

## Populism: a Permanent Shadow of Modern Democracy?

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*Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Hugo Chávez, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński. What do those people have in common? At one time or another they have all been deemed populists. But does a notion that puts such a diverse group of people under one roof really tell us anything about politics?*

Populism is probably a word most often used to describe recent developments on many political scenes across Europe and in the United States. We learn that populists are already in power in Poland and Hungary, that they were the driving force behind Brexit and now threaten to upend political systems in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, France, Germany and Italy. And, above all, we are quite often told that the last presidential campaign in the United States should be seen as a clash between left-wing populism of Bernie Sanders and its right-wing version embodied by Donald Trump. The term is so widely used, one could assume we all understand what it means. But do we? What makes a good populist?

The first thing that comes to mind is their hostility towards the so-called 'elites', be it the political class, media, judiciary, or simply the rich. From this hostility stems their main promise to 'shake things up' in the name of the 'ordinary people', who are 'fed up' with the current state of affairs. Politics is so corrupt – they would usually say – that only a real outsider can succeed in changing it.

All the above claims might seem like good characteristics of a populist, unless we realise they are also good characteristics of... almost every politician. Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Barack Obama – political figures hardly ever considered populists – have all campaigned as outsiders promising to revolutionise political culture and bring power back to the people. 'Change' and 'Yes, we can' – these slogans gave the highest office in the United States to the first African-American.

Even Hillary Clinton – to many voters the very epitome of the so-called Washington – in her 2016 presidential campaign tried to present herself as a newcomer. 'I cannot imagine anyone being more of an outsider than the first woman president,' she said in [one interview](#).

If therefore it is the promise of radical change that turns a 'regular' politician into a populist, then most of our political class must be deemed populist. Equating populism with criticism of the elites is thus not enough.

'It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be critical of elites in order to qualify as a populist. [...] In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always anti-pluralist: populist claim that they, and only they, represent the people', writes Jan-Werner Müller in his timely and lucidly written book 'What is populism?'<sup>2</sup>.

Müller accurately captures the essence of populism. In a system of representative democracy every politician running for office must by definition claim to stand for their respective electorates. Yet only populists assert they have the absolute monopoly to speak in the name of 'the People' as a whole. Other parties may represent certain 'groups of interests', but solely populists put the real 'common good' as their guiding principle. What is more, populists quite often maintain that this common good is self-evident to every 'reasonable man'. The current political class, however, corrupted, short-sighted or plain stupid will never act to advance it.

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<sup>1</sup> Though yesterday's election didn't confirm this assumption.

<sup>2</sup> Jan-Werner Müller (2016), *What is populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 20.

This way of framing political opponents is brilliantly captured by Müller, when he quotes Viktor Orbán's explanation of why he refused to debate opposition parties before Hungarian parliamentary elections:

'No policy-specific debates are needed now, the alternatives in front of us are obvious [...] I am sure you have seen what happens when a tree falls over a road and many people gather around it. Here you always have two kinds of people. Those who have great ideas about how to remove the tree. [...] Others simply realize that the best is to start pulling the tree from the road<sup>3</sup>'.

Such reasoning leads to a simple conclusion: if only populists represent the real will of the people, and if that will is obvious to anyone whose thinking is not impaired by partisan interests, then the populists can face no legitimate opposition.

Jarosław Kaczyński, populist leader of the governing party in Poland explained this view perfectly clear in one of his recent interviews: 'The current opposition's actions are purely destructive and in this situation, since I remain outside the government, I myself should be the opposition, a critical element of control<sup>4</sup>'.

If that is the case, then the next step taken by populists already in power must be a full-blown war against every potential source of resistance to the their government. And these sources include not only political parties, but also other independent organisations operating in a democratic society such as the judiciary, NGOs and the media.

The populist government in Poland began its rule by challenging the country's Constitutional Tribunal and is now about to introduce a profound reform of the whole judiciary, making it more dependent on political decisions taken by the government. In Hungary the third estate has been 'reformed' long time ago. Clashes between the government and the media, as well as non-governmental organizations, are yet another common feature in these countries.

Everyone challenging any claim made by populists is usually called 'the enemy of the People'. That is precisely how Donald Trump referred to the American media. The president has also already clashed with the judiciary over his so-called 'travel ban'. More conflicts along these lines are bound to follow.

Anti-elitism and anti-pluralism are therefore the two characteristics which truly unite populists around the globe. Assuming this perspective allows us not only to better understand populists' past actions and to predict their next move. It should also make us aware that populism is not just one of many weaknesses of our democratic systems. It is rather 'a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril<sup>5</sup>'.

The first step to avert this peril is to properly define it, expose its nature and assess its scope. Müller's book leaves no doubt that the exact same challenge is now facing not only the so-called 'new democracies' in Central Europe, but also one of the oldest, on the other side of the Atlantic.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Do Rzeczy*, no. 6/2016, February 6th 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Jan-Werner Müller (2016), *What is populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 11.