The Mistrust of Citizens in Democratic Political Institutions: a Key Factor in the Rise of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe?

Abstract: *In this article, I set out to look at one of the reasons why contemporary populism has gained momentum in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, and I have summed up to three States: The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. For each of the three countries concerned, we have looked at a relevant populist party that has been active in the post '89 political arena, whether it was in government or always remained in opposition. We have taken the assumption that the acute lack of confidence that citizens have in political institutions fosters the emergence and success of populist parties and populist leaders. Having presented the particularities of populism in the Central East European area, I explained why social and political trust is crucial for maintaining legitimacy and for the proper functioning of a democracy. Following the analysis, we have found that in all three countries, confidence in the main political institutions is at an extremely low level, at least from the 1990s to the present day, and one reason why populism has been made easier to enter the political scene, it was the citizens who were and are disappointed by how their political institutions function.*
Keywords: *political institutions, populism, Central Europe, Eastern Europe*

I. Introduction

We hear more and more often, at least in the last two decades, that populism is getting more and more deeply into the public of various societies in Europe[1]. If we are interested of the social-political field, we cannot fail to notice that the media is almost choking us with information on this subject. In particular, we find a variety of content on the Internet about this subject, from the success in elections of a populist party and the appearance on the political stage of a charismatic leader who uses populist rhetoric, to the policies/impact of the policies adopted by a populist government or party, but the list can still continue.

But given the avalanche of information presented to us, a legitimate question emerges: Do we really know what populism means? It is pertinent to ask this because this concept of populism is used so often and so easily that, in some cases, it seems to have lost any semantic value. As Paul Taggart notes, 'populism is one of the most used but also one of the less understood concepts of our time'[2]. To give some examples, since the term populism is used to

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describe both the policies of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the radical left-wing actions of the Scottish Socialist Party (SPP), but also the far-right policies of the Austrian freedom Party (FPO), it is clear that we are facing serious obstacles in terms of understanding and theoretical framing the populism[3]. This is precisely why, in this article, I consider it necessary, in the first stage, to explain and define as rigorously as possible the concept of populism, all of this in order to remove the concept of populism from the triviality with which it is currently viewed and used in society.

Leaving aside, for the time being, the operationalization and proper definition of populism, I propose in this work that I examine one of the reasons for the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe, which is to show whether mistrust, citizens have or have had in basic democratic political institutions such as parliament, government, political parties, etc., generated a good ground for the success of populist parties. As the area of Central and Eastern Europe is a vast one, which comprises a relatively large number of states, I will sum up, for this work, to three examples: The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Also, the limited space that I will have at my disposal does not allow me to use an analysis of the main populist parties that have emerged in these countries over the last three decades, which is why I will be summing up to an example for each country. The first reason for choosing these three countries to analyze the emergence and development of populism is reflected in the presence of numerous political, social and cultural similarities in their societies, all three of which are members of the Visegrad Group[i]. The second reason is that all three above-mentioned countries were 'hit' by a strong rise of the parties and populist leaders in the post-communist period[4].

For this analysis, I believe that two concepts are fundamental and they need to be deepened. On the one hand, one of them is populism, and we have already discussed that we need to be looked at rigorously, and on the other hand we have the concept of political trust/confidence, which at first sight may seem easy to explain and use, but we will see that he, too, needs certain theoretical boundaries in order to understand more clearly what we want to refer to.

In order to be able to check whether there is a causal link between distrust in political institutions and the upswing of populism, we must first understand what was the success recipe populists used to win the elections, or at least high percentages in the elections. More specifically, it is necessary to highlight the topics they have built and used in the electoral campaigns, the electorate they addressed and their behavior when they were in government and in opposition. I will start from two main assumptions: 1. the fundamental political institutions no longer manage to inspire trust among the electorate. 2. the populist's success is based on the inability of democratic institutions to remedy their slippages.

II. Populism – an ambiguous concept

'A ghost haunts the world – populism'[5]. It has become almost a cliché for the works that address the populist phenomenon to start with this paraphrase taken over from Ionescu and Gellner, who in turn adapted it after Marx's famous sentence in *the Manifesto of the communist party.* It is not by chance the analoguey, and Ionescu and Gellner are giving us a subtle warning that, just as for Marx Communism it was a seduction, the same way it happens to us in the case of populism[6]. Populism is not a concept recently created and developed in political science. Its origins lie in the middle of the 19th century in the Russian movement *Narodnicestvo,* a term which would translate into populism, but also in the Peoples' Party party of small Amer-

ican farmers[7]. Some authors, such as Guy Hermet[ii], appreciate that there is also a third move-ment that can join the two already mentioned, namely the boulangism that emerged in France in the late 1880. I will not go into more details about the origins of populism, but it must be mentioned that there are fundamental differences between historical/classical and contempo-rary populism. There are indeed some similarities between these two categories, such as the appeal to the people, anti-elitism or the presence of a charismatic leader, but at the same time there are also considerable differences, and this should not be overlooked[8].

Like any important concept in political science, populism has not been shielded from heat-ed debates either. But besides the theoretical confusion that is appease on it, there is another philosophical problem that calls into question the very existence of populism as such. On the other hand, ambiguity also arises from the fact that it is seen as ideology, movement, discur-sive style, political strategy or syndrome of liberal democracies[9]. However, the authors who have investigated the populist phenomenon have tried to provide definitions that are as appro-priate in context, but the problem that sometimes arises from these attempts is the restriction that these definitions address. For example, there are definitions that focus exclusively on the anti-elitist character of populism[10] or which place too much emphasis on charismatic leaders, and in some cases we see that populism tends not to resonate with these aspects, but rather manages to build on other bases. Benjamin Arditi capture very well the nature of populism when he mentions its obscurity, but also its ability to evade any definition[11].

However, certain definitions are retained in the literature that are capable of comprehen-sively and clearly identifying the main generalities of populism, even though there is no gen-eral consensus in the academic world. One such example is the definition given by Cas Mudde: *'A thin ideology, which believes that society can be separated into two homogeneous and an-tagonistic groups: 'The virtuous people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people'[12]*. Although this definition does not fail to explain quite briefly the typology of populism, even Mudde admits that its definition is not complete, especially as regards joining the term ideology to populism. Although he calls it an ideology, he says populism does not possess the same intellectual level of sophistication and consistency as well as established ideologies: socialism, conservatism or liberalism[iii]. Also, populism does not have a self-standing doctrine such as the above-mentioned ideologies and has recourse to various loans from other ideologies, which have a doctrinal basis behind them, in order to maintain their relevance, continuity and power on the political scene[iv]. Due to the lack of a doctrinal corpus and flexibility on the left-right axis, populism can easily combine with a multitude of ideologies, from which we recall as main: nationalism, communism, ecol-ogy and socialism. In short, we remain, from the above, with the fact that populism uses three fundamental concepts, people, elites, general will and directly opposes elitism and pluralism[13]. These three fundamental concepts are also added to those of democracy, sovereignty and the majority rule, each of which is identified and defined by its connections to each concept.[14]

III. What is trust and why is it important?

We can say with certainty that trust and, above all, political confidence is a basic ingredient for the optimum functioning of any society. Trust can lead to a multitude of positive things, from the desire to get involved in solving community problems, to the satisfaction we feel toward po-litical leaders who ensure good governance[15]. Even in daily activities, we rely on a little or more

interpersonal trust, and we cannot think of life differently. For example, we trust various specialists who can solve certain problems that we could not solve without their help, or we trust family members or friends because we have formed our social relations with them over time. If in a small group of people, such as a family or group of friends, it is easy to massage and analyze the level of confidence they have in a person, institution, party or anything else, it is not as simple when it comes to a society as a whole, although efforts have been made in the literature to measure citizen's trust in issues relating to aspects of political and social life.

In extremely broad terms, trust means maintaining a positive perception of the actions of an individual, group of individuals or organization[16]. But to make the concept of trust easier to operationalize I will use two definitions that manage to explain this concept succinctly but completely. The first of them belongs to Diego Gambetta: Trust is that subjective probability that an actor A expects an actor B to perform an action that is, if not necessarily beneficial to both, at least not harmful to A[17]. We have also used a second definition to complement the previous one and to introduce other important variables omitted by the former. So the second definition sounds like this: Trust can be spoken of when an actor A thinks that an actor B will serve his interests by taking X behavior in relation to a Y context in time T[18]. To set a practical example, in a hypothetical scenario, citizens (A) trust politicians (B) if they are concerned to reduce unemployment (X) in the context of an economic crisis (Y) within a one-year period (T).

IV. Contemporary populism in East-Central Europe

Now that we have drawn up the main theoretical lines of populism and have tried to eliminate the confusion that was going on over the term, I want to narrow the scope of analysis and highlight the main features of contemporary populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The Central and Eastern European area has not escaped populist manifestations either, most of them coming up with the collapse of communism. Although these countries have had a common, communist heritage, often the populist phenomena that have emerged in this geographical context have behaved differently and have even been contrary to each other in terms of the target[19]. The problem of societies in Central and Eastern Europe was that their populations were mostly rural populations, which were not suited to western capitalism or soviet-style socialism, but rather something different from both[20]. Perhaps for this reason, various populist manifestations with different behaviors have emerged in this geographical context. On the one hand, the Eastern European populists wanted a reform of society, given that the soviet-type society had to be removed, and on the other, the populists realized that reforms could be achieved more easily with revolutionary means and speeded up through far-right alliances. In this way, left-wing populists cooperated with the remains of the former communist formations, while right-wing populists collaborated with the far-right formations, hence the prime character of the populism in the region[21]. To conclude, the populism that prevailed on these societies was not an economic one[22], as in the case of Canada, Australia or some Western European countries, because there was no breeding ground for this. Populism in Central and Eastern Europe was an ethnic and marginal one in a post-1989 phase[23], then it was used and adopted by the leaders of the establishment, who seized the opportunity to use target themes to raise awareness and strategies such as flair of the people to win elections, all of this to ultimately impose its moral and political leadership[24].

V. Populism in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, over the last three decades, there have been, and still are, a multitude of parties which, even if they are not by definition purely populist, at least have adopted populist rhetoric. We have a wide variety of populist parties that we can include in this list, but we have chosen, for this work, to present the case of the Czech Republicans' Party (SPR-RSC-*Sdruyení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Ceskoslovenska),* because this party can be classified as the first populist party to have appeared in the Czech Republic, being recorded in the first days/months following the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

It was a small party and had some success in the early years of 1990 . Its registration as a party took place in 1990 and was made up of a multitude of tiny political groups, which considered themselves both republican and rightist. In a first phase, the party called itself a respectable party that operated with a right-wing, nationalist and anti-communist ideology[25].

Since the first days of its establishment, the party has started supporting a number of authoritarian and chauvinist elements. In particular, they were advocating the strengthening of the President's power and displaying your hostility to African or Vietnamese workers. In 1990, the party managed to get just over 1% of the seats for Parliament, but following the development of ultra-radical and ultra-nationalist elements, such as anti-elitist attitudes, racism directed toward the Roma population and chauvinism, it managed to reach about 6% of the vote in 1992. In addition to the above-listed attitudes, the party has also taken on a diverse mix of themes and problems, in order to increase its percentage of votes. For example, they said they would improve public services, increase social benefits, cut red tape and reduce state intervention in the economy. Amid these promises, in 1996 they managed to exceed their percentage since the previous elections and obtained popular support of 8%. 1996 was the party's best year because, since early elections in 1998 and so far, they have not managed to get any seats in Parliament[26]. In terms of support from citizens, the Republicans received a large part of the vote from male voters in 1996, when they received the most votes, with 67% of their voters being male. Young people have also played an important role in the relative success of the Republicans, with more than 35% coming from the 18-29 age group. As regards the social status, the majority of the SPR-RSC voters were less educated citizens from the lower middle class. About one in eight citizens who showed their support for the Republicans in the elections were workers, and two-thirds of voters had completed elementary education only[27].

VI. Populism in Slovakia

Over the past thirty years, a multitude of populist parties have emerged in Slovakia. Even if some of them failed to pass the threshold necessary to be able to participate in Parliament, and some of them were unable to pass the time test and dissolved relatively quickly, there were also important populist parties that had a serious impact on Slovak society. Moreover, there has been no rest in the last three decades where Slovakia has not experienced various manifestations of populist parties on its political scene, whether or not those parties were in government. In fact, we could say that in almost the entire post-communist period Slovakia was governed by populist parties, if we consider that the Smer-SD party is also populist[28].

For the present work, I will look at the size of populism in the case of the party's HZDS-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, led by Vladimir Meciar. I chose to look at the case of

the HZDS because during its six-year period (1992-1998), it showed the most prominent features of populism. The Meciar-led party managed to gather large votes not only through the use of populism, but also through the adoption of a nationalist vision. In an interview he gave before he became the head of the government, in addition to declaring himself a populist, Meciar gave a positive connotation to populism by saying that populism should not be regarded with a pejorative meaning because he can mediate the relationship with the people[29]. Since its formation, HZDS and Mecar have turned their political message to the 'people'. The people, in their sense, were a homogeneous segment of the population, based on ethnic criteria, and found themselves almost exclusively in Slovak citizens. As expected, the party relied from the beginning on populist rhetoric, and Meciar's statements at the time confirm this[30]. For example, Meciar said that the measures his party will design will always be for the people's interest, and that every member of his party will have to realize that it is only for the service of the people. Meciar has been trying in his first months of activity to get closer to his future voters by statements claiming he could be a serious and effective leader, but the most important thing that legitimized him as a leader was that he was identified as one of their own, of the slovaks[31].

For HZDS, the concept of people has been easier to use than the elite one. The problem in this situation was that Meciar and his party were the elite. However, Meciar has overcome this situation too because he managed to shape the elite in two ways: or foreigners outside Slovakia who wanted to turn the country into a vassal of foreign powers or international organizations, or the opposition within the Slovak state, built from deserters in HZDS, christian democrats, communists and ethnic Hungarians. Meciar, from '92 to '98, managed to win supporters and voters for his and his party's cause with a populist speech to the ordinary, poor citizens of Slovakia who were left out in the post-communist period, but also by adopting a position as the defender of the nation and its people, the slovak[32].

VII. Populism in Poland

The last case concerned is Poland and the PIS party (Prawo I Sprawiedliwoœæ). In the case of Poland, populism, through the PiS, has taken many forms. The most important one is the fight against the political and technocratic elite considered corrupt, and the PIS party's campaign in 2007 was built on two ideas: 1.on anti-corruption and 2.on de-communism. Thus, it is noted that in order to gain popular support, the SIP party has relied on a utopian vision that must be achieved with any purpose, such as the soviet one. More specifically, they considered that if the ultimate goal to be achieved is noble, the means used to achieve it no longer matter, because they are justified[33]. As for the fight against de-communism, the Kaczynski brothers amendment to the Polish lustration law, forcing the 700.000 people to declare whether they worked with the communist secret police, is famous. Although the amendment was in line with formal democratic procedures, in practice this amendment has turned into violation of the principles of democratic case-law and violated fundamental human rights[34]. In the same vein, in 2007, the Polish Constitutional Court said that some provisions of the amendments proposed by Kaczynski, the party leader, even violate the basic document of the Polish lustration law[35]. As regards the PIS anti-corruption campaign, it was based on an ultra-radical rhetoric, and especially on the theories of the conspiracy. For example, in order to find a scapegoat for internal corruption-related problems, Kaczynski and his party often used the expression 'uklad' in election campaigns, an expression that was a conspiracy formed by informal networks com-

prising politicians, former and current members of the security services, businessmen and criminals[v]. Basically, they promised the citizens that with their coming to power, this mafia system of 'uklad' would be removed, and as a result of it and from that moment on, Poland could hope for revitalization and economic growth and development.

The PIS party was founded in 2001 by the twin brothers Lech and Jaros³aw Kaczyñski, but 2005 was the year when its populist side began to be strong. Since 2005, the party has embraced a number of nationalist and ultra-conservative themes that it has frequently used in its campaigns to date. I mentioned the topic of anti-corruption and decommunism earlier, but in addition to that, PIS knew how to use narratives that are sensitive to the electorate. To a large extent, these narratives concerned the homogeneity of the Polish people, the need to build national identity on religious grounds, or the adoption of a highly critical attitude toward the political and economic elites of the post-communist period. The 2015 parliamentary elections best surprised the populist character of the PIS, with the electoral slogans being built around the words: Simple people, national identity, anti-establishment, anti-refugees, the importance of conservative values. If we were to sum up the populism of the SIP in one sentence, we can say about it is both anti-elitist attitudes combined with a nationalist ideology (connected, in turn, with Catholicism), but also cultural and political (ultra)conservative values[vi].

VIII. Can the mistrust of citizens in political institutions explain the success of populism in Central and Eastern Europe?

It is difficult to give an affirmative or negative answer to this question, given that trust in political institutions is equally dependent on social trust and political trust, and these two are difficult to measure because of the many variables they comprise. It is certain, however, that trust is one of the most important foundations on which a political system is built because it ensures its legitimacy and sustainability[vii]. We know how easily communist regimes collapsed in the late '80 years when their legitimacy was on the ground.

In this article, I passed succinctly through three states in the Central and Eastern Europe area, and for each of us I stopped looking at a representative populist party. Out of the three populist parties under consideration, two of them no longer exist on the political stage – the Czech SPR-RSC and the Slovak HZDS – and one of them – the PIS (Poland) – is an influential, large-scale party, which has governed the polish state from 2015 to now and a short period from 2005 to 2007.

From the statistical data available to us, in the states analyzed we see that mistrust in institutions is not a temporary phenomenon, but that has been going on for at least thirty years For example, from available data, the Czech Republic[36] and Slovakia[37] have always had low confidence rates in their institutions. In the years '90, when the first populist parties emerged in these two states, confidence in political institutions was extremely low[38], especially in the Czech case. There can be many causes, from the disappointment of the citizens in the new democratic political system that has not improved their living standards to the poor transition, to the take-over of power by the former communist elites. Poland does not differ significantly from the other two countries, even though in '90 confidence in political institutions was relatively higher[39]. But with the coming to power of the PiS in 2015, not only was confidence in institutions lower than in the years '90, but also overall trust in democracy has begun to decline among Polish citizens[40].

We have resorted to the summary of this data to understand the weight we face when we try to link confidence rates in institutions to the rise of populism. We cannot generalize and say that trust is the most important factor behind the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe, but it is not a factor that should be overlooked either. Because we have covered only a tiny part of the populist parties that have been active in those societies over the past thirty years and because the political institutions are numerous and we have not dealt with them separately, It is not yet possible to create an overview of a pattern by which predictions can be made about the generalities, behavior and the reason for the emergence and success of populist parties in the Central and Eastern Europe area. However, we can say that, to a certain extent, citizens' mistrust of political institutions manages to facilitate populists' access to politics, because by realizing that citizens have little confidence in and are disappointed with political institutions, populists can place anti-corruption, anti-establishment, anti-elites themes in their electoral campaigns with which they can secure greater electoral support.

Notes

[1] Populist manifestations exist, in fact, on all continents, but I will not go into more detail, because they are not subject to the present study.

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