Are 'United Left' and 'Human Blockade' Populist on Facebook? A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Campaigns

Research Article

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Are 'United Left' and 'Human Blockade' Populist on Facebook? A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Campaigns

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This paper aims to analyse the extent to which new political parties in Croatia and Slovenia use populist political communication discourse in social media. This paper focuses on two new parties that entered the parliament in the most recent elections: Živi zid (Human Blockade) in Croatia, and Združena levica (United Left) in Slovenia. The paper will analyse these parties' political communication on Facebook. The main question guiding the analysis is: to what extent are new parties in Croatia and Slovenia populist in their political communication on Facebook? The method used in the paper will be content analysis, with a Facebook post as a unit of analysis. The content analysis will be performed on posts published over a period of two weeks prior to the general elections (electoral campaigns).

Keywords: populism, New Parties, Živi zid, Združena levica, electoral campaigns.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the extent to which new political parties in Croatia and Slovenia use populist political communication discourse in social media, with special regard to their electoral campaigns. Croatia and Slovenia are former socialist Yugoslav republics, which underwent transition to a market economy and parliamentary democracy in the 1990s and are now both EU member states. This implies a convergent path in democratisation and political development, but these countries have differences in economic development and their experiences of war. According to Boduszynski,[1] Slovenia transitioned rather quickly to full substantive democracy, while for a long period Croatia belonged to the group of countries sitting between formal democracy and authoritarianism.

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[1] Boduszynski, Mieczyslaw. 2010. *Regime Change in the Yugoslav Successor States. Divergent Paths Toward New Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

This paper focuses on new parties that entered the parliament in the recent parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015. We chose one party from Croatia and one from Slovenia: Human Blockade (*Živi zid*) and United Left (*Združena levica*). These two parties, or their leaders, are described as populist by some Croatian and Slovenian scholars.[2] In order to assess their populist vein, we will analyse their electoral campaigns in the parliamentary elections that saw their breakthrough to the parliament (July 2014 for Slovenia and November 2015 for Croatia). Croatia had new parliamentary elections in September 2016, but we focus only on those of November 2015.[3] This choice gave us an opportunity to compare the political communication discourse of new parties for the first time that they were involved in a parliamentary election campaign. Human Blockade got 4.24% of the vote in the November 2015 Croatian election, and 6.23% in September 2016. United Left received 6% of the vote in the Slovenian parliamentary elections of 2014. These parties have the potential to shape the development of populist politics in these countries. For this reason, our

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[2] See Grbeša, Marijana and Berto Šalaj. 2016. Textual Analysis of Populist Discourse in 2014/2015 Presidential Election in Croatia. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3(1), 106-27; and Toplišek, Alen. 2017. The Slovenian United Left: From Protest to Movement, and From Movement to Party. *Open Democracy*, 19. January 2017 (accessed: 25. September 2017). Toplišek describes the populist beginnings of United Left, using Ernesto Laclau's criteria for defining populism. According to Toplišek, the beginning of United Left has two characteristics typical of populist movements: "formation of the antagonistic frontier discursively separating the people from the political elite, and the emergence of a chain of unsatisfied and heterogeneous demands," but fails to satisfy the third criteria (stable political configuration). However, with the constitution of the political party and its programme of democratic socialism, United Left proceeded to "thicken" its ideology towards a mainly Marxist path, with traces of populism. These include appeals to the ordinary people, the 99%, and an opposition between the wealthy elites and the majority. In Croatia, Grbeša and Šalaj analysed the rhetoric of Human Blockade leader Ivan Vilibor Sinčić in the presidential elections in 2014 and determined his rhetoric to be clearly populist, using Mudde's operationalisation.

[3] In the parliamentary elections in 2015, the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) under the leadership of Tomislav Karamarko won 59 seats in parliament, and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) won 56 seats. None of these two parties could form a government without a coalition with another party, so both HDZ and SDP tried to form a coalition with a new party, Most, which unexpectedly gained 19 seats after the elections. Most was a new party formed out of a coalition of independent lists for local elections, with very vague ideological positions, claiming to be made out of moral and uncorrupt experts fighting against the corrupt political elite. However, although avoiding positioning itself ideologically in its public discourse, some of its leading members had previously belonged to smaller religious conservative parties, so it could be positioned closer to the conservative side of the political spectrum. As Most based its rhetoric in the political campaign on its distinction from the corrupt political elite, it was not easy for them to form a coalition with either of these two parties. Long and painful negotiations emerged, in which Most tried to maintain the appearance of being moral and uncorrupt, often listing illogical or impossible terms on which it could form a coalition with HDZ or SDP. This provoked criticism by the media, which called Most "the most wanted bride in Croatia." The negotiations resulted in a coalition with HDZ, ideologically the more logical coalition partner, but not without problems, which promised political instability. Most formed a coalition with HDZ under the condition that an "independent non-political expert," a Canadian-Croatian manager in a pharmaceutical company, Tihomir Orešković, became Prime Minister, and Most President Božo Petrov a President of Parliament. Several Most members received a place in the government as ministers, while the HDZ President gained the position of Vice Prime-Minister. The bizarre political situation was established in which the Prime Minister had absolutely no political experience and poor knowledge of Croatian politics and even language, as he had spent most of his life in Canada. At the same time, Most and HDZ had a conflictual relationship, blocking each other's decisions. In spring 2016, a huge political scandal was discovered involving HDZ President Tomislav Karamarko's conflict of interest. This scandal resulted in Most representatives asking for his resignation, after which HDZ representatives asked the Prime-Minister to resign. Most and the opposition parties to HDZ at the end voted for the Parliament to be dissolved, and the new elections were announced in September 2016.

research seeks to address how much populism is present in their discourse on social media.

Since populist actors tend to be negatively portrayed or criticised by mainstream media, these parties seek alternative communication strategies and rely on the internet to overcome such media representation.[4] Therefore, our unit of analysis is a Facebook post, because this social media platform is one of the most important in the world, and only a few empirical works have assessed the populist use of Facebook by political parties.

The main question guiding the analysis will be: to what extent are new parties in Croatia and Slovenia populist in their political communication on Facebook? This paper is structured in the following way. First, a short literature review about the interpretations of populism will be presented, then we describe and justify the cases under consideration with an in-depth discussion about the relevance of populism in Croatia and Slovenia. At a later stage, we will present our data downloaded from Facebook, with the analysis we conducted, and finally we will draw some conclusions from this work.

Populism: a slippery concept
Populism is one of the most problematic and slippery concepts in the field of political science. Taggart for instance has stressed its vagueness because it is often defined depending the context in which it is used.[5] However, in literature we can distinguish three main waves of thought: 1) populism as a strategy/organisation; 2) as a discursive style; 3) as a thin-centred ideology.

The first considers populism to be "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers."[6] This definition supports the claim that populist leaders personalise their political communication the most with the aim of reducing the power of political parties and establishing a direct identification between the people and the leader.[7] Despite the fact that several scholars support this conceptualisation, strong criticism is also present. For instance, Moffitt and Tormey claim that "[t]he primary difficulty with this definition is that it identifies modes of organisation or strategy that appear across the political spectrum in many different articulations that we would ordinarily never consider calling 'populist.'"[8] Moreover, Hawkins underlines that several social or religious movements or forms of community politics should be

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[4] Aalberg, Toril and Claes de Vreese. 2016. *Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Strömbäck, Jesper and Claes de Vreese. New York and London: Routledge, 3-11, 5.

[5] Taggart, Paul. 2002. *Il Populismo*. Enna: Città Aperta Edizioni.

[6] Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics* 34(1), 1-22, 15.

[7] Akkerman, Tjitske. 2011. Friend or Foe? Right-Wing Populism and the Popular Press in Britain and the Netherlands. *Journalism* 18, 1-15.

[8] Moffitt, Benjamin and Simon Tormey. 2013. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political* Studies 62(2), 381-97, 386.

categorised as populist according to Weyland.[9] Finally, it is worth noting that the personalisation and "presidentialisation" of politics[10] is surely not limited to populist leaders and parties, but rather encompasses the whole political spectrum.[11]

With regard to the second school of thought, Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave see populism simply as a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people,[12] while Pierre-André Taguieff describes populism as a political style susceptible to multiple ideologies; it changes its political colour according to them.[13] In addition to this, Moffitt and Tormey say that populism is "the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations." In fact, they identify three necessary and sufficient features: the appeal to "the people," a "perception of crisis, breakdown or threat," and the use of "bad manners."[14] If we consider the conceptualisation of Laclau, we find out that it is not so far from this view.[15] The Argentinean political scientist sees populism as the logic of political action through a post-Marxist lens, which focuses on the discursive creation of a historical bloc centred on "the people" and the existence of a "logic of equivalence" among them.

These schools of thought are not very useful from an empirical point of view. In fact, if the first definition identifies populism with personalisation, the second is quite vague in pinpointing the key aspect of the concept. The appeal of the people is the common feature of these definitions, but if all Western political leaders appeal to the people, are they all populist?

Finally, the third definition is the only one which tries to help in the operationalisation of the concept. The most important definition of populism as a thin-ideology comes from the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde: "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.[16] Following this way of thought, a set of scholars agree that the essential features that characterise populism are twofold: i) an anti-elite sentiment; ii) a direct and explicit reference to the

[9] Hawkins, Kirk. 2010. *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[10] Poguntke, Thomas and Paul Webb. 2005. *The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis*, in *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, edited by Poguntke, Thomas and Paul Webb. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-25.

[11] Swanson, David. L. and Paolo Mancini. (eds.). 1996. *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy: An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and Their Consequences*. Greenwood: Publishing Group.

[12] Jagers, Jan and Stefaan Walgrave. 2007. Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties. Discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research* 46, 319-45.

[13] Taguieff, Pierre André. 2002. *L'illusione populista: Dall'arcaico al mediatico*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.

[14] Moffitt and Tormey, *Rethinking Populism*, 387.

[15] Laclau Ernesto. 2005. *Populism: What's in a name?*, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Panizza, Francisco. London: Verso, 32-49.

[16] Mudde, Cas. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4), 542-63, 543.

general will of the people.[17] Mudde also specifies that the core concept of populism is hence "the people," and, as a thin-centred ideology, populism can be easily combined with other very different ideologies, including communism, nationalism or socialism. As such, populist actors do not necessarily belong to the far-right political spectrum: it is theoretically plausible that the populist ideology can merge with left-wing political ideologies as well.

The parties under consideration, United Left and Human Blockade, do not belong to the political right. United Left positions itself as strictly leftist, while Human Blockade's ideological position remains unclear. In the section about their ideological position in the 2015 election programme, Human Blockade explains it could not be demarcated as belonging to the left or right of the political spectrum, but defines itself as a humanistic party.[18] However, its struggle against evictions probably collocates more to the left of the political spectrum. The division between left and right is not relevant when we speak about populism, because populist features could be present if there is an appeal to the people against the elite in the party's rhetoric or in its manifesto. This contraposition is Manichean: populist parties consider certain elites, such as political or economic ones, as an evil which plots against the common people. Usually, the concept of "the people" refers to a homogenous unity. Sometimes populist parties can refer to the national identity, which is considered populist if the reference is put in relation with an elite as an enemy, for instance in the claim "The European elite is the evil for Croatian people," a typical populist rhetoric. We must stress again the importance of the choice of Mudde's operationalisation. In our case, Mudde's definition detects few conceptual categories to be captured in a Facebook post. We will consider posts as "full" populist if there simultaneously: i) an explicit attack on political, financial or bureaucratic elites; ii) a direct reference to and exaltation of the people and/or the "general will" of the people. In case of the presence of anti-elitism without people-centrism, or vice-versa, we consider these posts as distinct elements of populist communication, but not "full populist." Indeed, Mudde's conceptual categories are used by communication scholars for determining specific populist frames used in political communication.[19] In this paper, our aim is to analyse whether political actors which are described by some authors as populist or having some populist traits[20] use populist discourse in their political communication on social media, using Mudde's conceptual categories to define the traits of populist discourse.

In order to better assess the populist vein of these parties, we will focus on political communication on Facebook, the most used social media platform across the world. In general, communication on social media can be untied by the ideology of the party, because it can depend on the communication strategy.

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[17] Di Tella, Torquato. 1995 *'Populism'*, in *The Encyclopedia of Democracy*, edited by Lipset, Semyour Martin. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Books, 985-89; and Abts, Koen and Stefan Rummens. 2007. 'Populism versus Democracy.' *Political Studies* 55, 405-24.

[18] Živi zid. 2015. Politički program 2015.

[19] Rainemann, Carsten / Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Strömbäck, Jesper, and Claes H. de Vreese. 2016. *Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of its Causes, Forms and Effects*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Tori / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Strömbäck, Jesper and Claes H. de Vreese. New York and London: Routledge, 12-28, 14.

[20] Grbeša and Šalaj, *Textual Analysis of Populist Discourse*; Toplišek, *The Slovenian United Left*.

This means that a conservative party might not use a "conservative topic" in a particular timespan on Facebook given the political opportunity of that moment. Facebook is a specific communication channel and it can be possible that the same party reveals itself as clearly populist in a media event like a talk show, but not on Facebook. Therefore, our paper sheds light exclusively on communication on Facebook and gives insight for further comparisons with other media.

Before introducing in depth the parties analysed, it is worth specifying the existing relationship between populism and political communication, with special mention given to the electoral campaigns.

As the literature points out, populist actors and parties are more bound up within the context of mediatization[21] and popularisation of politics.[22] In fact, populist leaders and parties continuously seek to gain the attention of the media by adapting their political communication to the media's logic. This happens because populist actors are usually new on the political stage and, therefore, often considered as "outsiders."[23] Therefore, one of the main goals of a populist leader and party, in particular in his/her early stage, is to get the media's attention in order to spread his/her political messages to the highest number of citizens.

Populist actors rely heavily on their rhetoric, political communication style and relationship with the media, especially in the electoral campaign.[24] Mainstream media are, on the one hand, typically critical towards populist parties and leaders, but on the other hand appropriate populist discourse and exploit the controversies which are brought to the public's attention by these actors.[25] For this reason, populist leaders and parties are often "media savvy" and have to adopt various communication strategies in their relationship with the media in electoral campaigns.[26] Political campaigns are usually divided into pre-modern (newspapers and rallies, more direct contact with the electorate), modern (television and advertising, more mediated and indirect contact with the voters) and post-modern (digital media and ICT, the weakest identification of voters with the parties).[27] As Mazzoleni would suggest, populist political actors are usually prone to pre-modern campaign styles in more direct contact with the people, very often because of the hostile stance of the media.[28] For this reason, populist actors have communication strategies such as holding rallies

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[21] Mazzoleni, Gianpietro and Winfried Schulz. 1999. Mediatization of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?. *Political Communication* 16, 247-61.

[22] Blumler, Jayg and Dennis Kavanagh. 1999. The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features. *Political Communication* 16, 209-30.

[23] Bos, Linda / van der Brug, Wouter and Claes de Vreese. 2011. How the Media Shapes Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders. *Political Communication* 28, 182-206; also Mazzoleni, Gianpietro / Stewart, Julienne and Horsfield Bruce. (eds.). 2003. *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

[24] Aalberg and de Vreese. 2016. *Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication.*

[25] Aalberg and de Vreese. 2016. *Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication.*

[26] Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. 2008. *Populism and the Media* in *Twenty-First Century Populism*, edited by Albertazzi, Daniele and Duncan McDonnell. Palgrave MacMillan, 49-64, 49.

[27] Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[28] Mazzoleni, *Populism and the Media*, 56.

and events, playing the role of the underdog, trying to get free media publicity and making tactical attacks on the media. However, the use of ICT and social media have significantly helped populist leaders and parties to develop new communication strategies.[29]

Social media plays a vital role in voter mobilisation and in the "renewal" of political parties by connecting them to voters through personalised channels, especially for parties that are connected or resemble social movements or networks.[30] As Chadwick and Stromer-Galley assess, "digitally enabled activist networks are reshaping parties" and are opening them for populist communication and protest repertoires.[31] Therefore, a number of new political actors or political underdogs (such as Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn) have relied on heavy social media campaigning to connect with the electorate. New innovative parties such as the Five Star Movement or Podemos are inseparable from social media, as they emerged from the movements that used new communication technologies to avoid traditional media and provide their alternative discourse, but also to coordinate their nonhierarchical organisation and mobilise supporters. On the other hand, as new political parties become more institutionalised, they may also engage in modern ways of political campaigning, using television, advertising and strategies such as the personalisation of their leaders. This is the case of Spanish party Podemos, which combined social media communication and "broadcast-era personal leadership strategy" by promoting the presence of the leader Pablo Iglesias on broadcast media.[32]

In this paper, we focus on the political communication of populist actors on social media. We find social media appropriate to analyse when dealing with new political parties who have limited access to mainstream media. Although United Left relied on traditional media during the campaign and tried to get publicity through print media and television, appealing to media even with a sort of personalisation of the campaign through promoting the party leader Luka Mesec,[33] social media is an important part of their political communication. These two parties, United Left and Human Blockade, have also developed their social media communication in protest and social movements that preceded the establishment of the parties.

Populism in Croatia and Slovenia
Populist parties in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe are more often perceived as right wing, using nationalism and

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[29] Chadwick, Andrew and Jennifer Stromer-Galley. 2016. Digital Media, Power and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns: Party Decline or Party Renewal?. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(3), 283-93.
[30] Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, *Digital Media, Power and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns,* 286.
[31] Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, *Digital Media, Power and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns,* 287.
[32] Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, *Digital Media, Power and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns,* 289.
[33] Sekloča, Peter and Mojca Pajnik. 2016. Mrežno povezovanje družbenih gibanj in (ne)možnosti emancipatoričnega komuniciranja. *Družboslovne rasprave* 32, 73-92, 82.

xenophobia in an anti-elitist and anti-minority rhetoric.[34] However, there is diversity across post-communist Europe, which may be reflected in the diversity of the types of populist parties and their political communication. Fewer authors have focused on the populist parties in post-Yugoslav countries. Although many political actors are defined as populist by scholars in the region, empirical research remains scarce. [35]

This article focuses on Croatia and Slovenia as similar cases. Both countries share common historical heritage as former republics of socialist Yugoslavia, they both underwent political and economic transition, and are both now members of the EU and high-income economies, with similar political and electoral systems. Yugoslavia was a distinctive case compared to other communist countries of the Eastern bloc: its citizens could freely travel and work in western European countries, it allowed some pluralism in the political sphere, had a more liberal economic system and held democratic potential from the practice of self-management.[36] Croatia and Slovenia were the two most economically developed and modernised former Yugoslav countries, and were more likely to develop "liberal political configurations" during transition.[37] However, Croatia and Slovenia diverged in their democratisation paths. Croatian democracy consolidated only after 2000, as its regime was until then characterised as a sort of authoritarian democracy, with capture of the state by the ruling party, combining conflict, "nationalist mobilisation" and economic clientelism.[38] On the other hand, Slovenia's transition and state-building was, from the beginning, based largely on a consensus of developing liberal democratic institutions and European integration.[39]

During the transitional period, populism bloomed across the region, driven mainly by ethno-nationalism, which fuelled the conflict which followed the dissolution of socialism. While "authoritarian populism" was used by the ruling regime in Croatia, radical right populist parties in Slovenia were left mostly on the margins of the political system.[40] According to Amon Prodnik and Mance,[41] scholarly attention in this period is mainly brought to this kind of exclusionary populism aimed at national minorities and populist rhetoric by the authoritarian Tuđman in Croatia and the "demagogue populist" Janša in Slovenia.[42] Besides conflict and its consequences during which "dangerous

[34] de Vreese, *Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication*.

[35] Mustapić, Marko and Ivan Hrstić. 2016. *Croatia: the Rise of Populism on the Path from Communism to European Integration*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Stromback, Jesper and de Claes H. Vreese. New York and London: Routledge, 274-84; also Amon Prodnik, Jernej and Boris Mance. 2016. *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Stromback, Jesper and de Claes H. Vreese C. New York and London: Routledge, 339-52.

[36] Dolenec, Danijela. 2013. *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*. ECPR Press, University of Essex, 141.

[37] Boduszynski, Mieczyslaw. 2010. *Regime Change in the Yugoslav Successor States. Divergent Paths Toward New Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 17.

[38] Dolenec, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

[39] Boduszynski, *Regime Change in the Yugoslav Successor* States, 117.

[40] Boduszynski, *Regime Change in the Yugoslav Successor States*.

[41] Amon Prodnik and Mance, *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*.

[42] In Croatia, the ruling HDZ under the leadership of Tuđman used ethno-nationalism against the Serbian minority and as a tool of mobilisation and militarisation of society during war. According

others" were produced, the privatisation process during transition could have provided ground for different types of populism in the region. Economic policies in both countries aimed at the privatisation of former socially owned companies and created a new social class of economic elites. This process was more gradual in Slovenia than in Croatia,[43] but in both countries, it created social inequalities between "winners and losers of transition." In Croatia, the privatisation processes started during the war, in which state property, in a number of criminal cases, was handed over to friends of the regime and created "a widespread perception according to which the elites had committed a gross injustice to society." [44]In Slovenia, the focus changed to anti-elitist populism in 2000s,[45] while Croatian scholars pointed to empty populism used by certain political actors.[46] Unfortunately, little empirical research is done to assess such claims.

The electoral win of the coalition of liberal-left parties in 2000 marked a radical turn towards democratisation in Croatia, and a path towards EU membership, which eventually became a consensus held by all mainstream political parties. In 2004, Slovenia became an EU member state, while Croatia got the status of candidate country. In the period up to the financial crisis, both countries enjoyed GDP growth and higher consumption, while new waves of privatisation and deregulation began under the economic policies adopted by governments in both countries. The economic crisis in 2008 brought negative GDP growth to both countries, rising unemployment, especially youth unemployment, and rising public debt, which was high in all post-Yugoslav countries, and especially in Croatia and Slovenia. Governments in both countries adopted austerity and further privatisation measures, while at the same time a series of severe corruption scandals followed political elites in both countries. The combination of economic crisis, unpopular austerity policies and corruption scandals resulted in lower trust in government and political parties, as well as with lower satisfaction and trust in democratic institutions.[47] A series of strikes and protests emerged throughout both countries, expressing discontent with the political elites, questioning and criticising the current political and economic order.[48]

In Croatia, during the so-called Facebook protests in 2011, in which citizens were mobilised mainly via social media, thousands of citizens held protest marches against the government (the main slogan of the protest was "The gang of thieves should tighten their own belt," as a response to the announcement of austerity measures). In Slovenia, citizens' discontent escalated in protests in Maribor in 2012 and 2013, triggered by the corruption of local politicians.

to Amon Prodnik and Mance, this kind of populism in Slovenia targeted economic migrants and refugees from parts of former Yugoslavia affected by war.

[43] Kirn, Gal. 2014. Slovenia's Social Uprising in the European Crisis: Maribor as Periphery from 1988 to 2012. *Stasis Journal* 1, 106-29.

[44] Dolenec, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*, 139.

[45] Amon Prodnik and Mance, *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*.

[46] Mustapić and Hrstić, *Croatia: The Rise of Populism on the Path from Communism to European Integration*.

[47] Krašovec, Alenka and Tim Haughton .2014. Privlačnost novog: nove stranke i promjena stranačkog sustava u Sloveniji. *Političke analize* 5.

[48] Štiks, Igor. 2015. "New Left" in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Issues, Sites and Forms. *Socialism and Democracy* 29(3), 135-46.

Thousands of citizens were mobilised and coordinated mainly via social media, and soon protests spread across the country, which were later labeled the "All-Slovene uprising."[49] Štiks situates these protests in the post-Yugoslav "new left," which has been especially established in Croatia and Slovenia.[50] However, as he notes, only in Slovenia is a political party created based on this kind of new left movement. United Left was formed in 2014 prior to the elections for the European parliament, referring to the Greek Syriza, Spanish Podemos and other European left parties as their partners. However, although not as directly as United Left, the new Croatian political party Human Blockade could also be seen as a result of such waves of citizen discontent. The founders and activists of Human Blockade were actively involved in the anti-government Facebook protests of 2011.

New political parties such as United Left and Human Blockade gained unexpected support and electoral success in parliamentary elections. Although the electoral systems in Croatia and Slovenia are open to new political actors (proportional systems with a 4% and 5% threshold respectively), they were rather stable until 2011, when new political parties gained far more votes than expected. New political parties in Croatia and Slovenia had even greater electoral success in the most recent parliamentary elections. In Slovenia, Modern Centre Party (*Stranka modernega centra*) won the parliamentary elections in July 2014 with 34.5% of the vote, while United Left won 5.9%. In Croatia, in parliamentary elections in November 2015, Most (Bridge of Independent Lists) entered the parliament with 13.76%, and Human Blockade with 4.32%.

United Left emerged from the Initiative for Democratic Socialism, which was inspired by and built on protests in 2012 and 2013. It was established as a coalition of three smaller left parties and various civil society groups and networks. In its programme, United Left advocates "democratic environmental socialism," criticises neoliberal capitalism, and stands for the "working people."[51] It advocates radical economic transformation, with the end of further privatisation, worker's participation in companies' management, control of the banking system, tax reforms which would benefit the lower classes, more direct democracy, environmentalism, etc. The party coherently positions itself on the political left. United Left voters are mostly urban and were in large numbers those that had voted for new parties in previous elections.[52]

The political party Human Blockade operates as a social movement and a political party since 2011 under the name Alliance for Change and under the current name since 2014. It emerged from an activist group which aimed to protect families threatened with forceful eviction from their houses due to tax debt. Human Blockade had the presidential candidate Ivan Vilibor Sinčić, who won 16.4% of the vote in the presidential elections in 2014. In the 2015 election

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[49] Kirn, *Slovenia's Social Uprising in the European Crisis.*
[50] Štiks, *"New Left" in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Issues, Sites and Forms.*
[51] Levica. 2014. Pot v demokratični ekološki socializem: strategija Združene levice (accessed: 25. September 2017).
[52] Tiran, Jernej. 2015. Urbano proti ruralnemu: (nov) razcep v Slovenskem političnem prostoru?. *Teorija in praksa*1-2, 271-90; and Krašovec and Haughton, *Privlačnost novog*, 19.

programme, Human Blockade stated that it is critical of the "neoliberal economic order… with detrimental effect for the majority of Croatian citizens left in poverty" and that it could not be defined as belonging to the left or right of the political spectrum.[53] It emphasises the need to "free Europe from the monetary occupation of private banks" together with parties like Spanish Podemos or the British Left Unity.[54]

According to Milošević and Džuverović, members and supporters of Human Blockade belong to both the left and right, but share anti-capitalist views, "united under the protest umbrella but without a clear worldview: they are dissatisfied and disenfranchised citizens who revolt against the existing economic and political order."[55] As trends in voter preferences and public opinion research suggest, Human Blockade voters are younger, and those that abstained from or voted for smaller parties in previous elections.[56]

The most recent research on populist political communication in Croatia found a clear distinction between mainstream and populist politicians, with populist ones using references to the people and anti-elitism, but no elements of right-wing populism.[57] Another study from the same authors about populism in the presidential campaign in Croatia in 2014 and 2015 showed that there were two "strong populists" in the campaign, frequently appealing to the people and using an anti-elitist rhetoric.[58] One of the strong populist candidates was Ivan Vilibor Sinčić, the Human Blockade leader, unknown to the public before the presidential elections, whose rhetoric was highly anti-elitist and defined economic elites as "dangerous others." As a political outsider, Sinčić had remarkable success in the first round of the elections, winning 16.42% of the vote and becoming a media star. In Slovenia, the word populism is often used in a derogatory way by the media, but no recent empirical research has dealt with the type of populism used by political actors.[59] The exception is Pajnik and Kuhar,[60] who discuss mainly exclusionary right wing populist rhetoric in Slovenia. In light of our analysis, we assess populism according to Mudde's minimal definition (anti-elitism and people centrism), discounting the sub-type of exclusionary populism more often associated with the right-wing parties.

The two new parties analysed in this paper, United Left and Human Blockade, are labeled as populist or having some populist characteristics by the Croatian and Slovenian public and media, as well as by some scholars. These parties also perceive and present themselves as close to other new European parties labeled as (left wing) populist. However, as these new parties emerge amidst

[53] Živi Zid, *Politički program* 2015, 6-7.

[54] Živi Zid, *Politički program* 2015, 6-7.

[55] Milošević, Aleksandar and Nemanja Džuverović. 2015. Thinking Beyond the Crisis. Social Mobilization in the Western Balkans and Political Representation of Underprivileged. Paper presented at the Italian Political Science Association conference 2015.

[56] Bagić, Dragan. 2015. Dinamična 2015: od predsjedničkih do parlamentarnih izbora (accessed: 25. February 2017); and Izbori 2015.

[57] Grbeša, Marijana and Berto Šalaj. 2014. Faces of Populism in Croatia. Paper presented at the IPSA conference, Montreal.

[58] Grbeša and Šalaj, *Textual Analysis of Populist Discourse in 2014/2015 Presidential Election in Croatia*.

[59] Prodnik and Mance, *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*.

[60] Quoted in Amon Prodnik and Mance, *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*, 340.

the economic crisis and lack of citizens' trust in government, we expect them to use populist ideology to appeal to the discontented.

As populism is a concept which could be operationalised and analysed empirically, the paper aims to empirically assess to what extent these parties have been populist in a crucial phase of their political lives: the electoral campaign on Facebook. With this control, we can also discover which are the most important issues dealt with, and what kind of populism was expressed.

Data Analysis
The posts of United Left and Human Blockade were downloaded through Netvizz, an application provided by Facebook which allows users to download Facebook data. The period analysed was two weeks before the political election, that is, the crucial phase of the electoral campaign. Specifically, Human Blockade posts cover a timespan from the 25th of October to the 7th of November 2015 (Elections held 8th November), while United Left's period was between 28th June to 11th July 2014 (Elections 13th July).

First of all, we highlight an important difference about the use of the social media. Human Blockade was far more active, posting 405 statuses in the analysed period, while United Left posted only 122 statuses in the considered timespan. As United Left also tried to engage in a modern political campaign type and gain presence in the traditional media,[61] they probably did not need such a strong social media campaign as Human Blockade.

Table 1: Posts per day

Human Blockade		United Left	
25/10/2015	52	28/06/2014	5
26/10/2015	30	29/06/2014	10
27/10/2015	26	30/06/2014	9
28/10/2015	25	01/07/2014	8
29/10/2015	27	02/07/2014	6
30/10/2015	32	03/07/2014	6
31/10/2015	25	04/07/2014	6
01/11/2015	23	05/07/2014	3
02/11/2015	28	06/07/2014	4
03/11/2015	40	07/07/2014	7
04/11/2015	46	08/07/2014	5
05/11/2015	38	09/07/2014	5
06/11/2015	44	10/07/2014	5
07/11/2015	13	11/07/2014	11
Average: 32.07 posts per day		Average: 6.4 posts per day	

Source: author

Each Facebook post can be published with three different rhetorical strategies: positive, negative or comparative.[62] A positive rhetorical strategy refers to

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[61] Sekloča and Pajnik, *Mrežno povezovanje družbenih gibanj in (ne)možnosti emancipatoričnega komuniciranja.*
[62] Fridkin, Kim L. and Patrick. J. Kenney. 2012. *The Impact of Negative Campaigning on Citizens' Actions and Attitude'*, in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by Semetko, Holly A. and Scammell Margaret. London: Sage Publication Ltd, 173-86.

those Facebook posts in which the only aim of the party is to support its policy positions. A comparative rhetorical strategy denotes a Facebook post in which the party is comparing its policy positions with those of one or more political opponents, whereas a negative rhetorical strategy expresses those Facebook posts in which the only aim of the party is to attack one or more political opponents. In our case, we noted that Human Blockade and United Left used only positive or negative rhetoric strategies and the table below shows the tendencies of the parties.

Table 2: Rhetoric strategies

	Human Blockade	United Left
Positive:	290 posts of 405=71.6%	79 posts of 91=86.81%
Negative:	115 posts of 405=28.39%	8 posts of 91=8.79%

Source: Author

United Left is more inclined to use a positive strategy compared to Human Blockade. This result will be interpreted in the following text.

Regarding populism, the tables below show in detail the percentage of populist posts for each party. We stress again that we used Mudde's definition and operationalised it in the analysis of social media. Full populist posts are those in which "people-centrism and anti-elitism" are jointly present (Table 3), while the presence of a single stance of populism, such as only anti-elitism or people-centrism, is classified as "elements of populist communication" in table 4.

Table 3: Full populism

Human Blockade	United Left
6 posts of 405= 1.48 %	0 posts of 91=0%

Source: author

Table 4: Human Blockade's populism divided according to elements of populist communication

Only Against Elite	Only Reference to the people	Both against the elite and reference to the people (Full Populism)
4 of 405=0.98%	7 of 405=1.72%	6 of 405=1.48%

Source: author

The crucial finding is the complete absence of populist discourse in United Left's posts and the low, almost insignificant presence of populism in Human Blockade's communication via Facebook. This means that, in the Facebook campaign, both parties preferred not to use this kind of discourse tied with populist ideology. So, despite both parties having a clear populist ideology or elements of populism, their discourse on Facebook does not address this issue. Finally, the last table shows the most important issues dealt with. In this case, we discounted the less frequent topics and present only the issues which achieved a threshold of 2%.

The issues have been coded in the following way: by campaigning we mean all the activities connected to the electoral campaign, such as presenting the

party's events; mobilisation of the electorate through appeals to voting; comments on the presence of the party in the media during the campaign; on political opponents; or sharing messages or communication with party supporters. The category of protest applies to all the protest activities organised by these political parties or in which these parties participated. Another important category deals with attacks on political adversaries or other elites or powers, such as the media and financial or economic elites. United Left had a far more diverse spectrum of issues they tackled during the campaign. As their programme suggests, the important issues in their campaign were connected to the welfare state (welfare, education), followed by environmentalism and direct democracy. These are the issues on which this party puts a strong emphasis in its election programme. However, this party also engaged in attack discourse on social media, by attacking the neoliberal economic system or banks. It also shared support for similar new European left parties such as Syriza.

Table 5: Human Blockade's issues

Campaigning	143 on 405=35.3%
Protest	12 on 405=2.96%
Attack political exponent, media, bank	107 on 405=26.41%

Source: author

Table 6: United Left's issues

Campaigning	46 on 91=50.54%
Environmentalism	3 on 91=3.29%
Supporting Syriza and other leftist parties	5 on 91=5.49%
Against neoliberalism	8 on 91=8.79%
Welfare	15 on 91=16.48%
Education	2 on 91=2.19%
Direct democracy	2 on 91= 2.19%
Attack bank	3 on 91=3.29%

Source: author

In both cases, the issue of campaigning is the most frequent, but we note some important differences between these parties. In the electoral campaign, Human Blockade focused on campaigning and attack discourse, while the campaign of United Left was more positive and dealt with a wide variety of issues, from welfare to direct democracy, not just using the strategy of blaming others. Two different strategies are noted: Human Blockade attacks and praises itself, while United Left praises itself but also talks about political problems in a positive way. The analysis showed that Human Blockade used very little populist discourse on social media, while United Left did not use any. In their few populist posts, Human Blockade is both anti-elitist and refers to the people. In Human Blockade's discourse, elites are mostly members of the established political class, but also economic elites and institutions, banks and the European Union. In referring to the people, Human Blockade uses terms such

as the ordinary people, Croatian citizens, or simply the people (they do not use the word people as in right-wing discourse). Human Blockade is also noted for its frequent attacks on the media, political marketing or opinion polling. As Mazzoleni shows, populist actors who do not have resources for greater media attention have to employ specific communication strategies such as creating events, trying to get free media publicity, attack the media and play the role of the underdog.[63] It seems that the entire social media activities of Human Blockade are aimed at their relationship with the mainstream media and attempts to get greater visibility: protest activities which could be seen as attempts to get free media attention, campaigning and attacks on the media and other political actors. Because of the more complex relationship with the media, Human Blockade has a more aggressive social media campaign. Another peculiar aspect of Human Blockade are their attempts to connect with the voters via social media. Human Blockade often posts messages from their supporters. The typical populist posts among those few detected from Human Blockade aim at attacking the political elites, as they say, "the two-headed snake" of HDZ and SDP, which have been the ruling parties or in ruling coalitions since Croatia was established as an independent state. These two parties are presented as two faces of the same coin, corrupted elites that together manipulate and rob the "Croatian people." This kind of discourse is presented in image 1: the SDP party says: "Stronger comrade, stronger, you can see that we can still squeeze something out of them!," while HDZ replies: "I can't believe it, comrade, we've been squeezing them for 25 years and they still have something." Therefore, the corrupt political elite is juxtaposed with a manipulated and exploited "Croatian people." However, there are only a few posts which could be defined as populist, so it is hard to consider the electoral campaign on Facebook as a populist one. We can only highlight certain tendencies of Human Blockade's populism.

Image 1: An example of Human Blockade's populist posts

Source: https://www.facebook.com/zivizidd/?fref=ts

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[63] Mazzoleni, *Populism and the Media.*

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to empirically analyse the extent to which new political parties in Croatia and Slovenia, labelled as left or post-ideological populists by media and some authors,[64] employ populist discourse in their political communication on social media. These two parties emerged from the movements and protests of citizens aimed at austerity measures and corrupted political elites after the economic crisis in 2008, which were described as movements of the "post-Yugoslav new left" specific to the Balkan region and especially developed in Croatia and Slovenia, the so-called "EU periphery."[65] As prominent populist actors in Central and Eastern Europe are usually right-wing, the rare research on populism in these two countries also focused mostly on right-wing exclusionary populism, connected to the ethno-nationalism that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia. However, recent empirical research of populist political communication found no exclusionary or right-wing populism among the major political leaders.[66] For this reason, it was interesting to follow the political communication discourse of two parties that diverged from this kind of populism and managed to secure enough votes in the parliamentary elections to enter the parliament. We focused on the social media communication of these two parties, with the assumption that new parties with a younger electorate will be more active on social media, as they already used social media for campaigning in various other protest activities and movements, and as media are less prone to giving visibility to new political actors.

The analysis of the social media activities of these two parties during the electoral campaign provided several results which showed important differences between the communication strategies of Human Blockade and United Left. Human Blockade was much more active on social media during the electoral campaign, used more negative rhetoric, tackled much fewer different issues, but used very little populist discourse. On the other hand, United Left was much more moderate in its activities on Facebook, but discussed a much wider array of issues connected with their electoral programme and avoided populism during the electoral campaign. There are several reasons which could explain such differences between these two parties. As some of the members of United Left explained, it seems United Left employed a more diverse media and communication strategy and tried to mould its activities in accordance with the media and build connections with the media instead of attacking them.[67] United Left, in a way, accepted the processes of the mediatization of politics, used opinion polling and tried to get publicity through print media and television, appealing to media even with a sort of personalisation of the campaign through promoting the party leader Luka Mesec. This might explain the more moderate type of political communication on Facebook which allowed them to focus more on the different issues they were concerned with. Additionally, as Toplišek explains, United

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[64] Grbeša and Šalaj, *Textual Analysis of Populist Discourse in 2014/2015 Presidential Election in Croatia*; and Toplišek, *The Slovenian United Left.*

[65] Štiks, *"New Left" in the Post-Yugoslav* Space; Mance and Prodnik, *Changing Faces of Slovenia.*

[66] Grbeša and Šalaj, *Faces of Populism in Croatia.*

[67] Sekloča and Pajnik, *Mrežno povezovanje družbenih gibanj in (ne)možnosti emanci-patoričnega komuniciranja.*

Left was more populist in its beginnings, but "thickened" its ideology in the later phase.[68] Human Blockade, on the other hand, probably deals with the problem of gaining media visibility. Human Blockade is therefore more active and more aggressive on social media, attacking not only political opponents but the media as well. It also connects its offline activities, rallies or events, with social media in order to give them broader visibility. These kinds of events are also popular means for getting media attention. In any case, Human Blockade did not massively employ populist discourse, which probably would have helped in gaining the image of a political underdog, useful for actors that fight for media attention. [69]

The conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that populist discourse could not be easily recognised in all various channels of political communication. Avoidance of populism during the electoral campaign on social media does not mean that these parties are not populist from an ideological point of view, but that they choose to have a different political communication strategy. As research of populism on social media shows so far, it is populism in a very fragmented form, which simplifies the populist message even further for the social media user.[70] Therefore, parties might choose to use this fragmented communication for some other aspects of their political communication strategy, and employ populist discourse in other media platforms and genres.

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[68] Toplišek, *The Slovenian United Left.*

[69] Mazzoleni, *Populism and the Media.*

[70] Engesser, Sven / Ernst, Nicole / Esser, Frank and Florin Büchel. 2016. Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(8), 1109-126.

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