



Populism in Eastern Central Europe

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10 September 2007

Directly after the fall of communism, hopes burgeoned for democracy and capitalism in a "new" Eastern Central Europe. What does the current climate of populism, and in many cases an accompanying extremist nationalism, mean for these hopes? How does it affect these countries' relations with the EU? The apprehension and opposition towards European integration that populist movements share could make current EU member states even more resistant to extending further east and could erode the political bonds within the EU. Although the EU has experienced populism before without toppling, just how far can its "absorption capacity" stretch?

In February 1989, I argued [1] that the crumbling of communism in Eastern Central Europe brought with it the prospect of democratic change but that its success would depend on the new balance found between the democratic ethos of opposition to totalitarianism and the resurfacing of deeper undercurrents of the region's political culture. Just as the term "return to Europe" was ambiguous, so the term "return of democracy" was problematic for anybody who had studied pre-communist politics of Eastern Central Europe. The test case, I thought, would be Poland, and I had ventured the following statement: The mix of Catholicism and nationalism that prevailed in Polish society had made it particularly resistant to communism (certainly in comparison with the egalitarian, social-democratic ethos of the legacy of Masaryk's pre-war Czechoslovakia).

However, the question was: would these "assets" of the Polish political culture in a context of resistance also be the most conducive to the establishment of a liberal democracy after the collapse of dictatorship? The question implied some doubts on the subject. The developments of the following decade suggested that these had been exaggerated and that Poland was displaying a remarkable combination of "Catholic ethics and the spirit of capitalism". If Catholics even in Eastern Europe today behave more like Protestants in Max Weber's time and if the experience of unfreedom and resistance paradoxically provided the conditions for the re-invention of a democratic culture associated with dissent and with the Solidarity movement, then one could dismiss the parallels with the first transition to democracy of the 1920s. Similar arguments could be made about the rest of the region from the Baltic to Hungary. With consolidated democracies and their new anchor in the European Union, a new Eastern Central Europe



(not “new Europe”!) was in the making.

Recent developments in the new member-states of the EU may lead us to reconsider or at least nuance that proposition. Rightwing populists in Poland and leftwing populists in Slovakia now run the government in alliance with extremist nationalist parties. In Budapest, the main opposition party FIDESZ (Hungarian Civic Union) called for its supporters to demonstrate in front of Parliament for the resignation of the government on the very day the Parliament had confirmed in a confidence vote the political outcome of last May’s elections. In contrast, in Prague, a minority rightwing government that has not gained a vote of confidence in Parliament after five months of bickering and mobilizing against the “communist threat” is carrying out a widespread purge of the upper echelons of public administration. Last but not least, Bulgaria’s entry into the European Union has been heralded by turning the presidential race into a confrontation between an ex-communist (who claims to like the EU) and a proto-fascist (who says he hates Turks, Roma, and Jews).

Eastern Central Europe’s political landscape has diversified dramatically since the upheavals of 1989, but since joining the EU certain similarities have also appeared. These similarities have serious implications for the state of democracy and the future of European integration. Since elections took place in all of the Visegrad countries in the last two years, the region has been characterized by political instability and low levels of predictability among political actors. Perhaps more worrying is an erosion of trust in democratic institutions. According to a recent Gallup International poll, Eastern Central Europeans appear to be the most skeptical concerning the state of democracy (only about one-third trust the democratic process). [2] In contrast to a majority of Eastern Europeans, Eastern Europeans do not consider their elections free and fair. To the question “Do you think your voice matters?” some 22 per cent give a positive reply. Democracy today has no rivals but is losing supporters. Populist movements, to some extent, express that ambivalence and discontent.

This points to the second feature of the current tide of populist movements. They are not anti-democratic (indeed they claim to be the “true voice of the people” and keep demanding new elections or referenda) but anti-liberal. If democracy means popular legitimacy and constitutionalism (the separation of powers), then the populists accept the former and reject the latter (i.e. the idea that constitutional norms and representative democracy have primacy over values and “legitimate” popular grievances). The Polish-style “politics of values” is, of course, based on the assumption that “moral order” based on religion should prevail over the freedoms guaranteed by permissive liberalism on issues such as abortion, gay rights, or the death penalty. Asked about his intention to remove Darwinism from school curricula, the Polish minister of education answered, “We’ve managed without tolerance for long enough. And we also shall manage without it now.” In Slovakia, the anti-liberal reaction applies also to the treatment of national minorities. Although in practice there is no significant shift (yet?), the discourse has changed: Jan Slota, the leader of the Slovak National Party, was reported as saying that he envies the Czechs for having expelled the Germans and that he would not mind sending Bugar, the leader of the Hungarian minority, to Mars “without a return ticket”. The legitimization of xenophobia is a major feature of the onslaught on political liberalism.

The common pattern in all the Visegrad countries is one of acute polarization. And this is



where the imprint of communist political culture becomes most obvious: you do not face a political opponent with whom you argue or negotiate, but an enemy whom you must destroy.

Another aspect of the anti-liberal drive concerns economics. After fifteen years of unabashed free-market policies, the populists in Warsaw, Bratislava, and Budapest want to bring back the state. In reality, they herald the return of the social question. The losers of the transition cannot really get excited about the merits of the flat tax or the self-serving rhetoric about the “new tigers from the Tatras” (one of the former Slovak government’s favourite slogan of the). Since for fifteen years even the socialist parties pushed liberal economic policies, it is not surprising that the social question returns on the right (Kaczynski or Orbán) with nationalist, protectionist overtones. It seems that the populists have destroyed the myth of a liberal “new Europe” that accuses the “old” one of decline and stalemate.

The third related feature of the Eastern European populist tide is its onslaught on the elite consensus that has prevailed since 1990. Governments come and go, but they have, on the whole, followed very similar market-oriented domestic policies and NATO/EU-oriented foreign policy. The populist challenge to the modernizing political and technocratic elite that has prevailed in the 1990s comes in two guises: as an anti-corruption drive, on the one hand, and as “de-communization” on the other. In Poland, we find an interesting combination of the two with the denunciation of the “original sin” of the 1989 compromise between a moderate dissident elite and a moderate communist elite which allowed a non-violent exit from communism. This moral and political mistake has allegedly allowed the ex-communists to convert their political power into economic power and slide into the widespread corruption which has accompanied the privatization process. Hence the need for a two-pronged attack: anti-corruption and de-communization, which is a leitmotif of the Kaczynski twins, Orbán, and to some extent of the rightwing (ODS) party in Prague.

The fourth feature of the recent populist tide in Eastern Central Europe is reluctance or outright opposition towards European integration. The pro-European coalitions have been exhausted and have disintegrated in the immediate aftermath of EU accession. Significantly, the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian prime ministers resigned within days or weeks of fulfilling the “historic” task of “returning to Europe”. The populist nationalists present themselves as the only defenders of national identity and national sovereignty against “external threats”, as the Kaczynskis put it. They also never miss a chance to stress that Poland is in the EU only to defend its legitimate interests. The EU is the perfect target since as a liberal, elitist, supranational project it represents a combination of most of the aforementioned grievances. The assumption that joining the EU would stabilize the political system of the new democracies has high currency in the pre-accession phase. After joining the EU, the “now we can show them who we really are” posture seems to prevail. In some cases, one senses a satisfaction in joining Europe in order to oppose those who for half a century “built it without us”. Tired of being the European pupils, the populist nationalists have been longing to reveal at last the kind of Europe they have in mind: a “Europe of sovereign nation-states”, a “Christian Europe” opposed to the materialist, decadent, permissive, supra-national one.

This raises a number of questions concerning the impact of the populist backlash on the



EU itself. The first and most obvious implication is that this will do little to help promote further enlargement of the EU, which is not particularly popular these days, particularly among its founding member states. One cannot describe the EU day-in and day-out as a menace (as the Kaczynskis or Vaclav Klaus do) and at the same time demand that the benefits of membership be extended further east to a long list of candidates starting with the Ukraine. One cannot, as Romanian president Traian Basescu has done, state that the number one priority is the “strategic axes” Washington-London-Bucharest and claim (even before having joined the EU) that Moldova and the Black Sea countries must become members.

The second implication is not a threat of unravelling but the steady erosion of the political bond within the EU. What the Eastern European populists do not fully appreciate is that the great benefits that their countries derive (and will derive according to the new budget for 2007-2013) from membership depend on the existence of a political bond. If populists obsessed with the sole defence of “national interests” prevail, they may well weaken the will to develop common policies and foster a re-nationalization which would not be in the “national interest” of the new member states.

There are at least two main reasons why the situation may be “desperate, but not serious”, i.e. why the EU could learn to live with the populists. One is that there are cycles of populism. They come to power on an anti-corruption drive “to clean house”, but once you become the house you may yourself become identified with the practices you have denounced. They then tend to fall back on clientelism and instrumentalization of the state by the ruling parties (as we see in Poland) rather than remaining true to their radical slogans.

The Euro consensus of the last decade has often been accused of emptying the political competition in the candidate countries of its substance and thus contributing to the populist backlash in which Europe is used as a scapegoat. But the EU can also work as a constraint on the populists. This, at least, is the experience with populism inside the EU prior to its enlargement to the east. Austria has been the main test case since 2000: ostracism showed its limits, absorption proved more effective. After all, populist nationalists joined (and have since left) government coalitions in Italy, Holland, and Denmark. The lesson for the newcomers could be that populism can erode or dissolve thanks to EU constraint. In other words, nationalist populism is a trans-European phenomenon, but, unlike in the 1930s, it does not see itself as an alternative to democracy and operates within the context of the European Union. The premature crisis of democratic representation in the new member states is defused by its banalization and the constraints of the European framework. Populism is perhaps the greatest test of the EU’s much-debated “absorption capacity”.

Footnotes

1. In a talk at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, entitled "After communism what?"

2. See Gallup International, *Voice of the People 2005: Trends in democracy*, www.voice-of-the-people.net/ContentFiles/files/VoP2005/VOP2005_Democracy%20FINAL.pdf



EUROZINE

Published 10 September 2007

Original in **English**

First published in **Transit 33 (2007) (German version)**

Downloaded from eurozine.com (<https://www.eurozine.com/populism-in-eastern-central-europe/>)

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