

Populism: simple demagoguery or threat to democracy?

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In recent years the term “populism” has become a part of public debate, especially during the period leading up to election. However, we seem to find different understandings of the term in media, political science and in everyday language. This article attempts to briefly explain what is populism, does it pose threats to democracy and what to do about it.

Populism has been on the rise for more than a couple of years now. There have been many attempts to explain the similarities and the root causes for this success in various states and to determine, on the basis of those, the best ways to tackle the challenge that populism may present to democratic discourse and to democracy itself. With the European Parliament elections looming in 2019, there is a growing unease about the prospect of Eurosceptic populist parties finally being successful at uniting themselves and becoming a major, if not the biggest force in the European Parliament.¹ On the national level early 2018 with general elections in Czech Republic, Italy and Hungary have shown that the threat of populism has by no means faded and it is high time for the states next on the general election schedule such as Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sweden, Luxembourg and others to take note and learn the lessons.

Nobody will doubt that being called a populist is not a compliment. Populism is often closely associated with racism, xenophobia and extreme nationalism and we cannot say populists have not given us ample reason for the birth of this association.² Populists themselves, however, are not striving for a designated title “populist” and prefer to think about themselves as “patriots”.³ When thinking about populists, we instinctively imagine characters that frequent our own information bubble or most likely are geographically relevant to us. For me the first association with a stereotypical populist would have to be the former United Kingdom Independence party leader, Member of the European Parliament Nigel Farage, the current US President Donald Trump or Hungary’s Prime Minister Victor Orbán, who all are more or less the on the right side of the political spectrum. However, is populism exclusively a far-right ideology? Is it even a self-sufficient ideology or rather an instrument that can be used by all sides of the political spectrum? Is it inherently dangerous to democratic discourse or democracy itself? And, finally, what can we do about it?

What is populism?

To answer these questions we need to have a common understanding of populism as a notion. When you google “populism”, the search engine will point you to other suggested searches like “nationalism”, “right-wing”, “demagoguery”. Everyone will also remember Stephen Hawking’s harsh description of Donald Trump in early 2016, where Mr. Hawking famously referred to the

presumptive Republican nominee as “a demagogue that appeals to the lowest common denominator”.⁴ It is true, that the common perception of populism is not associated with a particular ideology, but rather a style of presenting politics.⁵ Simplified, slightly aggressive tone, demagoguery, simple solutions for complex problems that are tailored to the language and understanding of general public are all associated with populist style of talking politics. This style of communication seems to be effective and thus particularly dangerous in post-truth era where facts take the back seat and emotions dominate political discourse. However, if we stop at this definition of populism, we would have to admit that every politician and indeed any individual who wants to get his argument across in a colourful and simplistic manner could be labelled a populist.

Political scientists define populism as “thin-centred” ideology,⁶ which focuses on the clash of the people and the ruling establishment. In the words of Cas Mudde, populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.⁷ What unites all populists is the notion that elites ignore the interests and needs of ordinary people⁸ and it is time for the power to be returned to the people. So, if the primary focus of populists is “people” why is it so widely considered to be dangerous to democracy?

Populism and democracy

Is populism inherently dangerous to democracy? The answer to this question, in my view, is yes and no. It was recently noted by Stefan Lehne, and I agree, that populism should not be regarded as pathology, but rather an element of democracy.⁹ Populists are correct in claiming that policies be it on national or international level are supposed to be built around the needs of the people. It is also accurate to claim that they are very often not. Therefore, populist participation in political discourse can help highlight issues that may have been neglected, motivate elites to adjust their policies and encourage participation of less politically active citizens. In other words, populism is like salt, in small doses it can keep the ruling elite on its toes, prevent stagnation and make political process more democratic. However, as shown by recent examples in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere around the globe, the problem arises when populism gets injected in governing institutions in large doses.

The problem with populism lies in its simplified perception of the structure of society and the way democracy is supposed to work. Populists claim to represent and defend the views of a homogenous mass — “the people”. Speaking in Mudde’s terms, they strive to have the “*volonté générale*” of the people (majority) implemented in all state structures and all areas of governance. The problem is, a sustainable 21st century democracy is more nuanced than the implementation of the will of the majority that populism proposes. It is evident that 21st century society is far from homogenous and far from having one distinct general will. Even a relatively homogenous society such as the one in Latvia, consists of groups of people with different interests, ideas and needs in

almost all areas of governance. In liberal democracy pluralism, including diversity of ideas and interests, is a value in itself. In liberal democracy society is governed by majority, but respects minority and values diversity. The essence of politics in a democratic society lies in the ability to compromise in order to enable everyone to live together in peace and with dignity. This is ensured by democratic representation of diverse views and by maintenance of a carefully designed mechanism of checks and balances. Above all it is ensured by the rule of law, which is designed to prevent excess and abuse of power of those who feel entitled by the “volonté” of the majority.

The problem is that populists promote a type of rudimentary democracy where majority *dictates* the course of action. It is claimed that populist movements often turn against representative democracy and instead advocate instead a shift towards direct democracy on all levels.¹⁰ As we can see from the extreme examples of Poland and Hungary, where populists achieve absolute majority in governing institutions, they can start dismantling the system of checks and balances as part of the establishment that lacks “moral core” and needs to be “returned to the people”.¹¹ In those cases it can be difficult to notice where the line between illiberal democracy and autocracy gets crossed, with some arguing that Poland’s governing populist *Law and Justice* party and Hungary’s *Fidesz* at this point are at the governing top of nearly authoritarian regimes.¹² Even if one could argue that these examples are not representative of all populist parties and populists are striving towards more direct implementation of the will of the people and a purer form of majority rule, it cannot be denied that populist parties (leaders) are still in essence a *representation*, an elite if you will, that claims to be justified as representation of the general will of the people. It is difficult to see how, given unimpeded power and common disregard for bureaucratic representative institutions, it may not pose danger to the balance of powers democracy requires or even lead to some form of autocracy.

Populism and political ideology

As to the content of politics, populism does not seem to offer answers as to what course the politics should take. In other words, populism in itself is not “right” or “left”, it is rather “against” the elite and “for” the people. Therefore, the direction (of lack of it in some cases) of populist’s politics will be determined by the underlying ideology which the party in question subscribes to. While the loudest populist voices in Europe are currently associated with the extreme end of right-wing politics, populism in Latin America is typically associated with left-wing political ideology.¹³ Populism is not alien also to centrist parties, with Italy as the prime example.¹⁴ Nevertheless, even if all populists are not necessarily extremist in their political views, they all seem to be capitalizing on the underlying unease and fear in society, be it fear of economic instability, or fear of changes in society that migration may bring about. One of the preconditions of populists’ success has been the ability to present themselves as the solution to the fears and insecurities that have previously been either a taboo or deliberately disregarded by elites in power. Unfortunately long-term success

also seems to call for constant reinforcement of that fear, which partially explains the rise of xenophobia, nationalism and intolerance. The danger of this trend was recently summarized in a grim statement by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein speaking in Vienna on the occasion of 25th anniversary of Vienna Declaration, recommending the establishment of his very mandate. The Commissioner noted that “here in Europe, ethno-populist parties are in the ascendant in many countries — fuelling hatred and scarring their societies with deepening divisions. Where these parties have achieved power, they have sought to undermine the independence of judiciary and silence many critical voices in the independent media and civil society. (...) Almost everywhere across Europe the hatred they direct at migrants has infiltrated the mainstream parties and skewed the political landscape towards greater violence and suffering.”¹⁵

Another no less significant danger lies in the un-nuanced criticism of the democratic institutions themselves. While periodical loss of trust in particular politicians or parties is part of the normal political process and a sign of success or failure of certain policies, people's lack of trust in democratic institutions that ensure balance of power, is far more dangerous to the health of democracy. Lack of trust in democratic institutions enables populists who have the political power to either change the constitutions or gain the necessary support in constitutional referenda.¹⁶

How to counter populism?

That leads me to my final question. What can be done about populism? Instinctively the first answer would be to expose the thin argumentation of populists, to defend the democratic values and educate the uneducated. However, countering populism needs a smart and nuanced approach. Defending the *status quo* will only serve as affirmation of populist message to those who feel neglected by the by the establishment. The starting point of every true dialogue is recognition of the fears and concerns of the other party. This also means recognition of the fact that least in some part populists may be right and certain issues have indeed been neglected in politics or at least in public debate. We also have to re-evaluate the efficiency of our previous approaches to defending human rights and democratic values.

Human rights education plays a crucial role in countering populism. As for the younger generation, the answer seems to be obvious. Article 29(1)(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that the education of the child shall be directed to “development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.” Human rights and civic education needs to become a part of the curricula in all education systems.

As for the general public, populists present human rights as the rights of minorities that threaten the identity and wellbeing of the majority. It is also true that human rights usually appear in the public debate in negative context. It is either news about human rights violations or criticism

to politicians or public officials for failure to implement policies that promote and respect human rights of certain vulnerable groups or individuals. This creates an impression that human rights only work for those who populists label as “migrants”, “criminals” or “minorities”. As human rights educators we need to find ways to rebrand human rights and to show that those same human rights that protect the perceived outsiders also protect “the people”.

To pass this message along we also need to find ways to address the potential audience of populists. Recent election results in Hungary showed that the populist message proved most efficient in the Hungarian countryside. We need to learn those lessons. Given the fragmented information space today, reaching out to potential audience of populists may prove to be the most difficult challenge. This means we need to find ways to enter the information bubbles of populist voters, to meet them and find ways to start a dialogue. I deliberately do not use the word “educate”, because I doubt that respect for democratic values and human rights can simply be taught. Undeniably it is important to explain how human rights work. However, the ultimate goal is to develop a sense of ownership of these values and thus also responsibility to protect them. Simpler and more positive messaging is crucial for this. We need to put human rights in the context of a better future and show that policies respecting human rights and democratic principles can address the needs and concerns of populist audience. And that those policies should be demanded from those in power.

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¹ Maïa de La Baume, [“Populist plan for 2019 election puts EU in crosshairs”](#), Politico (6 April 2018).

² Rob Price, Adam Payne, [“Nigel Farage backs embattled UKIP leader Henry Bolton after racism scandal”](#), Business Insider UK (15 February 2018); Charlie Cooper, [“Xenophobia has become the new normal – and these poisonous ideas won’t go away after the referendum”](#), The Independent (22 June 2016); Eugene Scott, [“Bannon encouraging populists to embrace ‘racist’ label confirms belief about the worldview he brought to the White House”](#), The Washington Post (12 March 2018).

³ Guy Chazan, [“Europe’s rightwing populists proclaim ‘patriotic spring’”](#), Financial Times (22 January 2017).

⁴ Alastair Jamieson, [“Stephen Hawking: Donald Trump Appeals to ‘Lowest Common Denominator’”](#), NBC News (31 May 2016).

⁵ Ilze Balcere, “What Does Populism Really Mean? A Political Science Perspective”, in Andis Kudors, Artis Pabriks (eds), *The Rise of Populism: Lessons for the European Union and the United States of America* (University of Latvia Press 2017) 29.

⁶ Cas Mudde, “The Populism Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol 39, No 4 (2009) 545.

⁷ Cas Mudde, “The Populism Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol 39, No 4 (2009) 543. See also Danielle Albertazzi, Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 3.

⁸ Ilze Balcere, “What Does Populism Really Mean? A Political Science Perspective”, in Andis Kudors, Artis Pabriks (eds), *The Rise of Populism: Lessons for the European Union and the United States of America* (University of Latvia Press 2017) 29.

⁹ Stefan Lehne, [“Populism: The Risks and Impact on European States”](#), Carnegie Europe (6 June 2018).

¹⁰ Stefan Lehne, [“Populism: The Risks and Impact on European States”](#), Carnegie Europe (6 June 2018).

¹¹ Bartosz Dudek, [“Opinion: A catastrophe for Poland’s democracy”](#), Deutsche Welle (19 July 2017).

¹² Dalibor Rohac, [“Hungary and Poland Aren’t Democratic. They’re Authoritarian.”](#), Foreign Policy (5 February 2018).

¹³ Noam Gidron, Bart Bonikowski, [“Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda”](#), Weatherhead Working Paper Series, No 13-0004 (2013) 22.

¹⁴ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, [“Italy: populist government sworn in as political deadlock ends”](#), The Guardian (1 June 2018).

¹⁵ OHCHR, [““Human rights no longer treated as a priority, but as a pariah,’ Zeid tells 25th anniversary gathering in Vienna”](#) (22 May 2018).

¹⁶ Cas Mudde, [“Are populists friends or foes of Constitutionalism?”](#), The Foundation for Law, Justice and Society (2013) 5.