
MIHNEA S. STOICA
Populismul în Europa: Dezvoltare istorică, discurs politic și susținători ai dreptei radicale

(Populism in Europe: Historical development, political discourse and supporters of the radical right)

 Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017

IN RECENT times, the phenomenon of populism has been automatically included as a “fashionable” concept in politics (predominantly in the context of elections). In Europe, more or less recent events (the terrorist attacks in Paris, the crisis of the refugees, etc.) favored the consolidation and diversification of the populist discourse of the parties. The increased attention to populism is justified by several facts: in many countries, leaders, parties and populist movements have become relevant, based on unexpectedly good electoral performance. Generally speaking, democratic systems continue to face the danger of various forms of political radicalism, above all that of ethnocentric populism.

Despite the increased interest in understanding the changing political landscapes and features of populism in East Europe, there is very little research dedicated to Romanian populism. In relation to these ambiguities and conceptual inconsistencies, we would like to bring to attention a book published by Mihnea S. Stoica. The volume structured in six chapters aims to fill a gap in the scientific literature on populism from a political communication perspective, providing a critical understanding of current European trends (focusing primarily on right-wing populism). Extremely familiar with the populist phenomenon and with a solid background in

contemporary history, Mihnea S. Stoica proposes a transdisciplinary approach (rejoining the historical-geographic evolution of populism and the recourse to demographic themes, which stand as a foundation of the populist speech of the radical right). The volume in question proposes a heuristic analysis model, able to deconstruct, understand and integrate the populist messages within a logical scheme applicable to empirical research.

The book is structured in two sections. The theoretical approach aims to bring to light the essence of contemporary populism, emphasizing the ongoing dispute within the literature regarding the integration of the abovementioned concept, either as an ideology or a political strategy. In the empirical part, Stoica underlines the populist tactics attracting the votes and electoral loyalty towards the extreme right political parties. As assumed by the author, the core of the book reflects the analysis of “populism in relation to the radical right, coagulated in political entities that have recorded important political successes in contemporary Europe” (p. 11).

The systematic study of populism is increasing due to the fact that the 2014 European Parliament elections have become a zero point in the rise of extremist parties in Europe. Political organizations with strong Euroskeptical, nationalist or ultra-conservative views have come to represent the interests of millions of European citizens disappointed with the performance of traditional parties and concerned with the crises that have eroded confidence in the values of the European Union. *Grosso modo*, the scientific ambition of the author is to portray the political parties which manifested themselves through rhetorical violence, rather than the entities engaged in acts of physical violence (the latter

being usually the object of study concerning extremist political movements).

Undeniably, populism has different meanings depending on the context or the author. All specialists recognize the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of finding a definition capable of covering the common aspects of extremely diverse manifestations in time and space. At the same time, this very possibility to define different, often contradictory, realities has made the term populism intensely used and popular among researchers. It is imperiously necessary to notice that Mihnea S. Stoica does not place populism into an ideological universe. The researcher argues that ideologies excel through ambiguity, raising uncertainties about the basis and validity of our deepest questions. Following this assumption, the possible correlation between ideology and populism would only nurture the “chameleonic” features of the latter, at the same time offering a precarious ground for justifying its intrinsic components. As in the case of ideology, populism encapsulates pejorative connotations. Assimilating the perspective of Slavoj Žižek, the author confirms that populism is being often perceived as Euroskepticism. Stoica argues that “the confusion between ideology and populism is maintained due to the fact that populism works close to ideologies, as ‘conceptual sieves.’ In other words, what remains above this ‘sieve’ is populism, and what is going through it is ideology in its purest form” (p. 336).

In order to establish a political identity for populism and clarify its “constitutional ambiguity” (P.-A. Taguieff), Mihnea S. Stoica presents the concept as “a political super-strategy, that is, an ensemble of communication strategies (anti-elitism/conspiracy, stigmatization, political redundancy, the call for absolute direct de-

mocracy and media-centrism) designed to attract as many votes as possible without a solid ideological foundation” (p. 19). In support of this perspective, the author adopts a neutral position highlighting the adaptable nature of populism, which is being applied as an umbrella term by parties on the right and on the left side of the political spectrum.

The first part of the book explores the historical roots of populism following three perspectives: linguistic, historical-geographic and political-ideological. In the end, the author identifies a few lines of continuity between classical and contemporary populism. From an American perspective, populism developed in the 19th century is a mass movement of independent farmers and other modest social categories that start from the grassroots and express some real interests of its adherents, even though they are often defined in a nebulous way. In nuce, this type of populism revives the idea of a Jeffersonian democracy: a patriarchal society of farmers-citizens and a minimal state that can only be felt through subsidies. In the Russian version, populism is essentially a product of urban intelligence fed with German Romanticism and marginalized in terms of political decision-making. Foreign ideas alter the true spirit of the nation, forcing Russian populism to apply its own grid to peasant tradition, and thus derive specific forms of social-economic organization, usually collectivist. The relationship with the state is not even clear here: especially through its anarchist component, the national movement is an enemy of principle of the existing state institutions. On the other hand, there is a strong nostalgia for the (hypothetical) mystical unity of the people grouped in village communities, rebuilt in a supposedly medieval tradition.

Moving forward to contemporary populism, Mihnea S. Stoica contends that the central element in the populist discourse is the importance of the people, since populists identify themselves with an idealized community to which they belong (emphasizing a sense of community and unity). The second central element of populism is antagonism, expressed not only against a corrupt elite, but against a more general category, an “alter” built by context (in which we include corrupt elites, a certain social category, an ethnicity, etc.). Populism identifies itself as demagoguery and anti-system rhetoric, and those who are using it are accused of dissimulating the direct dialogue with citizens, a dialogue that they actually do only through televisions, hence the birth of concepts such as “tele-populism” and “video demagoguery” (p. 59).

Adopting the position of M. Canovan, the author assumes that, charismatic leaders spread an “extra emotional ingredient” that distinguishes populist politics from routine politics, transforming it into a campaign to save the country. In this way, “populism succeeds, however, nothing more than an apparent resuscitation of deliberative democracy, because it does not propose reconnecting through real solutions with the electorate, but exploits their immediate needs, creating the illusion that the voice of the voter is heard” (p. 84).

The second part of the book presents seven illustrative case studies on radical right-wing parties in the European space, which have adopted the populist superstrategy: the National Front (France), the Northern League (Italy), the Freedom Party of Austria (Austria), the Freedom Party (the Netherlands), the Finns Party (Finland), the Dan Diaconescu People’s Party (Romania) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (Great Brit-

ain). The punctilious analysis is performed taking into consideration the agreement method. The scientific endeavor of Stoica is to prove that “despite the different geographical positioning, historical experiences and different political developments, populism develops relatively identical features” (p. 20). Mastering a variety of rigorous methodological instruments in addressing this case studies, he analyses party documents, interviews or press statements of the party representatives, and newspaper articles, printed or online, regarding the activity of the respective parties.

Mihnea S. Stoica identifies similarities regarding the populist tactics applied by contemporary parties. In Europe, but also throughout the world, populism has proven to be a winning strategy. Populism and extremism have come to be seen as viable alternatives in various corners of the world, in important countries, which we consider to be states with solid democracy. The discourse applied by the leaders of the National Front, the Freedom Party of Austria etc., are based on an incessant attack upon the capabilities and competitiveness of the European Union, as well as the poor administration of the immigration crisis. Marine le Pen (the National Front), Jörg Haider (the Freedom Party of Austria), Timo Soini (the Finns Party etc.) use messages that fully exploit the component of national identity, defined by religion, ethnicity, or culture, cultivating the adherence to xenophobia and authoritarianism in terms of immigration or the free movement of people.

In the Romanian case, the populist discourse is not coagulated around citizens, but rather towards the organic community whose borders are defined by Romanians, the Orthodox religion, and a mythical history. The pathogens are primarily the

Hungarian minority (in the 1990s), but also other groups of “foreigners” who are fighting against Romania (Americans, Jews, Hungarians, etc.). These extremist or populist parties try to convince us that national sovereignty can only be saved if these values can be defended, invoking a rejection of the ideas of multiculturalism, by proposing a nostalgia for a mythical world of racial and cultural homogeneity, but at the same time allowing the development of threats posed by Islam, terrorism or immigration.

In the second part of the volume, Mihnea S. Stoica focuses on building the profile of the electorate of the radical right-wing populist parties presented in the first half of the book. In this way, the author fulfils the quality condition of research, enriching the comparative literature on populism through this transdisciplinary approach.

The statistical data used as foundation for this rigorous work was provided by Kieskompas, a Dutch research institute based in Amsterdam. The author sought to identify and arrange the distribution of these people in electoral colleges, by drawing maps for six of the seven case studies (in the absence of data for the Netherlands case). In order to provide a stronger picture in respect to the views of these populist supporters compared to those who express loyalty for others parties, the author divided the questions into three categories: those that refer to cultural opinions, economic opinions and, ultimately, those referring to the European Union.

This book is a valuable resource for specialists in political communication, contemporary history and researchers studying the populist phenomena, offering pertinent observations and answers to

the following questions: Is Euroscepticism an opportunistic movement of parties to gain more political support in the national context? Which parties are inclined to use populist features? What should be done to limit populism and save the European Union? The volume stresses the need to understand populism from a discursive point of view, encapsulating the interpretation of visual, oral, written actions and messages of several contemporary political populist leaders. The constant application of populist rules determines the de-professionalization of the political environment and, as a consequence, leads to a deep institutional instability (in governments, public administration, national political institutions). However, a solution to stop the rise of populism is the “resuscitation” of the public agenda by affirming right or left answers to migration, a sustainable economic model to be followed, and European integration. Until a sustainable plan is devised, the artificial consensus between the two ideologies is an invitation to the rise of populism and the constant “Balkanization” of the political sphere.

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