

**Populism and attitudes
towards the EU
in Central Europe**

Objavljeno v knjižni zbirki **Politika**

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Politične vsebine in volilna kampanja

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Volitve v Evropski parlament 2009

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POLITIKA



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Foreword (Milan Brglez)¹

Dear colleagues and fellow researchers,
honourable representative of the European Commission in Slovenia
Mr Zoran Stančič,
ladies and gentlemen,

it really is a great pleasure to be joining you today at this round table, which seeks to unveil some of the more concrete numbers and phenomena underlying a common European challenge that seems to be growing by the day—the rise of political populism, particularly the one characterised by a significantly nationalistic aspect. In the last three and a half years, I have had the opportunity to experience first-hand the conceptions and misconceptions of trending European populism, which is bringing about alarming changes in our supranational and national political landscapes. And the problem certainly is real. In this respect, I am very grateful to the team of dedicated researchers that have taken on a project that will be presented in greater detail later on, and whose conclusions can prove useful in constructing a more responsible and inclusive political space that will be able to effectively respond to harmful populisms.

The discourse on European populism, however, is neither recent let alone new. Merely browsing through past mainstream political commentaries reveals that the European public sphere has been intensively dealing with this issue for more than a decade. In the aftermath of the last election to the European parliament in 2014,

¹ This speech was delivered by the President of the National Assembly of Slovenia at the presentation of the results of this research on 14 March 2018 at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

there was virtually no newspaper or political magazine across our continent that would not speak of “Europe’s swing to the populist right”. It turned out, however, that populists were able to delve much deeper into the fabric of European societies than we had thought. In order to understand how to react to the rise of their ideas, we must understand what populism actually is, where its roots in contemporary Europe lie, and how one can derail it from its climb to further power. I am in no way suggesting that I possess such answers—at the moment it actually seems that no one does. Nonetheless, I wish to briefly share with you some of my own points of view that I will be happy to elaborate upon later on.

Approximately a decade ago, Europe witnessed one of the most harmful collapses of the global financial and economic system. Countries and companies crumbled under the weight of their debts, individuals would lose their homes, jobs and livelihoods, and the youth somewhat lost its prospects. In this downward spiral, the EU chose to focus predominantly on saving the Eurozone as one of the key features of the European project. European governments more or less jointly agreed to this approach, and undertook a process involving restrictive fiscal agreements and painful austerity measures that most of all hurt the middle classes and those who already had the least. Those who were “too big to fail” received favourable treatment, regardless of the fact that they were often part of the original problem itself. To put it in very general and simplified terms—Europe thus forgot about the individual. It forgot about his or her inherent right to a life of dignity, a fundamental idea and value that the existing European project was actually built on. Slovenia, unfortunately, was no different at that time.

This forgetfulness brought about a breakdown of a specific trust link between the body politic and political elites. And as Adorno notes, the public and political spaces are in their essence completely open to those seeking to satisfy their basic emotional needs in relation to their most primitive and irrational desires and fears, rather than those susceptible to rationally articulated interests. The aforementioned breakdown of trust broadened Adorno’s space and gave populists a new opportunity to thrive on the misery of the losers of globalisation and the European project.

According to Margaret Canovan, one of the leading thinkers in this field, the universal features common to all populisms are their appeal to the people and anti-elitism. Such a definition, however,

does not reveal much about the social content of populism that—particularly in the case of Europe today—can be very specific. While contemporary agonistic politics is indeed based on the dichotomies of “Us versus Them”, existing populists do not place their focus merely on the somewhat traditional populist socio-economic space of a conflict between the “common man” on the one side and financial and political elites on the other. To a degree, of course, they do. Otherwise populists across Europe would not have been able to attract the sympathy of the working classes with the argument that their governments have concluded a pact with the inhuman Brussels bureaucracy in order to keep the common people away from any kind of social and political power.

Nevertheless, populists today fuel this conflict, this dichotomy with an important additional aspect—fear of the foreign. The ongoing migration crisis has offered them a convenient scapegoat that enables them to construct an external threat to the welfare of “our” people and create new lines along which the political space can be divided. And this is a very dangerous line. Not only because it is a line that borders exclusionary ideologies that have historically pushed Europe into actual conflict. It is dangerous because populists are drawing these lines using language that was constructed precisely because of the disastrous consequences of stepping over such lines. The vocabulary of fundamental human rights today is being abused by populists in order to further their increasingly illiberal ideas. According to them, individuals are not endowed with fundamental rights by the virtue of their personhood—they being human—but rather along the lines of nationality, citizenship or even ethnicity. Donald Trump managed to swing the election in his favour precisely because he said he would put America and Americans first. But at whose expense?

In Europe, it seems this approach comes at the expense of those seeking shelter from conflict and extreme poverty, as well as those seeking to harvest the benefits of a common European labour market. That is why it is unfortunately no longer rare to hear deputies of our National Assembly saying that we should not employ foreign nationals in our country before every Slovenian has a job, and that we should guarantee *human* rights to Slovenian citizens first and only then to others. This is not an accidental misconception of the existing social, legal and political order. This is a conscious attempt to break down the fabric of what constructs contemporary Europe, and it is the reason why populism is becoming so dangerous. When British

voters decided that the United Kingdom should leave the EU, the vice-president of the leading French National Front tweeted: “Their world is collapsing. Ours is being built.” I believe this new world order is absolutely nothing to look forward to. It is an order that puts into question the fundamental ideas of constitutional democracy on the one hand and the civilizational achievements of the European project on the other. When I was skimming through the Slovenian results of the survey under discussion today, I was relieved to see that, in general, the majority of Slovenians is still in favour of the European project for one reason or another, and that even those who speak critically of the EU are not *per se* anti-European. Nevertheless, uncertainties remain, especially given that louder calls for a more security-driven European project come at the expense of losing the support of those who praise the progressive normative achievements that gave Europe its global reputation as the cradle of human rights and prosperity—the achievements that today’s populists bluntly reject. As Time journalist Simon Shuster said, by voting for Brexit, the British people clearly demonstrated that the integration of the West is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Populists do have the power to create an international order where fundamental past agreements are opened up for renegotiation in the interests of nation states that simply no longer feel bound by the established order.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe certainly requires change and, in a political sense, a move away from what Tariq Ali labelled as the consensus of the “extreme centre”. Nonetheless, I believe that such change does not necessarily have to come from a radical political group, be it left or right. When the increasingly popular Belgian theoretician Chantal Mouffe speaks of the need for a rise of left-wing populism, she is only half right. True, the centre-left has lost a large part of its body politic to right-wing populists because it was unable and unwilling to address their alienation from the social and political space. We need to reinvent the language and approaches for advocating a more inclusive economy and democracy that is able to balance between both equality and liberty. However, left-wing populism that hides nothing or very little behind its formal veil is bound to drown in the pool of its own idealism. Greece is a perfect example of what happens when left-wing populism fails to deliver on its promises. It produces even harsher

counter effects on the other side of the spectrum, which was clearly seen with the rise of the Golden Dawn and many other right-wing populist parties across Europe.

In EU member states, the most fundamental responsibility of decision-makers is to clearly and concretely articulate to the people that it is the rule of law, the principles of inclusiveness, equality and non-discrimination, and a sense of social justice that guides public policy. And in order to preserve and further develop the European project, the great broadness of the latter must be brought to the attention of the body politic and decision-makers alike. The EU is not merely a bundle of structural and cohesion funds that we may use whenever we like. The EU is not and should not be a menu of choice—rather, it is a conscious decision to *integrate* that we have made in order to manage together the challenges that are simply too big to be managed by nation states alone. That is why devising a fully functioning Social Union and a common asylum and immigration system that will both reflect genuine solidarity among member states is of utmost importance. Europe's future must be based on solidarity and inclusion, not self-preservation and exclusion. The latter two will only enable populism to thrive.

Thank you for your invitation and attention. I am looking forward to our discussion later on.

Introduction by the editor

Populism is one of the most significant phenomena in the recent years. Some of the major recent events, such as the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential elections in the United States, or the British vote to leave the European Union—the former marking an end of a liberal internationalist era in United States' foreign policy and the latter the reversal of one of the greatest achievements of the liberal internationalism, the European integration—have been attributed to the impact of populism.

From the perspective of modern political science, populism is not new but is in fact as old as representative democracy itself. Defined as a political strategy to take power based on popular vote by referring to the gap between ordinary citizens and elites, it highlights the limitations of representative institutions on the one hand and of democracy on the other.

What has been particular for the recent rise of populism is the role of international politics. For a long time, international relations were considered separate from the domestic political games based on an assumed indivisibility of national interest. The development of the liberal international order enabled governments to profit from the transfer of authorities to international institutions in terms of leverage gained against domestic blockades. While growing interdependence acted as a constraint against nationalism, it also created systemic risks due to a growing share of transactions taking place in a decentralised environment that is increasingly affected by multipolarity and diverging interests. As systemic crises such as the global financial and economic crisis unfold, national elites fall victim to their own success—growing interdependence and external constraints—resulting in loss of legitimacy.

European integration was launched precisely to help contain nationalism by building on interdependence and to increase the weight of middle-sized and small European countries by pooling their sovereignties. However, as the Eurozone crisis and the migrant and refugee crisis demonstrated, the European Union (EU) suffered from the same illness of weak community-level institutions to deal with the diverging effects and asymmetric shocks that were enshrined in a decentralised system of governance.

A specific thing about the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is that in the context of a collapse of their communist regimes, the EU as an international organisation—among other actors and organisations supporting the international liberal order—filled the vacuum, transforming the societies through conditionality and learning, facilitating a transfer of European norms, institutions and policies in the process of accession. Thus, for CEE countries, the crises of the EU had all the more profound impact on the legitimacy of the liberal political institutions, as these were largely “imported” and not “indigenous”.

The purpose of this research is to reflect upon the recent rise of populism and anti-EU sentiments in CEE by combining existing literature and data with a new empirical research and analysis, with one eye on general theory and the other on the particular context of the region.

Chapter one engages with the common discourses suggesting that the rise of populism and anti-EU attitudes in CEE are mostly due to the poor quality of domestic institutions, which declined further after EU accession, thus blaming ‘input legitimacy’. Taking a sceptical stance, chapter one wants to test this against the role of economic transformation in these countries as an ‘output variable’. It reviews the literature to establish the role of domestic political institutions and economic change that are described as broader or structural variables, i.e. variables related but not necessarily leading to the rise of populism. It pays specific attention to the CEE countries that went through substantial institutional and economic reforms, which were often imposed without any real political debate. In the empirical part, this chapter uses existing data on institutional quality and economic transformation in five CEE countries (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia), also known as Central European new member states, referring to both objective measurements and subjective ones in terms of opinion polls on a fifteen-year

time scale to determine the correlation with the rise of populism and changes in the attitudes towards the EU.

The second chapter deals with the sudden rise of populism and in particular the Eurosceptic type of populism in the five CEE countries. As relatively small countries, they would be expected to pursue pro-European policies, which makes the rise of Euroscepticism particularly ambiguous. However, a mixture of an elitist approach and unrealistic expectations is considered to have created the perfect conditions for populists to flourish during the crises of the EU. Using foreign-policy analysis as a framework, chapter two looks into how the EU's two major crises in the recent years as the context of the rise of populism—i.e. the Eurozone crisis and the migrant and refugee crisis—resonated in the attempts of political parties in Central Europe to improve their election results through populist and Eurosceptic framing, and under what conditions particular actors were successful in doing so. By comparing individual crises and countries, this serves as a basis for locating the mechanisms facilitating the rise of populism and Euroscepticism.

Chapter three presents the results of a series of original national-level opinion polls, aimed at locating in more precise terms the types of positions linked with nationalist populism in CEE. It is based on a specialised survey on populism and attitudes towards the EU that was conducted in five CEE countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, all small Central European member states (Poland, which is a mid-sized country, was not involved in the survey).¹ In the survey, respondents were asked about their general attitudes towards the EU, different EU policy areas and general political norms and values. A comparative analysis looks at the similarities and differences across issues and countries to establish the role of particular issue areas as outputs and the general norms and values as inputs into the process, indicating the sources of populism and EU-related attitudes.

The fourth chapter features a detailed case study of Slovenia, drawing on the survey described in the preceding chapter and searching for determinants of a populist voter through a regression of different positions on the demographic variables. Slovenia is one of the smallest CEE countries and started out as the most open and most quickly progressing country with the most pro-EU attitudes, which

¹ The availability of data was based on EU project funding.

was significantly affected by both of the recent EU crises, making it a perfect example to test the role of the external environment. The chapter looks into how different demographic variables indicating input legitimacy (such as media consumption, party preferences), output legitimacy (socioeconomic status) or both (education) intersect with general positions on the EU, EU policies in different areas and political norms and values. Using socioeconomic locators and political profiles, chapter four establishes the role of institutions and economics for populist and nationalist tendencies.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the research, and sets them in the context of recent developments in the international and European order, such as growing nationalism and the ideas of differentiated or flexible integration.

I: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE AND DATA

