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Widening the Divide between Them and Us? The Effects of Populist Communication on Cognitive and Affective Stereotyping in a Comparative European Setting

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ABSTRACT


To explain the global spread and electoral success of populist rhetoric, a growing body of research has investigated the content and effects of populist communication. Extant research has shown that right-wing populist communication can activate negative stereotypical portrayals toward the populist out-group. Yet, we know too little about how exposure to populist ideas can widen the perceived cognitive and affective divide between the people and others in different European regions, although this Manichean view of in- and out-groups is at the core of populist ideology. Against this backdrop, we rely on a comparative experimental study in Western, Eastern, and Southern European regions to investigate how exposure to right-wing populist communication can activate the perceived divide between the ordinary people vis-à-vis the elites and immigrants. Our main findings demonstrate that populist communication in some cases widens the cognitive and emotional divide between the people and the populist out-groups, but the magnitude of the effects is small, and we do not find systematic patterns corresponding to regions. Nevertheless, our results have important implications for understanding the impact of populism on the cultivation of polarized divides in a diversified European region. Populist communication may augment societal divides, but these effects are spread across countries and only triggered by some elements of the ideological core of populism.

KEYWORDS

populist communication;
cognitive priming; affective
priming; stereotypes;
comparative research;
experiment

It has been argued that populist communication *by* or *through* the media has important effects on citizens' cognitions, attitudes, and even behavior (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). By priming populist attitudes among receivers, exposure to populist ideas in the press may make people more aligned with the populist worldviews propagated by different politicians across the globe (e.g., Krämer, 2014). Communicating the core elements of populist communication – emphasizing an antagonistic societal divide between the ordinary people and the culpable elites (Mudde, 2004) – may thus eventually make populist ideas more salient among the demand-side of

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voters, hereby contributing to populism's electoral success (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017).

Despite the field's growing interest in understanding the political consequences of populist communication (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Busby, Gubler, & Hawkins, 2019; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018a; Müller et al., 2017; Rooduijn, van der Brug, de Lange, & Parlevliet, 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017) – we know relatively little about the effects of populism on polarized perceptions – or the perceived distance between the in-group of the people and the out-group of the elites and/or “dangerous” others. Although these perceptions are related to populist attitudes – typically understood as individual-level support for the populist ideology (e.g., Schulz et al., 2017; Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, Helbling, & Littvay, 2019) – they more directly align with populism's antagonistic or Manichean worldview. Polarized perceptions are most directly related to the negative democratic implications associated with populism. The perceived gap between the people and the others may result in the reinforcement of existing views, it may stimulate confirmation-biased versus cross-cutting exposure to political views, and may therefore trigger political behaviors that are not in line with the principles of deliberative democracy.

Against this backdrop, this paper relies on a comparative experiment in most-different clusters of European regions (East, West, South) to assess how populist communication impacts the perceived distance between the ordinary people and the elites/immigrants (also see Hameleers et al., 2018b for the experimental set-up). As extant literature already hinted at polarization as a key political consequence of exposure to populist communication (Hameleers, Andreadis, & Reinemann, 2019; Müller et al., 2017), this paper aims to assess if both the cognitively and emotionally experienced distance between “them” and “us” is augmented when exposing people to the core elements of populist communication in a most-different cases comparative setup. Do individuals feel closer to the people and more distant from the elites and dangerous out-groups when these actors are held responsible for causing the people's problems?

Following the ideational approach to populism, we expect that populist cues activate perceptions of a divide between the people and the elites in settings where populist messages are most credible (Busby et al., 2019; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, & Andreadis, 2018). Specifically, the activation of stereotypical representation of the people, the elites, and the allegedly dangerous others should be most effective when these attitudes are available as mental schemata in receivers (Bos et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018). In line with this framework of trait activation, we identify three attitudes that may in particular predict the resonance of populist messages with preexisting schemata: (1) national identification as the extent to which people feel part of the populist in-group; (2) relative deprivation as the perception that this in-group is deprived and threatened by the culpable elites and immigrants; and (3) political cynicism/dissatisfaction with the government as the extent to which people perceive the national government as successful in representing their will. Finally, we compare the effects of populist communication in countries that are relatively well-off (Western Europe) to countries that have faced more (economic) hardships in recent years (Eastern and Southern Europe).

The main findings indicate that exposure to populist communication widens the perceived cognitive and affective distance between the people and the elites/immigrants in message-congruent ways in some European regions and through specific populist

dimensions. We do not find any systematic patterns across Europe and across the elements of the ideational core of populism. Moreover, the perceptual lenses of national identification and relative deprivation do not affect the persuasiveness of populist messages, whereas dissatisfaction with the national government does – but only in the Southern European region.

The Effects of Populist Communication on Cognitions and Emotions

In this paper, we take a communicative approach to the phenomenon of populism (also see Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, & de Vreese, 2019). We understand populist communication as the expression of the ideas of populism's (thin) ideology (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). More specifically, populist communication expresses that the ordinary people as an in-group are not represented by the elites in government and that the people have a general will that should be the focus of political decision-making. Opposed to the people as an in-group, the “corrupt” elites are held responsible for not representing the ordinary people and for prioritizing their own interests or the needs of other groups in society (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Next to stressing the divide between the people and the elites, right-wing populism excludes “dangerous” others from the people's in-group (Aalberg et al., 2017; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). These dangerous others are mostly seen as immigrants who are said to profit from the scarce resources of the ordinary people whilst not contributing to the welfare state.

Extant (content analytic) research indicates that these elements of populism may be disseminated to the people in a fragmented way (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). Thus, this study systematically analyzes the effects of three forms of populist communication (also see Jagers & Walgrave, 2007): (1) anti-elitist populist communication (the thin-cored ideology); (2) exclusionary ideas (the right-wing component that excludes immigrants from the people) and (3) right-wing complete populism (the combination of these cues). But how can the expression of such populist ideas by and through the media affect stereotypical representations, and eventually, the perceived emotional and cognitive distance between the people and the others?

As postulated by the ideational approach to populism (e.g., Busby et al., 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), populism also exists as an individual-level attitude among voters that needs to be activated or “woken up” by factors in the (political) context or by specific framing. In this paper, we postulate that populist communication can be understood as such an important supply-side factor that can make message-congruent responses more salient and in line with populist perceptions. Thus, in line with the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), we expect that when populist frames that emphasize a divide between us and them are credible for receivers, they can activate message-congruent perceptions on the demand-side of voters.

In line with this approach, many scholars have investigated the effects of populist messages on populist attitudes (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019). Populist attitudes can be understood as individual-level support for (parts of) the ideational core of populism (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2017). Because populist attitudes are relatively stable attitudes that are not easily affected by exposure to

single messages in people's communication environment, the effect of populist communication should rather be understood as activating or making salient traits or schemata in individuals that correspond to populist interpretations, such as a specific set of in- and out-group identities (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). In this paper, we do not directly look at the effects of populist communication on populist attitudes, but conceptualize support for, or alignment with, elements of the populist ideology in a different, indirect way: *as the perceived distance between the in-group of the people and the out-group of the elites*. As we understand populism as a social identity frame that refers to the ordinary people whilst emphasizing the central opposition to the corrupt elites (e.g., Bos et al., 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), we more directly assess how populism's antagonistic or Manichean worldview triggers or activates similar oppositional divides amongst citizens. However, analogous to populist attitudes, such a perception of polarization between in- and out-groups can also be regarded as a rather stable attitude, and no particularly large effects of one populist message are to be expected. Nevertheless, we first aim to investigate whether populist communication affects the perceived social distance between the in-group and the elites and immigrants as populist out-groups on a perceptual level.

Populist messages may impact receivers' stereotypical images of the people versus the others by means of the cognitive priming of social identity (e.g., Reinemann, Matthes, & Sheafer, 2017). The literature on trait or schemata activation and priming further indicate that exposure to ideas expressing conceptions of the in-group and the out-group may activate message-congruent mental maps among receivers (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984). Extant research indicates that populist communication cumulatively primes negative associations of out-groups (i.e., the elites or immigrants) by attributing negative attributes to these others whilst crediting the people (Arendt, 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017).

As a consequence of repeated exposure to positive stereotypes of the people and negative stereotypes of the elites and immigrants, these stereotypes may become chronically accessible among receivers of populist media content (Hameleers et al., 2017). Based on the theoretical framework of negative stereotyping and threat activation, we therefore hypothesize that exposure to populist communication primes positive stereotypes toward the in-group of the people and negative stereotypes of the out-group held responsible, hereby widening the perceived cognitive divide between the people and the elites (H1a) and immigrants (H1b).

Populist cues may also elicit emotional responses among receivers (Wirz, 2018). Populism can be regarded as an inherently moralized discourse: It communicates a Manichean view on socio-political reality by juxtaposing the "good" ordinary people to the "evil" elites (e.g., Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Moral references can have a strong effect on voters' political evaluations and emotional responses (e.g., Horberg, Oveis, & Keltner, 2011). The references to different types of moral content as explicated in the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) also illustrate a link between referring to the elites' harm and unfairness – central in populism's Manichean divide – and negative emotional responses toward the "evil" outsider (Graham et al., 2013). Moral references to harm (i.e., the elites that deprive the people) may connect to emotional suffering (Graham et al., 2013). It can thus be expected that exposure to moral language in populist communication evokes emotional responses in receivers.

Populism emphasizes in-group threat and relative deprivation of the people, which may also correspond to the activation of intergroup emotions (Smith & Mackie, 2008). More specifically, populist communication may cultivate positive feelings toward the in-group of the people whilst resulting in anger and fear toward the out-groups that allegedly threaten the people (Smith & Mackie, 2008). Thus, exposure to populist communication may not only foster a cognitive distance between the people and the others, it may also augment an affective divide by promoting more positive feelings toward the ordinary people who are innocent and more negative feelings toward the culpable elites and/or immigrants who are responsible for the problems of the ordinary people. We therefore hypothesize that exposure to populist communication augments the affective divide between the ordinary people and the elites (H2a) and immigrants (H2b).

Perceptual Screens Corresponding to the Perceived Distance between Them and Us

Populist cues are most likely to successfully activate (elements of) populism when these messages resonate with the context and/or specific framing of these messages (e.g., Busby et al., 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). We believe this context should not only be regarded as national- or context-level factors (i.e., economic situations) but also as attitudes and perceptions on the individual level. Recent research showed that populist attitudes do have the potential to moderate effects on behavior, such as individual's intention for populist voting and populist expression, albeit not always in line with theoretical assumptions (Busby et al., 2019; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). In contrast to populist attitudes that are seen as latent demand-side perceptions that must be activated and are less consciously held (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), we decided to focus on more stable predispositions.

We specifically propose three beliefs that are relevant for the activation of the perceived distance between the people as an in-group and the elites/dangerous others as an out-group: (1) national identification, (2) relative deprivation, and (3) political cynicism/dissatisfaction. It is plausible to assume that these attitudes are related to populist world-views, as they correspond to the perceived closeness to the heartland of the ordinary people (national identification), the moral perspective of this in-group to be deprived of what it deserves by other groups in society (relative deprivation), and the extent to which the elites are a credible scapegoat for the problems experienced by the ordinary people (political dissatisfaction). In-group attachment, relative deprivation, and distrusting the elites should make populist arguments more personally relevant and credible.

National identification relates to the people's closeness to the in-group that is typically emphasized in right-wing populist communication: the ordinary or native people that are part of the heartland – an imagined community in which the ordinary people share key values and a monolithic will (Taggart, 2000). More specifically, (right-wing) populist communication should resonate most among citizens who experience a stronger bond with the national identity (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2017). For these people, (right-wing) populism's cultivation of belonging to the nativist in-group should be most credible. Social identity framing further postulates that social identity frames that refer to an in-group (i.e., the ordinary or native people) are most effective when people actually identify with this group (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Against this backdrop, we hypothesize that the effects of populist communication on the perceived

cognitive distance between the in-group and the elite (H3a) and the in-group and immigrants (H3b) are strongest when people experience closeness to the in-group of the national people. We assume a similar moderation effect of national identification on the effect of populist communication on the *affective* distance between the in-group and the elite (H3c) and the in-group and immigrants (H3d).

People who experience that they have lost something they are morally entitled to may be affected most by populist ideas that respond to the sense of being left behind, for example, by the corrupt elites who only care for themselves. Populism essentially revolves around cultivating a divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites and/or dangerous others that are accused of depriving the ordinary people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Relative deprivation should thus make people more receptive to populist ideas: the more people believe that the elites are taking away resources that should belong to the ordinary people, or the more immigrants are seen as depriving the people of cultural or material prosperity, the more personally relevant the Manichean outlook emphasized in populism should be. Indeed, recent empirical research indicates that perceptions of relative deprivation can create a discursive opportunity structure that makes populist ideas stick among receivers (e.g., Bos et al., 2019; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers et al., 2018a). Relative deprivation can be defined as the experience that other groups in society are profiting relatively more than the in-group, resulting in the belief that the in-group is worse off whereas it is morally entitled to receive more than other groups in society (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers et al., 2018a).

Populist communication should thus be more personally relevant and “real” when people feel more deprived. This expectation again corresponds with social identity framing: social identity frames are more effective when receivers experience more injustice that can be attributed credibly to a scapegoated outsider (e.g., Gamson, 1992). The elites as a corrupt out-group, and the exclusion of immigrants in right-wing populism is thus more credible and relevant when people believe their in-group is actually worse off than other groups. In line with this reasoning, we hypothesize that the stronger the feelings of relative deprivation, the stronger the effects of populist communication on the perceived cognitive distance between the in-group and the elite (H4a) and immigrants (H4b) as well as on the perceived affective distance between the in-group and the elite (H4c) and immigrants (H4d).

Finally, the central populist argument that the elites are unresponsive and corrupt may especially activate negative out-group stereotypes of the elites and “dangerous” others prioritized by the elites among people who distrust politics and are dissatisfied with the political elites governing the country. The stronger the people’s dissatisfaction with the established political order, the more likely populist messages correspond to their negative associations of the elites governing the country. In line with this, Bos, van der Brug, and de Vreese (2013) found that populist messages have stronger effects among politically cynical or distrusting people. Moreover, the more dissatisfied people are with politics, the more likely they are to perceive populist out-groups as a threat – as politicians in government are not able to deal with issues such as immigration or crime. The perceptual screens of people with less favorable attitudes toward politicians or the functioning of the national political system should thus align with the expression of populist ideas. Therefore, we hypothesize that the effects of populist communication on augmenting the cognitive boundary between the in-group and the elites (H5a) and immigrants (H5b),

as well as the affective boundary between the in-group and the elites (H5c) and immigrants (H5d), are strongest for participants with higher levels of distrust in/dissatisfaction with the political elites governing their countries.

The Resonance of Populist Communication with Country-Level Opportunity Structures

Situated in a European setting where populist ideas on the left and right have been successful to different extents, we aim to assess how the effects of populist communication are similar or different across three clusters of European regions: Eastern, Western, and Southern Europe. Hence, as theoretically postulated in the ideational approach, national and political contexts can offer an important context for the activation of populist worldviews (e.g., Andreadis, Hawkins, Llamazares, & Singer, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018). Populist messages that emphasize the elites' corruption may, for example, be most effective under conditions of failed representation (Bornschieer, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).

These clusters are compared for two reasons. First, extant research has mainly focused on the effects of populist communication in Western Europe (Bos et al., 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Although we know that populist ideas are persuasive in Western European countries that have witnessed the rise of electorally successful right-wing populist parties, we know too little about the transferability of these findings to other settings. Although left-wing populism has recently been electorally successful in Southern Europe, research on the effects of populist communication in this setting is scarce. Second, country-level opportunity structures that are different between clusters, such as the level of unemployment, immigration, or the severity of the recent economic recession, may impact the effects of populist communication. Hence, just as populist communication may be perceived as more personally relevant when it resonates with people's perceptual screens, populist ideas that blame the elites for the people's problems may be more relevant for citizens in countries that have faced relatively more economic hardships.

Together, the three country clusters inform a so-called most-different comparative design: countries with varying levels of opportunity structures for populist communication are compared to assess the stability of populism's persuasiveness in different settings. In this setting, the following research question is forwarded: To what extent are the effects of populist communication similar in Eastern, Western and Southern European regions?

Method

Experimental Design and Stimuli

The results reported in this paper are based on a one-factor between-subjects experiment with four different conditions (see Hameleers et al., 2018b for more details on the project). The typology of populist communication manipulated in the experiment was based on Jagers and Walgrave (2007). In contrast to previous experiments on the effects of populist rhetoric, we systematically manipulated the three dimensions of populist communication and compared the effects of different populist cues to a control group: (1) anti-elitist populist communication, (2) excluding populism, (3) complete right-wing populism and

(4) a neutral control condition. All other factors were held constant between conditions and countries.

The central topic of all articles was a predicted decline of purchasing power in the respective countries. All articles had the same fictional source: a European-level foundation that explained the prediction and potential causes. These causes differed between the conditions. In the anti-elite populist conditions, a central divide between the innocent ordinary people and the corrupt elites who caused the future decline in purchasing power was stressed. In the exclusionist condition, the ordinary people were juxtaposed to the “dangerous” others: immigrants who profited from the people’s welfare, causing the negative development of declining purchasing power. The complete (right-wing) populist condition combined these cues: the ordinary people were framed in opposition to the corrupt elites who failed to represent the people and the dangerous immigrants who were prioritized and allowed to profit from the people. All articles were similar in length and layout. An extensive pilot test (Greece in the Southern cluster and Germany in the Western cluster, $N = 1,829$) was used to test the design and stimuli. Based on the credibility scores of the pilot test, the stimuli were further streamlined (see Appendix A for the English template). Pilot testing showed that the manipulations worked and that the message was perceived as credible – and indicative of a populist worldview corresponding to the manipulations of different types of populism.

Sample

The inclusion and exclusion criteria of countries aimed for maximum variety between clusters and minimal differences within clusters. The Western cluster consisted of countries that are geographically close and relatively similar in terms of unemployment rates, overall level of education, immigration, and overall economic situation: Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands. The salience of the recent economic recession and higher levels of unemployment were the central grouping criteria for the Southern cluster. In this cluster, Italy, Spain and Greece were included. Finally, in the Eastern European cluster, levels of distrust in the political establishment, alleged corruption, and the non-immigration basis of exclusionism (the debate in these countries revolves more around ethnic cleavages than the influx of migrants) were the rationale for inclusion: Romania and Poland were included in this cluster.

In all eight countries, the data were collected between January and April 2017. With the exception of Greece and Romania,¹ Survey Sampling International/Research Now collected the data and applied the sampling criteria. In all countries, the exact same sampling criteria were applied. More specifically, all countries aimed for maximum varied samples that reflected the country’s census data regarding the distributions of age, gender, and education. The total number of completes per country are as follows: Austria (566), Germany (501), Greece (555), Italy (529), Poland (683), Romania (750), Spain (500), and the Netherlands (465).² Although the country-level sample sizes are substantially smaller than the country clusters, we assessed that there was sufficient power to detect significant differences between the four conditions – even at lower levels of significance ($p < .001$). An overview of sample characteristics is provided in Table B1 of the online appendix. Four quality criteria (completion time, straight lining, item nonresponse and manipulation checks) were used as indicators for data cleaning (see Hameleers et al., 2018b for a discussion of the cleaning process).

Procedure

The experiment was conducted online in all eight countries. Participants had to give their informed consent to start the questionnaire. Before exposure to the stimuli, sociodemographic and moderator variables were collected. Respondents then were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and asked to read the news article which was visible for at least 20 seconds. The four conditions do not differ significantly with regard to age ($F_{3, 4484} = .998, p = .392$), gender ($X^2(3) = .694, p = .875$), education ($X^2(3) = 4.806, p = .569$), political interest ($F_{3, 4538} = .461, p = .709$) and ideology ($F_{3, 4009} = .115, p = .951$). The measurement of the dependent variables and manipulation check followed. The questionnaire ended with a debriefing.

Dependent Variables

The perceived distance between the ordinary people as an in-group and the elites or immigrants as out-groups was measured in an indirect and innovative way. It is based on two different measurements: the distance between stereotypical beliefs about these groups (*cognitive distance*) and the different emotional responses toward the people and the others (*affective distance*). Respondents were asked to assess both the in-group (most people in [name of the country], the political elite and immigrants with regard to four stereotypical attributes (trustworthy – untrustworthy, hardworking – lazy, honest – dishonest, sympathetic – unsympathetic, 7-point scale) and with regard to their feelings (1 = negative, 7 = positive, people: $M = 4.80, SD = 1.35$; politicians: $M = 2.64, SD = 1.55$; immigrants: $M = 3.65, SD = 1.63$). The four attributes formed a reliable mean index for each group (people: $M = 4.59, SD = 1.30; \alpha = .873$; politicians: $M = 2.73, SD = 1.49; \alpha = .935$; immigrants: $M = 3.74, SD = 1.49; \alpha = .931$). The perceived distance between the people and the out-groups was measured by calculating the individual difference between the perceived stereotype of the in- and the two out-groups which lead to our dependent variables (1) cognitive distance between the people and the elite ($M = 1.86, SD = 1.62$) and (2) cognitive distance between the people and immigrants ($M = .85, SD = 1.72$). The affective distance between (3) the people and the elite ($M = 2.16, SD = 1.83$) and (4) the people and immigrants ($M = 1.15, SD = 1.81$) was calculated in the same way based on the assessed feelings toward these groups. This indirect measurement of the perceived distance between in- and out-groups should be better able to detect cognitive and affective stereotypical perceptions than a direct question.

Moderators

In-group attachment was measured with a three-item scale (i.e., I have a strong sense of belonging to my [nationality], $M = 4.45, SD = 1.46$, Cronbach's alpha = .76). Perceived relative deprivation was also tapped with a three-item scale (i.e., If we need anything from the government, ordinary people like me always have to wait longer than others, $M = 4.33, SD = 1.60$, Cronbach's alpha = .83). Finally, perceptions of political dissatisfaction/cynicism were measured with one (reverse-coded) item: "Thinking about your government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?" (1 = extremely dissatisfied, 7 = extremely satisfied).

Although we did not formulate hypotheses on the relationship between left- and right-wing ideology (or extremity), political interest and education, we do control for these variables as robustness checks, because previous literature has indicated that these factors may influence support for populist ideology (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Left-right self-placement was recoded into ideological extremity by taking the two lowest values on the ten-point scale as a proxy for left-wing extremity and the two highest values as an indicator of right-wing extremity (± 1.5 SD from the mean). Political interest was measured with the item “How much would you say you are interested in politics and current affairs in general?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The education variable was recoded into a standardized ESS scale in all countries.

Manipulation Checks

Five statements checked whether our manipulation of the article was successful. Independent samples t-tests show that the three populism conditions significantly differ from the control group in terms of the people centrism dimension. Compared to the control group, respondents who saw one of the three populist versions of the article agreed more that the article described (1) the people of the country as hardworking ($F_{1, 4440} = 372.38$, $p = .000$), (2) a threat to the well-being of the national citizens ($F_{1, 4457} = 30.80$, $p = .000$), and (3) that the nation’s citizens will be affected by the economic developments described ($F_{1, 4455} = 8.91$, $p = .003$). Moreover, the anti-elitist condition differs significantly from the other conditions in the extent to which respondents ascribe responsibility for the decline of the purchasing power to politicians ($F_{1, 4449} = 295.10$, $p = .000$). The two anti-immigrant conditions differ significantly from the anti-elitist and control group in the extent to which they blame immigrants for decline of the purchasing power ($F_{1, 4446} = 1394.25$, $p = .000$).

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted a number of robustness checks. Ideology and prior attitudes in line with populist messages may correspond to the perceived cognitive and affective divide between the people and the others. For this reason, we controlled for (1) left- and right-wing ideological predispositions, (2) political interest and (3) education in all analyses. Including these factors did not change any of the results. However, we do find some associations between these controls and perceived cognitive and affective divides. More specifically, ideological extremity of the right wing corresponded to a perceived divide between the people and the elites in Eastern Europe ($B = .72$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$). In Southern Europe, left-wing ideological extremity corresponded to a weaker cognitive divide between the people and immigrants ($B = -.38$, $SE = .13$, $p < .01$), whereas right-wing extremity increased this gap ($B = .58$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$). In this country cluster, political interest also reduced the gap between immigrants and the people ($B = -.06$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$). Similar results were found for Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, however, extreme right-wing issue positions corresponded to a wider perceived gap between the people and immigrants ($B = .71$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$).

Regarding the affective divide between the people and the elites, results show that higher-educated participants in Eastern Europe perceive a stronger emotional cleavage than lower-educated participants ($B = .26$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$). In Southern Europe, only

ideology plays a role: the extreme right-wing participants perceive the gap to be larger ($B = .41$, $SE = .16$, $p < .05$). Finally, regarding the affective divide between people and immigrants, extreme right-wing participants in Western Europe perceived the gap to be wider ($B = .84$, $SE = .18$, $p < .001$), whereas the extreme left perceived it to be smaller ($B = -.64$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$). Similar effects were found in Southern Europe, whereas these perceptions did not play a role in Eastern Europe.

We find no interaction effects between exposure to populist communication and education, ideology, or political interest. As robustness checks, we corrected for the number of estimates – and assessed whether the effects are similar to non-significant results we excluded from the models. We further analyzed less complicated models in which we looked at the impact of the moderators separately. Again, our findings remain robust. For reasons of parsimony, we do not include all control factors in the models testing the hypotheses in the next sections.

The Effects of Populist Communication on the Cognitive Them-Us Divide

We first hypothesized that exposure to populist communication would activate message-congruent stereotypical portrayals of the in-group and out-group, augmenting the divide between the ordinary people and the others (H1). Regarding the perceived cognitive distance between the people and the elites (H1a), this hypothesis is only supported in the Western European setting (Table 1, Model I). More specifically, exposure to anti-elitist populist messages augments the divide between positive stereotypical images of the ordinary people and negative mental schemata toward the elites. In Eastern and Southern Europe, the stereotypical divide between the people and the elites is not significantly affected by exposure to populist communication, albeit the effects point in a similar direction.

Looking at the effects of right-wing populist communication on the activation of message-congruent perceived divides between ordinary people and immigrants, Hypothesis 1b is supported in both the Western and Southern European contexts (Table 2, Model I). More specifically, in Western Europe, messages that attribute blame to immigrants widen the perceived cleavage between positive mental images of the ordinary people and negative stereotypical schemata of immigrants. However, messages that blame both immigrants and politicians (complete right-wing populism) do not have this effect. In the Southern European cluster, both exclusionary and complete right-wing populist communication activate the perceived cognitive divide between the ordinary people and immigrants. In these countries, the effects are stronger than in Western Europe. Although the effects fail to reach the traditional thresholds of statistical significance, exclusionary populism in Eastern Europe also augments the gap between the people and immigrants. Taken together, the results provide partial support for H1a and H1b: populist messages can activate positive in-group stereotypes and negative out-group stereotypes, but the effects partially depend on the country cluster. Here, it should be emphasized that the effect sizes are modest at best (also see the explained variance of the models in Tables 1 and 2). Although mere exposure to populist ideas may widen the gap between the people and elites, it does so to a rather limited extent.

Table 1. The effects of populist communication on the perceived cognitive distance between the people and elites.

	Western Europe (N = 1,519)			Eastern Europe (N = 1,426)			Southern Europe (N = 1,553)		
	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)
(constant)	1.23 (.07)***	-1.60 (.18)***	-1.41 (.34)***	1.98 (.09)***	-.26 (.24)	.78 (.48)	2.19 (.08)***	-.86 (.23)***	.70 (.45)
Anti-elitist populism	.20 (.10)*	.17 (.09)*	-.12 (.45)	.10 (.13)	.08 (.12)	.73 (.69)	-.06 (.12)	-.02 (.11)	-.25 (.63)
Exclusionism	.08 (.10)	-.01 (.09)	-.56 (.48)	.14 (.13)	.13 (.12)	1.11 (.67)	.06 (.11)	.05 (.11)	.37 (.63)
Complete populism	.05 (.10)	.04 (.09)	.07 (.47)	.07 (.13)	.06 (.12)	.50 (.64)	.08 (.11)	.08 (.11)	-.56 (.62)
National identification		.17 (.03)***	.16 (.06)**		.18 (.03)***	.20 (.06)**		.21 (.03)***	.19 (.05)***
Relative deprivation		.11 (.02)***	.11 (.05)*		.12 (.03)***	.16 (.06)**		.08 (.03)**	.16 (.05)***
Political dissatisfaction		.34 (.03)***	.31 (.04)***		.18 (.02)***	.23 (.05)***		.33 (.03)***	.24 (.05)***
Identification × anti-elitism			.01 (.08)			-.02 (.09)			.02 (.07)
Identification × exclusionism			.02 (.07)			-.03 (.08)			-.05 (.07)
Identification × complete			-.01 (.08)			-.03 (.08)			.08 (.07)
Deprivation × anti-elitism			.01 (.07)			-.06 (.09)			-.15 (.07)*
Deprivation × exclusionism			.05 (.06)			-.12 (.08)			-.13 (.07)
Deprivation × complete			-.03 (.07)			.01 (.08)			-.06 (.07)
Dissatisfaction × anti-elitism			.05 (.07)			-.06 (.07)			.15 (.07)*
Dissatisfaction × exclusionism			.05 (.07)			-.05 (.06)			.09 (.07)
Dissatisfaction × complete			.03 (.06)			-.07 (.07)			.11 (.07)
F	1.32*	61.75***	24.85***	.46	17.25***	7.19***	.50	35.97***	15.46***
Adjusted R ²	.001	.194	.191	.001	.064	.061	.001	.119	.123

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.
Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standard errors (SE). The reference category for the experimental conditions is the control group.

Table 2. The effects of populist communication on the perceived cognitive distance between the people and immigrants.

	Western Europe (N = 1,519)			Eastern Europe (N = 1,425)			Southern Europe (N = 1,544)		
	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)
(constant)	1.04 (.08)***	-2.38 (.20)***	-2.22 (.39)***	.70 (.10)***	-.41 (.25)	-1.00 (.50)*	.40 (.09)***	-1.82 (.24)***	-1.14 (.48)***
Anti-elitist populism	.07 (.12)	.05 (.11)	-.13 (.55)	-.02 (.14)	-.02 (.13)	.86 (.72)	.09 (.12)	.06 (.11)	-.60 (.67)
Exclusionism	.23 (.12)*	.16 (.11)	-.78 (.56)	.17 (.14)	.15 (.13)	1.41 (.70)*	.34 (.12)***	.33 (.11)***	-.54 (.67)
Complete populism	.11 (.12)	.12 (.11)	.56 (.55)	.19 (.14)	.22 (.13)	.51 (.67)	.48 (.12)***	.42 (.11)***	-.69 (.66)
National identification		.37 (.03)***	.37 (.06)***		.33 (.03)***	.38 (.07)		.36 (.03)***	.39 (.06)***
Relative deprivation		.15 (.03)**	.12 (.05)*		.06 (.03)	.11 (.06)		.05 (.03)	.03 (.05)
Political dissatisfaction		.23 (.03)***	.22 (.05)***		-.11 (.03)***	-.08 (.05)		.11 (.03)***	-.02 (.05)
Identification × anti-elitism			-.03 (.09)			-.10 (.09)			-.06 (.08)
Identification × exclusionism			.09 (.09)			-.09 (.09)			-.05 (.08)
Identification × complete			-.05 (.09)			-.03 (.09)			-.02 (.08)
Deprivation × anti-elitism			.04 (.08)			-.03 (.09)			-.01 (.07)
Deprivation × exclusionism			.07 (.07)			-.12 (.09)			.01 (.08)
Deprivation × complete			.02 (.08)			-.05 (.09)			.06 (.08)
Dissatisfaction × anti-elitism			.04 (.08)			-.07 (.07)			.17 (.07)*
Dissatisfaction × exclusionism			.04 (.08)			-.06 (.07)			.18 (.08)*
Dissatisfaction × complete			-.06 (.08)			.01 (.07)			.16 (.07)*
F	1.38	56.29***	23.05***	1.27	32.36***	13.26***	6.87***	35.68***	15.12***
Adjusted R ²	.001	.179	.179	.001	.117	.114	.011	.119	.121

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standard errors (SE). The reference category for the experimental conditions is the control group.

Populist Communication and the Emotional Distance between the People and Others

In the next step, the effects of populist communication on the emotional cleavage between the ordinary people and the elites (Table 3) and immigrants (Table 4) were assessed. Again, the results depended on the country cluster. Regarding the activation of an affective cleavage between the ordinary people and the elites (H2a), only exposure to complete populist ideas in the Eastern European cluster significantly strengthened the emotional distance between the people and the elites (Table 3, Model I). These results only yield limited support for H2a. Exposure to populist ideas that express a divide between the elites and the people may strengthen the emotional distance between them and us, but this is also limited to the type of populism and the region: complete right-wing populist communication in Eastern Europe.

Looking at the effects of populist communication and the activation of an affective divide between ordinary people and immigrants (Table 4), the results indicate that populism's effects are not similar across countries. In Western Europe, exposure to excluding populist ideas strengthens the message-congruent cleavage between ordinary people and immigrants. Exposure to both anti-elite and anti-immigrant messages does not have this effect (Table 4, Model I). In Eastern Europe, the *combination* of anti-elitism and excluding populism activates an emotional cleavage between the people and immigrants (Table 4, Model I). Populist messages do not unconditionally activate emotional boundaries in Southern European countries. Against this backdrop, we found partial support for H2b. The emotional cleavage between people and immigrants may be strengthened as a consequence of exposure to message-congruent excluding or complete right-wing populism, but these effects apply to the Eastern and Western European country cluster only. Effect sizes are small, and the overall explained variance of exposure to populist communication on affective divides in society is marginal.

The Contingency of Populism's Effects on Perceptual Screens

Although the results are generally supportive of the alignment of national identification, perceived deprivation and political dissatisfaction with the perceived divide between the ordinary people and the others in all country clusters (Table 1 through 4, Model II), the interaction effects of preexisting attitudes and exposure to congruent populist ideas are less universal and persistent. First, in all three country clusters, the level of identification with the in-group of the ordinary people does not moderate the effects of populist communication on the cognitive divide between the people and the two outgroups, which refutes H3a and H3b (Tables 1 and 2, Model III). The interaction effect of exposure to populist communication and relative deprivation (H4a) and political dissatisfaction (H5a), respectively, on the cognitive divide between the people and the elites is only significant and positive in Southern Europe, and only for anti-elitist populist communication (Table 1, Model III). With regard to the cognitive divide between in-group and immigrants, there is no interaction effect of relative deprivation, thus H4b cannot be supported. Finally, the effects of all populist cues on the stereotypical distance between the people and immigrants are strongest for citizens with more cynical perceptions toward the

Table 3. The effects of populist communication on the affective distance between the people and elites.

	Western Europe (<i>N</i> = 1,519)			Eastern Europe (<i>N</i> = 1,423)			Southern Europe (<i>N</i> = 1,553)		
	Model I <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model II <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model III <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model I <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model II <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model III <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model I <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model II <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model III <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
(constant)	1.38 (.08)***	-1.61 (.18)***	-1.68 (.36)***	2.43 (.10)***	-.25 (.28)	-1.33 (.55)***	2.55 (.09)***	-1.00 (.26)***	-1.24 (.52)***
Anti-elitist populism	.09 (.11)	.06 (.10)	.44 (.50)	.18 (.15)	.15 (.14)	1.67 (.78)*	-.16 (.13)	-.10 (.13)	.02 (.72)
Exclusionism	.08 (.11)	-.02 (.10)	-.14 (.51)	-.01 (.15)	-.02 (.43)	1.59 (.77)*	-.03 (.13)	-.03 (.12)	1.09 (.73)
Complete populism	.03 (.11)	.02 (.10)	-.03 (.50)	.35 (.14)*	.33 (.14)*	1.45 (.73)*	-.05 (.13)	-.03 (.12)	-.29 (.72)
National identification	.19 (.03)***	.08 (.02)**	.23 (.06)***	.21 (.03)***	.21 (.03)***	.24 (.07)***	.20 (.03)***	.20 (.03)***	.22 (.06)***
Relative deprivation	.08 (.02)**	.39 (.03)***	.09 (.05)*	.16 (.03)***	.16 (.03)***	.27 (.07)***	.07 (.03)*	.07 (.03)*	.12 (.06)*
Political dissatisfaction			.35 (.05)***	.21 (.03)***	.21 (.03)***	.28 (.06)***	.43 (.03)***	.43 (.03)***	.42 (.06)***
Identification × anti-elite			-.05 (.08)			-.07 (.10)			-.02 (.09)
Identification × excluding			-.08 (.08)			-.02 (.10)			-.09 (.09)
Identification × complete			-.02 (.08)			-.06 (.09)			.05 (.08)
Deprivation × anti-elitism			-.02 (.07)			-.12 (.10)			-.10 (.08)
Deprivation × exclusionism			.01 (.07)			-.23 (.09)*			-.08 (.08)
Deprivation × complete			-.03 (.08)			-.09 (.10)			-.03 (.08)
Dissatis. × anti-elitism			-.01 (.07)			-.13 (.08)			.08 (.08)
Dissatis. × exclusionism			.09 (.07)			-.09 (.08)			-.07 (.09)
Dissatis. × complete			.06 (.07)			-.09 (.08)			.04 (.08)
<i>F</i>	32	62.60***	25.34***	2.78*	20.06***	8.69***	.54	41.80***	17.28***
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.001	.196	.194	.004	.074	.075	.001	.136	.136

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standard errors (*SE*). The reference category for the experimental conditions is the control group.

Table 4. The effects of populist communication on the affective distance between the people and immigrants.

	Western Europe (N = 1,520)			Eastern Europe (N = 1,423)			Southern Europe (N = 1,546)		
	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)	Model I B (SE)	Model II B (SE)	Model III B (SE)
(constant)	1.17 (.09)***	-2.54 (.20)***	-2.60 (.40)***	1.28 (.10)***	-.37 (.26)	-.63 (.53)	.73 (.09)***	-2.41 (.25)***	-1.74 (.49)***
Anti-elitist populism	.07 (.12)	.05 (.11)	.69 (.57)	.04 (.14)	.03 (.14)	.54 (.75)	.05 (.13)	.03 (.12)	-1.10 (.69)***
Exclusionism	.28 (.12)*	.20 (.11)	-.55 (.57)	.10 (.14)	.08 (.14)	.81 (.73)*	.20 (.13)	.19 (.12)	-.92 (.70)
Complete populism	.04 (.12)	.06 (.11)	.27 (.56)	.33 (.14)*	.36 (.13)**	.24 (.70)*	.12 (.13)	.08 (.12)	-.27 (.68)
National identification		.43 (.03)***	.47 (.07)***		.37 (.03)***	.32 (.07)***		.41 (.03)***	.43 (.06)***
Relative deprivation		.11 (.03)	.14 (.06)*		.13 (.03)***	.25 (.07)***		.10 (.03)***	.07 (.06)*
Political dissatisfaction		.26 (.03)***	.22 (.05)***		-.10 (.03)***	-.13 (.05)***		.19 (.03)***	.09 (.06)***
Identification × anti-elite			-.10 (.09)			.01 (.10)			-.01 (.08)
Identification × excluding			.02 (.09)			.05 (.09)			.05 (.08)
Identification × complete			-.03 (.09)			.12 (.09)			-.08 (.08)
Deprivation × anti-elitism			-.05 (.08)			-.09 (.09)			.05 (.08)
Deprivation × exclusionism			-.01 (.08)			-.20 (.09)*			.07 (.08)
Deprivation × complete			-.04 (.08)			-.19 (.09)*			.03 (.08)
Dissatis. × anti-elitism			-.01 (.08)			-.02 (.08)			.17 (.08)*
Dissatis. × exclusionism			.14 (.08)*			.01 (.08)			.10 (.08)
Dissatis. × complete			.02 (.08)			.11 (.07)			.09 (.08)
F	2.11*	62.92***	25.74***	2.13*	38.37***	15.24***	.93	43.68***	18.21***
Adjusted R ²	.002	.197	.196	.004	.130	.131	.001	.142	.143

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standard errors (SE). The reference category for the experimental conditions is the control group.

establishment; however, this effect can again only be found in Southern Europe (Table 2, Model III). This provides partial support for H5b.

Regarding the role of participants' perceptual screens on the persuasiveness of populist communication on affective boundaries, the results only offer limited support for a conditional effect of populist cues. Again, there is no interaction effect of national identification with regard to the affective divide between in-group and elites (H3c, Table 3, Modell III) and immigrants (H3d, Table 4, Modell III). Relative deprivation only significantly affects the emotional responses to populist ideas in Eastern Europe, but it does so in a *negative* way (Table 4 and Table 4, Model III). Contrary to the expectations formulated under H4c and H4d, this means the more people in Eastern Europe feel deprived, the weaker the effects of populist communication on the emotional boundary between the people and the elites/immigrants. Next, we find a significant and positive two-way interaction effect of dissatisfaction and excluding populism on the perceived affective divide between the people and immigrants in Western Europe and a significant two-way positive interaction effect of anti-elitist populist communication and cynicism on the divide between the people and immigrants in Southern Europe, which provides some support for H5c (Table 4, Model III). However, there is no interaction effect of cynicism as for the affective divide between in-group and elites.

Together, the expectation that the effects of populist communication on cognitive and emotional perceived boundaries between the people and the others are contingent on national identification (H3a-d), relative deprivation (H4a-d) or political dissatisfaction (H5a-b) finds only limited support in the data. Only political dissatisfaction may play a role, but these effects are largely limited to Southern European countries.

Discussion

Experimental research has indicated that exposure to populist ideas can have implications on the individual-level support of populist ideas (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018b; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Yet, we know too little about the effects of populist communication on the perceived cognitive and affective divide between the ordinary people as an in-group and the elites or immigrants as out-groups. Can exposure to populist ideas augment the divide between the people and others, hereby potentially fostering polarized divides in European societies?

To answer this question, we relied on a multi-country experiment ($N = 4,498$) in which populist communication was manipulated along the lines of Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) empirically established conceptualization of (1) anti-elitist populist communication; (2) exclusionism and (3) complete right-wing populist communication. We included eight countries from Eastern, Western and Southern Europe to extend prior experimental studies that mainly focused on single cases or two-country comparisons. The main results indicate that exposure to populist communication has the potential to widen the cognitive and affective cleavage between the people as an in-group and the elites and immigrants as populist out-group, but only in some country clusters and depending on the framing of the populist dimension. Cognitive stereotypical divides between the people and the elites were only affected by anti-elitist populism in Western Europe, and the divide between native people and immigrants was only affected by excluding and complete right-wing populism in Western and Southern Europe.

Message-congruent affective boundaries between the in-group of the native people and the out-groups of the elites and immigrants were only activated by exposure to complete right-wing populism (Eastern Europe) or exclusionary populism (Western Europe). Populist cues did not have an impact on emotional boundaries in Southern European countries, nor did the “thin” ideological core of populism (Mudde, 2004) activate the emotional distance between the innocent native people and culpable others. All in all, finding only a few effects of populist messages on a Manichean perception between in-group and out-groups, our study indicates that such populist attitudes are even more stable and manifest than has been assumed previously. Those attitudes mainly do not get activated by one single message. This is in line with previous experimental studies analyzing the effects of populist messages on populist attitudes (e.g., Andreadis, Cremonesi, Kartsounidou, Kasproicz, & Hess, 2019).

We expected the effects of populist communication would be partially contingent upon the resonance of populist ideas with perceptual screens related to closeness to the in-group or distance toward the out-groups. However, only the level of dissatisfaction with the national elites in government had an impact on the persuasiveness of populist communication, and this effect was again not consistent across populist cues or country clusters. More specifically, the level of dissatisfaction with the elites in government only played a significant and consistent role in Southern Europe. This finding may be explained based on the resonance with populist communication and the level of dissatisfaction in Southern Europe at the time of the study. The Southern European countries – Greece, Italy and Spain – were still dealing with the implications of the economic recession, and the elites in national government in those countries were under fierce attack for not solving this issue that threatened the native people. In line with the theoretical premises of the effectiveness of social identity frames, it can be argued that scapegoating the elites needs to be credible and personally relevant to have an effect (e.g., Gamson, 1992). In the case of the Southern European countries, populist blame attributions were most personally relevant and credible for citizens who distrusted and disapproved of the political elites in their countries.

In country clusters where scapegoats are most accessible in receivers’ schemata, populist blame attributions should thus be most effective. These findings support the notion that populist communication is most effective when it resonates with real-life, contextual-level opportunity structures (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2018; Reinemann et al., 2019).

Although a comprehensive, empirical-based explanation of all country differences reaches beyond the scope of this paper, we can at least arrive at some explanations for the non-universal effects of populist messages throughout Europe. One explanation is the success of populist parties in the different countries and the amount of populist messages recipients are regularly exposed to. The more this is the case, the less pronounced effects one might find for exposure to a single article, as recipients are familiar with those messages. In contrast, in several countries we analyzed, such as Spain or Greece, left-wing populism is more successful and anti-immigrant discourse less common than in countries from the Western cluster. This also holds for the Eastern countries where immigration is of less importance than in the other two clusters.

In Western European countries, anti-elitism and anti-immigration cues are highly salient in political discourse and public opinion (Aalberg et al., 2017) – which may explain why both anti-elite and anti-immigrant stereotypes can be directly affected by populist

communication in this cluster. Likewise, excluding and complete right-wing populism may be persuasive in Southern Europe as countries in this region have witnessed real-life consequences of the refugee crisis that hit Europe at the time of the data collection. Moreover, the country-level factors of dissatisfaction with the elite (partially related to the way in which politicians deal with the migrant crisis) and perceived corruption may explain why the effects of anti-elitism are contingent upon dissatisfaction with the elites in this, but not the other regions. Although immigrants may be a less salient populist out-group in Eastern Europe, other “dangerous” others are frequently scapegoated in this cluster (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017) – which may explain why complete populism affects an emotional cleavage between the people and immigrants in Eastern Europe.

Our results have important social and political implications. In many European countries, populists try to undermine liberal democracy and its democratic values, such as pluralism. This experiment showed that a populist ideology can, under some conditions, spread to perceived stereotypical divides on the demand-side of citizens (also see e.g., Müller et al., 2017). Thus, populists’ constant attacks of the political elite and social out-groups do, to some extent, lead to a polarized perception of these groups and the in-group. These findings support recent work by scholars that evaluate populism as a threat to democracy, as it boosts group-related misanthropy, anti-pluralist attitudes and political dissatisfaction cynicism among the public (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). As the effects of populist messages resonate more among cynical recipients, there is a risk of a downward spiral of cynicism. The mainstreaming of especially right-wing populist ideology in several European countries holds the danger of strengthening these effects.

This study has several limitations that at the same time provide a starting point for future research. First, by focusing on immigrants as a populist out-group, this experiment only analyzed the effects of right-wing populism. For left-wing populist out-groups, effects might look very different. Second, there are some limitations with regard to our measurement. In terms of political cynicism, we had to rely on a single-item measurement, which might limit its validity and reliability. Moreover, our measurement of stereotypical and emotional perceptions of the in-group referred to “most people in country X”. Thus, it predefined for every respondent who the in-group represents and did not account for individuals’ different understandings of belonging. Moreover, research indeed showed that populist messages have contradictory effects for populist and non-populist citizens (Busby et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2017). Consequently, future research should account for populist attitudes as individual predisposition and analyze whether the perceived distance between the people and the populist outgroups becomes larger among populist citizens through exposure to populism whilst those messages do not resonate among non-populists. In addition, as populist attitudes may preexist as schemata among receivers that are activated by the context or cues in people’s environment (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), we suggest future research to look at both preexisting populist schemata and the activation of these perceptions – as well as contextual factors that make populist frames more effective. Recent research has made a start in analyzing the moderating role of populist attitudes for populist voting (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018) and populist expressions (Busby et al., 2019). This experiment only tested the effect of one single message at one single point of time, which limits its external validity. In reality, recipients in many European countries are regularly exposed to populist actors who scapegoat the elites or immigrants. Future research should therefore test whether repeated frames are more likely to activate stereotypical divides between in- and out-groups. Finally, we only varied the content of the article, not the image. It would be

interesting to study the effects of populist depictions in pictures as visual communication, e.g., memes, often used by populist and extremist actors in social media.

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to investigate the effects of populist communication on the perceived cognitive and affective divide between the people and the others in different European regions – hereby demonstrating that exposure to populist messages may foster polarized divides in society. As a key democratic implication, repeated exposure to populist communication may enhance support for populist political parties that cultivate a cognitive and emotional Manichean opposition between them and us in their party communication and rhetoric.

Notes

1. In Greece, data were collected via a panel consisting of a national database of voluntary contributors maintained by the School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; Romania worked with Questia.
2. The original experiment is a 3×2 between-subject design with two control groups which has been conducted in 15 countries (Hameleers et al., 2018b). It investigates framing effects of the national in-group, two horizontal (immigrants and the wealthy) and one vertical (the political elite) out-groups on several attitudinal and affective outcomes. Based on the research interest of this paper, we only focus on (1) two out-groups: the political elite and immigrants and (2) on those countries to whom our criteria described above applied.

Data Availability Statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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