

Perceptions of 'Populism' and 'Anti-populism' in Greek Public Discourse during the Crisis: The case of the website 'Anti-news'

Lazaros Karavasilis, Postgraduate Researcher, Department of Politics, History and International Relations, Loughborough University

The aim of this paper is to present how 'populism' is perceived in the website 'Anti-news' as a representative example of the Greek public discourse in the period between 2010-2016, when the economic crisis heavily affected Greece at a political and social level. The paper will also attempt to explain how populism is portrayed through this right-wing oriented media and how their audience perceives populism. Moreover, the paper offers an account of how 'anti-populism' is formulated within this medium and how it contributes to existing notions of anti-populism.

Introduction

After 2008, the global financial crisis affected almost every country in Europe and the Americas with an unprecedented impact on the political and social landscape of these countries. Greece was one of the countries that saw its economy collapse due to a staggering external debt, which led Prime Minister George Papandreou to request a bailout package from the EU, ECB, and IMF in 2010. The introduction of the bailout mechanism (which became known as 'Troika') in the lives of the Greek people signaled a major turning point in the country's history, which can only be compared with the fall of the dictatorship and the beginning of the Third Hellenic Republic in 1974. The severe austerity measures that were a prerequisite for the loan started to have substantial negative implications on the Greek society and led to the further degradation of the country's political order. From 2010 up until today, the public discourse was focused on the causality of the crisis and also on criticizing the previous period from 1974 to 2010, known as 'Metapolitefsi', as a period responsible for the country's misfortunes.

One of the media that is a representative example of the aforementioned criticism is the website ‘Anti-news’¹, an alternative media site which hosts opinions from centre-rightists, liberals, to neoliberals, far-rightists and even fascists in some cases. The variety of the voices that are expressed through this website, along with that of its creator Failos Kranidiotis (a known far-right and nationalist lawyer and journalist), provide a comprehensive view of how an audience with right wing tendencies perceives a concept like populism. In addition, due to Kranidiotis’ personal friendship with Antonis Samaras (leader of the conservative party New Democracy [ND] from 2009 to 2015), Anti-news has a close affiliation towards ND, which justifies the critique of populism that is presented on the website. The aforementioned factors have prompted the purpose of this study, which is to explore how populism is seen through a right-wing website and how the opinions and thoughts that are presented contribute to the existing notions of anti-populism. For that purpose, I tracked the frequency of articles related to populism from 2010 to 2016. This was achieved by a thorough examination of the website’s archive through three keywords: ‘Populism’, ‘Metapolitefsi’ and ‘PASOK’. These keywords were chosen to identify articles dealing with anti-populism and comprise the empirical corpus of this study.

As Table 1 shows, in the first two years, the articles referring to populism are relatively low: 11 for 2010 and 17 for 2011. However, after 2012 we see a significant increase in the frequency of those articles: 48 in 2012, 40 in 2013, 45 in 2014, 59 in 2015 and 97 in 2016. This clearly shows that populism is becoming a matter of concern for the contributors of the website, especially after the rise of populist parties in government (SYRIZA and Independent Greeks) in 2015.

Table 1. Frequency of articles referring to populism per year

<i>Year</i>	<i>Articles Referring to Populism</i>
2010	11
2011	17
2012	48
2013	40
2014	45
2015	59
2016	97

The paper is divided into three parts: First, I will present how populism is signified in the contemporary political landscape of Europe and the main theoretical approach for the case. At the same time, I will also explore the existing notions of anti-populism and

¹ <http://www.antinews.gr/>

how these contribute to the research. Second, I will focus on the discourse that has been produced by Anti-news, which revolves around populism, anti-populism, and a critique of Metapolitefsi. The aim of the last part will be to interpret the website's views on populism as well as to analyze the particular form that anti-populism takes in Anti-news. Finally, I will conclude my analysis with a summary of the findings from the research.

Modernization Theory, Populism, and Anti-populism

The emergence of populist parties in the beginning of the 21st century in Europe (Mondon 2014; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Tournier-Sol 2014; Kiouпкиolis 2016) has refueled the academic interest delving into the causes, consequences, and aspects of the multi-layered phenomenon of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). According to Pappas there are at least seven major definitions of populism (2016) that represent the diversity of theoretical approaches to defining populism. However, despite all of these approaches there is neither a definitive theory on what populism exactly is nor a strict delineation of the specific characteristics that populism has. Instead, the different approaches of populism attempt to interpret the versatility of the phenomenon in accordance with parties that appear to be populist. This paper approaches populism and anti-populism using modernization theory. Based on the aforementioned theory, populism is regarded as an expression of social and economic anachronism, mostly associated with nationalism and statism that opposes economic progress. On the other hand, anti-populism is thought to be the solution to populism as it supports economic modernization through free markets, while embracing political liberalism. As I will analyze in the following paragraphs, these approaches will explain how Anti-news perceives populism and how that leads the site into developing an anti-populist stance.

It is of utmost importance for the paper's purposes to understand how populism is perceived within the discourse that is articulated in Anti-news. Modernization theory, its evolution across time, and how it came to define populism in a negative manner can provide the theoretical context for a satisfactory perception of populism. During the 1950's, Richard Hofstadter attempted to analyze the populist phenomenon and its contribution to the American political culture. In his work, Hofstadter (1955) examines populism in a negative manner. Based on the examples of the People's Party and McCarthyism, he claims that populism is heavily associated with nativism, nationalism, nostalgic traditionalism, and 'moral absolutism', while he describes populists as a movement that looks backwards (Stavrakakis 2017). However, populism seems to represent only one of two antagonistic political and cultural groups in Hofstadter's theory. According to Hofstadter (1955), the other group endorses the need for industrial capitalist modernization, whatever the cost may be, and promotes this modernization as the normal political and social evolution, that is against the anachronisms exhibited by pop-

ulism. The contribution of Hofstadter's perception of populism to the theory of modernization has made the latter the defining point of liberal thought, not only in the US but also to liberals on a global level (Gilman 2000; Latham 2000). At the same time, it has created a preliminary context for the development of anti-populism (Stavrakakis 2017).

The theory of modernization and its opposition towards populism has also been adjusted to the Greek political culture by academics who have adopted the theory of modernization in order to interpret populism. One of them is Diamandouros (2000), who introduced the theory of a dualistic Greece, according to which the Greek political culture has two different traditions. Each of these traditions has formed its own ideological system in order to interpret the Greek political and social reality, leading to a conflict between them. On the one hand, there is an 'underdog culture' which supports a state-oriented economy, a large public sector, and ethno-centrism – but not a free market and economic reforms. This culture has also become hegemonic through the use of populism as an ideological tool, which has become the defining element of this culture (Diamandouros 2000). The other culture that is present in Greece favors political and economic modernization. Therefore, its ideological influences are mostly drawn from political liberalism and at the same time characterized by a secular orientation towards the advanced industrial countries of Western Europe. This culture is in favor of the free market mechanism and believes in the state's regulatory role in making the Greek economy more competitive in a global level. That makes this culture more open towards reforms and technological innovation as well as more dedicated to liberal democracy and constitutionalism as the necessary political context to achieve economic and social modernization (Diamandouros 2000). To sum up, this dualistic scheme, which derives from the theory of modernization, manages to interpret populism in a negative manner. Populism is perceived as the main ideological orientation of social and political forces that oppose any form of progress and are more inclined towards a nativist and ethnocentric culture.

In light of this context, modernization theory has managed to characterize any alternative political and economic solution as populist and led to the creation of anti-populism (Gilman 2000) as the medium that can support and expand modernization thought. The forms that anti-populism has taken throughout the years vary from case to case, and, like populism, a widely accepted theory of anti-populism has yet to emerge. Therefore, there are several recent academic attempts to define anti-populism, examine its relation to populism and identify how populism is portrayed in political and media discourse. Even though these theories are extensive, I will focus on outlining the most important elements that each theory has to offer in order to understand the diversity of approaches used to define and interpret anti-populism.

Much of the work on anti-populism has focused on studying the concept through empirical analyses of the media. According to Mylonas (2014), who has examined anti-populism in the newspaper 'Kathimerini' (the most prominent printed newspaper in Greece), the anti-populist discourse is articulated mostly within a liberal and neoliberal

context. Specifically, Kathimerini as well as other mainstream Greek media have interpreted the Greek economic crisis in neoliberal terms, meaning that the pathologies of the Greek society are responsible for the crisis (Pleios 2013). According to their view, the backwardness of the Greek society and the way in which people ‘lived above their abilities’, along with an ideological hegemony of left wing populism, are the main reasons that Greece was led to a financial crisis and was unable to do the necessary structural reforms in its economy (Mylonas 2014). Most importantly, populism does not only obstruct Greece to reach a neoliberal restructuring of its economy; it also prevents the country from becoming more ‘European’ (Mylonas 2014). This perception is characteristic of liberal and neoliberal news media such as Kathimerini and is an example of how modernization theory has been adjusted to the recent economic crisis and the Greek case in particular. Moreover, the case of Kathimerini shows how anti-populism is articulated through media, which is of essential importance in order to analyze a similar discourse in Anti-news.

However, anti-populism has also been expressed from a political perspective, which in turn has ignited an alternative approach to the phenomenon. Medarov’s account (2015) on liberal anti-populism in post-1989 Bulgaria offers important information on the main elements of political anti-populism and anti-populism more broadly. Through an examination of how liberal intellectuals in Bulgaria articulate anti-populist discourse, Medarov concludes that populism is presented as the opposite of liberalism and a “pre-given set of neoliberal practices, ideas and technologies of governance” (Medarov 2015, p. 8). Anti-populism achieves the aforementioned distinction by using ‘populism’ as an empty signifier, rendering it capable of multiple meanings, including: irresponsibility, demagoguery, corruption, immorality, destruction, and irrationalism (Stavarakakis 2014). Attributing populism with the aforementioned characteristics is also representative of the anti-populist ‘fear of the masses’, which reflects a shift from political antagonism to post-political technocratic management as it negates any political opposition by characterizing it ‘populist’ and therefore reckless and irresponsible (Katsambekis 2014). Overall, Medarov’s analysis is a comprehensive example of political anti-populism, its articulation and signification that progresses research on anti-populism and its various interpretations.

Both of these examples are a reconfirmation that modernization theory is in complete contrast with populism, even if the latter is politically progressive. The liberal and neoliberal orientation of modernization theory automatically renders populism as a phenomenon that opposes real economic and social development, since neoliberalism does not recognize any other political or economic alternative as a viable option. For that purpose, anti-populism has been developed as a discursive tool aimed at debunking positions that oppose neoliberalism as irrational and against economic progress. The variations that we have presented can provide us with a few preliminary elements that will lead us closer to an understanding of anti-populism and will be of utmost importance for analyzing the discourse in Anti-news:

- Anti-populism originates from modernization theory and has become the ideological tool of liberals and neoliberals in contemporary world.
- The purpose of anti-populism is to render populism as a phenomenon that obstructs economic development and defies neoliberal governance and therefore is outside of the common logic and sense.
- This allows anti-populism to be developed from both the media and the political world in order to defend and expand liberal and neoliberal values in economy, society, and politics.

Populism Governs This Country!: Perceptions of Populism and Anti-populism in Anti-news

Since 2010, Greece has seen its traditional party system collapse, its economy shrunk due to austerity measures and the living standard of many Greeks has further diminished. These events have triggered new narratives which attempt to explain the causes of the crisis and interpret them through the context of the crisis (Liakos and Kouki 2015). Among these new narratives is one created from the contributors of the site Anti-news, which attributes populism as the fundamental origin of the crisis in nearly every social, economic, and political aspect. In this section, I explore how this narrative is constructed, how Anti-news perceives populism in connection with the Greek crisis, and the form that anti-populism takes within the website.

According to the writers of Anti-news, after 1974 Greece saw an exceptional transition towards democracy due to Constantine Karamanlis' efforts to lead the country into the European Economic Community and to further democratization of Greece after the military dictatorship (Voulgaris 2001). However, when the first socialist government of PASOK (Eleftheriou and Tassis 2013)² came into power in 1981, it signaled the beginning of an economic decline that led to the current crisis. Specifically, the journalists and the commentators tend to characterize this period as "a period defined by corruption, venality, populism and the mugging of the state resources" (Mitralexis 2012). This period is also defined by the so-called "'PASOK system', which deceived the people with false symbols and false promises into extracting as many resources from the state as they could" (Anonymous 2012a)³. Therefore, Metapolitefsi was dominated by the "ideological sovereignty of the left, which was established by PASOK" (Anonymous 2012c)⁴ and stigmatized by "lawless guild privileges, the distribution of promi-

² PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), was the most prominent socialist party in the period from 1974 to 2012 and has been intrinsically connected with the history of the country the last 40 years.

³ All Anti-news users are listed as 'Anonymous', as they write under pseudonyms on the site. Links to their posts can be found below in the References.

⁴ This narrative of the country after 1974 fully elaborates in characterizing the aforementioned ideological sovereignty as a "mentality and an ideology that encouraged despicable and distorted situations, the privileges of the public sector that led to an ungoverned country, an orgy of wasted money, the flee of private

nent governmental positions, which served to increase the power of the clientelistic state and by state-funded union workers who resisted any attempt at reform or modernization and they still govern the country” (Anonymous 2013a). However, these opinions seem to describe the ‘symptoms’ of a deeper cause that guided the political system of Greece after 1974 and led to the current crisis. The people who write to Anti-news seem to consider PASOK’s left wing populism as responsible for all of the aforementioned characteristics that defined the period of Metapolitefsi. Populism is at the forefront of nearly every article concerning the crisis and is also recognized as being the root cause of the country’s current situation. An article from Anti-news attempts to define populism as:

“Demagogy that is exercised in the name of the people, but works only for the benefit of the demagogues who attempt to manipulate the people. It is a propaganda technique that deceives the ‘people’ and pits them on one side, and tarnishes everyone who is against them as ‘enemy of the people’, aiming at their isolation from the people. Populism does not suggest any solutions, but only yells slogans, completely aware that they are false and dangerous” (Anonymous 2011a).

Another article describes populism metaphorically as: “A shepherd, who feeds the masses of desperate and less strong citizens with unfulfilled promises, empty words and vague, sweet banalities” (Anonymous 2013b).

The clear connection between populism and Metapolitefsi tends to blame populism for the creation and enlargement of the clientelistic state, the degradation of the nation, and the “forging of a false ‘popular unity’ not for the political emancipation of the popular classes, but in order to manipulate them efficiently” (Anonymous 2011a). Populism is not only presented as the primary cause of the crisis but also as the constitutive ideological tool of PASOK that governed for more than 30 years and created an “economic model, dictating that the state can be the solution for every misfortune, a model which is historically bankrupt” (Anonymous 2012b). The association of populism with PASOK and how the latter used populism also shows that for Anti-news populism can only originate from the left, since there is an apparent lack of criticism towards right wing populism, throughout the discourse of Anti-news.

The connection between Metapolitefsi and populism extends in many articles to the inclusion of PASOK and SYRIZA in their discourse. Many contributors often believe that SYRIZA continues to promote left wing populism, following PASOK’s legacy. At the same time and especially after SYRIZA saw a steady rising at the opinion polls (Katsambekis 2015)⁵, almost every contributor of the site saw the aforementioned

companies from Greece due to consecutive mobilizations from labor unions, the criminalization of entrepreneurship in Greece and the defense of the university’s asylum to outlaws. In other words, the ideological sovereignty of the left encouraged and supported all of the “diseases” of the Greek society that consequently led to the crisis”.

⁵ SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) is a radical left party that was formed in 2004 and rose to power for the first time on 25th January 2015.

party as the reincarnation of Andreas Papandreu's PASOK. An example for this comparison is an entire article focused on proving exactly how SYRIZA is the "New PASOK" by stating that "the rigid clientelistic state and the so-called 'army of PASOK' are now moving towards SYRIZA. The latter also attempts to destroy PASOK and become the only party that represents the centre-left" (Anonymous 2012d). That belief creates a triple connection between PASOK, SYRIZA, and populism, with populism being the element that is dominant in both parties. In summary, Anti-news views populism as the definitive characteristic of Metapolitefsi, mostly expressed by PASOK and to a lesser extent by SYRIZA.

However, writers of Anti-news do not confine themselves to criticizing populism and its responsibility towards the crisis. Another important aspect that is also present is that of the alternative solution; one that will counteract the effects of populism in the Greek society as well as the economy. According to several contributions, Greece has to "be a nation-state again, have a competitive economy in a global level and a strong national identity" (Anonymous 2010a). This will only be achieved if Greece will "continue to have a European orientation" (Anonymous 2015), "restructure its national economy" (Anonymous 2011b) and "embrace again the ideas of patriotism and social liberalism" (Anonymous 2010b). According to the writers of Anti-news, the only one who can modify the above solutions into a political alternative to populism is Antonis Samaras and the party of New Democracy (Karavasilis 2015). Therefore, a connection is made between Anti-news and New Democracy, since the former sees the party and its leader as the only alternatives that will reverse the effects of populism in the country.

Anti-news's Attitude towards Populism: A Different Form of Anti-populism?

The examples above are representative of the public discourse produced in Anti-news and provide a clear picture of the perception of populism and anti-populism among the political right in Greece. Based on the analysis, I outline the characteristics of this populist and anti-populist discourse in Table 2 below.

As presented in Anti-news, the characteristics typically attributed to populism are interpreted as negative elements that 'infected' the Greek society and its politics (Nikisianis et al. 2016). Populism is signified as a force that threatens the country, the nation, and the society with a devastating collapse (Stavrakakis and Sevastakis 2012). From this anti-populist perspective, populism derives from a clientelistic state, a left wing political culture, social struggles and a negative attitude towards the EU that, taken together, are seen as responsible for the current crisis. On the other hand, the signification of anti-populism in Anti-news discourse harbors some familiar but also new features of anti-populism.

Table 2: Characteristics of Populism and Anti-populism in Anti-news

<i>Populism</i>	<i>Anti-populism</i>
Clientelistic State	State as a Regulator for Economy
State-centered Economy	Global Competitive Economy/Reforms
Left Wing Political Culture	Ethnocentrism/ Liberal Values
Social Struggles	Common Sense
Euroscepticism	Euro centrism

While the objection to a state-centered economy and support for free markets is a common feature of anti-populism, in Anti-news the exclusion of the state and its potential is not absolute. Instead, the anti-populist perspective argues that the state must regulate the free market and, through neoliberal reforms, overcome the clientelistic state and make the economy more competitive at a global level (Doxiadis 2016). The website's anti-populism also considers a corruptive left wing political culture, and the populism that has both produced and dominated the political life in Greece, as obstructing the country from reaching its true economic potential (Mylonas 2014). To counteract the effect of populism at the cultural level, there must be a newfound turn towards the importance of national identity and how 'we, the Greeks' as a homogenous entity can overcome the crisis that populism has implemented (Mylonas 2014).

Justified by the connection between Anti-news and Antonis Samaras, the writers also stress the importance of liberal values and how they can provide an alternative to the dominant culture of the left (Karavasilis 2015). In this case, anti-populism also deems every social struggle or reaction to the implementation of neoliberal reforms as something illogical that contradicts common sense, the common good, and even the homeland itself (Stavrakakis and Sevastakis 2012). Lastly, there is also the association of populism with Euroscepticism and how the former opposes the idea of Europe and consequently, the country's position in EU. At this point we see that the contradiction between 'populism' and 'Europe' (Doxiadis 2016) leads Anti-news' anti-populism to embrace a Eurocentric approach as the only way that will make Greece economically dynamic, entrepreneurial and more westernized in a European way (Mylonas 2014).

The distinction between populism and anti-populism in Anti-news can also be interpreted within the context of modernization theory. As the theory dictates, there is a linear path to progress in which societies who fail to modernize are so-called ‘traditional’, and those who do are deemed as ‘developed’ (Liakos and Kouki 2015). From this point of view, populism and all its characteristics are the definitive elements of a society that is traditional, anachronistic and therefore unwilling to adapt to the technological and economic progress that is suggested by modernization (Doxiadis 2016). Moreover, populism is perceived as responsible for creating an underdog culture which lies in complete contrast with a modernizing culture based on economic reforms, the universal adoption of liberal values in politics and society as well as a continuous attempt to westernize the country in compliance with European standards (Diamandouros 2000). Although the anti-populist discourse in Anti-news mostly represents a relationship between modernization theory and populism, the role of the nation and national identity in anti-populism is peculiar. While modernization theory rejects the importance of ethnocentrism altogether (Diamandouros 2000), the writers of Anti-news see the nation and the strengthening of national identity as tools that will modernize Greece and bring the country closer to the political and economic model of Western countries. The combination of a strong national identity and liberal/neoliberal values will provide the necessary framework for the country’s exit from the crisis and, additionally, act as the only economic, social, and political solution to populism.

Conclusion

The website “Anti-news” can be described as a distinct case among the Greek media – print or otherwise. At the same time, the views that are expressed within the website provide a comprehensive account of how right-wing supporters perceive populism and how they articulate their anti-populist discourse. As presented in the analysis here, Anti-news holds populism responsible for shaping society, politics, and economy in Greece over the last 40 years and blamed for an unprecedented crisis. The suggested alternative to populism is an amalgamation between liberalism, neoliberalism, and ethnocentrism, and when combined with the proper political leadership (i.e. that of Antonis Samaras) will guarantee the modernization of Greece.

The discourse that is articulated in Anti-news is a clear example of how anti-populism in Greek media uses modernization theory to brand any alternative to neoliberalism as ‘populist’ and therefore ‘irrational’. Within the same context, any attempt to prevent the implementation of neoliberal austerity measures is met with disbelief and branded as a contradiction to ‘common sense’. Moreover, the peculiarity that makes this anti-populist discourse even more distinct is the role of the nation in Greece’s road towards modernization. As presented above, the significance of ethnocentrism as the ideological and cultural orientation of the country is of the utmost importance for the writers

of the website, and its necessity is stressed in almost every article. This leads to the conclusion that the anti-populism presented in *Anti-news*, although featuring most of the elements found in similar media discourses, fails to reject the idea of the nation altogether; instead, the nation is seen as the cornerstone of progress. Not only that – this form of anti-populism argues that a return to ethnocentrism and the strengthening of national identity will be able to counteract the effects that populism has had on the economy, society and politics of Greece.

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