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## Narrating the nation, embracing Europe: Populist markers in Albanian political discourse

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### Abstract

This study explores the evolution of populist discourse in the political communication of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama between 2013 and 2024. It examines how populist rhetoric is adapted in the context of a transitional democracy committed to European integration. The research is based on a purposive sample of 96 speeches, press conferences, interviews, and international addresses. It employs a mixed-method design combining holistic grading of populist intensity with itemized content coding. The analysis captures five dimensions of populist rhetoric: ideational, strategic, emotive, pluralism (reverse-coded), and migration. The results reveal a moderate and adaptive populist style, where anti-elitist and people-centered appeals are framed within a consistent pro-European stance. Rama's discourse frequently emphasizes national unity and moral leadership, particularly through references to Albanian hospitality during migration crises. While his rhetoric includes emotional and personalized elements especially during national or geopolitical emergencies, it rarely undermines pluralist or democratic norms. The European Union is framed not as an adversary but as a partner in reform and modernization. The Albanian case demonstrates that populism can be mobilized in inclusive, internationally aligned ways. Rama's discourse exemplifies a form of Europhilic populism that coexists with institutional legitimacy and normative alignment with the EU. This study challenges the notion that populism is inherently anti-democratic or anti-European. It suggests that in semi-peripheral states like Albania, populism may serve as a rhetorical bridge between domestic legitimacy and international aspiration.

**Keywords:** Albania, Emotive rhetoric, EU, Ideational approach, Migration, Pluralism, Political discourse, Populism, Strategic populism.

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## **1. Introduction**

Populism has increasingly garnered scholarly attention across diverse contexts [1]. While much of this research focuses on Western democracies, where populism often emerges in opposition to liberal institutions, cases like Albania require a more nuanced approach. As a country navigating democratic consolidation and European Union (EU) accession, Albania offers a fertile ground for examining how populist rhetoric operates in a transitional context. This study investigates Prime Minister Edi Rama's political discourse from 2013 to 2024, tracing how populist appeals manifest in government rhetoric over time. The analysis is grounded in a dual framework that captures both the ideational and strategic dimensions of populism, as articulated in established literature. Recent studies have shown that personalized leadership styles often associated with populist discourse tend to correlate with lower levels of internal party democracy [2]. In the Albanian case, scholars have noted a centralization of decision-making under Rama's leadership, which has increasingly sidelined intermediary party structures [3]. While this study does not focus on organizational dynamics per se, these findings underscore the relevance of analyzing discourse as an independent source of populist signaling, particularly in contexts where political personalization and rhetorical concentration around the leader are pronounced.

The existing literature on populist rhetoric in Albania offers important foundations for this study. Çullhaj [4] situates the rise of populism within Albania's broader socio-economic inequalities, arguing that unresolved disparities have created fertile ground for populist discourse. Bino et al. [5] in their analysis of the European integration deadlock, explore how the stagnation of Albania's EU accession process has contributed to an increase in anti-establishment and nationalist rhetoric, often framed in populist tones. Budini and Rama [6] offer a critical perspective on Rama's use of charismatic leadership, media-savviness, and spectacle to craft a personalized populist brand. While these studies offer valuable conceptual and narrative insights, they remain primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature. This study contributes a more systematic and empirical approach, offering a longitudinal populism index that traces the evolution of Rama's discourse across multiple dimensions between 2013 and 2024.

The study applies a mixed-methods approach to assess the development and dimensions of populism in Rama's public discourse. A total of 96 speeches were collected from the official website of the Albanian Prime Minister, covering a wide range of occasions from domestic announcements to international summits. Each speech was holistically graded for populist intensity on a 1–4 scale, adapting Hawkins's ideational populism index [7]. In parallel, speeches were coded for the presence and salience of core populist markers: people-centrism, anti-elitism, moral dichotomies, EU references, and migration discourse. This dual coding approach enables both an overall populist index and a disaggregated analysis across key categories, allowing for the detection of shifts in tone, framing, and populist strategy over time.

Recent methodological innovations in populism research have greatly expanded analytical possibilities. Holistic speech grading [7], automated text analysis [8], and survey-based measurements of populist attitudes [9, 10] provide valuable tools to map elite discourse and popular perceptions. Moreover, fuzzy-set analyses help explore degrees of personalism and institutional erosion [11, 12]. These tools clarify ambiguous cases and illuminate the fine line between populist rhetoric and democratic degradation. The current study builds on these innovations by combining qualitative coding with time-sensitive tracking to capture the evolution of populism within a governing context.

Theoretically, this research draws on both the ideational and strategic approaches to populism. The ideational perspective conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, often using moral binaries to justify direct rule by "the general will" [7, 13, 14]. In Rama's case, this framing is primarily directed at domestic political opponents and corrupt legacy structures. However, unlike populists in many EU member states who present Brussels as a hostile supranational elite, Rama often frames the EU as a normative and cooperative partner. This positions Albania as an aspirant member-state that leverages populist morality not to reject Europe, but to embody its reformist promise [15].

From a strategic viewpoint, populism is understood as a mode of political mobilization in which a charismatic leader directly appeals to the people while bypassing traditional party structures and mediating institutions [15, 16]. Rama's leadership style contains elements of personalism, plebiscitary communication, and performative moral authority. However, this personalism coexists with a strong rhetorical embrace of multilateralism, institutional legitimacy, and moral internationalism, particularly in relation to Albania's reception of migrants and refugees. This dual framing complicates conventional understandings of populism and opens space for what we might term inclusive, civic-oriented populism.

Populism's normative ambiguity its potential both to democratize and to erode liberal norms makes cases like Albania especially relevant. As others have argued [17, 18], populism can revitalize democratic participation or threaten pluralism depending on its institutional and discursive context. In Albania, populism intersects with EU accession efforts, national self-positioning, and symbolic resources such as hospitality. These dynamics suggest a hybrid model in which populism supports, rather than opposes, liberal-democratic values provided they are reframed through a nationally resonant moral lens.

Moreover, the organizational and financial foundations of Albanian political parties reveal a system structurally conducive to populist strategies. As Xhaferaj [19] observes, Albanian parties exhibit unusually high membership figures and territorial reach compared to declining trends across Western Europe and other post-communist states. However, these memberships are less a reflection of participatory engagement than of clientelist exchange, where citizens join parties primarily in hopes of securing employment in the public sector. Public funding mechanisms reward electoral performance rather than grassroots engagement, and parties are heavily reliant on opaque private financing especially the ruling party. This environment enables populist leaders like Rama to maintain formal ties with large party organizations while cultivating direct and unmediated relationships with "the people." In this context, populism becomes not an aberration, but a strategic adaptation to a political system where institutionalized parties are clientelist rather than programmatic, and where legitimacy

must be forged both domestically and externally often through moralized appeals to European values and national exceptionalism.

The Research Question of the paper is:

How has populist discourse evolved in the speeches of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama from 2013 to 2024, and which dimensions of populism ideational, strategic, emotive, pluralist, and migration-related have been most prominently employed?

We hypothesize that Edi Rama's populism is predominantly strategic and pro-European, combining anti-elitist and moralistic elements with inclusive rhetoric that emphasizes EU alignment, regional cooperation, and humanitarian values. This form of populism is expected to intensify during moments of domestic contestation or geopolitical opportunity, but remain constrained by Albania's aspirational identity as a modern, European state.

This inquiry contributes to broader theoretical debates by showing how populism can serve not only to challenge liberal norms but also to affirm them. It demonstrates that populist rhetoric in EU-aspiring countries like Albania may operate within and not outside the liberal-democratic order, mobilizing moral-symbolic capital to project both legitimacy and leadership on the national and international stage.

## 2. Literature Review on Populism

Populism has become a central concept in the social sciences, galvanizing research in political science, history, sociology, and political theory [1, 20, 21]. While the term historically emerged in the late nineteenth century, its application and theoretical formulations have proliferated across world regions from the Americas and Europe to Africa and Asia and through multiple distinct approaches [22].

Populism is widely recognized as an *essentially contested concept* [23]. Scholars diverge significantly over its definition: some conceive of populism as a *discourse* [24], a *style* [25, 26], a *mode of communication*, a *thin-centered ideology* [13, 14], or a *political strategy* [16]. Despite the differences, there is broad agreement that populism relies on an appeal to "the people" framed against an allegedly corrupt or self-serving "elite," while demanding the restoration of popular sovereignty [1, 20, 21].

The term *populism* was first used in connection with late-nineteenth-century movements such as the U.S. People's Party, known as the Populists and the Russian *narodniki* [27-30]. In both cases, leaders and activists opposed entrenched elites, be they Tsarist aristocracy or financial and railroad magnates, while elevating the moral stature of common people [31]. In Western Europe, Boulangism in France (1886-1889) and later Poujadism in the 1950s are sometimes cited as early manifestations of populist politics [12, 32]. In early 20th-century Latin America, leaders like Hipólito Yrigoyen and Arturo Alessandri foreshadowed "classical populists" such as Juan Domingo Perón, Getúlio Vargas, and others [33, 34].

By the 1970s, scholars [20] catalogued manifold instances of populism e.g., agrarian populism, populist dictatorship, and so on centered on a deep opposition between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" [13, 35]. Since the 1990s, academic interest surged as populist actors gained prominence in Eastern Europe [36]. Western Europe [37] and across the Americas [38]. Alongside these empirical developments, political scientists increasingly refined conceptual and methodological approaches to capture populism's specific core: a moral distinction between the people and the elite, and a claim to represent the "general will" [39, 40].

In the 1980s and early 1990s, a wave of research spurred by Latin American crises focused on *economic populism* [41, 42]. According to this view, populist leaders boosted their popularity with massive expansionary policies that eventually resulted in hyperinflation or fiscal collapse, as seen under José Sarney in Brazil or Alan García in Peru [15].

However, as the 1990s progressed, populist leaders (e.g., Carlos Menem in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Fernando Collor in Brazil) adopted neoliberal, not expansionist, policies. This incongruity challenged the universal application of an "economic" definition of populism [38, 43]. In the subsequent "left-populist" wave symbolized by Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa, there was no single macroeconomic formula either. Some, like Morales, pursued fiscal prudence [44]; others, like Chávez, tapped oil rents to sustain large social spending [45]. Thus, "economic populism" was too narrow and inconsistent [46], diminishing its usefulness within political science.

In light of these limits, many scholars now favor *discursive* or *ideological* definitions of populism [47]. Within this broad cluster, the ideational approach [1] interprets populism as: A set of ideas seeing society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and holding that politics should follow the *volonté générale* of the people [13]. Characterized as a *thin-centered ideology* [14], populism attaches itself to additional ideological content (e.g., nationalism, socialism). Empirically, scholars gauge populist discourse via content analysis, coding party manifestos, speeches, or media appearances for "Manichean" frames [48]. This approach "travels" well, capturing populist radical right parties in Europe [9], left-wing populism in Latin America [7], and more recent populist mobilizations in the United States or Asia [49].

Critiques note that purely discourse-based criteria can lead to "false positives," conflating any moralistic anti-elite rhetoric with populism [15]. Others underscore that populist leaders may shift rapidly among competing ideological messages, highlighting that moral anti-elitism though central does not exhaust the phenomenon [50].

A second major formulation sees populism chiefly as a *political strategy* in which a personalistic leader mobilizes unorganized masses via unmediated appeals [38]. Key features are a personalistic leadership, unmediated support and opportunism. Personalistic leadership is concentrated in one charismatic figure whose authority supersedes traditional parties or institutions. The leader claims a direct identification with "the people", overrides or weakens party organization, and mobilizes voters around his or her persona [51]. In this case, it is observed reliance on mass rallies, plebiscites, and direct media appeals rather than strong organizational structures [52]. Leaders pivot quickly in policy stances to maintain popularity,

demonstrating a “chameleonic” nature. Freed from strong partisan ties or programmatic constraints, populist leaders can pivot quickly in policy (e.g., from statist to neoliberal economics), aiming to maximise short-term popularity [53].

Thus, personalism in the hands of a shrewd politician becomes the central axis of populism. The rhetorical focus on “the people” masks the actual top-down character of many populist regimes, which in practice can override checks and balances [9]. This strategic definition thereby clarifies that what unites Perón (1940s Argentina), Fujimori (1990s Peru), Chávez (2000s Venezuela), and, in Europe, figures such as Berlusconi (in Italy) or Orbán (in Hungary) is primarily the personalistic mode of rule that relies on mass electoral majorities. Over time, these personalistic leaders often attempt to revise constitutions or manipulate electoral rules to extend their tenure [47].

Hence, while *ideational* scholars focus on the moral boundary between “the people” and “the elite,” *strategic* scholars argue that populism cannot be pinned down by ideological content alone: it resides in a personalistic, plebiscitarian linkage. This approach explains the volatility of populist rule leaders can rise quickly through mass appeal but also fall dramatically and clarifies their tendency to rewrite constitutions or norms to perpetuate power (Collor in Brazil, Fujimori in Peru, Chávez in Venezuela). Moreover, it draws a line between genuine “mass-based populists” and extremist fringe actors (e.g., ideocratic far-right movements) that do not actually aim for broad majorities [15].

In short, the strategic approach illuminates the “cat-dog” or “chameleonic” nature of populist leaders, who opportunistically shift ideological stances but share the consistent emphasis on unmediated mass support [53]. Recent scholarship suggests that one can employ fuzzy-set analysis to capture varying degrees of “pure personalism,” clarifying borderline cases such as Evo Morales in Bolivia (where strong social movements constrain the leader) or Marine Le Pen in France (who has softened the Front National’s ideology to broaden electoral appeal) [15].

Finally, there is a third approach to populism, the socio-cultural approach [54] that departs from traditional ideational or strategic conceptualization. Central to this framework is the “high-low” axis, which structures political space orthogonally to the conventional left-right axis. While the left-right axis organizes politics around distributive or authority-based cleavages, the high-low axis reflects cultural and stylistic distinctions in public comportment, language, leadership, and identity [54]. At its core, populism is defined as the “flaunting of the low” - a public performance that emphasizes immediacy, transgressive style, culturally “native” traits, which is characterized by cosmopolitan, formal, and institutionalized modes of authority. Populist leaders speak and act in ways that are locally rooted and culturally resonant with excluded or underrepresented social groups [54]. Importantly, Ostiguy’s approach underscores the performative and affectual nature of populist politics. Populism constructs a bond between leaders and followers based on emotional closeness, social identification, and mutual recognition, often invoking a shared sense of grievance and authenticity. This connection, built through spectacle and rhetorical antagonism, positions a “truer” people in opposition to an allegedly “nefarious” elite and distant cosmopolitan institutions [54].

Rather than a nominal category, Ostiguy advocates viewing populism as an ordinal category – a matter of degree rather than type. This allows for empirical gradation and placement of political actors along the high-low continuum, acknowledging the cultural and stylistic variation across time and space [54]. In sum, the socio-cultural approach adds a vital cultural-relational dimension to the study of populism. It emphasizes style, identity, and performativity, offering explanatory tools for understanding how populism resonates with particular audiences and how it is enacted as a form of culturally situated political communication and mobilization.

### **3. Methodology and Analytical Model for Examining Edi Rama’s Populist Discourse**

This methodological design draws on key conceptual frameworks from the ideational [9] and political-strategic Weyland [15] approaches, while taking into account Albania’s pro-EU stance, which may shape a distinct populist rhetoric compared to leaders in EU member states who often cast Brussels as a malign “elite.”

The ideational perspective defines populism as a *thin-centered ideology* that sees society as split between a “virtuous people” and a “corrupt elite,” asserting that politics should express the general will of the people [9]. Scholars emphasize Manichean moral framing, whereby populist actors champion “the people” as morally righteous while denouncing elites as self-serving [1]. This discourse frequently involves appeals to common sense, direct democracy, and hostility toward “special interests” [1]. In Albania, a country aspiring to join the European Union, the EU is less likely to be portrayed as a corrupt, alien elite. Instead, it can function as a positive anchor for reform and modernization [15]. Edi Rama’s discourse may incorporate moralistic anti-elite elements domestically, while framing the EU as a legitimizing factor, thus revealing an atypical variant of European-targeted populism (see also [55]).

From a political-strategic standpoint, populism revolves around a personalistic leader who appeals directly to unorganized masses, thus circumventing intermediary bodies such as parties or unions [15]. Personalism, plebiscitary mobilization, and an opportunistic shift in policy stances are typical. Leaders who adopt such a strategy can invoke EU support not as a scapegoat unlike populists in some EU member states, but as external validation of their governance choices, potentially strengthening their personal authority [15]. Hence, analysing Edi Rama’s potential populist discourse requires combining these two angles: (a) an ideational focus on anti-elitist, moral frames about “the people,” and (b) a strategic view of how a leader leverages mass support, appeals to direct democracy, and uses the EU’s legitimacy to bolster political moves.

The study is based on a purposive sample of 96 public speeches, press conferences, op-eds, and official statements delivered by the Prime Minister of Albania between 2013 and 2024. These materials were collected from the official website of the Prime Minister’s Office ([www.kyreminstria.al](http://www.kyreminstria.al)) under the “Fjalime” (Speeches) section. The selection criteria prioritized text intended for both domestic and international audiences, spanning a diverse range of topics and forums. The sample includes: bilateral and multilateral diplomatic meetings (e.g., visits with foreign leaders, joint press conferences, regional summits); national-level announcements and political speeches (e.g., budget, reforms, elections, crisis response);

public addresses and statements following important national and international developments; interviews and op-eds published in international media; ceremonial and symbolic appearances, particularly those emphasizing national identity, history, or values.

The corpus includes key political and symbolic moments: Albania’s progress toward EU integration, judicial and anti-corruption reforms, participation in the Berlin Process and Open Balkan initiative, as well as responses to international crises such as the wars in Afghanistan and Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and major regional developments. These texts were chosen for their relevance in capturing rhetorical patterns associated with populist discourse, including appeals to “the people,” critiques of domestic elites, expressions of national unity, and moral contrasts. Media appearances and unscripted press interactions were particularly useful in identifying spontaneous populist markers. All texts were analyzed using a combination of holistic grading and itemized content coding, drawing on established frameworks in the populism literature [55] to capture both structured and improvised dimensions of Rama’s rhetorical style over time.

**3.1. Analytical Model - Coding Scheme**

Adapting established coding tools, Rooduijn and Pauwels [48], the proposed scheme contains the following main categories and indicators:

**Table 1.**  
Categories and Indicators of Populism.

No.	Categories	Indicators
1	Ideational Populism	People-centrism, anti-elitism, moral dualism
2	Strategic Populism	Personalism, direct appeal, bypassing institutions
3	Emotive Framing	Emotional intensity, pro/anti-EU tone, moral urgency
4	Pluralism (Reverse-Coded)	Mentions of compromise, cooperation, checks and balances (Reverse-coded)
5	Migration Discourse	Hospitality, solidarity, and national pride through the reception of refugees/migrants

The analysis combines holistic grading and itemized content coding to assess the populist dimensions of Prime Minister Edi Rama’s discourse (2013–2024). Each speech is graded on a 1–4 scale for populist intensity, using an adapted version of Hawkins [56] populist discourse index, while itemized coding tracks key markers such as people-centrism, anti-elitism, EU references, and moral binaries. EU references are analyzed to determine whether the Union is framed as a cooperative partner or an adversarial force. Particular focus is given to migrant and refugee rhetoric, where Albanian hospitality is used as a moral counterpoint to exclusionary populism in Western Europe.

This approach integrates ideational and strategic models of populism to contextualize Rama’s discourse within Albania’s EU accession trajectory. Unlike Western populisms marked by nationalism and nativism, Rama’s rhetoric blends inclusive, pro-European populism with domestic anti-elitism and humanitarian pride. His discourse reflects a populist strategy tailored to Albania’s international aspirations, positioning the country not in defiance of European norms, but as their moral exemplar contributing to wider debates on populism’s adaptability in semi-peripheral contexts.

The measurement formula for the Overall Populism Index is:

$$\frac{[\text{Ideational} + \text{Strategic} + \text{Emotive Framing} + (4 - \text{Pluralism}) + \text{Migration}]}{5}$$

This approach enables a multi-dimensional view of populist rhetoric-tracking how it interacts with emotional appeals, institutional attitudes, and humanitarian narratives like migration.

**4. Analysis – Longitudinal Analysis of Edi Rama’s Political Discourse (2013-2024)**

This chapter presents a longitudinal analysis of the overall populism index in the political discourse of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama from 2013 to 2024. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset of 96 speeches intended for both domestic and international audiences, the analysis captures the evolving populist tone and thematic emphases over more than a decade. Using a hybrid methodology that combines holistic grading with itemized content coding, the chapter identifies patterns of populist expression across key dimensions: ideational, strategic, emotive, pluralist, and migration-related. The overall index serves as a composite score reflecting the intensity and consistency of populist markers such as people-centrism, anti-elitism, moral dualism, and appeals to national virtue or popular sovereignty. By tracking this index over time, the chapter highlights how Rama’s populism has responded to shifting political contexts, including domestic reform processes, European integration dynamics, geopolitical crises, and humanitarian challenges.

The sections that follow unpack this overall trajectory through a focused examination of five core dimensions of populist rhetoric. Each dimension is analyzed in comparison with the overall index to assess its relative weight and evolution. This structure enables a nuanced understanding of how populist discourse has been strategically adapted, morally framed, and ideationally deployed across different periods and political arenas.

**4.1. Ideational Populism**

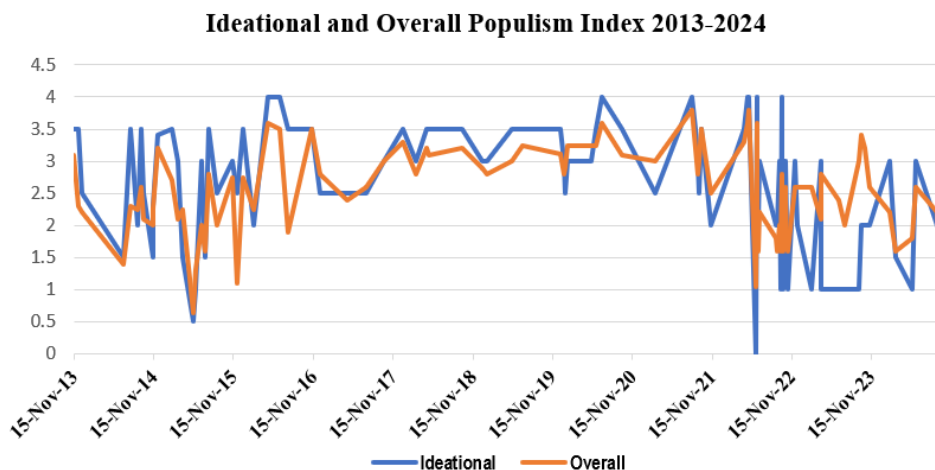
Throughout the 2013–2024 period, ideational populism in Edi Rama’s discourse has generally tracked closely with the overall populism index (Figure 1), though with some notable divergences. At its core, ideational populism – rooted in

concepts such as people-centrism, anti-elitism, and moral dualism – appears consistently but fluctuates depending on the political context. In the early years (2013-2015) of Rama's time in office, ideational populism displayed moderate intensity, often aligning with anti-corruption narratives and state-building reforms. While both indices show variability during this period, the ideational curve tends to be more volatile, suggesting a flexible ideological grounding shaped by rhetorical needs. From 2016 to 2019, ideational populism settled into a more stable pattern, generally oscillating between levels 2 and 4. During this period, its alignment with the overall index is especially tight, indicating that Rama's populist communication strategy remained ideologically consistent. His discourse emphasized the moral authority of the people especially around issues like justice reform, youth inclusion, and EU progress, while avoiding extreme anti-elite rhetoric. This consistency signals a form of moderate, civic-minded populism, distinct from the exclusionary nationalism seen elsewhere in Europe.

A critical shift occurs in the 2020-2021 period, during which both ideational and overall populism levels increase. Here, ideational populism spikes in tandem with national crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Afghan refugee response, and tensions in Kosovo. Rama's discourse adopts a stronger moral framing, portraying Albania as a humanitarian outlier in contrast to Western Europe's more defensive posture. This surge reflects the use of populist moral binaries (virtuous Albania vs. indifferent West), but also reinforces inclusive, pro-European values. Importantly, ideational populism plays a central role in shaping Albania's aspirational identity during this time.

In contrast, from late 2021 through 2023, a mild divergence emerges: the overall index remains relatively stable, but ideational populism dips. This suggests a pivot toward strategic, diplomatic, and institutional language, particularly during EU summits, bilateral meetings, and international engagements (e.g., Merkel, Zelensky, Meloni). Rama retains a direct and symbolic communications style, but the ideational populist elements become less pronounced. This indicates a temporary shift away from moral binaries and "people vs. Elite" framings, replaced by technocratic and cooperative discourse more suited for an international audience.

By 2024, ideational populism begins to climb again, closing the gap with the overall index. This resurgence likely reflects renewed focus on national symbolism (e.g., NATO airbase, UN speeches, bilateral deals with Turkey and Israel), and a reassertion of moral leadership within a multilateral context. Rama's populist discourse once again emphasizes Albania as principled and morally upright, subtly reintroducing ideational themes while staying within pro-European bounds.



**Figure 1.**  
Ideational Populism vs. Overall Populism Index.

#### 4.2. Strategic Populism

The analysis of Rama's speeches shows a strong alignment between strategic populism and the overall populism index across the 2013-2024 period, but with meaningful moments of divergence that offer insight into the communicative approach of Prime Minister Edi Rama. While the overall index reflects a composite of ideational and strategic populism, the strategic dimension captures how populist rhetoric is deployed instrumentally, often calibrated for political moments, target audiences, or situational goals, such as electoral competition, external diplomacy, or crisis response.

In the early phase (2013–2015), both indices moved closely but showed slight fluctuations, with strategic populism briefly dipping lower than the overall trend in late 2013 and early 2014. This reflects a cautious, state-building phase where populism was present but not heavily instrumentalized. However, by 2015, strategic populism rose, particularly during major political reform campaigns and regional diplomacy. This indicates a growing use of populist rhetoric not as ideology, but as a tool to build legitimacy, especially in relation to justice reform, anti-corruption efforts, and Albania's positioning on the European path.

Between 2016 and 2020, strategic populism stabilized at moderately high levels (mostly 3s and 4s), aligning tightly with the overall populism index. This suggests that Rama's use of populist style became more systematic and calculated during this period. It coincides with national referenda-like moments (e.g., justice reform, student protests), where direct appeals to the people were employed to bypass elite resistance and opposition narratives. The consistently elevated scores show that populist rhetoric was used not just reactively, but proactively framing policy victories in personalistic, emotive, and audience-centered ways to maximize resonance and control political tempo.

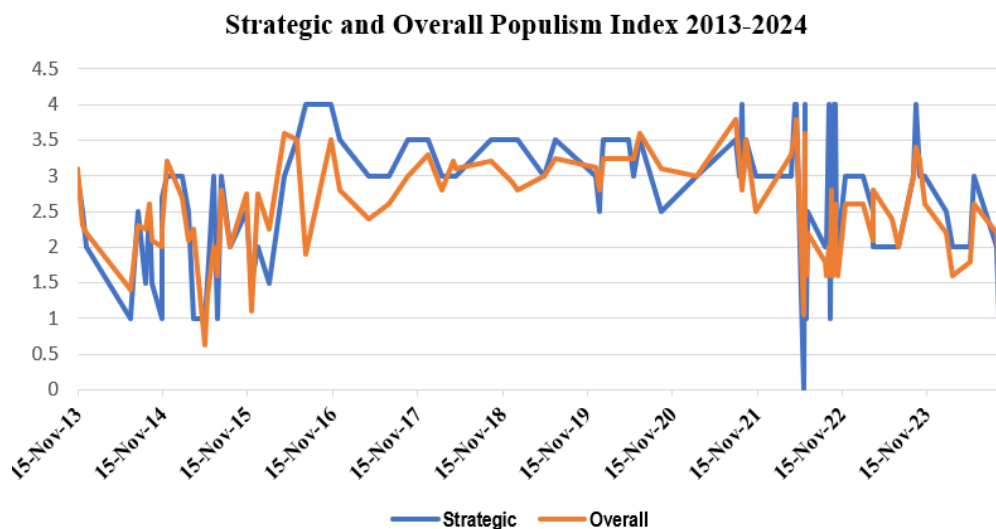


Around 2021, a strategic peak is visible coinciding with global humanitarian debates (e.g., Afghan refugee response, NATO positioning), when Rama’s rhetoric was imbued with moral leadership, humanitarian nationalism, and direct communication to global audiences. These moments demonstrate internationalized strategic populism tailored to elevate Albania’s image while simultaneously resonating with domestic pride.

However, late 2022 shows a sudden dip in both indices, with strategic populism briefly plummeting below 2. This suggests a temporary pullback from populist framing, likely in response to the international diplomatic stage (e.g., EU summits, security council meetings) where institutional language and multilateral alignment were more appropriate. It reflects Rama’s rhetorical flexibility dialing down populism when global norms call for technocratic or procedural tones.

In 2023 and 2024, strategic populism begins to rebound, diverging at moments from the overall index. These spikes often correspond to regionally or symbolically charged events such as high-level visits, joint summits, or security cooperation deals (e.g., Erdoğan, Meloni, UNGA). The upward trajectory suggests a return to strategic narrative framing, where Rama emphasizes Albania’s moral clarity, regional leadership, and resilience, without veering into polarizing populism.

Strategic populism is a dominant force shaping the overall populism index, especially during peak political moments. It is characterized by flexibility, audience awareness, and tactical intent, rising when Rama seeks to mobilize support, frame national identity, or enhance visibility both domestically and internationally. While ideational populism reflects foundational values, strategic populism shows how those values are communicated and when they are amplified. The close tracking between strategic and overall indices highlights the instrumental, calculated nature of Rama’s populist discourse one that is adaptive, performative, and highly situational.



**Figure 2.**  
Strategic Populism Index.

#### 4.3. Emotive Populism

The Emotive Populism Index (Figure 3) captures the intensity and frequency of emotionally charged appeals in Prime Minister Edi Rama’s speeches rhetoric centered on moral outrage, national pride, compassion, symbolic unity, and direct emotional resonance with the people. Compared to the Overall Populism Index, which averages ideational and strategic components, the emotive dimension shows much sharper variability, revealing how emotion is selectively but powerfully deployed in political communication.

The early years (2013–2016) are characterized by high volatility in the emotive index, with frequent spikes reaching 4s and even 5s, alongside intermittent dips to 0 or 1. This suggests a targeted use of emotional populism during key political turning points such as anti-corruption reforms, justice overhauls, and post-election discourses followed by more technocratic or diplomatic phases. Emotional appeals were often tied to righteous anger, celebration of national transformation, and symbolic inclusion of marginalized communities, consistent with a leader shaping a new narrative for Albania. In these years, Rama’s use of emotionally framed populism was reactive and performative, aiming to mobilize support, especially during political crises or major reforms. His oratorical style, which includes storytelling, personal appeals, and emotional empathy, elevated the emotive index well above the overall populism average at several points.

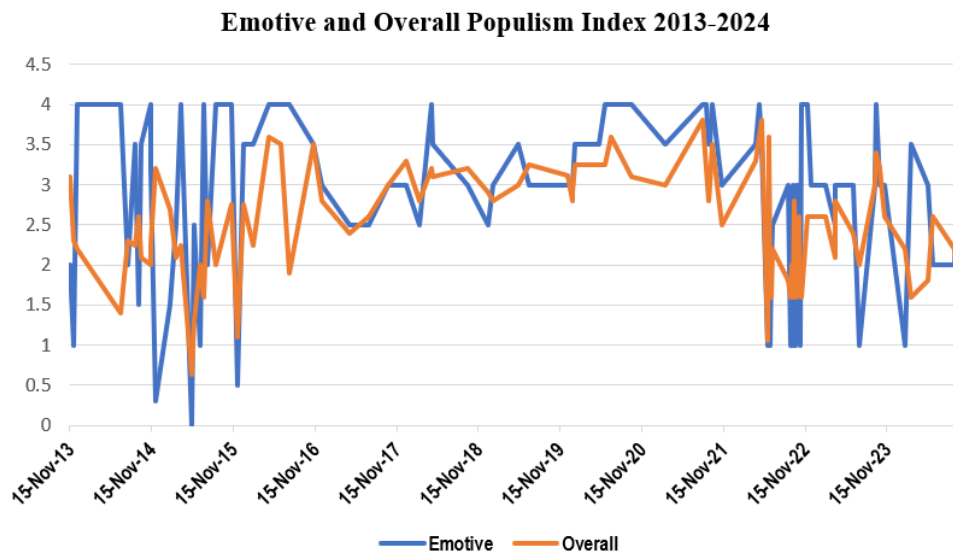
From 2017 to 2020, the emotive index stabilizes, converging more closely with the overall populism line, mostly fluctuating between 2 and 4. This reflects a consolidation period where emotional framing remained present but was moderated. Instead of dramatic swings, emotional appeals became more institutionalized used to amplify social welfare policies, frame student protests as moral causes, or promote EU integration as a source of national dignity. The steadiness of this period suggests Rama was using emotive populism strategically rather than erratically infusing speeches with empathy, pride, or frustration depending on the political setting, while maintaining a governing posture suitable for EU-facing diplomacy.

A marked decline in emotive populism is evident around late 2021 and 2022, with dips to index values of 1 or even 0. This coincides with Albania’s increased involvement in international diplomatic forums, including the UN Security Council, and high-level summits with EU and NATO leaders. In these forums, institutional tone and formalism took precedence,

causing a temporary suppression of emotionally charged populism. The emotive index's dip also aligns with post-COVID recovery phases, where speeches were focused more on reassurance and policy continuity rather than passionate appeals. The divergence from the overall index here highlights a discursive recalibration, where Rama avoids excessive emotion in favor of institutional credibility.

From 2023 onward, there is a modest return to elevated emotive populism, particularly in speeches on refugee solidarity, Jewish rescue memory, and international cooperation. These appeals are no longer polarizing but are framed through moral exemplarity, showcasing Albania's hospitality, historical pride, and regional leadership. For example, the Italy-Albania migration agreement and Jewish memory diplomacy allowed Rama to reclaim emotive frames of national virtue, portraying Albania as a moral actor on the world stage. The upward shift in this period reflects how emotion is reintegrated not in the form of populist rage or confrontation, but through symbolic capital and moral prestige.

The Emotive Populism Index reveals that emotion is the most elastic and tactical populist tool in Rama's rhetorical repertoire. While strategic and ideational populism follow steadier trajectories, emotive populism surges or recedes based on situational needs, peaking during national campaigns or moments of pride, and dipping during high-stakes international diplomacy. Importantly, emotional populism in Rama's discourse is rarely antagonistic or exclusionary. Instead, it tends to be inclusive, moralistic, and solidarity-driven, often used to reinforce national dignity or contrast Albania's values with those of less open or more cynical Western actors. This positions Albania as not just a rule-follower in EU accession, but as a normative leader grounded in emotional and historical legitimacy.



**Figure 3.**  
Emotive Populism vs. Overall Populism Index.

#### 4.4. Pluralism Populism Index

The Pluralism Index (Reverse Coded) measures the degree of anti-pluralism in Rama's rhetoric. A lower score (closer to 1) indicates more pluralistic discourse inclusive of opposition, institutional autonomy, and ideological diversity while higher values reflect greater anti-pluralist tendencies, such as delegitimizing dissent, framing opponents as morally corrupt, or presenting the government as the sole legitimate voice of the people. By reversing the coding to align directionally with populism (i.e., higher values reflect greater anti-pluralism), the graph helps illustrate how pluralism fluctuates in tandem with overall populist strategies.

In the early years of Rama's premiership (2013–2016), the Pluralism Index varied considerably, mostly ranging between 1 and 3, often below the overall populism line. This indicates that while Rama frequently employed populist appeals, they were not always exclusionary. There is evidence of rhetorical space for opposition and institutional pluralism, particularly in EU-related or reform-centered speeches. However, during periods of intense reform such as the territorial reform (2014) and justice reform debates (2015–2016) we observe temporary spikes in anti-pluralist rhetoric, coinciding with efforts to delegitimize political opponents as obstacles to progress.

Between 2017 and 2020, pluralism and overall populism gradually converge, with the Pluralism Index clustering around 2–3, suggesting a tightening of rhetorical space for dissent. This period overlaps with electoral tensions, opposition protests, and growing political polarization. Rama's discourse increasingly frames his government as the true representative of modernization and European progress, while depicting the opposition as reactionary or corrupt. This subtle demonization of opponents and emphasis on majoritarian legitimacy corresponds with a rising anti-pluralist tone, though still more moderated than in classical exclusionary populist regimes.

One of the most notable findings is the sharp drop in pluralism around late 2021 and into 2022, with values approaching 0–1, even as the overall populism index remains elevated. This period marks heightened populist moments, including rhetorical attacks on critics, confrontations over national sovereignty, energy policy, and migration, and assertive claims to moral and democratic superiority. In this phase, Rama's rhetoric reflects a clear populist dichotomy: the people versus a discredited elite, Albania versus cynical European skeptics, and government action versus opposition obstruction. These

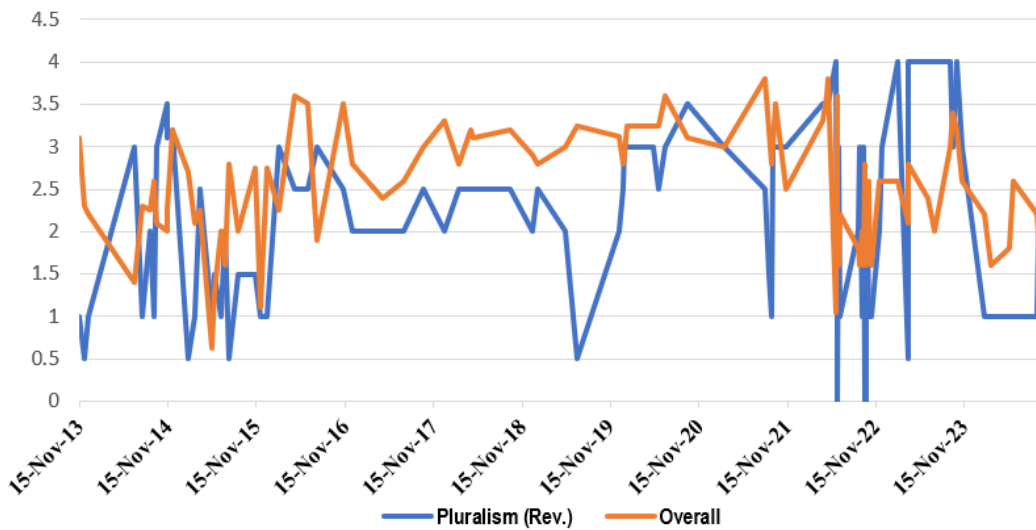


speeches exhibit low tolerance for dissenting narratives, even when performed in the name of democratic or international values.

From 2023 onward, the Pluralism Index stabilizes at higher values again (2–3), showing signs of restored rhetorical inclusion, particularly in multilateral forums, joint press conferences, and EU-facing speeches. Speeches around migration deals, international cooperation, and the UN stage show Rama taking a more statesmanlike tone, reframing disagreements as part of democratic discourse. This suggests a shift back toward pluralist framing, albeit selectively applied in international or institutional contexts, while maintaining sharper populist rhetoric in domestic partisan settings.

The pluralism dimension offers key insight into when and how Rama’s populism becomes exclusionary. While his discourse consistently displays populist intensity, the anti-pluralist edge is not constant. Instead, it spikes in moments of political threat, especially from opposition parties or when Rama seeks to consolidate moral authority on contentious reforms. Importantly, the index reveals that Rama’s populism is not ideologically anti-pluralist, but strategically conditional anti-pluralism rises in moments of domestic contestation and recedes in periods of external alignment and international diplomacy. This flexible approach allows Rama to maintain populist legitimacy without fully breaking from democratic norms, positioning his leadership at the intersection of majoritarian confidence and pluralist accountability.

**Pluralism and Overall Populism Index 2013-2024**



**Figure 4.**  
Pluralism Populism vs. Overall Populism Index.

**4.5. Migration Populism Index**

From 2013 to around 2017, the Migration Index remained at zero for the vast majority of speeches, indicating that migration-related themes were largely absent or played an insignificant rhetorical role in Prime Minister Edi Rama's discourse during this early phase. This aligns with the broader regional context; migration had not yet become a major political fault line in Albania, and populist discourse focused more on anti-corruption, institutional reform, and European integration. Meanwhile, the Overall Populism Index during this period was already well established and fluctuated between moderate and high levels (2–4), suggesting that Rama’s populist appeals were driven more by domestic political dynamics than transnational moral symbolism.

Migration began to appear sporadically from 2018 onward, but remained infrequent and marginal, with low index values (1–2) when present. These references are typically administrative or symbolic, acknowledging Albania's participation in humanitarian responses (e.g., Syrian refugees) without making migration a central populist motif. Importantly, while Western European populists framed migration as a threat, Rama’s discourse in these early stages did not mirror this exclusionary logic. Instead, any references to migration were non-alarmist and state-centered, more aligned with Albania’s aspirational identity as a cooperative, moral member of the international community.

Starting in late 2021, the Migration Index shows a noticeable increase, peaking sharply in several speeches across 2022. This shift corresponds with Rama’s active embrace of migration and refugee topics, especially around Afghan evacuations, Syrian war legacies, and broader humanitarian crises (e.g., Ukraine). What’s distinct here is that migration is not securitized but moralized, used to frame Albanian hospitality as a virtue and a point of national pride. For instance, Rama often contrasts Albania’s welcoming attitude with Western Europe’s anti-migrant populism, flipping the script by presenting openness as a populist moral stance rooted in Albanian identity and historical values (e.g., sheltering Jews during WWII). The high migration scores during this phase thus reflect a symbolic reconfiguration: migration becomes a populist resource used to assert Albania’s ethical leadership and exceptionalism, particularly in contrast to larger EU states.

In the final years of the dataset (2023–2024), the Migration Index remains consistently high, mirroring the period where Rama leverages migration as both a domestic and diplomatic narrative. Key moments include: Joint agreements with Italy (Meloni migrant deal); UNGA and UNHQ speeches emphasizing Albania’s stance on refugees; Continued references to Albania’s unique “hospitality doctrine” in contrast to European xenophobia. These speeches show that migration has become

a sustained component of Rama’s populist rhetoric not as a threat, but as a moral cornerstone and identity marker. The continued divergence from the Overall Populism Index suggests that migration-related populism operates somewhat independently, contributing to populist intensity only in certain thematic or internationalist contexts, rather than across all speech types.

Unlike the exclusionary, fear-based migration rhetoric common in right-wing populism, Rama’s use of migration is inclusionary, moralistic, and nationally flattering. The Migration Index helps reveal how hospitality becomes a populist currency, allowing Rama to stake moral leadership claims on the global stage. This dimension of populism is both ideational (linked to values, identity, and moral binaries) and strategic (used to boost legitimacy in EU and international negotiations). It shows how Albania’s peripheral position in the EU context allows its leader to reclaim the moral high ground, using migration not to divide society, but to unify it around a symbolic national virtue.

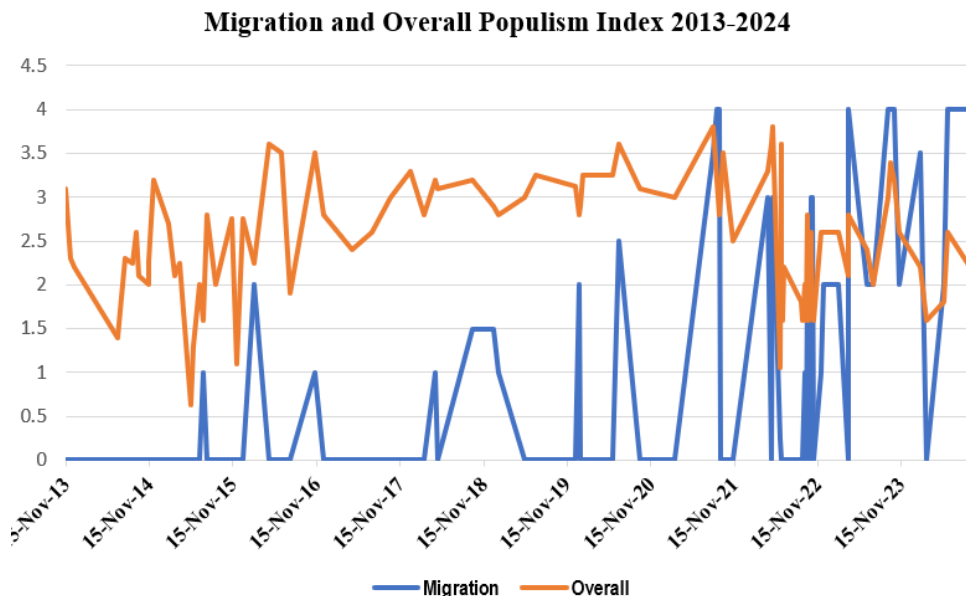


Figure 5. Migration Populism vs. Overall Populism Index.

### 5. Conclusions

This study has provided a longitudinal and multidimensional analysis of the populist discourse employed by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama between 2013 and 2024. Utilizing 96 speeches, interviews, and public statements, the research applied an ideational-strategic framework [16] to examine how populist appeals centered on people-centrism, moral dualism, and anti-elitism interact with broader narratives of Europeanization and democratic reform in a candidate country context.

Findings reveal that Rama’s discourse reflects a moderate but consistent form of thin-centered populism, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser [55], in which moral dichotomies between “the virtuous people” and “the corrupt elite” are periodically activated especially during electoral campaigns and moments of institutional contestation. However, unlike exclusionary populist styles common in several EU member states, Rama’s rhetoric refrains from targeting the European Union as a hostile external force. Instead, the EU is framed as a normative partner and a geopolitical anchor for Albania’s modernization an orientation that resonates with Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s [55] notion of populism as ideologically adaptable to national contexts.

Strategically, Rama exhibits traits of personalistic leadership and plebiscitarian mobilization [38] especially through mechanisms such as the National Consultation (*Këshillimi Kombëtar*) and media-centered citizen engagement. These practices situate him within a “governing populism” model, where symbolic appeals and rhetorical centralization coexist with functional cooperation with institutional structures [51]. In this sense, Rama’s leadership demonstrates a “fuzzy” populist configuration partially populist, yet consistently embedded within liberal-democratic frameworks [12].

Emotively and stylistically, Rama’s discourse displays traits consistent with socio-cultural approach of Ostiguy [54], particularly the use of high-low relational cues. His frequent invocation of Albania’s moral identity, especially around hospitality towards migrants and the historical legacy of rescuing Jews during WWII, constructs a culturally resonant narrative that elevates Albania as a moral actor on the international stage. This “flaunting of the low,” when framed against restrictive Western migration policies, not only affirms national pride but also functions as a performative populist identity that appeals to underdog status while maintaining normative alignment with European values.

Importantly, the analysis highlights a distinct Europhilic populism, in which populist frames are not deployed against transnational institutions but rather in concert with them. This reflects the broader theoretical insight that populism, particularly in EU-aspiring countries, may be instrumentally adaptive rather than ideologically antagonistic [55]. Albania’s status as a small state operating under asymmetric power conditions incentivizes rhetorical strategies that blend anti-elite domestic mobilization with external legitimation through the EU [16].

Ultimately, this study suggests that populism in Albania under Edi Rama represents a hybrid discursive style one that challenges rigid dichotomies between populist and liberal-democratic politics. Rather than posing a threat to pluralism or institutionalism, Rama's discourse often reinforces both, situating populism as a context-contingent communicative mode rather than a fixed regime type [26]. Future research should explore comparative cases in the Western Balkans and beyond, examining whether similar dual-nested populist strategies anchored in domestic moral appeals and internationalist legitimacy are replicated in other EU-aspiring polities.

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**Annexes**

**Annex 1: Coding Framework Structure**

Category	Subcomponents	Coding (0-4)	Frequency (Tally)	Notes
Ideational Populism	People-centrism, Anti-elitism, Moral Dualism	Sum or average of subitems	Count of references	Focus on "the people vs elite"
Strategic Populism	Personalism, Direct Appeals, Institutional Bypass			E.g., use of "I alone can fix it," strongman references
Emotive Framing	Pro-EU justification, EU compliance framing			Unusual: EU as legitimizer instead of antagonist
Pluralist Mentions	References to compromise, multivocality, checks & balances	Reverse-coded		Low populism=more pluralism
Migration Discourse	Emphasis on hospitality, solidarity with migrants			Albania-specific dimension