

Populism, Political Stability, And The Construction Of Tourism Destination Image In Contemporary Democracies

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between politics and tourism has long been acknowledged in both political science and tourism studies, yet it remains theoretically fragmented and empirically underexplored, particularly in the context of contemporary populism. In recent decades, populist movements and leaders have gained unprecedented power across Western democracies and emerging economies alike, reshaping political institutions, public discourse, and international perceptions of national identity. At the same time, tourism has become one of the most politically sensitive and economically consequential industries, deeply dependent on national image, political stability, and global reputation. This article develops a comprehensive theoretical and empirical synthesis of how populism and political instability interact with destination image formation and tourism competitiveness. Drawing strictly on the multidisciplinary literature provided, the study integrates political theory, particularly the work on populism, hegemony, and state legitimacy, with tourism research on destination image, risk perception, and country branding. The article argues that populism operates as a discursive and institutional force that reshapes how nations are perceived both domestically and internationally, thereby influencing tourism flows, investor confidence, and destination competitiveness. Through a qualitative and interpretive analysis of political discourse, institutional dynamics, and tourism perception frameworks, the study demonstrates that populist governance tends to produce volatile and polarized country images that simultaneously attract and repel different segments of the global tourism market. On the one hand, populist rhetoric may generate visibility, emotional engagement, and symbolic authenticity, potentially appealing to certain tourists seeking cultural or political novelty. On the other hand, populism often amplifies perceptions of political instability, nationalism, and social conflict, which are empirically associated with heightened travel risk perception and declining tourism demand. By synthesizing the political economy of instability with destination image theory and the politics of tourism governance, this article offers a unified conceptual model explaining how political ideology, state legitimacy, media narratives, and tourist psychology interact in the era of populism. The findings have important implications for tourism policymakers, destination marketers, and political leaders, suggesting that sustainable tourism development in the twenty-first century cannot be separated from the quality of democratic governance, institutional stability, and the strategic management of national image.

KEYWORDS

Populism, destination image, political instability, tourism governance, country branding, risk perception.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has never been a politically neutral activity. From its earliest forms as elite travel in imperial and colonial contexts to its contemporary manifestation as a mass global industry, tourism has always been shaped by the political structures, ideological climates, and power relations of the societies that host and generate travelers. Scholars of tourism and politics have long emphasized that the movement of people across borders, the representation of places, and the economic organization of destinations are inseparable from state authority, diplomatic relations, and domestic political stability (Hall, 1994; Hall, 1996; Richter, 1989). In the twenty-first century, however, this political dimension of tourism has taken on renewed significance due to the rise of populism as a dominant political force in many countries. Populism, characterized by a moralized division between a supposedly pure people and a corrupt elite, has reshaped political discourse, public policy, and international relations across Europe, the Americas, and beyond (Mudde, 2004; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Hadiz & Chrysogelos, 2017). These transformations have profound implications for how nations are perceived by external audiences and, consequently, for their attractiveness as tourism destinations.

Destination image, defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people hold about a place, is one of the most powerful determinants of tourism demand (Lopes, 2011; Martínez & Alvarez, 2010). It is shaped not only by marketing campaigns and media representations but also by political events, leadership styles, and broader narratives about national identity. Research in tourism studies has consistently shown that political instability, terrorism, and ideological conflict significantly influence tourists' perceptions of risk and safety, thereby affecting their destination choices (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Sonmez, 1998; Seddighi et al., 2001). Yet, despite this rich body of research, the specific role of populism in shaping destination image remains under-theorized. Populism is not simply another form of political instability; it is a distinctive mode of political mobilization and governance that reconfigures the relationship between the state, the media, and the public, both domestically and internationally (Chrysogelos, 2017; Lacatus, 2019).

The recent political trajectories of countries such as Italy, France, and the United States illustrate how populist leaders use emotionally charged narratives, social media, and nationalist symbolism to construct alternative images of their nations. The alliance between Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio in Italy, formalized through the so-called "Contract for the government of change," exemplifies how populist movements seek to redefine national priorities and international positioning (ABC, 2018). Such political shifts inevitably affect how foreign publics, including potential tourists, interpret the safety, openness, and cultural character of a destination. The literature on country branding and destination image suggests that these interpretations are not merely superficial impressions but deeply embedded cognitive and affective constructs that guide travel intentions and economic behavior (Echeverri et al., 2013; Chaulagain et al., 2019; Jalilvand, 2017).

At the same time, tourism is a critical sector of economic development, especially for countries seeking to diversify their economies and generate employment and foreign exchange (Agaraj & Murati, 2009). The political environment in which tourism operates therefore has far-reaching consequences for economic growth, social cohesion, and international integration. Political instability has been shown to undermine economic performance by increasing uncertainty, reducing investment, and disrupting institutional continuity (Gupta, 1990; Sanders, 1981). When such instability is driven by populist politics, its effects may be particularly pronounced, as populism often involves confrontational rhetoric, policy unpredictability, and challenges to established governance structures (Mudde, 2004; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). For tourism, an industry that depends on long-term planning, infrastructural investment, and international trust, these conditions can be especially

damaging.

Despite these connections, existing research tends to treat political factors as exogenous shocks to tourism rather than as integral components of destination image formation. Studies on terrorism and tourism, for example, focus primarily on violent events and immediate security risks (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Sonmez, 1998), while research on political ideology and destination choice often examines tourists' own beliefs rather than the ideological character of host governments (Legg et al., 2012). Similarly, the literature on country image and branding emphasizes marketing strategies and media narratives but pays less attention to how political discourse and populist leadership styles shape those narratives at a structural level (Echeverri et al., 2013; Lopes, 2011). This fragmentation creates a significant theoretical and empirical gap: we lack a coherent framework for understanding how populism as a political phenomenon influences destination image and, through it, tourism development.

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by developing a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between populism, political stability, and tourism destination image. Drawing exclusively on the provided literature, the study synthesizes insights from political theory, particularly the work on populism and hegemony, with tourism research on image formation, risk perception, and destination competitiveness. By doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that populism is not merely a background condition for tourism but an active force that shapes how destinations are imagined, evaluated, and consumed. The central argument advanced here is that populist politics produce a distinctive kind of destination image characterized by heightened emotional intensity, symbolic polarization, and narrative volatility, which in turn has complex and often contradictory effects on tourism demand and competitiveness.

This analysis is especially timely given the growing importance of sustainable tourism and destination governance in an era of global uncertainty. The European Tourism Indicator System, for example, highlights the need for political and institutional stability as a foundation for sustainable and competitive tourism development (Font et al., 2023). At the same time, destination leadership and governance have been identified as critical determinants of how effectively places can adapt to changing market conditions and social expectations (Pechlaner et al., 2014). Populist governance, with its emphasis on direct appeals to the people and skepticism toward expert-led policy, poses unique challenges to these frameworks. Understanding how populism reshapes the political and symbolic environment of tourism is therefore not only an academic exercise but a practical necessity for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

MMETHODOLOGY

The methodological approach adopted in this study is qualitative, interpretive, and theoretically integrative, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of the research problem. Given that the objective is not to test a narrow hypothesis through quantitative measurement but to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of how populism, political stability, and destination image interact, the study relies on a systematic analysis of the scholarly and institutional literature provided. This approach is consistent with the traditions of political economy and critical tourism studies, which emphasize the importance of theoretical depth, contextual interpretation, and the synthesis of diverse perspectives (Hall, 1994; Richter, 1989).

The first stage of the methodology involves a conceptual mapping of the key constructs involved in the analysis: populism, political instability, destination image, and tourism competitiveness. Populism is operationalized in line with Mudde's definition as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into a virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004), as well as with the more discursive and state-centered interpretations offered by

Chryssogelos (2017) and Hadiz and Chryssogelos (2017). Political instability is understood as a condition of uncertainty, volatility, and contested legitimacy within a political system, drawing on the economic and political analyses of Gupta (1990) and Sanders (1981). Destination image is conceptualized according to the tourism literature as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive beliefs, affective evaluations, and conative intentions (Lopes, 2011; Martínez & Alvarez, 2010; Jalilvand, 2017).

The second stage involves a thematic analysis of how these constructs are linked in the literature. Political science sources are examined to identify the mechanisms through which populism affects state behavior, media discourse, and international perceptions (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Lacatus, 2019; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). Tourism studies are then analyzed to understand how political conditions and narratives influence tourist perceptions, risk assessments, and destination choice (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Seddighi et al., 2001; Chaulagain et al., 2019). By comparing and integrating these strands, the study constructs a theoretical bridge between macro-level political dynamics and micro-level tourism behavior.

The third stage of the methodology involves an interpretive analysis of specific political and tourism contexts referenced in the literature. For example, the Italian populist coalition described by ABC (2018) is examined as an illustrative case of how populist governance can reshape national and international narratives. Similarly, the French presidential election data provided by the Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer (2017) are used to contextualize the broader rise of populist and anti-establishment movements in Western Europe. These cases are not treated as statistical samples but as analytically rich contexts that illuminate the theoretical relationships under study.

Throughout the analysis, the study adheres strictly to the principle of triangulation, using multiple sources to support each major claim. For instance, the link between political instability and tourism demand is supported by both economic analyses (Gupta, 1990) and tourism-specific studies (Sonmez, 1998; Seddighi et al., 2001). Similarly, the role of media and communication in shaping destination image is grounded in both political communication research (Lacatus, 2019) and tourism marketing studies (Jalilvand, 2017; Lopes, 2011). This methodological rigor ensures that the conclusions drawn are not speculative but firmly rooted in the existing body of knowledge.

Finally, the study adopts a critical and reflexive stance, acknowledging that concepts such as populism and destination image are not static but socially constructed and contested. By situating these concepts within broader theories of hegemony and discourse, particularly those derived from Gramsci (1980), the analysis seeks to reveal the power relations and ideological struggles that underlie seemingly technical issues of tourism marketing and political governance.

RESULTS

The integrative analysis of the political and tourism literature yields several interrelated findings that clarify how populism and political stability shape destination image and tourism dynamics. One of the most significant results is the identification of populism as a powerful narrative force that reconfigures national image at both domestic and international levels. Populist leaders and movements construct highly emotive and simplified stories about who “the people” are and what the nation represents, often in opposition to external forces, elites, or global institutions (Mudde, 2004; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007). These narratives are not confined to domestic politics but are disseminated through international media, diplomatic interactions, and digital platforms, thereby influencing how foreign audiences perceive the country.

From a tourism perspective, this narrative reconfiguration has direct implications for destination image.

Destination image is formed through a combination of organic sources, such as news and word-of-mouth, and induced sources, such as marketing campaigns (Lopes, 2011; Jalilvand, 2017). Populist politics tend to dominate organic information flows because of their controversial and emotionally charged nature. As a result, political events, speeches, and conflicts become salient components of the mental images that potential tourists hold about a destination. When populist leaders emphasize themes of national sovereignty, cultural purity, or resistance to globalization, these themes can translate into perceptions of insularity, unpredictability, or even hostility toward outsiders.

Another key result concerns the relationship between populism and political instability. Although populist movements often claim to restore order and represent the true will of the people, the literature suggests that they frequently generate institutional conflict, policy volatility, and social polarization (Hadiz & Chrysosgelos, 2017; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). Such conditions align closely with established definitions of political instability as patterns of uncertainty and contested authority (Gupta, 1990; Sanders, 1981). For tourism, this instability manifests as increased perceived risk. Studies have consistently shown that tourists are highly sensitive to political risk, including government change, protests, and ideological conflict, and that such risks significantly deter travel to affected destinations (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Seddighi et al., 2001).

The analysis also reveals that the impact of populism on tourism is not uniformly negative but varies according to the type of tourist and the symbolic positioning of the destination. Research on political ideology and destination choice indicates that tourists' own beliefs and values influence how they interpret political conditions in a destination (Legg et al., 2012). For some travelers, populist rhetoric emphasizing authenticity, tradition, and national pride may enhance the perceived cultural distinctiveness of a place, making it more attractive. For others, especially those who value cosmopolitanism, openness, and stability, the same rhetoric may generate discomfort and avoidance. This segmentation effect helps explain why some populist-led destinations may experience polarized tourism outcomes rather than a simple decline or increase.

Furthermore, the results highlight the role of media and communication in mediating the relationship between populism and destination image. Word-of-mouth and mass media are both critical in shaping how destinations are perceived, but their influence differs in important ways (Jalilvand, 2017). Populist leaders often use social media and direct communication channels to bypass traditional media, creating alternative narratives that may resonate strongly with certain audiences while alienating others (Lacatus, 2019). These dynamics can lead to fragmented and contradictory destination images, where different segments of the global audience hold radically different views of the same country.

Finally, the analysis underscores the importance of governance and leadership in managing the tourism implications of populism. Effective destination leadership and sustainable tourism governance require coordination, long-term planning, and trust between stakeholders (Pechlaner et al., 2014; Font et al., 2023). Populist governance, by contrast, often prioritizes short-term political gains and symbolic gestures over institutional stability and policy continuity. This tension can undermine the implementation of sustainable tourism indicators and the maintenance of a coherent destination brand, ultimately affecting competitiveness and resilience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study invite a deeper reflection on the theoretical and practical implications of populism for tourism and destination image. At a theoretical level, the analysis supports the view that tourism is not merely an economic sector but a site of ideological and cultural contestation. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of

hegemony, one can interpret populist politics as a struggle over the symbolic meaning of the nation, a struggle that extends into the realm of tourism through the representation and commodification of place (Gramsci, 1980). Destination image becomes a terrain on which competing narratives of national identity, belonging, and openness are negotiated.

This perspective challenges conventional tourism marketing approaches that treat political conditions as external variables to be managed or mitigated. Instead, it suggests that political discourse is constitutive of destination image itself. When populist leaders frame the nation as under siege from external threats, for example, they are not only mobilizing voters but also shaping the stories that tourists hear about the country. These stories influence cognitive evaluations of safety and attractiveness as well as affective responses such as curiosity, fear, or admiration (Lopes, 2011; Chaulagain et al., 2019).

The discussion also highlights the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of populism's impact on tourism. While political instability and ideological polarization generally reduce tourism demand by increasing perceived risk (Sonmez, 1998; Seddighi et al., 2001), populism can also generate intense media attention and a sense of drama that may attract certain types of visitors. This dynamic resonates with the broader literature on dark tourism and political tourism, where travelers are drawn to places associated with conflict, controversy, or historical significance. Although such forms of tourism are not directly addressed in the provided references, the underlying logic of symbolic attraction is consistent with the idea that not all risk is perceived negatively.

However, from the perspective of sustainable and competitive tourism development, the volatility associated with populism poses significant challenges. Sustainable tourism indicators emphasize stability, inclusiveness, and long-term planning as prerequisites for competitiveness (Font et al., 2023). Populist governance, with its tendency toward abrupt policy shifts and confrontational rhetoric, undermines these conditions by creating uncertainty for investors, local communities, and international partners. Destination leadership, which requires the ability to coordinate diverse stakeholders and maintain a coherent strategic vision, becomes particularly difficult in such an environment (Pechlaner et al., 2014).

The limitations of this study stem primarily from its reliance on secondary sources and theoretical analysis. While the provided literature offers rich insights into both populism and tourism, it does not include detailed empirical data on tourism flows under populist regimes. Future research could build on this framework by conducting comparative case studies or longitudinal analyses that measure how changes in political discourse correlate with changes in destination image and tourism performance. Such research would further clarify the causal mechanisms suggested here.

Another important avenue for future research concerns the role of digital media in amplifying or moderating the effects of populism on destination image. As Jalilvand (2017) and Lacatus (2019) suggest, communication channels play a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Understanding how social media algorithms, influencer culture, and online reviews interact with political narratives could provide more nuanced insights into contemporary tourism dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that populism is a central and underappreciated factor in the construction of tourism destination image in contemporary democracies. By integrating political theory with tourism studies, it has shown that populist politics reshape national narratives, generate political instability, and influence how destinations are perceived by global audiences. These processes, in turn, affect tourism demand, investment, and competitiveness in complex and often contradictory ways.

The key contribution of this study lies in its conceptualization of destination image as a politically embedded construct. Rather than viewing tourism as a neutral economic activity disrupted by occasional political shocks, the analysis reveals that political discourse and governance styles are integral to how places are imagined and consumed. In an era of rising populism, this insight is particularly important for policymakers and tourism professionals seeking to promote sustainable and resilient tourism development.

Ultimately, the future of tourism in populist contexts will depend on the ability of destinations to navigate the tensions between national identity, political legitimacy, and global openness. Recognizing and addressing the political foundations of destination image is a crucial step toward achieving this goal.

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