

Populism Politics in the Current Situation as an Object of Political Analysis *Post-Democracy and Web Populism*

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Keywords: populism, digital media, illiberal democracy, post-democracy, web populism, political transformation.

Abstract: In the modern environment, characterised by inconsistency and instability, there is a deep crisis in the socio-economic, political and constitutional-legal spheres, and the phenomenon of populism has become widespread in our society. The current political situation and the development trend in the US, Europe and many developing countries can generally be described as a "crisis of leaders". This phenomenon brings great uncertainty both in domestic and international politics. Modern liberal democracies are not able to provide citizens with full access to participation in political life: that is why the grey electoral zone is growing every year, and populist movements and leaders come to power in a number of countries. This article is devoted to the phenomenon of contemporary populism. Attempts at its conceptualisation give rise to a contradiction: populism is often described as a phenomenon which is completely ineradicable, but marginal, receding when the situation is normalised; and at the same time, in discourses that interpret modernity in the categories of post-politics, postmodernism, post-democracy, post-ideology, etc., populism appears as a system-forming element of the modern political field. Recent situations in Turkey, Russia and Myanmar were taken as a case for the paper. The aim of this article is to find answers to the following questions: What does this concept mean and why does populism act as an impeding factor in the development of democracy? What measures exist to minimise these political means that are dangerous for today's reforms?

1 INTRODUCTION

The current political situation and the development trend in the US, Europe (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012) and many developing countries can generally be described as a "crisis of leaders". This phenomenon introduces huge uncertainty both in domestic and in international politics.

When it comes to populism, media and commentators often suffer from historical myopia, seeing in the emergence of populist politicians a specific feature of the post-truth era. In fact, populism as a phenomenon goes back deeper than the recent political campaigns of Putin and Erdogan.

Turning to the technological characteristics of modern populism, it should be noted that it is often called web-populism, since its successes are largely based on internet technologies and, first of all, on working with the social network. Successful web-

populism understands the network not as a new media, but as a technologically new way of disseminating information, similar to newspapers and agitation, but only on the internet. The network is a set of horizontal interactions between people. The internet becomes only a means of facilitating communication between them.

In the 1990s, there was an increase in the discontented migration and globalisation of right-wing populists in France, Germany and Italy. Brian Fishman, the Yale University researcher, convincingly proves that jihadist movements in general and the "Islamic State of Syria and Iraq" in particular are forms of populism in the Islamic world.

So, populism has acquired a truly global character, which proves the political success of such figures as Polina Henson in Australia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Erdogan in

Turkey, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, or Vladimir Putin in Russia. This means that the challenges faced by these states, namely, the unjustified expectations of the population, the demand for simplified solutions, the expectations of paternalistic actions from the state, the demagoguery of irresponsible politicians and the gap between the demands of citizens and the real capabilities of the state – these challenges are not unique. This state of affairs is also good news, because the solution is being sought in Washington, Buenos Aires and Manila. On the other hand, the global nature of populism may portend the crisis of the world political system to which we are accustomed.

The varieties of populism are quite clearly defined: right and left, political and economic. The fundamental difference of right and left populism is the image of the enemy. The enemy of right-wing populism is the “immigrant”, “alien”, and “other” (Schäfer and Streeck, 2013). The enemy of left populism is the “world of capital”, “oligarchy”, “banks”. But they both agree on one thing: officials have moved away from the people and do not represent the interests of society.

Recent situations in Turkey, Russia and Myanmar were taken as a case for the paper. Content analysis was used as a method in order to enrich the discussion. The aim of the article is to find answers to the following questions: What does this concept mean and why does populism act as an impeding factor in the development of democracy? What measures exist to minimise these political means that are dangerous for today's reforms?

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 Populism and Media

Populism (from the Latin *populus* – the people) is a political stance or style of rhetoric appealing to the masses of the people. Politicians and public figures are obliged to appeal to the masses, because the people are the source of the legitimacy of any government.

However, the term has acquired a clearly negative connotation, because, in most cases, it is just about cheap, reduction populism when we are dealing with unrealistic promises or overly emotional PR-reasons on which politicians want to raise their rating. It is worthwhile to understand that such populism is certainly dangerous, but it has been and always will be (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, it is more important not to strive to eradicate it, but, remaining within the framework of a public consensus, to change it towards progress.

The ideological morphology of populism is quite simple. The core of the ideology consists of four coherent theses:

- In any organized community there are "people" and elites;
- They are in a state of irreconcilable antagonism between themselves;
- The people have the right to sovereignty;
- The people are the bearer of all social virtues, therefore it is necessary to listen to its thoughts and aspirations.

Semantic primitiveness and morphological simplicity allow populism to adapt to the problems and demands of a particular society, because any social problems and troubles can be explained as the result of a “conspiracy of greedy elites” but rather solved by a simple “return of power to the hands of an industrious and honest people”. Due to its ability to adapt, it seems that populism can be “right”, “left”, “religious”, etc. In fact, this ideology is only a “collection of empty symbols”.

As shown in the book with the eloquent title *How Democracies Die* by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), when populists win elections, they often paralyse the activities of democratic institutions and try (consciously or not) to establish an authoritarian regime. For example, of the five populists who won the presidential elections in Latin America (Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, Alberto Fujimori, Lucio Gutierrez and Hugo Chavez), each significantly weakened democratic institutions (Levitsky and Roberts, 2013). This applies to R. Erdogan in Turkey and V. Putin in Russia, that is, the “drift towards authoritarianism” caused by the political victory of the populists, which does not depend on the cultural or historical context. As noted by Burton and Higley, historical events show that when the regime faces various crisis phenomena and processes, the elites tend to begin to change institutions in radical ways (Burton and Higley, 1998). This is especially evident in the last few years, when the authorities of many transitional political regimes are trying to strengthen control over new media.

Specifics of the functioning of the media in transitional regimes can be considered through the concept of Bryant and Thompson (2004), who develop Laswell's idea that the mass media perform three main functions in society: observing the external environment, linking fragments of the external environment, transferring social norms and regulations. The authors offer several models of media impact on the audience: transactional, expectations-estimates, use and dependence (Bryant and Thompson, 2004, p. 149).

The instrumental nature of populism determines the appeal to the values and traditions of the masses, the simplification of the language, anti-elitist and people-centered demagoguery, that is, populism is one of the driving forces for the formation of the electoral behaviour of voters. This is an important variable in describing specific models of populism is the political culture of society, whereby, in terms of Almond and Verba (1965), a participatory subculture is developed, voters are more demanding of their own influence on politics and more stringently ask parties to fulfil election promises.

According to the American expert on populism John Judis, speaking on behalf of the people against corrupt elites is a typical example of left populism, which is vertical in a way – the struggle of the lower classes with the political elite, while right populism is more like a triangle – the struggle of the lower classes with the elites and another “parasitic” group, which the elites allegedly “condone” (Judis, 2016).

2.2 Myanmar and Rohingya

Perhaps most clearly the price of the refusal to counter the populist offensive on human rights manifested itself in Burma. The growth of rabid nationalist rhetoric by Buddhist extremists, high-ranking military and individual members of the civil government created the prerequisites for ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslims (Rohingya), which was motivated by the attacks of militants on security forces. The military operation launched by the army resulted in massacre, mass rape and arson in at least 340 villages. More than 640 thousand people fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in order to save their lives. These are the same crimes that the international community once promised it would no longer tolerate.

The victory of democracy party that promote the unity between minority and majority seem to be populism activity because the new form of racism was built against the Muslim minority especially the Rohingya people. The campaign for democracy and standing against ethnic conflict from NLD have gathered minority and majority who are belong to the similar identities as Buddhist. However, the majority consider the Rohingya to be foreigners and a danger to national identity (Buddhism), therefore the Rohingya become the victims of racism under the counter racism policy of the NLD against the minority.

Aung San Suu Kyii, the founder and chairperson of NLD, said “I don’t think there is ethnic cleansing going on. I think ethnic cleansing is too strong an expression to use for what is happening” (bbc.com, 2017). This is contrary to what was happening in Arakan state and she refused to use the term

Rohingya in her speech in order to hide the fact. The researcher assumed that she intended to promote a counter ethnic conflict issue between the people of Myanmar; on the other hand, facts regarding human rights abuses and genocide have always been revealed by the media and NGO organisations.

The researcher can conclude that the Rohingya issue has never been discussed in the populist shadow of the NLD. The figurehead of the party, Aung San Suu Kyii in this case, seemed to avoid the issue and distance herself from the problem to maintain her majority popular vote.

2.3 Russia and Putin

Putin was the first to discover a breach in modern liberal-democratic regimes: one can enjoy broad popular support and at the same time act with impunity in an authoritarian way, handing out empty promises and using the political shortsightedness and irresponsibility of the masses. According to this theory, a new generation of populists is simply trying to use Putin's recipe to undermine the foundations of Western democracy.

The reasons for expressing mass discontent were quite “legitimate”: the manipulation of the constitution for the transfer of the presidential post (“castling” of Putin and Medvedev), rigging elections in 2011, abuse of power by high-ranking officials, etc.

A separate line of unkind words, of course, refers to state-controlled media, including federal television channels and even such exotic things as a “troll factory”. Unfortunately, however, all this also does not explain the permanent electoral success of the regime. First of all, it is possible to effectively deceive only those who are deceived themselves. Where a more powerful Soviet propaganda machine did not save the Soviet Union from collapse, the first approach to which was the election of allied deputies.

It is necessary to distinguish between the keynote of Putin's policy and its arrangement. Repression, propaganda, falsification – all this is secondary. The primary combination of three chords is militarism, archaism and left populism. This is the melody that the people want to hear today, and they are not happy with anything else. Putin has learned to perform political symphonies of any complexity in a masterly way with the help of these three chords. All this became possible only because Putin managed to reformat the people “for themselves” before the 14th year, that is, before the counter-revolutionary coup. He crushed and subjugated the elites, turning them into an appendage of state power (novaygazeta.ru, 2018).

Even before the “Russian spring”, the elites ceased to play any independent political role in Russia. This gave Putin the opportunity to “short-circuit” his power “directly” to the “masses”. There was a link between the leader and the masses, which is now almost impossible to open. In this direct communication of the leader with the masses – bypassing the elite – lies, today, the main secret of the stability of the regime, which explains, among other things, record high voting figures for Putin and record low voting figures for his opponents in the March, 2018 elections.

Militaristic ethics always competed with liberal ones. In Russia, one can say, there is a struggle between militaristic ethics and the remnants of liberalism.

2.4 Erdogan in Turkey

The presidential elections in Turkey ended in the victory of R.T. Erdogan, and all the forecasts for a possible second round were untenable even before all the votes were counted. Immediately after the announcement of the results, June 25, the new-old ruler of Turkey said that his victory was “the victory of the Turkish people, all oppressed in our region and all oppressed in the world” (vesty.co.il).

The victory of Erdogan was the final stage of the long reform carried out by the Turkish leader for many years. He managed to gradually concentrate in his hands such a volume of power, that foreign analysts started talking about almost the beginning of a dictatorship.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan turned Turkey into a presidential republic, cutting down the powers of parliament and subjugating the government and the army. The post of prime minister will be abolished, and the appointment of cabinet members will become the prerogative of the president.

Populism began to occupy more and more places in Erdogan's agitation. The latest example was the readiness prepared by the president after the elections to consider the possibility of abolishing the state of emergency in the country (tass.ru, 2018).

Opponents and critics of Erdogan are convinced that he has concentrated too much power in his hands and almost abolished the system of checks and balances that can support the democratic balance in the state.

As for foreign policy, many observers are also not inclined to optimistic forecasts. Most likely, Erdogan will continue the populist course, which strengthens the position of Islamists; the issue of closer interaction with the EU will also not have priority on his agenda. His pro-Palestinian stance and Erdogan's populist rhetoric are well known to Israeli diplomats. Relations between the two

countries, for a long time, have been at a level close to crisis.

The collective West is certainly dissatisfied with the haste of the Turkish leadership. For the EU and the US, Erdogan's Turkey – a mixture of nationalism, Islamism, pan-Turkism, an emphasis on sovereignty, Islamic populism and, finally, anti-Western behaviour – is absolutely unacceptable (ria.ru, 2018).

3 CONCLUSION

As the well-known British Sociologist, Z. Bauman, noted “Populism offers unrealistic methods for solving real problems. The danger of populism in the disregard of the rules of democratic play, the reduction of politics to the struggle between good and evil” (Bauman, 2008, p. 211).

In our days both in developed and developing countries there is clearly a tendency for politicians to rise from social movements. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. With each crisis, various social movements have emerged in democracy, and always a populist politician has emerged from such movements. Right-wing and left-wing populists are everywhere today. On the one hand, they create new conditions for new politicians, including heads of state; on the other hand, they introduce huge uncertainty.

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