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The Structural and Temporal Curb of Populism: A Cross-Country Analysis of Authoritarian Populist Influences on Journalism

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ABSTRACT

As right-wing authoritarian-populism becomes a defining feature of world politics, scholars increasingly acknowledge its challenging impacts on journalism. Focusing largely on the populist rhetoric, this interest leaves the structural influences of authoritarian-populism on the journalistic field across diverse contexts largely unexplored. By drawing on in-depth interviews (n = 83) with journalists in Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, and Turkey, and combining political-economic, institutional and temporal analysis of authoritarian-populism, we develop a structural approach towards authoritarian-populist influences on journalism. We discuss three structural forces that authoritarian-populists in power implement or instrumentalise to influence journalism in respective countries: the discriminatory use of institutional power to deepen the polarisation, the populist intervention into ownership structures of the news media, and the strategic use of digitalisation in journalism. We argue that authoritarian-populism is a process whereby the curb of populist structural forces increases over time as authoritarian-populist politics mature in power.

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Populism; temporality; journalistic autonomy; authoritarian-populism; structural analysis; cross-country analysis

Introduction

The rise and endurance of right-wing populism across the world has been identified as a substantial global challenge for journalism (e.g., Panievsky 2022; Van Dalen 2021). Populist rhetorical attacks on news media and journalists such as “fake news” or “enemies of the people” are seen as crucial factors in the erosive impact of populist politics on journalism (e.g., Egelhofer and Lechele 2019). Such derogatory labels to denounce and threaten journalists by inciting harassment and violence are also found to damage public trust in the news media, deteriorating the institutional legitimacy and authority of journalism which ensures the critical role of the journalistic profession as a truth seeking-telling practice informing citizens for their self-governance (e.g., Pingree et al. 2018; Van Duyn and Collier 2018).

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Despite these valuable insights, the existing literature provides much fewer clues about the *structural* influences that populists in power generate for the journalistic world across nation-states. This can be related to the general tendency of existing literature on populism to treat populist politics as a rhetoric, style and discourse that articulates the opposition between the people and the elite (e.g., Moffitt 2016). Considering populism as a thin-ideology (e.g., Stanley 2008), many studies on media and journalism overlook how it gets “thickened” in the communicative sphere in structural ways, including political-economic and institutional influences. Furthermore, most works in this field focus on US/Western Europe contexts, leaving cross-country analyses of populist influences on journalism across diverse media structures largely unexplored.

Thus, our study aims to address this gap, by exploring the structural influences of right-wing authoritarian-populists in power on journalism across Western and non-Western contexts. Using Stuart Hall’s concept of authoritarian-populism (1985), which extends beyond communicative style to include material and institutional relations (e.g., Demirović 2018), we explore how populists undermine, capture, or manipulate democratic institutions (Edelman 2020) and exploit capitalist media systems (Kellner 2017; Schnyder et al. 2023). This focus on structural forces in the relationship between populist politics and journalism, including ownership relations, media policy, and the integration of digital platforms and technologies into journalism, is advocated by scholars in recent studies (e.g., Freedman 2018; Pickard 2018; 2020). We also use Blake et al.’s (2024) temporal model of populism to illustrate how populist influences intensify and proliferate over time as authoritarian-populist regimes solidify their grip on power. Combined with the structural analysis of authoritarian-populism’s impact on journalism, this model of populism offers new insights into the evolving relationship between populism and journalism across nations.

Our study examines four countries: Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, and Turkey. These countries have experienced varying degrees of exposure to right-wing authoritarian-populism over the past two decades, ranging from intermittent electoral successes in Austria and Slovenia to established regimes in Hungary (since 2010) and Turkey (since 2002). Drawing on in-depth interviews with 83 journalists in these countries, each with a minimum of 10 years of professional experience, we focus on influences such as polarisation, ownership control, and digitalisation, that were identified as the most pressing forces by our interviewees in terms of authoritarian-populism’s impact on the national journalistic fields.

We argue that the structural influences of authoritarian-populism on journalism are too significant to overlook in any analysis of the relationship between authoritarian-populist politics and journalism. Furthermore, we argue that as authoritarian-populists consolidate their power and influence within government, they generate increasingly potent impacts on journalism, distorting its boundaries and undermining its autonomy. Thus, authoritarian-populism operates as a process whereby populists utilise structural forces in relational and accumulative ways to subjugate journalism to their authority. While the journalistic struggle for autonomy persists even under enduring authoritarian-populist pressures, it is increasingly constrained by the maturing power of populism over time.

Theoretical Framework: Structural and Temporal Analysis of Authoritarian-Populism

Exploring the Foundations of Authoritarian-Populism

Our understanding of populism shapes its analysis in relation to journalism. Recent research mainly focuses on right-wing populism, depicting it as a divisive discourse with populists claiming to be the sole representatives of the people (e.g., Müller 2016). This form of populist politics challenges the ideals of the common good and truth, undermining the legitimacy and autonomy of journalism through rhetorical attacks on news media and journalists. Journalism's autonomy depends not only on journalists but also on external actors who define and defend its societal role in relation to common good and truth (cf. Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Van Dalen 2021). Journalism and politics are interdependent, with their mutual recognition of legitimacy being essential for functional democracies. Studies identify social media as a key platform for populist attacks that bypass traditional journalism, posing the "single biggest challenge" to journalism in the populist era and increasing its vulnerability (Crilley and Gillespie 2019). Research also shows how journalists defend journalistic legitimacy through strategies to counter populist rhetoric (e.g., Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017).

While acknowledging the challenges posed by right-wing authoritarian-populism, we argue that its influence extends beyond rhetoric. We align with scholars like Victor Pickard (2018; 2020) and Freedman (2018), advocating for a structural analysis of the relationship between journalism and populist politics. This analysis pays attention to the political-economic and institutional reconfigurations of capitalist media systems, which not only provide fertile grounds for the rise of populist politics but are further exploited by populists in power to distort journalistic autonomy and legitimacy. We draw on Stuart Hall's (1985; Hall et al. 1978) conception of authoritarian-populism, used to analyse the complex dynamics of "Thatcherism" in the UK, where coercion and consent were combined to secure support for authoritarian policies. Hall et al.'s analysis in "Policing the Crisis" (1978), highlighted how corporate media, state institutions, and moral panic narratives such as portrayal of social malaise in relation to race and crime, enabled populist government to implement coercive measures. While Hall noted the role of media in creating a "populist common sense" (Hall 1979, 180), he did not fully explore the impacts of authoritarian-populism on the media. Recent scholars have revisited this notion to link the rise of authoritarian-populism with media ownership and governance changes (e.g., Kellner 2017; Birkinbine, Gomez, and Wasko 2016; Schnyder et al. 2023).

Scholarship on authoritarian-populism's impact on journalism, though still emerging, draws from critical political economy traditions in communication and media studies. These studies focus on the concentration of ownership in commercialised news media markets, which is seen as conducive to populism by amplifying populist discourses (e.g., Pickard 2018; Freedman 2018; Trappel and Meier 2021; Baker 2007). Schnyder et al. (2023) note increased polarisation within private news media markets, dominated by large groups, while Esser, Stepińska, and Hopmann (2017) report the entry of politically motivated owners after populists gain power. Benson (2016) observes changes in public service broadcasting governance with the rise of populism. Although the influence of

ownership on journalistic content is debated, some studies indicate that ownership can affect on journalistic practices and work (e.g., Hanretty 2014).

While polarisation is widely recognised as central to populist politics, with studies often focusing on polarising discourse, emerging literature highlights the political-economic and institutional dimensions of populist polarisation and its impact on journalism (e.g., Schnyder et al. 2023). Research shows how populists in power utilise institutional resources and policy tools to reward supportive media and punish critical others (e.g., Dragomir 2018). Examples include biased allocation of public ads and discriminatory treatment of journalists based on their media affiliation (e.g., Wodak 2022).

Some studies link populist polarisation to the digitalisation of journalism, arguing that the rise of digital, mobile and social platforms, which create high-choice political information environments, contribute to the erosion of shared facts and fuels polarisation and extremism (e.g., Van Aelst et al. 2017; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Additionally, the integration of digital technologies has led to structural changes in work routines, increased time pressures, precarious working conditions, and the influence of algorithms and platform design on journalistic production (e.g., Örnebring et al. 2016; Lindblom, Lindell, and Gidlund 2024).

These insights are pivotal for understanding the impact of authoritarian-populism on journalism, but a broader model of institutional analysis is necessary to better grasp these influences across social contexts.

Temporal Analysis of Authoritarian-Populism

The emerging temporal analysis of populism offers a valuable lens for cross-country analysis of populist influences by highlighting the structuring role of temporality or duration of populist power in government (e.g., Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2023; Blake, Stanislav, and Martinez-Suarez 2024). Drawing on political economy and institutional theory, this body of literature delves into populist influences on institutional structures and strategic markets across diverse contexts where populist parties rise to power and consolidate their authority. Strategic markets, such as the news media, play a crucial role in bolstering the longevity of populist governments and the stability of authoritarian-populist regimes (e.g., Hsueh 2016).

In their comprehensive study of populism, Blake and colleagues “move beyond identifying institutional voids by theorising *the political process* through which such voids emerge under populism” (2024, 527) and provide a temporal framework elucidating the influences of populism. Within this model, they contend that the duration of populist governance correlates positively with the magnitude of its impact. Thus, their framework theorises populism as a *process* of de-institutionalisation, defined “as the progressive weakening of institutional safeguards and procedures of modern democratic governance as the populist regime becomes more established” (Blake, Stanislav, and Martinez-Suarez 2024, 529). This account resonates well with Hall’s notion of authoritarian-populism, emphasising the institutional characteristic and conditions of populism, while adding a temporal perspective that considers the duration and consolidation of populist institutional power over time. Thus, the trajectory of de-institutionalisation escalates notably when populists hold substantial governmental authority, particularly when they dominate as the sole ruling party or secure influence as the major party in a governmental coalition. Throughout this process, certain effects, such as the discriminatory

allocation of state resources to reward supporters and marginalise others, manifest shortly after populists ascend to power, while others, such as the broader restructuring of key markets, may require more time and only materialise as populists consolidate institutional authority over time (see also Sallai and Schnyder 2021). While this model acknowledges divergences in institutional structures and voids across national contexts where right-wing populist politics ascend to power, it posits that populism has the potential to “puncture holes in the institutional fabric of advanced and developing democracies alike” (Blake, Stanislav, and Martinez-Suarez 2024, 551).

This temporal model, which emphasises the duration and institutional capacity of populist politics in power, offers fresh insights for cross-country analysis in journalism and media studies. The conventional approach in the discipline typically involves understanding country-specific variations and differences by utilising media and political system models (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012). These models categorise the world’s media systems into Western liberal, democratic-corporatist, Mediterranean, or non-Western systems. However, the temporal model provides a more dynamic understanding of changing influences that can exert similar effects across both advanced democratic capitalist societies and developing capitalist democracies, contingent on the entrenchment and longevity of authoritarian-populist politics in power.

Methodological Approach, Research Contexts and Questions

We investigate how authoritarian-populists in power use structural forces to influence journalistic work over-time. While these forces may not always shape journalistic content directly, they are felt by those within the field. To explore this, we rely on perceptive data collected through in-depth interviews with political journalists across four countries (Hanretty 2014). Our case selection is guided by two main criteria: the power and duration of populist governance and the organisation of media markets. Strong cases include countries with continuous populist rule for over a decade (Hungary, Turkey), while weaker cases involve intermittent populist coalitions (Slovenia and Austria). We account for variations in populist influence, such as whether populists are majority (Slovenia) or minor coalition partners (Austria). All cases share similarities in media market structures, such as concentrated ownership and commercialisation, alongside pre-existing affiliations between media and politics (Schnyder et al. 2023). These commonalities provide a basis for comparative analysis, while recognising that national journalistic fields are shaped by diverse historical factors, resulting in varying degrees of inherent autonomy.

Austria exemplifies right-wing populist success in Western Europe (Sauer and Ajanovic 2016). The country witnessed two right-wing populist coalitions between the Christian-conservative People’s Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) from 2000 to 2006 and from 2017 to 2019. As a minor coalition partner, the FPÖ had limited ability to fundamentally alter the institutional pillars of journalistic autonomy. For example, their plans to change the public broadcaster ORF’s financing system, which would increase political pressure on ORF, were not realised (e.g., Seethaler and Beaufort 2021, 17). Nevertheless, the FPÖ successfully engaged in “self-mediatization”, establishing a strong presence on social media and right-wing media outlets (Schmuck, Matthes, and Boomgaarden 2017, 92). Alleging a left-wing-liberal bias of traditional media outlets, the FPÖ pursued the establishment of communication channels that are controlled by the party and supported party-

affiliated online portals (Weidinger 2021, 261). The more established Austrian press market is one of the most concentrated ones in Europe with a notably high reach of the tabloid press, which has benefited disproportionately from public ad spending (Kaltenbrunner 2021) under diverse governments in the country. Thus, the intertwining of media and politics is not exclusive to populist politics in Austria, however, the recent right-wing coalition led by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has drawn criticism for its fierce attempts to control the narrative through practises of "message control" (Wodak 2022, 794).

While the FPÖ never assumed leadership of the government in Austria during the period under study, Slovenia experienced periods of right-wing authoritarian-populism under Janez Janša and his Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) rule between 2004 and 2008, 2012 and 2013, then between 2020 and 2022. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavian socialism, Slovenia underwent rapid changes in its media market, characterised by increasing privatisation and concentration, alongside reinforced political influence over the media landscape (Splichal 1995). The trends from the 1990s continue to shape the current landscape of traditional media in the country. For instance, the four daily newspapers, which controlled 90% of the market in the 1990s, remain dominant. Various studies documented Janša's attempts at what has been labelled a "media war" against public service media as well as the newspaper sector, both of which play pivotal roles in political information consumption in the country. The RTV Slovenija Act passed by the first Janša government in 2005 was the most systematic and rigorous reorganisation of Slovenian public broadcasting, which ensured the political influence of the political parties on the governing bodies and editorial structure of the broadcaster (Bašić Hrvatinić and Petković 2007, 133). From 2015, Janša's nomenclature reorganised itself and built a parallel media system consisting of political magazines, a television station and a series of online web portals.

Hungary is often identified as one of the extreme cases of right-wing authoritarian-populism due to severe de-democratisation processes under Viktor Orbán's governance since 2010. Under his government, Hungary saw a transformation in its constitutional and state structure where the systems of checks-and-balances were distorted to create a network of ostensibly independent institutions effectively controlled by Orbán loyalists (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012). Being referred to as the "textbook case" of media capture, media scholars have pointed to strategies of regulatory capture, control of public media, the use of state funding and ownership takeover, that have all been deployed to successfully restructure the Hungarian news media landscape since 2010 (Dragomir 2019). Specifically, Polyák (2019) studied the structural limitations of public service media within Orbán's "illiberal" media system, while Williams (2021) identifies the Fidesz-affiliated KESMA Foundation (Central European Press and Media Foundation) as an example of political influence that "extends beyond controlling the media output alone". Hence, opaque ownership structures and the discriminatory use of state funds have been identified as pursued practices to tighten the grip on the country's media and thus increasingly restrict journalistic autonomy.

Similarly, Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's uninterrupted rule since 2002, has experienced a significant transformation in its political system, media, and journalistic sector (Çelik 2023). Turkey diverges from other case studies in our sample by being the only country not a member state of the EU, and it is considered a leading example of authoritarian-populist politics globally (e.g., Müller 2016). Erdoğan and his party have

not only governed the country with single-party rule, winning almost all national elections over more than two decades, but have also transformed the political system from a multi-party parliamentary democracy into a Turkish-style presidential system in 2018 where the elected president holds all executive powers. In parallel to these changes in political sphere, the institutional and economy of media markets, including news media have seen a remarkable transformation during Erdoğan's reign whereby the autonomy and independence of public and private media from the state and the clientelist capitalist market that are co-opted by Erdoğan's regime became a struggle, particularly in legacy media market (see, Akser and Baybars 2023). Notably, Turkey stands out as the only country in our sample where journalists face immediate risks of imprisonment.

Research Questions

Acknowledging the socio-political, cultural, and actor-specific nuances across our case studies and focusing on the common populist influences, we inquire into two key questions:

1. According to journalists' perspectives, what are the most pressing structural forces that authoritarian-populists in power implement or instrumentalise to restrict journalistic autonomy?
2. How does the implication of such forces vary across national contexts concerning the duration of authoritarian-populist incumbency and their power within governments?

Data Collection and Sample

For this study, a total of six researchers including the authors of this article, conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 83 journalists in all four countries. Our selection criteria focused on journalists with a minimum of 10 years of tenure in prominent national or regional news outlets, for this we used snowball method. Hence, our approach discerned the changes occurring within the field during periods of authoritarian-populist governance and the associated struggles. The final sample exhibits considerable diversity across age, gender, and professional positions, encompassing journalists at all levels from reporters to editors to higher decision-making roles such as editor-in-chief and executive managers. This diversity facilitates an examination of narratives within the context of structural hierarchies present in journalistic organisations (see Table 1).

Furthermore, the sample reflects a broad spectrum of media genres, including online publishing, print, and broadcasting markets. Politically, we engaged journalists from various country-specific enclaves, spanning tabloid and quality outlets as well as right-wing, liberal, and left-wing leaning organisations. However, it is noteworthy that the

Table 1. Sample of interviewed journalists.

Country	Interviewed journalists (n)	Female (n)	Male (n)	Broadcasting (n)	Print/online (n)	Only Online (n)	Age (60+) (n)	Managerial Position (n)
Austria	16	11	5	5	11	/	3	3
Hungary	15	5	10	2	4	8	5	8
Slovenia	20	11	9	6	11	3	7	7
Turkey	32	12	20	9	10	19	11	12
TOTAL	83	39	44	22	36	30	26	31

majority of participants in our study identified themselves as critical of right-wing populist politics, both domestically and abroad.

The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and took place between January and August 2022. All interviews were conducted in their native languages in person or online. We operationalised the research question by translating it into various blocks of topics and guiding questions (Riesmeyer 2019), ranging from personal to institutional dimensions of perceived influences. The interview guides were standardised and pre-tested in two pilot interviews in each country. After each interview, standardised interview notes as well as a full transcript in native languages were created by the interviewing researchers.

The analysis of the interviews largely followed instructions for qualitative content analysis, as suggested by Schreier (2012). We applied a combination of theory-driven and inductive coding, following a standardised but dynamic coding scheme, to carve out shared (and varying) experiences and perceptions of our interviewees. To ensure analytic rigour, we held weekly online coding sessions, discussing and refining coding categories. The data evaluation process was assisted by QDA-software to support particularly the comparative part of the analysis. Initial (theory-driven) categories focused on structural influences of populism on journalism differentiating between personal, routines, organisational and institutional level (see also Reese 2019). Prominent themes emerging from journalists' narratives surrounding the changes and disruptions that occurred during populist governments were included as inductive (sub-)categories. Throughout the analysis, we concentrated on factors that impact journalistic autonomy as depicted in the journalists narratives, which appear as "external forces", rather than viewed as natural aspects of news-work, regardless of the varying socialisation processes across different countries (see also, Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Örnebring et al. 2016). In this respect, we paid sustained attention to the political-economic, institutional, and technological forces – including ownership changes and their related influences as well as the manipulative use of polarisation and digitalisation in journalistic field by authoritarian-populist governments – in light of our theoretical framework. Additionally, we examined the temporal dimension of journalists' narratives to discern the enduring impact of authoritarian-populist on their professional experiences.

As many interviewees were concerned about the risks in case that they can be identified, we anonymise our interviewees in our analysis, by providing only limited information about them (i.e., using gender neutral language, specifying only the roles of managers).

Findings and Discussion

Our research findings reveal three primary external forces directly associated with authoritarian-populist influence in the narratives of journalists across our sample countries: Polarisation, ownership restructuring, and the strategic use of digitalisation. Consistent with Blake and colleagues' (2024) temporal model of populism, our interviewees' narratives suggest a developmental progression of these influences. The polarising effect of authoritarian-populism in the journalistic market becomes evident shortly after populists come to power, while the restructuring of media ownership takes more time and necessitates greater institutional power on the part of the populists. Digitalisation in the journalistic field operates with its own dynamics and temporality, relatively independent of the

rise or endurance of authoritarian-populism. However, the strategic utilisation of digitalisation, such as through social media and online platforms for political information and news, by populist incumbents is described as contingent, partly depending on the interplay with the other two forces in the journalistic field over time.

Importantly, while these three forces are identified across our sample as external forces associated with authoritarian-populism, interviewees highlight variations in their impact on journalism across countries. They occasionally reference other countries that have experienced a surge of authoritarian-populism in government to delineate internal differences within the national journalistic field. In Austria and Slovenia, for instance, some journalists reference Hungary as a prime example of heightened populist influence (SLO-02, SLO-07). However, they also recognise internal distinctions; some in Austria emphasise the nation's longer democratic history and robust institutional protections (AUT-07, AUT-12). Conversely, Austria is perceived by some Slovenian journalists as a democracy where populism can still deepen the nexus between media and politics (SLO-05, SLO-09). Concerning Hungary, journalists draw parallels with Turkey, noting the imminent threat of journalist imprisonment as a distinct characteristic (HU-03). Turkish journalists similarly regard Hungary as emblematic of populist control, albeit to a lesser extent. They particularly note the severe politicisation of judicial mechanisms affecting press freedom in Turkey. This distinction between Hungary and Turkey is linked to Hungary's protection by the European Union's shield of rule of law, whereas Turkey lacks such protection (TUR-02, TUR-18).

Polarisation

In our sample, most journalists highlighted polarisation as a significant structural influence associated with the rise and/or endurance of authoritarian-populism. They underscored the discriminatory use of institutional resources and policies by populist regimes across all countries, although the extent and impact of polarisation on the journalistic field varied between cases.

In Austria, discussions about polarisation in the journalistic field often revolved around distinctions between tabloid and quality media (e.g., AUT-04, AUT-05, AUT-06, AUT-07, AUT-10, AUT-13, AUT-16), with several noting the erosion of "grey areas" (AUT-07, AUT-09, AUT-14). Consistent with Krämer's (2014) conception of "media populism" which highlights the prime role of commercialised tabloid media in driving populist agendas, journalists explain that certain tabloid publications exert pressure on politicians, leveraging financial incentives in exchange for favourable coverage. Highlighting the symbiotic relationship between tabloid media and political interests, characterised by the influence of financial incentives, one journalist succinctly explained: "If you don't pay these bills, or commission these ads, whatever, then the coverage will change to the negative, otherwise, we'll cuddle a bit" (AUT-05). While this interdependence between media and political interests is not unique to populist politics, one journalist underscored that "tabloids are more dependent than ever" on public advertisements and added that this dependency generates "journalism-as-a-favour". This dynamic was further summarised by the statement: "I will not bite the hand that feeds me" (AUT-03). Highlighting the impact of advertising on editorial decisions, another journalist stated, "if someone advertises very, very much and often, you think twice about how sharply you formulate your words" (AUT-15). Similarly, another journalist concluded "public ads are never innocent" (AUT-06).

In Slovenia too, the economic mechanisms of polarisation feature prominently in journalists' narratives regarding the impact of right-wing populism. Additionally, they highlight a broader organisational impact on the journalistic field, citing the reorganisation of professional associations, press reviews, and awards. These changes are seen as "negative sanctions" or "positive incitements" which "ultimately transform journalistic practise in one direction or the other" (Benson 2016, 197). Specifically, journalists point to the establishment of the conservative, partisan Slovenian Journalistic Association in 2007, following the rise of right-wing populists to power in 2005 as a leading coalition partner. This association introduced its own membership structures, ethical code, and awards, as an alternative to bi-partisan journalistic associations (SLO-19, SLO-20). In conjunction with the establishment of "party-media" or "propaganda" media under Janša's government (further elaborated below), these partisan associations foster a partisan "eco-system" within the journalistic field. This ecosystem not only amplifies right-wing discourses but also validates partisan reporting as a credible journalistic practise (SLO-05, SLO-06, SLO-29).

The erosion of journalistic shared culture is more pronounced in Turkey and Hungary, where populist interventions introduced numerous mechanisms of "negative sanctions" or "positive incitements" over a prolonged period of uninterrupted populist governance. In Turkey, these measures escalated into punitive institutional actions, including the prosecution of critical journalists in counter-terrorism cases, closure of outlets through politicised regulatory systems, and exclusion of oppositional media from public ad spending and licensing. Under such conditions, pursuing truthful reporting becomes a "high-cost" endeavour (TUR-15). While Hungary did not witness such extreme measures, critical journalists describe discriminatory policies and practises by the populist government, such as banning them from political interviews, as one political journalist explained, "I do not know when I last talked to a politician" (HU-15).

In these countries, the journalistic sector is described as having been reordered around the pro-government and oppositional media, leaving little room for journalistic "neutrality" under Erdoğan's and Orbán. While many journalists acknowledge that political polarisation predates the current populist regimes, they highlight the deepening of polarisation and its strategic utilisation by the populists in power as a tokenism for press freedom and to solidify an enemy figure necessary for the success of populist politics (HU-06, TUR-09). Consequently, maintaining a bi-partisan news outlet becomes a struggle on its own, as a columnist in Turkey states, "the main problem here is that there is a very small grey zone. The sides on two poles are too extreme" (TUR-14). Similarly, journalists in Hungary describe an extreme polarisation, with one interviewee commenting that journalists are unable to extricate themselves from it (HUN-09). Whilst such forced duality can be found to be detrimental for professionalism, even by journalists who work for pro-government outlets in Turkey, as one interviewee states, "if you work for [names the biggest pro-Erdoğan media group], you cannot find a job in oppositional outlets (TUR-21), it can also be seen as an opportunity". As a columnist writing for a pro-government outlet in Hungary remarks, it provides them with "just as much leeway as [they] can fit into journalism" to express their own political views in their work (HU-14).

Such extreme division contributes to the erosion of the shared culture and belief in journalistic roles and responsibility. Although there is a relatively low level of agreement about journalistic values and norms in these countries (see also, Hanitzsch and Vos 2018)

as is evident in statements from journalists working for pro-government outlets who believe that there is no “objectivity in journalism” (HU-14) or “no possibility for neutrality” (TUR-07), while others argue for objectivity and bi-partisan reporting. Journalists from both sides of the political polarisation point to the erosion of the sense of collectivity they used to feel, “we used to come together in events, chatted, we were like colleagues, we do not even talk with each other anymore” (TUR-03, editor-in-chief). The structural influence of populist polarisation becomes more accentuated when the populists acquire the means to restructure journalistic markets by redesigning the ownership structures of the news outlets.

Ownership Structures

While news media ownership structures and related political influence are unanimously recognised by journalists in all countries as a risk for journalistic work, their perception of ownership influence varies across weak and strong cases of authoritarian-populism. In Austria, many journalists consider the actual ownership influence across private and public media on their everyday reporting to be either absent or subtle by referring to the resilience of journalistic positions as well as to the resilience of the internal structure of the field. As one journalist stated,

if there were calls and complaints or whatever, then I can only say thank you that it did not reach my ears. Because, of course, it does something to journalists and the best thing is, you do not tell anyone at all if you get something like that as editor-in-chief or publisher. (AUT-15)

Another interviewee states that not all media owners are the same and thus, “knowing where you stand is important” (AUT-03). Importantly, such characterisations of individual or institutional resilience, which protect or negotiate the journalistic boundaries against external forces, are also found in the narratives of journalists in other countries, including Turkey and Hungary. However, in the latter cases, there is a noted weakening of these internal forces as populist control over the field matures over time (TUR-02, TUR-06, HU-01, HU-15).

The more pronounced ownership related concerns in Austria have two dimensions. One revolves around potential risks rather than actual pressures, as highlighted in reference to the so-called “Ibiza-scandal”. This scandal involved a plot by the former Vice-Chancellor of the Austrian Freedom Party to change the ownership structure of *Kronen Zeitung*, the country’s biggest and most influential tabloid paper, by involving a politically affiliated “Russian oligarch”. While one journalist expressed scepticism, stating that it is “hard to imagine that the *Krone Zeitung* today would indeed be owned by a Russian oligarch” (AUT-11), another cautioned that

this is the danger of Orbanisation, because that’s exactly how it started in Hungary, where some oligarchs bought up the newspapers (AUT-06, former editor-in-chief), emphasising the temporal role of external forces. Journalists also highlight the political influence on public media through political appointments in the foundation council (Stiftungsrat) of the public broadcaster (ORF), which in turn decides on the director general (e.g., AUT-03, AUT-05, AUT-06, AUT-07).

Interviewees suggest that the ORF faces “greater pressure than private media” (AUT-05) due to its significant influence on agenda-setting in the country. While some journalists

assert that political appointments and pressures within the ORF do not impact reporting, one journalist cautioned that even if there are political pressures, no journalist at the ORF or elsewhere would acknowledge that they “act on politics” (AUT-07).

The other dimension concerns the actual influence of political ownership, which has become much more pronounced with the rise of digitalisation in the journalistic field. Journalists point to the ownership of mainly online outlets by political parties, characterising it as the resurgence of “party-media”, or “party-press”. Whilst acknowledging the establishment of online outlets by liberal and left-wing parties over the past decade, journalists highlight that it was the right-wing populist FPÖ that initiated and most successfully managed this trend (e.g., AUT-03, AUT-07, AUT-10, AUT-12, AUT-13, AUT-14). We will return to this in our discussion of digitalisation below.

In Slovenia, journalists illustrate the profound and processual implications of populist influences on ownership structures within the news media landscape, particularly during periods of intermittent governance by populist parties. They pinpoint the year 2005, during the Janša government, when significant interventions were made in both private and public news media markets to alter ownership structures and shape journalistic content in favour of populist strategy of targeting politically influential outlets for ownership changes, a strategy also observed in other countries such as Turkey and Hungary, where broader ownership structures have been redesigned by populist governments. In Slovenia, these targeted outlets included major dailies like *Delo*, *Dnevnik* and *Večer*. Journalists recall Janša’s decision to sell 30% of state-owned shares of the biggest retail company Mercator to Istrabenz and Laško Brewery (largest owner of *Delo*), in exchange for influence over the editorial policies of the largest print corporation. This event was “the end for all leading newspapers in Slovenia” one journalist stated by making an analogy between the overtake and “invasion of Iraq after 9/11” (SLO-01). To illustrate how partisan control was operationalised within these outlets, journalists point to the appointment of newly appointed “unqualified editors” (SLO-04) to enforce new, routinised practises, including scrutinising critical coverage in dailies at the behest of higher-ups, or even altering parts of op-eds deemed critical (SLO-01).

The intervention into the private news media ownership structure was also replicated in the public broadcasting sector, initially through the enactment of the Public Broadcasting Act during Janša’s first government in 2005. The Act facilitated the political appointment of individuals into public service broadcasting (SLO-15, editor-in-chief). Subsequently, during Janša’s third government in 2020, the institution underwent redesign to have a party-dominated programme council, control board and management (SLO-03). Following the partisan overhaul of the institution, a second news channel was introduced at the public broadcaster, where “new and inexperienced people were employed, who were offered salaries that senior journalists could only dream of”, resulting in the resignation of many journalists from the public media and the termination of some critical journalistic programming (SLO-16). By highlighting the gradual progression of populist influence on the journalistic field, journalists comment on the ultimate “political overtake” of the public media, which “completed the job that began in private media market” (SLO-12) and “destroyed some aspects irreparably” (SLO-07).

In the case of Turkey and Hungary, many journalists draw attention to the media ownership changes that took place under the governance of Orbán and Erdoğan’s parties. In the private news media sector, ownership transitions involved the transfer of control from

old media elites, whether foreign or domestic, to predominantly domestic pro-government media owners. This resulted in approximately 80% of pro-government ownership of news media in Hungary under Orbán's governance (Mérték 2019), and 90% of pro-government ownership of broadcasting and print news media in Turkey during Erdoğan's governance (White 2018). Recent research indicates that these ownership changes primarily targeted "big" mainstream media establishments, which encompassed respected and popular outlets across television, print, and online platforms, often frequented for political journalism consumption (Schnyder et al. 2023). Consistent with the findings of Esser, Stepińska, and Hopmann (2017), and Blake and colleagues (2024), the new market entrants were predominantly politically motivated businesses benefiting from the populist deinstitutionalisation of the journalistic field (e.g., Akser and Baybars 2023).

In terms of direct influence, journalists across various positions, from executive managers to reporters, describe a multi-level impact aimed at reshaping the journalistic landscape, affecting organisational structures and journalistic routines. Describing the ownership changes in Hungary's news media market as a governmental practise, an editor-in-chief highlights the "tools of political violence" manifested through mass firings of editorial staff or the complete closure of critical outlets (HU-09). Journalists stress the constant threat of unemployment at outlets owned by new pro-government owners if "political expectations" are not met (HU-07). Some also recount instances where fired journalists could be re-hired by pro-government outlets if they "changed their [ideological] capes" (HU-01, editor-in-chief). Consequently, another editor-in-chief remarks, "today, I don't think there is any sane journalist in Hungary who doesn't consider who the owner is and what kind of impact [the ownership] has" on journalists lives and work (HU-06).

In Turkey, journalists provided accounts illustrating how ownership changes led to transformations in journalistic routines and practises at the organisational level. While acknowledging that news outlet ownership has never been neutral in the country, these journalists recounted new organisational practises, implemented by newly appointed managers under the new owners. One journalist, employed by an influential outlet, recalled being asked to send the final copy of a daily to a designated executive board member before publication for approval (TUR-01). Another who worked for a popular television news program, remembered how they began receiving instructions on what and how to cover in news, particularly during critical breaking news events, through WhatsApp groups where representatives of the new owners and executive managers made instant editorial decisions (TUR-05). Ultimately, these journalists, along with others in our sample, either refused to adopt the new rules of the game and were either fired or resigned due to their resistance to pressure. However, another account showed that some individuals willingly or unwillingly internalised the new rules. A senior journalist working for a private pro-government outlet admitted, "I accepted that I do not have any power" over editorial coverage and added that if there is any critical coverage of the government, "there will be rejections from those within the hierarchical structure" in the organisation from managers to the new owners (TUR-21). Through the contribution of those who submit willingly or unwillingly to the new rules of the game in the journalistic field, an editor in chief in Hungary states that the pro-government media "try to control the narrative by always printing the same thing, always in the same form" (HU-09).

Considered from the lens of critical studies that highlight the relationship between concentrated private media and populism, these accounts confirm that when the ownership structures in big, influential media are aligned with the populists' wills and interests, the outlets under influence can help to generate a politically viable information environment for the populist politics.

While much of the owners' influence is discussed in these countries concerning ownership changes within the private news mediascape, journalists have also pointed to public service media as well as state owned news agencies increasingly becoming "mouthpiece" for the government (HU-12, TUR-20). Emphasising that ownership-related influences occur gradually over time, journalists highlight public service media as a key target for growing populist intervention, evidenced by political appointments in executive boards and managerial positions as authoritarian-populist governments reshape the journalistic market.

Digitalisation

The majority of journalists described the digital transformation of journalistic platforms and practises as a key change in the field, whose impact intersected with the rise or endurance of right-wing authoritarian-populism.

In Austria, journalists delineate two primary facets of digitalisation that could be exploited by populist actors. Firstly, there is the resurgence of "party-media" in online realms, as previously mentioned. Journalists emphasise that these outlets, whether owned by political parties or closely affiliated with them, are not always transparent about their partisan ties, making it challenging for audiences to discern between political messaging and "fact-based journalism" (AUT-06, former editor-in-chief). Some interviewees argue that politicians leverage the digitalisation-induced crisis in print media to advance their own agendas through party-owned digital platforms. A journalist refers to party-owned outlets, stating that

the internet makes it easy and cheap to do that. And it succeeds in simply bypassing the unpleasant questions from journalists and avoiding contextualisation. You just try to get directly to the audience. And if you do not have to print a newspaper, but can simply do so on the internet, it is done. (AUT-03)

Other journalists concur, highlighting that alongside social media accounts, party-media represents a "direct form of message control" (AUT-16), allowing political actors to disseminate their narratives, "success stories" and "view of reality", "without anyone having the opportunity to question it (AUT-07).

Second, Austrian interviewees state that digitalisation has profoundly changed journalistic working conditions and contributed to an economic crisis, particularly for print media organisations. They mention being increasingly confronted with resource constraints in editorial offices, heightened workload for journalists, accelerated publication timelines, and ultimately less time for investigative journalism or fact-checking. Concurrently, there has been a strengthening of political PR offices. This situation facilitates political influence within media organisations, as outlets are more likely to adopt prepared content (text or photos) provided by state departments rather than producing original material. As one journalist remarked, "the fewer people you have in the editorial offices, the easier it will be for

[politicians], if they are doing it professionally, to get through with their prepared stories” further adding “sometimes this is pure pragmatism” (AUT-12).

While Slovenian interviewees also emphasise the changing working conditions due to digitalisation as a factor that contributed to Janša’s hegemony over the news mediascape, they highlight the collision of digitalisation and authoritarian-populist impact most forcefully during the Covid-19-related lockdown measures implemented by the government under Janša’s premiership.

One of the key consequences of this collision was the “isolation of journalists” orchestrated by government’s arrangement of virtual press conferences to replace all in-person encounters (SLO-13). Another journalist explains the populist rationale for such measures, stating that it was to “eliminate any questions to be asked [by journalists]” and hence enable populists’ “monologues” who can avoid critical journalistic inquiries (SLO-02, editor-in-chief). Furthermore, this account refers to the governmental decree that “ban[ned] all sale of newspapers at newspaper stands, bars and hair-salons, which resulted in the loss of subscription which in return brought the newspaper industry further to its knees’ in the early days of the pandemic. The ban also accelerated the digitalisation processes of newspapers, leading to a migration of press readership to online platforms (SLO-14).

Pandemic conditions were also used as excuses for discriminatory treatment of journalists, hindering their access to public information, public bodies, and politicians (SLO-15, editor-in-chief; SLO-13, SLO-20). Instead of engaging with journalists, government officials opted to communicate directly with the public via Twitter, whilst accusing journalistic institution of “exaggerating the spread of the virus” or even “Covid-[related] deaths” (SLO-10). These processes really “diminished [their] watchdog function as [their] informational power was castrated, a situation that is only slowly recovering now” (SLO-12).

In enduring cases of authoritarian-populism, where the mainstream “legacy” media market is almost predominantly controlled by pro-government owners, journalists depict the digitalisation of journalism in two converging ways: while journalists in Turkey share concerns similar to those mentioned in other countries about the impact of digitalisation, including limited resources for digital journalistic practises such as low wages, decreased investigative journalism, and journalistic reporting and precarity with less or no social security, (TUR-09, TUR-10), they also emphasise how the digital news environment provides a relatively freer platform for critical journalists. These journalists can conduct journalism through small online outlets or personalised YouTube channels which have increasingly become the primary news media for oppositional citizens and journalists (TUR-02, TUR-12, TUR-10, TUR-17, TUR-19, TUR-18, TUR-09).

Apart from online outlets, social media is described as an important factor in restructuring the journalistic field to align with the interests of populists. A Hungarian editor-in-chief states, “if Viktor Orbán devoted his entire life and all his energy to the eradication of press freedom, he would not be able to cause as much damage as Mark Zuckerberg” (HU-03). However, he also notes that the populist government, recognising its inability to control all content, has exploited social media by investing substantial funds in training and employing of pro-governmental “professional Facebook warriors”. This phenomenon is widespread across other authoritarian-populist countries, including Turkey, where armies of trolls employed to combat social media activism against the populist government.

Conclusions

There are two main conclusions we can draw from our research: 1. *Structure matters*: In contrast to studies that consider the challenging impact of populism on journalism with a focus on discursive or rhetorical pillars of authoritarian-populism, our study shows that there are also structural influences at play, according to journalists' perceived impacts of authoritarian-populism. We employed Stuart Hall's concept of authoritarian-populism in this study to explore the structural pillars of populist politics, including political economic, institutional and technological factors, alongside discursive ones. Hall's conceptualisation, while not explicitly focused on the factors we discuss, allows for a multidimensional analysis of authoritarian-populist politics. This approach considers not only communicative styles but also political economic, institutional, and discursive elements. Our interviewees' perceptions reflect this conception. They acknowledge the demoralising effect of populist rhetorical attacks on journalistic practise, but their narratives emphasise issues such as ownership structures and control, the discriminatory use of institutional power and state resources to deepen polarisation in the journalistic field, and the strategic use of digitalisation to challenge journalistic autonomy. We consider these as exogenous forces exerted onto the journalism from politics distorting journalistic autonomy, whilst also impacting journalistic resilience practises and struggles.

2. *Structure matters in contingent ways across countries over time*: The evidence presented underscores that the impact of authoritarian-populism on journalism varies across contexts, suggesting contingent structural influences. To understand the contingent influences of authoritarian-populism across diverse national contexts, we adopted a temporal model of populism from recent political economy and institutional studies literature. This contrasts with the typically used models in media and journalism studies, such as the media systems model, which ties country-based differences and contingencies to political systems, internal structures, and journalistic cultures. The temporal model, in contrast, offers fresh insights, moving beyond the fixed binaries of democratic and non-democratic, Western and non-Western, or variegated conceptions of cultural, and political differences.

The model developed by Blake and colleagues (2024) proved invaluable in this regard, as it goes beyond merely identifying institutional voids in a given country, a method often employed by comparing developing markets against a presumed institutionally intact Western template. Instead, it highlights how populist politics can disrupt the institutional fabric of advanced and developing democracies alike, depending largely on the duration of populist incumbency and their governmental power.

In contrast to conceptualisation of populist polarisation mainly as a discursive (and affective) style, our study considers populist polarisation as a crucial pillar of authoritarian-populist politics whereby populists in power utilise policy, institutional and economic tools to deepen polarisation in the journalistic domain in line with enemy/friend divisions. Consistent with Blake and colleagues' findings (2024), our study demonstrates that the institutional and economic mechanisms of polarisation within the journalistic domain are evident in all cases regardless of the duration of authoritarian-populist incumbency or their power within a government coalition. While polarisation cannot be solely attributed to populist insurgency in these countries, populist governments effectively exploit and exacerbate it to fracture the journalistic field along partisan lines, using tools such

as public ad distribution and award/sanction mechanisms. In cases where populist parties hold a majority in power, as seen in Slovenia, or maintain uninterrupted control over an extended period, as in Hungary and Turkey, the deepening polarisation can lead to a weakening sense of professional solidarity among journalists.

The digitalisation of journalism is a broad issue that many current studies investigate to understand the impact of digital and social platforms, media, and technologies on journalistic practises, routines, production and consumption. Our study sheds light on how populists in power utilise the opportunities created by digitalisation processes, such as the demand for increased pace in news production or increasingly precarious economic conditions of legacy media companies. According to our interviewees, this has allowed populist politics to exert influence on journalism, a phenomenon most pronounced among Austrian journalists. Conversely, in countries like Turkey, where digital publishing and broadcasting ownership structures are—at least for now—beyond the control of the populist government, this has been narrated as a limitation on populist control over critical journalistic practise.

This divergence across countries can be attributed to the longer tenure of populist incumbency, during which the government interferes with the ownership structures of mainstream legacy media, primarily owned by domestic clientelist classes and popular among supportive voter groups. As a result, critical journalism is, at least partially, forced onto digital platforms, including social media such as YouTube, which are predominantly consumed by oppositional voters for political information and journalistic content.

While populist polarisation and the strategic use of digitalisation typically occur immediately after a populist government assumes power, the broader consequences of political-economic and policy bias affecting ownership structures in the news media take longer to manifest and require greater institutional control. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in enduring cases of authoritarian-populism, such as Turkey and Hungary, where the majority of the mainstream news media market has come under the control of pro-government owners. It is also evident, albeit to a much lesser extent, in Slovenia, primarily affecting the private newspaper market and public broadcasting. In Austria, attempts to interfere with ownership structures in the private media market are perceived as a risk, by some journalists who refer to changes observed in neighbouring Hungary. Narrated concerns about political influence in public media extend populist influence and point to broader issues of affiliation between media and politics in Austria, whereas in Slovenia journalists describe an effective “political overtake” of public service media by the Janša government.

Journalists in countries where ownership structures are redesigned by populist governments provide accounts of how such changes result in limiting journalistic autonomy. This includes the replacement of professional journalists in decision-making positions, editorial roles, and reporter positions with individuals willing to align with the party-line under new ownership structures. Additionally, new routines and practices emerge to regiment journalistic work in line with the interests of the populists. Despite these challenges, critical journalists continue to resist, even at a “high cost” in countries such as Turkey where journalistic rights are severely compromised.

In conclusion, our study highlights how authoritarian-populism poses structural challenges to journalistic autonomy, with these challenges intensifying over time as authoritarian-populists solidify their power. Future research should further explore these

contingencies and their implications for journalism, considering the structural pillars of authoritarian-populism.

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Data Availability Statement

Supporting documents for this study – including the interview guide, participant information leaflet, consent forms, interview notes and the coding scheme – are openly available at <https://doi.org/10.17028/rd.lboro.25975117.v1>.

The participants of this study did not all give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research interview transcripts are not publicly available but remain safely archived and accessible to authors.

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