

# Populist Cues in Media Framing

## Exploring How Populism by the Media Emerges in Western News Coverage of Protests<sup>1</sup>

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The media, or “fourth estate” as it is also known, which scrutinises the political elites, relies on journalists supporting the idea of a free press, independent of political interference. Research has demonstrated that journalists imply anti-elitism and people-centrism – the core features of populism – to criticise the establishment and speak on behalf of ordinary citizens. Scholars, therefore, developed the concept of “media populism” to conceptualise the proliferation of the populist communication phenomenon in different media content types. Spurred by the intention above, this study aims to fill a gap by analysing the extent to which anti-elitism and the general will of the people appear in the online news coverage of demonstrations in five Western media outlets. The study analyses 469 items of news coverage of protests from 108 countries between 2010 and 2020. Quantitative content analysis and confirmatory factor analysis revealed that news outlets emphasise anti-elitism as the primary populist cue in protest coverage. Additionally, the paper contributes to the concept of media populism by arguing that journalists articulate the *volonté general* in coverage when protesters oppose adverse changes in legislation. Media populism has a specific function in the coverage of protests: it suggests that protesters want to participate in decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** populism, demonstrations, anti-elitism, general will, media populism

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## Introduction

Populism has been widely analysed in social sciences, especially since the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's electoral victory in the United States (Hunger & Paxton, 2022). A specific segment of the research field argues that populism can be intertwined with social movements as a means of mobilisation that revolves around the moral division of the good people and the corrupt elite where public grievances are articulated (Aslanidis, 2016b). We argue that additional theoretical background paves the way indirectly for the connection between social movements and populism, namely the one that has explored ties between the media and populism (Moffitt, 2018). The theory that relies on media populism highlights the media's contribution to spreading populist claims (Esser et al., 2016; Krämer, 2014). This paper focuses primarily on a subtype of media populism, namely *populism by the media*, referring to "media organizations actively engaging in their own kind of populism" (Esser et al., 2016, p. 367) to provide a unique analysis of populist cues in media coverage that deals with protests from the angle of the media. Since there are many protests that articulate that the elite is out of touch with the people (Aslanidis, 2016b), we find it important to research the extent to which journalists imply the populist "us versus them" approach via populism by the media.

Scholars argue that "although populism by the media may be overall a scarce phenomenon, segments of populist ideas may be more salient in some outlets in some periods" (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020, p. 20). Ample empirical evidence proves that specific media types, such as tabloid newspapers, have intrinsic stylistic features aligned with populist people-centrism and anti-elitism (Herkman & Kalsnes, 2022; Krämer, 2014, 2018; Wettstein et al., 2018). However, Rooduijn (2014) found that opinion articles in *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are more populist than the tabloids *The Sun* and *Bild*. Additionally, Hameleers and Vliegenthart (2020) found no evidence for the theoretical assumption that popular news outlets are more populist in their coverage than broadsheets. In turn, they demonstrated that the left-wing broadsheet outlet *de Volkskrant* increased people-centrism and anti-elitism in its coverage between 1990 and 2017 (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020). These unexpected findings push us toward analysing populist cues in online coverage of protests between 2010 and 2020 in some mainstream news outlets. We chose the period between 2010 and 2020 because the last decade brought remarkable successes for populists, suggesting that hundreds of millions are disappointed in the mainstream political elite (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Ruth-Lovell et al., 2019).

Although the number of protests globally almost tripled between 2006 and 2020 (Ortiz et al., 2022), no empirical research has analysed media populism in news article coverage of demonstrations at international level. It is important to study media populism in this manner because we have little knowledge of how journalists embed populist features when they introduce the possible motivations of protesters internationally. In sum, our study aims to provide another research angle on the framing techniques journalists use for demonstrators by considering populism by the media (Rak, 2021). Our rationale for analysing news on demonstrations leans on the following

assumption: coverage of protests attracts the fragmented features of populism, resisting the “corrupt” establishment and articulating the “good” people’s demands (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, news articles on demonstrations might fit Benjamin Krämer’s argument: “media populism is more than regular (albeit politically biased) political reporting, but a particular form of politics by some media” (Krämer, 2014, p. 54). We emphasise that the aim of our study is not to prove that protests or demonstrators are populist. In turn, aligned with former studies (de Vreese et al., 2018; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), we analyse how journalists implement the general will of the people and anti-elitism in protest coverage. We chose to scrutinise the appearance of the *volonté general* rather than references to the people (e.g. solely people-centrism) because the latter could be too blurry and universal in the news and possibly skew the results of our analysis (Heiss & Matthes, 2020). Additionally, the manual quantitative content analysis might capture the general will of the people with higher validity than it detects people-centrism.

Furthermore, we argue that economic deprivation is also a vital theme to implement in this analysis. Even though economic deprivation is not the core element of populism, several scholars have claimed that it might be an important factor in the success of this phenomenon because the Great Recession, housing crises and remarkable differences in wages paved the way for the proliferation of populism (Adler & Ansell, 2020; Bos et al., 2020; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Maher et al., 2022).

To move forward within the research field of media populism, where research dealing with international rather than national media populism is scarce, we analysed how protest coverage is framed in a selected number of news organisations in the United Kingdom and the United States. We aim to provide insights into how the BBC, CNN, Fox News, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* depicted the motivations of demonstrators by embedding, intentionally or otherwise, the general will of the people, anti-elitism and economic deprivation in their coverage. Aligned with Ortiz and colleagues’ (2013) research, this paper does not focus on one specific issue that triggered demonstrations in many countries almost at the same time (such as the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States) but on different events in various countries (n = 108) to provide an extended picture of protest coverage. Finally, although scholarly analyses that interprets coverage of demonstrations implements the conceptual background of a protest paradigm that depicts protesters negatively (Gruber, 2023), populism by the media could be a possible alternative concept to help us to understand journalistic frames on demonstrations from a reversed angle in contrast to the protest paradigm.

## The conceptualisation of the populist communication phenomenon

Despite the ongoing scholarly debate on whether populism is an ideology (Mudde, 2004), a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a strategy (Weyland, 2017), or a logic (Laclau, 2005), recent studies have demonstrated that the discursive approach of populism is helpful if one’s aim is to measure this phenomenon (Aslanidis, 2016a, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “news”, “news articles” and “coverage” interchangeably.

Conceptually, almost every approach accepts that populism relies on the Manichean differentiation between the “evil” elite and the “good” people (de Nadal, 2021). These two groups are homogenous, and the former takes advantage of the latter (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). Populism revolves around the idea that the (political) elite does not care about the people’s interests because the former group is corrupt and selfish, while the latter is pure and decent (Mudde, 2017). In other words, the elite forces the people into an underdog status (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

In this paper, similarly to a recent study analysing the populist media coverage in newspapers (Hameleers & Vliegthart, 2020), we consider populism a communication phenomenon that implies fragmented elements through which populist ideas can be disseminated (de Vreese et al., 2018). We focus on anti-elitism and the general will of the people, two features that can appear together or fragmentally in populist communication (Engesser, Fawzi, et al., 2017). We also consider economic deprivation a relevant factor attached to anti-elitism and the general will of the people.

### **Anti-elitism, the general will of the people and economic deprivation**

The core of populist *anti-elitism* leans on the idea that the “corrupt elite” is the opposite of the “good people” (Reveilhac & Morselli, 2022). The “people” versus “elite” differentiation leans on morality: the former is an idealised group that deserves admiration (Taggart, 2004), while the latter is a selfish circle that turns its back on the silent majority (Mudde, 2017). Populist anti-elitism depicts the elite as a group that betrays ordinary citizens, and to preserve power, it goes against the “general will” of the people.

Many scholars (Canovan, 2005; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2017) agree with the idea that populism is not possible without its fundamental agent, “the people”. Mudde (2017) argues that even other features of populism, “the elite” and “general will”, obtain their meaning from “the people”. Although people-centrism is vital in populism, we have created a category that is more likely to be perceived in content analysis: *the general will of the people*. Our rationale for merging *the people* and *general will* into the same category is twofold. First, scholars argue that measuring and coding people-centrism is conceptually challenging and problematic in content analysis, especially in categorising pronouns such as *we* and *you* that might refer to broad or narrow groups (Heiss & Matthes, 2020; Krämer, 2017; Krippendorff, 2004; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Second, “Essential to populist politics is the concept of a general will, closely linked to the homogenous interpretation of the people” (Mudde, 2017, p. 33). In other words, populists claim that politicians should accept and follow the will of the people. We, thus, created one category from the above two to overcome the challenging concept of people-centrism. We presumed that journalists characterise the *articulated* demands of protesters or introduce how the authorities have disregarded their will. For instance, *The New York Times’* coverage of a protest in Lebanon articulates indirectly (e.g. inserts a quote from a protester) the demonstrators’ demands: “‘We need a whole new system, from scratch,’ said Omar Kammoureh, 47, a car dealership employee who had brought

his 7-year-old daughter, Lara, to the downtown Beirut protest on Monday. ‘It’s been a very bad 30 years’” (Yee, 2019). We acknowledge that such articulations are not equivalent to the *volonté general* because the protesters cannot articulate the will of the 99 per cent. However, Laclau (2005) emphasises that there is no need for the opinion of the 99 per cent to create populist messages, but it is crucial to articulate the will of the people that can theoretically create a *common denominator* for the silent majority. In this light, depicting and broadcasting the protesters’ demands fits the general will of the people category within media populism. Additionally, the quotes can still represent the main demands of the protesters although every individual protester might have different problems with their current situations. Still, we assume that these quotations are not embedded in coverage by chance. On the contrary, the reason for documenting and inserting the quotations in coverage should be rooted in the idea that they give important hints about the motivation of demonstrators. Finally, utilising the category of “the general will of the people” relies on another theoretical background: it implies that the elite does not support democracy and disregards common sense solutions, which is morally unacceptable (Laclau, 2005).

Researchers argue that between 2006 and 2013, the most frequent motivation behind demonstrations was economic injustice (Ortiz et al., 2013), which fact is vital to our analytical perspective: economic deprivation fuels populism and its mobilising effects (Spruyt et al., 2016) because discontent fosters the conflict between the elite and the people (Maher et al., 2022). Populists stimulate the feeling of deprivation, and those who suffer from it are more convinced if the responsibility for the grievance is placed outside the in-group individual and shifted towards the elite (Boeynaems et al., 2022; Spruyt et al., 2016). We included economic deprivation in this analysis because ample academic work analysing issues that possibly pave the way for populism suggests that economic deprivation and relative deprivation can be important predictors of populist attitudes (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). The former (economic deprivation) revolves around the observation that since the onset of neoliberal economic policies, economic inequality has been worse than in the 1950s or 1960s, even in many Western countries (Piketty, 2014, 2020). Relative deprivation is the perception that relies on the following thought process: “When I think about what I have compared to others, I feel deprived” (Callan et al., 2008, p. 1518). Relative deprivation, among many other attitudes, is a predictor of populist attitudes (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) and citizens’ participation in political gatherings (Gonthier & Guerra, 2022). Both economic and relative deprivation are rooted in economic injustice, thus we assume that they might be connected to media populism.

## Populism by the media

In his influential work, Benjamin Krämer argues that “media populism is neither political in a narrow sense, nor strictly apolitical, but political in a wider sense” (Krämer, 2014, p. 54). Researchers argue that media populism is a matter of degree and not a universal feature shared by every media channel (Krämer, 2014). Scholars have also revealed that media populism consists of three subcategories, namely populism through the media,

populist citizen journalism and populism by the media (Esser et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2018). We chose *populism by the media* as our conceptual research perspective for the following reason: populism by the media takes place when media coverage utilises “crisis narratives, people-centrism, blame frames, overly generalizing ‘us versus them,’ anti-elite, and anti-outgroup perspectives that are characteristic of populist communication” (Ragragio, 2022b, p. 783).

We presume that the news coverage of protests fits the description above because anti-elitism and the general will of the people are expected to emerge in the analysis. Journalistic ideology and the principle of the free press incorporate anti-elitist attitudes, viewing the media as the “fourth estate” that functions as the objective scrutiniser of the ruling establishment (Esser et al., 2016; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Supporting the aforementioned theoretical argument, Andersson (2010) also claims that political and media populism have one common feature: anti-elitism bias. Besides that, Wayne and Murray (2009) argue that British journalists overreact to the professionalisation of political communication by cynicism towards the elite and by emphasising the shortcomings of political agents. Anti-establishment populism in the media suggests that politicians must be responsive to people’s concerns and supports democratic procedures (de Maeyer & Trudel, 2016; Wettstein et al., 2018). Considering the media’s “fourth estate” position, its criticism of elites, and frustration with the routines of the mainstream political elites, we outline the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Journalists utilise anti-elitist cues more frequently in their coverage of demonstrations than they refer to economic deprivation as the motivation of protesters.

We argue that besides anti-elitism, articulating the people’s demands is also a vital feature of populism by the media because journalists might “see themselves as true representatives of the perspective, if not the will of the people” (Krämer, 2018, p. 17). In other words, the people-centrist style might appear in coverage because journalists intend to articulate the demands of the masses (Wettstein et al., 2018). Economic reasons might also foster a people-centrist style, as this type of storytelling is much easier to sell to wider audiences (Wettstein et al., 2018). Finally, ample empirical evidence proves that significant people-centrist bias prevails in the content and quality of tabloid and weekly news outlets (Wettstein et al., 2018). Therefore, our second hypothesis is the following:

**H2:** Journalists utilise the general will of the people more frequently in their coverage of demonstrations than they refer to economic deprivation as the motivation of protesters.

Although scientific literature on media populism has been published, there has been little research that quantifies the proportion of populist cues in newspapers. Specifically, Wettstein and colleagues (2018) found that weekly broadsheet newspapers are more prone to utilise anti-elitist discourse than people-centrism. However, the study above

also highlighted that besides anti-elitism, people-centrist bias was also significant in broadsheet newspapers in nine European countries (Wettstein et al., 2018). In turn, Hameleers and Vliegenthart (2020) found that people-centrism spectacularly outperforms anti-elitism in Dutch media outlets. Since the empirical results on the extent and ratio of people-centrism and anti-elitism within media populism vary, we outline our first research question:

**RQ1:** To what extent do journalists utilise the general will of the people, anti-elitism, and economic deprivation in coverage when they describe the motivation of protesters?

Finally, the three features discussed above consist of several content items<sup>3</sup> that might emerge in news coverage. For instance, “economic deprivation” implies four elements: housing, low wages, austerity, and high prices for travel and food. These items were created deductively. Consequently, we aim to scrutinise the extent to which they are depicted as possible motivations for demonstrators. Therefore, our second research question is:

**RQ2:** Which item is portrayed as the most common motivation for demonstrations in the coverage of protests?

## Materials and methods

### *Data collection*

We selected the BBC, CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* as the sources of the analysed news articles on demonstrations. We chose the media above because they are among the top ten most popular news websites in the world (Majid, 2022), and some of them have ideological biases, while others have rather neutral political positions: *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* are closer to the left-wing, Fox News is closer to the right-wing, while CNN and BBC have rather neutral ideological positions (Budak et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014). Moreover, since we were unsure of the magnitude of national political biases in news coverage in countries where autocratic political leaderships are in charge, we decided to analyse the above five sources that possibly have less bias towards the protesters in their content. We collected news from these sites between 2010 and 2020, including eleven years of protest coverage. We used the news websites’ search engines to find relevant coverage using two keywords: *protest(s)* and *demonstration(s)*. We disregarded filtering demonstration size in terms of the number of participants. Consequently, smaller protests with a few participants and mass demonstrations with tens of thousands of attendees were also part of the analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> We refer to content item(s) as “item(s)” in the rest of the study.

We included countries with a population of at least one million, and where at least three news websites covered the same demonstration. We excluded countries with less than one million inhabitants because most news outlets above tend to disregard protests in these territories. Overall, 108 countries fitted our criteria (see Figure 1), including 469 items of news coverage of protests. The aggregated population of the analysed countries is approximately 7.033 billion, and therefore, our analysis focuses on global protest coverage in a selected number of news organisations in two countries.

We analysed one specific demonstration from each country. For a specific demonstration to be included in our database, we adhered to the following criteria: at least three news outlets for the protest to be coded needed coverage. If several demonstrations emerged within the same country in the analysed time frame, we chose the one covered to the greatest extent (namely, by each media outlet). Similarly to Ortiz and colleagues' work (2013), this analysis does not screen for one specific protest type (violent demonstrations, riots, strikes) over another (non-violent demonstrations).



*Figure 1:*  
*Countries highlighted in green are included in the analysis*  
 Source: Compiled by the authors.

### **General description**

This study relies on two methods. We chose manual quantitative content analysis to reach high validity and sufficient reliability. As a result, we provided codebooks and training sessions for two coders who conducted a quantitative manual content analysis by searching for items such as 1. housing, 2. low wages, 3. austerity and 4. high prices



for travel and food that are parts of the economic deprivation factor. In other words, all three cues (e.g. anti-elitism, the general will of the people and economic deprivation) are factors constituted by the items (Table 1). Finally, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to demonstrate how the items constitute the factors and to what extent anti-elitism, the general will of the people and economic deprivation emerge in the coverage of protests.

### ***The protocol for the manual quantitative content analysis and intercoder reliability***

Two PhD candidates who are proficient in English coded the coverage. Three training sessions provided sufficient knowledge on possible items that might connect to the “general will of the people”, “anti-elitism” and “economic deprivation”. Moreover, we introduced all items (see the next section) that could be the components of the presumed factors. Coders worked with written texts only, including titles, subtitles, leads, the body of the text and photo captions. Additionally, if journalists embedded tweets within the news, the written contents of the post were also coded. Coders identified items using binary codes, where “0” means the absence and “1” is the item’s presence. We note that coding was conducted on items only. Later, these items constituted the three main factors.

We followed Neuendorf’s (2017) suggestion and selected an 11% database sample to measure intercoder reliability. Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$  was utilised to calculate intercoder reliability using ReCal (Freelon, 2013). The general will of the people reached the lowest reliability (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 0.67$ ), followed by anti-elitism (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 0.841$ ) and economic deprivation (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 0.958$ ). The general will of the people factor has acceptable reliability, while the other two factors have high reliability (Guo et al., 2020).

In the next section, we introduce the deductive items and their typologies. These typologies were parts of the codebook and functioned as the coders’ main instructions. We created easy-to-understand coding typologies because we assumed that reading articles is energy-consuming for coders. Therefore, a straightforward coding guide was vital to pursue high reliability. We also supplied examples for every item to demonstrate what a specific item typology means to make coders’ work as consistent as possible.

### ***Items and factors***

This section introduces the items that are parts of the specific, assumed factors. It is important to note that journalist(s) could utilise several of the following items in the same news articles. In this scenario, every perceived item was coded within the same coverage. When protests are not covered, we understand them as “missing value”, and when protests are covered, but features of media populism are missing, their values are zero.

## F1 – General will of the people

The problem in outlining general will connects to Laclau's (2005) claim, and the observations of other scholars (de Nadal, 2021), that defining the *volonté general* is highly problematic. Therefore, the demands of protesters that were emphasised in the coverage were coded. Since we were analysing populism by the media and not the attitudes of demonstrators, our question was: what did journalists find to be emphasised among the protester's demands? We emphasised to the coders that if expressions such as "we want", "we need", "we demand", "we wish", "people want", "people need", "people demand", "people wish", "country wants", "country needs", "country demands" and "country wishes" appear, they need to code the presence of that element in the relevant item(s). The General will of the people factor contains the following items:<sup>4</sup>

- Changes in legislation: amendments that harm the people's rights, welfare, or interests (Bánkuti et al., 2012), for instance, ratifying the increase of labour hours (Schaeffer, 2019)
- Separation of power: if a ruling political regime aims to weaken the checks and balances, for instance, by attacking and depowering the Constitutional Court (Mudde, 2016; Verseck, 2013)
- Sovereignty: the protesters claim that the government is created by and subject to the will of the people, which also emerged during the Arab Spring, evoking popular sovereignty through grassroots contention in the Arab world (Aslanidis, 2017)
- Freedom of speech, media and education: this item includes the free expression of the popular will, an independent media system that is not corrupted by the elite, and the education that is pivotal in providing a better life for the young generation. For illustration, college students at Johannesburg University in South Africa started protesting because tuition fees were raised by 10.5% in 2016 (BBC, 2016)

## F2 – Economic deprivation

Items of economic deprivation are apparent in the coverage of protests when "unemployment", "poverty", "starvation", "recession", "stagnation", "deprivation", or "economic decline" are explicitly articulated. Deductively, we outlined the following four categories of Economic deprivation:

- Housing: unaffordable housing is an enormous challenge for many citizens. For example, the Israeli "J14" movement was established against high housing prices (Schipper, 2017)
- Low wages: extant research proved that protesting for higher wages is among the most frequent demands of demonstrations on a global scale (Ortiz et al., 2013); for example, women in Switzerland protested for higher wages because males

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<sup>4</sup> We utilised capital starting letters in when we referred to factors.

earn significantly more than their female colleagues (Schaverien & Cumming-Bruce, 2019)

- Austerity: the Great Recession affected many countries in the 2010s; in Europe, demonstrations in Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain (PIIGS) were primarily fuelled by austerity measures (Accornero & Ramos Pinto, 2015)
- High prices for travel and food: increasing fares for public transport, water supply and food might mobilise citizens with extreme intensity. For instance, mass demonstrations in Brazil started because the bus ticket fee increased by 20 cents (Mourão, 2019)

### F3 – Anti-elitism

If a news article explicitly claimed that a demonstration was an anti-government protest, coders were instructed to code the “Protest the elite” item with “1”. If the article outlined that “anti-government” protests emerged because frauds were revealed on a moral basis, the coders were asked to code both the “Protest the elite” and “Corruption/frauds” items with “1”. It is important to mention that if coverage suggests that the elite is inexperienced, incompetent, etc., that is not enough to code the presence of populist anti-elitism because these allegations refer to the lack of abilities but not to corruptness. Populist anti-elitism revolves around moral issues such as disregarding the people’s will or grievances, misleading the citizens, risking their well-being, welfare, security, stealing from public funds, and so on (Hameleers, 2018; Laclau, 2005). Anti-elitism consists of the following items:

- Protest the elite: the failure of political representation and political systems means that the political elite disregards fulfilling the people’s demands; therefore, citizens express their discontent by joining demonstrations and explicitly opposing the political elite. A notable example is the Arab Spring, which can be considered a remarkable chain reaction in which protesters demanded democratic institutions and the freedom of expression (Aslanidis, 2017)
- Corruption/frauds: suspicious transactions to tax havens, nepotism, and alleged electoral frauds might fuel demonstrations (Dimitrova, 2018). In Romania, which is one of the most corruption-plagued members of the European Union, for example, protesters demanded the termination of the government because of the unbearable volume of its economic scandals (Agence France-Presse, 2018)
- Social media: this item seems irrelevant to anti-elitism, but former studies have demonstrated that social media is vital in resisting the establishment (Heiss et al., 2020). The mobilisation of the masses against the political elite via social media has become a well-functioning practice, especially since the Arab Spring, when communication between the organisers and protesters was essential in mobilising citizens (Comunello & Anzera, 2012). Unsurprisingly, many autocratic regimes shut down social media within their territory to prevent large, nationwide protests.

*Table 1:  
Factors and their constituent items*

<b>F1 – General will of the people</b>	<b>F2 – Economic deprivation</b>	<b>F3 – Anti-elitism</b>
Changes in legislation	Housing	Protest the elite
Separation of power	Low wages	Corruption/frauds
Sovereignty	Austerity	Social media
Freedom of speech, media and education	High prices for travel and food	

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

*Table 2:  
Factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha*

<b>Item name</b>	<b>F1 General will of the people</b>	<b>F2 Economic deprivation</b>	<b>F3 Anti-elitism</b>	<b>Explained variance (%)</b>
Changes in legislation	.448			69
Separation of power	.9			
Sovereignty	.722			
Freedom of speech, media and education	.864			
<i>alpha</i>	.665			
Housing		.744		74.49
Low wages		.726		
Austerity		.753		
High prices		.756		
<i>alpha</i>		.547		
Social media			.643	54.98
Anti-elitism			.765	
Corruption/frauds			.807	
<i>alpha</i>			.58	

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

Items were measured on a 5-point scale, where values represent the number of different journal outlets in which an item appeared. Measurements and calculations were aggregated on a country level; thus, there were 108 units of analysis for each item. For a unit, the maximum value (5) was added if a report containing the corresponding item was published in all five analysed newspapers.

As stated above, eleven items were grouped into three main factors based on theoretical considerations. To test the reliability of our factors, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Moreover, as a post hoc reliability test, we calculated Cronbach's alpha for testing the internal consistency of the three main factors. Items, the composition of the main factors, the results of the CFA, and Cronbach's alpha values are reported in Table 2. Concerning the number of items under our factors (3 and 4) and following Taber's (2018) instructions, Cronbach alpha values higher than 0.5 are acceptable if the number of items is lower than five; we considered our alphas reliable.

To address our hypothesis, we tested the mean differences between our factors. As two factors (Factor 1 and Factor 2) entail four items, while the third factor entails three items, we normalised the attributed values. For those factors with four items, the value range was originally  $5 \times 4 = 20$ , while the value range was  $5 \times 3 = 15$  for the third factor with three items only. Thus, we divided the final scores by four for factors with four items, and the final scores were divided by three in the case of the factor with three items. As a result, while keeping the original distribution of values, all factors have the same value range (1–5) after normalisation, and thus, we were able to compare the mean scores of the factors.

## Results

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test showed that none of our three factors has a normal distribution, so mean differences were measured by non-parametric (Wilcoxon rank-sum) tests. Mean differences were found to be statistically significant between all the analysed factors ( $p < 0.01$  for F1/F2,  $p < 0.001$  for F2/F3,  $p < 0.001$  for F1/F3).

*Table 3:*  
*Mean differences between factors*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
F1 General will of the people	108	0–5	.683	.6699
F2 Economic deprivation	108	0–5	.354	.9295
F3 Anti-elitism	108	0–5	1.1	1.0949

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

As Table 3 shows, we found the highest mean values in the case of Factor 3, followed by Factor 1 and Factor 2. In other words, “Anti-elitism” is the most dominant populist cue *depicted* as a driving force of demonstration, followed by the “General will of the people” and Economic deprivation. These findings validated H1 and H2: both Anti-elitism and the General will of the people outperform Economic deprivation. The outcomes above

suggest that the analysed newspapers' coverage imply populism by the media rather than focusing on economic challenges that might have fuelled protesters' discontent. The results regarding RQ1 are in contrast to Hamelers and Vliegthart's (2020), and aligned with Wettstein and colleagues' (2018) findings: "Anti-elitism" outperforms the "General will of the people", and "Economic deprivation" suggesting that journalists rather characterise citizens' discontent toward the elite than introducing protesters' demands and economic challenges. Therefore, the outcomes suggest that this form and extent of media populism primarily focuses on depicting the political elite as failing leaders who have lost the trust of the demonstrators.

*Table 4:*  
*Mean values for the individual items and main factors*

<b>Item</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Protest the elite	2.7315	1.806
Changes in legislation	1.1944	1.721
Factor 3 Anti-elitism	1.1	1.094
Corruption/frauds	.9074	1.450
Social media	.713	1.119
Factor 1 General will of the people	.683	.6699
Sovereignty	.6111	1.324
High prices	.5556	1.355
Freedom of speech, media, and education	.5278	1.054
Austerity	.4722	1.226
Separation of power	.3981	1.049
Factor 2 Economic deprivation	.354	.9295
Low wages	.3333	.8203
Housing	.0556	.2676

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

Besides the main factors, we also calculated mean values for the individual items. Results are reported in descending order in Table 4. Consequently, we answer RQ2: the mean values show that "Protest the elite" is the most frequent item, followed by "Changes in legislation" item, and the "Anti-elitism" factor. Again, the results above suggest that resisting the elite is the primary feature of the protest coverage, followed by an item attached to the "General will of the people". In turn, items dealing with economic discontent are not among the prominent frames that characterise the narratives on demonstrations.

## Discussion

Scholars argue that the relationship between the media and populism is ambivalent, and mainstream media outlets might contribute to the rise of populism as they are not just the “source of descriptions of society, but they are themselves subject to politicized descriptions of society” (Krämer, 2018, p. 17). Our results provided several contributions to the scholarly discussion on populism by the media. Our analysis revealed that there are coherent factors that we can consider in the analysis of populist communication as they appear in the coverage of reporting on demonstrations. Of these factors, two are frequently used in studies on political populism, namely “anti-elitism” and referring to “the general will of the people” (Akkerman et al., 2014). Our analysis shows that these characteristics of the populist communication phenomenon can also be found in news coverage, implying that anti-elitism is potentially a more general feature of contemporary mass communication. This outcome corresponds to other studies that found that anti-elitism might be a general characteristic of citizens without reference to their populist attitudes (Zsolt et al., 2021).

The interaction between the elites and citizens should be the fundamental feature of democracies (Dimitrova, 2018). However, researchers argue that the distances between these groups have increased in the last couple of decades (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). For instance, the case of Central and Eastern Europe is relevant, where anti-government mass demonstrations increased in the 2010s, compared to the 1990s and 2000s (Clark & Regan, 2021).<sup>5</sup> Regarding the theoretical arguments and experiences above, our finding is important because it shows that the analysed (online) quality news outlets imply a considerable anti-elitist feature in their coverage, suggesting the increasing cleavage between the political elite and citizens (Esser et al., 2016). The anti-elitist feature is introduced via the protesters’ frustration with the political elite, while direct criticism from journalists towards the establishment rarely appears in the scrutinised news. Instead, journalists embed indirect criticism in coverage by introducing the irreconcilable opposition between the establishment and the protesters. Based on the analysed news, citizens are predominantly depicted as desperate outcasts who feel discontent and disappointment with the political elite (Portos, 2021). Protesters are depicted as opposed groups to the political elite because they can feel that the current establishments are morally failed, corrupt, and, in many instances, oppressive (Aslanidis, 2017).

Although journalists and editors had no control over the demands of anti-elitist protesters, they could decide how the coverage was framed (Ragragio, 2022a). In other words, the journalists or editors could decide – in the cases of anti-government protests – whether they emphasised that which the demonstrators were demanding from the political elite (e.g. implying the general will into the news) or introduced the role

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5 We provided Table 5 (see Appendix) based on the Mass Mobilization Project (Clark & Regan, 2021), which collects anti-government demonstrations globally. In Table 5, we introduce data on mass mobilisations (50+ participants) from Central and Eastern European countries between 1990 and 2020. We inserted every Central and Eastern European country that existed or was established in the first half of the 1990s. On the other hand, we excluded Montenegro and Kosovo, which declared their independence in 2006 and 2008. Besides, we also disregarded the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, which ceased to exist in the first half of the 1990s.

economic deprivation was playing in anti-establishment demonstrations, if any. Based on the results above, we argue that populism by the media is fuelled primarily by protesters' hostile attitudes towards the political elite because readers might pay increased attention to proliferating political frustrations. At this point, the question is how and to what extent journalists add the *volonté general* and (if applicable) deprivation-driven motivations to the coverage of protests. We reflect first on the general will of the people, and then we discuss how our findings on economic deprivation relate to former studies.

The people-centrist aspect of media populism is apparent in our scrutiny because the constituent items of the general will are depicted as the motivations of protesters. This outcome is aligned with former findings where the increasing presence of people-centrism was perceived within popular and mainstream news outlets (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020). In our paper, the second most frequently perceived item is “changes in legislation”, which is a constituent of the “general will of the people” factor. This item reflected on demonstrations that started as an opposition to legislation that might harm citizens. This finding is also a considerable one because journalists articulated the will of the protesters as contrasted demands to unpopular measures. In other words, journalists might speak indirectly on behalf of the people, such as in the case of Guatemala, where news showed that demonstrations started because the establishment approved budget cuts on health care and education (Wirtz & Kitroeff, 2020). Journalist attitudes and the ideology of the free press imply the articulation of the people's discontent (Esser et al., 2016), which is spectacular in the scrutinised news that introduces citizens' anxieties when unpopular legislation occurs.

Researchers argue that citizens with populist attitudes support direct democracy more than their non-populist peers (Mohrenberg et al., 2021). To some extent, our findings on the two most frequent items (“protest the elite” and “changes in legislation”) corroborate Mohrenberg and colleagues' (2021) results from the angle of media coverage. Our findings suggest that protesters are depicted in several articles as anti-establishment demonstrators who exercise their right to articulate their discontent by protesting when harmful legislation emerges. Since politicians submit, accept, or reject legislative proposals in contemporary representative systems, demonstrators might feel that protesting is their only democratic opportunity to resist legislation that harms democracy, transparency, or well-being. Populism by the media also shows that people who react to unpopular legislation by gathering in public spaces are willing to participate or reflect on decision-making processes. In other words, populism by the media might support the exercise of democratic rights (Mouffe, 2018) from at least two perspectives. First, it introduces the sensitivity of protesters when they feel that painful legislative decisions harm them. Second, the supportive framing of protests might foster empathy toward demonstrators within and beyond the borders of the affected area (Harlow et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that populism by the analysed media is close to this phenomenon's inclusionary version (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013) because journalists avoided the utilisation of the protest paradigm, which delegitimises the demonstrations through the use of negative frames (Brown & Harlow, 2019; Gruber, 2023; Mourão, 2019; Rak, 2021).

Regarding economic deprivation, Ortiz and colleagues (2013) argue that financial grievance – followed by anti-elitism – was the most frequent motivation of protesters



between 2006 and 2013. In contrast, anti-elitism is the first, while economic deprivation is the last factor in our results. A possible explanation for this outcome is that the Great Recession affected the financial situation of citizens so severely that the motivation of demonstrators was inevitably the frustration of becoming or being deprived between 2006 and 2013. Possibly, as the austerity measures started to cease, so did the number of news articles on protests driven by economic grievances.

The study has specific limitations. It focuses on a single protest per country, which precludes the generalisability of our results. Although many quotes from protesters were embedded into the coverage to introduce the demonstrators' demands and grievances, we did not aim to prove whether protesters or demonstrations were populist because we did not implement comprehensive surveys or experimental methods. Besides that, local newspapers are also missing from our sample due to language barriers. We did not differentiate between coverage of democratic and authoritarian states because had we focused on this separation, we would have had to imply other concepts, such as populism in democracies and authoritarian systems, which was beyond our conceptual background, and would rather have pushed this paper's direction into the realm of political science that focuses on ideologies and governance rather than communication and journalism studies. Finally, we did not analyse geographical and geopolitical differences, so further analysis should decide if geographical scrutiny can find statistically significant differences across world regions regarding the potential motivations of protesters.

## Appendix

*Table 5:*  
*Mass anti-government demonstrations*  
*in Central and Eastern European Countries between 1990–2020*

Country	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2020
Albania	4	1	42
Belarus	30	24	22
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12	10	31
Bulgaria	72	21	24
Czech Republic	8	10	28
Croatia	11	11	20
Estonia	11	22	4
Hungary	18	20	33
Latvia	27	19	18
Lithuania	17	21	8
Moldova	28	41	41
North Macedonia	17	22	40

Country	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2020
Poland	62	17	40
Romania	119	11	72
Russia	41	41	100
Slovakia	15	14	25
Slovenia	11	10	11
Ukraine	16	28	105
Total	519	343	664

Source: Clark & Regan, 2021

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