



V4 EUROPE – “PIECES OF POPULISM IN EUROPE AND HOW TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGE”

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Dr Jacek KUCHARCZYK

President of the Executive Board, Institute of Public Affairs

Warsaw

On Populism

This essay aims to review key aspects of the upsurge of right-wing authoritarian populism across the Western democracies, including but not restricted to, the so-called „new democracies” in Central and Eastern Europe. The primary material for this analysis comes from my native Poland, where in 2015, Law and Justice government has overseen the deterioration of democratic standards, unprecedented in more than 25 years since the fall of communism in 1989.¹ While the Polish developments are frequently, and rightly, compared with a more prolonged experience of democratic backsliding in Hungary under the premiership of Viktor Orbán, an equally fruitful (I would argue) are the comparisons with the political developments in what we used to be described as established democracies of Great Britain (Brexit referendum and its consequences) as well as the USA (Donald Trump’s victory and first months in office). More recent elections in the Netherlands and France have informed the debate of the ways populism can be pushed back if not defeated. Last but not least, the broader context of the phenomenon under consideration is what is often referred to as global assault on democracy or the globalization of authoritarianism, whereby “...the authoritarians have challenged the universality of democracy and sought to erode liberal-democratic norms, replacing them with new counter-norms that emphasize “state security, civilizational diversity and traditional values”². Indeed, there is a well-established link between Russia’s „promotion of autocracy” and the rise of right-wing populism across the Western world.³ The existence of this Kremlin-sponsored „authoritarian international” has recently become part and parcel of political debates in some democracies. In one instance, Emmanuel Macron during his successful campaign for the French presidency, stated about his main rival: "We all know who Le Pen's allies are: the regimes of Orbán, Kaczynski, Putin. These aren't regimes with an open and free democracy. Every day they break many democratic freedoms"⁴.

In what follows I will try to briefly elaborate the tentative answers to three key questions related to the populist phenomenon. What is authoritarian populism? What are the causes of the current upsurge? And, in conclusions, how and under what circumstances it can be resisted?

What is authoritarian populism?

¹ See J. Fomina, J. Kucharczyk “Populism and Protest in Poland” [in:] *Journal of Democracy*, October 2016, Volume 27, Number 4, p. 58-68

² Diamond, Larry, Plattner, Marc F., and Christophe Walker (eds.) *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (A Journal of Democracy Book), (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016): 11

³ See “The Kremlin connections of the European far-right” http://www.politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=68 (accessed May 10, 2017)

⁴ See „Poland outraged after Macron comments on Le Pen and Putin” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-poland-russia-idUSKBN17Y1IE> (accessed May 10, 2017)

In most generic terms, populism may be defined as “a general protest against the checks and balances introduced to prevent ‘the people’s’ direct rule”⁵. This definition captures the essential link between populism (the claim to exclusively represent the „will of the people”) with authoritarianism that is the dismantling or weakening the institutions that put limits on the decisions of elected leaders /parliamentary majorities. Such institutions include in the first place independent judiciary, constitutional courts, independent ombudspersons, but also independent media, civil society organizations or local self-governments. Any organization, institution or group of individuals can be labelled as „the enemy of the people” if and when it stands in the way of the ‘will of the people’, which (in populist rhetoric) is the will of the parliamentary majority, a leader elected in direct elections or results of a referendum. Majoritarianism, the idea of the rule of the majority, seems to be key to understanding how populism works. The rule of law is usually the first casualty of populist rule, precisely because in liberal democracies the judiciary is conceived as the third branch of government, designed to limit both the executive and legislative branch. This in turn insults the populist mind, which believes that – to borrow a phrase from the speaker of the current Polish government – „the will of the sovereign is above the law”.

Furthermore, the populist definition of „the people” is highly exclusionary, which is part of the authoritarian streak so characteristic of contemporary right-wing populism. First of all, it excludes the „elites”, which it broadly defines as members of all but one political party, but also independent journalists, public intellectuals or artists or indeed anyone who dares to publically challenge populist rhetoric or policies. Once again, Jarosław Kaczyński’s depiction of anti-government demonstrators as „the Poles of the worst sort” (i.e. not „true Poles”) well illustrates this principle of populist exclusionary definition of who counts and who doesn’t count as „the people”.

The populist narrative not only accuses „the elite” of looking after their own narrow interest and the negligence of the interests of the people, but also finds the elites guilty of advancing or giving „undue privileges” to certain minority groups. Such „privileged” groups typically include migrants/refugees or ethnic and religious minorities (especially Jews, Roma or Muslims), but also sexual minorities and women (or „feminists”). It is usually claimed that members of these groups „infiltrate” the elites and exercise undue influence on them. This leads us to another feature of the populist mind, which is the proneness for conspiracy theories. Thus, one of best predictors of voting for Donald Trump was the belief in the so-called „birther theory” (of which he was also one of the most notorious disseminator).⁶ In Poland, the belief in the so-called „Smolensk conspiracy theory” (accusing Russian and Polish government of conspiring to bring

⁵ Pelinka, Anton, “Right-wing populism. Concept and Typology”, in: Wodak, Ruth, Khosravini, Majid and Brigitte Mral (eds.) *Right-Wing Populism in Europe. Politics and Discourse*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): 3-22.

⁶ “Trump Supporters Think Obama is A Muslim Born in Another Country”, <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2015/08/trump-supporters-think-obama-is-a-muslim-born-in-another-country.html> (accessed on 26 June 2017).

down the plane that carried the late president Lech Kaczyński) was found to be an equally strong predictor of voting for Law and Justice party.⁷

Finally, it should be observed that in Europe authoritarian populism is combined with euroscepticism. This ranges from „hard Brexiters” (Farage but also Boris Johnson and other members of the conservative party) who demand to leave the European Union, through Marine Le Pen who demanded that France leaves the Monetary Union, to anti-EU rhetoric of Viktor Orbán and Poland’s Law and Justice politicians. For Poland’s (and Hungary’s) political leaders, „Brussels elites”, with their insistence that Central European Member States should accept some refugees from the Middle East, constitute a perfect target of populist anger venting.⁸ Interestingly enough, this EU bashing goes well with the general public, which otherwise strongly supports EU integration. This apparent paradox can only be explained by pointing out to the strong anti-refugee (and anti-Muslim) sentiments of the larger public, which at such moments trump their European attitudes.⁹ This paradox is one of many when we approach the question of the reasons or causes for the current popularity of authoritarian populism.

The causes of the populist upsurge

One of the received theories on the rise of authoritarian populism across the Western world explains that populism is a response to growing social inequality, a product of neoliberal “Washington consensus” predominant after 1989 and resulting in the financial and economic crisis of 2008. What makes this theory plausible is that populism often draws its support from the less affluent and less educated sections of the societies, especially men, whose economic position has become precarious in globalized post-industrial economy. However, more and more researchers studying the voting patterns and political preferences of Western publics, have come to the conclusion that this theory of the “mobilization of the dispossessed” has limited explanatory power. As Pippa Norris aptly pointed out:

... populist authoritarian leaders have arisen in several affluent post-industrial “knowledge” societies, in cradle-to-grave welfare states with some of the best-educated and most secure populations in the world,

⁷ Roguska, Beata, “Elektoraty partyjne – charakterystyka poglądów”, CBOS, komunikat z badań, 95/2016.

⁸ Ajay Nair, “‘Madness of Brussels elite’ Polish leader’s fury at Europe leaders over Manchester terror”, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/809779/Poland-prime-minister-Beata-Szyd-o-rage-Europe-EU-leaders-Manchester-bombing> (accessed on 26 June 2017).

⁹ Michał Broniatowski, “Why Warsaw loves to hate Brussels. The Polish paradox: EU may be popular — but so is bashing it.” <http://www.politico.eu/article/why-warsaw-loves-to-hate-brussels/>(accessed on 26 June 2017).

*like Sweden and Denmark — where you'd expect social tolerance and liberal attitudes instead of xenophobic appeals.*¹⁰

Similar questions arise when we consider the rise of authoritarian populism in Poland, culminating with the electoral triumph of Law and Justice party. Once again, conventional wisdom, expressed in numerous journalistic reports and essays by public intellectuals, explained the rise of Polish populism by pointing out to winners and losers of transformation after 1989, which put Poland on a path towards economic growth and modernization and yet (the story continues) resulted in persistent high unemployment, rising income inequality and less work security. However, a closer inspection of recent economic and social indicators leads to the conclusion that the „economic anxiety” theory has rather limited explanatory value also in the Polish case. The Law and Justice victory in Poland came at after more than 25 years of stable economic development, at the time of systematic fall in unemployment and reduction of poverty rates. The 2015 level of inequality, as measured by standard GINI coefficient, puts Poland close to EU average, worse than egalitarian Nordics but better than the UK and crisis-stricken southern members such as Greece.¹¹ One can only conclude that inequality and socio-economic deprivation, while definitely creating fertile grounds for the rise of authoritarian populism, nevertheless fail to explain its political success in particular countries, such as Poland.

Instead, the analysis of the Polish case prompts me to agree with Pippa Norris, who argues that “authoritarianism can best be explained as a cultural backlash in Western societies against long-term, ongoing social change”¹². Poland has undergone very intensive social and cultural changes since the breakup of the communist regime in 1989 and especially since it joined the European Union in 2004. Integration with the western political and economic structures as well as opening up of the borders (visas to most West European countries were abolished in 1991/92), has not only resulted in a quarter of century of sustained economic development, vast investment in infrastructure (fuelled by EU structural funds) but also diffusion of liberal social norms and modes. After 2007, under the central-right government, many ideas and policies, once promoted by relatively marginal groups of feminist and LGBT activists have become mainstreamed even if they not always have been translated into legislation (i.e. marriage equality). In spite of the fact that most Poles formally remained members of the Roman Catholic Church, studies showed

¹⁰ Norris, Pippa, “It’s not just Trump. Authoritarian populism is rising across the West. Here’s why”, *The Washington Post* (11 March 2016): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/11/its-not-just-trump-authoritarian-populism-is-rising-across-the-west-heres-why/>

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the Polish case, including the socio-economic factor, see J. Kucharczyk et al. “When fear wins: causes and consequences of Poland’s populist turn” [in:] *Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself. Mapping and responding to the rising culture and politics of fear in the European Union*, DEMOS 2017, pp. 305-362 https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/DEMJS104_nothing_to_fear_report_140217_WEBv2.pdf / (accessed on 26 June 2017).

¹² Norris, Pippa, *ibid.*

growing social and political divide along moral-cultural rather than socio-economic issues.¹³ „The silent revolution” in social values, which started in Western societies during the 1970s, came to Central Europe much later but has evoked strong adversarial reactions among the more traditional sections of society, backed by the hierarchy of the Catholic church, which is in the vanguard of the contemporary counter-reformation.¹⁴

The rise of authoritarian populism should be seen as reaction to these liberal tendencies. Although Law and Justice was elected on the ticket of generous socio-economic promises, its dominant position on the right wing of the political spectrum and resilience after years in opposition came from its strong adherence to identity and sovereignty issues and deep alliance with the Polish Catholic church. Later on, the refugee crisis, and especially the controversial policy of the European Commission for mandatory quotas of Syrian refugees for each member state, had – in a matter of months – brought about an upsurge of xenophobia, which in turn made the Polish brand of populism rather similar to its West European counterparts.

The Polish experience of culture shock has been unique in the sense of a rather short time span of cultural change resulting from the opening to western liberal norms and cultural modes after 1989, but (as noted) it can be viewed as part of the larger trend of cultural counter-revolution. The claim that the rise of right wing populism is better explained as a socio-cultural rather than socio-economic phenomenon, has been substantiated by an extensive study of Pippa Norris and Ronald F. Inglehart, who conclude that

*The evidence examined in this study suggests that the rise of populist parties reflects, above all, a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies. Long-term processes of generational change during the late twentieth century have catalyzed culture wars, for these changes are particularly alarming to the less educated and older groups in these countries.*¹⁵

„It’s the xenophobia, stupid”, wrote Zack Beauchamp, commenting on Norris and Inglehart insights on the importance of non-economic factors in generating support for authoritarian populism:

contrary to what you’d expect, the “losers of globalization” aren’t the ones voting for these parties. Hardcore supporters of Trump and his global peers are not the people profiled endlessly in the Rust Belt, who lament the loss of factory jobs. What unites far-right politicians and their supporters, on both sides of

¹³ Kucharczyk, et al., “When fear wins”, op. cit.

¹⁴ Korolczuk, Elżbieta, “The War on Gender” from a Transnational Perspective - Lessons for Feminist Strategising’, in: Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategising for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe (Heinrich Böll Foundation: Berlin, Vol. 38 of the Publication Series on Democracy, 2014): 43-53.

¹⁵ “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash”, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, August 2016, <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/Index.aspx> / (accessed on 26 June 2017).

*the Atlantic, is a set of regressive attitudes toward difference. Racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia — and not economic anxiety — are their calling cards.*¹⁶

There is however a third factor, besides economic anxiety and cultural backlash, which made possible the upsurge of support for authoritarian populism, and that is the revolution in social communication and the rise of ‘alternative’ internet-based media. In Poland, Kaczyński party’s victory would not have been possible without the creation of highly effective „anger industry”, which fed on many discontents of different social groups. Right-wing media, both traditional and internet-based contributed to the creation of “parallel reality” of “Poland in ruin”, where indignation at alleged economic mismanagement, social injustices and political malpractices allowed the dismissal and side-lining of experts and moderate political voices as agents of the purportedly intolerable status quo. The same communication channels were used to create moral panic related to the advances of what the conservatives called „gender ideology” and later on, the prospect of Poland’s receiving a limited number of refugees under the EU quota system.¹⁷

Polish populist victory in 2015 can thus be seen as an exemplification of what was aptly termed „post-truth politics”, first mastered by Putin’s propaganda machine, both for domestic and international purposes, but also present in Donald Trump’s bid for US Presidency and UK’s “Leave” campaign during the Brexit referendum.

Conclusions – resilience and resistance to the rise of authoritarian populism

The first step towards finding effective ways and methods of resisting authoritarian populism is to understand the complexities of its societal appeal. Understanding the populist upsurge in narrow socio-economic terms is not only empirically false, but it can hinder the attempts of social and political actors and groups which struggle to reverse the rise of populism or to resist the destruction of institutions and societal norms when populist are in power. Depicting populist supporters as „victims of globalization and/or transformation” puts emphasis on fixing social policies towards greater social inclusion, which is desirable in itself, but hardly effective as far as undercutting the support for right wing authoritarian populism. For starters, it is difficult to outbid populists in their promises of unrestricted spending and other socially popular but irresponsible policies (such as lowering the retirement age in Poland). Also, the attempts of some left-wing parties to redirect social anger from migrants to bankers have so far brought about rather modest results. As was asserted in this essay, populism is a backlash against progressive and liberal social values and needs to be confronted directly by mobilization of the groups and social actors who are directly threatened by populists in power, such as women and different minorities. The power of the so-called

¹⁶ Zack Beauchamp, “White riot. How racism and immigration gave us Trump, Brexit, and a whole new kind of politics”, 20 January 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/19/12933072/far-right-white-riot-trump-brexit/> (accessed on 26 June 2017).

¹⁷ See Kucharczyk, et al. “When Fear Wins.”, op. cit.

„black protest” against the government assault on women’s rights is one good example of such social mobilization. Secondly, civil society groups and non-populist politicians need to reclaim social media and learn to fight back populism in the area of social communication. Thirdly, international institutions, such as European Commission and Parliament must muster political will and move against the offenders who breach the values enshrined in the European Treaties, while increasing support (political and financial) to those groups and civil society organizations, which are in the frontline of the confrontation with populist and far right governments and other actors.

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