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Keys to populism? Exploring varieties of mainstream populist discourse through key item analysis

Abstract

Despite extensive research, populism remains one of the most strongly contested concepts relating to political language. This study aims to contribute to its understanding by putting forward an approach to identifying markers of populist communication, which draws on the Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies toolkit. In order to test the “populist Zeitgeist” hypothesis (Mudde, 2007), and to fill the gap in research on populism in Eastern Europe, this methodology is then applied to a corpus of Polish mainstream politicians’ election campaign speeches. The results point to the populist contagion, provide counter-evidence to the claims of a transitory nature of populism and show significant variation, despite the relatively subtle ideological differences between the analysed parties. This suggests that populism should not be considered merely as an attachment to a “host” (usually extreme) ideology, but rather as a complex discursive phenomenon in its own right.

Keywords

Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), election campaign speeches, key item analysis, political discourse, populism.

Abstrakt

Pomimo licznych badań, populizm pozostaje jednym z najbardziej spornych pojęć w obrębie języka politycznego. Niniejsza praca ma na celu przyczynienie się do jego zrozumienia poprzez zaproponowanie podejścia polegającego na identyfikacji wykładników komunikacji populistycznej za pomocą metod stosowanych w badaniach dyskursu wspomaganym korpusowo (ang. *Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies*, CADS). Aby przetestować hipotezę „populistycznego Zeitgeistu” (Mudde, 2007) i wypełnić lukę w badaniach nad populizmem w Europie Wschodniej, metodę tę zastosowano do korpusu przemówień wyborczych polskich polityków głównego nurtu. Wyniki wskazują na zażalenie populizmem, dostarczają dowodów przeciwnych tezom o przejściowym charakterze populizmu oraz wskazują na znaczną zmienność, pomimo stosunkowo subtelnych różnic ideologicznych między analizowanymi partiami. Sugeruje to, że populizmu nie należy postrzegać jedynie jako dodatku do „głównej” (zazwyczaj skrajnej) ideologii, ale raczej jako złożone zjawisko dyskursywne samo w sobie.

Słowa kluczowe

analiza jednostek kluczowych, badania dyskursu wspomaganie korpusowo, dyskurs polityczny, populizm, przemówienia wyborcze.

1. Introduction

Populism is simultaneously one of the most widely used and most poorly understood concepts relating to the language of politics. In fact, it is so frequently put into question that a whole new level of meta-reflexivity has emerged, where it is now customary to “acknowledge the acknowledgment” of the contested nature of populism (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 382). In spite of the occasional claim that it should therefore be abandoned, most researchers nevertheless agree that it remains “too central to debates about politics from Europe to the Americas to simply do away with” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 5).

Recently, in particular, populism has been discussed above all with respect to the political transformations across Europe. However, partly due to the lack of a consensus regarding the nature of populism, prior qualitative and purely quantitative research suffers from a number of conceptual and methodological shortcomings, which make it difficult to draw valid conclusions and, in fact, add further to the confusion. Moreover, the focus has mainly been on Western Europe despite the evidence that populism might actually be more significant in the East (Hawkins et al., 2019), as well as on the fringes of the political spectrum despite the repeated claims of a “populist Zeitgeist”, i.e., an increasing adoption of populist rhetoric by mainstream politicians (Mudde, 2007). This study addresses these research gaps by examining populist communication in Poland using methods of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), which combine the strengths of qualitative and

quantitative approaches, and eliminate some of their respective weaknesses. The main goal of the investigation is to contribute to the understanding of populism as a general phenomenon and its specific manifestations in Eastern Europe (which are likely to differ from those observed in other parts of Europe and the world). At the same time, the study aims to answer calls (Demata et al., 2020, p. 12) for the development of a more rigorous and comprehensive methodological framework of identifying populist discourse in large collections of texts by drawing on the CADS toolkit.

2. Previous research into populism

The main point of the current debate on populism is the very definition of the term. Whereas some, following Mudde (2007), define populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (Breeze & Fernández Vallejo, 2019; Napolitano, 2019), others see it as a discursive practice (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013; Polk et al., 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017).¹ This has important theoretical and methodological implications concerning, in particular, units of analysis and measurement scales: populism understood as a discursive practice can be operationalised as a gradational property of individual instances of political messages rather than an intrinsic and relatively permanent attribute of individual politicians and political parties (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). In other words, the discursive approach does not rely on a straightforward binary dichotomy (populist versus non-populist), but is, instead, suited to capture variations in levels and types of populist communication between various political actors as well as across different contexts and over time. Furthermore, unlike the ideational approach, it does not limit the study of populism to the fringes of the political spectrum. While empirical analyses have confirmed that populism tends to manifest itself most strongly at the extremes (Ernst et al., 2017), disregarding the centre means that claims of a “populist *Zeitgeist*” in Europe remain to a large extent unaddressed.²

¹ Laclau’s (2005) conceptualisation of populism as a political logic overlaps to a significant extent with the discursive approach. On the other hand, Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) view of populism as a political style is not discussed here because it focuses narrowly on non-discursive “visual, performative and aesthetic elements” (p. 385), and is therefore less suited to a linguistic analysis; furthermore, it shares many weaknesses with the ideational approach, including the binary division of political actors into populists and non-populists.

² It is important to note here that while populism is often considered to be inherently problematic in both scholarly literature (e.g., contributions to the volume edited by Albertazzi and McDonnell [2008]) and popular discourses (e.g., Demata et al., 2020), the discursive approach to the study of populism (adopted for the purposes of this investigation) is more likely to see it as inevitable in representative democracies (De Cleen, 2019). This is supported by empirical evidence showing that populism may be seen as a latent set of attitudes which exist

Scholars also struggle to agree on a comprehensive list of features constitutive of populism, which would be robust enough to cover all of its varieties and sufficiently precise to distinguish it from other related concepts such as nationalism or, indeed, politics (De Cleen, 2019). Nevertheless, there is interdisciplinary consensus about the core elements of populism, namely that it includes an appeal to a large and homogenous group of people who remain in an antagonistic relationship to an (often illegitimately powerful) out-group, with the speaker positioning herself or himself as the true representative of the former's interests. It is important to note that both groups are constructed discursively and do not necessarily belong to any objective socioeconomic or sociocultural category. In consequence, who belongs to "the people" and who is excluded as well as who "the elites" are and why they threaten the well-being of "the people" is not uniform across different manifestations of populism. For example, for radical right movements, where populist logic is attached to nationalist and conservative ideas, "the people" is an exclusive term that refers to a specific ethno-culturally defined segment of the nation, in contrast to leftist populists who tend to be inclusive of immigrants and minorities. The fact that both the in-group and the out-group are constructed also means that populists are not against elites in general: in fact, they usually are or aspire to become a part of the conventionally-defined elite.

In spite of the difficulties in defining populism, there is surprisingly little discussion about specific examples of what are considered to be typical populist parties or politicians: instead, such claims are often taken at face value. As a result, populism tends to be investigated with respect to political actors who are assumed *a priori* to be populist (e.g., Breeze, 2020; Di Cocco & Monchi, 2022; Wrześniewska-Pietrzak & Kołodziejczak, 2018), leading to self-evident conclusions such as "[t]he populist manifestos contain much more populism [than non-populist manifestos]" (Rooduijn et al., 2014, p. 8). This circular reasoning further complicates the debate over populism's definition since claims about it as a general phenomenon are often based on analyses of selected cases. As a result, each time a new political movement is intuitively identified as populist, but its characteristics diverge from those established previously, the definition needs to be updated (De Cleen, 2019).

There is also the question of how populism should be measured, with a considerable number of studies limited to "the people" aspect of populist discourse (Aiezza, 2019; Napolitano, 2019; Önnersfors, 2019). This is particularly problematic in purely quantitative studies of populism, where numbers of references to the people are taken to indicate degrees of populist

in modern democratic societies and can be "activated" in some contexts, but remain dormant in others (Stanley, 2019).

logic (Rooduijn et al., 2014), whereas, naturally, they might as well be markers of other types of discourse. Nationalism, for instance, is also structured around the claim to represent the people (but as a nation; De Cleen, 2019). In fact, people-related terms have been found to be frequent in political discourse in general across different historical periods, without necessarily signalling a populist orientation (Kieraś & Zawadzka-Paluckta, 2023). Taking the construal of “the other” into consideration is thus crucial for a better understanding of the notion of “the people” (who are mainly construed *ex negativo* in opposition to the out-group) and, ultimately, the understanding of populism in general (Mudde, 2007).

Finally, if populism is a communication style rather than ideology, then the main object of the study should be the text. However, party manifestos, which are the most frequently studied text type (Di Cocco & Monechi, 2022; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Rooduijn et al., 2014), as well as other official documents (Mudde, 2007) are not particularly well-suited to the analysis of the populist logic, which is more likely to manifest itself in direct communication with voters via speeches or social media posts (Hawkins et al., 2019; Polk et al., 2017).

3. Aims of the study

In light of the above, this study investigates populist communication in a corpus of campaign speeches given by mainstream politicians (rather than those espousing more extreme views) in an attempt to test the “populist Zeitgeist” hypothesis and, if it is confirmed, to shed light on the potential differences between its manifestations across the centre of the political spectrum. To this end, it examines linguistic expressions of features which have been associated with populism in prior research. These features are not limited to mentions of the “us vs them” antagonistic dichotomy, which constitutes the cornerstone of populism. Instead they also encompass other, less studied characteristics of populist communication such as references to conflicts and other types of crises (Ekström & Morton, 2017; Ekström et al., 2018; Önnarfors, 2019), displays of emotion (Breeze, 2020; Ekström et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2017), evaluation (Ekström et al., 2018; Napolitano, 2019; Wrześniewska-Pietrzak & Kołodziejczak, 2018), as well as colloquial (Ekström & Morton, 2017; Ekström et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2017) and hyperbolic language (Breeze, 2020; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Considering the relative paucity of research into populism in Eastern Europe (Mudde, 2007; Zienkowski & Breeze, 2019), with the existing studies rarely moving beyond impressionistic, dichotomous descriptions of selected political movements and actors, the analysis focuses on Polish political discourse.

4. Populism in Poland and the 2023 election campaign

Barring traces of populism in the discourse of Solidarity³ and populist “flash” parties of the 1990s, its emergence in Poland is usually traced back to the year 2001 when four new parties entered the Polish Parliament for the first time since the transition from communism (Borowiec, 2024; Stanley & Cześnik, 2019). Two of them tend to be seen as quintessentially populist, considering their strong criticism of the political system and its elites as well as the perception of the common folk as the underdog of the transition: *Samoobrona* (Self-Defence) and *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families, hereinafter referred to as the LPR) (Stanley, 2019). Both, however, soon began losing support, mainly to the benefit of the other two parties which surfaced that same year: *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform, PO) and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS). Despite their common origins, goals and expectations that they should form a governing coalition, PO and PiS eventually followed divergent trajectories: whereas the former remained a mainstream, non-populist party (or so the consensus goes; but see Borowiec, 2020, 2024, for a notable exception), the latter became allies with *Samoobrona* and the LPR, gradually absorbing a significant proportion of their electorates, and becoming more radical and populist in the process (Stanley, 2019). While some researchers argue that populism is a transitory phenomenon, and populists moderate their positions once in office (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), the case of PiS may provide some counterevidence as it is reputed to have retained a strong populist appeal throughout the years in and out of power, even following its landslide victories in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, when it became the first party in post-communist Poland to be able to form a government without a coalition partner (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019).

As had been the case for the preceding two decades, during the 2023 elections the political scene revolved mainly around a strongly polarising rivalry between two parties and their leaders: Jarosław Kaczyński’s PiS and Donald Tusk’s PO. The former party—right-wing, conservative and eurosceptic (one of the major members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament)—had enjoyed a majority rule for eight years preceding the 2023 election. The undisputed leader of PiS is the party’s president, Jarosław Kaczyński. Together with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki they were the main faces of PiS’s election campaign.

³ The Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (formed in 1980) played a key role in ending communist rule in Poland.

The Civic Platform, on the other hand, ruled the country between 2007 and 2015 in coalition with *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (Polish People's Party, PSL), with Donald Tusk as Prime Minister. Originally an economically liberal centrist party, PO slowly evolved towards a slightly more social agenda. It is a member of the Christian democratic European People's Party (EPP). PO led the so-called Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*; KO), an alliance of small centre-left, green, liberal and pro-European parties formed as a reaction to PiS's 2015 election success. Apart from Donald Tusk, the second most active politician in this party was the mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski, who supported his party during the 2023 parliamentary election campaign even though he was not a candidate (for example, he gave the second highest number of campaign speeches, following Tusk).

Apart from these two major forces (PiS and KO), three other parties competed for votes during the 2023 election. The Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*; TD) was a coalition between the conservative and agrarian PSL (also an EPP member) led by Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, and *Polska 2050* (Poland 2050), a new centre or centre-right political party led by Szymon Hołownia. In its slightly eclectic agenda, *Polska 2050* combined moderate economic liberalism with environmentalism and Christian democracy. It was a member of the Renew Europe group. Contrary to the coalitions built around PiS and PO, the Third Way was seen as an alliance of equals formed to depolarise the political scene.

The remaining two parties were *Nowa Lewica* (New Left) formed by left and centre-left parties positioning themselves as part of the democratic opposition, and *Konfederacja* (Confederation), an eclectic coalition of three small far-right anti-systemic parties, which declared no interest in forming a government with either PiS or the other parties. Both parties conducted less conventional election campaigns with very few typical party events in which their leaders could give speeches. Moreover, both attracted less than 10% of the vote.

5. Corpus

The corpus under investigation comprises 182 speeches delivered by the leaders⁴ of KO, PiS and TD between 10 March 2023, when the then governing PiS

⁴ Initially, we aimed to collect speeches given by all candidates. However, most of them did not give more than three short speeches during the entire campaign. We have therefore decided to set a threshold of more than three speeches for a politician to be included in the corpus. This reduced the final number of speakers to the six major figures within their respective political movements: two per each of the three parties with the highest number of votes. This may limit the representativeness of the corpus, but only to some extent as the leaders of

announced the start of the campaign, and 14 October 2023, that is one day prior to the day of the vote. Only speeches longer than ten minutes given at events framed as part of the campaign and directed at the wider public were included: this excludes media briefings and communications related to the position a given politician held at the time (e.g., Prime Minister’s speech at a diplomatic event), which have differing functions. The speakers as well as the number of speeches and tokens each contributed to the corpus are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of the corpus.

	PiS		KO		TD		TOTAL
	Kaczyński	Morawiecki	Tusk	Trzaskowski	Hołownia	Kosiniak-Kamysz	
No. of speeches	36	28	61	16	25	16	182
No. of tokens	123.802	96.557	231.492	58.512	140.516	75.324	726.203
No. of unique tokens	12.356	11.455	22.240	6.878	16.286	11.131	80.346
No. of unique lemmas	5.650	5.718	9.880	3.450	8.003	5.628	38.329

Source: Authors’ own analysis.

The speeches were downloaded from the @videoparlamentpl YouTube channel,⁵ which aggregates this type of data, and transcribed automatically using Whisper⁶ (Radford et al., 2023)—a state-of-the-art automatic speech recognition (ASR) system. We used the largest available model providing the highest transcription quality. Each text was then saved as a separate .txt file, and annotated with metadata specifying the name of the speaker as well as the place and date of the speech. Finally, the corpus was uploaded, lemmatised and POS-tagged in a corpus analysis tool Korpusomat (Saputa et al., 2023),⁷ and then exported for the purpose of the subsequent statistical analysis.

the three parties played a dominant role in shaping the discourses of their respective parties, whereas second-tier politicians were more likely to repeat the dominant messages, rather than contribute any original themes and diverge from the “official” party standpoint.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/@videoparlamentpl/videos>

⁶ <https://openai.com/research/whisper>; <https://github.com/openai/whisper/>

⁷ The corpus is publicly available at: <https://korpusomat.eu/corpus/1734>

6. Methodology

To focus our research on key item analysis, we needed to make some decisions regarding the methodology. The first decision to be made was the selection of the reference corpus. Since our data set is relatively small and of a highly restricted domain, using a large general-purpose corpus as the reference corpus would result in extracting mostly domain-specific vocabulary, typical of political communication in general. A possible alternative could be an extensive and representative corpus of political public speeches but no such corpus exists for Polish. Therefore, we decided to compare parts of the corpus against one another in order to extract items that set the three parties apart. There were at least two possible ways of doing this: we could either compare each subcorpus against the remaining two subsets (ending up with three separate key item lists) or compare the three party subcorpora pairwise (ending up with six lists). Preliminary experiments with the former approach showed that frequencies of some important key items may become “neutralised”. For example, *nadzieja* (‘hope’) is frequent in the speeches of both opposition parties (which is natural for any opposition party in virtually any election campaign). It is therefore key for both KO and TD when only the PiS speeches form the reference corpus, but not when either of the former subsets is compared with the PiS subcorpus in combination with the other opposition party subcorpus as the frequencies of the word in the KO and TD subcorpora balance each other. To mitigate this limitation, we combined the two approaches, and contrasted each subcorpus with the other two separately and in combination. As a result, nine separate key item lists were generated.

Another important consideration was the units of analysis. The most widely used approach in corpus linguistics is to calculate keyness over words (tokens). This is an obvious choice especially when studying English data. However, this approach poses some challenges when applied to highly inflected languages such as Polish, especially in the case of relatively small target corpora. When a given lemma is represented in texts by dozens of variform tokens (potentially representing even more syncretic word forms), it would take a corpus bigger by an order of magnitude to capture a comparable keyness signal than in the case of languages with less diverse inflectional paradigms. Therefore, we decided to perform keyness analysis based on lemmas rather than text forms (words), even though we realise that some information may be lost as a result (e.g., idioms or phrasal compounds are easier to track based on a keyword rather than key lemma list). While the analysis focuses on lemmas, we sometimes employ the term “key word” or “keyword” for ease of reference to prior research on keyness.

Another issue was the choice of a keyness metric. There is an ongoing discussion in corpus linguistics regarding differences between significance test statistics and effect-size statistics as methods for measuring keyness and their appropriateness in various contexts (e.g., Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2018). We have chosen the log-likelihood, the most widely used significance test, as our primary method. The strongest support for this decision comes from the fact that effect-size tests ignore the absolute frequencies and tend to favour less frequent items. In small domain-specific corpora this often means assigning very high keyness values to items that do not occur in the reference corpus at all. Since we wanted to capture domain-specific vocabulary rather than idiosyncrasies of individual speakers, we decided to use the log-likelihood test which is more adequate to our research goals. In order to avoid cutting off the key item lists arbitrarily, we employed Wilson's (2013) Bayesian Factor (BIC) and set its value to 10, which indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis, and thus strong keyness.

Among the identified key items, one of the authors selected words likely to signal populist discourses, based on the criteria discussed above. Specifically, we marked as potentially populist words used to discuss (i) the in-group vs the out-group; (ii) crises and conflict situations; (iii) emotional states; (iv) evaluation; and (v) boosters and maximisers (i.e., emphasisers and words indicating the maximum number of elements in a set, e.g., *everybody*, *never*, *really*). We employed concordance analysis to verify the contexts of use of each item. Initially, this led to a compilation of three lists of potential markers of populism per subcorpus (since each subcorpus was contrasted with the other two separately and in combination), with most potentially populist key items being repeated across two or all three lists, and a smaller proportion of items unique for only one list. These lists were subsequently merged, with duplicates removed, resulting in one list of markers of populism per subcorpus.

7. Results

The analysis has shown that the two parties which have been dominating the Polish political scene for more than two decades, i.e., KO and PiS, were equally likely to resort to populism in their campaign messaging. This stands in contrast to TD, whose third-way consensual communication style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 393) has proven to be largely in keeping with its name. With respect to the former two parties, both relied heavily on discursive strategies associated with populism: between 28% and 42% of all key items identified for the PiS subcorpus were marked as populist (depending on the

reference corpus), whereas these figures were as high as 35% and 47% for the KO subset. The highest numbers of potentially populist words were detected when the KO and PiS subcorpora were contrasted each with the non-populist TD: 47% and 42%, respectively. Nevertheless, as can be observed in Table 2, populist keywords were also identified when KO and PiS were contrasted with each other, providing initial evidence that each favoured its own specific brand of populism, which differed from the one espoused by the political rival.

Table 2. Populist keywords: Statistical information.

PiS	vs KO	vs TD	vs KO & TD	Total
All keywords				
	236	218	301	755
Populist keywords				
	67 (28%)	92 (42%)	105 (35%)	264 (35%)
KO	vs PiS	vs TD	vs PiS & TD	Total
All keywords				
	207	163	219	589
Populist keywords				
	73 (35%)	76 (47%)	94 (43%)	243 (41%)
TD	vs KO	vs PiS	vs KO & PiS	Total
All keywords				
	131	160	174	465
Populist keywords				
	26 (20%)	35 (22%)	26 (15%)	263 (57%)

Source: Authors' own analysis.

At the same time, Table 2 shows that contrasting KO with TD and vice versa elicited lower numbers of keywords in general than contrasting PiS with either one of the other two subcorpora. This points to ideological similarities between the former two parties as well as to their unlikeness to PiS with respect to features going beyond populist communication strategies. From the methodological perspective, it demonstrates the robustness of the criteria applied to identify markers of populism, which are able to point to populist features without conflating them with other elements of political discourse such as ideology.

In total, the analysis has identified more populist keywords for the PiS subcorpus than the KO subcorpus: 264 and 244, respectively. However, when duplicates are excluded, KO prevails slightly with 130 unique populist keywords, compared with 123 such items detected for the PiS subcorpus. TD, in turn, has 88 keywords which might potentially be characteristic of populist communication (43 following the removal of duplicates). The following sections discuss these results in more detail, with each section focusing on one of the five categories of populist keywords: *us vs them* (Section 7.1), crisis and conflict (Section 7.2), evaluation (Section 7.3), emotions (Section 7.4) and boosters and maximisers (Section 7.5).

7.1 *Us vs them*

References to the in-group and the out-group are more characteristic of the speeches given by Jarosław Kaczyński and Mateusz Morawiecki, compared with those delivered by their main political rivals: specifically, 68 and 50 such keywords have been identified for the PiS and KO subcorpora, respectively. In regard to TD, only 25 *us vs them* keywords have been detected, the overwhelming majority of which refer to the coalition itself, as can be observed in Table 3. In other words, one of the most fundamental markers of populism—pitting the in-group against an out-group—is almost non-existent in the campaign discourses of the TD leaders.

Table 3. *Us vs them* keywords.

	PiS (N = 68)	KO (N = 48)	TD (N = 25)
In-group	rodak (compatriot), sprawiedliwość (justice), naród (nation), Rzeczpospolita (republic), emigracja (emigration), polska (poland), prawo (law), nasz (our), zjednoczyć (unite), polak (pole), władza (government), jarosław, polski (polish), emigrant, ludność (people), prawica (right), prowincja (province)	polka (pole, female), polak (pole, male), słowo (word), spotkanie (meeting), kobieta (woman), obywatelski (civic), spotykać (meet), wy (you), polski (polish), dziewczyna (girl), rozmawiać (talk), bohaterka (heroine), ja (I), rudy (redheaded), mój (my), wasz (your), wspólnota (community), spotkać (meet), koalicja (coalition), lider (leader), porozmawiać (talk), wałęsa, nowacka, liderka (leader, female), ojczyzna (homeland)	trzeci (third), szymon, 2050, ludowy (peasant), ty (you), my (we), droga (way), władek, hołownia, psl, stronnictwo (party), twój (your), kosiniak, ludowiec (member of PSL), władysław, kosiniak-kamysz, mój (my), ja (I), wy (you), wspólnota (community), rozmawiać (talk), partyjny (of party)

	PiS (N = 68)	KO (N = 48)	TD (N = 25)
Out-group within the nation	tusk, platforma (platform), droga (way), elita (elite), psl, obywatelski (civic), sojusz (alliance), trzaskowski, donald, mafia, liberalny (liberal, adjective), liberał (liberal, noun), sekta (sect)	władza (government), morawiecki, premier (prime minister), pisowski (of PiS), kaczyński, błaszczak, telewizja (television), lech, pis, ziobro, tvp, czarnek, rządzący (governing), rządowy (of government)	pis, sasin
Out-group outside the nation	nielegalny (illegal), berlin, imigrant (immigrant), niemcy (germany), bruksela (brussels), imigracja (immigration), niemiec (german, noun), niemiecki (german, adjective), zapora (dam), francja (france), merkel, wschód (east), ruski (russian), granica (border), holandia (netherlands), obcy (alien), relokacji (relocation), ogrodzenie (wall), moskwa (moscow), anglia (england), rosjanin (russian), europejski (european), europa (europe), zachód (west), białoruś (belarus), rosja (russia), unia (union), międzynarodowy (international), hiszpania (spain), muzułmański (muslim, adjective), włosy (italy), ukrajiniec (ukrainian, noun), zewnętrzny (outside), kanclerz (chancellor), brukselski (brusselian), islamski (islamist)	europejski (european), migrant, granica (border), europa (europe), unia (union), zachód (west), migracja (migration), chiny (china)	
Mixed	kraj (country), przeciwnik (opponent)		

Source: Authors' own analysis.

The analysis of the us vs them keywords characteristic of the KO and PiS subcorpora sheds light on the differences in the use of populist rhetoric by the two competing parties. Firstly, it shows that the KO politicians were more likely to discuss the in-group as well as relations between its different members: party representatives and the voters, above all (but also leaders of the party and its female members, as discussed below). The aim is to construe KO as being in touch with the people, in contrast to the political opponents who, in a typically populist move, are presented as aloof and disdainful of the common folk, as shown in (1):⁸

(1)

Odwagi, żeby wyjść do ludzi, **nawet** tych, którzy niespecjalnie ciebie czy **mnie** kochają, ale żeby z nimi **rozmawiać**, a nie pogardzać. Nigdy nie będę traktował wyborców **PiS-u** tak jak ta **władza** traktuje **was**, tak jak ta **władza** traktuje większość **Polek i Polaków**.

‘Courage to go out to the people, **even** those who do not necessarily love you or **me**, to **talk** to them, not to show contempt. I will never treat **PiS** voters the way that this **government** treats **you**, the way that this **government** treats the majority of **Polish women** and **men**.’

(Donald Tusk, 15 September 2023, Skarżysko-Kamienna)

Secondly, a notable feature of the discourse of KO are the frequent references to women. For instance, *Polka* (‘Pole’, female) has 286 occurrences in this subcorpus, including in Example (1) above (compared with one and eight occurrences in the PiS and TD subsets, respectively). It is, in fact, its top keyword when the other two subsets in combination form the reference corpus. This can be seen as an attempt to present the speaker and the coalition he represents as particularly respectful of women and protective of their rights—again, in contrast to the governing party, as can be seen in (2):

(2)

Ale **każdy**, kto rozumie, jaka jest sytuacja **Polek**, najmłodszych, nastoletnich **dziewczyn** i najstarszego pokolenia, ten **naprawdę** nie ma prawa powiedzieć sobie, zagłosuję na **PiS** albo na Konfederację i równocześnie, że kocham żonę czy matkę, czy córkę, czy siostrę. **Nikt**, kto chce rzeczywiście odwrócić ten **dramat polskiej kobiety**, **nikt**, kto kocha swoją matkę, córkę, żonę czy siostrę, nie może udawać, że nie wie, jakie piekło oni zgotują **Polkom**. Próbkę już były. Te siedem lat **PiS-u** czy osiem lat **PiS-u** niedługo, to był taki postępujący proces degradacji praw, swobód, godności. Tyle, co udało się uratować, to było w **was**, w **polskich kobietach**.

‘But **everyone** who understands the situation of **women in Poland**, from the youngest, teenage **girls** to the older generation, **really** does not have the right to tell himself, ‘I will vote for **PiS** or Confederation’ and, at the same time, say,

⁸ Note that in (1) and the following examples, items that are key for the given subcorpus are marked in bold.

'I love my wife, mother, daughter, sister'. **Someone** who really wants to change **the plight of Polish women** and loves his mother, daughter, wife or sister cannot pretend not to know that it is going to be hell for **Polish women** under their rule. We have already had a taste. Those seven or, soon, eight years with **PiS** in power have been a continuous process of degradation of our rights, freedoms and dignity. Now we can only save what is still left in **you, in Polish women.**'

(Donald Tusk, 7 October 2023, Płock)

At the same time, as Example (2) demonstrates, women are construed as the last vestiges of liberal democracy under Law and Justice's rule. This type of discourse bears traces of gender essentialism which sees women as superior to men as a result of their extraordinary power of resistance as well as their omniscient and intuitive awareness of what is wrong with the current government, as illustrated in (3):

(3)

Że to **kobiety** lepiej rozumieją, że ostatnią rzeczą, jaka jest **Polsce** potrzebna to są awantury, to są jakieś idiotyzmy na górze, to są jakieś wojny.

'That it is **women** who understand better that the last thing **Poland** needs now are rows, idiocy at the top, wars.'

(Donald Tusk, 10 October 2023, Łódź)

In a similar vein, the leaders of KO often stress the high status of women within the party structure as well as their crucial role in a future government.

Thirdly, apart from criticising the governing party, KO rarely discussed out-groups. This stands in contrast to the discourse of PiS, which focused less on its domestic opponents than on enemies from outside of the nation/state. Specifically, more than half of the us vs them keywords identified for the latter subcorpus refer to different entities and agents construed as standing in opposition to the Polish people, but operating from beyond Polish borders, ranging from immigrants (Muslims, in particular), through supranational institutions (mainly the EU), to European foreign powers. The latter include both countries with which Poland has historically had an inimical relationship (such as Germany and Russia) as well as those which are usually considered to be friendly or, at least, neutral, such as Spain and the Netherlands, but which represent values seen as threatening to the Polish traditional way of life. These countries are presented as being in decline, in contrast to Poland which is bound to reach their levels of development soon provided that it does not deviate from the right political path. Consider (4) below:

(4)

Polska pierwszy raz w swojej historii, także tutaj na ziemi łomżyńskiej, ma szansę żyć, **Polacy** i Polki, na poziomie mieszkańców z **bogatych krajów Zachodu**.

Ale bez tych problemów, które oni tam mają. Bez **nielegalnej imigracji**, bez strzelanin na ulicach. ... Czyli to, co kiedyś było niedościgłym marzeniem, dzięki rządowi **Prawa i Sprawiedliwości** i dzięki ciężkiej pracy **Polaków**, także tych, którzy wracają z **emigracji**, staje się marzeniem możliwym do spełnienia. ... Bo nigdy **Polska** nie była na tym poziomie jak tamte **bogate kraje Zachodu**. Trzeba o tym **wszystkim** wiedzieć wam wszystkim, **drodzy rodacy**. A dzisiaj tak. Bo nas też okradali, ale przede **wszystkim**, bo nas niszczyli, mordowali, gwałcili, **rabowali**, jak ostatnie 250 lat. **Niemcy i Ruscy** przede **wszystkim**. I ci **Niemcy** i ci **Ruscy**. Ci **Ruscy**, z którymi **Donald Tusk**, jak się wczoraj okazało w filmie, podpisał, dał zgodę na wymianę danych wywiadowczych pomiędzy **Polską Służbą Kontrwywiadu** i **ruskimi** służbami specjalnymi FSB. ... Zobaczcie, co to za człowiek za **niemieckie** podle ordery. Ja bym się brzydził wziąć do ręki ten order. ... Za te **niemieckie** srebrniki, za te ordery, za czapkę gruszek jest gotowy sprzedać interesy **Polski**. I całą **Polskę**.

‘For the first time in its history, **Poland**, including the Łomża region, and **Poles** have a chance to live like citizens of the **rich Western countries**. But without the problems they face there. Without **illegal immigration**, without street shootings. ... What used to be an unattainable dream is now about to come true thanks to the **Law and Justice** government and the hard work of **Poles**, including those returning from **emigration**. ... **Poland** was never on the same level as those **rich Western countries**. You need to know **all** this, **dear compatriots**. But it is today. Yes, they have been stealing from us but, above **all**, they have been destroying, murdering, raping and **robbing** us for the last 250 years. **Germans** and **Russians**, above **all**. Those **Germans** and those **Russians**. Those **Russians** with whom **Donald Tusk**, as we saw yesterday in that video, signed an agreement to exchange intel between the **Polish** Counterintelligence Services and the **Russian** special forces, FSB. ... What kind of man sells himself for a filthy **German** medal? I would be repulsed to ever touch that medal. ... For **German** silver,⁹ for medals, for a hatful of pears, he is willing to sell **Polish** interests. And **Poland** itself.’

(Mateusz Morawiecki, 4 October 2023, Łomża)

The enemies standing in the way of Poland’s reaching this goal, however, are not only numerous but also interconnected, as Example (4) demonstrates: the domestic opposition under the leadership of Donald Tusk is purported to act in the interests of both Russia and Germany, which are said to have been complicit in the attempted destruction of Poland for a very long time; whereas Western Europe in general is linked to the threat of immigration from Africa and Asia. This bears traces of what Hofstadter (1964) refers to as the “paranoid style” in (populist) politics, whose central characteristic is precisely the concern about an all-encompassing conspiracy in pursuit of taking control of the given country and changing its most fundamental values.

⁹ This is a biblical reference to the thirty pieces of silver for which Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus.

7.2 Crisis and conflict

Similarly, the PiS politicians are more insistent on discussing conflict and crisis situations than their political rivals. As Table 4 demonstrates, these discussions tend to focus on verbal aggression as well as physical violence and damage to property. The main victim is the in-group conceived broadly as the entire Polish nation—in which case, the perpetrators are usually foreign agents, as shown in Example (4) above—or narrowly as the PiS party—then, the attacker is often the domestic opposition, as in Example (5):

(5)

... oni mają **potężną** przewagę medialną i **plują** tym jadem, zieją trucizną, **kłamstwami**, hejtem i obrzucają nas wyzwiskami. Mówią najgorsze słowa, jakie widziały kampanie wyborcze do tej pory. Nie będę tego przytaczał. To jest ich polityka nienawiści.

‘... they have a **huge** media advantage and **spit** their venom, belch out poison, **lies** and hate and throw insults against us. They say the worst words an election campaign has ever seen. I won’t quote them. This is their politics of hate.’

(Mateusz Morawiecki, 7 October 2023, Mysłówice)

The political rivalry is not, therefore, perceived as a conflict between equals; instead, the PiS leaders see themselves as weaker and more vulnerable (despite their eight years in power), whereas the opposition is purported to hold sway over Polish political and social life, for instance as a result of their control over the media.

Table 4. Crisis and conflict keywords.

PiS (N = 16)	KO (N = 6)	TD (N = 1)
zwyciężyć (win), bronić (defend), kłamstwo (lie, noun), atak (attack), kłamać (lie, verb), przeciw (against), strzec (protect), zniszczyć (destroy), obronić (defend), rabunek (robbery), broń (weapons), zbrodnia (crime), rabować (rob), grozić (threaten), pluć (spit), szkalować (slander)	kłamstwo (lie, noun), kłamać (lie, verb), konflikt (conflict), szczuć (antagonise), ukraść (steal), wygrana (win, noun)	spór (dispute)

Source: Authors’ own analysis.

KO, in turn, focuses almost exclusively on their conflict with the governing party, with the strongest keywords in this category referring to the latter’s purported untruthfulness. Similarly, KO attributes property damage

to their political opponents (however, *ukraść* ('steal') is also used metaphorically, with PiS being accused of stealing democracy, the truth and time, among others). TD, on the other hand, has only one keyword pointing to conflict discourses: *spór* ('dispute'). Moreover, it is employed predominantly to discuss the rivalry between KO and PiS (which dates back to the early 2000s), with TD positioning itself as the new power outside of the conflict and, thus, able to judge it as outdated, inappropriate and counterproductive, as shown in (6):

(6)

Świat nie będzie czekał, aż poukładamy swoje **spory** sprzed 20 lat.
 'The world will not wait for us to settle 20-year-old **disputes**.'

(Szymon Hołownia, 28 April 2023, Szczecin)

Thus, not only is TD's discourse revealed to be non-populist; it is, in fact, characterised by a critique of the populist logic which sees the world as divided into antagonistic factions remaining in a perpetual clash.

7.3 Evaluation

The KO leaders displayed a much stronger tendency to evaluate people, objects and phenomena than their political rivals, as shown in Table 5. At the same time, both KO and PiS were more likely to communicate their disapproval rather than praise. The latter, in particular, has only five clearly positively evaluative keywords, and more than twice as many negative ones. This disproportion is smaller for the KO speeches, where half of all the evaluative keywords are clearly negative (21 items) and 36% are clearly positive (15 items). The TD politicians, on the other hand, followed an inverse strategy by largely avoiding evaluation and criticism in particular, with only one clearly negative evaluative keyword identified for this subcorpus. This, again, points to the divergence in how TD and the other two parties discursively construct the world, including in its political dimension: as driven by relatively amicable processes of consensus-building or a Manichaean struggle, respectively.

Table 5. Evaluative keywords.

PiS (N = 25)	KO (N = 42)	TD (N = 10)
wielki (huge), bogaty (rich), silny (strong), ogromny (enormous), gigantyczny (gigantic), chaos, nadużycie (abuse), przeciętny (mediocre), drogi (expensive), daleki (far), błąd (mistake), grzech (sin), niebezpieczny (dangerous), zwykły (regular), prosty (simple), potężny (powerful), normalność (normalcy), sukces (success), biedny (poor), farbować (dye), niedobry (bad), nędza (misery), lis (fox), rzeczywisty (real), niemały (not small)	nowoczesny (modern), dramatyczny (dramatic), pozytywny (positive), prawdziwy (real), odkleić (detach), niekompetencja (incompetence), krzywda (hurt, noun), autentyczny (authentic), istotny (significant), problem, nieduży (not big), kapitałny (brilliant), odpowiedzialny (responsible), ponury (grim), szczęśliwy (happy), slogan, oczywisty (obvious), krytyczny (critical), ludzki (human), wyjątkowy (exceptional), katastrofa (catastrophe), zło (evil, noun), brudny (dirty), upiorny (ghastly), zły (bad), niekompetentny (incompetent), hipokryzja (hypocrisy), cynizm (cynicism), odważny (brave), cyniczny (cynical), poważny (serious), manipulacja (manipulation), pazerność (greed), przesada (exaggeration), nieudolność (inefficiency), gigantyczny (gigantic), nadzwyczajny (exceptional), zwykły (regular), gotowy (ready), niezależny (independent), fajny (cool), dramat (drama)	dobry (good), ciepły (warm), gospodarny (resourceful), stary (old), ogromny (enormous), święty (saint), kochany (dear), dobro (good, noun), czysty (clean), dramat (drama)

Source: Authors' own analysis.

A closer analysis of the evaluative keywords provides further evidence that the TD leaders often resort to depolarising rhetoric, in contrast to their political opponents. For instance, as demonstrated in (7), the former usually employ the keyword *dobro* ('good' as a noun) to form the phrase *dobro wspólne* ('common good'), but also to denounce polarising discourses which see political competition as a fight between good and evil:

(7)

Zachęcam **was**, żebyście odważnie myśleli o tym, że to nie jest wybór między **dobrem** a złem, między szatanem a najświętszą panią, między Frodo a Saurem, czy jeszcze jakichś innych, których sobie za chwilę w tych rolach obsadzimy. 'I urge **you** to have courage not to think about it as if it were a choice between **good** and evil, Satan and the Holy Mary, Frodo and Sauron, or anyone else we might cast in these roles.'

(Szymon Hołownia, 2 April 2023, Warsaw)

On the other hand, *zło* ('evil' as a noun) is key for the KO speeches, where it is mostly employed to argue for an antagonistic view of the world, where the good should be clearly differentiated from the evil and, ultimately, prevail over it (preferably, during the upcoming elections), as shown in Example (8):

(8)

I 15 października prawda zwycięży nad **kłamstwem**. Dobro zwycięży nad **złem**. ... miłość wygra z nienawiścią.

'And on 15 October, the truth will win over **lies**. Good will win over **evil**. ... love will win over hate.'

(Donald Tusk, 21 September 2023, Piła)

While the evaluative keywords characteristic of the KO subcorpus tend to be used predominantly to criticise the governing party and to portray the in-group favourably, the picture is slightly more complex when the PiS speeches are concerned. With respect to the positively evaluative keywords, the PiS leaders tend to use them to describe themselves as well as Poland under their rule, but also to magnify the perceived strength and shrewdness of their enemies, as can be seen in (9):

(9)

Dlatego, że [Lech Kaczyński] był **przeciwnikiem** tej **bardzo potężnej** w **Polsce** frakcji **rosyjskiej**, czy po prostu **rosyjskiej** agentury, **rosyjskiej** grupy wpływu w **naszym kraju**, ale także był **oczywiście przeciwnikiem niemieckiej**.

'Because [Lech Kaczyński] **opposed** the **very powerful Russian** faction in **Poland** or, put simply, **Russian** spies, the **Russian** lobby in **our country**, but he also **opposed** the **German** [lobby], **obviously**.'

(Jarosław Kaczyński, 20 September 2023, Opole)

In a similar fashion, Kaczyński and Morawiecki use negatively evaluative keywords not only to criticise their enemies, but also to denounce their own abuses of power (*nadużycie*), mistakes (*błąd*) and sins (*grzech*), as illustrated in Example (10):

(10)

I warto, jak sądzę, podtrzymywać rządy **Prawa i Sprawiedliwości**, bo chociaż my też nie jesteśmy bez **grzechu** i nie jesteśmy bez **błędów**, bo popełniliśmy **błędy**, a i **grzechy** się zdarzały, ale my **grzechy** karzemy we własnych szeregach. To jednak, w porównaniu z konkurencją, jest, szanowni państwo, niebo a ziemia.

'I believe **Law** and **Justice** should remain in power even though we, too, are not without **sin** and without **mistakes**, we have made **mistakes**, and there have been **sins**, but we punish for **sins** within our ranks. Still, dear ladies and gentlemen, we are like angels, compared with our rivals.'

(Jarosław Kaczyński, 13 October 2023, Gózd)

This self-criticism is, however, always limited as the misdeeds committed by PiS politicians pale in comparison with the depravity of the opposition in yet another instantiation of typically Manichaeic discourse.

7.4 Emotions

KO was also much more likely to use words and expressions pointing at emotional states than TD and, in particular, PiS, as shown in Table 6. In fact, the latter has only two emotion-related keywords: *wstyd* ('shame') and *hańba* ('disgrace'). Both refer to emotions that are said to be provoked by the actions of various out-groups (usually the opposition) or—often as part of the expression *pedagogika hańby/wstydu* ('pedagogy of disgrace/shame')—to describe the purported attempts of the opposition to induce feelings of shame in Poles who should, instead, be proud of their country and its history. The excerpt in (11) illustrates both trends:

(11)

W czasach **Tuska Niemcy** bezczelnie produkowali film, może część z państwa słyszała, **Nasze matki, nasi ojcowie, szkalujący naszych** bohaterów z Armii Krajowej. ... Co za pedagogika **hańby, wstydu?** My, **Polacy**, którzy mamy jedną z najpiękniejszych, jeśli nie najpiękniejszą historię na świecie.

'In **Tusk's** times **Germans** shamelessly produced a movie, some of you may have heard of it, **Our mothers, our fathers, slandering our** Home Army heroes. ... What is this pedagogy of **shame, of disgrace?** We, **Poles**, who have one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful history in the world.'

(Mateusz Morawiecki, 12 October 2023, Rybnik)

Table 6. Emotional state keywords.

PiS (N = 2)	KO (N = 13)	TD (N = 5)
wstyd (shame), hańba (disgrace)	serce (heart), satysfakcja (satisfaction), czuć (feel), pogarda (contempt), emocja (emotion), dziwić (astonish), krzyk (shout, noun), bać (be afraid), kompleks (complex), nadzieja (hope, noun), odwaga (courage), marzenie (dream, noun), szacunek (respect, noun)	nadzieja (hope, noun), docenić (appreciate), szacunek (respect, noun), odwaga (courage), cieszyć (enjoy)

Source: Authors' own analysis.

In a similar way, KO's emotion-related keywords with negative connotations refer to feelings experienced or evoked by PiS, whereas emotions associated with positive values are attributed to the in-group. For example, while the KO leaders present themselves as courageous (see Example (1) above), PiS politicians are construed as gripped by (often unfounded) fear (*bać*) and complexes (*kompleks*). For instance, Rafał Trzaskowski's speech (given in Kalisz on the 13 October 2023, quoted in (12)) indicates that Jarosław Kaczyński's feelings of fear and inferiority are both due to and constrain his parochial and narrow-minded worldview:

(12)

Nie wiem dlaczego; bo nie mówili tam po **polsku**, bo było dużo samochodów, może zobaczył ludzi o innym kolorze skóry, może ktoś się trzymał za ręce; ja tego nie wiem, ale on był przerażony [podczas wizyty w Wiedniu]. ... I on chce nas zarazić tym strachem. Chce nas zarazić tymi swoimi **kompleksami**. Chce nas zarazić tymi resentymentami i **złymi emocjami**.

'I don't know why; because they don't speak **Polish** there, because there were too many cars, maybe he saw someone of a different skin colour, maybe people were holding hands; I don't know why but he was terrified [during a visit to Vienna]. ... And he wants to infect us with this **fear**. He wants to infect us with his **complexes**. He wants to infect us with the resentment and with **negative emotions**.'

This also serves to ridicule the political opponent by suggesting that his experience of the world is so limited that he is afraid of everyday, harmless things (such as cars) and phenomena (including human touch).

The TD leaders, in turn, tended to focus on positive feelings while describing their own emotional states (such as hopefulness) as well as discussing relations between themselves and Polish voters, including the former's respect and appreciation of the latter.

7.5 Boosters and maximisers

Finally, the KO leaders were more likely to use boosters and maximisers than the other two parties, as Table 7 demonstrates. This serves to stress their claims and present them as indisputable, as seen in Example (13):

(13)

... **rządzący** doprowadzili do takiej sytuacji, że **wszyscy** wszystkiego się **boją**. Ja jeszcze raz będę błagał **was wszystkich** bez **wyjątku**: nie dajmy się skłócić.

'... this **government** has caused **everyone** to be **afraid** of everything. I will once again beg **you all**, without **exception**: let us not fight.'

(Donald Tusk, 19 June 2023, Kłodzko)

Such expressions thus relieve the speaker from the expectation to provide more concrete data or evidence for his claims since they are purported to be commonsense and universally shared. It also helps present him as particularly attuned to all Poles' real feelings and beliefs and, thus, better equipped to act on their behalf than his unequivocally erroneous political opponents. At the same time, as Example (13) demonstrates, this often results in exaggerated, hyperbolic statements (note also the choice of the verb "beg", which presents the request as particularly pressing, and the politician as emotionally engaged). Boosters and maximisers play a less significant role in the discourses of PiS, and they are largely avoided by the TD politicians.

Table 7. Boosters and maximisers keywords.

PiS (N = 15)	KO (N = 20)	TD (N = 3)
nawet (even), ciągle (continuously), bardzo (very), oczywiście (obviously), naprawdę (really), rzeczywiście (really), całkowicie (completely), wszelki (every), nieustannie (continually), cały (entire), wszystko (all), ogromnie (hugely), doskonale (perfectly), nieporównanie (incomparably), straszliwie (terribly)	właściwie (actually), naprawdę (really), wszędzie (everywhere), nikt (nobody), wszyscy (everyone), wyłącznie (only), cały (entire), serio (seriously), każdy (everyone), dokładnie (exactly), wyjątek (exception), absolutnie (absolutely), codzienny (everyday, adjective), kompletnie (completely), nawet (even), ciągle (continuously), niesłychanie (extremely), nic (nothing), tylko (only), zawsze (always)	nikt (nobody), doskonale (perfectly), dobrze (well)

Source: Authors' own analysis.

8. Conclusions

By uncovering features which, based on prior research, may be considered typical of populist communication in Polish mainstream political discourses, the analysis has demonstrated that populism is not a binary zero or one phenomenon, whose study should be relegated to the fringes of the ideological spectrum: instead, its traces can be found across the board. This finding provides some support for Mudde's (2007) "populist Zeitgeist" hypothesis.

Furthermore, the investigation has shown populism to be a complex, shape-shifting phenomenon which cannot be measured reliably based on the frequencies of several *a priori* selected words that are intuitively associated with it, and which takes different forms depending on the ideological

profile of the given movement as well as other factors. With respect to the former, while the keyword analysis has identified a number of references to the Polish people, the word “people” itself (*człowiek/ludzie* or *lud*)—which is often taken to be the strongest, if not the only, indicator of populist discourse—is not key for any of the subcorpora. At the same time, its functional equivalents, such as *Polak* (‘Pole’) or *rodak* (‘compatriot’), are key for each subcorpus (although the Third Way politicians are much less likely to refer directly to their constituents, compared with the other two parties). Similarly, the analysis has pointed to the salience of a gamut of other linguistic items indicative of populist discourse, as discussed in the literature, which could not be identified reliably by means of introspection.

With respect to the latter, the investigation has shown that populism is not a uniform and invariable discursive phenomenon characterised by a set of fixed linguistic features. Whereas prior research distinguishes between left- and right-wing populism (even though comparative linguistic analyses are rare), this study suggests that this commonly-held distinction is unlikely to capture the full complexity of populist communication by failing to take into account subtler differences between the actors occupying closer positions along the ideological spectrum (rather than being located at its extremes). Specifically, while both of the two major mainstream political parties in Poland resort to populism to similar degrees, the particular linguistic strategies they employ differ. Most importantly, with respect to what is often perceived to be the essence of populism, namely the antagonism between the in-group and the out-group, the leaders of PiS emphasise the danger posed by their internal and, in particular, external enemies, while presenting themselves as, paradoxically, both considerably weaker and prone to failure as well as uniquely capable of protecting Poland against any threat. KO, in contrast, focuses on the in-group, with special emphasis on women, and on the rivalry with the then governing Law and Justice party. Not only do they seem to be largely oblivious to the purported dangers posed by the outside world (with the exception of immigration), but they also mock such views and people expressing them as childishly irrational.

Although ideology certainly plays an important role, it cannot explain all the variation in the linguistic expressions of populism observed in this study. For instance, while PiS and KO concur that securitising Polish borders against immigrants is vital, the latter are somewhat reticent to emphasise this issue in their campaign messaging. This suggests that there are other, non-ideological factors shaping populist discourses and that distinguishing between left- and right-wing populisms does not only lead to an oversimplification but may, in fact, be misleading.

The analysis also puts into perspective the commonplace assumption—supported by empirical studies (Dai & Kustov, 2022; Ernst et al., 2017)—that populism is a transitory phenomenon which “either fails or, if successful, ‘transcends’ itself into something bigger” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Specifically, it has shown that the ruling party is as likely to employ populist rhetoric as the opposition. By resorting to populism, the former might legitimise their government and delegitimise the opponents, especially if the latter used to hold power and might still be perceived as possessing influence over some spheres of social life such as the media, as shown in Example (5). Indeed, denouncing elites in a field different from politics (e.g., media, culture, economy) or on some other (e.g., supranational) level might be seen as a useful strategy for both the incumbents and the opposition. In short, since both the in-group and the out-group are constructed discursively rather than forming objective socioeconomic or sociocultural categories, there is no reason why governing parties should renounce the perceived potential of populism to attract votes, especially if they rose to power on a populist platform, and feel their dominance may be threatened, for example during election times.

While the study dispels some of the most persistent misconceptions regarding the nature of populism, more rigorous linguistic research is still needed to deepen our understanding of these aspects of populist communication that are beyond the scope of this investigation. Above all, while the study employs quantitative methodologies, the thematic categorisation was conducted manually, which means that it may unavoidably be subject to differing interpretations depending on the researcher’s own reading of the concordances of a given item. Considering the complete ideological spectrum, that is both its far ends and the mainstream, could help establish precisely the impact of ideology and other factors on the quality and quantity of populism displayed by different political actors, especially if non-populist politicians are also included: as Demata and colleagues (2020, p. 10) note, “a rigorous linguistic and political study of populism must also be a rigorous study of anti-populism”. Comparing the use of populist rhetoric in and out of elections might help confirm (or disprove) the accepted belief that it thrives especially in the former context, whereas future diachronic analyses could shed more light on the life cycle of populism: whether it tends to wither, grow, stay static or change over time, depending on the particular circumstances. Finally, including other countries in the sample would show whether or not the findings can be generalised across other national contexts. For instance, Breeze and Fernández Vallejo (2019, p. 13) claim, with respect to an examination of Romanian populist discourse (Roventă-Frumușani & Ștefănel, 2019), that the populist contagion—which has also been observed in this study—is

typical of post-communist countries. This and other assumptions regarding the different geographical and historical permutations of populism can, however, only be tested confidently by means of comparative multinational analyses.

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