

CURRENT FORMS OF POPULIST MANIFESTATIONS AND EUROPEAN UNION'S VALUES

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Abstract. *My paper aims to research the compatibility/ incompatibility of the populist discourses and political phenomena with the founding values of a United Europe, in the context of globalisation. The conceptual perspective (in as much as it is possible in the case of manifestations of this paradoxical phenomenon in different and sometimes contradictory situations) facilitates understanding of the comparison between the values of the European Union and the imperatives of populism. Therefore, based on a minimal definition, populism, understood rather as a “political style”, may give form to various symbolic substrates and imprint itself in multiple ideologies, incorporating the ideological nuances of various ideological affiliations. Although the descriptions of populism often involve the idea of an “appeal” to people “like us” and an anti-elitist critique, the term “populism” refers to a specific style or an opportunistic electoral strategy, or it is associated with xenophobic political actors. Neo-populism makes promises such as: cleaning up the political world, a reduction in fees and taxes, strengthening the power of citizens concerning referendums, helping poor regions, restoring the dignity of the elderly, supporting the integration of young people, sending the corrupt to people’s courts, limiting immigration, etc. In the context of an upsurge in economic and cultural instability and of growing hostility towards globalization and European integration, populism is becoming an increasingly common feature of the European political landscape.*

Often opposed to globalisation and European integration, picturing them as systems that unfairly favor elites to the disadvantage of the “people”, with a strong component of skepticism directed towards the EU, populism has been strong in Europe, at least in the past 15 years. On the other hand, populism appears as legitimate in circumstances where the phenomenon of globalisation affects every state, and every aspect of life (not just the cultural one) is controlled by economic forces mostly hostile to the economic development of national states for the benefit of their citizens. In terms of

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national populism and European integration, in the post-Maastricht period and in a context of the economic recession and widespread political scandals (including cases of fraud, in particular those linked to the functioning of the common agricultural policy), the European Union, in general, and its officials, in particular, have become the main targets of populist critics.

Keywords: *populism, ideology, European Union values, liberal democracy, crisis.*

Some assumptions

My article aims to explore whether populism, as a political style, strategy, discourse or ideology, is compatible with the values of the European Union, and if linked to the phenomenon of globalization, whether we can talk about the “legitimacy” of this political current.

For, whether it’s about extreme populism, majority populism, opposition populism or populism of the left or of the right, in broad terms, the general characteristics of this political phenomenon can be found either in the false correspondence or the complicity between the private interest or the group interests of politicians, and the private or the group interests of the electorate, whose occurrence overrides the issue of the general interest (although claiming to speak in its name). Populist discourse analysis has highlighted the rift or the difference between a politician’s opinions and his beliefs and actions, as well as that between the electorate’s public opinions of and its private thoughts and actions.

As a demagogic game whereby a politician mimics the resolution of problems for the benefit of the citizens of a country, populism is aimed at an electorate seen as either “naïve” in terms of political culture, or “exasperated” by the postmodern evolution of multicultural democracy. Bringing arguments that rely on the psycho-emotional side of the personality of individuals to whom they are addressed, populist discourse is particular to politicians who consider themselves to be “charismatic”.

In this context, where the language of political propaganda and resentment is received by citizens already predisposed by nostalgic attitudes towards “the golden age” and hopeful of “better times”, as opposed to the present, it appears that the founding values of the European Union do not have any place. But in fact, in virtue of their pragmatic orientation, European neo-populisms are unable to exclude: solidarity; respect for human rights (including the rights of minorities); unity; communication; pluralism; democracy; human dignity; freedom; the rule of law; justice; tolerance; non-discrimination; and peace.

The premise I start from is that the sum of these values, or the main value on which the European Union and the European public space are based, is liberal democracy. On the one hand, populism is seen as a threat to this value. On the other hand, it is seen as a way to redress a democracy marked by crisis.

Let us remember that Article I-1 of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe states: “The Union shall be open to all European States which respect its values and are committed to promoting them together”. Article I-2 of the draft Constitution emphasizes the Union’s values: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”¹. Therefore, the European Union means peace, prosperity and protection – a result due to respect for the common values of the Member States.

If related to these humanistic values populism is at least debatable, it is not less true that, when measured against the democratic deficit in Europe, populism becomes explicable. “How to reconcile the democratic ideal – according to which power is held by people – with the reality of restricted and controlled power? What law can limit the power of the people and to what purpose?” – wonders Christopher J. Bickerton in his study of limited power and democratic legitimacy in Europe, in which he identifies a language that he calls neo-Madisonian: “This language expressed a convergence between the process of integration in the loss of imagination and of institutional creativity on one hand and, on the other, a preference in European studies for analyzing the EU outside traditional schemes, and in particular those of the nation state and sovereignty.” The author’s opinion is that “to the extent that Europe will be a foreign construct for European societies, the fruit of numerous compromises between the elites, it will lack legitimacy.” For “political legitimacy today must involve a collective engagement, a public process of justification, which will doubtless involve conflict, but nonetheless inevitable” and “popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy are not opposed to each other”, but rather: “the legitimacy of limited political power is that of popular sovereignty which limits itself in virtue of its orientation towards the public good. And the democratic legitimacy of the Union must proceed through the construction of a European people, but it cannot be guaranteed, of course, that this people will keep the EU.”²

If populism seems an idea taken from the realm of democracy, then one of its features is anti-elitism, both at the global and local level. Populism addresses itself to the majority, while elites are perceived as minorities: “Whatever the criterion adopted for identification (professional, cultural, religious, linguistic), an elite is not identifiable as such only by comparison with a majority which constitutes the non-elite.” Moreover, the notion of elite seems to oppose the idea of democracy, defined as the “government of the people, for the people and by the people,” as President Lincoln said in the Gettysburg declaration, which “leaves the smallest possible place for elites.”³ But an author such as Joseph Schumpeter who made

¹ https://europa.eu/europeanunion/sites/europa.eu/files/docs/body/treaty_establishing_a_constitution_for_europe_en.pdf.

² Christopher Bickerton, “Une Europe néo-madisonienne? Pouvoir limité et légitimité démocratique,” *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 60, No. 6, 2010, pp. 1077; 1089; 1090.

³ Jaques Coenen-Huther, *Sociologia elitelor (Sociology of the elites)*, translated by Mihai Ungurean, Iași, Polirom, 2007, pp. 36; 81.

a clear distinction between democracy as ideal and democracy as institutional reality, states that in a democratic regime, “the people’s role will consist in giving birth to a government,” in which democracy is defined as a system that “leads to political decisions, in which some individuals acquire the power to act on these decisions after a competitive battle involving the people’s votes.”⁴

While the notion of elite seems to be contrary to the idea of democracy, because of the concept of the people that its definition implies, populism falls within the discourse of democracy.

As Jack Hayward recalls, elitist democracy had a supporter in Giovanni Sartori, who defended the “realism” of his Italian predecessors Mosca and Pareto, transforming their analyses for democratic liberal purposes. In *The Theory of Democracy* (1962) and *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (1987), Sartori emphasized the quality of leaders, “vertical democracy,” compared with mass participation, quantitative or “horizontal democracy.” Although looking to evoke a mythical unity of nation, class, profession and so forth, populist discourse is mostly against the elite, to which a fictional unity is also attributed⁵.

In terms of national populism and European integration, in the post-Maastricht period and in a context of the economic recession and widespread political scandals (including cases of fraud, in particular those linked to the functioning of the common agricultural policy), the European Union, in general, and its officials, in particular, have become the main targets of populist critics.

However, European policy will continue to remain primarily the responsibility of the representative elites who operate in an increasingly unpredictable environment, but have to be fully responsible for those who will have to live with the consequences of their decisions⁶.

One of the paradoxes of populism is that, sometimes, representatives of the elite make appeals to the people. At least in Romania, as long as they are in the opposition, all leaders make statements which are in some degree in the style of populism.

Mirroring the paradoxes of the concept of “populism”, studies from a volume translated recently in Romania, *Populism in Europe and in the two Americas. Threat or cure for democracy?*, offer a trans-regional approach to the populist phenomenon and the impact that it has on democracy by analyzing contemporary populist experiences and showing that populism can be interpreted both as a threat to democracy, and a remedy for its dysfunctionality. In addition, the topics treated highlight the similarities between populisms of the left and of the right, both being inclined to defend a political model which does not oppose democracy purely and simply, but rather liberal democracy: Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework of analysis; Populist parties in Belgium: an example of the hegemony of liberal democracy?; Czech Republicans (1990-1998): a populist outsider in a consolidating democracy; Populism in government: the case of Austria (2000-2007);

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

⁵ Jack Hayward, “The Populist Challenge to Elitist Democracy in Europe,” in *Elitism, Populism, and European Politics*, edited by Jack Hayward, New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 2004, pp. 13; 19.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 27; 30.

Populism, democracy and nationalism in Slovakia; Populism: remedy and threat to democracy⁷.

Italian political scientist Gianfranco Pasquino believes that populism should not be simplified: it can not be reduced to a few clichés, arguing about some political leaders that are populists to end the discussion before it begins. Criticism of democracy is in some cases justified, and political elites are called to solve the problems that populists pose. From this dialectic populism-democracy can be born a surplus of democracy. Other authors do not treat populism as a form of opposition to democracy and of possible remedies, but as an expression of a new form of conservatism that seeks to revalorize the primacy of politics and seeks to reaffirm the necessity of the national framework as an arena of expression of political interests. This is the opinion expressed by Marcel Gauchet in an interview recently published. Gauchet explains the attractiveness of populist discourse by the fact that in the last decade, due to the expansion of social networks, the individual is increasingly affirming in public space, to the detriment of the parties. This is the fertile land of populism. Any message of a politician on these networks ensures that votes are obtained, and thus the representation that means a depersonalization of the relationship between the one chosen and the one who chooses takes on a new form. Populists exploit this form of representation very well, selling the illusion of the possibility of a direct democracy with the help of the Internet. Gauchet also believes that Brexit and US elections express the will to deepen democracy, not to deny it⁸.

Globalization as a factor favoring populism

Moreover, populism appears as legitimate in circumstances in which the phenomenon of globalisation affects every state, and every aspect of life (not just the cultural) is controlled by economic forces mostly hostile to the economic development of national states for the benefit of their citizens. Regarding this situation, Andrew Jones shows that “beyond academic polemics, we can say that globalisation remains defined almost exclusively as an economic phenomenon... theorists addressing only tangentially the awkward issues their ideas raise as soon as they slide towards non-economic areas, such as politics or culture.”⁹ In this regard, for example, Friedman connects his “economic vision about globalisation with a series of arguments relating to technological developments in the field of information provision,” while Klein and Marcos “feel globalisation equally as a phenomenon driven by economic forces, but without denying the importance of its cultural and political impact.”¹⁰

⁷ Cas Mudde, Rovira Cristobal, Rovira Kaltwasser (editors), *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?*, translated by Emil Juverdeanu, Daniel Șandor, Iași, Institutul European, 2015.

⁸ Radu Carp, *Populismul în creștere – vor supraviețui democrațiile? Adevarblog*, 18 Dec. 2016, http://adevarul.ro/news/politica/populismul-crestere-vor-supravietui-democratiaiei-1_585649955ab6550cb889aa15/index.html.

⁹ Andrew Jones, “Concluzii: Regândind globalizarea (din nou)”, in *Globalizarea. Teoreticieni fundamentali*, edited by Andrew John, translated by Monica Neamț, Sorina Pricop, Cluj-Napoca, CA Publishing, 2011, p. 286.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

In today's world populism can be interpreted as a reaction to the standardization of life resulting from the globalisation process: "This rupturing of the contemporary world is all the more shocking as the sense of the essential unity of mankind is more than ever a central part of our imagination. The belief in this unity is reinforced by the increasingly apparent existence of a model of transnational culture that renders life, in all its various aspects, uniform at the planetary level."¹¹ But the limits of this Westernization of the world see also its forthcoming failure: "If the Westernization of the world is on the verge of failure, it is not because it is not getting its message across sufficiently strongly, but simply because, on the one hand, the 'cultural base', the economy, and, on the other hand, 'the social system' which the project requires are in the process of decomposition"¹².

In this cloudy, foggy, misty world of life in which "a 'chaos' replaces for now, and for a long time to come, the orderly, Manichaeian world of the 'cold war'"¹³, some analysts consider that "the EU must find solutions in order to reconnect with its own citizens – which means more efficiency and transparency in its activities – but also adapting to radical changes in the international environment over the last ten years".

A positive aspect of globalisation, criticized for the standardization it produces worldwide, and which is opposed by the nationalist type of populism, is democratization. Globalisation makes possible the internationalization (even if not fully realizable), of democratic principles, at least at the level of correct political discourse, and "the importance the European Union attaches to democracy and the protection of human rights is manifested not only within its borders, but also at the level of external action."¹⁴

As we have seen, democracy is the main value on which the EU is founded, and globalization facilitates it.

In the article "Growing Populism – Will Democracies Survive?", Radu Carp points out that the year 2016 has occasioned a wave of popular elections and consultations that have put populism at the forefront – starting with the failed referendum in the Netherlands on the EU's Ukraine Association Agreement, followed by the British vote for leaving the EU, the German Länder elections that confirmed the advance of a populist, AJP party to the failed referendum in Italy that allowed The 5-star Movement (M5S) to become the main favorite party in the early elections, by the Austrian elections where FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer had a very good score in both polls. All these express the mistrust in the current

¹¹ Serge Latouche, *Occidentalizarea lumii. Eseu despre semnificația, amploarea și limitele uniformizării planetare*, translated from French by Paul Kun, Cluj-Napoca, CA Publishing, 2012, p. 125.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹³ Alain Joxe, *Imperiul haosului. Republicile în fața dominației americane după războiul rece*, translated by Angela Jiopescu, Bucharest, Corint, 2003, p. 23.

¹⁴ Victor Negrescu, "Globalizarea discursului umanitarist: Respectul valorilor democratice în politica externă a Uniunii Europene", in *Ontologie, politică & etică: supozițiile metafizice și implicațiile morale ale teoriei politice contemporane*, coord. Cecilia Tohăneanu, Bucharest, Editura Universitară, 2010, p. 131.

form of democracy, a phenomenon not only present in Europe, but also in the US where, with an anti-system discourse, Donald Trump secured victory in the presidential election¹⁵.

According to MediaFax, Romanians are among the most receptive Europeans to populist politics, with 82% of Romanian respondents in a poll of the YouGov research institute showing populist sympathies, notes *The Local*, quoting the German daily *Die Welt*. According to survey data, Germany has the lowest level of support for populist politics, with only about 18% of Germans being receptive to populist manifestations. On the other hand, among the surveyed states, the highest support shares for populism were recorded in Romania and Poland, with 82% and 78%, respectively. The level in Germany is significantly lower than in the UK and Italy, where almost half of respondents have shown populist sympathies, while in France there is a 63% percent¹⁶.

Populism and democratic values

As Sorina-Cristina Soare reiterates, in an interview by Vladimir Adrian Costea, regarding populism, we are dealing with a concept that is often found in the neighborhood of democracy. Contemporary populism is also supposed to be the promoter of a “pure” form of democracy. For while democracy is the citizens’ regime, the populist-driven democracy is based on an organic community. Therefore, explains Sorina-Cristina-Soare, “populism does not accept the particular factions and identities (incarnated by traditional parties), rejects exogenous elements (ethnic, cultural or religious minorities) and often summarizes the valorization of the simple human, in our case, the Romanian on the street”¹⁷.

Although there are country-to-country differences, populism is largely aimed at protectionist objectives, especially in the social field, as well as a certain civic mobilization, opposed to the elitist arrogance of the political class.

But it is no less true that populism “accompanies all the failures of representative democracy all over, fed with the illusions of those in whom, in an increasingly complex world, can no longer imagine answers to their power of comprehension,” the common denominator of populist discourses (in France or Austria, Poland or Slovakia, the Netherlands or Denmark, Italy or Romania) is the “anti-system” attitude.¹⁸

According to Guy Hermet, the word “populism,” no longer served at a time in the old European democracy other than to describe bouts of passion that should

¹⁵ Radu Carp, “Populismul în creștere – vor supraviețui democrațiile?”, *Adevarblog*, 18 Dec. 2016, http://adevarul.ro/news/politica/populismul-crestere-vor-supravietui-democratiilei-1_585649955ab6550cb889aa15/index.html.

¹⁶ <http://www.mediafax.ro/externe/sondaj-romanii-printre-cei-mai-receptivi-europeni-la-politicile-populiste-15987874>.

¹⁷ <https://adrianvladimircostea.wordpress.com/2016/05/31/interviu-cu-doamna-prof-sorina-cristina-soare-universitatea-din-florenta-italia-evolutia-populismului-in-spatiul-politic-romanesc-postdecembrist-studiu-de-caz-asupra-partidului-poporului/>.

¹⁸ Ion Iliescu, “Prefață”, in Guy Hermet, *Sociologia populismului*, translated by Dan Burcea, Bucharest, Artemis, 2007, p. 1.

banish back to “episodes shameful of national history or the gallery of exotic curiosities.”¹⁹

On the other hand, the French philosopher believes that Le Pen and Heider “are far from representing only isolated cases since the re-emergence of populism is observed in different forms and often before those adopted in France and Austria, and in other European countries in the West and East, North America and even Australia.” Thus, neither the extreme right-wing German movements, nor the Norwegian and Danish Progressive Party, who have actually re-introduced populism in Europe, nor the Belgian separatists and the “dangerous Vlaams Blok” nor the Northern League in Italy, nor the national populists in Europe central and eastern or post-communist Russia – should not be ignored²⁰.

Hermet’s view is that all this happens because “most of humanity misconceptions a democratic regime, including when it comes to people who aspire to see it appearing on the horizon.” For “the populist imaginary” (despite the intuition of democracy) often tends to “encounter any power that succeeds in one form or another of tyranny as a ‘democratic progress,’ whose capacity of deception is unlikely to last more than a spring”. Moreover, the masses “acclaim with the same illusion of progress the arrival of an authority in which they recognize themselves more and more as their representatives are intolerant of the minorities accused of not belonging to ‘their people’.”²¹

So, I think that only a return to values can restructure the chaotic world. It is well to remember this, today, when we are powerless while seeing the crumbling of Europe’s foundation, both externally and internally. European values are based on classical and modern culture (which also includes political culture), their function being to structure, not deconstructing. In this respect, the EU values are compatible with European values: Greco-Roman classicism, Christianity, the scientific and Renaissance spirit, and the modern philosophy of human rights. A society must be structured on such values. Otherwise, the crisis of values is an old one.

On the other hand, it is clear that populism is not the greatest threat to EU values but terrorism in all its forms including cyber terrorism. Populism is only a reaction or a way to respond to and conceptualise these crises. In this context, we may ask: Does populism want direct, participative democracy vs representative democracy? Personally, I think that the populist discourse belongs to “popular” leaders who aspire to elite status.

Eventually, the current European crisis is the result of disregard for academic cultural values, of exaggerated pragmatism, cynicism, greed, injustice, and clientelism, is the result of forgetting the thought of the starry sky above us and the moral law within us, of “forgetting” rational and altruistic community projects, of the paralysis of civic consciousness.

¹⁹ Guy Hermet, *Sociologia populismului*, ed.cit., p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

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