

National School Of Political Science And Public Administration

The European Commission's discourse on populism in
times of crisis: the economic crisis, the migration crisis,
the health crisis

Summary

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Summary

In recent decades, the European Union (EU) has faced a series of major crises that have tested its cohesion and resilience. The 2008 economic crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, and the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were turning points for European institutions, including the European Commission (EC), responsible for proposing and implementing policies at the EU level. These crises not only put pressure on the administrative capacity of the EU, but also fuelled the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties which criticized and challenged the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU.

In this context, the general objective of this thesis is to analyse the official discourse of the EC regarding populism during these crises in order to identify how populism and populists are represented in the official communications of the institution. At the same time, the thesis aims to explore whether and how the EC's discourses contribute to the institution's legitimization strategies and how these vary depending on the crisis. From these general objectives, emerge the following secondary objectives:

- I) to study how populists are represented as social actors.
- II) to identify the most frequent associations and metaphors regarding populism.
- III) to explore other themes present in the discourse on populism.
- IV) to identify other discourses which appear alongside the one about populism.

To achieve these objectives, this paper combines quantitative and qualitative methods from discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. Specifically, the research focuses on the textual, intertextual, and socio-cognitive analysis of EC discourses, using a corpus of selected discourse strands from during the time of the three aforementioned crises. The thesis is structured into nine chapters that address the literature review, research methodology, analysis of EC discourses during the three crises, and the resulting conclusions.

In *Chapter 1*, the opening section of the thesis, I explain the context and motivation for the research. In a period marked by multiple crises, the EU was forced to rethink many of its policies and strategies. Particularly, the crises led to an increase in dissatisfaction with European institutions,

fuelling the popularity of populist parties which promote an anti-EU discourse. In response to these challenges, the EC had to adapt its discourse, to both counteract the influence of populism and maintain stability and cohesion within the Union. I continue by discussing the central objective and the resulting research questions. Lastly, I identify the research as relevant in the current political context and for academic endeavours, given that there are only a handful of studies analysing the anti-populist discourse (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, Glynos, & Mondon, 2018).

In *Chapter 2*, I review the literature I considered relevant for research topic which I divided into four major areas: studies on populism in the EU, studies on the discourse regarding populism, research related to the EU and the EC in times of crisis, and studies on crisis discourses. Throughout this process, I highlight the following aspects:

Studies on populism in the EU show a lack of consensus on a clear and uniform definition of this concept (Gagnon et al., 2018). This conceptual diversity is also reflected in the various classifications of populism based on political orientation (right, left, center) or type of opposition (anti-establishment, anti-elite, etc.). Furthermore, empirical studies on populism in Europe reveal that right-wing populism is frequently associated with nationalism, economic protectionism, and Euroscepticism, while left-wing populism is often seen as a reaction to neoliberalism and an attempt to boost democracy by challenging elites (Mudde, 2016; Antal, 2019; Blokker & Anselmi, 2019). Studies on the discourses regarding populism, though few in number, indicate the existence of an anti-populist discourse alongside the populist one, in which populism is perceived negatively, being associated with ideological currents such as nationalism or authoritarianism, with an urgent threat to liberal democracy (Dean, 2022), or with an outdated, immature political approach and a social evil (Markou, 2021). Research on the EU and the EC during times of crisis highlights EU institutions faced legitimacy and politicization issues during crises, leading to a fragmentation of solidarity among member states and affecting the European integration process (Zeitlin & Nicoli, 2020). Lastly, research on the EC's discourse during times of crisis is quite limited, mostly focusing on the institutional response to the crisis rather than the EC's discursive strategies. However, some studies have investigated how the EC used the crisis to justify greater economic centralisation and coordination measures (Schmidt, 2016), as well as how the EC's neoliberal discourse was contested by populist movements (Jacoby & Hopkin, 2019).

In *Chapter 3*, I described the theoretical framework and methodologies used in the research. The thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining elements from discursive institutionalism, discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. This approach aims to provide a detailed perspective on

how the EC constructs and uses the discourse on populism during times of crisis. Discursive institutional theory focuses on how ideas and discourses influence political and institutional dynamics (Haastrup 2022). Discourse theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) provide a theoretical framework for examining how language reflects and shapes power relations and ideologies (Johnson & McLean, 2020). Corpus linguistics allows for a quantitative examination of texts, identifying linguistic patterns and semantic relationships (Wright & Brookes, 2019) that are relevant for understanding how the EC constructs its discourse. The research is conducted at three levels: micro (textual analysis of discourses), meso (analysis of intertextuality and inter-discursivity), and macro (socio-cognitive context).

In *Chapter 4*, I present the first observations regarding the selected corpus of discourses, as well as the context of the crises, along with a discussion of the EC as an institutional actor and the importance of individual speakers in constructing the narrative about populism. In other words, this chapter contextualizes the discourse and signals the first linguistic patterns regarding populism. For example, the economic crisis was marked by austerity measures and the contesting of the EU's legitimacy, while the migration crisis highlighted the divisions among member states concerning European solidarity and border security. The health crisis caused by COVID-19 exacerbated distrust in institutions and provided populists with a platform to criticize public health measures. European commissioners addressing the topic of populism during these times were generally centre-right politicians, but from one crisis to another, their political orientations became more diversified. Quantitative observations showed that some associations between populism and other concepts were reiterated from one crisis to the next, but there were also associations reflecting the specific nature of each crisis.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 represent the empirical analysis of the EC's discourse on populism during each crisis. Thus, in each section, I applied selected parameters to the corpus and presented the results at each level of analysis. For example, the textual analysis of discourse fragments from the economic crisis reveals that the EC portrays populists as negative social actors who threaten the economic and political stability of the EU, and populism is frequently associated with instability, demagoguery, and irresponsibility. During the migration crisis, the EC describes populists as actors who manipulate public fears and prejudices to gain electoral support. They are presented as opponents of European values of solidarity and cooperation. During the health crisis, populists spread misinformation and scepticism about public health measures. They are described as being responsible for amplifying the crisis by undermining the efforts to combat the pandemic.

When looking at metaphors and associations, I noticed that the EC's discourses use metaphors to describe how populists try to isolate the EU from the rest of the world (either through economic protectionism or through walls against migrants). In most cases, populists are portrayed as adversaries of the EU and even as an existential threat to the European project. Themes associated with populism include European integration, which appears in all three crises, as well as democracy and legitimacy, which appear during the migration and health crises. Additionally, the mentioned in the discourse include EU treaties, EC documents, and contemporary and historical speeches that confirm a legitimization strategy on the part of the institution.

Chapter 8 synthesizes the main findings of the research and discusses the common elements and differences with regards to how the EC approached populism in the context of each crisis. A common element in all EC discourses is the representation of populism as a threat to European stability, unity, and values. Regardless of the crisis analysed, the EC used similar discursive strategies to delegitimise populism. However, there are also differences in how the EC addressed populism depending on the nature of the crisis. For example, during the economic crisis, the EC focused on the legitimacy of austerity measures and the need for structural reforms, while during the migration crisis, the emphasis was on European solidarity and the protection of European identity. During the health crisis, the EC highlighted the importance of respecting public health measures and international cooperation. The chapter also discusses how EC discourses contribute to the institution's legitimization strategies. The EC used discourse not only to counter populism but also to justify the policies and measures adopted during the crises. These discourses are intended to strengthen public perception of the EC as a responsible and legitimate actor in crisis management.

Chapter 9 provides a reflection on the contribution this research makes to the academic literature and social practice. The conclusions emphasize that the EC's discourse on populism is structured as an anti-populist discourse which plays an essential role in the institution's legitimization strategies. The importance of a more nuanced understanding of how institutional discourses can influence public perceptions and political dynamics is also highlighted. The thesis contributes to the literature by adopting an interdisciplinary approach and investigating a relatively unexplored topic—the EC's anti-populist discourse. At the same time, the work brings new data and theoretical perspectives that may be useful for future research in this field.

As with any research endeavour, this one is not without its limitations and challenges. Among the limitations are the focus on a single institution (the EC) and a selected corpus, which limits the

generalization of the conclusions. Among the challenges are the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods and the selection of appropriate research tools.

Regarding practical implications, the research suggests that discourse can be a tool for legitimizing policies and countering populist challenges, as well as the need for more effective strategic communication from European institutions to maintain public trust during times of crisis.

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