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POPULISM AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

POPULISM FROM AN INSTITUTIONAL POINT OF VIEW

The political definitions of populism, one way or another, are built around the dichotomous opposition of the elite class and the people. In everyday life, though, populism is understood as demagogic statements made by politicians and aimed at gaining or retaining the support of the masses. It is more correct, however, to define populism **as a qualitative characteristic of political doctrines, parties and movements, for which the opposition of the elite class and the masses is the key point of the agenda; it is also the method and style of mobilizing mass support aimed at supporting these forces and doctrines.**

The principal message of populism refers to the quality of the representation of interests in politics. However, at the same time, its main institutional feature is its disrespect for pluralism. With its appeal to the masses, it seeks to spread this narrative across the whole political arena, and to free it from all intermediary institutions and procedures¹. Populism, by its very nature, has pronounced institutional contradictions. First, it is by definition, "anti-elite," even though its proponents in the political arena are themselves part of the political elite. Second, by reducing the importance of the role of institutions, it threatens the wholeness of the entire political system, especially that part of it which ensures the responsibility of the government and the protection of minority interests.

Populism is often viewed as a symptom of "democracy's illnesses": corruption, management inefficiency, and ruined communication between government and society.² However, both the "demand" and "supply" of appeal to the public which goes "over the heads" of the privileged classes can appear in other types of societies, including both authoritarian, as well as transitional ones. The only difference is that, in competitive political regimes, populism is a message indicating the desire to replace or change the elites, while in non-competitive ones, it is a negation of the elite as a political institution.

In countries where, as termed by Almond and Verba,³ the participatory political sub-culture is developed, voters are more demanding in terms of their influence on politics. However, if the civil culture is weak, populism (if established by those in power) "freezes" a subject-type of political culture in society. This means that the relationship between the government and society develops in the form of a plebiscite. In such a situation, there is a possibility that a populist regime will establish itself for a long period, even in those countries with a tradition of handing over power via elections, but, with no fully realized civil culture (Venezuela, Hungary, and Poland).

Until the second half of the 20th century, democracy was associated with the "redistributive" demands of the poor layers of society, and the fear of populism acted as a restricting factor preventing the expansion of voting rights⁴. The principle that "competition

¹ Urbinati, N. *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and the People*. Harvard University Press, 2014 pp. 131-145

² *Populism on the rise: Democracies under Challenge?* A.Martinelli (ed.), Edizione Epoke, Milano, 2016, p.113

³ Almond, G., and S. Verba. 1965. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁴ D.Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, NY Cambridge UP, 2006

precedes inclusiveness" is one of the key conditions for the establishment of a polyarchy⁵. More often, populism actually appeared where this condition was not observed. And today, in those countries where political pluralism has developed "from the ground up," and the factors restricting active law are unacceptable, populism is almost inevitable. This has been proven both in the cases of Latin America and post-communist countries.

Populism's "political platform" can impart its accent onto various ideological trends – leftist, rightist, and nationalist. Some researchers characterize populism as a "thin ideology" ⁶ or identify in it only "basic" common traits, such as anti-establishmentism, authoritarianism, and nativism ⁷. In a number of works,⁸ modern European populism is interpreted as a manifestation of a new *transnational* cleavage based on the opposition of traditional and postmodernist-liberal values. Thus, populism does not have an integral doctrine: the opposition of society to "malicious" elites is a factor that consolidates broad public support in order to solve other social conflicts. The "anti-elite" message is what makes populism powerful: when the leading, "mainstream" parties are limited in their choices of socio-economic and political solutions, populism offers an attractive alternative agenda. However, that is also its weakness: in democracies, it is the need to deliver the results of the regime to society, and in non-democracies, the imminent ineffectiveness of the regime.

For most of the 20th century, socio-economic cleavage played the role of an "axis" in the familiar pattern of socio-political demarcation ⁹. However, in contemporary conditions, it forsakes this role. The long-term (for a half-century) improvement in the standard of living and the creation of the social state have smoothed out social contradictions in Western societies. The termination of this growth, made worse by the socio-economic crisis of 2008-2009, exacerbated this demarcation. However, the channeling of this conflict was expressed via other "points of tension": first and foremost, "identity problems"¹⁰, which have high "populist potential" – a logical possibility of a Manichaean opposition between "us " and "them ", with the blame for the support of the latter being placed on the elites.

THE SUCCESS OF POPULISM: VALUATION CRITERIA

The concept of populism's "successes" differs depending on the type of political regime in which it occurs. For non-democratic regimes, it means victory in elections and consolidation of power for a long period of time. It is more difficult to determine the success of populism in democracies. Historically, most populist movements have been short-lived; they influenced a country's politics and the behavior of the main parties, but then, usually disappeared quickly.

In the modern world, the success of populism as a way of coming into power is relatively rare, and in these cases, populists experience strong "mutations to accommodate power", which sometimes result in the rapid disenchantment of the electorate. However, in transitional regimes, populist parties can grow to reach the size of ruling, or even dominant, parties (like the "Law and Justice" party in Poland and the Fidesz Party in Hungary). In those countries where democracy is not fully consolidated, the main "antidote" to populism, namely, holding politicians accountable,

⁵ Dahl R. Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1971.

⁶ Martinelli, op.cit. p.15

⁷ Cas Muddle, 2007. Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe, NY, Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Ronald Inglehart, 1997. Modernization and Post-Modernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies. Princeton, Princeton University Press, PP. 243-246; Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris. Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash. August 2016.

<https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/Index.aspx>

⁹ Lijphart A. Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1999. Pp. 78-89.

¹⁰ Krastev I. The Unraveling of the Post-1989 Order. Journal of Democracy, Vol.27 No 4 October 2016, p.11

may not work. Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. elections is a special case: the President, who won with a clearly populist agenda, has set his course with an "executive team" that hails from the traditional elite class, and is reliant on the "mainstream" Republican Party.

Since the 1960's, and through 2016, the political influence of populist parties has grown significantly, having doubled in votes cast (from 5.1% to 13.2%), and trebled by number of seats in parliaments (from 3.8% to 12.8%).¹¹ From the point of view of a broader criterion (the ability of populism to influence a country's political course), there are not many successful examples, but those that have succeeded are quite resonant. One example is Brexit, as well as the constitutional reforms in Poland and Hungary that significantly weakened the systems of checks and balances, thereby strengthening the power of the majority.

The format and scale of populism's success with the electorate depends on the electoral system itself. On one hand, proportional systems guarantee populist parties representation in parliaments in case they overcome a moderate cut-off barrier of 3-5%. On the other hand, with a proportional system, it is more difficult to polarize the agenda of the election campaign and achieve a majority. However, Hungary (which has a mixed system) and Poland (a proportional system) are remarkable exceptions to this rule. The majority election system cuts off radical extremes: that is why in France and in Great Britain, populists did not acquire significant representation in parliaments, even though they had a high level of electoral support; this also explains why a new populist party did not appear in the U.S. However, thanks to the bipolar and adversarial nature of politics that is borne out of the majority one-round election system, populist parties won two astonishing victories in 2016 (Brexit and Trump). In France, the two-round election system gives the National Front solid electoral support in the first rounds of any voting, but in the second round the so-called phenomenon of "republican mobilization" is automatically activated, involving an anti-authoritarian coalition of all of the country's systemic political forces. In 2002 and 2017, this phenomenon worked against the National Front's candidates in the presidential election.

“THE INSTITUTIONAL CARTOGRAPHY” OF POPULISM: REGIMES AND ELITES

1. Regimes with limited or no pluralism

Authoritarian, and especially, totalitarian regimes, do not meet a key condition of populism: the institutionalized division of the elite and the “masses”. Nevertheless, populism is quite common in such societies. Its main features and peculiarities are:

- (Often) “Revolutionary legitimacy:” the elite presents itself as having come “from the people,” having overthrown the old (aristocratic, colonial, or corrupt) elite.
- The need for “permanent”¹² or “charismatic”¹³ legitimization: constant state-sponsored propaganda, where the overriding theme is the “unity of the government and the people”.
- The “flipside” of such legitimacy is the need for an “enemy”, real or imagined, from which the ruling regime defends the people. Constructs such as this can be found in many variations of corporatist regimes, which view society as one body, where its “brain” is the elite, and the “parts of the body” are represented by society at all levels; everyone who does not fall into line is treated as an external infection that poisons the body (the allusion Mussolini was credited with

¹¹ Inglehart, et al. op.cit.

¹² Gel'man V. Cracks in the Wall: Challenges for Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia. Problems of Post-Communism, №2 (April 2013). PP. 3-10.

¹³ Baunov A. Going to the People—and Back Again: The Changing Shape of the Russian Regime. M. Carnegie Moscow Center 2016. <http://carnegie.ru/2017/01/16/going-to-people-and-back-again-changing-shape-of-russian-regime-pub-67691>.

creating, and that has been co-opted by the creators of the concept of "sovereign democracy" in Russia in recent years)¹⁴.

- A personalist character: a charismatic leader who builds a plebiscite-type relationship with the people, excluding elites from the process; the society's role is limited to *acclamation*, and the one-time approval of a leader who has de-facto full *carte blanche*, allowing him to create and follow any political course.

What differentiates populism in non-democratic regimes is that it is not aimed at changing relations between elites and society. Moreover, its objective is not to replace the forces in power, but the opposite; it aims to preserve their power and assure mass support for the government.

2. Regimes with the developed political pluralism

In democracies, there is an inescapable element of populism present in the platforms of all participants in the electoral process as they strive to win over voters. This can be called the "natural minimum level of populism" of democratic politics. Here, the opposition claims more elements of populism, as their opposition status implies that those in power can be accused of "elitism", while the opposition will "stand up for the people".

Before the appearance of "New Parties" (according to Gunther-Diamond typology¹⁵), populism was mostly an option for those mass movements that were either based on agricultural workers, or the urban lower-middle class (for example, the Populist Party at the end of the 19th century in the U.S.A, and Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" movement). It was also an option for communist parties, which have in recent decades forsaken their role as the "counter-elite." Until recently, modern "new left" and "new right" parties have remained on the periphery of their respective party systems, constituting minorities in parliaments, and rarely participating in governmental coalitions. Following the logic of G. Sartori's party systems' typology,¹⁶ they almost never have possessed "coalition potential," though somewhat more often, they have claimed to have "blackmail potential."

The contemporary stage of populism's development begins following the crisis of 2008-2009, the consequences of which were considered by many Western societies as a threat not only to quality of life, but also to identity, lifestyle and security. As a result, factors such as disillusionment with the worsening financial situation and with living conditions have appeared, which is a classic example of relative deprivation.¹⁷ Populists are followed by the population strata that experience the most difficulty in adapting to new challenges – the "second-to-last fifth of postmodern society, who [by income level] represents a stratum which is rather secure but objectively can still lose something."¹⁸

The concrete configuration of the "triggers" of the "populist agenda" possessed significant differences in various European countries and in the U.S.A. It is possible to highlight three distinct models of modern Western populism:

¹⁴ <http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148>

¹⁵ Species of Political Parties / R. Gunther, L. Diamond // Party Politics. 2003. Vol. 9. № 2. PP. 167–199.

¹⁶ Sartori G. Parties and Party Systems: Volume 1. A Framework for Analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976

¹⁷ Gurr, T. 1970. Why men rebel. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁸ Minkenberg M. 2000. "The renewal of the radical right: between modernity and anti-modernity." Government and Opposition Volume 35, Issue 2 April 2000, pp. 170-188. P. 187

(a) “Old-European”: strong anti-migrant sentiment and Euroscepticism. The main trend here is the rise of the "new right"; the principal ideological message has anti-liberal and "anti-cosmopolitan" overtones. Countries: Great Britain, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Scandinavian countries, and France, with its own special considerations.

(b) “Post-communist”: once the agenda hailing the movement away from “post-communist heritage”¹⁹ was finally exhausted, there was an increase in skepticism about the country's further development and membership in the EU. In addition, the poor quality of local democracy created a situation where it is possible to change the government itself, but not the country's political trajectory. Constant crises led the left-of-center forces to see a decrease in their power, and, as is typical in such situations, gave victories to populists on the right.

(c) “Mediterranean”: the main “shock” is the rapid growth of unemployment, the contraction of the social safety net, and a decrease in quality of life. In all cases, it caused the rise of leftist populism (SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain) or populism of the “catch-all” variety (5 Stars in Italy), with a sharp increase in Eurosceptic sentiment caused by the fact that it was the EU itself setting the harsh austerity requirements.

3. “Transitional” types of regimes

Variations of the "democratic" and "non-democratic" types of populism can be observed in transitional or hybrid regimes. Even in cases of limited competition, the "populist game" played by those in power is limited by the presence of other political forces in the country, and therefore should be more sophisticated.

"Milder" political regimes also encounter real opposition (i.e. opposition not controlled by the government). Similar parties in hybrid regimes are borne from "alternative elites", and therefore, fit the definition of populist parties, as they aim to supplant the established elite.

Table 1. POPULISM: DIFFERENT REGIMES, DIFFERENT ELITES

Type of political elite	Competitiveness level of political regime		
	No competition	Limited competition	Full competition
Monolithic non-changeable elite	“Dictatorial Populism” claims to express the whole nation's interests	Dictatorial Populism Vs. Populism of the “permitted opposition”	Impossible
Competing mainstream elites	Impossible	Impossible	Natural level of minimum populism
Alternative elites: aim at becoming the new mainstream	Impossible by definition	Marginal. Populism is an important element of the alternative agenda	Populism is the main political weapon
Counter-elites: aim at radical regime-	If it exists, it is illegal	Marginal or does not exist	Marginal or does not exist

¹⁹ Krastev, op.cit., p.13

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PERSPECTIVES AND FORECASTS

The current populist wave is based on objective factors and phenomena in Western politics, such as the complication of the system of socio-political cleavages, the slowdown in economic growth and reduced quality of life in Western societies, and the increased scale of migration. In effect, it is a crisis of the system of political representation, and the increased disagreement between the absolute domination of the "establishment" and the diversification and fragmentation of what the public requires from its politicians.

Over recent decades, Western democracies have experienced an increase in liberalism. The rapidly growing urban middle class demanded liberal standards in politics, culture and morality. This meant there would be a convergence between the traditional "left" and "right." While these processes were on the rise, the contradiction as described remained hidden, but the situation changed when the "establishment" proved its inability to handle the consequences of the socio-economic crisis. Liberalism, both economic and political, thus became the main target of criticism in the current situation.

A somewhat conventional comparison here would be that of the current crisis of party systems to the period between the two World Wars, when in most European countries, the party systems underwent a significant period of re-invention, as Social Democrats, Communists and Fascists appeared on the political scene. While in this case, such shifts took place as a response to the crisis of classical modernization (i.e. the transition to a modern industrial society), the current rise of populism is a response to the "postmodern crisis": the "Thermidor" that appeared because of the accumulated costs and the disillusionment of the "losers."

It would be a mistake to consider the rise of populism as only a negative phenomenon. It partially resolves the contradiction described above, giving significant segments of the population political representation and the ability to influence the political agenda. This way, populists perform the functions that are typical in parties according to all classical theories.

The minuses of populism are also obvious. It places the power of the majority at the maximum possible level, while ignoring other functions of democracy (the functioning of checks and balances, the rule of law, tolerance) and aims to "replace equality with unity".²⁰ If plebiscite-type democracy in Western politics increases because of the populist wave, then these regimes become less liberal, creating an imbalance in the entire institutional system.

The electoral successes of the populists can be attributed more to the triumph of political will, and the desire to remove the mainstream elite from power. At the same time, populism does not prove that it is able to satisfy the long-term interests of voters because its economic and social programs have not yet been tested in practice.

It would be wrong to automatically predict the quick failure of populists' economic platforms and the subsequent loss of their popularity among voters. According to the Chilean political scientist Andrés Velasco, the experience of Latin American rulers shows that the

²⁰ Urbinati, op.cit. p.152

implementation of populist economic policy in the long-run does in fact cause serious crises and recessions, but the short-term effect may, on the contrary, be positive.²¹

When evaluating the prospects of a "populist wave," one should not go to extremes. The rise of populism will not "go away by itself," but at the same time, the prophesy of a "victorious march" followed by catastrophic consequences, is based rather more on the mainstream and liberal elites' fear of populism's victories in 2016, rather than on a rational analysis of the situation. In 2017, key electoral events include the recent elections in France and the Netherlands, and the upcoming elections in Germany. These will not give populist parties symbolic wins on the scale of Brexit or Donald Trump's victory (though their respective electoral tallies were quite high). In those countries where populists are in the government (Greece, Sweden, Finland), or where the government acts in accordance with an imposed agenda (Brexit, U.S.A.), it will still be necessary to see how voters express themselves in subsequent elections. The emerging economic recovery in European Union countries and the migration issue having "passed its peak" does not eliminate the demand for populism, but it can put an end to its expansion. In the U.S.A., during the first months of Donald Trump's presidency, institutional checks and balances clearly strengthened, thereby restraining the populist tone of his populist pre-election promises.

However, significant factors will also help increase the "viability" of populism. First, it will not be possible to overcome the real social and economic prerequisites for the rise of populism in the short term. Second, as many observers note, even an economic recovery is unlikely to quickly "extinguish" populist party voters' proclivity for protest.

As for populism in "underdemocratic" regimes, its fate depends on the types of politics specific to various countries. The threats to the stability of such regimes are twofold: on one hand, under such regimes, a split of elites is possible. On the other, in this case it is more likely to lead to an overthrow of power in the top echelons, and the formation of a similar populist model, but with a different leader and an updated set of "messages" (which occurred, for example, in Egypt). A qualitative shift is hypothetically possible if the "alternative" (most likely, also populist) political forces succeed in establishing themselves as significant players on the political arena, capable of getting involved in the process of democratization (which occurred in Tunisia).

²¹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/economic-populism-temporary-success-by-andres-velasco-2017-02>