Populism, Media Messaging, and Media Literacy

MATEVŽ TOMŠIČ

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Abstract: *The article deals with the rise of populism in connection with the functioning of the media and the role of media literacy in the receptivity of citizens to populist messages. The assumption is that the media play a dual role in this context: on the one hand, they make people susceptible to populist messages, and on the other hand, they can train them to become resistant to them. The quality of media communication affects the level of media literacy, i.e. the ability of people to understand and reflect on messages that are being disseminated by mass media, both traditional and online ones. The author claims that media literacy is the main protection against negative media phenomena such as disinformation and fake news. At the same time, it makes citizens resilient to those political messages that contain these elements on which populist politics is often based.*

Keywords: ***media; communication; media literacy; democracy; populism***

1. Introduction

Democracy is a political setting, the essence of which is the plurality of views on the common issues that are relevant to the functioning of the state and society. In an ideal situation, these views result from a thorough and rational reflection of conscious and socially engaged individuals who are aware of their interests and how to realise them; at the same time, they are committed to democratic values.

These views are conceived and manifested in the civil sphere, which is expressed in diversity of actors, i.e. individuals and groups representing interests that are the result of the social and cultural heterogeneity of modern society. For this kind of self-organisational potential of society to manifest itself, institutional guarantees are necessary, which enable citizens to freely connect and

communicate with each other. In addition, there must be channels through which their wishes, initiatives, and demands are expressed. In this sense, the public sphere, and especially the media space, plays an important role as a place where various social interests are articulated. Mass media serve as a means of presenting positions, ideas, criticisms, and proposals formed by the opinions of citizens in various spheres of society. However, they also produce them themselves, thereby acting as a creator of public opinion.

The mass media, with their operation, undoubtedly define the political events in society in an important way. With their messages, they influence how people perceive political actors, their relationships with each other, and the decisions they make. In this way, they also have indirect impact on their electoral choices.

With the operation of the media, especially the so-called new media, one of the most frequently discussed political phenomena of recent years is supposed to be connected. We speak about populism. Numerous politicians, academics, journalists, and other opinion leaders constantly claim that populism is on the rise and that it represents a great challenge – if not a danger – to the future of democracy and to the very existence of the European Union. Unlike the 19 century, when this concept appeared and had a predominantly positive reputation, today it has a predominantly negative connotation in the dominant political and media discourse. It is associated with phenomena such as intolerance, exclusivism, manipulation, and sometimes even authoritarian tendencies. And in the rise of populism, an important role is supposed to be played by the modern media space, particularly by the new media (social networks) which contributes to the spread of populist messages with their sensationalism.

The present article discusses the rise of populism in connection with the functioning of the media and the role of media literacy in the receptivity of citizens to populist messages. As we know, most of what citizens know (or at least think they know) about what is happening in various fields, including in politics, is provided by the mass media. The assumption is that the media play a dual role in this context: on the one hand, they make people susceptible to populist messages, and on the other hand, they can train them to become resistant to them. It depends on the concrete social circumstances which aspect, as far as the influence of the media on people's consciousness is concerned, will prevail. In any case, the cognitive competencies of those whom the media targets with their messages also play a very important role in this.

2. Mass media as a key channel of political communication

Communication in modern society cannot be imagined without the media (Habermas 1991; Pinter 2005, Deane 2005). Therefore, many discussions and controversies revolve around them regarding their place in the structure of modern society and the role they play in this context. The media is usually associated

with the performance of functions such as informing the public, i.e. reporting on events, as well as others, more banal, such as entertainment, etc. Even in connection with political life, their importance is often emphasised. Hence the designation of the media as the "fourth branch of government" (Carter 1977; Splichal 2005), in which media actors independent of the government appear and represent public opinion, which enables them to control the other branches of government. Of course, in this case, it is not about power in the sense of formal authority (as the executive, legislative and judicial branches have), but about the influence that the media have by providing citizens with information about the state of affairs in politics, the economy and other areas at home and abroad. This does not mean information in a purely factual sense, i.e. as stating the facts, but also or especially in the sense of interpreting those facts.

In this regard, positive aspects of their activities are mentioned on one site, especially the control over the authorities and thereby limiting their arbitrariness. The phrase about the media as "the watchdogs of democracy" is related to this. Mass media are said to be the ones who protect democracy from those who undermine it with their actions. Of particular importance is their role of exerting surveillance over the powerful and influential, as they are the ones who decide the fate of the system and the people who live in it.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the negative aspects of media messaging. Undoubtedly, this includes interfering with the privacy of individuals in the function of obtaining profits by satisfying people's sensationalistic desires. Even more problematic is the instrumentalization of the media in the sense of their abuse for various particularistic goals. In this case, the media cannot be considered guardians of democratic norms and procedures, but a tool for asserting the interests of certain centres of power.

This dual nature of the media stems from their systemic location. The media can be understood as an intermediary subsystem of society. In this sense, their function is to convey information about various relevant social phenomena and processes. In terms of development, i.e. in terms of strengthening the development performance of society, the result of this function is mainly expressed in, firstly, strengthening the competencies of citizens (their knowledge and ability to act as active citizens) and, secondly, in the maintenance of normative consensus in society (agreement on those fundamental values and principles, which represent the "value core of society").

The functioning of the public sphere in modern society cannot be imagined without the mass media. The media can be understood as its institutional framework. They represent a mechanism of social communication between actors from different social fields, and their role as a mediator between citizens or civil society on the one hand and power-political structures and their holders on the other. In addition to the function of exchanging information, the purpose of which is to educate both citizens and power holders, their function of controlling the

ruling elite is, as said, especially important. In doing so, they serve, on the one hand, as a means of presenting positions, ideas, criticisms, and proposals formulated in the sphere of civil society; while, on the other hand, they produce them themselves, thus acting in the role of creators of public opinion. Thus, media institutions – newspapers, radio and television stations, and online portals – indirectly, but often have a very significant influence on the course and results of the political process, thereby acting as an element of the political space. An article or broadcast where irregularities or even illegalities in the operation of a certain state body are revealed can, for example, trigger the process of determining responsibility and consequently sanctioning those responsible.

Even though the ability of the media to construct people's consciousness is often overestimated, its influence on people's attitudes (including or especially in relation to politics) cannot be ignored. Therefore, we can say that social and political dynamics depend to a large extent on the way the media space operates. From the point of view of the development of democracy, it is not only the freedom of expression of individuals and groups that is important but also the possibility that their views are presented to the public in a comprehensive and fair manner. And that no views are *a priori* privileged. Namely, in the case of media dominance of a certain part of society, one of the basic democratic postulates is denied, i.e. equality of political competition, since different political alternatives do not have the possibility of adequate articulation. This can result in an artificially induced imbalance of the political space. In the case of collusion (financial, personnel, ideological) with the ruling elite (and other elites, e.g. economic), the media do not fulfil their role as critics of the government, which undermines the second fundamental postulate of democracy – control over the government. In a situation where one of the political groups has a monopoly position, the plurality of views and opinions of citizens is not guaranteed, so they cannot create their own autonomous ideas about what is right and what is not for them, whom to vote for and who not (Jaklič 2020: 102). Therefore, without an autonomous and plural media space that would enable the expression of a wide range of viewpoints formed based on different ideological and value orientations, where different social groups can have their 'voice', the democracy of political life is seriously curtailed.

Democracy, therefore, requires not only freedom but also equality of expression. This is where the importance of media pluralism comes into play (Brogi 2020; Brogi – Parcu 2014; Ciaglia 2013). The political life of a democratic society, which, as has been said, is by its very nature plural, can only develop qualitatively in the presence of a branched and diversified media space consisting of organizations (newspapers, radio and television houses) that are receptive to the viewpoints of different ideological and ideological orientations. Of course, those that fall within the framework of the constitutional arrangement, that is, agree to the fundamental postulates of a modern and democratic society.

The mere fact that an individual medium is graphically or politically defined is not, in principle, problematic (Tomšič 2020: 209). Most of the reputable media in established democracies have a recognizable ideological and ideological profile (conservative, liberal, social democratic). In most European countries there is at least one major left-wing and right-wing newspaper. Thus we have, for example, in United Kingdom (right-leaning) The Times and (left-leaning) The Guardian, in France (right-leaning) Le Figaro and (left-leaning) Liberation, in Germany (right-leaning) Die Welt and (left-leaning) Frankfurter Rundschau, in Austria (right-leaning) Die Presse and (left-leaning) Der Standard, etc. It is important that the political space is at least relatively balanced (that is, composed of media of different ideological orientations, which are at least roughly equivalent in terms of their 'reach') so that individual issues are illuminated from different angles.

When we talk about the importance of the media for the development of democracy, we cannot ignore the role played by the creators of media content, especially those who could be considered the media elite (Tomšič 2007). This includes editors, presenters, anchor commentators and columnists. They are among the most important opinion leaders, who are often considered by citizens to be intellectual and moral authorities, and therefore have a great influence on how they perceive the world and what is happening in it. However, the positive effects of the media elite on democracy are not something to be taken for granted. We can say that the media elite can perform its democratic function only if, firstly, it expresses an appropriate degree of independence (both vis-à-vis the political and economic elite); second, it follows standards of professionalism; and, thirdly, it achieves a sufficient degree of internal plurality.

When considering the relationship between the media and politics, especially in terms of the influence of media coverage on political behaviour, we must consider the changes that the media space has recently undergone. Some (mainly) print media are facing a decline in readership, while on the other hand, the so-called new media. All this is related to certain changes in the political dynamics of Western societies.

3. Populist appeal and the role of media in its spread

Due to its elusive nature, is hard to state some concise and universal definition of populism (Chiran – Tomsic 2020). Different dilemmas, ambiguities, contradictions, and simplifications often arise when dealing with it. Namely, populism belongs to the category of "essentially contested concepts" (Mudde – Kaltwasser 2017). It is often even used as a label that members of established political elites and their supporters stick to their critics (Blokker – Anselmi 2020). In this context, we can sometimes even speak about some kind of "populist hype" and the spread of anti-populism (De Cleen et al 2018). Populism is a concept

that is very stretchy and diverse. It is difficult to draw the line between populism and non-populism, it is difficult to determine whether an act is populist or not, whether a political leader is a populist or merely popular (Tomšič 2022). In this regard, phenomena like populist politics should be studied and considered from different points of view, various sources must be taken into account to avoid ideological and subjective biases. The rise of populism in contemporary democracies is the entanglement of both structural conditions and characteristics of political actors (Adam – Tomšič 2019). It is related to the change in social cleavages, prevailing value patterns, mode of political organization, and decision-making as well as to the (lack of) responsiveness of established political elites and their (in)ability to resolve the most important social problems.

Populism is a divergent political phenomenon in various respects. We can speak about "varieties of populism"" (Gidron – Bonikowski 2013; Ivaldi et al. 2017). It is diverse in terms of *ideological orientation*. Both in academic circles and the general public, the most is talked about is right-wing populism when parties are mentioned such as *National Front* in France, *Lega* in Italy, *Freedom Party* in Austria, or *Party for Freedom* in the Netherlands, as they have the greatest weight in general in terms of election results. However, in some places, we are also dealing with strong left-wing populism, as is the case of *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain, and *Left* in Slovenia. There is also a so-called centrist populism that rejects political positioning, as is the case with *ANO 2011* in Czechia. Further, populists differ regarding their *thematic focus*, that is, as to what their main theme is, with which they wish to gain the support of the electorate. Some raise the issue of migration, others the issue of regional autonomy or national sovereignty, and still others focus on the fight against capitalism. There are also differences in their orientations in terms of *international alliances*. Thus, some European populists (majority of them) are pro-Russian, and others (a minority of them) are anti-Russian oriented.

Populism can be thematised from different perspectives, as a multifaceted phenomenon that is related to different aspects of political life. First, it can be perceived as *ideology*, although diverse, incoherent and 'empty-hearted' (Riedel 2017). It nevertheless rests on some ideological principles. Mudde (2004, 534) defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". However, the content of this "will of the people" varies greatly among populists. Secondly, populism can be seen as a specific kind of *political conduct*. We speak about the type of leadership, referring particularly to the relationship between the leader and its followers where the key component is trust (Soare 2017). This means that populist leaders must demonstrate – or at least pretend – that is "one of us", i.e., to belong to the ranks of the "common people". Thirdly, political conduct

is related to *political strategy* (Weyland 2017). Its main aim is the mobilization of support of the citizenry for the populist cause. This refers to the choice of topics, the way citizens are addressed, the attitude towards political rivals, and the choice of political and social alliances. And finally, populism can be perceived as a *political style* (Moffit – Torney 2014). This refers particularly to its style of communication (Jagers – Walgrave 2007). Populist messages are very important for activating support for the ideas of populist political actors (Hameleers et al. 2021).

Despite many differences, there are some common characteristics of populism(s). The most important one is *anti-elitism*. As has been said, it is a marked opposition to established elites who are presented as selfish, exploitative, and incompetent. This is not just about the political elite but is often joined by other influential groups, such as the business (corporate) or intellectual elite. That is why populists declare themselves protectors of the people they want to free from elitist oppressors. It is paradoxical that some of them, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, or Andrej Babiš, come from the very top of the social elite. Populists also have in common a *notion of the political community as a homogeneous entity*. They are prone to glorify "the people" as an indivisible whole with joint values, wishes, and interests (Lavi 2021). Therefore, they are averse to pluralism, as it leads to the undermining of people's unity. This is also related to the *rejection of the division of power*, as populist politics is supposed to be the emanation of the people's will, so a leader, party, or movement should have relatively "free hands" in making decisions when it comes to power. And finally, in the context of the European Union, populism is coupled with *Euroscepticism*. The vast majority of populist parties are also Eurosceptic and vice versa (Conti 2018). At the global level, populists usually share *anti-globalist* orientations, rejecting global neoliberal capitalism, criticizing transnational corporations, and opposing the authority of transnational political organizations.

Populism can be seen as the rejection of established political order and the ideologies on which it rests. It is against globalism and transnationalism which is related to the sovereigntist notion which claims that nation-states shall not be subjected to any kind of "higher" authority. It is against neoliberalism and/or multiculturalism, claiming that they contribute to the erosion of autochthonous traditions of communities and thus undermine their identities.

Populist politics is defined by a particular type of discourse. It is characterized by plain messages based on a black-and-white depiction of social reality. From them comes the logic of "us against them", i.e. us ordinary good people against the corrupt elites. which oppress us. This discourse strongly emphasizes the emotional dimension, which means that it plays on people's feelings (their traumas, fears). Entertainment skills play a very important role (since politics is often understood as a show). And finally, it is characterized by a strong reliance on the personality of a populist leader. He is positioned at the same time

as an "exceptional person with superior abilities" and a "man of the people" who understands their needs and desires.

The rise of populism is related to the increased role of the media in the political process, i.e. so-called the "mediatization of politics", that brought to the situation where modern mass media, especially electronic ones, increasingly build their stories on "spectacle" where images play a more important role than ideas and programs (Campus 2010). In such circumstances, how a political candidate "present" them to the audience (supporters, voters) is more important than how relevant and/or feasible are their political proposals and solution to resolve political, economic and social problems.

One should not neglect the role of new digital media in the rise of populism. These media are based on network principles, erasing the border between producers and users of information, which leads to a de-hierarchisation of the news production process in which the role of traditional gatekeepers is reduced. For example, in the past, a political actors – an individual politicians or political parties – when they wanted to launch their message to the public (for example, present his point of view on a certain social issue, offer a proposal to solve a certain problem, etc.), called a press conference and invite representatives to it media. Then they had to rely on them to convey that message in a way that was as favourable to him as possible. That means they were dependent on them. Now political protagonists can address the voters directly, which means reducing their dependence on the issue.

The use of social networks thus allows political messages to be spread beyond traditional media channels. Let us only state the example of Donald Trump's presidential campaign where he managed to "bypass" traditional media – which was most adverse to him – through Twitter and other new media. The use of the Internet enables direct communication between a leader and the people (the constituency).

Although new media allow more and more people to spread their ideas and views, there has been an increasing amount of discussion in recent years about the negative aspects of their use. Many see social networks as a significant generator of spreading misinformation, "fake news", and 'hate speech'. This ought to be linked to the increasing dispersion of information resources and to this lack of control. These negative media phenomena are often perceived as an integral part of the populist discourse (Mudde 2004). This refers to the inclination of such discourse to exaggeration and simplification of social reality if not its direct falsification. This is related to the phenomenon of post-truth politics, where facts become less important in the formation of public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal feelings. Thus, some politicians do not even try to hide the fact that they are not telling the truth.

However, even established politics is not immune to the afore-mentioned negative phenomena. It is not only populist politicians who manipulate and

spread disinformation and fake news. Those politicians who belong to traditional parties that cannot be considered populist often use these practices to justify their goals.[1] In this regard, we can draw a parallel with the media world. It's not just the new media that spread fake news. This is also done by established traditional media, even those that are considered very respectable.[2]

4. Impact of media messaging on media literacy

The nature of media communication strongly affects the perception of social and political reality. The quality of information that individuals receive from the mass media determines how comprehensively and deeply they will be able to deal with individual phenomena and events, their causes, their carriers, and the effects they will have on the future development and life of people.

Media communication is related to media literacy, i.e. the ability of people to understand and reflect on messages that are being disseminated by mass media, both traditional and online ones. Media literacy can be perceived as a wide concept that "includes all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it".[3] It also covers the ability to focus on creative problem-solving (Hobbs 2010; Sonck et al. 2012; Mascheroni – Murri 2014). As such, it represents one of the central competencies, which enable people not only to find themselves in the conditions of the information society but also to actively participate in public and thus also political life.

Critical thinking is a core element of media literacy (Rek et al. 2021). It is the ability of individuals to use and at the same time, autonomously and critically interpret the flow, content, values, and consequences of the use of various media messages. It also enables them to participate in the creation of media messages (Martens 2010; Martens – Hobbs 2015). Based on this, they can play a more active role in the public life of the community, as they can use their messages to inform, raise awareness and mobilize fellow citizens to activities, directed to achieve common goals.

1 Let us recall the case of information about alleged weapons of mass destruction allegedly possessed by Saddam Hussein's regime, which was presented by the administration of US President George W. Bush as the reason for the invasion of Iraq. These later turned out to be untrue.

2 For example, in 2003, a scandal erupted in the New York Times, when it turned out that journalist Jayson Blair had falsified information and stories (Barry et al., 11 May 2003). Journalist Class Relotius did a similar thing in 2018 in the weekly Der Spiegel (to make matters even more problematic, he even received certain awards for his falsified articles) (Connolly, 19 December 2018).

3 This definition was established by the EU Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG), which meets regularly to "identify, document and extend good practices in the field of media literacy, facilitate networking between different stakeholders, with the aim of cross-fertilisation, explore synergies between different EU policies and support programmes and media literacy initiatives." (https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-literacy). See also Badescu et al., 2023 – forthcoming.

One of the functions that the media should have in a democratic society is the education of citizens. In addition to providing them with credible information about what is happening in society, they should also be made aware of key social problems. Above all, we should strengthen awareness of what the common good is and what goals a political community based on democratic principles should strive for. In this way, it contributes to consolidating the value consensus on which democratic political culture is based, without which democracy cannot develop in a sustainable way.

In this respect, we can state that the quality of media messaging has an impact on the level of media literacy. In the case that we are dealing with the media, which report on events in society in a truthful manner, taking into account high professional standards (e.g. clearly distinguishing between facts and interpretations, reporting on events and commenting on them), providing a plurality of views which put light on soma particular issues from different angles and at the same time transparently presenting their own positions (e.g. possible values and ideological orientations), then we can say that they contribute to a greater ability to understand media messages on the part of the citizenry.

However, it is by no means self-evident that the media can perform such an democratic educational function. If they report in a biased, politically, or otherwise instrumentalised way, depending on one or another centre of power, then they contribute to the indoctrination and manipulation of the users of their contents. The use of the media for propaganda purposes is characteristic of all autocratic regimes, where the rulers use them to convince people that they are the only ones fit to rule. Of course, in such a situation, the media is under the direct control of the authorities. In a democratic system, there is media freedom, so the government does not have a monopoly in this area, but temptations to politically instrumentalise the media still exist. This especially applies to the so-called new democracies, i.e., countries with a legacy of various forms of authoritarian rule, where there is no tradition of free and independent media.

There is also a problem with the media that pushes attractive but socially irrelevant topics, while serious topics – to the extent that they deal with them at all – are tackled in a superficial and sensationalistic way. Such media do not contribute to raising media literacy. On the contrary, they actually lower their level. Instead of contributing to the education of informed, responsible, and active citizens, they contribute to their passivation.

For the media to perform the function of education and thereby strengthen their media literacy, certain conditions must be met. In addition to systemic guarantees, such as the legally guaranteed freedom and autonomy of the media, the conduct of the media protagonists themselves, i.e., those who create media messages, is also important. It is essential that the creators of media content, regardless of their political and ideological orientation, are guided by truthfulness, which means that they avoid activism, manipulation, deception, and the

spread of fake news; and that they can maintain a critical distance even from the political option that is close to them. They must be able to resist the attempts of those who wish to instrumentalise them for their own needs. They must not allow themselves to be turned into a tool for political, economic, or other interests.

5. Media literacy and resilience against the populist appeal

Modern society, which is often described as "information society", is characterised by a significantly higher level of complexity than was the case in societies of the past. This complexity is (also) expressed in the abundance of information that an individual is confronted with on a daily basis. The "informational" nature of today's society is not that information is now more important than it used to be. Possession of strategically important information meant a great advantage over adversaries or enemies in the past just as it is true in the present. The difference lies in the importance of the ability to manage information. Nowadays, the ability to select information plays a very important role, that is, to distinguish which information is authentic and which is misleading. This, however, in a situation where we are faced with a wide variety of information daily, represents an increasingly demanding task.

The dynamic of the societies in which we live forces people to rapidly develop social and cognitive abilities of online social interaction without any guarantees of improving at the same pace their capacity to critically assess the information that they access. Thus, although nowadays the consumption and production of digital content are high and media literacy implies developed digital literacy and ICT skills, citizens are still often victims of misinformation and exposure to the antisocial radicalised type of content.

The ability to manage information is important so that people can orient themselves in different life situations and can successfully play their social roles in different areas. This is especially true for the role of a citizen, that is, a politically aware subject who is actively engaged in the public life of his community and who participates to the best of his ability in decision-making on common matters.

When it comes to political life, we have a large amount of information at our disposal from various sources. Mass media play a key role in this. The vast majority of what we know about what is happening in this area (as well as in many others) is not a matter of our direct insight but is conveyed to us by the media. Here, an important question is how credible these sources are, that is, to what extent it is possible to trust the accuracy of the information they disseminate to the public. Assessing the credibility of information sources is an important factor in their selection. Therefore, it is necessary to determine whether the information comes from one single source (or several such sources that are interconnected) or from different mutually unrelated sources. It is also

important to whom the author of a certain media piece refers when creating his story. A contribution is considered credible if it builds its point on the information obtained from different interlocutors, who shed light on a certain matter from their own point of view. Especially when reporting on topics that are the subject of controversy and conflict, it is essential that different points of view are considered and that all parties involved have a say. In this way, it is possible to present a comprehensive picture of the situation.

Media literacy is particularly important for building resistance against media disinformation, fake news and hate speech. In this way, citizens will be able to identify those who want to manipulate them. Of course, manipulations are also a widespread phenomenon in the context of the political life of modern representative democracies. They are produced and transmitted by actors on different sides of the political spectrum. In this way, populist politicians are by no means the only ones doing it. However, such practices are still more common among them. Namely, populist politics rests on a simplified perception of societal reality, offering simple and straightforward recipes on how to deal with issues (Tomšič 2022). It tends to portray the situation in society in black and white fashion and to show complex social phenomena one-sidedly. Its messages are more often than not based on emotion than on rational argumentation. There is also a common inclination towards various "conspiracy theories", according to which various "dark forces" (secret organizations, global power centres) are working against the community, portraying themselves as heroes protecting ordinary people from these "villains". Of course, these "conspiracy theories" are usually based on unverified (even unverifiable) facts or sheer fabrications. And media-literate citizens have competencies with help that they are able to discover and expose this.

Producers of media content, i.e., editors, journalists, opinion-makers, etc. significantly influence the "hearts and minds" of the people. As such, they affect their behaviour in different realms of society and politics. On the other hand, people's ability to reflect media messaging also affects what kind of content the mass media will "serve" them. The connection between media communication and media literacy is therefore mutual. A high level of media literacy shall be perceived as the main protection against negative media phenomena such as the above-mentioned ones. At the same time, it makes citizens resilient to those political messages that contain these elements. And, as stated before, although these elements are not an exclusive feature of populist politics, the latter often builds its image and appeal to citizens on them.

6. Conclusion

Democratic polity rests on free, independent, and professional media. These media keep a close eye on the actions of political decision-makers and others who have power and influence in society. On the other hand, in non-democratic

regimes of all kinds and ideological colours, the media are subordinate to the ruling elite whom they serve to maintain their power. The greater the control of society by this ruling elite, the more the media are engaged in driving the power of the regime. Their main function is to propagate the regime and its ideology, with the aim of indoctrinating citizens and mobilising them to support those in power (Rončević – Tomšič 2021). This was also the role of the media in communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Many of the former communist countries in the region have made a dramatic change from communist regimes to democratic nations that are integrated into the European sphere. The transition to democracy led to the establishment of institutional conditions required for the introduction of a free, open, and diverse media space (Avbelj – Letnar-Černič, 2020). However, we can witness phenomena like political or even party colonisation of media (Bajomi-Lazar 2013) that hamper their autonomy and professional integrity. In such a situation, the media cannot fulfil its democratic mission, which includes educating and strengthening the democratic political culture of citizens; in this context, it cannot contribute to raising their media literacy. In this case, their capacity for active citizenship in terms of productively contributing to the public life of their community is seriously hampered.

Media literacy can be seen as a core political competency for active, engaged, and participatory citizenship (Mihailidis – Thevenin, 2013). Media-literate citizens can determine their preferences and make decisions in a deliberate and informed manner, while carefully weighing and evaluating the information they are confronted with daily. The main source of this information in modern society is the mass media. Therefore, it is imperative that people can critically evaluate their messages. In this way, they will be less susceptible to manipulations, half-truths, and fake news, which are abundant in today's media space and whose important generator is populist politics.

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Matevž Tomšič *is a political sociologist and Professor at the School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica. He also works at the Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto, and Study Centre for National Reconciliation. His research interests include political elites and political leadership, quality of governance, political culture, Europeisation, media pluralism, democratisation and development of societies from Central and Eastern Europe. Among others, he published a book Elites in the New Democracies (Peter Lang, 2016). He also co-authors the book The Challenges of Sustained Development (Central European University Press, 2005). E-mail: matevz.tomsic@fuds.si*