

The golden era of populism. Analysis of a political phenomenon.

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Introduction

The year 2008 spurred an economical crisis of a scale unknown to the post war generations. Causing much trouble in the banking system and countries in the whole world. By 2012 the United States seem to go out of the recession, this however cannot be said about the European Union. The stock exchanges are watching the situation in Greece very carefully and lower their sales every time bad news come from Athens. The fast changing elected governments are unable to fulfill the requirements laid upon Greece by the EU Commission. With each elections it is clear that the radical populist parties gain much more votes, which adds even more instability to the situation. In instable times populists always gain electoral support. One could think that it is a phenomenon that occurs only in countries devoured by a crisis, and one could not be more mistaken. Just a brief overlook of the European political scene shows that populism is on the rise even in countries that were not really affected by the crisis, like Poland, Austria or the Netherlands. Examples of populist parties are ranging from nationalist, neofascist to leftist. The national ones are: the Austrian Union for the Future of Austria (BZO), Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), Swedish New Democracy (ND) and Italian Lombard League (LL). These are followed by the French National Front (FN), German Union of the German Nation (DVU) and the Hungarian Jobbik¹. The leftist populist parties are a new quality and are the babies of the crisis. They are the answer to the movements like Occupy Wall Street or the Spanish Indignados or to any leftist electorate that could not find representation. The two most prominent examples are The Pirate Party in Germany and The Palikot's Movement in Poland.

It is easily seen that the issue is indigenous to Europe as a whole, both western and post-soviet. While populism gets much attention in the media, specially the tabloids political science seems to omit this phenomenon leaving it without description and academic analysis. The view of populism show in the media is strictly negative. That is why populism requires a holistic description.

¹ Husbands T. Ch., *The other face of 1992: The extreme right explosion in Western Europe*, from the webpage: <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org>.

The left, the right, populism.

The term itself is derived from the Latin word *Populus* which means the people. The first political party ever that is the origin of populist politics was the American People's Party founded in 1891. The name identifies the members of the party as the lower classes – the poorer part of American farmers to be exact. The basis of the political program of this party was anti-elitist, and sought to improve the situation of American farmers. Those two elements: the fight with the establishment (it does not matter if it is financial, political or bureaucratic) and the idea of economical protest are the core of populist politics. It can be easily detected that all types of parties could be populist if they introduced those elements into their program. This breeds a lot of problems concerning the creation of typology for populism. The most classical one comes from the great book by Margaret Canovan: *Populism*. She classified the populist movements according to their historical development:

1. Agrarian populism:

- *Farmer radicalism (the aforementioned American People's Party)*
- *Peasant's movements (In Eastern Europe in the first part of the XX century like Polish PSL)*
- *Radical Socialist Agrarism (Russian Narodnik)*

2. Political populism:

- *Populist dictatorship (like Juan Peron)*
- *Populist democracy (emphasizing the role of referenda and direct democratic participation)*
- *Reactionist populism (like McCarthyism)*
- *Politician's populism (a movement without ideology that refers only to the people – The Pirate Party would be a good example²)*

It may seem that the agrarian populism is now its historical form. But the example of a Polish populist Andrzej Lepper showed that the formula of an agrarian movement still has potential and valid. The distinction made by Canovan has many weaknesses. The historical focus seems to be correct yet the distinguished types of populism seem to overlap themselves as politics

² Canovan M., *Populism*, London 1981, p. 13.

bring many examples that are hard to classify. That is why it is needed to confront this classification with yet another one, a newer one.

An Argentinean philosopher Ernesto Laclau in his book *On populist reason* tries to convince the reader that populism is not a political excess that is too ambiguous to describe and define. Using the theories of Marx, Freud and Lacan Ernesto Laclau tries that populism is a logical process which can occur not only in a democratic system but in every space based on community³.

Karl Marx when describing social classes and their historical role noticed the existence of a class that did not participate in the historical processes. He named it lumpenproletariat. The lumpenproletariat was a mixture of ruffians, thieves and people that he called social parasites. They usurped and appropriated the goods of other classes work, which made the lumpenproletariat similar to the parasitic aristocracy or industrial oligarchs. But contrary to the aristocracy and oligarchs, the lumpenproletariat has no historical role to play. Describing the specifics of this group Marx notices that it is not homogenous but scattered much like a *bag with potatoes summed up is a potato bag*⁴. The representatives of lumpenproletariat were too heterogeneous to create a separate social class.

From this description Ernesto Laclau comes to a conclusion that in every system there is a specific group of people that exists outside of it. Its voice is not articulated in any political way. So only when this collectivity articulates its demands it creates its political identity. According to Laclau the core of populism lies in the method of articulation of demands⁵. In this way a voiceless and excluded part of the society creates a political narrative⁶. This leads Laclau to the second core element of populism. All populist demands are at its base against the system and against the regime, even if the system is democratic. Democracy too has the potential to exclude whole groups from the political life, especially in representative democracy of western countries. The lack of representation is a form of exclusion. Because of that democracy per se creates the base for populist demands, chiefly the demand of representation (a demand to create a political identity). Populism then is an imminent part of the democratic system and they are bound to co-exist. Laclau continues: the political logic of

³ Laclau E., *Rozum populistyczny*, Wrocław 2009, p.5.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 126

⁵ Interestingly Laclau names this type of demands as democratic (because of the way of their creation). This does not necessarily imply that these demands need to be created by a democratic party in a democratic system. Those demands are expressed by the weakest individuals in a community and are addressed to the ruling régime (regardless of type). Thus they have an egalitarian dimension and carry a democratic potential.

⁶ For Laclau populism is a political equivalent of the Freudian repressed memories that always come back.

democracy is indeed the logic of populism. If democracy is the rule of the people than the people should have the right to articulate its demands. It is known that that democracy proved otherwise⁷.

Populism should not be bound to any specific social base. It could find its pillars in peasants, the middle class or even parts of the elite. How so? It all depends on their presence in the political discourse, or to be exact, their exclusion from this discourse. “The people” are not made of the lumpenproletariat described by Marx, but from all social classes, groups and communities that are bound together with the same demand of political nature. Populism is also not connected to any political option. Populist slogans can be used by the left, the right, fascist, anarchists and communists. Why is it then that the term populism has been almost fixed with right-winged (extremist) parties? To answer this question a historical overview is necessary.

A bit of history

How did the phenomenon of the populist radical right come to life? The answer lies in the changes in the European (and American) political scenes throughout the last couple of decades. The fifties and the sixties were the years of relative peace and economical development. Hidden under the atomic umbrella of the mighty United States Europe developed untroubled. Moreover the money from the Marshall plan and the unification tendencies led by Robert Schuman and Conrad Adenauer had a huge share in the economical development and a raise in wealth of the average western-european citizen. The boom was combined not only with the raise in production or development of the services sector but also thanks to tax redistribution and social policies. All of the mentioned elements contributed to the sense of stability, much needed in the troubling times of the Cold War. On the political level the fifties and the sixties were not only looking on the rise of redistribution but also on the rise of the political left. It was the time when countercultural movements spawned across the western part of the old continent. The highlight of those movements was the year 1968. What was firstly a student riot soon turned out to be a movement that changed the ideological focus of western societies and made many cultural changes. The seventies that came afterwards were the triumphant times of the left. There is however a Newtonian law that states that every action causes a reaction. And the reaction of the right was of tremendous

⁷ Democracy is a system where the majority governs with the respect of the minorities rights. It does not provide the necessary means for all groups to articulate their demands.

proportions. The first signs of change came from the Anglo-Saxon world. In the year 1979 in the United Kingdom the elections were won by Margaret Thatcher. A year later Ronald Reagan was elected as the president of the United States of America. If Herbert Marcuse was the ideological *spiritus movens* of the leftist movement this can be said about Friedrich von Hayek concerning the New Right. His ideas created the core of the political thought of both Reagan and Thatcher. The neoconservative governments of both politicians shifted the political scene much to the right. They managed to maintain stability after the economical crisis of the mid seventies and started to deconstruct the welfare state of redistribution. But it is not the political shift that was the most important event in the late XX century. Constant pressure inflicted by Reagan on the Soviet Union led ultimately to its collapse. The gravity of the fall of the communist empire was so huge that it undermined the political position of any leftist party. The political pendulum swung to the right side. It is then in the nineties when the radical rightist movements started to appear and gain on popularity⁸. The most evident example is the Austrian Freedom Party that gained 27% in the elections in 1999 which caused an international scandal and sanctions of the European Union countries imposed on Austria (after a democratic election!). The Dutch Party for Freedom raised from 5% in 2006 to 15% in 2010. The French National Front could not get even 1% in the seventies but that changed in the nineties when this party got almost 10% in 1988 and 1993 and almost 15% in 1997. Even in countries with strong leftist parties like Finland the populist right had its gains. True Finns received 19% in the elections in 2011.

The political left's position was undermined to that extent that it accepted the basics of capitalism and the free market. Anthony Giddens a British philosopher and author of the political program of Tony Blair's Labour Party published a book in 1998 called *The Third Way. The Renewal of the Social Democracy*. The acceptance of the capitalism paradigm by the left caused to abandon the anti-capitalist and anti-regime rhetoric. Since Laclau stated that this type of rhetoric is the base of populism it is obvious that the left lost its populist potential in favor of the political right. Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher argues that the left should not accept capitalism "as the only game in town" and to become more radical⁹. His text was written in 2002 and it took another 8 years and a worldwide economical crisis for the leftist parties to remind themselves of their anti-capitalist legacy. It seems that by 2012 the political pendulum swings to the left again.

⁸ A similar narrative was shown in: Höbelt L., *Defiant populist. Jörg Haider and the politics of Austria*, West Lafayette 2003, s. 15-20.

⁹ Žižek S., *Why we all love to hate Haider*, [in:] <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2228>.

Two examples

When Jörg Haider became the leader of the Austrian Freedom Party in 1986 the party was on the verge of political extinction balancing on the 5% of electoral results. The popularity of Haider and his party rose dramatically to achieve an astonishing 27% in 1999. During this time the party went through a huge transformation of identity. Founded in the fifties the Austrian Freedom Party was a national liberal party. Haider began to add more and more new components to the once simple program. He found place for social, national and patriotic, liberal and ecological elements, thus creating a party that could be named postpolitical, without a fixed program. But that happened when Haider decided to expand his group of traditional voters. One of the main factors that distinguished the Austrian Freedom Party from the other ones was its approach towards Austrian history. The Austrian national identity was based on a post-war anti-german sentiment that stigmatized the III Reich and the Nazis. Haider on the contrary said that Austrians need to embrace their history fully without shame. He became the voice of this part of the Austrian society that was completely omitted in the post-war Austrian political spectrum. The stage was dominated for decades by two parties the Austrian People's Party (conservative) and the Austrian Socialist Party. In his rhetoric Haider was not only expressing the demands of the excluded part of the society but also criticized the two-party rule. Clearly he transformed his party from a national-liberal one into a full time populist movement.

In Poland which political scene is dominated by two right-winged parties the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice party. The post-communist left seem to have lost almost all of its political legitimacy and has problems with finding a new leader. The New Left has never had a political voice in Poland. It was, one can say, excluded from the political discourse. According to the theories of Ernesto Laclau it was inevitable and imminent that this excluded voice would find its way in the form of a populist movement. In October 2010 a splinter of the leftist wing of the Civic Platform appeared on the Polish political scene called the Palikot's Movement. It is named after the leader of the party Janusz Palikot a controversial figure of a scandalous reputation. His political demands are a colourful mixture of anti-clerical, socially liberal and entrepreneurial slogans. While his social demands are almost completely leftist- this cannot be said about his economical ones, which are clearly liberal. Being a new political entity the Palikot's Movement program is fickle as the wind which was clearly shown as the case of ACTA appeared in July of 2012, when the Movement changed its

approach towards it from fully affirmative to a complete negation because of mass protests in Polish major cities. The Palikot's Movement embodies everything that a populist party should have.

Technically the aforementioned examples of populist parties do not have much in common aside of the populist label. One focuses on nationalism and traditional values the second one embraces the program of the New Left. There are yet many similarities. The both are leader based. The leader in a populist movement holds the key role. Much like the Tribune in the ancient Roman Republic that could convene the Plebeian Council and lead it the leaders of populist parties create laws in the name of "the people" that chosen them. Both Haider and Palikot understand the power of mass media, especially the tabloids. That is why they were often interwoven into scandalous activities. Haider was known for meeting former Waffen SS soldiers and calling them publicly "men of great honour"¹⁰. Palikot showed on a press conference with a gun and a dildo. Populists could not exist without the media. Not only they give them topics to write about but also they deliberately form the media's agenda. The role of the media changed recently. Its purpose is not only to inform but also to entertain this mixture is called – *infotainment*¹¹. Because of this politics is shown as a conflict stage and adventure in a fashion of a reality show (for instance surveys concerning the popularity of certain politicians are published once in a while much alike the program like Big Brother where the audience also voted for the most popular participant). The meeting of Polish Sejm Commissions are presented in a way that resembles a series based on politics¹². Populists are perfect *agenda-setters* for the tabloids and the rest of the media¹³. They provide topic that amuse the audiences. That is why scandals will always accompany populist parties, in that way they will always stay high on the media agenda.

Closing comments

The topic of populism and populists cannot and should not be omitted. As stated before almost every European country has one (and in some cases two) populist parties that are

¹⁰ Zöchling Ch, *Haider, kim jest?*, Kraków 2000, p. 93.

¹¹ Hipfl B., *Politics of Media Celebrities: The case of Jörg Haider*, p. 55-56. [in:] Ociepka B., *Populism and media democracy*, Wrocław 2005.

¹² Like the Polish series *Ekipa*, or the HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

¹³ There is a known example of an Austrian newspaper *Der Falter* banned publishing information about Haider. The idea behind this move was to limit Haider's impact on the society.

becoming more and more significant. By neglecting whole groups of people the mainstream parties are just giving them as an electoral gift to the populists. And by that populist shape and will shape the politics of whole countries. Just to mention the Polish populist Andrzej Lepper who became vice prime minister in Poland or Haider that forged a ruling coalition. Imminent to the democratic system the populist movements must not be neglected. It seems that they have become a constant part of the European political life contributing to the instability. The EU institutions fear that due to the economical crisis in Greece the eurosceptic leftist and rightist parties will gain much more support from the voters to that extent that they could win the upcoming elections. Every occurrence of a populist movement should be a signal to the mainstream political parties that they have done something wrong and neglected the demands of significant masses of people. And seeing that the way in which the populists gain their support is effective the mainstream parties will modify their behaviors to match those of the populist movements. Such is the ruthless world of politics.