

інституційної співпраці. Важливо, що Україна не лише демонструє готовність до глибинних реформ, а й активно інтегрується у європейський простір.

Узагальнюючи, можна стверджувати, що перспективи набуття Україною повноправного членства в ЄС виглядають реалістичними, хоча й залежать від одночасної готовності обох сторін — України до продовження трансформацій та Європейського Союзу до подальшого розширення. Саме поєднання політичної волі, стабільного реформаторського курсу та європейської солідарності стане визначальним чинником успішного завершення цього історичного процесу.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Contemporary populism cannot be understood without acknowledging its conceptual roots and its psychological transformation in digital media environments. Classical theorists have consistently emphasized that populism rests on a moralized antagonism between two imagined camps: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” Mudde (2004) defines populism as a thin-centered ideology structured around this binary division and oriented toward expressing “the general will of the people” [1, p. 543]. Canovan similarly shows that despite the diversity of movements labeled “populist,” they share a normative appeal to popular sovereignty and an underlying suspicion toward intermediating institutions [2].

This conceptual foundation, however, tells only part of the story. The psychological architecture of populism has become increasingly central to its spread, especially as digital technologies reshape how individuals perceive political reality, process information, and engage emotionally with political messages. Digital platforms

introduce new modes of attention, new forms of social affirmation, and new pathways for the circulation of emotionally charged narratives.

This thesis examines the psychological mechanisms that underpin contemporary populism — including cognitive simplification, emotional mobilization, conspiracy mentality, identity threat, and algorithmic reinforcement — and demonstrates how digital environments intensify their political effects. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for analyzing the resilience of populist narratives in modern democracies.

Cognitive simplification lies at the core of populist reasoning. In conditions of information overload, individuals increasingly rely on intuitive heuristics and emotionally charged cues. Glăveanu describes this as a shift toward low-effort cognition in the post-truth era, where narratives become persuasive not because they are factually accurate but because they provide coherence amid uncertainty [3].

Digital media environments dramatically magnify this tendency. The rapid, fragmented flow of information encourages users to skim rather than evaluate, and to prefer short, emotionally appealing messages over nuanced analysis. This is a psychological necessity in a digital ecosystem that overwhelms human attention.

Populism thrives in this cognitive climate because its core structure is narratively simple and morally unambiguous. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser emphasize that the populist worldview reduces political conflict to a binary struggle between good and evil, embedding complex social problems within a readily understandable moral frame [4, pp. 6–8]. Such reductionism is not a defect but a key psychological advantage.

Moreover, digital echo chambers compress the range of perceived political alternatives, reinforcing cognitive closure and consolidating simplistic interpretive schemas [5, p. 153]. Individuals increasingly experience politics not through pluralistic debate but through algorithmically curated homogeneity, which strengthens the cognitive foundations of populist thinking.

Populism is not just cognitively simple; it is affectively powerful. Emotions serve as psychological shortcuts that reduce uncertainty and provide meaning. Emotional mobilization — particularly through fear, resentment, and anger — is central to the persuasive power of right-wing populism [6]. Emotional messaging activates preexisting grievances, making individuals more receptive to identity-protective narratives.

Digital platforms are engineered to privilege high-arousal content. Their reward structures — likes, shares, algorithmic boosts — elevate messages that generate outrage, fear, and indignation, as emotionally charged content receives disproportionate reinforcement in digital echo chambers, creating a feedback loop in which emotional polarization becomes self-sustaining.

Lilleker and Weidhase argue that the psychological appeal of populist communication lies in its capacity to resonate with deep emotional needs: recognition, belonging, and identity affirmation [7]. Populist leaders employ emotional language to transform individual frustrations into collective identities, offering symbolic protection from perceived external threats. Thus, emotional mobilization is not merely a tool of populism; it is the psychological mechanism that binds individuals to populist narratives, especially within algorithmically curated media ecosystems.

Conspiracy mentality has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary populist psychology: conspiracy beliefs are tightly linked to anti-elitism, institutional distrust, and perceptions of injustice — all of which align with populist political logic [8]. Conspiracy mentality provides an emotionally satisfying framework in which hidden forces explain social change, political uncertainty, and personal grievances.

The digital environment accelerates these processes by lowering barriers to the circulation of conspiratorial narratives. Decentralized information flows, the erosion of traditional gatekeepers, and the viral dynamics of misinformation contribute to what can be described as epistemic fragmentation and the “erosion of shared factual baselines” [9], [10]. Epistemic insecurity fosters a preference for emotionally coherent explanations over empirically grounded ones. This dynamic is amplified online, where emotionally resonant misinformation travels faster and more broadly than corrective information. Populist actors exploit this vulnerability by framing political opponents, experts, institutions, and media outlets as conspiratorial adversaries. This reinforces mistrust in democratic institutions and deepens the psychological appeal of populist interpretations of reality.

Beyond cognition and emotion, populism draws heavily on identity dynamics. Perceptions of identity threat are among the strongest predictors of populist support: individuals who perceive cultural or economic displacement often gravitate toward populist rhetoric that promises restoration of status and recognition. These perceptions are not purely material — they are psychological and symbolic.

Relative deprivation plays a central role. Loziak and Havrillová identify a strong correlation between perceived injustices and the adoption of both conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes [8]. Such grievances are easily transformed into political mobilization when framed in collective terms: “people like us” have been wronged by “powerful others.” Digital media expand this dynamic by enhancing group visibility. Online communities allow individuals to find others who share similar grievances, amplifying perceived injustices and fostering emotional solidarity, which leads to the normalization of extreme interpretations and strengthens identity-based polarization. Identity becomes the primary lens through which political events are interpreted, making populist narratives appear not only plausible but psychologically necessary for maintaining in-group cohesion.

Digital platforms are not neutral channels — they reshape psychological processes. Jost et al. show that social media environments reduce participation costs, increase exposure to emotionally charged political content, and foster rapid mobilization driven by perceived group grievances [11, pp. 88–89]. These affordances privilege reactive, emotionally saturated forms of engagement over deliberative reasoning.

Algorithmic curation reinforces perceptual closure by tailoring political content to prior preferences, creating a sense of informational certainty. This process amplifies preexisting biases and continuously exposes individuals to homogenized narratives that intensify cognitive and emotional polarization.

In such an environment, political communication becomes increasingly shaped by:

- short-form emotional cues,
- identity signaling,

- perceived moral conflict,
- us-versus-them framing,
- algorithmically boosted outrage,
- virality of conspiratorial narratives.

These features collectively transform the public sphere into a psychological arena where populist messages enjoy significant structural advantages.

Contemporary populism emerges from the interaction of enduring psychological tendencies with the transformative dynamics of digital communication. Cognitive simplification, emotional mobilization, conspiracy mentality, identity-based threat perception, and algorithmic amplification together constitute the psychological mechanisms that sustain modern populist movements.

Digital media intensify these mechanisms by reshaping how individuals process information, relate to political communities, and navigate uncertainty. As a result, populist narratives gain psychological credibility and emotional resonance, even when they lack empirical grounding.

A deeper understanding of these mechanisms is crucial for strengthening democratic resilience in an era where digital ecosystems increasingly shape political behavior. Addressing the psychological underpinnings of populism — through media literacy, epistemic resilience strategies, and institutional trust-building — will be essential for mitigating the destabilizing effects of digitally amplified populist dynamics.

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