

Essay

Nina Horaczek

Will coronavirus harm right-wing populists?

Hopes that the pandemic will also destroy political populism may be premature

Abstract: Numerous political commentators see the end of political populism approaching in view of the Corona epidemic. Indeed, the popularity ratings of populist parties have been in decline since the outbreak of the corona crisis. But the virus offers populists also great opportunities for their media discourse. They frame Corona, the invisible, stateless virus, into a tangible scapegoat. Not without reason US-President Donald Trump speaks of a »Chinese virus«. To spread their message, populists on both sides of the Atlantic can rely on a media network that they and their confidants have very cleverly built up in recent years.

It would be an interesting form of collateral damage: Is coronavirus killing the political disease that is populism? Is political propaganda of the »us against the others« kind obsolete in a pandemic? Does corona mean that objective information counts more than populist conspiracy theories?

Yes, say many commentators. »The populists are missing a bogeyman,« was the analysis of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* at the end of June. In the current crisis, »obviously constructive political approaches [are being] rewarded – and destructive ones punished.«^[1] News magazine *Der Spiegel* recently made the following comment on acceptance of the coronavirus policies of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jair Bolsonaro in its online edition: »The politics of lies no

1 Mark Schieritz: Den Populisten fehlt das Feindbild. In: *Zeit Online* dated 24.6.2020, <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2020-06/corona-krise-folgen-staerkung-demokratie-populismus-liberale-welt-hoffnung>, accessed on 29.6.2020.

longer works when people are dying.«^[2] In the forum of left-wing weekly *der Freitag*, blogger »alge93« saw the end of populism coming as early as the start of May: »But, as always in life, crises also bring opportunity: Perhaps the end of populism is very close.«^[3]

These voices may be right. Or perhaps the optimism of those predicting the end of right-wing populism is no more than wishful thinking. The popularity of populists is currently falling – albeit not everywhere, as the example of Hungary shows. But coronavirus also offers huge opportunities for the populists' media discourse. After all, on both sides of the Atlantic, from US President Donald Trump to former Austrian Vice Chancellor and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache^[4] and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, populists can draw on a media network that they and their allies have established very cleverly over the last few years.

As the journalistic research network »Europe's Far Right,«^[5] a collaboration between journalists from seven different countries (Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, and Hungary) specializing in right-wing populism, we have been able to analyze^[6] how right-wing populists want to shape the media discourse and create a media hegemony for their political content. The individual steps range from setting up their own media empire to looking for scapegoats, from defaming critics to generating fear with fake news. Of course, not all of these steps are or have been seen at the same time or in all the countries examined – but all the right-wing populist movements examined used the same mechanisms, albeit in different ways based on their different levels of political strength.

Framing and fake news

If coronavirus is to be an opportunity for populists, rather than their downfall, the invisible, stateless virus first has to be framed as a tangible scapegoat. In the USA, for example, it has been named the »Chinese virus« – a term used by US President Donald Trump more than twenty times between March 16 and March

- 2 Christian Stöcker: Stunde der Wahrheit für die Populisten der Lüge. In: *Spiegel Online* dated 28.6.2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/corona-und-populismus-stunde-der-wahrheit-fuer-die-politik-der-luege-a-2211f3b9-c30d-4f4c-9810-7cfc8648ef1>, accessed on 29.6.2020.
- 3 alge93: Corona und das Ende des Populismus. In: *der Freitag* dated 1.5.2020, <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/alge93/corona-und-das-ende-des-populismus>, accessed on 29.6.2020
- 4 Heinz-Christian Strache was leader of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) from 2005 and Vice Chancellor of the Republic of Austria from December 2017. He resigned from both roles in May 2019 after *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* revealed that he had been secretly filmed promising someone he believed to be an oligarch's niece government contracts if she first bought a share in the biggest selling daily newspaper Kronen Zeitung and published positive reports on Strache and his party.
- 5 You can find information and research by the network »Europe's Far Right« at <https://europesfarright.eu/>
- 6 See Nina Horaczek: Propagandakrieg in Europa. Die Medien der Rechten. In: *Falter* 42/2018 dated 17.10.2018.

30, 2020.¹⁷¹ A photo taken of Trump's speaking notes by a *Washington Post* photographer shows that »Chinese virus« is not a slip of the tongue, but a deliberate provocation: In Trump's manuscript, »corona« has been crossed out and replaced with »Chinese«.¹⁸¹

In Austria, the Vienna Chair of the far-right Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ), Dominik Nepp, also referred to corona as an »asylum seekers' virus,«¹⁹¹ thus associating the feared virus with that group in the minds of his followers. The FPÖ calls asylum seekers »corona asylum seekers,« turning a group of people who have fled to us in the hope of escaping war and torture into a threat, and a disease that does not distinguish between nationalities and skin colors into a visible danger. It is the perfect scapegoat.

The effect is reinforced with fake news positioned in a targeted way. In Austria, the FPÖ claims that asylum seekers are prioritized above native Austrians in corona tests.¹¹⁰¹ In Germany, AfD Member of the Bundestag Hansjörg Müller claims that 88 percent of those who have died of coronavirus in Italy are not actually corona deaths at all. And Bavarian State Chair of the AfD Corinna Miazga issued her own online video warning against »forced vaccination« – without providing any evidence at all to back up the claim.¹¹¹¹

The media of right-wing extremists in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany

The next step is for the message to get out into the world. A successful populist needs a media network. One option is to repurpose the traditional media as a propaganda instrument – as has been done with the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche*, which was a left-wing liberal paper for many years before Chief Editor Roger Köppel, who is also a member of parliament for the right-wing populist party SVP in Switzerland, switched to a strictly right-wing, conservative course.

7 See Jérôme Viala-Gaudefroy/Dana Lindaman: Donald Trump's Chinese virus: The politics of naming. In: *The Conversation* dated 21.4.2020, <https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>, accessed on 29.6.2020. All Trump's mentions of the »Chinese virus« can be accessed here: <https://factba.se/search#%22chinese%22Bvirus%22>, accessed on 29.6.2020.

8 See Mary Papenfuss: Photographer Captures Trump's Handwritten »Chinese« Virus Revision On Speech Script. In: *Huffington Post* dated 19.3.2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-coronavirus-chinese-virus-photograph-racism_n_5e73eaac5b6f5b7c54130a5?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d-3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKpu8UTlkRJAgrEMlKE5Sy9_BrZJueqyS6dLFqgH-jz5NRU8Yij7RhjhcjQRD-j3Ozrmmi9TrVEM7UZQo-ERlyZhYemKzeNEXJtqUSmEgHUWmKpUUFrUamqVGckG-7IwhMfDjSjCmDIZD4Fbd99Agh7Vg8tLmMt4Pj4Q88kg6 (29.6.2020).

9 Press release by FPÖ Vienna dated 17.5.2020.

10 Press release by the FPÖ dated 5.5.2020.

11 N.N.: AfD verbreitet Fake News zu Corona. In: *BR24* dated 4.4.2020, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/afd-verbreitet-fake-news-zu-corona.Rv7jler> (29.6.2020).

For example, *Weltwoche* writes that the battle against coronavirus is »also a battle of cultures,« namely a battle between authoritarian China and free America.^[12] In addition, *Weltwoche* gives plenty of media space to those who see the governments' Covid-19 measures as hysterical – for instance an emeritus immunologist who states that, »the virus has gone for now. It will probably come back in winter, but it will not be a second wave, just a cold. Those healthy young people walking around in masks at the moment would do better to wear a helmet, as the risk of something falling on their heads is greater than that of becoming seriously ill with Covid-19.«^[13]

Although *Weltwoche* clearly positions itself on the side of the right-wing populist SVP, in contrast to other media on this political spectrum it does not repeat the conspiracy theory that US billionaire Bill Gates is behind coronavirus as he wants to increase his wealth at the cost of the world's health.

This claim is made by other media, such as the German far-right *Compact-Magazin*. The cover of its June 2020 edition shows Gates under the headline »The vaccination dictator.«^[14] *Compact-Magazin* even published an 80-page *Compact Aktuell* special edition with the sub-heading »What the state is keeping from us.« The thrust of this special edition is that the German federal government's coronavirus measures are »alarmism« and the »hysterical hygiene state« is leading the German population into a dictatorship.^[15] *Compact-Magazin* is not an AfD magazine, but maintains good contacts with the right-wing populists of that party.^[16] For example, the then State Chair of the AfD Schleswig-Holstein, Doris von Sayn-Wittgenstein, was a speaker at the »Our history, our heritage, our pride« conference organized by *Compact-Magazin* in 2019.^[17] It was also AfD politicians Uwe Schulz, Udo Hemmelgarn, Petr Bystron, and Nicole Höchst who organized the »1st Conference of the Free Media« in Germany, indeed at the very heart of the Republic, in the German Bundestag. According to the program flyer, the aim of this conference was to explore »synergy effects and opportunities for cooperation« for the parliamentary party and »freelance journalists.«^[18]

12 Peter Keller: Das chinesische Virus. In: *Weltwoche* 13 dated 25.3.2020.

13 Beda M. Stadler: Warum alle falsch lagen. In: *Weltwoche* 24 dated 10.6.2020.

14 The cover of the June edition of *Compact-Magazin* can be accessed at <https://www.kopp-verlag.at/a/compact-magazin-ausgabe-juni-2020?d=1&emcso=2&emcs1=Kategorieseite&emcs2=132489&emcs3=132571>

15 See *Compact Aktuell*, <https://www.kopp-verlag.at/a/compact-aktuell%3a-corona?d=1&emcso=2&emcs1=Kategorieseite&emcs2=&emcs3=132489> (29.6.2020)

16 The research network *Correktiv* has published a seven-part series on the media of the New Right, offering interesting further information on this topic: <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/neue-rechte/2016/12/27/futter-fuer-afd-waehler> (29.6.2020)

17 See: Andreas Speit: Einsatz für Rechtsextreme. In: *die tageszeitung* dated 23.8.2019, <https://taz.de/AfDler-in-Doris-von-Sayn-Wittgenstein/!5618808&s=compact+magazin/> (29.6.2020)

18 Quoted in Tilman Steffen: Weiterbildung für rechtskonservative Blogger. In: *Zeit online* dated 8.5.2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-05/afd-bundestag-konferenz-freie-medien-blogger>

The right-wing populist FPÖ has been targeting investment into media linked to the party for ten years now. »We have tried to turn a certain communicative emergency into a virtue,« said then FPÖ General Secretary and now leader of the FPÖ in the Austrian parliament, Herbert Kickl.¹⁹ Although the FPÖ has recently been weakened by the resignation of its long-standing party leader Heinz-Christian Strache, the party has successfully and silently built up an impressive propaganda network over the years. Examples include long-standing FPÖ media like *Zur Zeit*, a weekly paper founded in 1997 by then FPÖ politician Andreas Mölzer. The paper published racist insults against footballer David Alaba and called for »groups with »anti-autochthonous views« to be stripped of the right to vote and the »workhouse to be reintroduced.« The online platform *unzensuriert.at*, which has close links to the FPÖ and whose managing director Walter Asperl is employed by the group FP-Parlamentsklub, agitates against Muslims, refugees, and homosexuals. The *Info-Direkt* magazine published in Upper Austria, on the other hand, forms an interface between the FPÖ and *Identitäre*, a far-right youth splinter group whose active members include a few former Neo-Nazis. Now, in the time of corona, the *Info-Direkt* website is claiming that Austria is »on the way to becoming a surveillance state with corona.«

Some of the funding for these far-right newspaper publishers comes from the FPÖ, which regularly advertises in *Info-Direkt*. It is unclear who the other financiers behind this glossy magazine are, although the paper's extremely pro-Russian line is striking. The cover of the first edition of *Info-Direkt* showed Russian President Vladimir Putin wearing sunglasses, under the headline: »We want someone like Putin.«²⁰

There is lively exchange between far-right media in Austria and Germany. The online editor of the Upper Austrian magazine *Wochenblick*, another far-right paper with close links to the FPÖ, previously worked at *Blaue Narzisse* and *Sezession*, two New Right media close to the AfD. Chris Ares, a nationalist rapper from Germany (»Du mein Deutschland – Lied für Chemnitz«), also writes for both *Info-Direkt* and the German *Identitäre*.

One of the speakers at the »Verteidiger Europas« [Defenders of Europe] congress organized by the *Identitäre* in Linz in 2016 was Jürgen Elsässer, who was formerly a journalist for left-wing media and is now Chief Editor of the German *Compact-Magazin*. There were also information stands from *Zur Zeit*, *Compact*, *unzensuriert.at*, *Alles roger?*, and the New Right *Sezession*, whose publisher Götz Kubitschek personally attended the congress with ten cases full of magazines in the trunk of his car. Later, *Info-Direkt* interviewed the former ARD journalist

(29.6.2020)

19 Unless otherwise stated, the quotes refer to Nina Horaczek: Propagandakrieg in Europa: Die Medien der Rechten. In: *Falter* 42/2018 dated 17.10.2018.

20 *Info-Direkt* 1/2015.

Armin-Paul Hampel, who is now the Foreign Affairs Spokesman for the AfD. Manuel Ochsreiter, a subversive far-right journalist from Germany and listed as »Middle East Expert,« wrote in *Wochenblick* why Syria is safe enough for people to be deported there. In an interview with the Austrian weekly *Falter*, *Wochenblick* Chief Editor Christian Seibert denied the accusation that his magazine is far right, claiming that, in reporting on migration, »mainstream journalism distorts the truth, and we want to set a counterpoint.« In the time of corona, this counterpoint takes the form of *Wochenblick's* claim that Italy is now in the grip of a »corona Stasi«^[21] and Islamization in Germany is »advancing thanks to corona.«^[22]

The media of right-wing extremists in the USA and Europe

This kind of media in the populist environment is not a phenomenon that is limited to German-speaking countries. In the USA, President Donald Trump uses not only Twitter, but also TV channel Fox News in particular as his very own broadcaster. In France, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN), as the Front National has called itself for the last few years, has been building up its own media from opposition for some years. The press spokesman of Le Pen's niece, former RN politician Marion Maréchal, set up the glossy magazine *L'Incorrect*^[23] to appeal to a young audience in 2017. The paper's role is clear: to deliver arguments for the New Right and »to keep the others quiet« (»faites-les taire«).

L'Incorrect is not the only medium with close ideological links to RN. The range of far-right media available in France, especially online, is now so great that a new term has been coined: the »Fachosphère« – a sphere of fascists online. One example is *Fdesouche*, an abbreviation of François Desouche. Like *unzensuriert.at*, *Fdesouche* openly agitates against migrants and other minorities, and has become one of the most popular platforms in the French fachosphère. Figures from analysis site Alexa show that seven of the ten most-read political websites in France in 2016 were from the radical right wing. And their influence in France has long since extended into conservative traditional media. The conservative daily newspaper *Le Figaro* made the career of Éric Zemmour – a star of the right wing whom Le Pen would like to see as Minister of Culture – as a columnist. Zemmour openly argues that employers should have the right to reject Arab or black applicants and told French television presenter Hapsatou Sy, whose mother comes from Senegal, that her first name was »an insult to France.«

21 Kornelia Kirchweiger: Italien setzt auf Corona-Stasi. In: *Wochenblick* dated 26.5.2020, <https://www.wochenblick.at/italien-setzt-auf-corona-stasi/> (29.6.2020)

22 N.n.: Islamisierung Deutschlands schreitet Dank Corona voran. In: *Wochenblick* dated 26.5.2020, <https://www.wochenblick.at/islamisierung-deutschlands-schreitet-dank-corona-voran/> (29.6.2020).

23 <https://lincorrect.org/>

In countries such as Hungary and Poland, where right-wing populists are in government, they use their power to bring the public service broadcasters into line with the government's views. When Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán lost the election – unexpectedly in his view – in 2002, he was quick to find who was at fault: the independent media, who had reported critically on his party Fidesz. As a result, Orbán built up his own media power from opposition, with a key role played by oligarchs with close links to Fidesz, who invested in newspapers and private broadcasters. Today, they control the media market in Hungary. Critical journalists are sacked and loyal party followers put in positions of power. Careers are offered to people like Daniel Papp, the former press spokesman of the far-right Jobbik who has recently been named Director of the Hungarian state broadcaster. He made headlines in 2011 when he faked a news piece about Green politician and Orbán critic Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Papp's piece described how Cohn-Bendit was confronted at a press conference with the question of whether he thought that sexually harassing children was one of the European basic rights, upon which he left the room without saying a word. In fact, the Green politician had given a detailed answer.

Following Orbán's restructuring of the state media, all news reports for public service broadcasters now originate from the state news agency MTI. Pluralism of content is impossible from the start. MTI also provides its reports to Hungarian private broadcasters free of charge. It is a win-win situation: Private commercial broadcasters do not need to maintain their own news editorial offices, and the government can spread its propaganda even better throughout the country.

In Austria, the FPÖ was forced to return to the opposition benches following the Ibiza scandal in 2019, giving it less influence over public service broadcasters than politicians like Orbán and the right-wing populist PiS party in Poland. Instead, it makes more use of the party's YouTube channel FPÖ TV, in part to stir up opinion against the corona measures taken by the turquoise-green government. »Are you fed up with the government's scaremongering and alarmism?« the FPÖ asks the video's viewers.¹²⁴¹ There is no doubt that those who have no access to public service broadcasters, nor have their own private broadcaster like Italian right-wing populist Silvio Berlusconi in the 1990s, today use social media as an amplifier.

Social media platforms for spreading fake news and far-right propaganda

The French RN leader Marine Le Pen currently has 1.5 million followers on Facebook; Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's far-right party Lega, has 4.2 million fans.

24 The video can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjACXjyTtzQ>

Salvini has long focused the online strategy of his Lega party fully on Facebook: The party's former daily newspaper, *La Padania*, ceased publication in 2014; the Lega radio station Padania broadcasts online only. Everything now runs via the leader's Facebook profile.

On it, Salvini holds political speeches while his four-year-old daughter dances across the screen; the Lega Interior Minister, dressed in swimming trunks, jumps into the pool of a mafia villa that has been confiscated by the police, or tells his three million fans in a video message: »You pay my wages. I answer only to you.« The Lega leader is not so pleasant towards journalists – the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* quoted him in 2013 as saying that his party would »give one or another sleazy, groveling journalist a kick up the ass.«

Again on Facebook, Salvini is now running a campaign for those who Lega claims have been financially ruined by the Italian government's measures to combat coronavirus – of course not forgetting to link the issue to the party's favorite topic: migration. The Italian far-right politician calculates on Facebook that, since he has no longer been represented in the government as Interior Minister and the country has gone through lockdown, the number of refugees reaching Italy by sea has increased by 162 percent.^[25]

Coronavirus also gives those right-wing populists who are in government the opportunity to further limit press freedom in their own countries. This was already happening before corona, but the crisis has seen Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, for example, go a step further. In late March, the Hungarian Enabling Act gained a new clause: Anyone who publicly spreads fake news or distorted facts in their reporting, thus impeding the success of the measures to protect against coronavirus, can now be punished with up to five years' imprisonment. Of course there is nothing wrong with fighting fake news – but in a country in which Hungarian state television (these broadcasters have long since ceased to count as public service broadcasters) deliberately spreads fake news, there is a fear that this law could be used to criminalize critical reporting. After all, just before the Hungarian elections in March 2018, Hungarian state television itself broadcast reports from Germany in which a man on the street complained that he had had to give up his home because migrants had been settled in the neighborhood. A woman told the reporter that Hamburg was now so dangerous that she only left her house armed with pepper spray. Yet those shown as passers-by were actually AfD politicians. The deception was uncovered by Márta Orosz, a journalist from Hungary who works at the investigative research center *Correctiv* in Germany. Orosz demonstrated at least seven cases in which AfD politicians had spoken on Hungarian state television without their party affiliation being mentioned. At the start of 2016, Hungarian state TV even presented images of

25 Matteo Salvini: Facebook post dated 29.6.2020, <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/> (29.6.2020)

sexual violence from Tahir Square in Egypt in 2012 as images taken on New Year's Eve in Cologne. And at Whitsun 2018, Hungarians learned on state news that the German city of Essen [also the German word for »eat«] had been forced to change its name to »Fasten« due to Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. This story really had been shown on German television – on a satire show.

A virus that frightens people and for which it is easy to find a scapegoat. Fake news that populists like to spread about coronavirus. And a media network that, combined with social media, provides the ideal means of transport for populist propaganda. The poll ratings of right-wing populists may well have fallen since the start of the coronavirus crisis, but it is certainly too early to celebrate their demise.

About the author

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