

Populism and the contemporary far right politics

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Recently there is a growing tendency to use the term populism to describe far right politics. Such an equation is however simplistic, problematic and therefore often criticized. The following article focuses on the relationship between far right politics and populism and discusses several arguments criticizing the association between the two.

Just like any other ideological concepts, neither the far right nor populism are homogeneous. While the far right can be divided into several ideological branches ranging from neo-Nazism to radical right and it includes various subjects from which some are being populist while others are not, populism can be both left and right. However, despite the fact that neither every far right is necessarily populist nor every populism is automatically far right, the most visible examples of populist politics in Europe today are still those associated with far right parties such as the Front National in France, Party for Freedom in Netherlands or The Danish People's Party. The valid question to be asked is therefore the following: what is the relationship between populism and the far right? The answer is however not an easy one.

The truth is that populism recently became one of the major ideological features of most of the successful examples or contemporary far right parties. At the same time, as a phenomenon it is considered to be a relatively new trait within far right's traditionally elitist ideological circles. Several authors therefore point out that it is precisely the populist aspect that distinguishes the traditional antidemocratic extreme right inspired by interwar fascist movements from the modern populist far right parties. However, the situation is not that straightforward as it may be seen at the first sight and the relationship between populism and extreme right or fascism is more nuanced.

Let's take for example arguably the most popular definition of fascism today by the British historian Roger Griffin, who includes populism among the core features of the fascist ideology. According to Griffin the (generic) fascism is a *"political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism"*¹. Similarly, the political theorist Nadia Urbinati stated in a recent interview that *"Populism should be considered as belonging both to the democratic and to the fascist family. It shares common elements with both"*². However, in case we apply perhaps the most widespread definition of populism today by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde who sees it a *"thin ideology that considers society to be essentially divided between two antagonistic and homogeneous groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and wants politics to reflect the general will of the people"*³, we come to a different conclusion. Mudde argues that only if all of these three necessary conditions of populism (anti-elitism, people centrism and the emphasis on general will) are met we can actually speak of populism.⁴ Despite the fact that interwar fascist movements were strongly criticizing the "established elite" as well as referring frequently to "the people"⁵, they were never in favor of the idea of sovereign „people“ whose General Will should be the main source of power in the

¹ Griffin, R. (1991): The nature of fascism. Pinter Publishers, p. 44.

² Interview #19 Nadia Urbinati – The roots of #Charlottesville, techno-populism, and the end of World War II - <https://populismobserver.com/2017/08/22/interview-19-nadia-urbinati-the-roots-of-charlottesville-techno-populism-and-the-end-of-world-war-ii/>

³ Mudde, C. (2014). Fighting the system? Populist radical right parties and party system change. Party Politics, 20(2), p. 218.

⁴ Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (Eds.). (2012). Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?. Cambridge University Press, p. 7-9

⁵ For example in Weimar Germany Hitler's NSDAP often portrayed the established political parties as traitors who betrayed the German „Volk“ by accepting the results of The Treaty of Versailles.

state. In fact, because of their elitist and autocratic legacy embodied in the Führer Principle, fascist movements always despised the idea of popular sovereignty, which is, according to Mudde, a necessary condition for populism. Therefore, we can conclude that, while these movements may use some of the populist arguments and we can definitely speak of populist aspects present in their ideology, they neither were nor are not populist as such.

The situation is slightly different within the new type of far right parties, that are well aware of the fact, that extreme right's old ideological framework consisting of biological racism, anti-Semitism and antidemocracy, has become ineffective in attracting voters. It is a result of the delegitimization, stigmatization and consequent marginalization of anything that has been associated with Nazism or Fascism after the Second World War. Therefore, within their new ideological framework developed in the late 1970s, they dropped the antidemocratic sentiment and replaced it with populist critique of the establishment. Moreover, they moved from biological racism to ethnonationalist xenophobia and cultural racism based on the concept of ethnopluralism, that does not advocate the hierarchical relationship between races in biological sense, but rather stresses the supposed incompatibility between different cultures. These, on the first sight insignificant ideological differences played however an important role in legitimizing the originally discredited far right ideology. As their result, the far right managed to mobilize the xenophobic public opinion without being stigmatized and marginalized as racists. At the same time, through populist critique of the establishment, they managed to present the criticism of the current liberal democratic system without being stigmatized, marginalized or banned for being extremists.⁶ Perhaps there is not a better example of this argument than the recent electoral success of Alternative for Germany in the country that has been long time immune to far right menace. We can therefore agree with both Anton Pelinka according to whom the success of the far right now depends on its ability to become populist,⁷ as well as with Paul Taggart who argues that only if we understand populism, we can we fully understand the current increase in the support for far right in Europe.⁸

Despite populism's crucial role in rise of the far right politics in last decades, several arguments that criticizes labeling far right politics as populist can be identified. One of the frequent complains is that the notion of populism is not negative enough to capture the evil aspects of the far right and therefore it helps to legitimizes it. The main problem with this argument is that it does see both populism as well as the other proposed labels such as extremism or fascism rather as battle terms than analytically useful concepts that could help to explain and understand the rise of the far right politics in last decades.

Other critical voices usually come from the political left that often argues against the application of the term "populism" to both radical left and radical right. The reason for that is that they see such a usage, along with the usage of the term extremism, primarily as a tool to discredit the radical leftist ideas by likening them to the radical or extreme right. While these arguments are valid and such an equation is inaccurate, the often proposed solution, to use the term fascism instead is even more problematic.

Most of the authors who study the contemporary far right refuse to equate it with fascism, not only because it completely ignores the ideological development on the far right scene since the end of the Second World War that, as already mentioned, helped to legitimize the originally discredited far right,

⁶ Rydgren, J. (2005): Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family. *European Journal of Political Research*, 44(3), p. 428

⁷ Pelinka, A. (2013): Right-wing populism: Concept and typology. In Wodak, R., KhosraviNik, M., Mral, B. (eds.) (2013): *Right-wing populism in Europe. Politics and discourse*. Bloomsbury, p. 12.

⁸ Taggart, P. (2003): *The Populist Turn in the Politics of the New Europe*. Paper prepared for presentation at the 8th Biannual International Conference of the European Union Studies Association conference, Nashville, p. 17.

but it also leads to a false impression that what we are facing right now is the return of the 1930s and the rise of a new fascism. That is however a complete misunderstanding of the current situation. The truth is that even the few successful extreme right examples such the Greece's Golden Dawn party, previously Hungary's Jobbik or more recently People's party of Slovakia are not successful because of their fascist traits but despite them.

Even some authors on the left such as Chantal Mouffe criticize the contra-productive moralistic usage of the term fascism and rather speak of populism.⁹ In similar vein, in one of his recent lectures Slavoj Žižek, for example, accused the left of intellectual laziness for applying the word fascism too broadly while ignoring the new developments within the far right agenda, which leads to missing the point entirely.¹⁰

However, labeling the far right parties simply as populist or right-wing populist would be inaccurate as well and is being criticized by several authors. For example, Cas Mudde, according to whom populism is only one of the core ideological features of this party family, along with nativism and authoritarianism, uses the label populist radical right and not radical right-wing populism by purpose. The reason for using rather the adjective *populist* than the noun *populism* is that the ideological core of these parties is primarily based on nativism and not populism and therefore these parties are first and foremost radical right-wing parties and only secondly populists.¹¹

The conclusion here is that while populism is not a feature of all far right parties, neither is it the most prominent feature among those far right parties that do have populism within their ideological core, it is still a useful and crucial concept. It not only helps to explain and understand the roots of the recent rise of most of the successful far right examples in Europe and overseas, but it also helps to develop effective counter-strategies, because without correct understanding of this phenomenon it would be impossible to tackle it.

⁹ Mouffe, C. (2005): The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism. In Panizza, F. (ed.) (2005): Populism and the Mirror of Democracy, Verso, pp. 50-71.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek - The Courage of Hopelessness (May 2017) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNIW3HnNqIk>

¹¹ Mudde, C. (2007): Populist radical right parties in Europe. Cambridge University Press, p. 26.