
POPULISM AS THE ‘DEMOCRATIC MALAISE’

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Abstract

The vast majority of the papers on populism describe this political phenomenon as one which is very difficult to explain and to analyze due to its discursive versatility and behavioural chameleonism. The increase of scientific interest around this issue reflects a presence in the growing empirical reality of the populist discourse in the global political landscape. And that is because this phenomenon occurs in the most unexpected forms in areas that seem to have nothing in common with each other. Despite these facts, the paper aims to demonstrate that populism in Central and Western Europe is not exactly the same, because populism is a discourse, a discourse that adapts to its public and feeds from its context. The populist discourse, therefore, took on different forms.

Keywords: populism, anti-immigrationism, crisis of representation, anti-system discourse

1. Introduction

The vast majority of the papers on populism describe this political phenomenon as one which is very difficult to explain and to analyze due to its discursive versatility and behavioural chameleonism. Furthermore, I would argue that the term populism covers more political and social realities than one single term would normally concentrate from a semantic point of view. This is why many analysts of this phenomenon, such as Guy Hermet or Gianfranco Pasquino, have tried to introduce the term ‘populisms’ instead of populism, in an attempt to find as clear a definition as possible to this phenomenon [1, 2]. Some authors have defined populism as a system of ‘post industrial’ parties and thus, ‘post classial’ [3, 4]. Others have defined it as a certain style of making politics, varying in discourse from one society to another, but similar through its intimate structures of behaviours and ideas [5, 6]

Therefore before assuming a definition I think it would be important to describe the main political elements that are considered to be populist, no matter the area or region where they manifest themselves: 1. contempt and even hatred of political elites, 2. a strong anti-corruption rhetoric, 3. a discourse based on an anti-system the appeal to the nation as a whole, 4. cultural conservatism (or religious), 5. economic egalitarianism, 6. rhetorical anti-capitalism, 7. declared

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nationalism, 8. xenophobic behavior and discourses, 9. conflicting public policies (when they arrive into power), 10. anti-system foreign policy and alliances [I. Krastev, The new Europe respectable populism and clockwise liberalism, open Democracy, 21 March 2006, online at http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/new_europe_3376.jsp].

Of course, these are pieces of a puzzle and cannot be found all in the same formula, with the same intensity and at the same time. But each of these elements can be considered as being expressions of populism and of this type of discourse. And, probably, this is why the term ‘populisms’ seems fair as a generic term.

Despite significant differences in behaviour and discourse, there is a defining hard core that allows keeping into account the multiple forms that populism can embody. Following Canovan’s perspective, I will define this common core as “an appeal to the nation against the established structures of the ruling power, as well as against the society’s dominant ideas and values” [7]. And the other definition is that of Cas Mudd which aims to synthesize populist discourse - he defines populism as an ideology with a thin center which considers that society must finally be divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘pure people’ versus ‘corrupt elites’, and argues that politics must be the expression of a general will of the people. (...) In the populist democracy nothing is more important than general will, not even constitutional guarantees [8].

The increase of scientific interest around this issue reflects a presence in the growing empirical reality of the populist discourse in the global political landscape. And that is because this phenomenon occurs in the most unexpected forms in areas that seem to have nothing in common with each other. However, the identity elements of populism seem to unite different social and political areas. In general, there is talk about three types of populisms largely considered to be different from each other - the Latin American, the Western European and Central East European. But as we are trying to show there are ties of discourse and political action between these areas, which shows that political discourse has globalized as well.

As regards Western Europe, the success of the radical right winged populist parties, such as the National Front in France or the Liberty Party in Austria, which stabilized at around 10% in the 80s, has awoken researchers’ interest. They have constructed theories and analyses on this subject, theories that no longer matched for the Central and East European populist parties, which did not mean that in essence the parties from the CEE did not have similar discourses, but rather adapted to other political and social realities. Parties such as the Socialist Labour Party of the ‘România Mare’ (Great Romania) Party from Romania, Vladimir Meciar’s People’s Party in Slovakia etc. had a discourse so nationalist and xenophobic that they divided society between the ‘right people’ and the ‘corrupted elite’, the same case as in the West, but reported to different situations and receptors.

The radical right winged populist parties had scores relatively comparable on both sides of the Iron Curtain in Europe at the beginning of the 90s. Despite this common feature, most authors tend to focus their analysis on Western populism, avoiding both the pan-European perspective and a thorough examination of populism in post-communist countries. The little specialized literature that has attempted comparative studies on populism in this regard is deeply divided, as some authors focus on the intrinsic difference between populism in the CEE and Western Europe, while others emphasize the risk of making artificial distinctions between East and West and to generate categories and different realities, as the phenomenon is pan-European. This last tendency considers that the growing success of populist discourse in both parts of the EU is generated, in essence, by a common frustration of Europeans in relation to democracy.

2. The analytical core of populism

Focusing on defining populism as pointed out earlier, these two approaches are not necessarily contradictory. In other words there is a 'common analytical core' or a structure that can be found in the discourse of populism both in the East and West. However, because populism is in two fundamentally different political environments, well-established Western democracies and post-communist democracies of Eastern Europe, one needs to analyze the different forms on both sides of the former Iron Curtain [9].

Before analyzing the various expressions of populism in Europe, it is necessary to define more precisely the 'common analytical core' that Panizza Francisco uses to connect together various forms of populism. According to this approach, populism is a speech against the status quo, which simplifies the political space, by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' and 'the others'. 'The people' in this perspective, is not the necessary abstraction in any democratic theory, but a uniform and homogeneous organism, defined by opposition to its enemies. The latter consists primarily of the political and economic elite, which usurped political power and that of minorities, threatening the identity and homogeneity of the nation.

Defining for this feature of the populist discourse is what Paul Taggart called the "intrinsic chameleonic quality of populism" [10], which varies depending on the specific realities in which the populist discourse appears. In other words, they are 'empty signifiers' that can take many forms. According to Canovan [7] the power structure of the State (or region) is essential in forming this specific populist discourse as populism is above all a reaction of the elite to power and to the dominant political discourse. Starting from here, the ability to identify specific forms taken by populist speech in CEE and Western Europe appears.

Depending on the definition of ‘the Other’ we can find differences between the populist discourse of the East and West: while in the Western populist rhetoric ‘the Other’ is described as an external threat, an invasive structure that threatens the homogeneity of the nation, a category that includes immigrants and those who are calling for economic or political asylum, ‘the Other’, in Eastern populist rhetoric is often an insider set for a long time in the respective society, but not part of the nation itself, such as Roma populations, Jews or Hungarians (in Romania or Slovakia for example). More specifically, in Eastern Europe the populist discourse tends to be more inclined to exclusion, racism and xenophobia with open accents. As indicated by Cas Mudde [8], anti-Semitism and racism are more widespread and accepted in CEE countries, and therefore, they are more obviously part of the radical political discourse as “populist political parties and even main stream (...) are less willing to act against racist or nationalist extremism than in the West “. On the other hand, the arguments for exclusion of radical right winged parties in Western Europe is based on an economic discourse (‘immigrants steal our workplaces’) or a sociological one (‘they refuse to integrate’), as a form of the political correctness of xenophobia.

3. Populist experiences in Central-Eastern Europe

While in Western Europe has a long tradition of populist discourse anti-establishment, the elite being defining for those holding political power - according to the theory by Vilfredo Pareto [11] - and economic power, in the CEE the discourse against the elite is often associated with national-communism. In most cases anti-elitism in Central Europe is often directed against the main party to the left of the political spectrum, especially the one who is regarded as the successor of former communist party. The case the Polish Order and Justice party of the Kaczynski brothers is extremely relevant, because it came into power with a profound anticommunist discourse a decade and a half after the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. From here stems another fundamental difference between post-communist and Western populism. Generally, and perhaps with the exception of Forza Italia (currently Popolo della Liberta) in Italy, Western European political parties recognize the political legitimacy of their political opponents, or, in other words, take into account political pluralism as a necessary component of a functioning democracy. In the perspective of Chantal Mouffe, “the monopoly of the opposition on the established order” confers Western populist parties an aura of adolescent rebels against the democratic order but without really being taken into account to a significant extent [12]. But they are forced to respect the democratic order, which they claim and consider it the heart of their ideology. Precisely because they appeal so much to the people they cannot afford to question democracy, although they want it changed according to their principles. As shown by Michael Shafir “the image that non-populist politicians strive to propagate is that of a reluctant politician whose entry into politics is a necessary

evil which requires self sacrifice. Thus, results the fact that non-populist politicians are 'systemic' at least in appearance. [...] they no longer aim for objectives that focus on destroying the current political system, but, on the contrary, they pretend that this objective is safeguarding genuine democracy" [13].

Not necessarily so is the case of post-communist Europe, where the center-right parties tend to have a populist discourse similar to their national extremist counterparts, such as Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, or PDL and PRM in Romania. In this speech that left 'part' becomes the main political adversary of the people is often regarded as the illegitimate representative of the nation, because it is associated, at least symbolically, with communism. Viktor Orban, leader of the ruling party at present in Hungary, has been exemplary for such a trend. For example, after losing the 2002 elections in Hungary, he said: "Those of us who are here today, we are not and will never be in opposition. The Motherland cannot be in opposition." [M.G. Tamas, Ungaria: "Republica in strada", Critic Atac, 23 January 2012, online at <http://www.criticatac.ro/13410/ungaria-%E2%80%9Erepublica-este-in-strada/>] Thus although declared to be a right-center party, Fidesz adopts, increasingly more populist perspectives, using the concept of nation with an extensive sense, even totalitarian, in which the principle of representative democracy - a legitimacy that is represented by every elected representative - is abandoned. Also, because of this trivialization of the link between populism and nationalism in the CEE, the center-right parties do not distance themselves (and they never actually distanced themselves) or do not condemn populist radical right hand parties, and are more open to forming coalitions with them (again the Hungarian case, but also in Slovakia by 2012).

According to Panizza, populism thrives in "times of crisis and mistrust", as a consequence of "the failure of existing social and political institutions to limit and regulate political issues in a relatively stable order" [9]. In other words, populism is the most seductive ideology (or alternative) when the institutional system is unable to resolve the imbalances caused by the change or crisis in the political, economic or social spheres. This is because unsatisfied demands and expectations grow in times of crisis and populist parties provide an explanation for problems in the figure of 'the Other', and a solution to this problem by truly restoring the popular sovereignty.

In this sense, populism, also offers to perform a vital function of representation, to "bridge the gap between the representative and the represented", at a time when traditional parties fail to do so [9]. Populism is therefore not only an effective request for a change at an economic or social level, but also a fever revealing a 'democratic malaise' [14].

Most CEE societies have adopted the multi-party democratic system rather suddenly, after a long military dictatorship or single party state (the case of Poland), which led to the reproduction of the one-party model to competing political parties, each of them being more interested in playing political games rather than building public policies adapted to the society accordingly.

Moreover, by adopting European programs for EU integration, the parties have 'forgotten' to make programmatic politics, being only interested in accessing power. Thus society seemed to be taken 'hostage' by the populist discourse, the only one that directly addresses them. Hence the democratic malaise which appeared as soon as the mainstream parties could not perform for the benefit of society, but only in support of the interest groups around them.

4. The different facets of western populism

In this analytical framework, the rise of populism in Western societies and in the post-communist ones can be at least partly linked to the accelerated social and economic changes that they had to face in the last 30 years. All EU states - newer or older - have had to cope with an increasing opening their economies to international competition, Europeanization, the transition to a post-industrial economy and to population aging. Not only have these changes generated high social costs, but they also represented severe constraints on the state's capacity to address these costs, which led to a considerable reduction of welfare. In this context, populist parties were able to build their discourse on grievances arising from these changes by appealing to 'the losers' of globalization, in the West, and to the 'losers' of transition in post-communist countries. But the populist discourse did not propose solutions to economic crises, but only looked for the guilty in the 'profiteering political elite' [15]. Generally, especially in the CEE populist parties are adepts of the ultra-liberal economic model similar to the U.S., while the western populist parties undertake similar economic insights.

Of course, the economic differences between East and West continue to be extremely important, even though both areas face similar economic and social situations because of the economic crisis. But the political changes between the two parts of Europe are increasingly more different. Populism appears in Western Europe in a time of redefining the gap between party systems operating within the well-known democratic benchmarks. On the other hand, populism appears in the CEE at a time when democracy and political identification are in the process of invention, rather than in process of re-definition. This difference can be defined by using the concept of inheritance: while most Western European political systems are based on fundamental democratic heritage, Central European countries are based on an authoritarian legacy, often called 'communist' or 'national communist'. But through the concept of inheritance, beyond the specific elements, we can speak of a 'crisis of representation' in both parts of Europe.

Populism in Western Europe was often seen as a side effect of de-politicization of public action and of the growing importance of consensual politics in contemporary democracies. According to Mouffe, Western populism comes from the predetermination of the liberal democratic values and from the end of adversative politics in Western democracies [12]. The crisis of representation is key here, because those who disagree with the consensus of main parties' establishment feel that they have the ability to influence

representatives according to their wishes. Citizens feel that politicians have a different agenda, driven by political correctness and multiculturalism, while their problems are totally different. In this sense, populism is a symptom of a dysfunctional democracy - occurs because the principle of popular sovereignty was neglected, and that, in the words of Canovan, this principle 'reaffirmed in the form of populist challenge' [7].

On the other hand, depoliticizing political action cannot explain the specifics of populism (especially since there is no such depoliticizing) in Central Europe, in particular its mass and its open character more towards excluding 'undesirables'. First, politics in the new EU member states can hardly be described as consensual. Although there was consensus undercover, at least in foreign affairs and economic policy in the 90s, most CEE party systems have rapidly become polarized in a very adversative way around socio-cultural values. Communist-anticommunist cleavage remained a principle driver of Eastern European politics, to which was added the element of exclusion of minorities. For example, in Poland, where the Kaczyński brothers held power, communists, Jews and homosexuals played approximately the same role of 'enemies' of the people.

If in Western Europe populism is understood as an anti-system discourse, in Central Europe this discourse is rather adversative to the 'common policy' [16]. Central European populism cannot be anti-system because the system has not stabilized in the western form, being constantly under anti-consensual and nationalist pressure. But rather, the analysis of cultural heritage from the communist period can give convincing explanations of specific forms of populist discourse in Central Europe.

As shown by Cas Mudde, post-communist societies are strongly prone to populism because of strong anti-political and anti-elitist feelings who were familiar with and formed under communism [17]. The dissident elite, which in most countries of Central Europe had an important role in the immediate political transition at the beginning of the 90s, was socialized in a political environment in which politics could be conceived only in a non-political way. In this context, in the terminology of Mudde, 'anti-moral people' could be also called 'civil society', which was united against the 'corrupt communist elite' strongly identified with the state structure, in general. During the transition, this 'anti-political discourse' enjoyed great popularity, especially since some former dissidents joined some 'post-communist political actors' out of which some were 'opportunists and anti-democrats'. Few dissidents and intellectuals joined the newly emerged political parties, preferring associations or groups of dialogue, leaving politics in the hands of people who just cautioned them ideologically.

Populism was a really seductive rhetoric for a population that, without at first and being strongly anticommunist and anti-elitist (against the communist elite) was taught to be in this way. The ideology that was imposed was a quickly revengeful one, which explained all the social dystopia through the communist legacy and denationalization. But this ideology was not capable to teach society to cope with new situations of national emancipation - where it was the case - or

to learn self collective governing and personal autonomy. Thus, economic and political transition has not also produced a process of learning the rules of democracy and economy but has generated only frustration for a huge majority of ‘the losers’ of transition. On this fertile soil, were born the populist-nationalist currents that were rapidly adopted by the mainstream parties.

It must be said that nationalism as a politic principle is not the same in Western Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe. R. Griffin is the one who introduced the term of ethnocentric liberalism to describe this form of paradox of European populism that embraces enthusiastically the liberal system of political and economic competition, but considers, at the same time, only the members of an ethnic groups as being full members of society [18]. The nationalism assumed by the National Front from France, the North League, the Flemish Block and others imply a rejection of the ideas of multiculturalism by proposing a type of nostalgia for a mythical world of racial and cultural homogeneity. In other words, right winged populism brings again into the discussion a form of nationalism focused on the ethnic community and on tradition, being many times an advocate of xenophobia and authoritarianism as regards immigration or freedom of movement of persons. For example, the Flemish Block proclaims everywhere the sympathy for the former Southern African system of the apartheid by upholding the principle ‘eigen volk eerst’ (the indigenous must be the first), which leads to a complete separation from Belgium – Flanders of the Flemish, Wallonia of the Walloons (the Franco phones), Europe of the Europeans (whites). And the Flemish model is not a singular one, because similar principles were promoted by Haider in Austria and Bossi in Italy in the past decade. Thus, we see that the reaction of populism is not only towards the ruling elite, but also towards those that are – in one way or another – considered to be foreigners.

The most obvious element of this form of populism is anti-immigrationism, and, in principle, is considered to be the most important. But anti-immigrationism must not be understood as having only an economic base, reducing the success of the populist formula for fear of only losing work places, higher taxes to protect the poor of other countries and so on. Certainly this subject also has a specific place in populist discourse, but the essence of this discourse is more of a cultural political invoice than of an economic invoice. The fear that tries to nourish populism is similar to that of Oswald Spengler at the end of World War I - falling under the domination of Eastern European culture, only that the actors have changed.

However, in Central and Eastern Europe, nationalism is more complex, being both endogenous and exogenous: it reacts both to internal factors (national minorities, ethnic or religious) as well as external factors (notably the ‘Russian threat’). In this perspective, nationalism had (and also has in some states) a positive connotation, especially in societies that have lived for over four decades in a “dissolution of the state-action in an international socialist order” [19]. Therefore the call to historicism and national memory is part of the post-communist populist discourse. What is interesting is that most post communist

societies still value European integration but continues to appeal to specific national characteristics and cultural religious differences of these societies. Moreover in Romania, populist-nationalist leaders such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Laszlo Tokes are colleagues in the European Parliament (valuing declaratively the European values) and at the same time build ultra-nationalist identity discourses related to a philosophy of ethnic separation.

If there is a space of total ambiguity as regards the populist discourse is that of economy. Although there have been repeated tries to find a common denominator in this field, populism immediately transforms into populisms as soon as one enters the economic area. Kurt Weyland has tried to bring together the Latin-American populism and the Central-Eastern European populism on neoliberal bases, but acknowledges beyond the common elements of the conservative neoliberalism of the completely free market and of total privatization, the discourses do not coincide on cultural and social dimensions [20]. In Latin America the fear of American neo-colonialism has nothing to do with the models of globalization assumed in the European space whose fears are focused towards China and Russia. Furthermore, Latin-American populism can be divided into what Robert Dix calls 'authoritarian populism' (a form of chauvinism) and 'democratic populism' (as was that of Carlos Menem in Argentina) [21]. From an economic point of view, the two variants are profoundly different, although both stem from Peronism. The authoritarian one comes closer to a socialist-type, planned economy, while the democratic one is profoundly neoliberal, an advocate of the completely free market.

Neither is in Europe a single model of economic populism, as populism is rather an ideology of reaction, a reason for which it reacts both against the completely free market, by making appeal to the memory of the welfare-state, as well as against the extended assistance of the state towards the categories of poor or non-European immigrants. The term used it that of producerism (Canovan, 1999) and describes a double reaction towards the great corporations and banks that, in accord with the state, enjoy tax exemptions and generous subventions, and towards the system of social assistance given to the immigrants, used as a mass of electoral manoeuvre by the mainstream political elite. This type of discourse has been used both by the National Front lead by Jean Marie le Pen in France, and by Jorg Haider (Liberty Party) in Austria. But this discourse is not longer that current, as the majority of western populisms have joined the American neoconservative model or have simply abandoned any economic discourse.

5. Conclusions

The populist discourse has quickly extended in the latter years by denoting a crisis of representation, determined by an 'indisposition of democracy'. Throughout the European Union populist or eccentric parties have been experiencing an unprecedented development in the last fifty years. It would have been impossible for this current not to have reflexes in Central and Eastern

Europe, especially the adversative discourse about ‘the People’ and ‘the Other’ is not a new one. But it has amplified following complaints provoked by the important economic and social transformations that took place in the last decade, and populism appeared as a palliative to the crises of democratic representation. Despite these facts, our paper aimed to demonstrate that populism in Central and Western Europe is not exactly the same, because populism is a discourse, a discourse that adapts to its public and feeds from its context. The populist discourse, therefore, took on different forms, as it has been presented above in the societies that have had a radically different democratic experience, and are subject to a fundamentally different process of redefinition. It is still yet to be seen if, in the words of Cas Mudde, “the differences between East and West (...) will soon become irrelevant, taking into account the homogenizing effect provoked by EU integration” [17], or if the legacy of the first two parts of Europe will prove to be more resistant than maybe we have expected.

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