by extreme freedom of expression (almost no gatekeepers), directness, speed, reach, and immediacy. Moreover, it can be argued later on that in contrast to legacy media logic (the organisational, technological, and aesthetic determinants of media functioning), social media or networks' logic works differently.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that Umberto Eco suggested before expansion of social media a concept "media populism" that he defined as "appealing to people directly through media." (Rodrigue, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> For the first: "It refers to media organizations actively engaging in their own kind of populism", for the second, "refers to the strengthening of politicians' populist messages,", for the third "It occurs when media organizations open the gates to populist messages by audience members-usually in the form of reader comments on their websites" (Esser, Stepinska, Hopmann, 2016).

Even *populist citizen communication* could be seen as just a sub-category of *populism through the media* since it is usually strongly associated with online (both online-only and online versions of legacy media) and social media.

In general, Krämer (2017b) explained the logic and importance of social media use for populists and its fundamental impact on populist communication transformation: first, populists attempt to systematically circumvent the mainstream media; second, many populists need a platform where they can criticise the mainstream media – seeing them as offering distorted and unfair coverage; and third, populists need an alternative medium for those supporters who do not trust the legacy media. These alternative communication tools are usually social networks, especially FB and Twitter. Krämer (2017b) further explains that social media create “ideological filter bubbles” and “echo chambers”, i.e., isolated communicative spaces that allow unchallenged one-sided populist discourses. The selective exposure promotes an in-group mentality that populists can use to mobilise their supporters and coordinate political actions.

Moreover, the main functions of social media use for (right-wing) populists include the representation of the relationship between leaders and the ‘people’, justifying the exclusion of out-groups, the conceptual elaboration of the right-wing populist ideology, developing a right-wing populist lifestyle and identity, and circumventing the traditional media (Krämer, 2017b; see also Gerbaudo, 2018 or interview with Ernst).

In general, modern political communication has two main characteristics: tabloidisation (content and style of communication transformation towards entertainment and celebrities or emotions in general) and related personalisation (the move of discourse towards political personalities rather than policies, issues, and political parties).<sup>5</sup> Of course, this transformation may be country-specific (McAllister, 2004).

In addition, populism has three main characteristics from a content perspective: anti-elitism, people-centrism (people are seen as key reference point) and usually an “otherness” strategy (quite often, enemies or victims are sought to justify failures of policies or possible or invented threats).

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<sup>5</sup> There is also a second level of personalisation of politics, related to the psychology of politics, concerning the influence of personality factors on the way of exercising power.



However, it should be mentioned that some authors analyse populist communication on social media in more refined categories: polarisation, conspiracy, exaltation and leadership, personalisation and privacy, emotions and feelings, and media publicity (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado-Suárez, Waisbord, 2021). It can be argued that these six categories can be simplified into personalisation (exaltation and leadership, personalisation and privacy) and tabloidisation (polarisation, conspiracy, emotions and feelings, media publicity).

Within this theoretical context, the relevant information traffic pattern for social media is the integrated network whose main characteristics are multiple channels, personalisation, interactivity, and participation. As van Dijk (2006, p. 359) further argues:

“The birth of integrated networks implies a combination of allocation, consultation, registration and conversation in a single medium. [...] The evolution of the four information traffic patterns involves a clear shift of patterns towards local units. The new media cause a shift from allocation towards consultation, registration and conversation. The initiative and selection by local units, and the interactivity between these local units and the centre and between these local units themselves, have increased the opportunities in communications. But this does not mean that these opportunities will be taken up. That depends on the content and the context of the communication taking place. Opportunities for users can be enlarged by the combination of speech, text, data and images and by a firmer grip on the dimensions of space and time. On the other hand, they can be limited by new media management and supply. One-sided supply, limited access and increased possibilities for central control, manipulation and registration threatening privacy may just as easily result. One certainty is that these opportunities, and what is actually done with them, will cause a revolution in mediated communications, and perhaps even in all communications in our society”.

For example, as mentioned, FB provides an opportunity for connecting through (either *ad hoc* or permanent) “liking”. But has this opportunity been utilised among our sample of populist politicians? Before answering this question, it may be useful to compare the importance of social media in selected countries. It helps to answer whether local populations have taken the communication opportunities provided by social media. It can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

## Social Media in Usage in Selected Countries

Country	Number of Users in Millions (January 2020)	Change (April 2019–Jan- uary 2020)	Penetration (January 2020)
Slovakia	2.80	+6.6%	51%
Poland	19.00	+7.8%	50%
Hungary	6.00	+5.9%	62%
Czech Republic	5.70	+6.7%	53%

**Source:** <https://datareportal.com/reports/>.

The data is rather similar across these countries in terms of social media usage and penetration trends, strengthening the validity of our comparative perspective. However, how do social media function in a society in general and in political communication in particular? What are their fundamental underlying characteristics?

There are at least two perspectives on social media logic – or, there is a rather rapid development of various perspectives on social media, or, more broadly, digital media logic, sometimes called network/social media logic. First, Dijck, and Poell (2013) identified social media logic according to four principles: *programmability*, *popularity*, *datafication*, and *connectivity*. *Programmability* is the “ability for a social media platform to trigger and steer users’ creative or communicative contributions, while users, through their interaction with these coded environments, may in turn influence the flow of information and communication activated on such a platform”. *Popularity* has both “algorithmic and socio-economic components. Each platform has its distinct mechanism for boosting the popularity of people, things, or ideas, which is measured mostly in quantified terms”. *Datafication* is the “ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before”. *Connectivity* refers to the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect to user activities and advertisers where the “mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers and, more generally, online performative environments” is the driving mechanism. For our current purposes, we will focus on a combination of programmability and connectivity, i.e., the “like” button.

Kalsnes, Larsson, and Enli (2017) offer a second perspective on social media logic. They argue that the social media logic can be operationalised into “connected affordances” (possibilities and limits for interaction

and connectivity on social media platforms): redistribution, interacting and acknowledging or: amplifying, recording, and spreading information. These authors put “liking” among connective affordances, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

**Three Types of “Connective Affordances”**

	Facebook
Acknowledging	Like
Redistributing	Share
Interacting	Comment (Chat)

**Source:** Kalsnes, Larsson, Enli (2017), based on work by Larsson, 2015.

However, Klinger and Svensson (2019) argue that algorithms are an outcome rather than a replacement of media logic, and ultimately, they connect human agency to media logic. In short, they argue that human agency permeates network media logic. It can follow from this line of argumentation that “liking” certain pages more or less permanently on FB or elsewhere is evidence of this human agency-driven social media logic. Users, in this case, politicians and political parties, create their own version of network/social media logic or contribute to network/social media logic created by algorithm and tools designers and other users.

Be that as it may, as a result, we can find here (mental) links among legacy media, FB and public discourse. Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann (2016) point out that civil discourse, on the one hand, and journalistic discourse, on the other, are increasingly decoupled. Lorenzi and Berrebi (2019) argue that “For the first time, public discourse is more important than reality”. Perhaps it is correct to argue that FB covertly constructs our distorted vision of reality the same way television did in the past, but faster and more personalised and emotional (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). We see a (mental) link or impact to personalisation and tabloidisation of populist communication here.

Moreover, there is a clear co-emergence of alternative political entities and alternative communication sources in some countries, mostly understood as social media, although explanations for this unfolding differ. Gansinger and Kole (2018) believe that the successful replacement of traditional parties by movements based on personality cults around “marketable young faces” is strongly linked to products and services based on monetised likes and followers. Bongiovanni (2018) found the explanation

for this connection in ideological bias and manipulation by the public. Dyer-Witheford (2020) argues that the rise of left populism correlates with the ascent of platform capitalism (understood as the use of the Internet in general and social media in particular by IT giants like Facebook, Google, Apple, etc., as platforms to conduct their business, monetising the Internet). More specifically, among the six categories of social media (Collaborative Projects, Content communities, Virtual game worlds, Blogs, Social networking sites and Virtual social worlds), it is the social networking sites and virtual social worlds that constitute the media of the highest level of social presence and self-presentation (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2020). This argument fits well into general findings on the psychological factors contributing to FB use that it is motivated by two primary needs: (1) the need to belong and (2) the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni, Hofmann, 2012).

As a result of these transformations, there is also a specific online media sector, including blogs. It is typical with “alternative” media, often conspiracy, populist and in general low quality or low professional public journalism. However, alternative media can be a balancing factor against governmental propaganda (Bárdy, 2020) in some countries, namely Hungary. In other countries, like Poland, alternative media are not seen as an important actor or source because of pluralistic media and political environments. Importantly, FB has concentrated most of these alternative media, or at least gives them additional visibility and allows further connectivity and emotional reactions. Therefore, in the following section, we shall discuss the roles of alternative media in general. It is not a self-evident concept, as we shall discuss here and in the case studies.

### **A Conceptualisation of Alternative Media**

Although, as mentioned, many see social media as synonymous with alternative media, there are also websites, and sometimes print copies of the media that see themselves as alternative media or are labelled as such by others. Indeed, the history of alternative media is older than that of social media, but the concept remains unclear, and a scholarly consensus over its definition is still lacking. For example, Yapıcıoğlu (2013) divided alternative media into four categories: ‘Alternative media (an alternative to a mainstream media), Community media (based on geography and ethnicity), Civil society media (third voice – a place between state media

and private commercial media), and Rhizomatic media' (non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, multiplicitous, and centred media – see more on this controversial term in Gartler, 2020). It is a rather traditional approach but a bit confusing and outdated one. A similar approach was adopted by Jeppesen (2016), who identified four distinct categories of alternative media: DIY media influenced by individualist ideologies and subcultural belonging; citizen media theorised by third-world Marxism and engaged in local community organising; critical media influenced by the Frankfurt School of critical theory and focused on global anti-capitalist content; and autonomous media influenced by social anarchism and rooted in global anti-authoritarian social movements. Fuchs (2010) believes that alternative/critical media should include either critical form or content (Fuchs, 2010). Similarly, and more recently, Kapec (2019) argues that the current alternative media do not possess more advanced technologies than the mainstream media, nor do they use alternative forms of communication. Their alternative specification can be found in the opinions they present and how they capture reality and information.

Others see alternative media as those that challenge mainstream media at the level of organisation (i.e., ordinary people or not professional journalists can control production) as well as mainstream media productions (i.e., ordinary people can express their concerns – often, in a semi-amateurish way) (Atkinson, 2017) by offering access to decentralised, democratic methods of media production and dissemination (Gehl, 2015). Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández (2019) discuss the disintermediation role of alternative media, at the level of agents, spaces, and messages. Some authors (e.g., Bhatt et al., 2018) use the term hyper-partisan websites and their corresponding FB pages. Hájek and Carpentier (2015) have suggested that instead of describing those media that label themselves as “alternative” but do not comply with the definition of “alternative”, these media should be labelled as “hybrid”. As such, they should remain positioned *within* the category of mainstream media, though at the same time, they are *different* from the ideal-typical conceptualisation of mainstream media. Hájek and Carpentier (2015) suggest the notion of “alternative mainstream media”. It is an important suggestion that moves us away from normatively conceptualised alternative media in some of the studied countries.

One has to agree with the following claim:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [https://libraryguides.mta.ca/alternative\\_media](https://libraryguides.mta.ca/alternative_media).

“No one term adequately describes all of the various types of publications and sources of information that fall outside of the mainstream: independent, dissident, radical, underground, subversive, non-corporate, progressive, grassroots, activist, anarchist, small, alternative... Similarly, no one definition adequately describes all of the publications or types of publications included when one refers to the alternative press. Often, the alternative press is defined by describing what it is not...”

Therefore, we specify a national understanding of what is meant by alternative media for each country’s case study by individual authors.

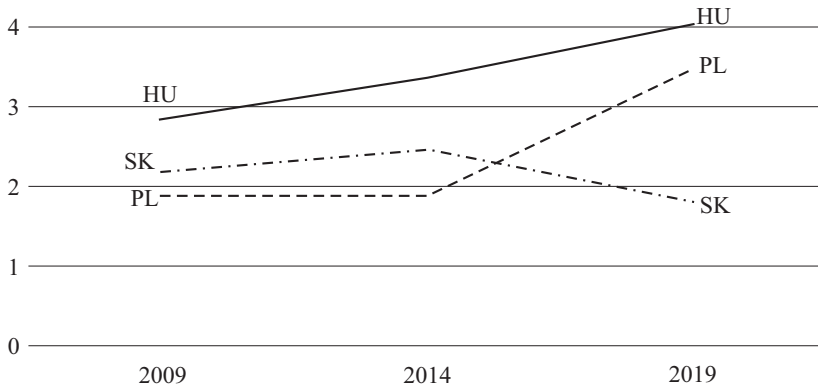
### **Why Is Alternative Media Booming?**

It has been noted that the developments of alternative media are largely a result of perceived bias on the part of legacy media – in some countries, many citizens feel that the media/journalists show their own biases (often, centre-right or liberal-right in the EU), too. Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, & Engesser (2016) found that levels of media bias in Central and Eastern Europe are similar to those in Western Europe. They also found that left-right party ideology predicts media bias in the latter, but not in the former group.

In some countries such as Hungary and increasingly in Poland, affiliation (or simply “captured media”, see various definitions in Schiffrin, 2017) can be found between populist politicians and a large part of legacy media (Rozgonyi, 2019; Klimkiewicz, 2019). In such cases, we can discuss perspectives of captured media/journalism. Interestingly, alternative online media, including social media, may play a balancing or even an opposition role in relation to captured legacy media in such countries. Media is usually captured by media owners and their interests or by politicians and state actors. Longitudinal data from V-Dem Institute shows (chart 1) that in most V4 countries, the perceived media bias against opposition parties or candidates has increased over the last decade and elections, and is most pronounced in Hungary and Poland. It gives us a measure of media state capture. Slovakia’s opposite end, where media bias increased in 2014 and decreased in 2019, the lowest in our sample. It is also important to note that, according to this data, Polish media are perceived to have become more biased than Slovak media.

**Chart 1. Evolution of Media Bias**

**Evolution of media bias against opposition parties or candidates**



**Source of data:** V-Dem Institute, Country Graph, Media Bias. 0=least biased, 4=most biased against opposition parties or candidates. <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>.

In short, if there are politically biased mainstream media, we can see two developments. When alternative mainstream media are still present, like in the case of Poland, there is not much need for alternative niche media. Yet, surprisingly, this works in the same way when most mainstream media is biased as in Hungary. However, if the mainstream media are more homogenised (being more liberal-orientated), as in the case of Slovakia, alternative media may seem to create a counter-discursive space.

The increased distrust of people in national media outlets because of their perceived bias and de-professionalisation has made many of them turn to alternative media sources. It is perhaps ironic that FB is a major promoter of alternative media and their content. One of the tools developed for that purpose is the “like” button. In the following section, we discuss algorithmic design at the time of research before FB introduced changes.

### The “Like” Button on Facebook

There are three essential ways to interact with content on FB: liking (or reacting), commenting and sharing. The most prominent of them is the “like” button. It was introduced in 2009/2010. “Liking” is a way to “give

positive feedback and connect with others". Users can like FB pages and "react" to posts, status updates, comments, photos, and links posted by their friends or strangers, as well as adverts, by clicking the "Like, Love, Ha Ha, Wow, Sad, or Angry" buttons at the bottom of the message. However, a user can use the button "like" also for more or less permanently giving a "like" or "follow" to a certain FB page. It means they can sign up for a specific type of relationship with that page – parasocial interaction with digital media or imaginary social relationships. The users who have "liked" a FB Page are called Fans/Followers. "Friends" is a term given to a personal profile one follows on FB.

When a person likes someone's page, they automatically follow this page. There are other forms of engagement with a page: Page Follow (previously, one had to "like" the page in order to "follow" it, while now one can "follow" a page without "liking" it). Then there is a Profile Follow, which is the same type of action as a Page Follow, except it applies to another personal user account rather than a Page account (this action used to be called a Subscribe). When someone follows somebody as a fan, it is possible to see some of their public posts in their own News Feed, but the other party will not follow them back and will not see the follower's posts.

There are technically four levels of interaction a Profile can have with a Page. From least engaging to most engaging, they are: Not Liked nor Followed, Liked but not Followed, Followed but not Liked, Liked and Default Following and finally, Liked and See First Following.

The difference between the Follow relationship with a Page and with a Profile is the "entry fee" engagement. Previously, if one wanted to Follow a page, one had to Like that page first. After the algorithmic change, if one wants to Follow a Profile or Page, one can just Follow it, no "friending" is necessary. It can be an option for people who want to stay up to date with what a certain page or profile is posting, but it does not necessarily align with the respective ideas or values, like in the case of political parties or representatives.

Some pages can automatically get liked by a FB account, which is part of the promotion strategies used by some brands. It can happen if a user has given access to any app or any website that is used to auto-like and claims they will increase the number of the user's followers, status, likes, etc. It can be corrected manually.

From the political communication theory perspective, this type of activity may be viewed as a specific sub-type of political distributed gate-



keeping. While distributed gatekeeping can be defined as story-placement choices many readers make, political distributed gatekeeping can be seen as a more permanent selection of individuals and institutions or resources by a political institution (politician, political party). In particular, liking articles and media on the web could help build online reputations (D'Costa, 2012). Fundamentally, psychologists Eastwick and Finkel argue that "Reciprocity of liking (also called reciprocity of attraction or reciprocal liking) is a particular type of reciprocity that refers to the tendency of people to like others who express liking for them." (Eastwick, Finkel, 2009, p. 1333). The perspective that is preferred here argues that the item "like" serves to create a network of hyperlinks (either "Like" or "Follow") that can be seen as means of alliance and a sign of belonging, or a connective public good via which other actors, ideas or events are brought to the attention of the audience (Vicari, 2014 and Shumate, Lipp, 2008, in Fujdiak, Ocelík, 2019, p. 137). Liking shows that one is paying attention, and allows one to be recognised as a participant within the network, regardless of the degree of connectivity.

There is theoretical and empirical reason to argue that liking a particular media source represents an initiative in establishing connections based on similarity, social network connections being driven by homophily based on different socio-demographic characteristics like gender, race, ethnicity, and age (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Cook, 2001). It can be argued that there is at least an expectation to get tacit support for one's own views coming from the media (reciprocity), or, at a minimum, simply "liking" some sources and wanting to follow their updates due to their proximity (for example geographically). In that sense, it is reasonable to expect that if we can identify some values of a particular source, we can make inferences about the persons who like that source. As mentioned, people tend to like ideas similar to their own.

The issue of "liking" other pages by politicians or political parties on FB (as different from "liking" such FB pages in direct communication threads (Jacobs, Sandberg, Spierings, 2020) seems to remain understudied. Yet, as indicated in the previous section, this type of research can tell us a lot about a) how much politicians or political parties use the various FB tools to promote themselves, their parties or their interests, b) about the one-sided or mutual relationship nature of populist leaders and movements' preferences towards other subjects, and, finally, c) about the personality/values/ideology/affinities of a (populist) leader as revealed by their "liking" behaviour on FB.

## Conclusions

Social media has become an increasingly popular source of news for many, despite the issues it raises in terms of information accuracy, the credibility of sources or accountability of the social media platforms as gatekeepers or distributors of news. Part of the reason can be found in the erosion of people's trust in legacy media, democratic institutions, and politics. Media capture by private or political interests has made many turns to "alternative media" sources, mostly online, many of them distributed on social networks. This tendency has been instrumentalised, often successfully, by populists who attempt to systematically circumvent the mainstream media and to have a more direct and informal connection to "the people".

Despite this increasing social media consumption and its role in boosting (more often right-wing) populists in Europe or the US, the social networks created by or surrounding populists have been little explored from perspective of an egocentric social network analysis. In addition, available literature and studies give us some clues about the types of media that populists prefer but they are usually focused on the traditional media channels like television. There is a significant gap in studies on populists' linkages on social media, such as FB or Twitter. Our research aimed to bridge this knowledge gap by focusing on the current populist leaders in the European context, more specifically Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. We have chosen this sample due to historical and socio-political similarities which make these countries comparable at the level of the media system, usage of social media and rise of populists and populist discourses and attitudes.

Building on cited research that shows that the FB "Like" button can measure or predict personal characteristics, political affinities, values or ideology, our four-country studies are based on the assumption that this can be a valuable research tool. In studying the page "likes" networks of populists from the countries under the analysis, we start from the assumption that a public "like" of another FB page represents a public endorsement and is, therefore, a conscious, acknowledged, strategic type of allyship. For this reason, studying the "liked" pages networks can give us further knowledge into what type of media sources populists are close to, whether they are "alternative" or legacy media and whether the endorsements are reciprocal or unilateral, as well as which are the other players in the (social) media network (in this case FB) promoted by and that often

helps promote populists. Furthermore, studying these networks can also provide additional insights into how populists in different countries construct their image, their discourse, and their strategic partnerships, as well as the values that they appeal to and that may help increase their popularity. Unfortunately, FB has removed the “like” button from its redesigned public pages used by artists, public figures and brands in January 2021. The explanation was that FB focuses on Followers to simplify the way people connect with their favourite Pages. However, as a result, from a scientific point of view, the research presented in the four-country case studies becomes a unique achievement.

In carrying out the four-country research, the authors faced some challenges in finding mutual contradictions of many available theories, differences in terminologies used by different authors, and varieties of concepts and inconsistencies in some findings. Methodological-theoretical parts of research projects of comparative studies based on individual case studies need more extensive space. Any reader could claim that this theoretical-methodological introduction is insufficient either from the point of view of how many issues are tackled, which issues are discussed, or how in-depth these issues are tackled. Yet, then, one can wonder how the authors could cover these issues in an even more size-limited article?

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## Teoria, metodologia i kontekst czterech studiów przypadku

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wprowadzenie do czterech studiów przypadku opublikowanych w tym tomie. Wyjaśnia szersze aspekty metodologii stosowanej w studiach przypadków czterech państw i leżącej u ich podstaw teorii. Opiera się na przekonaniu, że badania powinny być kontekstualizowane i oparte na dogłębnej wiedzy teoretycznej i empirycznej. Niniejszy wkład wyjaśnia zastosowaną metodologię, kryteria doboru próby oraz konceptualizację alternatywnych mediów oraz uzasadnia ukierunkowanie badań i ich znaczenie, zwłaszcza w perspektywie długoterminowej. Ponadto badanie umieszcza studia przypadków wybranych państw w szerszym porównawczym kontekście komunikacji międzynarodowej i politycznej, w szczególności w mediach społecznościowych. Ponadto wyjaśnia znaczenia i użycia przycisku „Lubię to” na Facebooku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Facebook, przycisk „Lubię to”, Czechy, Węgry, Polska, Słowacja, populizm, media społecznościowe, analiza sieci społecznościowych, media alternatywne, Orbán, Babiš, Morawiecki, Matovič, Kollár, Kaczyński

