Book Review

Reviewed by Mariam Gogashvili, Celeste Serrantoni, Michele Tatarella and Alessandro Zanoni

Email: ge22360088@eu.edu.ge
Email: celeste.serrantoni@studenti.unimi.it
Email: michele.tatarella@studenti.unimi.it
Email: alessandro.zanoni2@studenti.unimi.it

The Rise of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe
by Simona Kukovič and Petr Just
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The book looks at the rise of populism in Central and Eastern European democracy from the 1990s to the present, with a focus on historical developments like the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the USSR. Other topics covered include the fall of traditional parties, economic instability, historical trauma and the 2015 migration crisis. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and social media in fostering populist sentiments are also presented in the book. With different authors contributing to each chapter, the book, edited by Simona Kukovič and Petr Just, offers a range of viewpoints and methods on the topic of populism. The authors examine the latter concept, which is complex and dependent on country's specific economic and social situations, political actors, and structural conditions. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the complexities surrounding populist discourse, highlighting its evolution from a term with a positive connotation in the nineteenth century to its predominantly negative aspects in modern times. It offers a thorough examination of the historical context and current situation in Eastern and Central European countries including Austria, Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

In the first two chapters, the authors analyse the causes of populism, which has emerged as a result of a crisis of democracy caused by inefficiency and irresponsibility of traditional political parties that have exploited a decline in confidence in political institutions. In these chapters Matevž Tomšič, Simona Kukovič and Petr Just highlight the new trend in these contemporary democracies, including the personification of politics in a leader, the strong contrapposition between elites and people, and the changes in the mobilisation of political support, such as social media. Considering the migrant crisis of 2015, it exposed the European Union's lack of contingency planning, resulting in tensions and frustrations among local populations, particularly in Slovenia, Poland, Hungary and Romania. Overall, the authors present the complex situations between migration, multiculturalism and ideological divides in European society. While some

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countries, for example Hungary and Poland, have populist parties that are *de facto* ruling coalition, others have populist parties in the opposition forces, like L'SNS in Slovakia. The chapters in this volume distinguish between different types of populism observed across Europe. They also distinguish between 'soft' populism, which respects constitutional principles, and 'hard' populism, which rejects these principles. These chapters explore the divergent effects of populism, citing both positive aspects, such as the rise of new political actors and negative consequences like creating mistrust in the political system, in the European Union and in the democratic institutions.

From chapter 3, the authors analyse some case studies about populism in Central and Eastern European countries, which were previously mentioned. Karin Liebhart analyses right-wing populism in Austria. In particular, they examine the electoral victory of the Austrian People's Party in October 2017, led by Sebastian Kurtz. He transformed his party into a movement centred around his own personality, utilising his youthful charisma to his advantage, but did not establish a new party like other populist leaders. Kurtz formed a coalition between his party and the far-right Freedom Party. Both parties focus their campaigns on anti-immigration policies and rhetoric. This chapter also outlines the distinctive trajectory of national populist politics in Austria, contrasting it with the experiences of other European countries. One such country is Germany, where the far-right populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has recently gained significant support. Overall, the chapter provides an explanation of the complexity of populism in the Austrian political landscape.

Chapter 4 examines the impact of the 2010, 2013 and 2017 Czech parliamentary elections and the country's political landscape. These elections are interpreted as 'earthquakes' that led to permanent changes in the Czech Republic party system.

In chapter 5, Vladimír Naxera attempts to ascertain the manner in which a politician may be defined as populist, with a particular focus on the studies conducted in the Czech Republic following the end of the communist era in the 1990s. The President Miloš Zeman is presented as a case study in this chapter. The researchers employ a theoretical approach, as outlined in the methodology, which is based on empirical data derived from the president's speeches and the arguments presented therein. The study analyses three presidents since the 1990s, specifically Havel, Klaus and Zeman. However, Zeman is more populist than the other previous presidents according to the study.

In Chapter 6, Boglarka Koller analyses the political identity and the idea of the European Union in Hungary after 2010. This means that the analysis is conducted in the context of the first crisis of 2008 and all the challenges faced after the entry into the European Union in 2004, including the migration crisis of 2015 and the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter discusses two distinct types of nation-building in Europe over the past century: firstly the state-nation, which is defined by a specific territory, secondly the civic conception of the nation; the second is the cultural-nation, related to a shared cultural identity. Hungary's national identity was shaped by historical and religious factors. Hungarian nationalism comprises three elements: national-building, mother-country and minority. One of the first manifestations of populism connected to minorities in Hungary was a change in the citizenship law, which facilitated Hungarian people in other countries to become Hungarian citizens. The Hungarian presidency of the Council of the European Union in June 2011 proposed many policies: one of these was the concept of the 'Europe of Nations', which pertained to the political identity formation that emerged in the wake of the 2010 events.

The chapter 7 discusses the nineteenth-century context in Romania and Hungary, and the disputes and debates about ethnicity; the authors also describe the transition from the communist era to liberal democratic institutions in a completely different political culture and civil society than in Western countries. The populist discourses in these countries are correlated, especially historical events linked to the theme of borders, that are important today too: such as the trauma of the Trianon Treaty in Hungary in 1919 and the trauma of the unification of Romania in the same year. In addition, both countries use references to the mythology of the past, to symbolic dates and the dichotomy of Us vs Them, as populist themes. All these references to the past and the creation of enemies are used by populist politicians to distract people from the problems of the present.

Chapter 8 looks at populism in Lithuania from Mudde's perspective: populism is seen as a thin ideology based on the opposition between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups. Populist parties gain popularity during economic crises, social changes, racial or ethnic rivalries or pandemics. The Russian financial crisis of 1998, which caused an economic crisis in Lithuania, helped populist parties gain more votes. Based on these themes, many populist parties were born between 2004 and 2020, and the book analyses the history of them in the elections, some examples are the 'New Union Party', the new 'Labour Party' and the 'Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union'. Their themes were reducing the number of deputies, promising to solve important social problems (like opposing the LGBT community and law), criticising the ruling parties and defending unvaccinated people. One of their strategies was to use the rhetoric of 'trust in experts', to distrust the political elites. Finally, we can underline that the issue of immigration was not relevant for the Lithuanian populist parties.

A thorough examination of Poland's intricate political system is given in Chapter 9, with special attention to the Poland's EU membership from 2004. Following the accession of Poland to the European Union, the country's national interest became a key topic in the political debate, the focus was on crucial matters such as the opening of new labour markets and the protection of fundamental EU rights. The rise of Eurosceptic parties like Samoobrona RP and Liga Polskich Rodzin, however, was a result of this emphasis on national identity and reflected worries about European solutions during the 2008-2010 economic crisis and the 2015 migration crisis. Moreover, in addition to Poland's growing distrust of the EU, the chapter looks at the relationship between the Polish state and the Catholic Church, spotlighting the Church's critical role in influencing populist and nationalist sentiments in Poland. Lastly, it talks about how populist parties like PiS are becoming more and more popular. PiS's rhetoric focuses on national identity building and economic inequality, and it makes promises of financial support. This section offers insightful information about Poland's intricate political system in the context of Europe.

In Chapter 10, a complex and paradoxical historical dynamic is revealed by examining the relationship between the Catholic Church and the resurgent neo-nationalist movement in Poland. Ironically, the Church experienced a rise in political influence and support despite a decline in religious fervour among the populace. The Church was a powerful force in politics and society before 1989, standing up for democratic principles. But even as its spiritual authority over the faithful waned, its political power increased dramatically following the shift (its increased participation in the social and political spheres serves as proof of this). This dynamic defies conventional wisdom because it

reflects a complex interplay of religious, political, and social factors. Growing nationalist organisations and ethnocentric crimes, indicate that radicalisation within Polish society is becoming a serious concern. In spite of efforts to combat nationalism, the government and religious authorities' inaction has the consequence of sustaining social divisions and fostering intolerance towards minorities. In addition, there has been a concerning rise in hate crimes committed against members of the LGBT community; however, the authorities tend to minimise these incidents, which serves to legitimise nationalist beliefs. Due to the serious obstacles this presents to minority rights and social cohesion, tolerance and inclusion are desperately needed in Poland's socio-political environment.

In Chapter 11, populism is examined in light of the growing radicalisation of societies in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEC). This study focuses on populist components found in Slovak political actors' and social media communications. Politics and social life have suffered as a result of populist politics' ascent and the radicalisation of nationalist movements in Europe. This phenomenon has reduced trust in political institutions and traditional media, opening the door for alternative sources that are frequently influenced by extremist groups. It is fuelled by social factors like poverty and disinformation. The case study examines the social media conversations surrounding the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections in order to better understand the influence of populist rhetoric and extremist content on political discourse. This has made it possible to find examples of this kind of language and content being used by politicians in the opposition as well as the government. The study focuses on speeches and emotive tones used by politicians to engage voters in order to demonstrate how they used social media to sway public opinion in Slovakia. An analysis of the various political actors in Slovakia and how they used social media during the elections for this topic showed that populist elements were widely used in political communication. Politicians who aimed to engage and persuade voters, like Boris Kollár of SMERODINA, Andrej Kiska of ZA L'UDÍ, and Igor Matovic of OL'ANO, often used populist strategies, such as emotional appeals, personal attacks, and simplified rhetoric. Populist rhetoric is clearly present in political discourse, even though some politicians, like Richard Sulík of SaS and Peter Pellegrini of SMER-SD, have shown a more policy- oriented approach and less emphasis on populism. This could worsen social division and reduce confidence in government agencies and the media in general. This chapter suggests that, albeit with different subtleties, populism has become a standard tactic used by Slovak politicians. This raises significant issues about the morality and accountability of political communication as well as the need to encourage a knowledgeable and welcoming discourse in order to stop the spread of populist rhetoric and the polarisation of society.

The section 12, by Petr Just, examines the case of the People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) within the Slovak political landscape. The party emerged from the ashes of extreme right-wing parties such as SP-NS and SPV, exploiting nationalist, anti-minority and anti-establishment sentiments to gain support. Despite initial ostracism, the party achieved significant electoral successes, indicating a change in Slovakia. The assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018 precipitated a political crisis, weakening the dominance of established parties such as Smer and opening the door to cooperation between Smer and L'SNS. Although officially denied, this cooperation intensified over time, culminating in the formation of the 'Platform for Value Slovakia' in 2020. The case study of L'SNS demonstrates that, despite the other political parties' proclaimed

condemnation of far-right and national populist parties' activities, there is still scope for cooperation. We can observe similar approaches in other Central European countries, such as the Czech Republic with the SPD party.

Chapter 13 explores the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008 in Slovenia, with the new left-wing government struggling to address the challenges, this resulted in growing disillusionment among the population, for example in 2009 the low turnout in the European elections highlighted this distrust. In 2010–2011, the government proposed economic reforms, but was defeated in three referendums in 2011. In that year, early elections saw the emergence of the Positive Slovenia (PS) party, which lacked a stable coalition. A new left-right coalition was formed by the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) with Janez Janša as prime minister; however, this government was short-lived due to allegations of financial violations. Growing discontent fuelled populism, as evidenced by Eurobarometer data showing a high level of dissatisfaction with democratic institutions in 2013-2014. Early elections in 2014 saw the emergence of new populist parties, such as the 'Party of Miro Cerar' (SMC) and 'Levica'. Despite greater economic stability, disillusionment persisted due to broken promises and the European refugee crisis. In 2018, the Cerar government faced new elections, leading to a leftist coalition led by Marjan Sarec. This coalition was also short-lived due to internal conflicts that led to Janša's third government. However, he was criticised for populist policies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Today Slovenia continues to struggle with corruption, cronyism and distrust in political institutions, with populist leaders and parties emerging, but often failing in the long run.

The final chapter of this report seeks to elucidate the manner in which the term 'populism' has become a pivotal concept in the political discourse of the 21st century. The author focuses on the subtype of national populism, which is characterised by nativism and authoritarianism. He examines the impact of Central Europe's pre-communist past on the contemporary political agenda, exploring how it influences the promotion of anti-modern and anti-liberal narratives. Populism is defined as a fundamental opposition between the people and the elite, characterised by resistance to liberal democracy and polarisation. Nativism, which is characterised by anti-immigrant rhetoric and a focus on the interests of natives, is combined with authoritarianism, which highlights a defensive reflex against economic and social change. This combination is reflected in identity politics, the construction of historical narratives and the defence of Christian values as a pillar of Western culture. The politics of morality, through attacks on the LGBT community and the traditional view of gender roles, provide further insight into the culture war. Anti-modernist and anti-liberal influences can be traced back to historical divisions in Central Europe between the 'East' and the 'West'. These divisions have manifested as resistance to change and modernisation. The fragmentation of historical memory, with the use of anti-communism to delegitimise political opponents, is combined with xenophobia and Islamophobia as political tools. Finally, the Declaration on the Future of Europe, presented and signed by 16 populist politicians from all Europe in 2021, demonstrates efforts to unite national populism and Christian conservatism in a new supranational political vision.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the political landscape in Central and Eastern Europe, offering historical context and analysis. One of its key strengths is the diversity of perspectives presented by a multitude of authors, which enables readers to gain a nuanced understanding of populism and its multifaceted manifestations. The book also delves into the intertwined factors that have contributed to the rise of populist parties, including economic crises, migrants crises, and the erosion of trust in traditional political institutions. Finally, populism may also become problematic, particularly when a charismatic individual assumes control over the decision-making process, operating independently from both the government and parliament.