

# Marching Against a Rising and Manipulative Threat: Metaphorical Constructions of Populism in the Spanish and the Italian Press

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## Abstract

Whereas the use of metaphors in populist political communication has been widely studied, few works have considered the way in which the concept of populism is constructed through metaphors in the public sphere and in the media. By applying Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) to a sample of newspaper articles published in Spain and Italy, we detect the main metaphorical frameworks used for discursively constructing populism in countries characterized by a polarized pluralist media system. Results show that populism is metaphorized in less than half of the analyzed items and that there are three common source domains for conceptualizing the term: PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT, CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME and PERSONIFICATION. While similar narratives can be drawn from the use of these source domains, different perspectives appear when looking at newspapers' political leanings.

## Plain language summary

### Marching against a rising and manipulative threat: An analysis of the concept of populism through metaphors in the Spanish and the Italian press

The use of metaphors in populist political communication has been widely studied, but few works have approached the way in which the concept of populism is constructed through metaphors in the media. In this research we apply the Critical Metaphor Analysis method to newspaper articles published in Spain and Italy for identifying the main metaphorical frameworks used for discursively constructing populism. These countries belong to what is known as the polarized pluralist media system, in which little research on this topic has been conducted. Results show that populism is metaphorized in less than half of the analyzed items and that there are three common domains of knowledge for conceptualizing the term: PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT, CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME and PERSONIFICATION. While similar narratives can be drawn from the use of these source domains, different perspectives appear when looking at newspapers' political leaning.

## Keywords

populism, metaphor, media, Spain, Italy, public sphere

## Introduction

Populism has increasingly been gaining attention in academia and in society more generally in recent decades, along with the rise of populist political parties in European and other countries all over the globe. This has resulted in a populist “hype,” which, according to

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Brown and Mondon (2021), can entail serious implications for how we understand the meaning of populism. For instance, the label “populism” has been used so far to refer to a wide spectrum of circumstances, political actions, ideologies, actors, movements, and parties in diverse geographical and temporal contexts with little or nothing in common (Hunger & Paxton, 2022). Thus, the concept of populism has become distorted to the extent that everything can be populist and, consequently, nothing is. And so, it is difficult to encounter an explicative model covering the different manifestations of populism across various countries and periods, and in relation to opposing ideologies (Pano, 2017).

Populism has been understood either as a thick ideology (Canovan, 1999), a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a political signifier (Laclau, 2005) or a political communication style (Engesser et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and its definition differs according to the paradigm adopted. According to Tarchi (2003), it is a versatile concept that gathers elements of political style, discursive strategy, and political content.

Scholars agree that populism divides society into two groups, the people and the elites, which are homogeneously composed and opposed to each other. Morally speaking, the people are defined as necessarily pure, whereas the elites are necessarily corrupt (Mudde, 2004). Populist actors identify themselves with the people, on whom they construct their political project. These ideas are referred to by de Vreese et al. (2018) as “core components of populism ideology,” while Aslanidis (2015) and Cassell (2021) use the concept of a “populist frame.” Populism’s components are rendered visible through various linguistic tools that are as central as the political ideas they frame (de Vreese et al., 2018) and that, when concretized in terms of norms, routines, and processes, create populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1280).

Nevertheless, there is no academic consensus when it comes to defining any other element that can bring together different kinds of populism. Whereas populism is defined by the dichotomy between the people and the elite, populist parties build this opposition very differently to one another, depending on their specific ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Thus, this is actively interpreted and articulated together with the particular social, economic, and cultural aspects of a certain situation. All these conceptions of populism are disputable, so any temporary stability of these constructions needs to be comprehended as the product of a discursive fight (De Cleen et al., 2018).

The lack of a concrete definition makes it difficult to set frontiers that delimit what can be considered

populism and what not (Bale et al., 2011). In this sense, Gaspar (2020) states that the description of “populism” has poorly defined referential limits, and Olivas Osuna (2021, pp. 377–378) affirms that the term has suffered what Sartori (1970) posits as “conceptual stretching” and is associated with more social and political realities than would ordinarily be semantically attributed to a single term. Following the work of other authors, Dean and Maignashca (2020, p. 24) propose “to shift our attention from populism-as-concept to populism-as-signifier, paving the way for a critical analysis of discourses about populism, and their relation to broader ideological formations,” as the open character of the concept allows for it to be concretized in diverse manners, and also in the social field.

This has brought different authors (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Dean & Maignashca, 2020; De Cleen et al., 2018) to claim the need to specify the meaning of populism both in academia and in common language, as populism as a signifier acts on our contemporary political thinking. They argue that the concept of populism has been widely studied in the academic field, but not in the social one, and so there is a need for more studies that focus on the daily use of the term. Because research on discursive patterns linked to the signifier populism “is just as important and interesting as is the effort to establish an analytically productive concept of populism” (De Cleen et al., 2018, p. 651), it is paramount to investigate how populism is socially constructed. Our study aims to contribute to the knowledge on how populism is defined by the media through metaphors. In doing so, we look at Italy and Spain, since these are countries belonging to the polarized pluralist (or Mediterranean) media system, which, as we argue in the theoretical framework section, has been little investigated in relation to the social definition of populism. Moreover, these two countries also have the distinctive feature of having other populist movements beyond right-wing ones—Podemos (left-wing) in Spain, and the Five Star Movement, which lacks a well-defined political orientation, in Italy—and this allows us to investigate how newspapers with different editorial leanings metaphorically frame the concept of populism. Considering that the term is “under dispute” in the public sphere (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022, p. 1524), we believe that metaphor is an adequate tool to understand how the meaning of populism is shaped by common language. Unlike some studies that have considered the use of the term by the news media (Bale et al., 2011; Berti et al., 2025; Brookes, 2018; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Herkman, 2016), we go beyond content analysis and propose an approach to the social definition of populism that has been little explored in literature.

## Theoretical Framework

Media play a fundamental role in the construction of social representations (McNair, 2007) and, as indicated by Pano (2017), we may think about them as key actors in the process through which a term is relexicalized and frames are created. Among the first studies that analyzed the mediatized use of the concept of “populism” is Bale et al. (2011). In their analysis of British newspapers, they conclude that the terms “populism” and “populist” are rarely central to the articles’ content as well as scarcely defined. Their use is not sound, and they are employed to describe a wide spectrum of politicians, parties, and policies—both left and right—in diverse countries and, when referring to British politics, populism is frequently used in a pejorative manner. Brown and Mondon (2021) used the British newspaper *The Guardian* as a case study to examine how the concept of populism has been used and abused: they find that the term trivializes racist, nativist, or far-right politics when used as their synonym, since it is less stigmatizing and, thus, contributes to blur their meaning. The authors claim a need for a critical and careful use of the concept in public discourse.

Mediatization of the concept of populism has also been investigated in other contexts, such as the Nordic press (Herkman, 2016); the Australian and US press (Brookes, 2018); the Spanish press (Marín Lladó et al., 2022); and in a comparison between the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, and Turkey’s press (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022). Herkman (2016) finds that populism is framed negatively in most of the analyzed newspapers and that it appears linked to right-wing, nationalist political forces. Nevertheless, he insists that the meanings given to populism in different countries and newspapers can only be fully understood in their specific political, cultural, and journalistic contexts. Brookes (2018) analyzes the media coverage of the 2016 general elections in Australia and the US and concludes that the concept of populism was used pejoratively to dismiss and delegitimize a range of political actors, from Donald Trump to smaller political parties. In her analysis, she underlines three key constructions of this term, which is used to (a) describe a trend or phenomenon in domestic politics; (b) link local political actors to wider global movements to make sense of them; and (c) frame the people as fueling populist movements. More recently, Marín Lladó et al. (2022) studied the presence of the concept of “populism” in two major Spanish newspapers between 2019 and 2020: they found that populism is mostly used in the news on national and international politics and does not appear much in opinion articles and headlines. Moreover, they state the analyzed newspapers talk about populism in a generic way, without referring to parties or political leaders and that, whereas there are negative appeals, they are not the majority.

Lastly, Hatakka and Herkman (2022) study how the press in six different countries (Finland, Sweden, US, UK, Netherlands, and Turkey) use the term and show how media use has shifted from populism’s stylistic elements toward its ideological ones. Their work shows that there is a global understanding of populism referring to the far right, which is seen as a growing ideology detrimental to democracy.

These authors stress the need to approach this issue qualitatively in media systems other than the liberal and democratic corporatist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), as well as in countries where left-wing populism is a relevant force. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have tried to shed light on these questions, mainly in the field of linguistics. An example is the work of De Santiago Guervós (2015) who argues the use of the concept of populism by the Spanish press underwent a relexicalization process coinciding with the appearance of the left-wing populist party Podemos. By 2014 the word “populism” started to accumulate negative connotations related to political interests, and its meaning as a way of doing politics became subsidiary to the social meaning of the term as portrayed by the media. Pano (2017), who analyzed newspaper headlines between 2014 and 2017, similarly concludes that the press uses the term “populism” in a derogatory manner, which is malleable to relexicalization by political actors confronting other organizations. This way, the concept is put at the service of the editorial leaning of each newspaper, confirming what some of the studies cited above point out. Gaspar (2020) adds that, according to the results shown by the analysis of three major Spanish newspapers in 2018, populism is no longer to be considered as a category of analysis but as an insult. He states that the term has become a signifier without a reference, useful for pejoratively qualifying any situation or anyone, by grouping under the same lexical field very different references.

Another example is the work of Thornborrow et al. (2021), who explore populism as a discursive label in editorials and opinion-based articles in France, Greece, Sweden, and the UK. In doing so, they take a discourse-analytic approach and examine the patterns and variations in the range of salient semantic fields, and metaphorically evaluative language, identified across the corpus to conclude that there is a shared meta-language in relation to the conceptualization of populism. In their research, they use metaphorical language to identify representations of populism in the press. While our primary aim is not detecting common frames of reference in different languages and socio-political contexts, we believe metaphor analysis is a useful method for identifying discourse positions (Bickes et al., 2014) and approaching how meaning is negotiated in the public sphere (Capdevila & Moragas-Fernández, 2019).

As stated by Demata et al. (2020, p. 10), metaphors “play a key role in orienting the public perception of populism based on shared modes of understanding social and political life.” Their power lies in their ability to shape our perception of political issues and influence “how we view or understand political issues by eliminating alternative points of view” (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 32). The metaphor, beyond being considered a frame detection mechanism (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), plays a dual cognitive and persuasive role and sometimes itself gives rise to a frame (Burgers et al., 2016). In its cognitive role, metaphor is a figurative way of understanding the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Analogy, in particular, is fundamental to the linguistic construction of social and political reality because it shapes a new reality, the target domain (TD), from a known reality, the source domain (SD; Mio, 1997; Musolff, 2004). In its persuasive role, metaphor shifts attention to specific aspects of reality (Eco, 1993; Semino, 2008) to the detriment of other aspects. Because of that, abstract target domain concepts can be presented in terms of usually more familiar and concrete source domains. Metaphors have the capacity to create a story about a certain political event as “they [...] ‘set the scene,’: what is an issue, what is the issue about and what is it not about, how does it link to other issues and why must we or must we not therefore take this or that political action” (Stenvoll, 2008, p. 2). And this is especially relevant when the definition of the issue that is being discussed is under negotiation due to its conflictual character or its non-consensual meaning, such as is the case with the term “populism.”

Whereas there are several studies on how populist political actors use metaphors in their political communication (Arcimavičienė, 2020; Capdevila et al., 2022a, 2022b; Demata, 2017; Freistein et al., 2020; Keating, 2021; Keating & Soria, 2019; Llamas-Saiz & Breeze, 2020; Stulík, 2019; Valdivia, 2020), few works have considered the way in which the concept of populism is constructed through metaphors in the public sphere and, in particular, in the media. Among them we find the work of Pano (2017), Demata et al. (2020), and Thornborrow et al. (2021). Pano identifies the presence of metaphors of a meteorological nature that warn of natural disasters, conflicts and, on one occasion, of populism being portrayed as a virus; moreover, she detects (Pano, 2017, pp. 75–76) a framing based on personification where populism acts without control and can carry out numerous offensive actions. In all cases, populism is framed in a negative way, as a threat that must be slowed down or stopped. Demata et al. (2020) analyze the construction of the concepts of populism and anti-populism and their metaphorical realizations in British news discourse in 2016. They point out the prevalence of the metaphor

POPULISM IS (UPWARD) MOVEMENT, both for populists and anti-populists, but with diverging evaluations depending on the editorial policy of the analyzed newspaper. Lastly, Thornborrow et al. (2021) find four conceptual metaphors referring to populism that are shared between different countries in a variety of media systems: personalized populism, populism as battle/war, populism as a force of nature, and populism as a disease. All of them give a negative vision of the phenomenon since the metaphors are based on negative semantic fields, but with slightly different narratives depending on the country’s political context.

In this study, we intend to expand the research on the news media’s conceptualization of populism by critically analyzing metaphors. Through an analysis of newspaper articles in Spain and Italy, we aim to accomplish the following objectives:

- (1) To detect the metaphors that conceptualize populism in the Spanish and the Italian press
- (2) To identify the source domains referred to by the concept of “populism”
- (3) To establish the narratives derived from the most relevant metaphors in the analyzed news outlets according to their political leaning.

## Methodology

The sample consists of 455 news and opinion articles (253 from Spain, and 202 from Italy) mentioning the root “populis\*” in all its possible variations (in the original languages), and it was collected using the database Factiva. Because the root “populis\*” could be mentioned more than once in an article, and not all articles were specifically focused on populism, we used single sentences as units of analysis. The total number of units of analysis was therefore 588 (345 from Spain, and 243 from Italy).

The analyzed items were published a month before two recent national elections (10 November 2019 in Spain and 25 September 2022 in Italy) and 1 week after. They were gathered from a selection of newspapers printed in Spain and Italy considering their different political leanings and their circulation. For Spain, we chose *El País* (liberal and center-left), *elDiario.es* (left-wing, progressive), and *La Razón* (right-wing, conservative). And, for Italy, we selected *Corriere della Sera* (liberal, center), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (considered close to the ideas of the Five Star Movement), and *Il Giornale* (right-wing, conservative). An overview of the sample is presented in Table 1:

The analysis of the 588 sentences that mentioned the word “populis\*” revealed that 234 of them contained metaphors referring to this concept. So, in total, the

**Table 1.** Research Sample (Articles and Units of Analysis).

Sample	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale	Total
Articles	80	94	79	91	52	59	455
Units of analysis	123	115	107	105	63	75	588

**Table 2.** Coding Variables With an Example.

Article ID ( <i>unit of analysis identifier</i> )	EP18
Text ( <i>contains the analyzed statement</i> )	“Populism is the enemy of pluralism,” said in EL PAÍS Daniel Gascón.
Country ( <i>identifies if the unit of analysis belongs to the Spanish or Italian sample</i> )	Spain
Newspaper ( <i>identifies the newspaper</i> )	El País
Headline ( <i>identifies the headline of the article to which the unit of analysis belongs</i> )	Philosophy against the current discomfort
Date ( <i>publication date</i> )	14 October 2019
Topic ( <i>identifies the topic of the article to which the unit of analysis belongs (options: “National/local politics”; “International politics”; “Economy”; “Culture and entertainment”; “Other”)</i> )	Culture & Entertainment
News/Op ( <i>identifies if the original article is news, or opinion (the latter including editorials, opinion pieces, and interviews. Letters to the editor were disregarded)</i> )	N
Page ( <i>indicates on which page the article was published</i> )	27
Quote ( <i>indicates if the unit of analysis is a direct quote between inverted commas. If it is a quote, the quoted person is indicated in the Notes section</i> )	Yes
Metaphor—Yes/No ( <i>is used for coding if a metaphor was found in the analyzed text</i> )	Yes
Metaphorical expression ( <i>if yes, contains the identified metaphorical expression</i> )	Populism is the enemy of pluralism
Source Domain—SD ( <i>conflict-war-crime; personification; mechanics-physics; path-travel-movement; nature-weather; cinema-show; game-sports; health-illness; religion-belief; family-love-friendship; construction; container; economy-business; fantasy-dream; others, Charteris-Black, 2006, 2011; Musolff, 2004; Semino, 2008</i> )	conflict-war-crime
Target Domain—TD ( <i>aspect to which the metaphor refers, i.e. Populism, Populist(s), Others</i> )	Populism
Notes ( <i>this section is freely available for any comments on the unit of analysis that might be helpful to integrate the coding and increase the depth of analysis</i> )	Daniel Gascón

corpus of analysis consists of 234 metaphorical expressions (142 from Spain and 92 from Italy).

The sample was codified manually by three researchers (fluent/native in Spanish and Italian) according to the categories detailed in Table 2. Inter-coder reliability for the variable Metaphor (Yes/No) was calculated by undertaking an inter-rater agreement test of a subsample of 60 units with the software ReCal3 (Freelon, 2010). This resulted in a Cohen’s Kappa value of 0.615, which is considered adequate for an explorative study. Subsequently, we coded the full sample and, if doubts emerged, they were discussed by the coders and agreement reached.

By adopting a Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) methodology, we can identify, interpret, and explain metaphorical expressions (Charteris-Black, 2011). Different from other well-known methods for analyzing metaphors, such as the MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) or the MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010), CMA is framed under the tradition of Critical Discourse Studies, which

considers the pragmatic dimension of discourses. Hence, it focuses on the conceptual dimension of metaphors as well as on the context in which they are used. By employing CMA, we aimed to reflect on what the implications are of metaphorically framing the concept of populism under certain domains of knowledge. We thus identified expressions referring to a semantic field that diverged from the remaining content—generating what Charteris-Black (2004) calls “semantic tension”—and grouped those expressions in terms of broader conceptual units (SDs, see Table 1). Once a word or a set of words had been identified as potentially metaphorical, researchers checked their original meaning in the Real Academia Española’s dictionary (for Spanish) or in the Vocabolario Treccani (for Italian) to confirm that these words were being used in a different way from the one that was intended in their most basic meaning. Interpretation and explanation were based on relating salient items from the identified SDs with TDs considering the context, which then illuminated which narrative,

**Table 3.** Presence of Metaphors in the Newspapers Analyzed.

Metaphors	<i>Corriere della sera</i>		<i>Il Fatto Quotidiano</i>		<i>Il Giornale</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>elDiario.es</i>		<i>La Razón</i>		Total	
	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%
No	69	65.71	41	65.08	41	55.67	71	57.72	66	57.39	66	61.68	354	60.24
Yes	36	34.29	22	34.92	34	45.33	52	42.28	49	42.61	41	38.32	234	39.76

**Table 4.** Target Domain for Newspapers and Countries.

Target domain	<i>Corriere della sera</i>		<i>Il Fatto Quotidiano</i>		<i>Il Giornale</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>elDiario.es</i>		<i>La Razón</i>		Italy		Spain	
	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%	$\mu$	%
Populism	32	88.89	16	72.73	29	85.3	37	71.15	38	77.55	29	70.73	77	83.7	104	73.24
Populist	4	11.11	6	27.27	3	8.82	9	17.31	10	20.41	11	26.83	13	14.13	30	21.13
Other	-	-	-	-	2	5.88	6	11.54	1	2.04	1	2.44	2	2.17	8	5.63

or definition of a situation, arose from the use of the metaphor in question.

To address the second and third phases of CMA, correspondences were identified between the source and target domains, that is, conceptual maps were created that highlighted the common points between the two domains and the transfers of meaning between them. Conceptual maps articulate different possible narratives or perspectives of a source domain and thus guide the interpretation of the conceptualized issue. To determine the narrative that underpinned the use of a metaphor, the different expressions categorized in a source domain were grouped and studied in depth in terms of their context. The first two phases of the CMA were completed by the third phase, a detailed analysis of the identified metaphors based on the pragmatic aspects of the texts in which they were included. As an example, in declaring that “Populism is the enemy of pluralism,” the writer and *El País*’ collaborator Daniel Gascón is using the SD of CONFLICT-WAR-CRIME to link populism with illiberalism, as the existence of the former is seen as incompatible with liberal democracy.

In the next section, we present the results using qualitative extracts from the articles when necessary to further elaborate on ideas and concepts. Translations are by the authors (see Supplemental Appendix for the originals).

## Results

### *To Detect the Metaphors That Conceptualize Populism in the Spanish and the Italian Press*

Metaphors that conceptualize populism were detected in 234 out of the 588 units of analysis in which the terms “populism” and “populist” were mentioned, this being

39.76% of the sample. Table 3 shows the distribution of metaphors in the different news outlets. In all of them, the number of units of analysis that do not contain metaphors referring to populism is greater than those that do. As can be seen, *Il Giornale* shows a higher percentage of metaphors (45.33%) compared to the other Italian newspapers (which are around 34%). At the other extreme, *La Razón* shows a lower percentage of metaphors (38.32%) if we compare it to the other newspapers in the Spanish sample (which are around 42%).

### *To Identify the Source Domains Referred to by the*

**Concept of “Populism”** In relation to the SDs referred to by “populism” and “populist,” Table 4 shows the distribution of metaphors between the two analyzed TDs. Most of the metaphors (83.7% in Italy and 73.24% in Spain) refer to the term “populism,” whereas only 14.13% in Italy and 21.13% in Spain refer to “populist.” A marginal percentage of metaphors (2.17% in Italy and 5.63% in Spain) conceptualizes other aspects related to populism in a collateral or imprecise way [i.e., *the Chilean constitutionis filled in with populism (infarcita di populismo)*, *Il Giornale*, 8-30-2022], and they have been classified under the category Other.”

Because we consider that the concept of populism is mainly constructed by the TDs “populism” and “populist,” Table 5 gathers together the SDs used for conceptualizing both terms, with the most prominent ones highlighted in bold. Apparently, there is no SD that clearly predominates over the others, but PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT, CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME and PERSONIFICATION are used by all the newspapers with a percentage above 10%.

As can be observed, the SD with the highest percentage is that of PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT metaphors

**Table 5.** Source Domains for the Concept of “Populism.”

Source domain	Corriere della sera		Il Fatto Quotidiano		Il Giornale		El País		elDiario.es		La Razón		Total	
	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%
Cinema/show	-	-	-	-	1	3.1	1	2.2	-	-	1	2.5	3	1.4
Conflict/war/crime	5	13.9	4	18.2	4	12.5	12	26.1	4	8.4	6	15	35	15.6
Construction	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.5	1	0.5
Container	3	8.4	2	9.1	1	3.1	1	2.2	2	4.3	2	5	11	4.9
Economy/business	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	4.3	-	-	-	-	2	0.9
Family/love/friendship	2	5.5	-	-	1	3.1	1	2.2	3	6.2	1	2.5	8	3.6
Fantasy/dream	2	5.5	2	9.1	1	3.1	-	-	3	6.2	-	-	8	3.6
Game/sports	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.2	1	2	2	5	4	1.8
Health/illness	1	2.8	-	-	1	3.1	2	4.3	1	2	1	2.5	6	2.6
Mechanics/physics	1	2.8	3	13.6	1	3.1	2	4.3	8	16.7	4	10	19	8.4
Nature/weather	5	13.9	-	-	4	12.5	5	11	3	6.2	8	20	25	11.1
Other	7	19.4	1	4.5	4	12.5	2	4.3	2	4.3	1	2.5	17	7.7
Path/travel/movement	3	8.4	4	18.2	8	25	6	13	10	20.8	9	22.5	40	17.8
personification	5	13.9	4	18.2	4	12.5	7	15.2	8	16.7	4	10	32	14.3
religion/belief	2	5.5	2	9.1	2	6.3	4	8.7	3	6.2	-	-	13	5.8
Total μ	36		22		32		46		48		40		224	

(17.8%). Under this SD we can find metaphors that define populism as if it were a path someone could walk down [*the path of populism (la strada del populismo)*, Il Fatto Quotidiano, 9-26-22; Il Giornale, 9-27-22], as something that can move forwards or backwards in time [*the return of populism (ritorno del populismo)*, Corriere della Sera, 9-4-22; *right-wing populist parties are gaining ground in Europe (los partidos populistas de derechas han ganado terreno en Europa)*, elDiario.es, 10-16-19] and in every direction without any control [*populism is roaming freely (el populismo campa a sus anchas)*, El País, 10-24-19; *populist leaders are losing their compass (los líderes populistas pierden la brújula)*, El País, 10-25-19]. While there is a claim for *fleeing from it (huir de los populismos)*; elDiario.es, 11-8-19) or *stopping it [Mexico hits the brakes on the populist axis that sustains Venezuela (frena el eje populista que sostiene a Venezuela)*, La Razón, 5-11-19], it is not easy for governments to escape the drift to populism [*the very same members of the Socialist party observe with concern the drift toward radicalism and populism of the next Government (la deriva hacia la radicalidad y el populismo del próximo Ejecutivo)*, La Razón, 11-16-19].

Secondly, the newspapers defined populism with CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME (15.6%) metaphors. By using war-like expressions, they referred to populism as having *its own fighting methods (metodi di lotta propri del populismo)*; Il Giornale, 8-27-22), as a *political fight (lotta politica e populista)*; Il Fatto Quotidiano, 9-16-22) and a *fair war (una nobile guerra)*; Il Fatto Quotidiano, 9-7-22). In this fight, populists conceive of themselves as accomplices of the common people [*Johnson presented himself as an accomplice of the ordinary folk (como el cómplice populista del pueblo llano)*, El País, 10-20-19] and Europe

is pointed out as populism's opponent. This is why it needs to be defended [*Let's defend Europe from right-wing populism (Difendiamo l'Europa dalla destra populista)*, Corriere della Sera, 9-22-22], as populism is an *enemy to pluralism (El populismo es enemigo del pluralismo)*; El País, 10-14-19), which *must be fought (combatir al populismo)*; elDiario.es, 10-11-19) and *defeated (vencer definitivamente al populismo)*; elDiario.es, 11-4-19), because *right and left populisms are the main threat to democratic coexistence in Europe (los populismos de derecha e izquierda son la principal amenaza a la convivencia democrática en Europa)*; La Razón, 10-20-19).

The third most recurrent metaphorical SD is that of PERSONIFICATION (14.3%), which attributes human qualities to populism. This way, populism is able to be fed and to feed [*As if abstentionism and populism were not fed by that manifest deafness (Come se l'astensionismo e il populismo, tanto deprecati, non si alimentassero a quella manifesta sordità)*, Il Fatto Quotidiano, 10-4-22; *a feeling fed by populism (sensación alimentada por el populismo)*, El País, 10-14-19), capable of seizing someone [*Judicial populism has taken over the Democratic Party (Il populismo giudiziario si è impossessato del Pd)*, Il Giornale, 8-25-22], has a date of birth [*the birthdate in Europe of the democracy of opinion, or if you like, of populism (la data di nascita in Europa della democrazia dell'opinione, o se volete del populismo)*, Corriere della Sera, 9-18-22], makes exhalations [*Spanish transition to democracy is questioned by other exhalations of populism (la Transición española se cuestiona desde otras exhalaciones del populismo)*, elDiario.es, 10-11-19], is *vigorous and has instinct [the vigorous emergence of populism in many countries (la irrupción vigorosa del populismo)*; *populist instinct is to*

*destroy institutions* (**El instinto populista es destruir las instituciones**), *La Razón*, 10-22-19 and 11-16-19, respectively] among others.

Overall, both in Spain and in Italy *PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT*, *CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME* and *PERSONIFICATION* are the most relevant ways of framing the concept of populism despite the different percentages in which they appear in the analyzed newspapers. Nevertheless, there is not a common way of metaphorizing populism by country, nor do the newspapers of the same country clearly share the same SDs. However, more coincident patterns can be found when looking at the news outlets' editorial stances. In keeping with this, Table 5 also shows the diverse metaphorization strategies in the analyzed press. Except for *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, the newspapers metaphorize populism using a predominant SD. In the case of these two news outlets, populism is defined from more than one perspective. Thus, in *Corriere della Sera* three SDs—*CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME*, *NATURE/WEATHER* and *PERSONIFICATION*—are equally used (13.9%), while *Il Fatto Quotidiano* combines *PERSONIFICATION* with metaphors of *PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT* and *CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME* (IN ALL CASES WITH A PERCENTAGE OF 18.2%). In the case of *Il Giornale* and *La Razón*, *PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT* is over 20% of the identified metaphors, while in *El País* *CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME* metaphors are the most salient, with 26.1%. As for *elDiario.es*, *PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT* metaphors (20.8%) predominate but are closely followed by *PERSONIFICATION* and *MECHANICS/PHYSICS* metaphors (16.7%).

### *To Establish the Narratives Derived From the Most Relevant Metaphors in the Analyzed News Outlets According to Their Political Leaning*

The identified SDs associated with the terms “populism” and “populist” generate diverse narratives that may lead to a certain vision of the concept. The results of this section are presented according to the criteria of shared SD, but also according to the political leaning of the analyzed media. Considering this, three main narratives have been established: (i) *Populism is on the rise and moving forward and needs to be stopped*; (ii) *Populism must be fought because it poses a threat to democracy*; and (iii) *Populism is a schemer that divides society and does not help people*. Whereas these metaphorical frames are common to the analyzed news outlets, they are constructed differently depending on the newspapers' editorial slant.

*Populism Is on the Rise and Moving Forward and Needs to be Stopped*. In the analyzed corpus, *TRAVEL/PATH/MOVEMENT* metaphors are employed to present populism as a phenomenon that can either advance or step back, and their use, far from being neutral, mostly entails a negative

vision of the concept. In the case of *Corriere della Sera* and *El País* (liberal), populism is seen either as a destination that many countries, parties, or citizens are approaching, or as a path that they are currently following. It is an adventurous path, which implies it is not quiet, where obstacles to free trade, immigration, and investment are set. But populism is also presented as the traveler when said to be returning—as if it had previously been the status quo—or advancing and roaming freely—suggesting that it is something that should be stopped or contained—despite having lost its compass.

[...] But what worries observers is this **return of populism**. Many are wondering if this anticipates a new European wave, fueled by inflation and the energy crisis. («[...] Ma quello che preoccupa gli osservatori è **questo ritorno del populismo**, in tanti si chiedono se non anticipi una nuova ondata europea, alimentata dall'inflazione e dalla crisi energetica».) *Corriere della Sera*, 9-4-2022.

[...] Italians are good Europeans, they know their place. I don't think they will **follow populism** in the long term («[...] Gli italiani sono buoni europei, sanno qual è il loro posto. **Non credo seguiranno il populismo** nel lungo periodo»). *Corriere della Sera*, 9-27-2022.

Populist leadership [...] **tends to favor** economic fragmentation, **the establishment of barriers to trade, immigration and investment**, favoring, therefore, the balkanization of the world. (Los **liderazgos de carácter populista** [...] **suelen favorecer** la fragmentación económica, **el establecimiento de barreras** al comercio, a la inmigración y a las inversiones, favoreciendo, por tanto, la balcanización del mundo). *El País*, 11-8-2019.

The inconvenience of dealing with **temperamental populist leaders** is that they improvise, **lose their compass** and are thus not very credible: they generate uncertainty. (La inconveniencia de tratar con **líderes populistas** temperamentales es que improvisan, **pierden la brújula** y son así poco creíbles: generan incertidumbre). *El País*, 10-25-2019.

Even Jean-Luc Mélenchon's **populist left seems disoriented**. (Incluso **la izquierda populista** de Jean-Luc Mélenchon **parece desorientada**). *El País*, 11-7-2019.

Both *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *elDiario.es* (progressive) construct negative-oriented narratives regarding *TRAVEL/PATH/MOVEMENT* metaphors. The two newspapers stress the need to flee from the rise and advance of right-wing populism, which is spreading throughout Western democracies and drags both other politicians and citizens down an uncertain path.

[Social Democrats] are concerned about **the rise of populism and authoritarianism**. On the contrary, they are linked to parliamentary democracy and the EU. ([I socialdemocratici] Sono preoccupati per **l'ascesa del populismo e dell'autoritarismo**. Al contrario, sono legati alla democrazia parlamentare e all'Ue). *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9-20-22.

In one way or another, the only certain thing is **the spread of populism**. (In un verso o nell'altro, l'unica cosa certa è il **dilagare del populismo**). *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9-18-2022.

[...] those who have shown themselves in favor of the **right-wing populist parties which in recent years have gained ground in Europe**, are also more inclined to show themselves unsatisfied with the work of the EU [...] ([...] aquellos que se han mostrado a favor de **los partidos populistas de derechas** que en los últimos años **han ganado terreno en Europa**, también son más propensos a mostrarse en desacuerdo con la labor de la UE [...]). *elDiario.es*, 10-16-2019.

We need [...] a youth that **does not let a fascist populism like Vox's drag them in** (Necesitamos [...] a **una juventud que no se deje arrastrar por un populismo fascista** como el de Vox). *elDiario.es*, 10-18-2019.

[...] although there is a **xenophobic, racist, macho and populist party** that has entered the parliament with force, and **that is dragging the Spanish right-wing down a dark path** that was overcome many decades ago ([...] aunque exista un **partido xenófobo, racista, machista y populista** que ha entrado con fuerza en el parlamento, y que **está arrastrando a la derecha política española hacia un camino oscuro** que ya se había superado hace muchas décadas). *elDiario.es*, 10-20-2019.

Unlike the newspapers cited above, *Il Giornale* (conservative) holds the EU elites and the left responsible for the spread of populism, while still referring to the “populist path.” The newspaper also points to the populist drift that the Democratic Party is considering after the election results. Likewise, *La Razón* (conservative) blames the Socialist Party for the populist drift of the Spanish Government and for its will to hand over Spain's governability to secessionists through a golden bridge built by left-wing populism. In doing so, the newspaper also conceptualizes populism as something that is rising, ascending, and moving forward, which entails that it is favorably progressing toward gaining power in the institutions.

When asked about the responsibilities of the European elite and the left for “**letting populism spread in the suburbs**” [...] (Alla domanda sulle responsabilità dell'élite europea e della sinistra per «**aver lasciato dilagare il populismo nelle periferie**» [...]). *Il Giornale*, 9-21-22.

At stake is the fate of the leader Enrico Letta, of course: [...] there is a rift between supporters of **the populist drift in alliance with the Grillini** [members of the Five Star Movement] **and the reformist resistance**. (In ballo c'è il destino del leader Enrico Letta, certo: [...] ci si dilania tra fautori **della deriva populista in alleanza con i grillini** e resistenza riformista). *Il Giornale*, 9-26-2022.

The crisis of traditional parties and **the rise of populism in Europe** has complicated the formation of a Government to the extreme. (La crisis de los partidos tradicionales y **el auge**

**de los populismos en Europa** ha complicado hasta el extremo la formación de Gobierno). *La Razón*, 11-8-19.

[...] sectors of the Spanish left, including the Socialist party itself, who observe with concern **the drift toward radicalism and populism of the next Executive** [...] ([...] algunos sectores de la izquierda española, incluso, del propio partido socialista, que observan con preocupación **la deriva hacia** la radicalidad y el **populismo del próximo Ejecutivo** [...]). *La Razón*, 11-16-19.

The Socialist Party is so desperate for the governability of Spain not to be handed over to Oriol Junqueras' independentists and Arnaldo Otegi's philo-terrorists **over the golden bridge of Pablo Iglesias' populism**. (El Partido Socialista que hipa desesperado para no se entregue la gobernabilidad de España a los independentistas de Oriol Junqueras y a los filoterroristas de Arnaldo Otegi por **el puente de plata del populismo de Pablo Iglesias**). *La Razón*, 11-16-19.

*Populism Needs to be Fought Because It Poses a Threat to Democracy*. The use of CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME metaphors promotes a negative vision of populism, which is common to all the analyzed newspapers. The most frequently extended idea is that of populism as a threat that must be fought. However, nuances can be found regarding the seriousness of the threat and the intensity with which it must be combated. *Corriere della Sera* and *El País* opt for a narrative where populism (especially of the extreme right) is defined as an existential risk to Europe and as a menace that endangers democracies and wreaks havoc in society. Populism is an enemy of pluralism, and this is why it must be battled or, at least, requires society to be defended from it. However, according to these newspapers, this action is to be put forward by politicians and political parties, not by citizens.

**We defend Europe from the populist right**, which wants to give simple answers to complex problems [...]. And we have long observed that Putin uses his trolls to stoke the fire in Europe, **supporting populist right-wing parties to divide and destroy it**. Giorgia Meloni's party appears to be following this path. (**Difendiamo l'Europa dalla destra populista**, che vuole dare risposte semplici a problemi complessi [...] E osserviamo da tempo che Putin usa i suoi troll per attizzare il fuoco in Europa, **appoggiando i partiti della destra populista per dividerla e distruggerla**. Il partito di Giorgia Meloni mostra di seguire questa strada). *Corriere della Sera*, 9-22-2022.

[...] In two years we will see if we were right in trusting in Brussels and **fighting populism** ([...] Fra due anni vedremo se avremo avuto ragione nel confidare in Bruxelles e nel **combattere il populismo**). *Corriere della Sera*, 9-22-2022.

**The ravages of populism** are clearly visible in other countries [...] (**Los estragos del populismo** son bien visibles en otros países [...]). *El País*, 11-10-2019.

**Populism is the enemy of pluralism.** (El **populismo es enemigo del pluralismo**). *El País*, 10-14-2019.

**Populisms [...] are a threat** to economic progress and endanger democracies. (Los **populismos [...] son una amenaza** para el progreso económico y llegan a poner en peligro las democracias). *El País*, 11-8-2019

A similar narrative is developed by *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *elDiario.es*. These news outlets also report on populism as a perceived threat to liberal values, which is something made clear by many linguistic choices that specify and amplify this menace. For instance, they point at populism as a tragedy for countries, which are incapable of doing anything but fighting against other populists.

Falling asleep thinking that **“populism” has been defeated by Draghi** and, upon waking up, discovering that the so-called “populists” who in 2018 had 55% have 60% this time. (Addormentarsi pensando **che il “populismo” è stato sconfitto da Draghi** e, al risveglio, scoprire che i cosiddetti “populisti” che nel 2018 avevano il 55% stavolta hanno il 60%). *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9-24-22.

People have to assume that their responsibility is with democracy and that **we have to put an end to populism** in the world, because **populism becomes a tragedy for countries [...]** (La gente tiene que asumir que su responsabilidad es con la democracia y que tenemos que **acabar con el populismo en el mundo**, porque el populismo **se convierte en una tragedia para los países [...]**). *elDiario.es*, 10-19-19.

[...] a rising **populism threatening the liberal values** that defeated communism [...] ([...] un **populismo** en auge **amenazando los valores liberales que derrotaron al comunismo**). *elDiario.es*, 11-4-19.

Finally, *Il Giornale* and *La Razón* propose a narrative in which populism, in addition to being considered a threat that could end in catastrophe or disaster, plays a more active or belligerent role. Here populism is not only threatening but is also capable of developing fighting methods, conquering and blackmailing parties and countries, and acquiring offensive capacity. In this case, these dynamics are attributed to both right-wing and left-wing populism.

[...] the Marxists, and socialist-revolutionaries who took up themes and **fight methods** typical of populism [...] ([...] i marxisti, i socialisti-rivoluzionari che riprendevano temi e **metodi di lotta propri del populismo [...]**). *Il Giornale*, 8-27-2022.

I'm sorry for the Democratic Party, **it ended up in the hands of the populists [...]** (Mi dispiace per il Pd, è **finito nelle mani dei populistici [...]**). *Il Giornale*, 30-8-2022.

Nationalism and **populism from the right and left are the main threat to democratic coexistence in Europe and**, of course, in

**Spain.** (Los nacionalismos y los **populismos de derecha e izquierda son la principal amenaza a la convivencia democrática en Europa** y, por supuesto, en España). *La Razón*, 10-20-2019.

Let's see what [Pedro Sánchez] does now, with the majority of the Senate lost, the PP on his heels, the old PP with 52 seats, and **subject to the coercion and blackmail of the separatists and the Stalinists of populism.** (A ver qué hace ahora [Pedro Sánchez], con la mayoría del Senado perdida, el PP pisándole los talones, el antiguo PP con 52 escaños, y **some-tido a las coacciones y chantajes de los separatistas y los estalinistas del populismo**). *La Razón*, 11-12-2019.

*Populism Is a Schemer That Divides Society and Does Not Help People.* To attribute certain human qualities to populism entails a neutral, slightly negative or positive perception of the phenomenon, depending on which values these features entail. In the case of *Corriere della Sera* and *El País*, they opt for negatively evaluating populism when personifying it. The former claims that populism has a destiny, which is not that of helping people but of using them, and is attributed the traits of anger and stubbornness. The latter argues that populism is attractive, robust, and strong. But, far from being positive features, these are depicted as necessary abilities to create fragmentation and to question liberal democracies.

What will the choice of Italians indicate about **the fate of populism** and sovereignty? (Cosa indicherà la scelta degli italiani **sul destino di populismo** e sovranismo?). *Corriere della Sera*, 9-7-22.

In an Italy where absolute poverty has tripled in the last 15 years [...] it is a slap in the face to the dignity of people and confirms a fact: **populism does not help the people, it uses them.** (In un'Italia dove la povertà assoluta è triplicata negli ultimi 15 anni [...] è uno schiaffo in faccia alla dignità delle persone e conferma un dato: **il populismo non aiuta il popolo, lo usa**). *Corriere della Sera*, 8-31-22.

We can already imagine the attempt of a scaled-down but **stubborn populism** to fan the discontent to regain momentum. **His DNA leads him to always bet on the collapse of the system, he needs it like oxygen [...]** (Già si indovina il tentativo di un **populismo ridimensionato ma pervicace** di soffiare sul malcontento per riprendere spinta. **Il suo dna lo porta a scommettere sempre su un collasso del sistema, ne ha bisogno come l'ossigeno [...]**). *Corriere della Sera*, 10-7-2022.

In his opinion, these **populisms** have negative consequences with what happens within the countries, “they **create fragmentation and call into question our systems of liberal democracies and the social economy.**” (A su juicio, **esos populismos** tienen consecuencias negativas con lo que sucede en el seno de los países, “**crean fragmentación y ponen en cuestión nuestros sistemas de democracias liberales y la economía social**”). *El País*, 11-8-19.

[Vox] seems to have become a party somewhat more comparable to those of the **European populist extreme right (strong in rural areas, and more attractive to voters with a lower educational level and economically vulnerable)**. ([Vox] parece que se ha convertido en un partido algo más asimilable a los de la **extrema derecha populista europea (fuerte en zonas rurales, y más atractivo para los votantes de menor nivel educativo y económicamente vulnerables)** [...]). *El País*, 11-12-19.

*Il Fatto Quotidiano* denounces the attempts to make populism look reasonable and argues that it feeds on contextual factors, such as the continuation of some deputies in the Italian parliament after many terms in office, blaming both the ones acclaiming it and the ones responsible for society's dissatisfaction with those that have traditionally exercised power. As for *elDiario.es*, populism is accused of jeopardizing people's futures and generating tyrannies or dictatorial regimes, but the newspaper also recognizes the movement's ability to gain support from many citizens. Be that as it may, both news outlets underline the manipulative nature of populism, whose aims are not clear.

According to Bannon, Trump's victory strategist, "put a **reasonable face on right-wing populism** and get elected." (Secondo Bannon, lo stratega della vittoria di Trump, "metti **una faccia ragionevole al populismo di destra** e vieni eletto"). *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 10-3-22.

In the face of the brazen obstinacy of too many long-standing PD parliamentarians who are refractory to the idea that a limit on mandates is necessary. A limit that a serious party should enforce [...] As if abstentionism and **populism**, much deplored, **were not fed on by that manifest deafness**. (A fronte della sfrontata ostinazione di troppi parlamentari Pd di lungo corso refrattari all'idea che un limite ai mandati sia necessario. Un limite che un partito serio dovrebbe fare rispettare [...] **Come se l'astensionismo e il populismo, tanto deprecati, non si alimentassero a quella manifesta sordità**). *Fatto Quotidiano*, 10-4-22.

**Populism generates emotional adhesions** that obscure critical reason, and the liberating gurus end up imitating the sectarian device. (**El populismo genera adhesiones emocionales** que oscurecen la razón crítica, y los gurús libertadores acaban imitando el artificio sectario). *elDiario.es*, 10-25-19.

**Populism mortgages your future** so that you live in the present, and when it's over, it's over. (**El populismo te hipoteca el futuro** para que vos vivas un presente, y cuando se acaba, se acaba). *elDiario.es*, 10-25-19.

[...] mass **populism** acclaiming the leader **always ends up generating tyrannies with an alibi, freedoms with a card, dictatorships in the name of the people** ([...] el **populismo** de masas aclamando al líder siempre **acaba generando tiranías con coartada, libertades con carnet, dictaduras en nombre del pueblo**). *elDiario.es*, 10-25-19.

In the case of *Il Giornale*, journalistic indifference is said to be the presentable face of populism, putting the blame on some media—in this case *Corriere della Sera's* journalist Massimo Gramellini—for whitening it. Populism is also conceptualized as being noisy and able to take over some political parties. It must be noted that, in this case, *Il Giornale* is referring to the Five Star Movement. Regarding *La Razón*, the newspaper states that populism—either right or left-oriented—has an instinct, which is that of destroying democratic institutions, as it does not value them and it worsens democracy's real problems.

But **journalistic indifference** as easy as drinking a coffee is **just the presentable face of political populism**. A column and 1,400 characters, spaces included. (Ma il **qualunquismo giornalistico** facile come bere un Caffè **solo la faccia presentabile del populismo politico**. Una rubricchetta e 1.400 battute, spazi inclusi). *Il Giornale*, 10-17-22.

**Judicial populism has taken over the Democratic Party. (Il populismo giudiziario si è impossessato del Pd)**. *Il Giornale*, 8-25-2022.

But the closer the percentage of the Five Star Movement gets to that of the Democratic Party, the more likely it is that the pressure will restart within the party from those who can't wait to mend relations with the former prime minister and follow **his noisy populism**. (Ma più la percentuale di M5s si avvicinerà a quella del Pd, e più è probabile che nel partito riparta il pressing di chi non vede l'ora di ricucire i rapporti con l'ex premier e di mettersi in scia **al suo chiassoso populismo**). *Il Giornale*, 9-26-2022.

But unless it becomes part of a broad coalition, **the populist instinct is to destroy institutions**. (Pero a menos que se convierta en parte de una coalición amplia, **el instinto populista es destruir las instituciones**). *La Razón*, 11-16-19.

[...] this **populism**, whatever its form, "**ignores the value of institutions and procedures**" and "**aggravates the real problems of democracy**" (**ese populismo**, sea del signo que sea, "**desconoce el valor de las instituciones y los procedimientos**" y "**agrava los problemas reales de la democracia**"). *La Razón*, 10-22-19.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Our study on the discursive constructions of populism in the Spanish and Italian press through metaphors expands the current literature on how the term is defined by the news media by proposing a novel scope for approaching this topic, and doing so in the context of the polarized pluralist media system. In this section, after describing which metaphorical frames were used for conceptualizing populism, we argue for similarities with other investigations, while also identifying some specifics of our case study.

After detecting the metaphors and identifying the source domains referred to by populism, we have determined three main narratives through which the notion of populism is framed. As pointed out above, these conceptualizations are common to all the analyzed newspapers, but they originate different ways of understanding the phenomenon depending on their political leanings. For instance, while all the news outlets refer to populism in terms of moving upwards and forward—and stress the need to stop it –, liberal newspapers apply this to both right-wing and left-wing populism, but progressive and conservative media specifically refer to right or left respectively. As shown in the previous section, the other identified narratives show similar patterns. Whereas the scope of the study is different, this would differ from Hatakka and Herkman's (2022) findings that point to an understanding of populism referring to the far right in the six countries they analyze, which can be true for liberal and democratic corporatist models of journalism, but not for polarized pluralist ones.

In any case, and in line with what previous studies have demonstrated, the term is mostly used in a negative manner “for criticizing and delegitimizing a range of political projects, from the radical right to the radical left” (De Cleen et al., 2018: 655). Again, populism is depicted as threatening the status quo as understood in liberal democratic terms (Brown & Mondon, 2021). And, in the present investigation, this menace is articulated through the interaction of three domains of knowledge that operate together to put forward this idea: PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT, CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME, and PERSONIFICATION. The need for populism to be stopped (PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT) is linked to the need to combat it (conflict/war/crime) because of its unscrupulous abilities (personification). Almost all the occurrences that sustain the metaphorical frame network that portrays populism as a rising threat that manipulates the people implied negative evaluations of the phenomenon.

As stated by Demata et al. (2020, p. 29), “metaphorical constructs of populism are crucial in the way populism is codified and understood in discourse.” Nevertheless, while they can generate narratives through which it is possible to make sense of such a disputed concept, metaphors also contribute to its relexicalization due to their ability to create new meanings through analogy. Consequently, opting for lexical choices that build up a cognitive framework that promotes populism as undesirable for society implies that nobody wants to be labeled under such a negative concept (De Santiago Guervós, 2015). However, metaphors could also contribute to the opposite. This could be the case, for instance, in the use of the PATH/TRAVEL/MOVEMENT metaphor if employed to frame the very same concept as an exciting journey for getting the institutions back into people's hands.


Unlike in Thornborrow et al.'s (2021) work, populism as a force of nature and populism as a disease were not relevant metaphors in the analyzed news articles overall. Instead, populism as a movement or as a path predominated, as well as personalized populism and populism as battle/war, which the authors also identify in their study. In our analysis, the way in which these source domains were articulated did not just depend on contextual factors, but also on the media's editorial slant. For instance, metaphors of CONFLICT/WAR/CRIME were used, not only for depicting the populist extreme right or extreme left as a menace, but also for blaming social democrats in Spain and Italy for being permeable to populism and considering Podemos or the Five Star Movement as “allies.” This also shows how malleable the concept is, implying that Spanish and Italian news media have also been perpetuating the emptiness of the term and generating confusion as to its meaning. The presence of metaphors in less than 50% of the analyzed sample could indicate limited effort when it comes to providing a definition of what populism is.


Finally, there were no relevant differences in the use of metaphors depending on the news outlet's country of origin, quite the contrary. The identified metaphorical expressions tended to resemble one another, possibly because they did not just conceive of populism as a local phenomenon but rather as a European and global threat under which national populist movements were framed. As an example, expressions such as “rise,” “spread,” “gain ground,” “flee from” or “stop” coexist in the Italian and the Spanish samples and build up the broader narrative of populism as something that is “rising and moving forward and needs to be stopped.” As mentioned above, what differs in each country, and specifically in each newspaper, are the targeted political movements, which mostly depend on the news outlet's ideological background.

Our findings may be affected by certain limitations. The first one is related to the period of analysis, which coincides with an electoral period in both countries. Further research could look at the way populism is constructed through metaphors in the newspapers analyzed outside election campaigns. Moreover, it should also be considered that the organizations that are framed as populist political forces at a national level in both countries are currently experiencing an institutionalization process; it could be interesting to see if the media perception of these political actors changes in the future. In methodological terms, it would also be interesting to employ mixed methods to explore other dimensions related to the definition of populism (i.e., content analysis considering variables such as ideology or political actors and movements linked to this concept), as well as considering reception studies for reflecting on how media

practitioners understand populism, and how journalistic practices have been affected by populist political communication.

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### Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article supplemental material. Further enquiries can be addressed to the corresponding author(s).

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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