

BETWEEN “TRADITIONAL” POPULISM AND “PANDEMIC” POPULISM

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Abstract. In relation to the European Union, populist discourse is marked by Euroscepticism. Populism is related to the dysfunctions of democracies politically exploited by populist leaders and parties. In this sense, democracy makes possible the emergence of populism through dysfunctions, not through its nature. And the recent phenomenon of the pandemic demonstrates how a health crisis can increase the dysfunctions of democracy. In this crisis situation critical views show that “All practical issues hide theoretical issues” and this paper focuses on this aspect.

Keywords: *populism; populist parties; pandemic; critical theory; Europe.*

The actual situation

“The fight against populism is our fight, everyone’s” stated the EESC’s “Diversity Europe” Group on 20 February 2020.¹ And in the situation when, in just one year, a pandemic entered the fight against the balance of society and citizens, the situation became particularly complicated, as it was and still it is in Europe during 2020 and 2021.

As is well known, in relation to the European Union, populism is closely linked to Euroscepticism. Presenting the study “Societies outside metropolises: the role of civil society organizations in confronting populism” on 20 February 2019 in Brussels, “Diversity Europe” Group within the European Economic and Social Committee considered the rise of populism in the EU, noting that this phenomenon was in Europe at the highest rates since the 1930s.: “The average level of populist voting in EU Member States currently stands at 24%, up from 8.5% in 2000. Right-wing or left-wing populists are members of many European governments, while in other countries members, they have an influence on the

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¹ EESC Diversity Europe Group, “Fighting against populism is everybody’s business”, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/fighting-against-populism-everybodys-business-says-eesc-diversity-europe-group>, 20 February 2019, accessed in Romanian on 27 March 2021.

20 February 2019, accessed on 27 March 2021.

political agenda, as members of the opposition, forcing moderate parties to adopt extremist policies. In this context, Euroscepticism is often the direct result of populist resentments”².

Involving documentary research, statistical analysis, questionnaire responses, interviews with civil society organizations and experts, the study emphasizes economic decline, social instability and low levels of education as key factors in increasing support for populists across the EU. In addition to these issues, the “desire to maintain the status quo and the need to protect traditional values, cultural homogeneity or certain identities should not be ignored”³.

These, in fact, are observations common to all researchers of populism, from its beginnings to the present.

And now, the task of those who aim to combat populism and Euroscepticism “by strengthening networks, better explaining the important role of Europe and bringing «Europe» closer to its citizens”⁴, starting in March 2020 and during 2021, must also take into account the phenomenon called by Hans Pfeifer “pandemic populism”⁵.

The name of this strategy was given by a group of researchers from the University of Münster, who analysing how conspiracy theories of the right wing operates during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining about 120.000 Facebook posts operated by various German media companies, found that “Conspiracy theorists mix the pandemic with familiar topics, such as climate change or the refugee problem. The result is an apocalyptic fantasy on a coronavirus theme”⁶.

In addition, those who adopt conspiracy theories consider that “a small group of self-titled elites (...) pull the strings behind the scenes (...) against the people, the common people”. This belief is also fuelled by regular reports concerning “abuse of power and fraud committed by some politicians and potentates”⁷.

In this context, there are numerous conspiracy scenarios that fuel Euroscepticism and populism, related to the cause, development and purpose of this pandemic.

On the other hand, ignoring the real causes of popular discontent, some voices argue that Europe “is in an information war, against democratic political parties and against parliamentary democracy” caused by individuals who “spread insecurity in order to overthrow the system”. It is no less true that “the pandemic frightens people, especially since they realize that even those in positions of responsibility do not really know which is the way out of the crisis is”, while “«alternative media» reports mainly on the same verifiable facts, but adorns reports with speculations such as «the coronavirus was produced in a laboratory» or «the virus is less dangerous than politicians and the press claim»”⁸. A situation that is fully found in other European countries including Romania, where it can

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ „Germania: Populismul de pandemie și teoriile conspiraționiste” [“Germany: Pandemic Populism and Conspiracy Theories”], 27 April 2020, <https://www.dw.com/ro/germania-populismul-de-pandemie-%C8%99i-teoriile-conspira%C8%9Bioniste/a-53261183>, accessed on 27 March 2021.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

be observed especially nowadays a sceptical-outraged attitude "as the period in which people have to give up their normal and ordinary daily life is prolonged", and the result of the pressures is seen even in the change of attitude of the supporters of social isolation who "become more receptive to conspiratorial contents, given the perpetuation of the uncertainties"⁹.

In a revealing article, "Covid-19 and the state of emergency in the age of populism", summarizing the data on populism in recent years and the desire to prevent the rise to power of populists, Ion Popa shows that they "speculated on the migrant crisis or attacks terrorists to induce the idea that states are weak and can no longer protect their citizens". Using this manipulation technique for electoral purposes, launching "messages of force" and recommending themselves as "protectors, sometimes even with religious, messianic values", in countries where populist parties are already in power (Hungary, Poland), their leaders act according to their schedule. In countries such as Italy or France, "out of the desire to avoid the rise to power of the populists, moderate leaders are forced to take draconian measures, measures which, if there were no such fear of losing the electorate, they would take them with more caution"¹⁰. The author compares the situation that is now manifested in many countries with the situation in Romania "in the second half of the 1930s, when King Charles II and other politicians of the time embraced and adopted policies of the Iron Guard precisely to stop its rise". Although the comparison does not seem inspired, Ion Popa argues: "The COVID 19 crisis has created a dangerous situation in which many states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, have entered into a competition of draconian measures and the declaration of a state of emergency". Thus, analysing what happened in 2020 at the beginning of the crisis (but such events were perpetuated throughout the crisis, until 2021), the author notes, following discussions in the online environment, as some USR politicians, "party that has in the political program the idea of defence, not of restriction of civil rights, they insisted on the president to decree the state of emergency". As if they were participating in a competition, their main argument was that "neighbouring countries, including Bulgaria, did this". Such decisions, according to the author, can create problematic situations: "For example, the Czech Republic has banned, from March 16, any entry and exit from the country, including its own citizens. While the ban on entering the country could be justified, by the desire to protect the population from disease, the ban on leaving the country immediately made me think of the communist regime. If there was a fear that their own citizens would leave and then want to return, endangering the population, the warning could be included in the respective order or law that, once out of the Czech Republic, a person, even a citizen, would not be able to return for a certain period of time if it comes from an area with a high risk of contamination. Unfortunately, such nuances disappear when measures are taken in a hurry and in a competitive spirit"¹¹.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Ion Popa, „Covid 19 și starea de urgență în epoca populismului” [“Covid 19 and the state of emergency in the age of populism”], Scena9, 19 March 2020, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/COVID-19-stare-urgenta-populism> accessed on 21 March 2021.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

The author concludes the article with the hope that “this crisis will be overcome soon and we will return to normal”, although “the way in which many countries hurried to declare a state of emergency in the context of COVID 19 does not foresee a good future for European democracy”. Significant examples in this regard are “Images like those in Spain, where drones are used to monitor and warn people not to leave their homes, or those in South Korea, where the movement of people is tracked by modern technology (online, mobile phones)”, a situation which “shows how close we are to a situation that can get out of control and turn into a dystopia”¹².

In the context of this great health challenge amid the rise of populist currents in the EU, what theoretical perspectives can be seen?

For researchers, it may be a generous and current topic, but populist discourse and practices (among which are, paradoxically, those allegedly anti-populist) can be harmful to democracy in both nation states and the EU.

However, if populism, in short, as a doctrine, ideology, practice or political discourse invokes the people (the one called to the polls to vote for politicians) how can it be harmful to democracy, *i. e.* that regime that ultimately gives it power?

A provisional answer would be that the nature of populism is demagogic, not democratic. One is the doctrine of populist parties; another is the procedure by which they are voted. Parties are populist by what they propose to the people, not because they are voted by the people. The appeal of populist politicians to the people aims to criticize the democratically elected (“corrupt”) political class.

Populism is related to the dysfunctions of democracies politically exploited by populist leaders and parties. In this sense, democracy makes possible the emergence of populism through dysfunctions, not through its nature.

And the recent phenomenon of the pandemic demonstrates how a health crisis can increase the dysfunctions of democracy.

This may also explain the fact that an anti-system discourse like George Simion’s can be successful in Romania, where in the December 2020 parliamentary elections, the “surprise” was the political party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a party founded with only a year ago, which obtained nine percent of the voters’ votes, becoming “the fourth political force in the Romanian Parliament”¹³. About this party, the opinion was circulated that “AUR occupied the place left vacant by the Greater Romania Party, after the death of the leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor” (sociologist Dan Petre in an interview given to edupedu.ro.), or “some say that the PSD led by Marcel Ciolacu is to blame, because it abandoned Dragnea’s nationalist and xenophobic notes, quickly recovered by AUR. Others accuse Traian Băsescu and his creation, the Popular Movement Party, of the same thing.”¹⁴.

As we see from this example, populism can become a doctrinal dimension of any party, either right-wing or left-wing, depending on the context. In fact, in connection with the evolution of populism in Romania, a volume coordinated by

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Recorder, 10 December 2020, <https://recorder.ro/cum-a-ajuns-aur-a-patra-forta-politica-din-romania/>, accessed on 4 April 2021.

¹⁴ Tania Radu, Press Review in Bucharest, Radio Free Europe Moldova, 07 December 2020, [https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/aur-a-ocupat-locul-l%C4%83sat-liber-de-partidul-rom%C3%A2nia-mare-\(dan-petre-edupedu-ro\)/30988247.html](https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/aur-a-ocupat-locul-l%C4%83sat-liber-de-partidul-rom%C3%A2nia-mare-(dan-petre-edupedu-ro)/30988247.html), accessed on 4.04.2021, 18.00.

Sergiu Mișcoiu and Sergiu Gherghina, *Populist Parties and Personalities in Post-Communist Romania* (2010), designated FSN and PDSR as populists in the early 1990s, PNL in 2003-2004 and 2009-2010, PDL in 2003-2004 and 2007-2008, in addition to PRM, PUNR and PNG¹⁵.

In connection with the rise of neo-populism starting from different ideologies, from right to left, after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 which resulted in the return of the rule of law, in 2018 Robert Adam distinguished, among others, the following common elements of this political phenomenon: "recourse to the nation, nation, ancestral faith"¹⁶; judicial attitude, the fight against the harshest means against corruption; the option for ethnic nationalism, to the detriment of the civic one; the ideal of a strong state, capable of promptly solving citizens' problems; "demagoguery, media and interested philanthropy, the fluttering of immediate collective advantages"¹⁷. The author noted that "the populist discourse was taken over by mainstream political actors, which is far from being a prerogative of Romania (it happens in most of Central and Eastern Europe). Populism is cyclical, it never disappears forever"¹⁸.

Thus: "In England the effects of populism were seen at Brexit, and in France and Germany populist ideologies and discourse, beyond the immigration crisis, have a chance to win a wider audience, following recent events, attacks, etc."¹⁹.

A recent book on the possibility of combating populism rather than its definition is signed by Jan-Werner Müller. If "all populists oppose «the people» and a corrupt elite, pursuing their own interests", says Jan-Werner Müller, "what really distinguishes a populist – and this is the main argument of the book – is the assertion that he and only he represents the authentic people"²⁰.

Referring to the "annus horribilis" of 2016, Jan-Werner Müller notes that "today almost not a day goes by without hearing and reading about a «world wave» of populism". Despite this, "the idea of a global trend towards an «anti-establishment sentiment» is not a neutral description of political reality"²¹. And this is because "the populist leaders themselves promoted it, in addition to a kind of domino theory". Thus, "Marine Le Pen exclaimed at a meeting of European populists in Koblenz (Germany) in January 2017 that «2016 was the year in which the Anglo-Saxon world woke up»" and expressed the certainty that 2017 will be the year in which the people of continental Europe will also wake up."²² We are already in 2021, and the unforeseen phenomenon of the pandemic has strong effects in the area of populist resurgence.

Jan-Werner Müller records other significant attitudes, facts, statements: "Nigel Farage – dissatisfied with the metaphors of dominoes or of simple waves – spoke

¹⁵ Apud Robert Adam, *Două veacuri de populism românesc* [Two centuries of Romanian populism], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2018, p. 288.

¹⁶ Robert Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, *Ce este populismul?* [What Is Populism?], transl. by Irina-Marina Bortoi, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2017, p. 9. (Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

of a «tsunami» and, easily mixing the metaphors, praised the Italian voters who rejected constitutional reforms by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi for allegedly firing a «bazooka» against Europe”.²³

But the populist attitude is also recognizable in the “honorable” ideological area, so to speak. For “Farage did not produce Brexit alone. To make the «exit» a reality, he needed conservative allies such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove – the latter perhaps more than anyone else. (...) When Gove said that citizens should not trust experts, that meant something – after all, Gove himself was an expert. More importantly, Brexit was not just the result of spontaneous anti-establishment sentiments of the oppressed; Euroscepticism, once a marginal position among British conservatives, had been fueled for decades by tabloids and politicians such as David Cameron, who did not believe in leaving the European Union but for opportunistic reasons often repeated standard claims about how bad is Brussels”.²⁴ On the other hand, “in Austria, where the victory in the December 2016 election of the far-right populist Norbert Hofer had been widely predicted, a Green politician, Alexander Van der Bellen, emerged victorious”. Thus, “What seemed like a short circuit in the great populist trend is in fact giving important lessons to the whole West”.²⁵

That is why it is desirable “not to become too obsessed with populist and extremist parties”, but rather “to keep other politicians under surveillance and, above all, to see if the Conservatives are also willing to cooperate”, moreover, the more “we must be aware that sometimes the major parties that call themselves conservative or Christian Democrat turn into populist parties, somewhat erasing the clear division between «establishment» and «anti-establishment»”.²⁶ Thus, for example, “Orbán’s Fidesz Party has not always been a populist party and did not campaign with a populist platform in 2010; it was only after the election that Orbán became a deeply illiberal, anti-EU leader who systematically undermined the rule of law and democracy in his country”. Likewise, “Jarosław Kaczyński’s «Law and Justice» Party had a moderate image in the autumn 2015 elections, revealing its deeply populist character and following in Orbán’s footsteps only after winning a majority.”²⁷

In the opinion of this author, given that “there is no universally valid solution in the fight against populists”, a conciliatory strategy would be possible by encouraging other politicians “to talk to populists, but not as populists” and even more so, if populists “cease to be still populists – that is, anti-pluralists – it is perfectly legitimate to work with them in a democracy”.²⁸

Making the remark according to which “Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, one of the best analysts of democratic life today, called these times an «Age of Populism»”, Jan-Werner Müller also notes that “we do not have a theory of populism and it seems that we lack coherent criteria for determining when political actors turn significantly into populists”.²⁹

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

That's why a question like "Is everyone a populist?" has multiple meanings, also expressible in a rhetorical style: "Can a populist simply be a successful politician that we don't like? Can the label «populism» be populist in itself? Or could populism ultimately be the «true voice of democracy», as Christopher Lasch argues?"

A necessary condition for being considered a populist, says Jan-Werner Müller, is that the politician "to be *critical of the elite*", and "apart from being anti-elitist, populists are always *anti-pluralists*".³⁰ Among the characteristics of populism are the fact that when they candidate, "populists present their political competitors as part of the immoral and corrupt elite", and "when they lead, they refuse to recognize the legitimacy of any opposition". In addition, "populism is always a form of identity politics (although not all versions of identity politics are populist)." Understanding populism as an exclusive form of identity politics leads to the interpretation of this political current as "a danger to democracy", given that "democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we must find a level playing field to live together as free, equal citizens, but also irreducibly diverse".³¹

We can add to these characteristics as well demagoguery, but beyond the "populist" demagoguery that I don't believe any politician has escaped at least in election campaigns, this phenomenon is typical for crisis situations, when dissatisfaction or fear increases, when people wait "prophetic" leaders or those who are able to provide them with some existential comfort. More precisely, then the favourable conditions for the phenomenon are created. In this sense, through the dysfunctions it caused, in total contempt for individual human tragedies, the Covid-19 pandemic provided unexpected "arguments" for populist attitudes, relying on the psycho-emotional side of the personality of the individual to whom it is addressed.

However, which theoretical perspectives are possible?

Thus, the crises of recent years, coupled with the recent pandemic crisis, have highlighted the failure of traditional parties to communicate with citizens, and the rise of populist leaders in European states with a strong democratic tradition was a response to the chronic "democratic disappointment" in the individual and collective mentality in the first twenty years of this millennium.

Defining the crisis as a feeling of stalemate, of non-fulfilment, of confusion, of lack of logic, of amorality, of a state of perpetual conflict makes this concept always current for contemporaries of states or events that, related to a ideal scale of values, appear as ill-conceived and even catastrophic, hence that a "paradisiacal" state has never existed in the earthly life of people, and individuals and institutions through which they have organized socio-political felt always in crisis.

Now, in the context of the globalization of a dangerous small and invisible virus, the philosopher Olivier Abel conveys a message whose complexity captures the drama of this situation for the isolated individual: "With the pandemic, we first measure the illusory nature of our independence-related imaginary, whether

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

national or individual, of the survivor's imaginary, strong enough, intelligent enough to save itself. In the shadow of our cult of emancipation, of the legitimate hatred of any servitude, we have allowed exclusion. At the moment of isolation, we measure this voluntary loneliness in which we pampered ourselves. When we might lose them, (...) we realize the importance of our connections and the extent of our attachments."³²

At the social level, the philosopher notes the devastating effect of the crisis, compared to economic differences between individuals, manifested very clearly in the practical way of living: "With the pandemic, we measured the terrible nature of inequalities, above all, housing inequalities, and I saw the ridiculous nature of the borders, of the pretensions to barricade oneself, to save oneself, the call for prudent hospitality that implies possible hostility, the call for both local and global solidarity. But I fear that after this crisis, everyone will strengthen their means of protection, insensitivity to the fate of others will increase and leave behind a landscape in which all these inequalities will be deepened, more irremediable than ever."³³

Globally and therefore also at European level, "This crisis is also a good opportunity to rethink the meaning and shape of our borders. Borders have a history that matches that of political regimes. The marches of the former multinational empires are not the linear boundaries of nation states, nor those of federal states, nor those that are still very different from immigration societies, to cite Walzer's *Treaty of Tolerance*, which distinguishes different cohabitation regimes. At the beginning of a new transformation, the borders of contemporary states are now disturbed by financial and digital globalization, forced migration with its miserable camps, tax evasion and internationalized mafias that are getting out of control. How can we rediscover the boundaries that respond to their anthropological function necessary for differentiation, closure, internal solidarity in a society and that allow both the reconstruction of the rules of interdependence and the global hospitality that we lack?"³⁴

For the time being, the philosopher notes, the most obvious form of solidarity at this time of maximum human vulnerability is to share the same fate as an individual in prison, despite the differences between practical ways of living: "If habitat is the condition and measure of the economy, the consequence is the equivalence of habitats, which are less than an addition of objects, than the boundary horizon in which we assess and divide our goods. We can say that this horizon is a priori equivalent for everyone. This principle of habitat equivalence does not find any economy, but provides a basis for endless criticism of any economy and for increasing the world's economic density, its diversity in lifestyles and ways of life, in ways of living. We are locked up together"³⁵.

It is therefore about a favourable context for the reception of populist discourse, in which, in addition to the health crisis, there are economic, financial, social

³² Olivier Abel, „Habiter le monde” [Living in the world], *Esprit*, April 2020 #Philosophie #Covid-19, <https://esprit.presse.fr/actualites/olivier-abel/habiter-le-monde-42695?fbclid=IwAR1jVxaBqd8VhNSAav-IF6NnCyeYvGd4FV1E9qKe2HMm67Xo6ROq7UYYhg>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

crises, "democratic" dissatisfaction with poverty, as if specially to highlight the comforting virtues of freedoms used without discernment, these themselves are a threat not so much to the values of the European Union (whose "officialised" panoply lacks some authentic European values), but to the human being.

Added to this is distrust in politicians, in parties, in institutions that seem to be moving towards the totalitarianism described by Orwell, as the French philosopher Michel Onfray argued in an interview for the Belgian newspaper *L'Echo*. In this respect, first of all, the philosopher defends himself against a possible accusation of exaggeration: "I am not saying that we have returned to Nazism or Stalinism. What interests me is not how totalitarianism sometime worked, but how it works in the age of the internet, digitalization and mobile phones. This contemporary totalitarianism does not wear a helmet or boots. Instead, we live in a society of control: the fact that we can be constantly listened to, the fact that data about us is being collected, and so on. This control society is at an unprecedented point of crisis"³⁶.

This new form of totalitarianism is based on the dependence induced on individuals, on "a kind of voluntary servitude to new technologies", in the current situation, when "SF (...) is no longer fiction; it has become science. That tele-screen that constantly watches over us actually exists today", which shows that "Orwell invented things related to the control and invisibility of powers" and the latter "distinguishes the old totalitarianism from the present one".

Regarding the explanation for the support of populism, Onfray states that "There is no longer any connection between peoples and their representatives. In assemblies and parliaments there is an over-representation of the liberal professions: lawyers, teachers, etc. Few are shepherds, taxi drivers or students. Which means that there is a part of society that is simply not represented. In addition, in order to hope to be elected, you must have money, to comply with the requirements of a device, to go through the sieve of a party. Representative democracy is a thing of the past (...) the elected act against the people"³⁷.

Asked as a thinker who expressed his "confidence in the people for the rebirth of democracy", how he defines populism "of which there is so much fear today", the philosopher speaks of "the death of representative democracy", while confessing: "I have no problem to define myself as a populist". Onfray distinguishes between populists and "populicides", not between populists and democrats. For example, Macron, Chirac and Mitterrand are "populicides" because "they do not want to rule for the people". In this respect, "The referendum for the citizens'

³⁶ Michel Onfray, "La crétinisation progressive du peuple représente un vrai problème" ["The progressive turning of the people into idiots represents a real problem"], *L'Echo*, 06 November 2019, <https://www.lecho.be/opinions/general/michel-onfray-la-cretinisation-progressive-du-peuple-represente-un-vrai-probleme/10179117.html>, accessed on 4.04. 2021, Apud *Evenimentul Zilei*, 19 November 2019, https://evz.ro/poporul-este-cretinizat-pentru-a-batatori-calea-spre-dictatura.html?fbclid=IwAR0miQEZnDadZ95A1e5BT0GsT9AKBwoZQBpmX_b5_hTSSh6KDhwn2Hqwl4I accessed on 27 January 2020.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ The main demand of the Yellow Vest movement is that it proposes the establishment of a kind of direct democracy, whereby a certain number of citizens can call a referendum, without the need for the consent of parliament or the president. The referendum would have the power to revoke a law approved by Parliament or a treaty, to amend the constitution or to revoke an elected dignitary. – Redaction's note, *Evenimentul Zilei*, 19 November 2019.

initiative³⁸ it's a very interesting idea. The idea of having some revocable elected officials is a good thing". And, despite the current context, in which "the progressive turning into idiots of the people is a real problem", "the great advantage of the Internet is that the people can go in search of alternative information", and "the fact that a text of law is designed and criticized of the people is a splendid idea"³⁹. Asked how he perceives the various social movements on the planet, the philosopher simply answers that "All these movements are a sign that the peoples are tired. It can't stand to see that there are some senseless fortunes and that there are some guys who make wars for the sole purpose of getting rich".

Another issue brought up and exacerbated by the Coronavirus crisis is "Destruction of the school", which "led to the destruction of intelligence", given that "Now, there is less of a problem for the education system to create a citizen who thinks and more to produce a paying consumer".

Onfray states that he opposes progressivism as presented today, because "progress is not a good in itself", moreover, "There can be a progress of evil, a progress of death", so what has proved beneficial must be preserved. And because "Today, our civilization is groping like a blind man", the philosopher concludes: "I do not enter the game of systematically opposing bad populists with nice progressives".⁴⁰

In other words, the fear of populism seems a new fashion, a new wooden language "in the light of the urgencies of time", in fact, a problem of this "time of the world" marked by the politicization of the Covid-19 crisis, of these times when a new "World order" tries to install a dominant discourse, to use the language of Derrida whose lucid observations help us to better understand the world in which we live. The dominant discourse is found, according to Derrida, in the culture more or less properly called politics (official discourses of parties and politicians in power in the world, everywhere where Western models prevail), in interpretations and "communications", in the selective and hierarchical production of "information" on the channels whose power has grown, sometimes in the "scholarly culture" of historians, sociologists and political scientists, literary theorists, anthropologists and especially political philosophers. The euphoric discourse of (neo) liberal democracy and of the market economy still dominates the new geopolitical scene⁴¹. The analytical deconstruction made in this sense is as convincing as possible in terms of the power of words to create a reality that comes after discourse, of the word that becomes distressing "kratophany".

It can be said that a new ghost haunts (through) Europe: the ghost of populism. We must not confuse the sincere revolt against those who, living in luxury, apologize for austerity with the hypocritical discourse of the rich who appeal to the "people". If we can call a "good" populism, it is a reaction to posthumanism and less of a challenge. In this sense, populism is not an extremism, a totalitarianism, more worrying being the potential of cruelty, indifference and irresponsibility of man.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectrele lui Marx. Starea datoriei, travaliul doliului și noua Internațională* [The spectres of Marx. The state of duty, the labour of mourning and the new International], transl. by Bogdan Ghiu and Mihaela Cosma, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999.

“People without imagination are mesmerized by clichés and slogans” – Mircea Eliade wrote in a short story. Maybe European leaders should not leave us mesmerized by the clichés of populism, nor by the slogans of populists, but to look for real solutions to the current crisis, amplified by the pandemic.

*Instead of concluding:
“All practical issues hide theoretical issues”*

I said at the beginning of this article that in relation to the European Union, populist discourse is marked by Euroscepticism.

More or less “populist” criticism of the pathological phenomena of democracy (such as corruption of the political class, various invented identity crises, demographic decline, social anxieties, the uncontrolled power of the financial oligarchy) is in some cases justified, all the more so, as Marcel Gauchet has stated since 1998: “The distance between the base and the top is growing inexorably. This is because, indeed, there is something more going on up there than was promised, namely the aggregation of all these negotiated decisions, one by one, with great fanfare, the bringing together of all these actions carried out dispersed in a unifying orientation. (...) We come to the original contradiction of a society that knows itself incomparably in detail, without being understood as a whole. (...) In the name of democracy, it turns its back on the supreme democratic demand, that of self-government. Thus, we may risk saying that one day we will find that democracy is moving in another direction. An unpredictable day, but a day marked in advance, nevertheless, in the device of democracy as it unfolds again today. (...) At some point, the ideal of self-government will bring back to the center of attention, as indispensable elements of support, these dimensions of public generality and collective unity repudiated by current aspirations. They will recompose in a new light, while the very ideal of autonomy will find a new language.”⁴²

Perhaps that approximate “day” of Gauchet has come, and the new necessary language can be found by returning to cultural and spiritual models that have become valuable landmarks for both the individual and society, whose restoration appears all the more urgent in times of crisis: medical, moral, economic, institutional, geopolitical, as is the one that humanity has been going through for a long time.

In a text entitled “The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy”, written in 1935, Edmund Husserl stated that “All practical questions hide within theoretical questions which, in turn, must generally be referred to and raised in the field of science”⁴³. Referring to the “crisis of European existence” rooted in a “self-confusing” rationalism, which “does not in any way mean the failure of rationalism”, but of its “externalizations”, the Husserlian text is a plea for the purpose of philosophy in Europe, but from the perspective of the spirit. From

⁴² Marcel Gauchet, *Ieșirea din religie* [The exit from Religion], transl. From French by Mona Antohi, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2006, pp. 143-146. (Original text published as: Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie*, Éditions Gallimard, 1998.)

⁴³ Edmund Husserl, *Criza umanității europene și filosofia* (și alte scrieri) [The Crisis of European humanity and Philosophy (and other writings)], transl., notes, comments and afterword by Alexandru Boboc, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Grinta, 2009, p. 58.

this perspective, philosophy appears as an “infinite task”, beyond what it means as a historical fact in a certain epoch, and from such a hypostasis it is called to take an attitude towards the problem of the crisis of European humanity.

Husserl’s imperative of 1935 is still relevant today, and the task of philosophy can be fulfilled if the government (of a country, of Europe, of the world) meets the requirement of Ezra Pound: “Government has so far been based on facts, fantasy, superstition, customs popular, customs, ideas, ideologies. Facts [are] pure physical force, operating through armies”, but “The best government is (naturally?) the one that uses everything that is best in the intelligence of the nation”.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Ezra Pound, „Europa sau decorul” [Europe or the Scenery], Ezra Pound, *Opere II, ABC-ul lecturii. Ghid spre Kulthură* [Works II. The ABC of Reading. Culture Guide], transl. by Radu Vancu, Bucharest, Humanitas Fiction, 2019, p. 417.