

*The Analysis of Cultural and Visual Symbols in the Political Campaigns
of the Right-Wing Populism in German Speaking Countries*

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Abstract

The growing importance of the right-wing political parties in the central and eastern European countries in the 21st century shows, that our present is determined by the atmosphere but also by the fear of rising nationalism. The paper would like to help to understand the strategies and techniques of the political campaigns, which lead to the surprising success of the right populist parties in Europe. The main focus of the study lies especially on the analysis of the visual political campaigns – such as election posters, billboards and other visual display campaigns – used by the main right-wing political parties in Austria and Germany. The comparative study discovers, how some specific cultural symbols and words have been used with the goal to influence and manipulate the recipients and potential voters. Analyzed should be the visual and verbal representation used in the political marketing and also the interaction between picture and text in the advertising materials in the latest political campaigns.

Keywords: populism, cultural identity, political campaign

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Introduction

As a political term, populism dates back to the 19th century while it became widely used in sociology and social sciences starting in the 1950s. But in the last three decades, populism has gained considerable popularity. Although populism is in essence a very heterogeneous phenomenon, there have been attempts by many authors to define it precisely. Müller and many other authors have legitimised populism at its core as a collective subject, convinced of its foundation that “we - and we alone - represent the true people”. (2017, pp. 26-27) In our opinion, it is identification with this collective entity that helps increase the number of sympathisers and voters of populist parties, guaranteeing them success in the political arena. Success among right-wing populists has been recently observed in the European context. Through an analysis of different political campaigns, specifically in election posters and images posted on Facebook, this paper seeks to demonstrate how media constructs collective consciousness. Our interest will be focused on the visual aspect (different images and symbols) and how it interacts on a verbal plane (using specific expressions). The material to be analysed consists of visual presentations and campaigns conducted by the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* or FPÖ) and the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland* or AfD) between 2012 and 2018. The current database consists of 666 images, of which 126 come from the AfD and 540 from the FPÖ.

The concept of populism

The etymological origin of the word “populism” logically encourages a concept derived from the *vox populi*. But Paul Taggart objects to this, writing “Populist rhetoric uses the language of the people not because this express deeply rooted democratic convictions about the sovereignty of the masses, but because ‘the people’ are the occupants of the heartland and this is what, in essence, populists are trying to evoke.” (2000, p. 95) For Taggart, the “heartland” contrasts with utopias and the ideal world of diverse ideologies. While utopias are based on the rationality of the mind, the “heartland” may not itself be rationally based, but rather drawing its strength from heartfelt sentiment and embodying the positive aspects of everyday life people face in times of need and which they believe worthwhile to protect. (p. 95) Despite backward-looking imagination, there is no real historical character and involves a more romanticising, ahistorical construct, which Karin Priester finds the equivalent in German terminology in the phenomenological concept of *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) (2012, p.5). Priester also writes that both *Lebenswelt* and heartland are the primordial categories needed to understand populism, while another is “common sense”, a category other authors have mentioned (e.g. Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). Unlike Taggart, however, Priester does not perceive the concept of people as derived from the concept of heartland. She differentiates between the social category “people”, whom Taggart believes to be diffuse, and the topos “people”, a non-political element of remaining in an ideal state called *Lebenswelt* (2012, p. 6). From our perspective, both conceptualisations describe an idealised space formed from imagination, evocation and discursive mechanisms where a specific collective identity is born. The next section gives attention to *heart*, *homeland* and *people*, concepts which seem to be at the symbolic core of these concepts.

The heart as a symbol

Figure 1 below combines all three of the symbols into a single slogan that says “Our homeland is in our hearts”. “Heart” appears twice in the poster – once verbally as “*Herz*” and once as a visual cue. The term “*Heimat*” (homeland) is equally used visually twice, in the Alpine scene and its reflection on the water. The mountain peak can be understood in the poster as the cultural symbol found in the text of Austria’s national anthem, which starts with the words “*Land der Berge, Land am Strome*” (land of mountains, land by the river). The poster’s main text appears in red and white, Austria’s national colours, which in combination with all the other elements associates it with national identity. Thirdly, mirroring is also seen in the pronoun *wir* (we), which on one hand refers to the Freedom Party of Austria as “the social homeland party” and on the other lets all Austrians who love their homeland identify themselves with the party. The foundation for a common identity is thus embodied in love of the homeland, whereby a symbolic and imaginary image is transformed into a true image based on emotional inwardness.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The FPÖ uses different variations of the symbolism seen above. Figure 2 again images a picturesque landscape with a slogan expressing love for the country (“We love Austria!”) and the colours of the national flag directly in the heart motif. The desire for a wonderful holiday in the country gives a sense of mutual proximity and belonging. Although the German language allows an indirect object pronoun to be included to indicate receivers of the message, such as *dir* (to thee – the familiar form of “you”), *euch* (to you – the familiar plural) and *Ihnen* (the polite form of “to you”), the pronoun itself is omitted. Omitting the pronoun aids to some extent in easier identifying with the constructed collective since the pronoun would have created an undesirable distance between the familiar “*du*” (thou) and the polite “*Sie*” (you).



Figure 3

Even though Figure 3 depicts the Austrian countryside and shows the heart in the colours of the Austrian flag, the sense of identity similar to the previous two examples is constructed at a rational and emotional level simultaneously. It is emotionally based on the same symbols seen in the previous images, while it rationally relies on a leader standing in opposition to the Government. While Heinz-Christian Strache sees Austria, the Government sees an apparent tactical manoeuvre for election purposes. The constellation of “him” versus “them” is another, additional element allowing identification with the party in the sense of “it’s us against them”. This contradiction is a significant element found in populism that we will return to later.



Figure 4

The symbolism of the heart can still be present even if the heart itself is not directly visualised. A poster promoting the AfD (Figure 4) depicts the chest of a man dressed in folk costume and putting his right hand “over his heart”. Men looking at this poster are able to reflect upon themselves in the image and complete the missing face with their own. They are directly addressed by the prompting message in the red signal colour that says (in German), “Take your country back!” The familiar pronoun *Dir* (to thee) and possessive adjective *Dein* (thy) are printed in upper-case and the alliteration helps highlight them. The appealing tone is also underscored by the exclamation marks used in both sentences. Moreover, because no head is shown, the appeal is more to the reader’s emotions than his rational side. Additional subliminal information and impulses are also present in the image. The figure is clad in a brown leather jacket, chosen to evoke the idea of tradition and to be nostalgic, while the colour subtly resembles that in uniforms used by the National Socialists. The ring on his finger indicates him to be a husband (and possibly a father), so the man supposedly practises traditional values and can be a man you can depend upon. This corresponds to the party’s centrally highlighted “*The AfD keeps what the CSU promises!*” It connotes the AfD’s word as more than a promise, but the word of a man who takes his vows to heart and can be trusted. At the same time, honesty, credibility and reliability are values forming a common identity based on loyalty. If the reader of the message identifies with the pattern depicted in the poster, he would place his own hand over his heart and swear his loyalty to the AfD, which in return would claim to keep their promises.

The next AfD poster (Figure 5) communicates to voters a similar emotional strategy, portraying then party leader Frauke Petry with a child in her arms. Even here, no heart is depicted directly, although under certain circumstances the shape of a heart can be subconsciously perceived in how the mother's and baby's heads are specifically inclined and the almost continuous colour of their similar skin (highlighted in Figure 6). The poster visualises at its centre the idea of love, directly symbolised by the heart. The graphic element appeals to the emotional side, evoking motherly instincts and parental feelings evoked. Here the verbal question "And so why are you fighting for Germany?" addresses the reader's cognitive side by giving (in this case) her an opportunity to think about it. The selected text contrasts "ich" (me) and "Sie" (you), creating space for self-identification through a communications strategy slightly different from the posters previously discussed. First, there is the option of identifying yourself with Petry and fighting for Germany in the sense of a higher goal, such as for the generations following yours. Notwithstanding, how the question is placed also permits readers another option of defining their own grounds for fighting on behalf of Germany. This way may specifically appeal to male readers or to anyone else not identifying with a mother's emotions. The basis for this identification is the difference between "me" (a woman and a mother) and you (a man or a woman who is not a mother).



Figure 5



Figure 6

At first glance, the noble idea of advocating for your homeland or children is accompanied by the ability to pursue it for purely individual motives. It even stimulates the possible syllogism formed by the combination of Petry's question and the slogan "Dare yourself, Germany!" It is evident that the term "Germany" as *totum pro parte* is metonymically representing individual recipients of the message, evoking in them the notion of themselves being Germany (Germany = you). Subsequently, when Petry calls for a search of the grounds to fight for Germany, she is also calling for a fight for herself, perverting the altruistic idea of egoistic instincts. Subliminally, it creates the image of the party leader as a mother, putting the reader in the role of a child finding confidence in his or her mother while being taunted not to be afraid and to show courage.



Figure 7

The motif of a child and motherly love connected with the idea of future generations was also exploited by the FPÖ during the 2017 parliamentary election campaign, with both the mother's hands and child's feet heart-shaped. This symbol and the associated feeling of love are also used here as an instrument to promote the spirit of political ambitions and goals.

Love of country and cultural identification

The previous examples have shown the symbolism behind “heart” and “love” to be closely tied to the topos of homeland. Another poster taken from the 2016 Austrian presidential election (Figure 8) employs the same features – relatively simple visuals working exclusively with the national colours – white and red – alongside blue, the FPÖ’s party colour. Behind the smiling candidate is the national flag against the background of a blue sky. Three words on the main text are capitalised on a vertical line, with “love of country” at the top of the imaginary hierarchy followed below by “pride” and then “Austria”, specifically the country of which to be proud. The image simultaneously convinces readers that two types of love for the homeland exist, of which only one of them is true. An explanatory note under the text names the wrong type, indicated as exaggerated patriotism. This simple note and differentiating the right and wrong love unobtrusively express both rivalry and hostility, subconsciously transforming love for the homeland into the militant instinct the slogan “*Your country needs you now*” awakens. These words are supposed to mobilise voters and turn their emotions into action, that by choosing the true candidate they can save their beloved homeland. In addition, placing the slogan under the candidate’s picture legitimises on another significant level his own participation in the political struggle. Norbert Hofer presents himself here as a leader able to distinguish between true and fake love for the homeland and to be the person his country needs. Voters and the candidate become allies in the battle against false patriots.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Looking at another poster from the same campaign (Figure 9), it is clear that the same communication and appeal strategy is being used. This time, attention is centred on the values and traditions referred to as “ours”, which becomes the link between the leader and anyone reading the poster. They both stand on the same side, defending and protecting their cultural heritage because they need their homeland. To justify their attitude, they distinguish between true and “false” tolerance. Paradoxically, the concept of “tolerance” evokes an image of a foreign cultural entity and encourages protection of the country’s own culture against it. Many posters highlight individual and specific cultural aspects such as language (Figure 10), holidays, clothing and traditions (Figure 10, 11, 14 and 15) and typical cuisine (Figure 12, 13 and 14).



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

All of the examples presented here are different mosaics of cultural reality familiar to people receiving the message, and in this way, they associate it with a feeling of home and country. However, in none of the examples above is cultural identification based on positive patterns, but instead on anxiety, danger and potential loss. Political players in this context take the potential role of “coming to the rescue”, while the use of pronouns such as “*wir*” (us) and “*unser*” (ours) evoke the notion of collective consciousness where even the recipient of the message can participate. What is important here, in principle, is a common consciousness shaped in contrast to another culture. It is a process Homi Bhabha describes it in his post-colonialism theory as “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, [...] it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification [...] entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness” (1994, p. 45). The political advertisements observed here often derive otherness from religious tradition. The complex system of foreign creeds is then reduced to very specific aspects like different religious holidays, burqa-wearing women and bans on pork and alcohol. Using the metonymy *pars pro toto*, it gives rise to the concept of an identity deviating from how one’s own identity is derived and differentiated. Features paradoxically present even in their own culture are highlighted as divergent. Kindergartens encourage development of children’s mother tongues, while a common feature in any society is vegetarians, vegans and anyone who wishes not to consume certain foods or abstain from alcohol. The local culture accepts individuality in dress and the wearing of various headgears as inherent and under certain circumstances etiquette has demanded and still does require them. Caps are even a part of a nun’s habit and likewise typical for most traditional garments. Holidays celebrated today have become partially secularised and commercialised, with Christmas associated with decorated trees and Santa Claus and Easter with the Easter Bunny.



Figure 16



Figure 17

However, the process of identification wipes out any possible similarities and plurality existing in a society, replacing them with a cultural totalitarianism that permits a clearer segregation of what is foreign from what is native. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, shown in Figure 16 and Figure 17, also contribute toward the creation of cultural identity. The symbolism of the Cross takes on a connotation of totalitarianism and cultural hegemony by deciding and determining what belongs or not in Austria, Bavaria or Germany itself. Thus, identity is also defined spatially,

depending on the notion of frontiers and differentiated by what lies inside and outside them.



Figure 18



Figure 19

On one hand, borders define one's identity, while on the other they may signal and evoke threats. Such motifs appeared relatively often on posters during the "migration crisis". Figure 18 shows an example that simply and clearly calls for protection of the border. The poster is much more sophisticated than it might appear at first glance. The message itself, *Bayern. Aber sicher!* ("Bavaria. Safe and secure!"), can act upon readers of it in at least two ways. *Sicher* ("Safe") in the sense of "certain" or "without doubt" preaches a message of the AfD truly and certainly concerned about the country (at the federal level), while interpreting "safe" as drawing attention to the need for a safe country, evoking the feeling of it under threat. Another meaning can be noticed in the image at the upper part of the poster, which activates the binary logic of difference and several imaginary boundaries. It can be about opposites such as inside/outside, water/land, fish/mammal, large/small and predator/prey. There is a big cat in the upper left corner naturally seen first as our culture reads from left-to-right and top-down, while the small goldfish is found on the lower right-hand corner. The arrangement underscores the relationship between superior and subordinate, creating a sense of oppression, where the fish at risk from a predator even in its own home. However, the animals chosen for the poster not only represent native and foreign identities, but in Germany and some other cultures they are also symbols of happiness (the goldfish) and misfortune (the black cat). In addition, both the cat and fish can be read as specific cultural-religious ciphers. In Christianity, the fish (ichthys) is both an acronym and symbol of Jesus Christ, while a cat named Muezza was the Prophet Mohammed's favourite pet. In additions, one of the Prophet's companions was Abū Hurayrah, whose name derives from "Father of a Kitten" for his care of a little cat. In general, cats enjoy exceptional respect in Islamic culture, which some sources say is also reflected in the *hadith* "Love of cats is a part of the faith." (Nizamoglu, 2019, n. p.) In this context, the black cat can be interpreted as Islam menacing Christianity. A similar emotion of fear from a homeland and religion under threat is also evoked by Figure 19, with faith and creed even more accentuated. Compared to the previous poster, the symbolism is more direct because the Cross and Holy Scripture are evident. Unlike in Figure 18, however, the particular threat and what belief and Christian values are to be protected remain unnamed and imagined, while assuming that the enemy is generally known.

People as a topos

A policy marked as populist should be essentially people-based. Yet Karin Priester believes today's populism to be characterised more by the attributes of liberty, patriotism and criticism of Islam and therefore it is also possible to speak of populism without the people (2012, p. 9). However, the notion of people has not completely disappeared from political rhetoric, so this part of the analysis focuses on how and in what context people are categorised in party campaigns.

The following four examples speak of the ambivalence in which people are both the objective and source of politics. On one side, the Alternative for Germany talks about its people policy (Figures 22 and 23), while pointing out that real power lies in the hands of the people (Figures 20 and 21). Nevertheless, Jan-Werner Müller points out that populism can often appear democratic or radically democratic, but as its essence is and will be undemocratic; he speaks of it as the shadow of representative democracy. (Müller, 2017, pp. 14-18). This attitude is also partly reflected in the examples analysed in this paper. For example, Figure 20 literally calls for direct democracy. Notwithstanding, full government of the people would mean the disappearance of representative democracy, so power of the people ought to be limited to a referendum modelled on Switzerland's. In fact, political parties have no interest in having their power taken away by ordinary citizens. This political intention is also indirectly implied in Figure 21, which unwittingly deconstructs itself. The combination of the expressions "Our candidates are citizens" and "Put citizens in power" can lead to a judgment that the AfD's citizen candidates should come to power. Such ambiguity is in itself hidden by "AfD X your vote!" (Figure 22) So the AfD here pretends to be the voice of the people (the party wants to be your voice and speak in your name), while simultaneously it is the voice of the voter (the party wants your vote) to be able to govern.



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23

These examples clearly illustrate the dual approach toward people and also the very concept of people crossing a notational demarcation line where politicians no longer act as representatives of the people *per se*, but primarily become advocates for people they call *their own* (Figure 22 and 23). Besides cultural differences in the spirit of “our own people” against “foreigners”, vertical stratification on a power axis also plays an important role. AfD candidates purposefully differentiate themselves from professional politicians to make room for identifying themselves as ordinary citizens (Figure 21). Professional politicians – as *those types* – represent power torn from the people, just as foreign cultures are perceived negatively. In this respect, what Priester says is true that both the polarisation and moralisation of politics can be considered the least common denominator among various populist positions (2017, p. 8). Some of the previous examples stage images of political adversaries who are calculating (Figure 3), dishonest, not keeping promises (Figure 4), false patriots (Figure 8) and arbitrary (Figure 9). These and other amoral categories are immediately linked to the notion of power. People in power are in principle somebody else (“them”), defining a category of people (“us”) which are identified as having been pitted against “them”. This contradiction is most often illustrated using symbolic antonyms such as *top-bottom*, *ruler-servant*, *great-small*, *criminal-victim* and *powerful-powerless*. Figure 24 agitates for more direct democracy similarly to Figure 20 and 21, justifying it by the need to control the powerful and the power apparatus that is undermining obedient servants.



Figure 24

Another poster (Figure 25) displays an example of political polarisation (small/large) and moralisation (betrayal/loyalty). Politician Guido Reil stands on the side of the “little people”, presenting himself in ordinary street clothes, unlike Norbert Hofer. He

identifies with those whom major politicians have betrayed and wishes to represent their interests. A new confidence in people on the same level receiving the message and having experienced a type of enlightenment are supposed to compensate for the activated feelings of betrayal and having been humbled, since the reasoning behind the intention is the long-time SPD politician's defection to the AfD and him turning from a utopian to a realist. Simultaneously, the campaign also mobilises dissatisfaction and defiance, offering an eye-for-an-eye solution. Because the feeling of betrayal can be compensated by double-crossing the betrayer, loyalty to the SPD can be replaced by a new loyalty to the AfD, a path that the reader of the message can also followed.



Figure 25



Figure 26

Pointing out a powerless policy, Figure 26 also constructs an image of an incompetent politician whose strong and capable counterpart should be opponent Marcus Pretzell. The difference between a powerful and a powerless policy, once again, points to the ambition and ambivalence of populist parties to distinguish themselves from the major parties on top, while concurrently trying to climb the imaginary ladder of political success and reach power.



Figure 27

The same can also be seen in Figure 27. A poster from the FPÖ's campaign promises fairness to Austrians while provoking them to demand what belongs to them. It challenges people to take what belongs to them, using the familiar "du" form (literally, "take what belongs to thee!"), while standing in the background behind him are his political opponents. Dominating in the forefront is "We're giving YOU back what THEY'VE taken from YOU." The image of a common enemy is what the FPÖ and the reader of the message should associate, creating a foundation for identifying with the party. But in the relationship between us and them, the people are only seemingly an equal partner, when in fact it is only *tertium comparationis* – what they and we have in common, namely that the people on both sides of the political divide want to govern. Creating the notion of an ordinary person as an accomplice in battling against an opponent and paraphrasing the basic principles of democracy as government of the people (Figure 28: "JUSTICE comes from the PEOPLE") are only the same kinds of mimicry.



Figure 28

The visual campaigns are presented to relate to the concept of people and show all the typical features of populism Meyer says include:

- Politically orienting the lower and middle classes against established institutions and their representatives
- Fear and mistrust of the "top"
- Simple templates and a black-white vision
- Differentiated thinking in a friend-enemy scheme
- Communication directed toward indictment, suspicion and blame instead of understanding. (2006, p. 81-82)

In addition, several posters depict a man and a leader who is the only person able to relieve readers of the message of the negative and frustrating feelings share and to offer them a solution. In essence, the figures are enlightened examples (Figure 25), the answer to all questions (Figure 26), a fair "Robin Hood" (Figure 27) and protection against imminent danger (Figure 28). The phrase "Only HE" on the poster depicting Norbert Hofer (Figure 28) even in its own way highlights the messianic nature of populist rhetoric.

Conclusion

This analysis focuses mainly on symbols relating to expressions such as “heart”, “homeland” and “people”, while pointing out some of the strategies used in political campaigns by right-wing populist parties. One of the earliest strategies has been an effort to create a collective entity by mirroring and innovating specific common values such as love of the homeland and their own culture alongside honesty, credibility, reliability and loyalty. Although the emotional side of readers of these messages is primarily addressed and their emotions are instrumentalised in the spirit of achieving political goals, a combination of emotional and rational appeal is often observed. Both a common consciousness and cultural identity are likewise constructed from similarities and differences, while individual elements of the culture act as a *pars pro toto* figure representing culture as a whole, thereby establishing cultural totalitarianism accompanied by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In doing so, cultural identity is no longer based on positive patterns, but rather on the feeling of anxiety and threat because it is delimited on the basis of an imaginary frontier between the outside and the inside. An inner, intrinsic cultural subjectivity is constantly threatened by foreign culture, while at the same time is dependent on it. The constantly recurring opposites of *me* and *somebody else* can be interpreted by Lacan, who describes the subject’s constitution as: “The “I” is an “Other” from the ground up ... the ego is at the base an object: an artificial projection of a subjective unity modelled on the visual images of objects and others that the individual confronts in the world.” (Sharpe, 2010, n. p.) Just as one’s own cultural identity is confronted with other cultures, populism itself finds its own self in the context of differentiating from other political entities. Through polarisation and a metaphorical vertical stratification of the political spectrum into top and bottom, it endeavours to make recipients of its message into accomplices and, working together, to grapple against treachery and immorality. Many findings correspond to some of populism’s stylistic elements that, according to Decker and Lewandowski, accompany populist political appearances. Specifically, these elements are:

- Appealing to common sense
- Passion for radical solutions
- Conspiracy theories and painting an image of the enemy
- Provocation and “goring of sacred cows”
- Emotionalism and intimidation
- Using biological metaphors and metaphors of violence (2017, pp. 28-29).

The most striking of the characteristics above is the painting of enemies; or rather more generally to say, promoting binary logic and polar differentiation. Equally important is also the human responses that emanate predominantly from negative emotions, often triggered by only subtle clues from certain symbols and expressions which act as subliminal impulses. However, the analysis revealed several examples of visual political campaigns which in themselves carry some ambivalence and are able to help deconstruct both the communication strategies and the manipulation used by right-wing populists. Understanding the processes of political manipulation appears important and essential to regaining our own political future, free from negative populism, nationalism, and right-wing extremism.

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