

# Right-Wing Populism in Europe & USA: Contesting Politics & Discourse beyond 'Orbanism' and 'Trumpism'

Ruth Wodak and Michał Krzyżanowski

Lancaster University / University of Liverpool

## 1. (Right-Wing) Populism Old & New: Shared Ontologies, Recurrent Practices

Through a number of theoretical and empirical contributions, this Special Issue of the *Journal of Language and Politics* addresses the recent sudden upsurge of right-wing populist parties (RWPs) in Europe and the USA. It responds to many recent challenges and a variety of 'discursive shifts' (Krzyżanowski 2013a, 2018 a,b) and wider dynamics of media and public discourses that have taken place as a result of the upswing of right-wing populism (RWP) across Europe and beyond (e.g., Feldman and Jackson 2013; Muller 2016; Wodak et al. 2013; Wodak 2013 a,b, 2015 a, 2016, 2017). The papers in the Special Issue cover institutionalised (individual and group) varieties of right-wing populist politics and also transcend a narrowly conceived political realm. Moreover, we investigate the ontology of the current surge of RWP, its state-of-the-art as well and, most importantly, how right-wing populist agendas spread, become increasingly mediated and thereby '*normalised*' in European and US politics, media and in the wider public spheres (e.g., Wodak 2015 a,b; Link 2014).

Indeed, in recent years and months new information about the rise of RWP has dominated the news practically every day. New polls about the possible success of such political parties have progressively caused an election scare among mainstream institutions and politicians. The unpredictable and unpredicted successes of populists (e.g. Donald Trump in the USA in 2016) have by now transformed anxieties into legitimate apprehension and fear. In the European context, RWP have threatened to undermine many of the flagship post-war projects, including, most obviously, that of the supranational European Union. Elsewhere they have undermined – especially through their focus on politico-economic isolationism and nativism – many aspects of the international order and of agreed treaties and charters of human rights. Not to mention the threat that they have posed to long-term forms of social and political systems (for example, by the danger posed by 'Brexit' to not only the EU's but also the UK's unity and future; cf. Bauböck and Tripkovic 2017; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2018).

In this Special Issue, we thus examine not only the nature or the state-of-the-art of contemporary RWP but also point to its ontology within and beyond the field of politics. We argue that the rise and success of RWP is certainly not a recent or a momentary phenomenon. On the contrary, it started much earlier, with the first incarnations of Jean-

Marie Le Pen's *Front National* in the 1970s, Jörg Haider's *Austrian Freedom Party* of the 1980s and 1990s (Wodak and Pelinka 2002; Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2009a), and Silvio Berlusconi's Italian media empire and his party *Forza Italia* burgeoning from the 1980s well into the new Millennium (Colombo 2012; Ruzza and Fella 2008). Those are, of course, just a few European examples, yet they illustrate that RWP have been around for a long time and continue to be active until today.

However, the success of RWP should not only be ascribed to their own agenda and activism, but must be placed in the wider context of socio-political dynamics that have provided fertile ground for many key aspects of their ideology/ies. Indeed, in the European context, the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 can probably be considered one of the major tipping points (Galasińska and Krzyżanowski 2009; Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2009b; Triandafyllidou, Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2009). The ensuing social and political transformation – in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but also to large extent in the West of Europe – also implied the increase in migration within Europe and eventually provided RWP with opportunities of using anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric immediately after 1989 (e.g., Matouschek, Wodak and Januscsek 1995; Wodak and Van Dijk 2000) as the central issue on RWP agenda. This remains a successful means to mobilize voters behind RWP ideologies, as a European trait and - as illustrated by the 'wall-building' rhetoric of Donald Trump – a global phenomenon (see e.g., Triandafyllidou, Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2018).

Similarly, transformative moments (such as 1989) have spawned the upsurge in the anti-establishment rhetoric of RWP in CEE, especially in Hungary and Poland. Victor Orbán was re-elected as Hungary's Prime minister on 29 May 2010, and soon started dismantling Hungary's young and still volatile democracy with the help of nativist and exclusionary slogans that legitimised his anti-democratic agenda. In Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the now governing right-wing populist Law and Justice Party PiS (Krzyżanowski 2012, 2018a) is regarded as Poland's most powerful politician since the general and presidential elections of 2015 and leads the country in an authoritarian manner whilst remaining only a regular member of parliament and party chairman, not holding any other state or government functions. Controlled by Kaczyński, the current Polish government is transforming a vibrant Polish democracy into a so-called 'illiberal democracy' *a la Orbán*, by taking over media and limiting pluralism of opinions. On the periphery of Europe, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is similarly transforming the Turkish post-Kemalist democracy into a presidential system close to a dictatorship, with many historical reminiscences of the Ottoman empire. Last but not least, Donald Trump's RWP politics has also gradually penetrated into, and increasingly attempted to undermine, the integrity of US judicial and other federal institutions.

However, beyond the many controversies around the RWP in power one should not discard the fact that many more RWP are currently enjoying the rise in public support in CEE, Western Europe and beyond. Nevertheless, their success seems far from

guaranteed as the developments of early 2017 have shown. Indeed, after Brexit and Trump's election as US president in 2016, the political and media worlds focused on Austria in December 2016, where the RWP candidate of the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, Norbert Hofer lost to the independent pro-European candidate Alexander van der Bellen (see Wodak in this issue). Attention next turned to the Netherlands in March 2017, where the RWP candidate Geert Wilders had long been perceived as one of key candidates. However, Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) eventually succumbed to the re-election of the liberal leader and governing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. In a state of prolonged panic, the eyes of the world subsequently switched to the French presidential election in May 2017, where, despite all the odds, one of the European key icons of RWP politics – Marine Le Pen – eventually lost against the pro-European yet neoliberal/centrist candidate, Emmanuel Macron. In June 2017, deployment of populist tones à la UKIP also did not help Theresa May and her UK Conservative party to win the snap UK general election. Indeed, instead of gaining increased legitimacy for their ideas of further isolationism and the 'hard Brexit' from the EU, the Tories came out of the elections battered and not only lost their majority in the UK parliament and thus also effectively strengthened the Labour opposition now increasingly turning (back) to the left under Jeremy Corbyn.

To be sure though, the RWP election saga is certainly far from over and will surely continue throughout 2017 and beyond. With up-coming elections in such key EU countries as Germany (fall 2017), the rise of the intellectually-driven RWP *Alternative für Deutschland* should be closely watched. The same applies to several countries in and beyond Europe incl. Turkey, Egypt, and the Philippines (e.g. Bremmer 2017) where populist leadership is almost certainly set to sooner or later threaten the stability of the respective socio-political systems.

## **2. The Elusive and Highly Complex Nature of (Right-Wing) Populism**

Populism, especially in its right-wing form, is an extremely elusive phenomenon. And, while it can be sometimes characterised according to national and regional traits, it remains a strange hybrid at the intersection of a range of both traditional and new forms and formats of political action and political behaviour. Hence, although some more 'standardized models' of RWP are currently emerging or even re-emerging – for example, the nationalist and collectivist one as embodied by various versions of 'Orbanism', or the mediatised and individualised model best exemplified by the US-American 'Trumpism' – it is important to emphasize that each national or other variant of RWP is necessarily different and must be approached in a distinct and context-dependent way.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the affordances of mediatisation and self-mediation of RWP are probably among the key reasons behind the upsurge and success of populist ideologies and views, and remain one of the stable factors for its longevity (Forchtner et al. 2013; Mazzoleni 2008). Indeed, the manifold patterns of mediated communication

and the ubiquitous appropriation of dominant media agenda and frames by RWP cannot be dismissed as a mere coincidence. Donald Trump's US-Presidential victory is believed to stem – to large extent – from his unconventional, aggressive, and offensive use of social media, and specifically Tweets, explicitly attacking his opponent Hillary Clinton and the traditional liberal media (see papers by Montgomery and Kreis in this issue). Similarly, Austria's far-right presidential candidate 2016 Norbert Hofer attracted a large community of fans primarily via Facebook.

Hence, the disproportionate success of some RWPs can probably be partly explained by the excessive exposure that these parties receive in the media, despite their lack of what used to be regarded as required organizational and political structures due to what Wodak (2015a: 20ff) describes as the *right-wing populist perpetuum mobile*. The latter boils down to intentional and excessive provocation of scandals and the subsequent recurrent dynamic of victimisation, launching of conspiracy theories, frequent denials and lies, and finally to ambivalent apologies. In a similar vein, the RWP skills in self-mediation – esp. via social and online media – and the ability to exploit – as part of their anti-establishment rhetoric – the 'alternative public spheres on the web' (Dahlgren 2005; Alvares and Dahlgren 2016) have served to spread exclusionary or outright discriminatory populist ideologies and imaginaries (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013; Krzyżanowski 2013a, 2018a,b; Wodak 2013a,b).

However, as Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese (201: 3) illustrate, in the strongly male (but now also increasingly female) dominated *Führerparteien* of right-wing populists, many party leaders have actually achieved a delicate balance between appearing, on the one hand, as extraordinary, unique and possibly even anti-establishment, and, on the other, as authoritative and legitimate. They have thus been able to convince the *demos* that they are able to actively counter the elites while not undermining the liberal democratic system *per se*. This has frequently been achieved by 'scandalisation' (Wodak 2015a, 2016) or by what Albertazzi (2007: 335) labels as 'dramatisation', i.e., "the need to generate tension in order to build up support for the party [...] by denouncing the tragedies that would befall the community if it were to be deprived of its defences." Scandalisation also implies manifold references to the allegedly charismatic leaders of such parties, who construct themselves as saviours, as problem solvers and, of course, as crisis managers. Obviously, these strategies might provide voters with more confidence in the effectiveness of the politics of the RWP.

Following on from these considerations, RWP can best be defined as a hybrid political ideology that rejects the hegemonic post-war political consensus and usually, though not always, combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism or other, often profoundly different and contradictory ideologies. This ideology is considered as populism because of its appeal to the 'common man/woman', as to a quasi-homogenous *demos* (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 4-5). Indeed, as Betz (1994: 41) rightly argues,

“their [the élites’] inability to restore the sense of security and prosperity, which steady material and social advances in the post-war period had led their citizens to expect from their leaders, has become a major cause of voter alienation and cynicism. [...] It is within this context of growing public pessimism, anxiety, and disaffection that the rise and success of radical right-wing populism in Western Europe finds at least a partial explanation”.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012: 8) elaborate on this definition and emphasise that populism (both left-wing and right-wing) “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’”. Moreover, they claim that populism always perceives “politics to be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people” (ibid.). This creates antagonism and a Manichean division into good and bad, friends and foes, we and ‘the other’ salient characteristics of populism and allows foregrounding nativist exclusionary ideologies. Mudde and Kaltwasser conclude their conceptual analysis by arguing that three core concepts necessarily belong to any serious definition of populism: the people, the élite and the general will; and its two direct opposites – elitism and pluralism (ibid.: 9).

Pels (2012: 31ff.) emphasizes, moreover, that it would be dangerous to regard modern populism as void of serious content or to reduce the new right-wing populism to a “frivolity of form, pose and style” and thus to downplay its outreach, its messages and resonance. Indeed, it would be, Pels continues, “erroneous to think there is no substance behind its political style. [...] It is precisely through its dynamic mix of substance and style that populist politics has gained an electoral lead position in current media democracy” (Ibid.: 32). Pels lists various important socio-political challenges which currently concern voters, especially during times of financial and environmental crises, and which are related to a multitude of fears, disaffection and pessimism: fear of losing one’s job; fear of ‘strangers’, i.e., migrants; fear of losing national autonomy; fear of losing old traditions and values; fear of climate change; disappointment and even disgust with mainstream politics and corruption; anger about the growing gap between rich and poor; disaffection due to the lack of transparency of political decision-making, and so forth.

Thus, when analysing right-wing (or, indeed, also left-wing) populist movements and their rhetoric, it is essential to recognize that their specific propaganda – realized in many genres and across various social fields – always combines and integrates form and content, targets specific audiences and adapts to specific contexts. Only by doing so, we can deconstruct, understand and explain their messages, their resonance and their electoral success (Wodak 2015a: 5ff).

### **3. From Theory to Analysis of (Right-Wing) Populism: About this Special Issue**

Due to the huge complexity and elusiveness of RWP highlighted above, we are, of course, aware that our special issue cannot cover all facets and contexts of contemporary RWP. Its aim is therefore to deliver several scholarly analytical

“snapshots” which allow insight in the on-going socio-political changes and accompanying new discourses esp. as part of the current upsurge of RWP politics. Taken together as puzzle stones, the insights offered by the papers will hopefully enable readers to understand the emerging larger picture and dynamics of RWP politics and rhetoric as well as point to possible explanations. The papers in this issue allow experiencing RWP as both discursive and material practices and as a political/discursive imaginary. It is obvious that many contradictions govern local, regional and national politics and no one-size-fits-all explanation exists. That is why context-dependent qualitative research is vital, as is an ongoing theoretical reflection on the nature of contemporary RWP.

In this special issue, we cover a range of countries, political parties, protagonists, written as well as oral and visual genres, and specific dimensions of right-wing populism. We analyse examples from countries as different as Sweden, Austria, the US, the UK, Greece, Hungary, and France. These are presented, contextualized, and analysed with different methodologies and methods. We consider rhetorical, cognitive, historical, economic, argumentative, multimodal, and discourse-analytic aspects in an integrative and interdisciplinary way. Last but not least, we analyse traditional and new (online-based) discourses incl. genres as tweets, TV debates, web platforms slogans and posters, Facebook, speeches, and party programs. The authors of the papers come from a wide range of critical social-science disciplines including: political sociology, political science, communication, and media studies, economy, discourse theory, (critical) discourse studies, and linguistics.

The special Issue opens with a set of papers offering theoretical reflections on the nature of contemporary RWP. Jens Rydgren challenges the existing scholarly literature on populism and tests the extent to which it applies to contemporary radical right-wing parties in Europe. As Rydgren argues, these parties are increasingly referred to as populist parties; he claims that naming them as ‘populist’ might indeed be misleading since populism as such is not the most pertinent feature of this party family. These parties are, he claims, mainly defined by ethnic nationalism, and not a populist ideology. In their discourse, they are primarily preoccupied with questions pertaining to national identity and national security – and their ‘negative’ opposites, immigration, multiculturalism, and Islamist threat. They consistently pitch ‘the people’ mainly against elites however do so by implying the latter as responsible for a cultural and political threat against their own, idealized image of (their) nation state. Hence, Rydgren contends that ethnic nationalism of European radical right-wing parties is far more important for their discourse and only tends to influence the populist elements rather than vice versa.

In the second paper, Walter Ötsch and Stephan Pühringer offer a theoretically-informed comparison between RWP and its key operationalising sister-concept of market fundamentalism. Based on an analysis of the work of important founders of market

economic thinking as well as of the arguments brought forward by leading right-wing populists, Ötsch and Pühringer point to several similarities between real and imaginary dimensions of RWP and market fundamentalism. The authors claim that both the former and the latter act as mutually reinforcing and serving as a gateway for each other. The authors also test their theoretical exploration via the analysis of recent political developments and its ideological roots in the US under Donald Trump. Their main conclusion maintains that – in addition to ethnic nationalism (see paper by Rydgren, above) - market fundamentalism remains one of the central ideologies that help operationalise contemporary RWP.

In the following paper, Mark Littler and Matthew Feldman conduct an analysis of the ontology of the spread of (right-wing) populism in recent years. They argue that the majority of existing research largely fails to explain how these ideologies have moved from the political fringes to occupy positions of influence and power, particularly given the traditional media *cordon sanitaire* observed in Europe about reporting extreme parties. Littler and Feldman offer a more nuanced understanding of the traditional media *cordon sanitaire* – and the process/es by which it has been subverted fuelling (right-wing) populism. They propose an explanation for its erosion, identifying the growing pluralisation of the online media environment and the impact of social media content sharing as means by which fringe political actors may subvert overt and implicit barriers to popularising extreme positions (see also paper by Krzyżanowski and Ledin, below). Littler and Feldman test their theoretical exploration by analysing data from the British Election Study. There, they find an inconsistent relationship between social media use and the reporting of extreme political opinions, even when controlling for political interest.

In the final paper of the theoretical section, Yannis Stavrakakis looks at populism as one of the most hotly debated topics in contemporary politics and academia. Stavrakakis offers an analysis of how (much) the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau is still viable for the analysis of contemporary populism. He claims that populism is now used to describe a series of heterogeneous and diffuse phenomena and developments: on the one hand, Donald Trump, Brexit or the European Far Right in government or in opposition; on the other, Bernie Sanders, the so-called Pink Tide of left-wing populist governments in Latin America and inclusionary populisms in the European South. Stavrakakis argues that recent developments have undoubtedly generated significant research material and new foci of study and analysis. However, major challenges exist, requiring urgent attention. Stavrakakis discusses three important challenges (reflexivity, definition, and typology) from a discursive (i.e. discourse-theoretical) perspective. He concludes by formulating a crucial theoretico-political dilemma populism researchers are increasingly facing today.

The second part of our Special Issue moves to the more empirically-driven, 'localised' analyses of RWP dynamics. It explores changes in RWP politics and discourse in

various parts of Europe and the USA. First, Erzsébet Barát investigates the CEE right-wing populist agenda and phenomena by focussing on the Orbanist variety of populist politics. Extending Laclau's claim of the relevance of 'populism' for democratic debates, Barát argues that the 'we', when issued from a left-wing position around 'empty signifiers', must be informed by an inclusionary logic. In her critical study of the Hungarian Government's RWP discourses, Barát illustrates that their billboard campaign in 2016 against the EU's migrant quota articulates the 'we are not like them' exclusionary distinction of 'against and over'. By drawing on Butler's category of vulnerability and Matsuda's relative distinction between immediate and indirect targets of exclusion, the author explores the inclusionary logic of the campaign by the Two-Tailed Dog Party. Barát argues that a non-identitarian collective subject 'from below' in their alternative left-wing populism is made possible by the power of irony that may sidestep the mobilising force of fear that serves to legitimise Orban's government's agenda.

The CEE focus also continues throughout Ruth Wodak's paper in which, drawing on examples from Austria, the author first discusses the attempt by all RWP to create, on the one hand, the 'real' and 'true' people; and on the other, the 'élites' or 'the establishment' who are excluded from the true *demos*. Such divisions, as Wodak elaborates in detail, have emerged in many societies over centuries and decades. While analysing an example of the recent Presidential campaign 2016, Wodak illustrates that the arbitrary definition of opposing groups supports contemporary RWP reasoning. She then poses the question of why such divisions resonate so well in many countries. She argues that – apart from a *politics of fear* (Wodak 2015a) – a lot of the resentment is intentionally evoked, which could be viewed as both accompanying as well as reacting to the existing huge disenchantment with politics and the growing inequalities in globalized capitalist societies.

The following paper by Michał Krzyżanowski and Per Ledin compares Austria with Sweden while exploring the connection between the emergence of new types of online uncivil discourses on the one hand, and the success of RWP on the other. The authors argue that while discussions about RWP have mainly centred on institutionalised politics and politicians, only limited attention has been paid to how the success of the former and the latter was propelled by developments outside of the realm of narrowly conceived political practice. Krzyżanowski and Ledin focus therefore on the rise of uncivil society, in particular on the web, and in its 'borderline discourse' at the verge of civil and uncivil ideas, ideologies and views. These discourses, as is shown, have progressively 'normalised' the anti-pluralist views across many European public spheres on a par with nativist, xeno-ethnic and exclusionary views now widely propagated by RWP in Europe and beyond. As the authors maintain, they are also at the core of so-called 'post-truth politics', where imagined exclusionary ideologies and emotions abide, norms of civility are constantly tested, and facts and reality are treated as, at best, secondary.



The European focus of our Special Issue closes with a paper by Paul Chilton who explores RWP language use in France in comparison to populist (Trump) and non-populist (Obama) political rhetoric in the US. Chilton operates within a framework of cognitive linguistics and argues that the language of populism must first and foremost be explored from the perspective of ideas underlying the concept of populism, on the one hand, and from the point of view of populist behaviour induced by discursively constructed populist ideologies and views, on the other. Chilton thus argues that populism not only implies causal effects on political behaviour, but also changes the understanding of politics as such and, prominently, the meaning and behaviour of 'people' as the main addressee of populist political language and action. Chilton claims that populism is, essentially, a discourse that works by activating emotion-laden and value-laden schematic concepts and concomitant emotions, rather than using overt arguments and evidence.

The US context defines the last part of our Special Issue with papers exploring the nature of US-American populism as a token of the aforementioned 'Trumpism'. This part opens with the paper by Robin Tolmach Lakoff who studies the ontology of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American presidential elections. Lakoff poses questions about the reasons for Trump's success, in particular: what brought it about, and what might it portend? Lakoff explores these and other questions while analysing Trump's communicative strategies which compromise/d the culture's notions of "truth" – via a continuum from "lie" through "post-truth," "truthiness," and "alternative facts" to "truth". The author asks whether, judging from his language and other communications, Trump is indeed a populist.

The analysis of Donald Trump's discourse continues in the paper by Ramona Kreiss who explores how Donald Trump employs Twitter as a strategic instrument of power politics to disseminate RWP agenda. While applying critical discourse studies, Kreiss analyses the meaning and function of Trump's 'own' discursive strategies on Twitter. The findings illustrate how Trump uses an informal, direct, and provocative communication style to construct and reinforce the concept of a "homogeneous people" and a "homeland" threatened by the dangerous (though often largely unspecified) other. Moreover, Trump employs positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation to further his agenda via social media. She maintains that Trump's top-down use of Twitter may thus lead to the normalization of RWP discourses.

While Kreiss (above) mainly focuses in her paper on the post-Election Tweets of Trump, his pre-election discourse is the topic of the closing paper of our Special Issue by Martin Montgomery. The author argues that, although undoubtedly aspects of authoritarian populism in Trump's campaign discourse can be identified, its appeal rested on more than its content. Montgomery hence contends that, although significant parts of the U.S. public sphere rejected many of his claims as lies, significant portions of the electorate found Trump's words acceptable (see also paper by Lakoff, above). By comparing

Habermas' notion of 'validity claims' with Aristotle's distinctions between different kinds of rhetorical appeal, Montgomery's paper suggests that a discourse of 'authenticity' rather than 'truth' provided a/the crucial cornerstone of Trump's successful appeal to his electoral base. This might also explain why Trump's rhetoric proved to be so potent and politically efficient as to secure US presidency for a businessman and TV entertainer, with no prior political experience.

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### Author Contact

Prof. Ruth Wodak  
Department of Linguistics & English  
Lancaster University  
County College South  
Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK  
[r.wodak@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:r.wodak@lancaster.ac.uk)

Prof. Michał Krzyżanowski  
Department of Communication & Media  
University of Liverpool  
19 Abercromby Square  
Liverpool L69 3BX, UK  
[michal.Krzyzanowski@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:michal.Krzyzanowski@liverpool.ac.uk)

### About the Authors

Ruth Wodak is Emerita Distinguished Professor of Discourse Studies at Lancaster University, UK. She is also and affiliated to the University of Vienna, Austria, as well as

to Malmö University, Sweden, where she is the Willi Brandt Chair holder in 2017. She is member of the Academia Europaea and British Academy of Social Sciences. Her research interests focus on discourse studies; identity politics; language and/in politics; prejudice and discrimination. She is co-editor of the journals *Discourse & Society*, *Critical Discourse Studies* as well as a senior editor of the *Journal of Language and Politics*. She has published extensively on critical discourse studies on European right-wing populist politics.

Michał Krzyżanowski holds since 2017 a Chair in Communication and Media and serves as Head of Department at the University of Liverpool, UK. He also remains affiliated to Örebro University, Sweden, where he has held a Chair in Media and Communication Studies since 2013. His interdisciplinary research focuses on the discourse of media & politics incl. in the context of right-wing populism and the politics of exclusion and anti-immigration rhetoric. He is, inter alia, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Language and Politics* and co-editor of book series Bloomsbury Advances in Critical Discourse Studies. He is the author and editor of several monographs and anthologies as well as numerous articles in critical discourse research on media, and populist political communication.