

Is the populism narrative still the right approach to address the threats to liberal democracy?

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It is rather difficult to pen a reflection piece if one shares all major conclusions of an author. I agree with Zsolt Boda about all his key points on the anti-pluralist nature of populism, its polarizing impact on the polity, and most importantly that populism is both a symptom and a driver of the disintegration of pluralist democracies. Populism is the famous spectre that haunts democracy (Arditi 2004,) summoned by the decade long rise of inequalities in the Western world.

Instead of repeating some of the author's arguments or getting lost in the nitty-gritty of contradictory case studies, this paper tries to address the puzzling relationship between populism and liberal democracy through a different, non-academic lens. It poses the question whether the populism discourse is still the right narrative to foster our understanding about the recent challenges to Western democracies. And the paper's answer to that question is a delicate "not really".

Although the academic research investigating the phenomenon of populism provides important insights into the social variables of the electorate that cast their ballots for populist parties, into the characteristics of the populist discourse or the various strategies deployed by populist parties in opposition or in government, as a matter of fact academic research has barely informed the strategies of non-populist parties and how they reacted to the populist challenge during the past decade.

At policy level, strong reliance on the populism concept obscures key developments and characteristics. On the one hand, it does not contribute anymore to the solid understanding of anti-democratic tendencies that haunt liberal democracies, while on the other hand it fails to trigger the rally around the flag effect among democratic stakeholders. It is fair to say that the populism narrative failed to trigger the militant democracy response to the ongoing autocratization process in the Western world, therefore it would be worth to reconsider how democracy contenders should be labelled.

The forgotten externalities

Most academic endeavors that try to shed light on the contested relationship between populism and democracy share a key common presumption: they assume that although populism in a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004) that usually can be found in combination with other ideological constructs, it is still the populist core that determines the impact on the quality of democracy, especially of pluralist liberal democracy. However, that assumption is largely unproven, even if I also share the point about the intrinsically illiberal and anti-pluralist nature of populism.

Although any sort of populism may indeed contribute to increasing social polarization, lack of social trust, while its style of political communication (Moffit & Tormey 2014) may impede efforts of democratic deliberation, the structural weakening of the social fabric of democracy still cannot be put on par with the overt authoritarian attempts as we know them from Hungary, Poland or lastly from the United States. While demand-side populism (and its triggers) may indeed prepare

the ground for autocratization as they undermine the structural resilience of democracy, on the supply-side not populism, but the attached ideologies are the key triggers of autocratization.

As Margaret Canovan (Canovan 1999) impregnably argues, populism is an intrinsically democratic phenomenon. Not only does it represent the *redemptive face of democracy*, but it is conceptually difficult to argue against the per se democratic nature of a concept that is built on the *will of the people*. This inherently democratic character of populism is the key reason why populism often underperforms as democracy's discursively created main concept of enemy in mobilizing sufficient popular support to the defense of liberal democracy.

The anti-pluralist characteristics of populism—which pose the main threat to the rights of minority groups—also vary significantly depending on the other (thin or full) ideologies populism is attached to. While left-populist regimes in Latin America also evolved into full-fledged authoritarianisms, as the example of Venezuela convincingly demonstrates, in Europe the anti-pluralist and anti-democratic potential of *inclusionary* left-populism appears to be significantly lower than those of the *exclusionary* populism represented by the populist radical right. Thus the distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013) demonstrates the most reliable signaling effect regarding populism's potential threat to democracy.

In a European comparison, the radical left-wing populist parties established after the 2008 economic crisis, like Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, all remained within the frames of democratic politics while they boosted political participation and enhanced the representativity of democratic politics in the respective countries. While the categorization of Italy's M5S is rather problematic on the left-right axis, the party is without doubt a representative of inclusionary populism. M5S not only obeyed the rules of liberal democracy in government, also as major coalition partner aside of Lega Nord, but it is not far fetched to argue that in spite of all the government crises—which are rather common phenomena in Italy—in fact M5S acts as a stabilizing factor in Italian politics.

In Central and Eastern Europe, traditionally two left-wing parties are accused with anti-democratic aspirations and are often labelled as left-wing populist parties: Slovakia's Smer and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD). In both cases it is at least questionable whether the parties' populist characteristics contributed to their authoritarian moves.

Smer, which was founded in 1999 as a genuine left-wing populist party, underwent a significant moderation and mainstreaming process and according to Spač and Havlík to 2012 it left behind most of its populist characteristics. (Spáč & Havlík 2015) Slovakia's democratic demise under the rule of Smer from 2012 until 2020 has not had its roots in Smer's populist policy or in any deliberate, ideologically motivated assault on the institutions of liberal constitutionalism and pluralist democracy, but in the widespread, paralyzing political corruption and classic state capture. In Romania's case the PSD government's repeated attacks on judicial independence and other aspects of the rule of law can be labelled as a sort of "technocratic autocratization" as their primary aim was to avoid the prosecution of PSD party chairman Liviu Dragnea and other PSD politicians for political corruption. While both parties faced significant institutional constraints which prevented autocratization processes in a fashion similar to Hungary or Poland, it is fair to say that neither Smer's nor PSD's policies were aimed at leaving the framework of liberal democracy.

Against this backdrop, one could conclude that inclusionary left-wing populism, especially in well-consolidated democracies, hardly poses a serious threat to pluralist democracy or liberal constitutionalism. In contrast, populist radical-right parties contest the basic fundamentals of

democracy throughout Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, including the integrity of the electoral process as the Hungarian elections in 2014 and 2018 and the U.S. presidential election in 2020 proved it.

Obviously, the populist radical-right enjoys significantly higher electoral support in the Western world than its left-wing peer, mostly for structural reasons. While left-wing populist parties can only build on the social and representation crisis of Western societies, the populist radical-right can capitalize the same sources of political support, while they can also exploit the identity conflicts of modern multicultural societies. However, the structural and electoral advantage of the populist radical-right does not invalidate the above arguments about the largely democracy conform characteristics of European left-wing populism.

Apparently, not populism per se, but the populist radical-right poses a considerable threat to Western liberal democracies and the poisonous ingredient is not necessarily populism, but the nativist, nationalistic and authoritarian features of the radical right ideology that is attached to populism.

The challenge of mainstreaming and labelling bias

There are at least three further variables which influence how the existence of populist parties impact liberal democracy or the democratic societies' ability to resist them.

First, starting in reverse order, the decade long mainstreaming of populist radical-right parties significantly reduced aversions in the electorate against them. Populist radical-right is not a fringe contender to liberal democracy anymore, but is formally part of the democratic machinery for decades. Bearing the fact in mind that Rassemblement National or Lega Nord constitute the parties perhaps with the most solid structure and electoral base in two leading European democracies, the terminology of “mainstream” or “established” parties representing the counterparts of populists simply lost its relevance.

This mainstreaming process also contributed to the fact that the concept of populism as a threat simply lost its persuasion and mobilization potential even among the electorate committed to the values of liberal democracy. As [Michael Meyer-Resende argues](#), the populism narrative in fact obscures the key question that matters: whether a party remains committed to the democratic rules of the game or despises them. It does not make any sense to call Erdogan, Kaczynski or Orbán populists. They are autocrats busy with constructing non-democratic, authoritarian regimes. Populism is not the key or distinguishing feature of their policies at all.

Second, the political consciousness of stakeholders, the policy community and the electorate follows the ideological, discursive and policy-related developments of parties with significant delay, which results in a sort of ‘labelling bias’. The ideological label attached to a party mostly answers the question “where is the party coming from” and not the one “which values and policies does this party represent”. Parties coming from the radical or populist spectrum of politics, like Jobbik or Smer, long suffer from their reputation and it is constantly questioned whether their self-moderation is credible and genuine. In contrast, parties coming from the moderate/mainstream spectrum are still treated as trustworthy mainstream parties long after their radicalization process turned them to populist radical right parties in programmatic and discursive sense. While [there is a growing academic consensus](#) regarding the classification of Fidesz and PiS as populist radical-right parties, among stakeholders of European party politics that classification often equals to hybrid.

Against this background, former moderate parties that underwent a populist turn and radicalization process pose a higher level of threat to liberal democracy than genuine populist radical right parties as they enjoy a significantly higher level of electoral and international trust.

Third, as Mudde and Kaltwasser argue, whether populism can be deemed a threat or a corrective to democracy depends on two external variables: the consolidation level of the given democracy and the fact whether populist parties occupy a government position or remain in opposition. (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012) They conclude that populist parties entering government positions in non-well-established democracies pose the most significant threat to the quality of democracy.

There used to be a broad academic consent in political science that populist parties may face significant challenges in government position as they face pressure to tone down the radicalness of their discourse and agenda and moderate under the conditions of government responsibility. To describe this phenomenon, Reinhard Heinisch coined the concept of ‘incumbency challenge’. (Heinisch 2003) Case studies still support the relevance of Heinisch’s concept, as important populist parties, like Smer, Syriza or M5S indeed opted for the most obvious ‘mainstreaming strategy’ to overcome the incumbency challenge and underwent significant moderation process in government position.

As I tried to demonstrate in one of my previous papers, the mainstreaming strategy is not the only open strategy for incumbent populist parties. (Hegedűs 2019) Through the externalization of the populist we-them dichotomy and the concepts of public enemy populist parties can maintain a radical discourse in government and are even able to further radicalize. Hungary and Poland are textbook examples of incumbent radicalization. However, even in their case, the ideological and discursive radicalization is mostly limited to the radical-right spectrum of the populist radical-right ideological composite.

Summary

While populism as a thin-centered ideology has a contradictory relationship with liberal democracy due to its intrinsic anti-pluralist characteristics, this paper argues that not the populist ideological core, but mainly “the attached” ideologies determine the impact of a specific populist party on its particular political environment. Furthermore, other externalities also deeply influence the interplay between populism and democracy. Due to the overuse of the populist narrative and the exhausted deterrence and mobilisation effect of alleged populist threats to democracy the paper argues that at least at policy level populism is not the right concept to understand the threats to contemporary Western democracies. Democracy is threatened by authoritarian temptations and one should not shy away to call the threats by their right name.

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