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The Role of Eurosceptic Tabloids in Building Awareness of the British People Ahead of the Referendum on UK Membership in the European Union in 2016

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Brexit, media, tabloids, populism, tabloid populism, migration

ABSTRACT

The research aimed to explain the role of the leading British tabloids in the 2016 referendum campaign and to show that tabloid populism practised by selected press titles, using several methods and tools, skilfully influenced the formation of public opinion. The study, which was essentially based on content analysis, examined the three most opinion-forming tabloid daily newspapers: “The Sun”, “The Daily Express”, and “The Daily Mail”, which, according to the observers, were and remain populist newspapers. The article is only a contribution to undertaking broader research, the subject of which should be the instrumental role of the British press in shaping attitudes and social opinions hostile to the European Union during Great Britain’s membership in this organization.

Introduction

The aim of the article is to examine how the populism characteristic of leading British tabloids shaped public opinion during the 2016 referendum on Great Britain’s membership in the European Union (EU) and how selected tabloids influenced British voters to legitimize Brexit. The article addresses only a fragment of a broader problem, namely the instrumental role of British tabloids not only in the case of the EU referendum in 2016 but in the long-term impact on the British, aimed at developing a negative attitude towards the EU and British membership in this organization.

The basic hypothesis adopted at the beginning of the research is the conclusion that selected press titles convinced the majority of their readers to leave the EU by using a populist mechanism to antagonize selected social groups and, in this case, by contrasting the allegedly corrupt European and national elites with „ordinary, honest and hard-working people”, inciting fear of the influx of immigrants and appealing to national resentments. An important part of populist rhetoric was exaggerating threats to the British nation and its sovereignty from the EU and shaping the belief that only the will of the “people”, and the determination of “ordinary Britons” can eliminate them.

The research was carried out based on the content analysis method (Pisarek, 1983; Michalczyk, 2009; Klepka, 2016) of three British press titles: “The Sun”, “The Daily Mail” and “The Daily Express”, which, being the most read tabloids on the market, strongly supported the country’s exit from the European Union and - in line with observers’ opinions - were and remain populist newspapers (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). The study covered the period between April 15

and June 23, 2016, designated as the official duration of the referendum campaign.

The content of the mentioned tabloids was analyzed based on selected keywords, which - as available literature shows - most accurately characterize the phenomenon of populism. These include “establishment”, used interchangeably with “elite”, which should be combined with related words: “people”, “ordinary people”, “ordinary Britons”, sometimes “nation”, and the term “foreign”, but in this case closely related to words almost identical to Brexit supporters: “immigrant”, “immigration”, “crime/law”, “order”, “burden on public services”, selected immigrant nations: Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Turkey (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 5).

To examine the socio-political context of the activity of the populist tabloid press at a theoretical level, a query was used - in relation to scientific publications and documents, reports, analyses and legal acts. The research used existing and very extensive statistical analyses relating to the activity of the British media in the 2016 referendum campaign (Moore & Ramsay, 2017; Levy et al., 2017; Simpson & Startin, 2022).

The essence of populism

In the political science literature, it is accepted that populist movements emerged simultaneously in Russia and the United States in the late 19th century and had a close connection with agrarianism in the sense that they were necessarily a revolt of a reactionary, economically backward class of peasants in rapidly modernizing societies (Müller, 2016, p. 18). The term „populism” appeared in scientific studies on the theory of modernization already in the

1950s, and in the 1960s, it was present in debates on decolonization and the future of the peasant class. It returned in the early 21st century in discussions about the origins of communism in general and Maoism in particular. In its early days, populism was described as “a helpless articulation of the anxieties and anger of those who long for a simpler, “pre-modern” life” (Müller, 2016, p. 17). J-W. Müller (2016, p. 11) notes that currently, especially in Europe, around the word populism, „all kinds of anxieties and - much less often - hopes are crystallizing”.

Populism is difficult to define precisely; hence, it is most often described through the prism of its manifestations and characteristic features. This is because, unlike other “compact” ideologies, it is axiologically unclear and does not have a “rigid canon of values” (Marczewska-Rytko, 2011, p. 25). It is often “borrowed” by other ideologies.

In the literature on the subject, populism is presented in at least five dimensions: ideology, discourse, political communication style, political logic, political or electoral strategy, and organization (Lipiński & Stepińska, 2020, p. 11). According to J. Szacki (2006, pp. 15-18), there are three approaches to populism: demophilia, i.e., idealization of the people, demagoguery and negation (rejection) of the institutional framework of operation of a given system. Populism is approached in a similar way by the English political scientist Paul A. Taggart, who highlights the negation of the politics of representation and identification with an idealized people (community). He calls populism an ideology, but one without any value. Populists avoid permanent involvement in political life; they become involved only in situations of political crisis, serious reforms, or social structural changes (Marczewska-Rytko, 2011, p. 24).

There is an increasingly clear view among experts that populism is a “gradable property of communication acts”, a type of discourse strategy, style, or communication mechanism used by specific entities (Lipiński, Stepińska, 2020, p. 7). The analysis of the literature allows us to identify three basic elements of populism:

- the people (sometimes referred to as the nation or “common people”),
- morally motivated fight,
- elites.

It can be said that in the populist approach, the people are fighting in the name of moral, noble goals against corrupt, degenerated elites. In other words, the people morally confront the elites (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 60). Populism, according to J-W. Müller (2016, p. 19), is “a particular moralistic

imaginary of politics, a way of viewing the political world that pits morally pure and fully united - but ultimately fictitious - people against elites who are considered corrupt or otherwise morally inferior”. It is also defined as a specific type of discourse in which one side claims to express the popular interests and represent the will of the people against the “establishment” or elite, perceived as an obstacle to the development and satisfaction of the people (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 527).

All populist movements claim to represent “the people”. Ordinary people are seen as morally good or oppressed, and elites are seen as corrupt or evil in some ways. The relationship between the people and the elites is antagonistic - there is no room for compromise. An inherent feature of populist discourses is appealing to the will of the people. It is epitomized by the statement made by Nigel Farage, the leading herald of Brexit, who, commenting on the first results of the referendum, considered them “a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people” (The Independent, June 24, 2016).

The above-mentioned elements of populism suggest its other features, namely the uniformity or homogeneity of the people (nation), its exclusivity, greater direct power of the people and nationalism (Müller, 2016, p. 21). Populists often emphasize the strong ideological coherence of the people. The danger of such a procedure is that the suggested homogeneity leaves no room in the public debate for disputes, diversity of interests, and the need for negotiation and compromise. This is unacceptable in a democratic country. The view of the unity of the people corresponds to the claim that the people represented by a populist movement or party are the only legitimate actors in a democracy. So, as Müller (2016, p. 21) notes, “this is the essence of populism: only some people are truly a people”.

The thesis about the moral superiority of ordinary people is not so much a suggestion but a strong belief that people should rule more directly. Populists demand direct elections where they are indirect and advocate greater participatory democracy. A large role is given to referenda or other voting methods by which citizens can bypass perceived (sometimes real) distortions of the popular will through complex legislative and administrative processes. Populists sometimes demand - contrary to constitutional provisions - the simplification of democratic “complexities” for the benefit of ordinary people. Such demands undermine the structures of liberal democracy. Finally, populism, although not directly (it

does not appear on banners), is related to nationalism associated with political communities based on ethnicity or race. In practice, the word “people” in existing populist movements means the people of one nation or limited political community: a distinct historical and geographical entity (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 64).

All the above-described elements and features are sometimes accompanied by other correlates related to populism, namely:

- the will of the people embodied in a charismatic leader,
- opposition and even hostility towards foreign groups,
- attributing special value to authentic folk knowledge (people know best) while negating dialogue, compromise and scientific knowledge (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 65).

In some versions of populism, an individual - often charismatic - presents himself/herself (or is presented) as representing the people in a unique way that divided elected representatives cannot. According to populists, there is no threat to democracy if people temporarily gather around an individual. Many populist leaders, in order to meet popular expectations, try to emphasize that they are „just like us”. However, some clearly do not fit this description.

Populists generally maintain that the people are in an antagonistic relationship not only with the elite but also with one or more social groups presented as parasitic and harmful to a “healthy society” (e.g. Black people, Jews, immigrants, Muslims, etc.). We are dealing here with variants of populism such as “ethnopolitism” (Laclau, 2005, p. 196) or “nativism” (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Antagonism towards foreign and politically weak groups is a common, perhaps immutable, feature of right-wing populism (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 66).

Populists articulate a belief in the innate wisdom of the people, accompanied by passion, strong will and direct action, as well as an aversion to deliberation, complicated procedures or compromises. They also appeal to some psychological characteristics of authoritarianism, including impatience with constitutional trappings that make it difficult to act for a clear good against a clear evil directly. Venezuela’s populist leader Hugo Chávez described this characteristic of the people as follows: “all individuals are subject to error and seduction, but not the people, which possesses to an eminent degree of consciousness of its own good and the measure of its independence. Because of this, its judgment is

pure, its will is strong, and none can corrupt it or even threaten it” (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 66).

Concluding his considerations on populism, Müller (2016, pp. 70-71) formulated seven theses characterizing this phenomenon. He emphasized that populism is not a part of modern democracy, but neither is it a type of pathology represented by irrational citizens. This is the permanent shadow of representative politics, its negative by-product. There will always be someone who will speak on behalf of „real people” and challenge the elites in power. However, not everyone who criticizes the elites is a populist. Populists are not only anti-elitist but also anti-pluralistic because they claim that they have a monopoly on representing the people. Populists should be criticized for being a real threat to democracy. However, this does not mean that they should not be involved in a political debate. A conversation with populists is not the same as a populist conversation. The issues they raise need to be taken seriously without condoning the way they are presented. Populism should force defenders of liberal democracy to think about the reasons for the failures of the system of representation and encourage deeper reflection on general moral issues.

The phenomenon of tabloid populism

Tabloid journalism is a type of popular, largely sensational journalism; its name comes from the format of a small newspaper, usually half the size of traditional newspapers. It should be emphasized that not every newspaper printed in a tabloid format is a tabloid in terms of content and style. In the early 21st century, several traditional, influential British newspapers, such as “The Independent”, “The Times” and “The Scotsman”, moved to a smaller format, calling it a “compact” format.

In its essence, tabloid journalism refers to a form and style of journalism that is the opposite of opinion-forming, high-quality journalism (Bastos, 2019, p. 1). However, some scientists question the division between tabloid and broadsheet, arguing that both types of journalism approach similar content. Since the second half of the 20th century, changes have been observed in the news production system, which has moved away from focusing on political and socio-economic issues towards information and entertainment news, covering the personal lives of celebrities and show business events (Bastos, 2019, pp. 2-3).

David Rowe (2000, p. 81), having analyzed a representative sample of literature relating to tabloids and tabloidization, selected ten features of tabloids,

noting, at the same time, that this is an incomplete set:

- disappearance of content relating to orthodox, official policy,
- presenting (often as a result of intrusive voyeurism) private matters in the public domain,
- sensationalism and spectacular nature of the news, combined with the ephemerality of both media celebrities and the news itself,
- blurring the boundaries between news and entertainment (“infotainment”) and news and advertising (“advertorial”),
- the growing obsession with and fetishization of celebrity and popularity,
- uncontrolled expansion of media and media products and applications,
- focus on quickly accessible and digestible information, often combined with its personalized nature,
- the decline of media ethics and the “serious” role of the press as the fourth power, combined with moralizing hypocrisy replacing moral seriousness,
- the drift towards right-wing, owner-sponsored, authoritarian populism and the failure of the political left to lose its monopoly on involvement in the life affairs of “the people”,
- “rough” cultural climate and blunting of individual sensitivity.

It should be noted that the presented catalogue of features refers not only to the press itself but more broadly to the tabloidization of social life.

The role of the tabloid press has been the subject of particular scientific interest in recent decades, and some researchers refer to tabloid populism as a specific discourse with a high ideological charge, as well as a communication genre that differs from the qualitative press and clearly participates in the dissemination of populist views and opinions (Zappettini, 2020, p. 5). It is believed that due to its nature, the media has always been an essential factor in the spread of populism in mass societies (Herrmann et al., 2021, p. 524). Their role is compared to a “helper” or an “inhaler” of populist discussions because they provide them with the “oxygen of publicity”, regardless of whether their tone is positive or negative. Media populism can be defined as the dissemination of populist ideas and styles by the media (Wettstein et al., 2018, p. 478). This dissemination may take place indirectly (reluctantly, under some informational pressure) or directly (intentionally).

It should be noted that tabloid journalism is a separate genre compared to the so-called “quality

press” or “serious” press (Filar, 2007-2008, p. 490), characterized by certain specific features. Firstly, tabloids differ in their understanding of their own social role. They aim to oppose the „excesses of political correctness and liberal intellectualism”; they are not interested in supporting substantive civic debate (Krämer, 2014, p. 44). Secondly, the tabloids focus on the so-called “soft” content and opinions, not substantive and verified facts. They tend to focus on people, not problems, and try to present the latter in a simplified and catchy way. Thirdly, their emotional, sensational and everyday language resonates with the communication style increasingly adopted by politicians. Characterized by headlines, this language relies on wordplay, rhyme, and alliteration, designed as forms of entertainment, humour, and satire to suit the culture of the target readers. Various studies have paid attention to colloquial, emotional and evaluative vocabulary (Zappettini, 2021, p. 648).

Sensational language is intended to maximize the information value of a given message, but it is also intended to arouse a sense of threat in the recipient. As M. Filar (2007-2008, p. 490) aptly put it, „a scared person is particularly susceptible to psycho- and socio-manipulation. A person who is scared afterwards should be given a simple diagnosis of the causes of the threat, God forbid, without hamleting and intellectualizing on this occasion. Many people prefer simple and obvious things. However, the simpler the diagnosis, the simpler the therapy. People like easy therapies constructed because of simple, common rules of causality”.

On the one hand, tabloids actively enter the populist discourse, matching the communication style typical of populist leaders. On the other hand, if they are not clearly linked to populist movements, they provide them with contact with the people (ordinary people), becoming, as it were, their spokesmen (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50).

These interconnected dimensions have contributed to the tabloid press becoming an outstanding media actor in the new “popular politics”, both cultivating populist tendencies in the media institutions themselves and representing a specific journalistic style through which world phenomena are popularized. The tabloid press has also historically fuelled fierce debates about nation and race, typically promoting a nationalist, in some cases chauvinistic, and outright xenophobic agenda, encouraging readers to feel part of a group rather than an antagonistic another group if feelings are mobilized in this way.

Characteristics of the Eurosceptic British tabloid press

The British press market can be broadly divided into two parts: high-quality, opinion-forming press, often referred to as “broadsheets” (e.g. “The Guardian” and “The Times”), and tabloids, which are characterized by sensationalism and attract eye-catching article titles (Foos & Bischof, 2022, p. 23). It should be emphasized that tabloids are also opinion-forming - they shape the world-view of their readers, but they do not categorize themselves as opinion-forming press.

Britain, perhaps more than most Western countries, has a politically engaged and even partisan press. The content goes beyond traditional, even controversial opinions and “normal” promotion of the newspaper’s editorial line. Over the last few decades, political opinions have increasingly replaced facts and commentary, and, on some issues, many British newspapers do not even pretend to be objective. The role of tabloids in Great Britain cannot be overestimated. Today’s press barons are generally right-wing businesspersons, with Rupert Murdoch being the most famous and powerful one. They use their press to propagate their political views, marked by nostalgia for the British Empire. There is probably no other country that has a press culture dominated by tabloids to such an extent as Great Britain. The average Briton reads more newspapers than any other country’s citizen, with the five main tabloid titles reaching around 85% of all readers (Hinde, 2017, p. 81).

The most aggressive, politically engaged part of the British press is the right-wing press, which combines respect for free market economics with ultra-conservative nostalgia (partly imaginary) for Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. Most British newspapers owe their existence to a small group

of “press barons” - businesspersons such as Lords Beaverbrook (the first Max Aitken), Northcliffe (the first - Alfred Harmsworth), and Rothermere (the first - Harold Sidney Harmsworth), who founded newspapers for profit and political influence and required them to broadcast their conservative social and political views. Today’s press barons are generally right-wing businesspersons, with Rupert Murdoch being the most famous and powerful. They use their press to propagate their political views, marked by nostalgia for the British Empire (Hinde, 2017, p. 81). For this group of owners and their publishers, the European Union represents many “hideous” things: regulation, taxes, welfare, collectivism, and the constant reminder that Britain is just one country among many (unlike the Empire they ruled).

The right-wing press, during not only the referendum but also almost three years after it, used the language of civil war towards the opponents of Brexit. The insults carried the threat that opponents would be treated as internal enemies. The same press articulated the promise and hope that Brexit would make Britain great again. In the few years after the referendum, as Nick Cohen noted in “The Guardian”, Brexit hopes had evaporated and only threats remained.

Tabloids have historically played a key role in informing millions of Britons about and giving meaning to the world around them and their internal social and political life. Importantly, over time, the popular press became increasingly involved in political programs, exerted a stronger influence, and divided public opinion. Available post-Brexit research indicates that the tabloid press was able to shape public opinion in the long run, with potentially important political consequences (Foos & Bischof, 2022, p. 19). The readership of the most important British tabloids in 2016 is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1:

Circulation of selected tabloids and their position on Great Britain’s EU membership

Newspaper	Circulation (2016)	Brexit or Remain
The Sun	1,787,096	Brexit
The Daily Mail	1,589,471	Brexit
The Daily Mirror	809,147	Remain
The Daily Star	470,369	Neutral
The Daily Express	408,700	Brexit

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations. (2016). As cited in Simpson, K., & Startin, N. (2022). Tabloid tales: How the British tabloid press shaped the Brexit vote. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(2), 281–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13386> (p. 310).

The comparison shows that the three analyzed tabloids: “The Sun”, “The Daily Mail”, and “The Daily Express”, which supported Brexit with a total number of 3.785.267 readers, clearly outperformed “The Daily Mirror”, which opted to remain in the EU with 809.147 readers. The “force ratio” was 4.7:1. Such proportions are not surprising for British press analysts. They show that in Great Britain, support for Brexit was much greater among readers of the tabloid press.

The British press has historically played a key role in constructing public perceptions of the relationship between the UK and the European Union. Since the creation of the EU, most British newspapers have openly taken a strong political stance: for or against membership in the organization. It can be assumed - although with some reservations - that while most of the titles of the quality and opinion-forming press presented relations between Great Britain and the EU from a Euro positive or slightly Eurosceptic position, the majority of „red” tabloids (red tops - the name adopted in connection with the red logo of the titles), as well as some influential newspapers such as „The Times” and „The Daily Telegraph”, tended to support either Eurosceptic or even Europhobic views (Hinde, 2017, p. 82).

The Sun

“The Sun”, whose predecessor was the trade union newspaper “The Daily Herald”, is a good resource for examining how a politically radical, left-wing newspaper was transformed into a magazine that combined conservative values with the style and content of tabloids. “The Sun” was bought by Ruppert Murdoch in 1969 and turned into a tabloid to directly compete with “The Daily Mirror”, the newspaper that dominated the British tabloid market in the 1960s and 1970s. By the late 1970s, “The Sun” had overtaken “The Daily Mirror” in circulation, and by 1992, it had a daily circulation of around 3.6 million.

“The Sun” began to play a special role in anti-European campaigns. In the mid-1990s, it took a strongly negative stance towards the EU. Between 1996 and 2016, nearly 92% of its editorials had a negative tone towards European integration, and 80% were classified as Eurosceptic (Simpson & Startin, 2022, p. 5). They portrayed the UK and the EU as adversaries, using metaphors of war. In the 1980s, „The Sun” encouraged readers to submit „anti-French jokes”, and in 1990, it published the infamous headline „Up yours Delors”, denigrating the then president of the European Commission for his supposedly French-centric vision of Europe.

Mainstream tabloid discourse portrayed Britain as a victim of the Franco-German alliance or the Brussels “conspiracy” (Zappettini, 2021, p. 650).

In 2016, its print circulation reached 1.787.096 copies, which placed it in first place among British tabloids. The newspaper has had a reputation for being Eurosceptic for over 30 years, and there are various explanations for why its specific stance towards the European Union has sometimes turned Europhobic.

The Daily Mail

„The Daily Mail” is a forerunner in the British tabloid market. Alfred Harmsworth founded the newspaper in 1896 as a right-wing and populist magazine in the format of the American tabloid press (12x16 inches), and soon other titles followed suit, such as „The Daily Express”, which was launched in 1900 and then in the 1930s, Labour-supporting titles such as „The Daily Herald” and „The Daily Mirror” (Zappettini, 2021, p. 648).

The print circulation of “The Daily Mail” in 2016 was almost 1.6 million copies, but in 2020, after the “referendum dust settled”, it dropped to 1.3 million, while its digital reach covered 25 million readers (Simpson & Startin, 2022, p. 4). The newspaper has had a reputation for being deeply conservative for decades. The infamous stance of its owner, Lord Rothermere Harold Harmsworth, towards German fascism, of which he was a sympathizer and an advocate of closer ties between Great Britain and Nazi Germany, became part of history. The newspaper’s 1934 article “Hurrah for the Black Shirts” led to the newspaper being considered extremely nationalistic from then on (Simpson & Startin, 2022, p. 4).

“The Daily Mail” did support the campaign to remain in the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1975 referendum, but the appointment of Paul Dacre as editor-in-chief in 1992 brought about a groundbreaking change in the paper’s political stance and attitude towards the EU: moved to at least Eurosceptic positions. After a few years, its editorial line was characterized as a belief in Franco-German conspiracies and threats to the sovereignty and security of Great Britain from the European Union (Anderson & Weymouth, 1999, p. 18).

In 2011, the newspaper claimed that Germany was turning Europe into a “Fourth Reich” (Harding, 2017, p. 11). Following the EU referendum and resigning from the newspaper in 2018, Paul Dacre warned against a change in the newspaper’s approach to the EU, stating that support for Brexit “is in the DNA of both the “Daily Mail” and its readers” (Simpson & Startin, 2022, p. 4).

The Daily Express

“The Daily Express” was founded by Arthur Pearson in 1900 as an opinion newspaper, and in 1916 it was sold to William Maxwell Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, who in the 1940s turned it into the newspaper with the largest circulation in the world. In 2000, the controversial Richard Desmond, previously the owner of many pornographic titles, became the owner of the newspaper.

Similarly to “The Daily Mail”, the circulation of “The Daily Express”, which during the referendum campaign was 400,000 copies, in 2020 it dropped to 300,000 copies. However, the newspaper’s influence on British Eurosceptics is much greater than its circulation might suggest. In 2010, “The Daily Express” launched a crusade called “Get Britain out of Europe”, emphasizing that it is the first newspaper to openly call for the country to leave the European Union: “From this day on, our energies will be directed towards supporting the cause of those who believe that Britain will be better off outside the EU” (The Daily Express, November 25, [2010](#)).

In 2011, the newspaper initiated the collection of votes for a petition to Parliament to hold a referendum on Britain’s continued membership of the EU, which was signed by 373,000 people. Thanks to these and other actions of the newspaper, the issue of EU membership entered broad public discourse, and the position of “The Daily Express” became unambiguously Eurosceptic.

Table 2:

Number of articles in the analyzed tabloids relating to immigration

Newspaper	Number of articles referring to immigration
The Daily Express	568
The Daily Mail	416
The Sun	337

Source: Own study based on Moore, M., & Ramsay, G. (2017). *UK media coverage of the 2016 EU referendum campaign*. Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power (p. 71).

which means that the three surveyed newspapers had a 30% share in this number. Moreover, an analysis of 15 national press titles during the 90 days of the campaign showed that the issue of immigration was signalled 99 times on the front pages, 55% of which was in the three tabloids examined: “The Daily Express” - 21, “The Daily Mail” - 20, “The Sun” - 13 (Moore & Ramsey, [2016](#), p. 65).

The populism of leading anti-EU tabloids regarding immigrants was based on two main arguments. Firstly, immigration is enabled by

Analysis. Position of selected British tabloids on UK membership in the European Union in the 2016 referendum campaign

The content analysis of articles by three anti-EU tabloids during the referendum campaign allows us to select two main threads of populist discourse:

- immigration as a threat to the interests of ordinary Britons;
- EU membership as a clash of antagonistic interests of ordinary people and the establishment.

This does not mean that other topics discussed in the referendum campaign, such as economics or state sovereignty, were not characterized by populism, but - as it had been shown earlier - the clash of elites with the “common” people and a reluctant or even hostile attitude towards foreigners best characterize tabloid populism.

Immigration as a threat to the interests of ordinary Britons

Statistical analyses showed that the three tabloids examined published a total of 1321 articles during the referendum campaign that referred to the issue of migration or immigrants, as presented in Table 2.

According to M. Moore and G. Ramsey ([2016](#), p. 71) from King’s College London, who analyzed the content of major news channels, press titles and news portals in the same period, the topic of immigration was raised in 4383 articles (information materials),

European rules of free movement, and this depletes Britain’s resources in terms of jobs, housing, social care, health care and, education and other public services, and as a result, ordinary Britons lose out. Secondly, immigration poses a risk to public security, which would be much smaller if the UK left the EU (Zappettini, [2020](#), p. 11). In both cases, immigration was presented as a phenomenon beyond the control of the authorities imposed by the EU. It was therefore argued that Brexit would make it possible to regain control over this process.

“The Daily Express” bombarded its readers with titles that indicated that they were dealing with a real flood of immigrants, the scale of which would grow dynamically as long as the country remained in the EU. Examples included the headlines: “Immigrants pay just £100 to invade UK” (The Daily Express, June 1, [2016](#)), “20,000 migrants ready to cross into UK” (The Daily Express, June 3, [2016](#)), “Migrant intercepted every 6 minutes” (The Daily Express, June 10, [2016](#)) and the warning from Brexit ideologue Nigel Farage “There will be bodies on our beaches” (The Daily Express, June 4, [2016](#)). The message of the publication was simple - the British should be afraid because the country is at the mercy of the EU and the leaders of gangs smuggling migrants by boat across the English Channel.

“The Daily Mail” added to the feeling of immigration threats by warning: “We cannot deport killers and rapists from the EU” (The Daily Mail, June 3, [2016](#)). The category was then expanded to include robbers, paedophiles and drug dealers. According to the Daily, they are difficult to get rid of because the government is powerless, yet there are over 13,000 foreign criminals in the UK - the size of a small city - either in prison or on the streets. Many foreigners, after serving their sentences, avoid deportation, citing human rights regulations. A few days later, The Daily sounded the alarm again: „A double Albanian killer has been living in open Britain for 18 years” (The Daily Mail, June 8, [2016](#)), from which readers could learn that the Albanian was not wanted by the police, although he remains wanted by Interpol, he received a British passport in 1998 by posing as a refugee from Kosovo and collecting thousands of pounds in benefits by working in the informal economy and being linked to a prostitution business. The newspaper also warned of the possibility of 1.5 million Turks invading Britain: “Rage over plot to let 1.5 million Turks into Britain” (The Daily Mail, June 12, [2016](#)). The conspiracy was said to be a joint work of the British government and EU bureaucrats, who wanted to make a “symbolic gesture towards Turkey” by granting visa-free travel to Turkey’s 75 million population.

“The Sun”, relatively the most restrained of the three tabloids surveyed in terms of the severity of its opinions, also played into the narrative of fear of a flood of immigrants. Just before the referendum, it warned that “a huge crowd of 300 migrants is storming the port of Calais in a brutal attempt to smuggle them into the UK” (The Sun, June 21, [2016](#)). Eyewitnesses quoted by the newspaper spoke of chaos, aggression, and immigrants throwing

bricks. In addition to the crime story, many articles were devoted to the negative impact of immigration on the British labour market and the social benefits system. According to “The Sun”, in 2015, out of five job vacancies, four were held by immigrants, so the British were discriminated against, which later turned out to be untrue (The Sun, May 19, [2016](#)). The tabloid also signalled that immigrants, or at least a significant part of them, come to the UK only for benefits, and what is worse, even when they take up work, they receive benefits. An immigrant from Bulgaria explained to the newspaper that since the benefit was on offer, it should be collected; he receives £50 a week in benefits, but “this could be spent in a pub in ten minutes” (The Sun, May 21, [2016](#)). The immigrant quoted was - according to The Sun - one of 1.6 million EU migrants who moved to the UK in the last five years who received a total of £886 million in support each year - housing benefit, jobseeker’s allowance and sickness benefit.

The situation could get much worse because, as “The Sun” points out in another article, “staggering figures show five million migrants have become EU citizens in just six years” (The Sun, May 13, [2016](#)). This statistic comes from Migration Watch, which reported that net migration from the EU to the UK could average 320,000 people a year over the next two decades. According to the author, the population of Great Britain may increase annually by a city the size of Coventry. The tabloid states that everyone has the right to become a British citizen, but the huge numbers indicated make the system inefficient and require regulation. The conclusion is that “this opportunity should be used to get out of the EU” (The Sun, May 21, [2016](#)).

The message of the three tabloids on the issue of immigration was clear in its basic direction: immigration and immigrants contribute to the breakdown of “healthy” British society, and only Brexit will allow Britain to regain authentic Britishness. “Mass immigration and EU membership are the twin forces destroying our nationality” said regular commentator of The Daily Express, Leo McKinsty, adding that “Brexit is the only hope for regaining our national identity” (The Daily Express, May 26, [2016](#)).

Establishment (elites) in anti-EU tabloids

From the beginning of the campaign, both the tabloids supporting Brexit and those supporting remaining in the European Union reduced a serious political problem to a simple populist scheme: a fight between the establishment (elites), which

exploit the EU, and ordinary people (nation) who suffer the unpleasant consequences of membership. However, the understanding of the concept of “establishment” or “elite” was not entirely clear because populist newspapers treated their meaning with great discretion. They unanimously included the government (but not all ministers), governmental and international institutions, including the Treasury, the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the OECD and the World Bank. The establishment also included English politicians who were against leaving the EU, while on the side of the people stood politicians, even incumbent ministers, who supported Brexit. The hostile elites included all “Eurocrats” - a term resulting from the association of the European Union with bureaucracy - i.e. people associated with Brussels or the European Commission. Foreign politicians such as Barack Obama and Angela Merkel easily fit into the elite ranks (Moore & Ramsey, 2017, p. 156).

Generally, however, membership in the establishment was assumed, discretionary, and not defined. Sometimes the establishment were Londoners juxtaposed with the rest of the country’s inhabitants; the terms “political establishment”, “economic establishment”, “metropolitan elite”, “EU elite”, “political elite” were often used. The elite

have usually been characterized as “unelected” and “self-serving”, but many elected politicians have been identified with the people (Moore & Ramsey, 2017, p. 157).

One “The Daily Mail” commentator managed to highlight four pejorative references to the establishment: the metropolitan political elite, the ivory tower elites, the Hampstead liberals and the “talking” metropolitan tycoons. At the same time, he collided with two different worlds: the unreal world in which elites move and the real world - that of ordinary people. In the latter, “the second debate on the EU referendum is taking place. This is a debate by people who don’t listen to the CBI’s views or the international chatter of people like Christine Lagarde of the IMF or the Governor of the Bank of England, and who didn’t watch the last two-hour televised debate because they had better things to do, like looking for a family doctor. This is a debate between millions of working-class people who don’t care what political party leaders have to say because, in their opinion, Westminster has long since lost their trust” (The Daily Mail, June 11, 2016).

The statistical analysis shows that the three tabloids examined during the referendum campaign referred to the establishment (elites) in 316 articles, with the term “establishment” used in 149 and “elites” in 167 articles, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3:

Number of articles in the analyzed tabloids referring to the establishment (elites)

Newspaper	Establishment	Elite
The Daily Express	68	74
The Daily Mail	48	70
The Sun	33	23

Source: Own study based on Moore, M., & Ramsay, G. (2017). *UK media coverage of the 2016 EU referendum campaign*. Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power (p. 152).

The presented data show that among the surveyed tabloids that strongly support leaving the European Union, “The Sun” published the smallest number of articles referring to the establishment/elites. Interestingly, unlike the other two newspapers, “The Sun” used the term “establishment” more often than “elite”.

The analysis of publications on Brexit issues during the referendum campaign conducted by Moore and Ramsay indicates that the total number of articles (information materials) in which the issue of the establishment or elites appeared was 1183, of which the term “establishment” was used 547 times, while “elites” 636 times (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 152).

This means that three tabloids strongly supporting Brexit had a significant twenty-seven percent share in these publications. Only the opinion-forming „The Guardian” clearly towered over each of them, but in this newspaper, the terms „establishment” or „elites” were used in a different context, not as a fight between the elites and the common people, but presented conflicting opinions on whether the elites would be in favour of remaining or leaving the EU. Brexit, according to some authors of „The Guardian”, was perceived as a struggle between the „British establishment” and the „European establishment” (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 153).

The examined tabloids described the relations

between elites and ordinary people more clearly. For example, The Daily Express often dazzled its readers with the word “fury”, which was intended to reflect the reaction of ordinary people to the actions of the establishment. Prime Minister D. Cameron caused fury when he proposed a list of pro-EU politicians to be honoured by the Queen, a ceremony that takes place twice a year. According to the daily, people are fed up with the establishment rewarding each other, an act that borders on corruption. “The British people will simply no longer tolerate what Brussels, Cameron or his newly honoured associates are doing” (The Daily Express, June 11, [2016](#)). The International Monetary Fund was also outraged when it intended to publish another report on the economic impact of Brexit just before the referendum (The Daily Express, May 13, [2016](#)). In the opinion of the tabloid’s interlocutors, the EU-funded International Monetary Fund should not interfere in the national democratic debate a week before Election Day, and if it does, it is done at the request of the government, which wants to scare the British people with unfavourable economic indicators in order to weaken the will to leave the EU.

For Sarah Vine, a commentator for „The Daily Mail”, the gap between the Brussels elite and ordinary people was obvious. The European Union is an organization of elites, not ordinary people; those who support remaining in the EU do so against national interests: “The EU responds to fat bosses who earn millions because workers` wages are stagnant due to immigration”. She reinforced her message by adding, “I would have voted to remain in the past. Now I would rather burn my ballot than support these bullies and fear mongers” (The Daily Mail, June 22, [2016](#)).

Eurocrats are the group that was most attacked and identified by “The Daily Mail” with the sinister, luxurious establishment. They spent tens of millions of pounds on trips to luxury resorts, expensive meals and private jet flights, according to the newspaper. EU officials` spending also included “Caribbean cruises, thousands of pounds of alcohol and chocolate and team-building days” (The Daily Mail, June 14, [2016](#)). The data, as the Daily emphasizes, were taken from the website of the European Commission, which lists so-called „discretionary spending”. Quoting the comment of anti-EU minister Priti Patel, the tabloid stressed that EU officials also spend ordinary Britons` money in this way: “Eurocrats think they can get away with living the high standard at our expense. They have been trying to hide these expenses for years”. This comes at a time when most families have been hit hard by the financial crisis and are struggling

to make ends meet, “but EU officials are using our money to finance their jokes and exorbitant claims” (The Daily Mail, June 14, [2016](#)).

“The Daily Mail” did not hesitate to respond to US President Obama himself, who appealed to the British to remain in the European Union, believing that Great Britain outside the EU would be at the “end of the queue” during important talks. Toby Young retorted: “The British don’t respond well to threats. We will make a decision on June 23, and President Obama’s intervention has probably made it slightly more likely that we will vote to leave the EU” (The Daily Mail, June 24, [2016](#)).

The Sun did not mince its words when confronting the plans of EU officials with the needs of ordinary citizens. The Daily accused the EU of adopting shock tactics to citizens who are afraid of the unknown, calling it „the damn arrogance of our ruling EU elite” (The Sun, May 22, [2016](#)). Commentator Trevor Kavanagh gave three reasons to leave the EU: it is irresponsible, unelected, and undemocratic and treats its citizens with contempt; EU leaders are failing in the face of a real crisis, such as the conflict in the Balkans and mass immigration; currency Euro is on the verge of a catastrophic collapse. At the same time, he attacked the domestic ruling elites, stating that “no one in Downing Street seriously believes that the sky will fall if we wave goodbye to Brussels. Otherwise, as responsible ministers, they would have taken all necessary steps to avoid it” (The Sun, May 22, [2016](#)).

In its articles criticizing the establishment, “The Sun” struck patriotic notes or referred to the national pride of the British people. But also, in probably its most famous campaign material (“BeLeave in Britain”), it clearly stated that the establishment has a global reach: “the campaign to remain in the EU led by the corporate establishment, arrogant Europhiles and foreign banks aims to scare us all life outside the EU. Their “Project Fear” strategy predicts mass unemployment, skyrocketing interest rates and inflation, plummeting house prices, and even world war. The Treasury, the Bank of England, the IMF and world leaders have been roped in by Downing Street to add their grim warnings” (The Sun, June 13, [2016](#)). It called for a return to the principle that Britain should be governed by politicians elected or removed every five years, rather than foreign bureaucrats.

Using the method of clashing the interests of various social groups, the examined tabloids presented Brexit as an opportunity for ordinary Britons, hard-working people, both for economic and dignity reasons. They agreed on the basic message - society will be much better off outside the EU (Zappettini,

2020, p. 17). At the same time, the previously described patterns were repeated, thus highlighting the antagonistic interests of selected groups (British vs EU immigrants), as well as freeing themselves from the economic yoke of the EU (British vs neoliberals), which was supposed to result in lower taxes.

Using this type of narrative, “The Sun” published an article with the telling title “Boris promises cheaper gas bills for households if Britons support Brexit”, in which the main arguments of the leading advocates of leaving the European Union, Ben Johnson and Michael Gove, were cited. First of all, both politicians maintained that fuel bills would be lower for the average Briton; leaving the EU would increase wages and allow Britain to regain control over its borders. The healthcare system will be more efficient, and class differences and taxes will decrease. They concluded: „Leaving the EU is a great opportunity for us to regain control over our borders, our economy, and our democracy” (The Sun, May 30, 2016). In another edition, “The Sun” gave the floor to Labour MP John Mann, who appealed to “working people” to join the people’s revolution that was underway. According to the MP, Westminster elites will be surprised by how Labour Party members will vote for Brexit (The Sun, June 9, 2016). The free movement of people imposed by the EU undermines the wages and living conditions of the working class. It is not possible for the country’s population to increase by 300,000 new people every year. The influx has created two kinds of people: those who benefit from it and those who lose because of it. The author highlighted the different interests of the inhabitants of the metropolis and the British countryside „if you live in London and you want a cheap nanny, a gardener or a cheaper plumber, you can find really nice, really good people cheaper than before, you can go to a different restaurant every night and eat a different kind of food. In the north of England, in the Midlands, and in South Wales, people do not receive these benefits. They get problems” (The Sun, June 9, 2016).

“The Daily Mail” maintained its information and journalism in a similar tone. In one of his editorial comments, Richard Littlejohn described the EU referendum as “our last chance to escape from the disaster movie taking place across Europe” (The Daily Mail, June 21, 2016). Similarly to many other campaign messages, he juxtaposed the interests of “ordinary working people excluded from the system and the corridors of power, condemned to the worst excesses of the EU behemoth” with the particular interests of big business, merchant banks and “almost” the entire political class. He warned that

if Britons vote to join the EU, Brussels would lock the country “in an anti-democratic, corrupt federal straightjacket from which there is no escape” (The Daily Mail, June 21, 2016).

Research conclusions

The analysis showed that “The Sun”, “The Daily Express” and “The Daily Mail” were the most active and loudest titles that legitimized Brexit by referring to antagonistic social interests, nationalistic or even xenophobic threads, scaring strangers, in this case a flood of immigrants. Due to their consistent and strong anti-European message, observers of the British political scene describe them as the “Mail-Express-Sun” triad (Zappettini, 2020, p. 20).

The tabloid triad “Mail-Express-Sun” mobilized people using specific linguistic techniques that emphasized the superiority of “ordinary “British” or “hard-working people” in relation to other groups, especially immigrants and elites, defining the latter very arbitrarily. They created an imaginary reality in which an “imaginary healthy nation” was in dispute with “imaginary enemies”, both outside (the EU bureaucracy as a dominant, omnipresent force) and inside the country (corrupt elites supporting the European project).

A feature of the journalism and information of the three studied tabloids during the campaign was the frequent use of explicit words, such as “outrage”, “fury”, “attack”, “slam”, and “ridicule”, which were a negative reaction to the demands and position of supporters of remaining in the EU. Opponents’ arguments and opinions were also described as “desperate” or “hysterical”, and their behaviour was stigmatized as “scaremongering” or “fear project” (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, pp. 51-52).

The analysis showed that the tabloids were based on populist strategies referring primarily to emotions, fear, national resentments and hopes for a better tomorrow - outside the European Union. Tabloid populism manifested itself in lies, distortions, exaggerations, and, above all, disregarding information sources. Journalists of the studied titles filtered information, ensuring that the public was „properly” informed about the fundamental socio-political problems in the spirit they desired. During the referendum campaign, lies and their regular repetition seemed to strengthen the position of Brexit supporters. In the case of the „Mail-Express-Sun” triad, we can even talk about propaganda journalism.

The tabloid triad “Mail-Express-Sun” did not create a socio-political reality favourable to Brexit, but it skilfully used and fuelled the long-standing

frustration of the British people caused by the problems of everyday life.

Summary

The British media, especially anti-EU tabloids, were actively involved in the referendum campaign in 2016 and influenced its course. The three examined titles were an important link in the process of legitimizing Brexit, shaping the framework of a discourse characterized by populist and nationalist logic. Brexit became an ideological response to serious, real socio-political problems that undoubtedly affected the British people on a daily basis.

The arguments for leaving the European Union were based largely on an exclusionary rather than inclusive form of populism. Content analysis of the examined tabloids showed a manipulative, emotional use of immigration issues, dazzling recipients with false information and numbers, causing fear and even social panic. Observers of British reality guided solely by the opinions of the three analyzed titles could come to the conclusion that Great Britain is a xenophobic country hostile to foreigners, although the reality is completely different. Young, educated people and residents of big cities are tolerant, and each generation entering adulthood is more liberal than the previous one.

The analysis of the British press's messages allows us to conclude that the simple presentation of facts and rational arguments, which characterized the opinion-forming, qualitative press supporting remaining in the EU, did not bring results. The facts did not work. The tabloids winning the debate were those who presented simple, emotional messages that often discredited public figures supporting the EU and used expert language. The essence of this dispute is reflected in the statement of Michael Gove, a leading supporter of Brexit: "the inhabitants of this country are fed up with experts" (Hinde, 2017, p. 85).

Populism in general and tabloid populism in particular, did not die out when Great Britain left the European Union. British tabloids are still serious actors in imposing populist discourse, legitimizing or delegitimizing certain political actions. The analysis of this type of discourse and the role of the tabloid segment of the press gives rise to further research.

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