

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY**

Faculty of History and Philosophy

**EUROPEAN RIGHT-WING POPULISM  
IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY**

DEVELOPMENT, POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND SUPPORTERS

Coordinators:

**Prof. Univ. Dr. Ioan BOLOVAN**

**Prof. Univ. Dr. Sandu FRUNZĂ**

PhD Candidate:

**Mihnea-Simion STOICA**

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## SUMMARY

**Key words:** populism, radical right, ideology, strategy, demography, political discourse, socio-demographic profile, comparative European politics, political theory, historical development, political support.

Populism has remained a concept so frequently used that its original meaning has been lost through time, and studies hardly manage to keep pace with its conceptual distortion and stretching. Research on the issue usually aims at explaining the characteristics of populism by using methods typical to only one discipline. The present paper, however, is the expression of the author's belief that populism is such a complex of a phenomenon that only a trans disciplinary approach can shed light on its case. This doctoral thesis aims to bring a contribution to the repeated attempts – especially of political scientists, sociologists, specialists in communication and historians – of explaining populism. The author's commitment is to achieve this goal by using at least a two-folded approach: a historical one and a political science one.

Of course, the amplitude of the populist phenomenon goes far beyond a single doctoral thesis, which is why the current research is limited to the *populism of the European radical right*. Parties which constituted the paper's case studies have won considerable support in national or European elections and represent what the literature calls „the usual suspects”. I therefore focused on parties that use a violent rhetoric, and not those which engaged themselves in violent physical actions and which usually fall under the category of the „extreme right” rather than of that of the „radical right”. Therefore, I followed the evolution and characteristics of those parties that have adopted a populist rhetoric in order to increase their competitiveness in elections.

The need for a thorough study of populism has emerged once again with the electoral success of politicians who embraced such a strategy in the European elections of May 2014, when alternative parties<sup>1</sup> that are rather close to the two ends of the political spectrum have won an important number of seats. The major questions which revolve around the influence of

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<sup>1</sup>Am considerat că folosirea acestei denumiri („alternative”) pentru caracterizarea partidelor non-mainstream ne permite să facem referire, cumulativ, la toate partidele populiste, eurosceptice, radicale, anti-europene sau pur și simplu non-mainstream care și-au dobândit accesul în legislativul european în urma alegerilor europarlamentare organizate în perioada 22-25 mai 2014.

these parties is whether they have the capacity of forming political groups in the European Parliament and whether their cohesion is strong enough to uphold their aims. Recent history has proven that parties which are not fundamented on a clearly defined ideology face real difficulties in harmonizing their political programs. Even so, they should not be underestimated: it is in this sense that we should take into consideration Sartori's theory on the blackmailing potential,<sup>2</sup> Taggart's argument on the contagion of the populist pathology<sup>3</sup> and Meguid's hypothesis that niche parties can have a rather important influence on mainstream parties.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the question arises whether the anti-immigration topics – which populist parties champion – will be adopted by moderate parties in an attempt to win back the electorate they lost in favour of the former.

The thesis also suggests answers to the conceptual conflict that has dominated the debates about populism, i.e. ideology versus rhetorical strategy. It is difficult not to notice that a significant part of the literature is trapped in the temptation of highlighting especially the negative valences of populism, condemning it either explicitly or by slipping subliminal messages between the lines. The only rational explanation that one can find for such an attitude is that populism is understood as an ideology, which one can embrace or feel hostile towards. However, if – as we argue – one understands populism as a rhetorical strategy, such attitudes (whether positive or negative) no longer have a place, because unlike an ideology, which naturally arouses passions, a political strategy can only be regarded as right or wrong in a given context. It is in this sense that the populist (super) strategy has proven its efficacy many times, but the electoral battles have also revealed its limits.

I divided the current thesis in two main parts which cover approximately the same number of pages: the first represents the theoretical approach, and the second one represents the empirical approach. The research begins with questioning the nature of contemporary populism, a concept marked by controversies especially given the impossibility of researchers to reach a consensus on whether the concept represents an ideology or a strategy. I have therefore presented the two viewpoints of the literature after the Second World War and argued that populism is a super-strategy, i.e. an ansamble of communication strategies amongst which anti-elitism/conspirationism, scapegoating, political reductionism, appeal for

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, vol. 1., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Taggart, „Populism and the pathology of representative politics” in Yves Mény, Yves Surel (edited by), *Democracies and the populist challenge*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002, p. 64. (în continuare: Paul Taggart, „Populism and the pathology”)

<sup>4</sup>Bonnie M. Meguid, „Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success” in *American Political Science Review*, Volume 99, Issue 03, August 2005, pp. 347–359.

absolute direct democracy and media-centrism. Their aim is to attract voters in the absence of a solid ideological support. This is the main reason why populism is perfectly adaptable both to right-wing and left-wing parties. In proving my argument, I started by showing that contemporary populism is only in a very small degree the successor of the 19th century populism.

I continued the theoretical approach by presenting seven representative case studies for populist radical right-wing parties in the European Union. I have chosen these case studies based on the so-called *agreement method*, frequently used in studies of comparative politics and which entails demonstrating that, despite the differences that exist *ex ante* between the case studies, the hypothesis remains valid for all of them. I therefore demonstrate that in spite of the different geographical position, historical and political experiences, populism develops roughly identical characteristics. My case studies are represented by Great Britain, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Austria, Romania and Finland.

The second part of my thesis is devoted to the analysis of the electorate of populist radical right-wing parties. The data for my statistics were provided by *EUVOX*, a VAA (Vote Advice Application) for the development of which I worked as a national expert. Such platforms (now online) have been created for the first time in history for the 1989 Dutch elections.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that such an application stores not only data on the position of the user in the political spectrum, but also background variables, e.g. year of birth, gender, education, religiousness etc.<sup>6</sup> I have therefore created the socio-demographic profile of the electorate of the populist radical right-wing parties in the seven states that represent my case studies. I have indicated, in this sense, in all cases (with few exceptions, given lack of data), the following information about the users who have declared to vote for Front National (France), Lega Nord (Italy), Austrian Freedom Party (Austria), Party for Freedom (The Netherlands), True Finns (Finland), Dan Diaconescu's People's Party (Romania) and United Kingdom Independence Party (United Kingdom): age, gender, education, religiousness and/or religion, work situation, area of living (small/medium/large urban, suburb of large urban or rural), as well as interest in politics. I have created this profile by using the results of simple frequencies in SPSS. Moreover, the results also shows the distribution of these voters on electoral districts.

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<sup>5</sup>Stefaan Walgrave, Peter Van Aelst, Michiel Nuytemans, „'Do the Vote Test': The Electoral Effects of a Popular Vote Advice Application at the 2004 Belgian Elections", in *Acta Politica*, Volume 43, Issue 1, April 2008, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed view on creating a VAA, see André Krouwel, Thomas Vitiello, Matthew Wall, "The Practicalities of Issuing Vote Advice: A New Methodology for Profiling and Matching", in *International Journal of Electronic Governance*, 5 (3-4), 2012, pp. 223-243.

To conclude, the historical development of this political phenomenon proves that few characteristics of the 19th century American and Russian populism have survived to become part of contemporary populism. This is the main reason why scholars write about today's political phenomenon as a rather "false" or "rootless populism". I highlighted these differences from two perspectives: a linguistic one and a historical-geographical one. If in the United States of America political populism was defeated in 1896, once the candidate they supported lost the presidential elections, in Russia the populist ideals have been adopted and adapted by other political movements – especially by socialists and anarchists. Romanian populism had quite a similar fate: despite having been the initiator of two major reforms (the electoral and the agrarian one), the Romanian populist movement did not act under the form of a party of its own and ended up seeing its ideals torn apart by other parties, which appropriated its ideological arguments.

Today, the phenomenon seems to be closer to a political (super) strategy than an ideology in its pure sense, using rhetorical elements such as political reductionism, anti-elitism, scapegoating and constant appeals for direct democracy. However, it is crucial to note that populism acts only in the immediate vicinity of ideologies (this is why the theory of the "accompanying ideology" was developed). Therefore, we can easily consider that researching populism is actually a method of (rather involuntary) creating a "conceptual sieve". And this is because by understanding the behaviour of populism, one can easily understand the ideologies that truly fundament parties. In other words, what remains above this sieve is the populist dimension, and what passes through it is ideology in its purest form.

The scientific research of populism has begun more than fifty years ago, but despite important progress in understanding it, enough questions still await their answers. Probably one of the most important ones refers to the survival of political communication in the absence of the populist strategy, a question whose answer undoubtedly needs a transdisciplinary approach – history, political science and communication sciences. The interest in further researching populism lies in the ongoing crisis of party politics, one that has allowed the birth of the concept of post-ideologies.



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