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Reflections on the Future of Conservative Populism

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Abstract: This paper will focus on one dimension of contemporary populism which I believe is the most dangerous for ex-communist countries. Designated as “conservative populism,” its most powerful resource is the past. Memory is used to legitimize populist claims and to delegitimize open discussion and solutions of complex problems in the present. The cultivation of national identity via heritage, tradition, and collective memory played a crucial role in the formation of modern nations. “Conservative populism” abuses this logic by radicalizing the opposition between cultural identity and liberal democratic order, thus creating false dichotomies and offering populist solutions.

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This text is focused on one of the variants of populism which we call “conservative.” We will offer a definition of populism and respectively of conservative populism, outlining its main characteristics. We will discuss why it is particularly dangerous in fuelling anti-European Union (EU) sentiment in former communist countries.

What is populism?

The transnational rise of what in contemporary political science is called “populism” is probably the most striking political phenomenon in regard to contemporary democratic states. Accordingly, the rise of populist parties is one of the major transformations of party systems in the 21st century and has led to an overabundance of research analysing this development. For a long time, scholars disagreed over how to define “populism”; ever since the term was first used, it has been debated. The profusion of publications liberates us from the obligation to propose something fundamentally new, and we are left with the modest task of joining already established interpretations. We will give full credence to Armin Schäfer,¹ who argues that in the last ten years, most scholars seem to have rallied behind a common definition of populism. It goes back to Cas Mudde and describes populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite.’”² This is considered to be at the heart of the so called “ideational” understanding leading to “the current near-consensus” that as a “thin ideology,” populism can be attached to different, more substantial host ideologies. From this perspective, three elements define populism:

(a) a Manichean and moral cosmology; (b) the proclamation of “the people” as a homogenous and virtuous community; and (c) the depiction of “the elite” as a corrupt and self-serving entity. In other words, something is defined as “populist” if it has all three of these conditions. So, one cannot categorize a particular discourse as populist solely on the basis of anti-establishment rhetoric or purely on references to “the people” as a political body that is morally superior. The peculiarity of the populist set of ideas lies precisely in the combination of these elements.³

¹Schäfer, Armin. “Cultural Backlash? How (Not) to Explain the Rise of Authoritarian Populism,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 52 (4), 2021, p. 1977.

² Mudde, Cas. “The populist *Zeitgeist*,” *Government and Opposition*, 39, 2004, p. 543.

³ Hawkins, K.A. et al.(eds). *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory and Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, p.3.

Despite some deviations and emphases of our own, our understanding of populism does not leave the framework outlined by authors Mudde and Hawkins. We begin with an apophatic description of populism, before presenting our own interpretation.

Populism is not an ideology. Compared with classical ideologies (such as socialism, liberalism, or fascism), populism stands out for its eclecticism and inconsistency. Various political leaders who have practically opposite ideas and values have been defined as populists. As it is impossible to look for ideological unity between sometimes extreme positions, we cannot identify a minimal common conceptual premise that will allow us to speak of common ideological identity.

Populism is not confined to either the Left or the Right. The facts speak for themselves: populists come from all across the ideological spectrum. One can argue about whether populism in some countries (or even on some continents) tends to be left or right as a rule; one can claim that in some historical periods, populism in a particular country has been predominantly left-wing or right-wing. We must admit, however, that a careful look at the actual manifestations of populism will often reveal the presence both of classical left and right theses.

Populism is not a sign of political immaturity, i.e., even the oldest and thoroughly consolidated democracies are not immune to populism. Many undesirable characteristics of democracies (and especially of young post-communist democracies) have been declared to be temporary and surmountable. In this view, particular flaws of the democratic political process are something like “child diseases of democracy” that are cured by experience. It is precisely experience that shows that populist “outbursts” are possible both in new and in old democracies. It is obvious that the roots of populism are deeper.

Following our own conclusions, we must admit that giving a substantive definition of political populism is impossible in principle. Considering that populism is so heterogeneous, it is hardly appropriate to try to capture the main ideas of the various populist parties and politicians in a single definition. The best approach would be to ignore the specific “filling” of the different populisms and try to outline a most general form of that which accommodates the variety of specific manifestations. That is why we think that it would be most appropriate to define populism as a form of political thinking and rhetoric, a set of rhetorical figures and techniques with a single common characteristic: permanent appeal and reference to the collective image of the “people” that is opposed to the image of the “elite” inevitably conceived

of as a power and economic “elite.” Our understanding is very close to Norris and Inglehart, who define populism “as a rhetorical style of communications claiming that (i) the only legitimate democratic authority flows directly from the people, and (ii) established power-holders are deeply corrupt and self-interested, betraying public trust.”⁴ If the elite is also seen in ideational–cultural perspective, then the appeal to the “people” can be turned not only against the established structure of political and economic power but also against dominant ideas and values of the society.

Margaret Canovan seems to be the first to analyse populism within this theoretical framework⁵ that has been developed and perfected in recent years by many scholars. She is definitely the first to offer an interpretation of the uses of the appeal to the collective term “the people” in populist rhetoric. Canovan identifies an appeal to the people understood as an organic monolithic entity against all organisations that represent it as internally heterogeneous; second, an appeal to the people understood as a linguistic-cultural kinship community against an internal or external foreign, alien community; third, an appeal to the people understood as a collective image of “ordinary people,” or the “underdogs.”⁶

Although schematic and limited, this classification leads to an important methodological suggestion. The concept of “the elite” is a derivative of that of “the people”; it is a negative projection logically connected to its positive qualities. “The people” is by far the stronger part of the populist dichotomy. It can be shaped by a variety of combinations of discontent, frustration, fears, and hopes. The image of “the people” can undergo multiple transformations over time, even within the same political community. This explains the enormous variety of incarnations of the “people-elite dichotomy” that sets the basis for populism as political thinking and rhetoric.

What is conservative populism?

If we follow the methodological approach suggested above, we should start by asking what are the characteristics of the collective image of “the people” in conservative populism? We will not strive for a complete and detailed description but for the identification of leading

⁴ Norris, P and Inglehart, R. *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁵Canovan, Margaret. *Populism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, pp. 13, 128–138.

⁶Canovan, Margaret. “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies*, March 1999, p. 5.

and dominant characteristics that may coexist with many other less important ones. Let us begin by arguing that, without being excluded, economic grievances are not leading in the narrative of conservative populism. Insofar as any “elite-people” cleavage implies some dissatisfaction with the status quo, in our case it is cultural grievances based on perceived threats to national or cultural identity that are prominent.⁷ In this sense, our interpretation is entirely within the field of “cultural backlash theory” developed by Norris and Inglehart. What is new with us is the specific combination of characteristics grouped around the core meaning of “the people.” It must be associated with a culturally and ethnically distinct community, i.e. the “people” of conservative populism must be understood not as a politically disenfranchised *demos* or an economically exploited *plebs*, but above all as a culturally endangered *ethnos*.

We call this version of populism “conservative” because what is perceived as threatened with destruction is invariably described as traditional values and traditional culture. In the context of the European Union, tradition is directly linked to Christianity, i.e. the very idea of cultural heritage is inseparable from the Christian religion. Differences about tradition are treated as cultural incommensurability, whose carriers are not only liberal cosmopolitan elites but potentially every non-Christian group. In conservative populism we see that “the people” can be defined in relation not only to those on top, i.e., the elite, but also to those on the bottom. As far as those at the bottom are alienated from traditional values, they are treated with utmost hostility even though their material condition should engender closeness and sympathy. This requires recognizing that within the discourse of conservative populism, “the people” are opposed not only to a culturally alien elite but also to culturally alien minority and migrant groups.

The most powerful ideational resource of conservative populism is an idealised version of the past. Memory is used to legitimise claims which are tied to “instantiations of nostalgic nationalism.”⁸ This trend is aptly described as “memory politics” that requires “the political instrumentalization and weaponization of the past.”⁹ This politicization of historical memory demands positive reframing, glorification, or even white-washing. Frustration with the present

⁷Oesch, D. “Explaining workers’ support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland,” *International Political Science Review*, 29, 2008, p. 353.

⁸Rensmann, L. “Im Schatten des Trumpismus: Autoritärer Populismus in der Regierung und die Neuformierung der radikalen Rechten in den USA,” *ZRex-Zeitschrift für Rechtsextremismusforschung*, 1(1), 2021, p. 8

⁹Couperus, Stefan, Tortola, Pier Domenico & Rensmann, Lars. *Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe*, *European Politics and Society*, 24 (4), p. 436.

and fear of the future give rise to a widespread disenchantment with the ability of current politicians to solve problems. Imagined aspects of the past, genuine or putative, serve as the main landmarks in drawing the road-map to a better world. Having lost all faith in the idea of building an alternative society of the future, many turn instead to the grand ideas of the past. Zygmunt Bauman coins the term “retrotopia” for this resurrection of the failed and forgotten potentials of the past.¹⁰ Unlike utopia hoping for the future to rectify the current predicament, retrotopia is “a state of sickly nostalgia for an imagined past where things were better managed and organized.”¹¹

Conservative populists may go as far as identifying their version of “the people” as native (non-immigrant), white, Christian, and disenfranchised.¹² Insisting on the idea of cultural incommensurability, they can create confrontation not only with the corrupt elite but also with the culturally inassimilable “other.” This extreme version of conservative populism is dangerously close to what has been called by scientists like Balibar “cultural racism” or “neo-racism.”¹³ It rests on the notion of “the indispensable foundation of a political community: a primordial, essentialized national culture.”¹⁴ From here one can certainly reach the final stop of neo-racism; however, using more moderate and mild rhetoric, one can stop in the middle of the road and launch a devastating attack against a very vulnerable target – the European Union.

Conservative populism against the EU

By using “apparently innocent language about culture”¹⁵ one can attack the EU by emphasizing cultural identity, traditions, and heritage. We are convinced that this moderate version of conservative populism is much more dangerous and destructive because it uses the ubiquitous and noble rhetoric of common European culture and identity. The problem is that it gives its own anti-EU answer, according to which European culture has a brighter future without the EU. It claims to represent the “forgotten Europe” of Christianity, traditional values,

¹⁰Bauman, Zygmunt. *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

¹¹Clegg, Stewart R. “Reading Bauman and *Retrotopia*,” *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 34(4), 2018, p. 355.

¹²Wodak, R. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, London: SAGE, 2015, pp.1–25.

¹³Balibar, É. “Is There a ‘Neo-Racism’?” In: Balibar, E. and Wallerstein, I. eds., *Race, Nation, Class*. London: Verso, 1991, pp. 17–28.

¹⁴De Cesari, Chiara and Kaya, Ayhan. *European Memory in Populism. Representations of Self and Other*, Oxon-New York: Routledge, 2020. p. 27.

¹⁵ Barker, M. *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe*, London: Junction Books, 1981, p. 3.

and family. The hostility to liberal democracy is an integral and distinctive element of this process.¹⁶ This trend is many times stronger in the former communist countries of East Central Europe (ECE) which joined the EU in the beginning of the 21st century. Unlike older member-states in the West, their history during the 20th century was overwhelmingly anti-liberal and anti-democratic, stretching between authoritarian or totalitarian nationalism and totalitarian communism.¹⁷ There is simply no liberal-democratic multicultural past to be revived and glorified. Neither existed, nor would anyone bother to invent it.

There was, however, something that can be likened to a liberal consensus in the first decade of the transition to democracy and market economy. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in the early 1990s, the vast majority of politicians from the ECE, both Left and Right, embraced the reforms necessary for EU and NATO membership. Within this “transition paradigm,” the popular goal of adapting to EU institutions and practices was pursued; that was legitimised by the manifest historical victory of “Western” liberal democracy over “Eastern” communism. This liberal framework seemed to be so dominant that many analysts tended to speak of a liberal hegemony in ECE during the 1990s.¹⁸ Socio-economic problems were explained by the burden of the communist legacy, and their solution was oriented towards the future through membership in the EU. With minor exceptions, anti-EU sentiment was based almost entirely on nostalgia for communism.

Conservative populism poses a threat to ECE countries because the long-sought EU membership has been achieved, which implies that expectations for fundamental renewal and radical policies are unrealistic. Today’s discontents look to the future not with hope, but with anxiety and even fear. The opportunities and achievements of the EU are always accompanied by restrictions, obligations, and pressure to follow unpopular policies. The latter are particularly painful for some when they clash with their understanding of values and cultural identity. The cultural grievances thus generated can easily be joined by the ever-present economic grievances. For many, this ultimately leads to widespread disenchantment with the ability of current politicians to effect change and to growing doubts about whether the path chosen after the fall of communism – membership in NATO and EU – was the correct one.

¹⁶Mudde, Cas. *The far right today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, p. 7.

¹⁷The presidency of the “founding father” of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, from 1913–1935 seems to be the only exception before WWII. There are no exceptions during the Cold War – only differences in the degree of repression by communist totalitarian regimes.

¹⁸Trencsényi, Balázs. “Beyond Liminality? The Kulturkampf of the Early 2000s in East Central Europe,” *Boundary 2*, 41(1), 2014, p. 136. 135–152.

Since neither the present nor the future offers a clear alternative, the only thing that remains is the past.

However, no continuity with the recent totalitarian past is looked for – and this is a key part of the conservative populist appeal. Its retrotopia is so enchanting because it is fuelled by the longing to restore a more profound but forgotten tradition of pre-communist social and cultural harmony. Indeed, it is absolutely indisputable that the EU has no place in this idealised past. It is preferable to communism, but it is not part of any nation’s historical identity; it is novel, unprecedented, unsatisfactory, irritating, demanding, both too strict and too tolerant in the wrong way.

The foundational narrative of the EU should constantly remind us that its creation was driven by the need to overcome the consequences of some of the greatest catastrophes in human history. The EU embodies the telos of a progressive ascent – from war to peace. The very concept of a “united Europe” emerges from a painful memory, forming the consensus that the mistakes of the past must never be repeated. This was not a past where socially and culturally homogeneous peoples lived in isomorphic harmony in proud nation-states. This past has never existed. The retrotopia of conservative populism is as delusional as the utopia of communism. It would be one of the most tragic examples of historical irony if, after abandoning the utopia of an impossible future they were compelled to pursue, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe were to turn to an equally destructive, backward-looking utopia whose major difference from the first one is that this time it would be the result of their free choice. Paradoxically, the promising future of conservative populism relies not so much on preserving the memory of the past, but on deliberately forgetting its most painful parts.

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