## In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe


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# In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe

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In the last decade, many scholars have remarked on a re-emergence of populism within European politics. In Western Europe, the term is generally used to refer to modern or moderate types of so-called extreme right or radical-right parties. In Eastern Europe, however, populism is considered a more diffuse phenomenon, spreading throughout the ideological spectrum.[1] Like nationalism, populism has become a catchword for both the media and the scholarly community that deal, often only in passing, with the postcommunist East.

Has populism indeed returned to the center of East European politics? In search of a response, three different types of populism will be examined here (1) to assess *whether* populism is relevant at all in the postcommunist context; (2) to assess *which* type of populism is relevant; and (3) to assess the role of the "Leninist legacy,"[2] i.e., how is populism in contemporary Eastern Europe influenced by the legacy of the communist regimes?

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1. Various examples of these warnings can be found in the fascinating collection of classic texts by Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *The Revolutions of 1989* (London: Routledge, 1999). A lone dissenting voice is Charles H. Fairbanks, who writes: "The absence of *open* populist appeals is a distinctive feature of postcommunist antipolitics; at a time when open populism, after the Cold War, is rising in the West, it is declining in the postcommunist world (See id., "The Public Void: Antipolitics in the Former Soviet Union," in Andreas Schedler, ed., *The End of Politics? Explorations into Modern Antipolitics* [Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997], 91–114).
2. Ken Jowitt, *The New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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## The Concept of Populism

As has often been noted, populism is a highly contentious concept, having more enemies than friends within social science.[3] The fact is that populism is an often used concept in both social science and the public debate, seemingly denoting some specific form of politics. Leaving the normative discussion aside, much can be said about what the actual meaning is or should be. The most important question within populism studies is whether there is one overarching form of populism or whether there are (only) different types of populism.[4]

Three different types of populism are examined here. As the claims of a resurgence of populism in Eastern Europe have been made on the basis of a variety of often implicit definitions, a more flexible framework might in this instance clarify more than it obscures. It must be stressed that the three categories of populism are ideal types, overlapping in both theory and practice. Therefore, they should be seen merely as tools to provide better insight into a complex situation rather than as a conceptual answer to the question of how to define populism.

### AGRARIAN POPULISM

The origins of agrarian populism are found in two rather different movements from the end of the nineteenth century: the People's party, a political movement comprising mainly, though

3. See Alan Knight, "Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, especially Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (1998): 223–48; Paul Piccone and Gary Ulmen, "Populism and the New Politics," *Telos* 103 (1995): 3–8; Pierre-André Taguieff, "Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem," *Telos* 103 (1995): 9–43.
4. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction, 1981); Michael L. Conniff, "Introduction: Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism," in Michael L. Conniff, ed., *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 3–30; Werner W. Ernst, "Zu einer Theorie des Populismus," in Anton Pelinka, ed., *Populismus in Österreich* (Vienna: Junius, 1987), 10–25; Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism. Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); A. E. Van Niekerk, *Populisme en politieke ontwikkeling in Latijns Amerika* (Rotterdam: Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1972); Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: 'Populism,' in Latin American Studies" (paper presented at the 95th Annual Meeting of APSA, Atlanta, 2–5 September 1999).

not exclusively, farmers in the heartland of the United States,[5] and the *narodniki,* a cultural movement comprising mainly the urban intelligentsia in tsarist Russia.[6] What these movements shared was an anti-elitist ideology in which the peasant was considered the source of morality and agricultural life the foundation of society.[7] Vehemently opposed to the urban elites and the centralizing tendencies and materialist basis of capitalism, agrarian populists argued for the preservation of small family farms by founding cooperatives and strengthening the communities and for self-governance.[8] Though often misperceived as merely defensive or backward-looking, agrarian populism also had a clearly progressive side. For example, populists demanded radical economic reforms to save small farm agriculture as the backbone of the entire economic society and fought for the uplifting of the peasantry by increasing and improving schooling and health facilities in the countryside.[9]

## ECONOMIC POPULISM

Springing from Latin America in the 1920s, economic populism had a second upsurge in that region in the 1970s.[10] In the Latin American tradition, populism is described in terms of "a multiclass political movement, characterised by personalist, charismatic leadership, *ad hoc* reformist policies, and a repudiation of

5. See Richard Hofstadter, "North America," in Ionescu and Gellner, eds., *Populism,* 9–27; Clyde Wilson, "Up at the Fork of the Creek: In Search of American Populism," *Telos* 105 (1995): 77–88.
6. See Andrzej Walicki, "Russia," in Ionescu and Gellner, eds., *Populism,* 62–96.
7. Joseph Held, "Antecedents," in Joseph Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe. Racism, Nationalism, and Society* (Boulder, Colo: East European Monographs, 1996), 1–20; Donald MacRae, "Populism as an Ideology," in Ionescu and Gellner, eds., *Populism,* 153–65.
8. Piccone and Ulmen, "Populism and the New Politics."
9. Andras Bozóki, *An Outline of Three Populisms: The United States, Argentina and Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Political Science Department, 1994); Lawrence Goodwyn, "Rethinking 'Populism': Paradoxes of Historiography and Democracy," *Telos* 24 (1991): 37–56.
10. See for example, Michael L. Conniff, ed., *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Albuquerque University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Paul W. Drake, "Conclusion: Requium for Populism?" in Conniff, *Latin American Populism,* 217–45; Kurt Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 31 (1999): 379–401.

revolution."[11] This definition is only partly useful outside of that context, especially when applied to postcommunist Europe. For example, the "multiclass political movement" is the norm in an area that has been declassed by 40 to 70 years of communism. Also, the feature of "personalist, charismatic leadership" has little discriminatory value in postcommunist politics, particularly in the first decade, given the embryonic stage of party development and the general choice of party organization.[12]

Therefore, I define economic populism more broadly, focusing predominantly on the *economic* dimension. Trying to achieve a Third Way between capitalism and socialism, the core values of the economic populist program in Latin America (1920–1960) have been described as "growth" and "moderate redistribution," with its core program being "import-substitution industrialization."[13] More generally, a populist economic policy includes a pro-active role for the state, among others, in setting up protective tariffs, transferring income from the export to the domestic sector, redistributing wealth among the population, creating a supportive infrastructure, expanding consumption and welfare facilities, and coercing the social partners into cooperation.[14]

Economic populism, broadly defined, is a phenomenon not restricted to a recent past or a specific area. At the same time, it is more distinct than contemporary usage of the term suggests. As Torcuato Di Tella[15] notes, "in recent years [populism] has become almost a by-word to imply irresponsible economic policies." An example of this usage appears in a speech by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan,[16] who considers populism one of the three types of backlash against globalism—the other two being nationalism and illiberalism. According to Annan, economic populism, in the

11. Knight, "Populism and Neo-Populism," 237.
12. See Petr Kopecky, "Developing Party Organizations in East-Central Europe: What Type of Party Is Likely to Emerge?" *Party Politics* 1 (1995): 515–34.
13. F. H. Cardoso and E. Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); J. D. Writh, "Foreword," in Conniff, *Latin American Populism*, ix–xiii.
14. Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependency and Development;* Drake, "Conclusion"; Béla Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience. East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1998).
15. "Populism into the Twenty-First Century," *Government and Opposition* 32 (1997), 188.
16. "The Backlash Against Globalism," *Futurist* 33 (1998), 27.

form of a host of protectionist measures, is increasingly used by "embattled leaders" in a rhetorical sham fight with globalization.

## POLITICAL POPULISM

The more recent notion holds that populism is, first and foremost, a particular *style* of politics, referring to "the people" (*das Volk*) as a homogeneous entity, proclaiming a direct link between the people and the populist actor, and using a *Stammtisch*-discourse.[17] For good reasons—generality and vagueness—this definition has been attacked, making political populism virtually identical to basic political campaigning techniques.

To sharpen the distinction, I define political populism as a *political style that builds upon a rigid dichotomy of "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite."* What is important to note is that these categories are not defined strictly in formal terms, but rather in moral terms. That both categories are imagined is less relevant than the centrality, consistency, and rigidity of this dichotomy. Rather than being truly antipolitical,[18] populists have an ambivalent relationship with politics; on the one hand, they consider politics a dirty job, typical of the amoral elite, while on the other hand, they need politics to return the power to the people. In short, political populists are reluctantly political,[19] considering politics a necessary evil. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, they are among the staunchest believers in the primacy of (national) politics, rejecting any alleged limitations set by international pressure or economics. In terms of policies, they support forms of direct democracy, such as referendums. However, rather than presenting alternative policies, political populism exploits existing or newly created emotions and sentiments, most notably resentment and rancor.[20]

17. Armin Pfahl-Traughber, *Volkes Stimme? Rechtspopulismus in Europe* (Bonn: Dietz, 1994); see also Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 2–16; Ernst, "Theorie des Populismus."
18. Andreas Schedler, "Introduction: Antipolitics—Closing and Colonizing the Public Sphere," in Schedler, *The End of Politics?*, 1–20.
19. Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).
20. Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); Ernst, "Theorie des Populismus"; Vladimir Tismaneanu, "The Leninist Debris or Waiting for Perón," *East European Politics and Societies* 10 (1996): 504–35.

This type of "politicians' populism"[21] has been linked predominantly with the right wing, most notably in recent studies of the phenomenon in Western Europe.[22] And indeed, political populism's reference to the undivided people sits well with nationalists' belief in the nation; the two are often mixed in the dichotomy of the national people versus the anti-national elite, typical of national populism.[23] However, and as we shall see, non-nationalist and left-wing political actors have at times also excelled in political populism.

Though there are similarities between political, economic, and agrarian populism, there are some clear differences as well. First, "the people" are defined (or better, imagined) differently: agrarian populists focus *exclusively* on one group, the peasantry; economic populists use a broader definition, favoring the urban proletariat; while political populists include virtually all the people, with the notable exception of the elite. Consequently, contrary to agrarian populism, the economic and political forms of populism do not *exclusively* hail the agricultural economy. Indeed, their sympathy is little more than a call for state support for the agricultural sector (through subsidies and tariffs), which has at least as much a nationalist (e.g., national independence in food production) as a populist component. The same applies to the overlap between economic and political populism, which though substantial is not complete. Moreover, the protectionist policies of contemporary national populist parties have their origin in their nationalism, as the economy in general is considered of secondary importance, subordinate to the overriding goal of protecting the rights of the nation.[24]

These three variants sharpen the focus here whether populism is a relevant feature of post-communist politics in Eastern Europe. In that context, any analysis must weigh the importance of the Leninist legacy on the specific phenomenon of post-communist populism.

21. Canovan, *Populism.*
22. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism;* Pfahl-Traughber, *Volkes Stimme?;* Paul Taggart, "New Populist Parties in Western Europe," *West European Politics* 18 (1995): 34–51.
23. G. Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1978); Taguieff, "Political Science Confronts Populism."
24. Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2000).

## Agrarian Populism in Eastern Europe

Prior to the communist period, Eastern Europe was largely backward, rural, and at best marginally democratic. Agrarian populist movements were, thus, severely restricted in terms of mobilizing supporters and influencing politics. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the political situation in most East European countries improved somewhat as the feudal nobility increasingly permitted some form of democratic participation alongside their own still dominant power. Not surprisingly, "where the majority of the population were peasants, peasant parties came to power,"[25] and agrarian populism became the dominant ideology. While in some countries the populists' influence was mainly intellectual or cultural, for example in Hungary,[26] most East European populists developed action-oriented political movements.[27]

These movements, however, were very broad and diverse encompassing both intellectual and peasant leaders, right- and left-wing ideologies, pro- and anti-regime wings, and so on. What all agrarian populists had in common was

> the philosophic foundation . . . that the peasants were biologically and morally the healthiest stratum of society and that they were destined to create a society more balanced and more just than the existing system which was dominated by the urban bourgeoisie and a corrupt bureaucracy dependent upon its favors.[28]

In practice this meant the demand for an 'agrarianist' program, in which agriculture was seen as the foundation of the whole economic system, and small farms were to be rescued from fragmentation through the formation of rural co-operatives.[29] Just like their brethren in the United States, East European populists were strongly anticapitalist and antiliberal.[30] However, in addition to

25. Peter Worsley, "Populism," in Joel Krieger, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 731.
26. Bozóki, "Three Populisms"; Miklós Lackó, "Populism in Hungary: Yesterday and Today," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 107–28.
27. Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe;* Ghita Ionescú, "Eastern Europe," in Ionescu and Gellner, eds., *Populism,* 97–121.
28. M. K. Dziewanowski, "Polish Populism," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 171.
29. Ibid.; Ionescu, "Eastern Europe."
30. Peter Hanák, "The Anti-Capitalist Ideology of the Populists," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 145–61.

the usual critique of the antisocial and materialist features of capitalism, East European populists also criticized its alien roots. Capitalism was seen as a foreign element forcefully implanted in East European societies by antinational elites. In virtually all countries, the usual suspects were the Jews.[31] Like American populists, East Europeans considered the Jews the archetypal speculators, making money without actually producing anything.

Despite resistance from the bourgeois and noble elites, populist agrarian parties gained overwhelming electoral victories in the early twentieth century.[32] However, their governments were generally short-lived, falling prey to authoritarian coups d'état in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., in Bulgaria and Poland). The consequence was a split rather than a demise of the agrarian populist movement, with one part opposing the new rulers and one collaborating with them. This process repeated itself when the Communist parties took power after the Second World War. Though various populist leaders had originally believed in a sincere cooperation with the Communists, they were soon to be disappointed and more often than not landed in prison, charged with subversive activities. Once the Communists had taken full power in a country, peasant organizations were either forcefully integrated into the ruling Communist party (for example, in Bulgaria) or coopted as so-called bloc or satellite parties (as was the case in, for example, Czechoslovakia and Poland). These parties were more communist than populist or even agrarian, functioning as the Communists' "transmission belt to the masses."[33]

After the fall of communism, peasant parties reappeared in all East European countries. These included some historical parties, i.e., dating back to the precommunist period, some reformed bloc parties, as well as some completely new parties. With a few notable exceptions, agrarian parties have not been particularly successful in postcommunist elections. Moreover, the few successful parties have been non-populist, for example, the Polish Peasant party

31. György Csepeli, "In the Captivity of Narratives: The Political Socialization of Populist Writers in Hungary, and the Origin of National Narratives in Eastern Europe," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 129–44; Kurt W. Treptow, "Populism and Twentieth Century Romanian Politics," ibid., 197–218.
32. Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe;* Ionescu, "Eastern Europe."
33. Dziewanowski, "Polish Populism," 182.

(PSL). Among the few relevant populist agrarians have been two very different organizations, the Hungarian Independent Smallholders' party (FKgP) and the Polish Self-Defense.

The marginalization of agrarian populism in Eastern Europe is, as in the West, closely related to the process of industrialization and the consequent gradual disappearance of the peasantry in the region.[34] However, there is more to it. Unlike the West, where capitalism, through a process of the survival of the fittest, merely decreased the number of individual farms, in the East the communist process of collectivization was like a "tornado [that] swept the traditional family farm off the face of the earth."[35] The remaining collective farms (*kolkhoz*) had little to do with the old family farm, and peasants became rural workers with little personal relation to the land they farmed. This rural proletariat is nowadays more susceptible to the socialist ideal of a workers' paradise than to the populist ideal of the peasant society. Consequently, rural areas in many postcommunist countries form the backbone of (not so) reformed communist successor parties or of nonpopulist peasant parties which function as special interest groups rather than a support base of agrarian populist parties.[36] Not surprisingly, agrarian populism only survived in those postcommunist societies where collectivization was either successfully resisted by the rural population[37] or was moderated by "goulash socialism."[38]

## Economic Populism in Eastern Europe

As economic populism is a relatively modern phenomenon, dating to Latin America of the 1920s, it comes as no surprise that it did not play an important role in precommunist Eastern Europe.

34. Stephen Fischer-Galati, "Conclusions," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 245–47; Held, "Antecedents."
35. Václav Havel, "Anti-Political Politics," in John Keane, ed., *Civil Society and the State* (London: Verso, 1988), 385.
36. John D. Bell, "Populism and Pragmatism: The BANU in Bulgarian Politics," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 21–61; Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, "Reflections on the 'Revolutions' of 1989 and After," *East European Politics and Societies* 13 (1999): 303–12.
37. As was the case in Poland, see Dziewanowski, "Polish Populism."
38. As was the case in Hungary, see Peter Agócs and Sándor Agócs, "'The Change Was But An Unfulfilled Promise': Agriculture and the Rural Population in Post-Communist Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies* 8 (1994): 32–57.

Moreover, with economic policy at the core of the communist model, economic populism was one of many rejected alternatives to the official socialist economic policy in communist Eastern Europe. This said, communist policies entailed some important overlap with economic populist policies.[39]

With the fall of communism, many observers in the West warned about the emergence of economic populist politics in the East. Not surprisingly, neoliberal economists were at the fore, arguing to rapidly push through neoliberal policies so as not to give the populists any chance. Social scientists, too, warned against a populist threat, but did so in reaction to the increasingly unpopular neoliberal policies.[40] Only a few scholars actually focused on the populists themselves, noting a marginal role for economic populism in postcommunist politics. With the possible exception of Slovakia,[41] economic populism never found a foot hold in East-Central Europe. It remained by and large a rhetorical phenomenon (even in Slovakia), in economic terms closer to other (nonpopulist) political strands of postcommunist politics than to traditional Latin American populism.[42] In the post-Soviet space the situation has been largely similar, though often for entirely different reasons. Possibly one of the closest fits is Belarus, though this might also be because of the many similarities between communism and populism. Further afield, Central Asian countries seem more prone to populist leadership, although their usually rural economies hardly fit the Latin American model.

Béla Greskovits explains the surprising absence of "a populist episode" in postcommunist Eastern Europe through a comparison with Latin America of both the 1970s–1980s and the 1990s. The last period is particularly insightful for Eastern Europe today; while the economic crisis in Latin America led to violent protests and neopopulist leaders in the 1970s–1980s, a similar economic situation in the 1990s led to neither in both Latin America and East-

39. Drake, "Conclusion"; Greskovits, *Protest and Patience.*
40. Greskovits, *Protest and Patience.*
41. See John Carpenter, "Slovakia and the Triumph of Nationalist Populism," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30 (1997): 205–20.
42. Greskovits, *Protest and Patience.*

ern Europe.[43] He sees the explanation in the worldwide domination of neoliberal theory and practice in the 1990s, not least through the powerful Bretton Woods organizations, on the one hand, and a far less favorable socio-economic breeding ground in the East than in the South, on the other. He concludes that "[w]hile there has as yet been no convergence of political and economic factors favourable to populism, this may occur in the future."[44]

This is even more likely when one considers the importance of socio-economic *values* among the masses. Largely as a result of the Leninist legacy, a significant potential for economic populist measures exists at the mass level in contemporary Eastern Europe. Socialized under communism, which claimed to take care of the people from the cradle to the grave, East Europeans have become accustomed to the idea of a protective welfare state. Various surveys have shown far greater support for extensive state involvement in providing welfare in Eastern Europe than in the West.[45]

In addition, the main defense walls against economic populism are crumbling. Though still strong, the international consensus on neoliberalism has come under increasing criticism, both from the center and the periphery. In Eastern Europe itself, various political actors have openly doubted the former dogma, calling for a middle way. More radically, the introduction of market capitalism, and its specific development in the region, has given way to "social polarization."[46] Most notably in the lesser-developed parts of Eastern Europe, such as the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, this could create a situation similar to that in the heyday of Latin American populism, when "[g]roups disadvantaged and

43. Authors who argue the resurgence of neopopulism in Latin America in the 1990s, generally admit that these new populists differ significantly from their predecessors, associating neopopulism instead with free-market economics, a particular political style, or both. See, respectively, George Philip, "The New Populism, Presidentialism and Market-Oriented Reform in Spanish South America," *Government and Opposition*, 33 (1998): 81–97; Knight, "Populism and Neo-Populism"; Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism."
44. Greskovits, *Protest and Patience*, 100.
45. See for example, Fritz Plasser, Peter A. Ulram and Harald Waldrauch, *Democratic Consolidation in East-Central Europe* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998); Richard Rose and Christian Haerpfer, "New Democracies Barometer 4. A 10-Nations Survey" (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 1996; Studies in Public Policy no. 262).
46. Christopher Williams, "Problems of Transition and the Rise of the Radical Right," in Sabrina Ramet, ed., *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe Since 1989* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1999), 29–44.

alienated by modern urban, oligopolistic capitalism and foreign penetration looked to the state to restore the protection and cohesion of older communities."[47]

## Political Populism in Eastern Europe

Political populism has been considered particularly powerful in postcommunist Europe. As noted by western media and scholars, right-wing or national populist parties have had some striking electoral successes in postcommunist elections. One thinks of the 23 percent share of the vote that Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) gained in the 1993 Russian parliamentary election; the 18 percent of Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical party (SRS) in the 1996 Serbian election; or the 15 percent of Joachim Siegerist's Popular Movement for Latvia (TKL) in the 1995 Latvian election.[48]

What is most stunning, given the particular anxiety over national populism in Eastern Europe, is that in electoral terms, the situation is not so different in the West. For example, these electoral results have been matched by similar parties in Western Europe, such as Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom party (FPÖ) or Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance (AN) in Italy. Moreover, and contrary to many reports, as in the West, contemporary national populism is not a "ghost from the past," but a modern phenomenon. The successful parties, such as those mentioned above, are all new parties with their ideological and organizational origin in the postcommunist period. Actually, very few national populist parties with a precommunist or communist identity have posted any significant success in the polls.[49]

What *does* divide the two parts of Europe is how national populism is treated in the political environment. Contrary to the situation in most of Western Europe, where national, and to some extent all political populists are considered political pariahs, like-minded parties in Eastern Europe are often considered *koali-*

47. Drake, "Conclusion," 236–37.
48. See Cas Mudde, "Extreme Right Parties in Eastern Europe," *Patterns of Prejudice* 34 (2000): 5–27.
49. Ibid.

*tionsfähig*—for example, the Greater Romania party (PRM) and the Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR), the Slovak National Party (SNS), or Serbia's SRS. These parties profit from the fact that political populism, more broadly defined, plays an important role within the political mainstream.[50]

The Leninist legacy has made postcommunist societies particularly prone to political populism. On the one hand, it reinforced long-existing antipolitical sentiments on the mass level,[51] on the other hand it gave rise to an intellectual variant of populism. This also explains the most significant difference between the East and the West, i.e., not so much the alleged higher levels of electoral success of populist parties, but rather the success of political populism at the elite level. While politicians' populism is mainly the weapon of the outsider in Western Europe, in the East it is employed by leading intellectuals (such as György Konrád) and even presidents (such as Václav Havel and Lech Walesa).

Communist rule created a perfect social environment for mass support of political populism. As many authors have noted, "real existing socialism" created nihilist and atomized societies in which egalitarianism became mixed with deep social envy.[52] This, combined with the stained reputation of the institutions of the state and the party, which were, rightfully at the time, considered identical to the communist regime, created a deeply felt dichotomy between "the moral non-Communist people" versus "the corrupt Communist elite"—incidentally, very similar, if not identical, to the dichotomy between (moral) "civil society" versus the (corrupt) "state."[53]

What most authors do not mention, however, is that, in intel-

50. Klaus von Beyme, "Rechtsextremismus in Osteuropa," in Jürgen W. Falter, Hans-Gerd Jaschke, and Jürgen R. Winkler, eds., *Rechtsextremismus. Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1996), 423–42.
51. Jowitt, *The New World Disorder;* G. M. Tamás, "The Legacy of Dissent," *Uncaptive Minds* 7 (1994): 19–34.
52. Aurel Braun, "The Incomplete Revolutions: The Rise of Extremism in East-Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union," in Aurel Braun and Stephen Sheinberg, eds., *The Extreme Right: Freedom and Security at Risk* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 138–60; Tismaneanu, "The Leninist Debris"; Otto Ulc, "Populism, Racism, and Society in Czechoslovakia," in Held, ed., *Populism in Eastern Europe,* 63–106.
53. Piotr Sztompka, "Mistrusting Civility: Predicament of a Post-Communist Society," in Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed., *Real Civil Societies. Dilemmas of Institutionalization* (London: Sage, 1998), 191–210; Tamás, "Legacy of Dissent."

lectual terms, this dichotomy has been promoted by the discourse of some of the most famous dissidents. As the communist systems left little room for political opposition, the dissidents tried to voice their opposition while officially staying away from politics.[54] Against the all-encompassing politics of the Communist party, dissidents, most notably in East-Central Europe, developed the concepts of "antipolitics" and "anti-political politics."[55] Like other key concepts in the writings of the East European dissidents, such as "Central Europe" or "civil society," "antipolitics" was a rather vaguely defined term. While not directly a problem in the virtual reality in which the dissidents lived under communism, it became an immediate and clear problem in the postcommunist period. What could antipolitics add to democracy, given that it was defined as "the political activity of those who don't want to be politicians and who refuse to share in power"[56] or as "one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them?"[57]

However, the populist element of antipolitics is not so much in its voluntary separation from classic politics in terms of government or in its watchdog attitude over real politics. Rather, populism colors its claim of absolute righteousness towards politics, in which the people exert pressure "on the basis of their cultural and moral stature alone, not through any electoral legitimacy."[58] This position is understandable under communism, if only because electoral legitimacy was impossible to achieve for dissidents, but "moral antipolitics"[59] was never meant to apply solely to this period. As Konrád clearly stated:

> If the political opposition comes to power, antipolitics keeps at [sic] the same distance from, and shows the same independence of, the new government. It will do so even if the new government is made up of sympathetic individuals, friends perhaps; indeed, in such cases it will have the greatest need for independence and distance.[60]

54. Tamás, "Legacy of Dissent."
55. Respectively György Konrád, *Antipolitics* (London: Quartet Books, 1994), and Havel, "Anti-Political Politics."
56. Konrád, *Antipolitics,* 230.
57. Havel, "Anti-Political Politics," 397.
58. Konrád, *Antipolitics,* 231.
59. Schedler, "Introduction: Antipolitics."
60. Konrád, *Antipolitics.*

After the fall of communism, many dissidents originally became active in practical politics and tried to implement their dissident ideas, particularly in the transition years. Though differing on many issues, they generally shared several key populist features: a belief in "moral politics," a strong anti-elite rhetoric, and a deep hostility towards political parties. Virtually all anticommunist umbrella organizations that defeated the old Communist party in the founding elections defined themselves explicitly as "movements," not as parties. This argumentation was captured in the slogan of the Czech Civic Forum (OF): "Parties are for party members, Civic Forum is for everybody."[61]

Though most dissidents were pressured out of leading positions shortly after the founding elections, either by more skilled old-style politicians or by electoral defeat, their legacy of antipolitics increasingly gained ground. Ironically, while antipolitics had been known to only a small group of isolated dissidents under communism, it achieved large-scale popularity only under democracy. Moreover, captured by opportunists and antidemocrats, antipolitics was stripped of its admittedly naive, positive underpinnings and reduced to sharp, negative features. The struggle of the postcommunist, antipolitical actor is not so much *for* something, i.e., a private space free of political/state intervention, but exclusively *against.*

Postcommunist political populists fight against the power monopoly of the political class, arguing that the revolution has been stolen by former Communists and opportunists. Against the political class stand the people, who in the tradition of both political populism and antipolitics have a higher moral stature than the amoral politicians.[62] This suits the mood of East European societies, which have come to define themselves as a "victimized majority" and tend to "absolve [themselves] from the need for normal political intercourse and compromise."[63] Consequently, in line with both communist and anticommunist practice and morality,

61. Petr Kopecky, "The Limits of Whips and Watchdogs: Parliamentary Parties in the Czech Republic," in Knut Heidar and Ruud Koole, eds., *Behind Closed Doors: Parliamentary Party Groups in European Democracies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 177–94.
62. Greskovits, *Protest and Patience;* Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism."
63. Braun, "The Incomplete Revolutions," 150; Tismaneanu, "The Leninist Debris."

postcommunist politics is to a large extent a struggle of good against evil, of all or nothing, with no room for compromise.

Within this atmosphere of polarization and conspiracies, the rhetoric of the stolen revolution finds a fertile ground. Its populist variant is mostly represented by right-wing rather than left-wing populist parties. The reason is simple: in most cases the argument is that the revolution has been stolen by former Communists, which resonates with the traditional anticommunism of the right. A good example, among many, is that of the Czech Republicans (SPR-RSC) of Miroslav Sládek. Originally, the party had campaigned on a platform that included, among other points, a call for a very severe lustration law for former Communists. Later, the party broadened its "politics of antipolitics" by also targeting "imaginary communists."[64] This led to the absurd situation of Sládek, a former communist censor, accusing Havel, the former leading dissident, of being part of the "traitors of the velvet revolution."

Some Communist (successor) parties have also used the stolen revolution argument against the new elite. Having disposed of, or at least nuanced, their traditional elitist theory of a class struggle under a communist vanguard, these parties now defend the people against the elite. Obviously, this strategy is most successful in countries where former Communists are not particularly visible as such in postcommunist politics and in the economy. In the Czech Republic, for example, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) has made a stunning comeback with such a populist campaign. In other countries, former Communists are highly influential in postcommunist politics, yet no longer affiliate themselves with the Communist party. Good examples are Russia and Ukraine, where they have formed corrupt oligarchies under the heading of defenders of democracy and the free market. Marginalized by the (super)presidentialist system in these countries, parties like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) have also resorted to populism in an attempt to attract members.[65]

64. Vladimíra Dvoraková, "The Politics of Antipolitics? The Radical Right in the Czech Republic," in Lone Sorenson, ed., *Liberalism, Fascism and Social Democracy in Central Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, forthcoming).
65. A. James Gregor, "Fascism and the New Russian Nationalism," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31 (1998): 1–15; Syed Mohsin Hashim, "KPRF Ideology and Its

Communism has further facilitated populist success in Eastern Europe in its breakdown. Both economic and political crises demonstrate strong correlations with populism.[66] Moreover, as the democratization movement in many countries fought two struggles at the same time—i.e., one for freedom and against communism and one for national independence and against Soviet domination, the powerful combination of national populism surfaced in many countries. Though its nationalism has often been overstated, there is no doubt that the largest party in Slovak politics, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), is a populist party. Centered around its charismatic leader Vladimir Meciar, the "quintessential populist demagogue,"[67] HZDS has from the outset championed the interests of the Slovak people, first against "the Czech elite" and later against "the anti-Slovak elite."[68] This example also shows that populist politics in Eastern Europe is not purely an opposition phenomenon, as Meciar's HZDS has been the major governmental party in independent Slovakia.

Various studies have pointed to the positive relationship between presidentialism or semi-presidentialism and political populism.[69] This relationship is particularly evident when populism is defined first and foremost as "personalized politics." Various postcommunist presidents have indeed, at least at times, used political populism, claiming to defend the general interest of the people versus the special interests of the parties. Often-noted examples of such populist presidents are Lech Walesa in Poland, Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine, and Boris Yeltsin in Russia,[70] all functioning in a semi-presidential, presidential, or even super-presidential system. However, presidents in parliamentary systems have used political populism as well, including Václav Havel in the Czech Republic or Árpád Göncz in Hungary. In most cases,

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Implications for Democratization in Russia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 32 (1999): 77–89.

66. Ernst, "Theorie des Populismus"; Knight, "Populism and Neo-Populism."
67. Ulc, "Populism, Racism and Society."
68. Carpenter, "Triumph of Nationalist Populism"; Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics. Nation Versus State* (Boulder Colo.: Westview, 1998).
69. See, for example, Philip, "The New Populism"; Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism."
70. Von Beyme, "Rechtsextremismus in Osteuropa"; Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism."

it had less to do with the *type* of political system than with the *maturity* of the system. The first decade of post-communist politics was characterized in most countries by a struggle over and between political institutions.[71] In their struggle against parliaments and political parties, presidents often choose to present themselves as the defenders of the whole people versus the defenders of special interests.

However, as party systems increasingly resemble their western counterparts, particularly in East Central Europe, the phenomenon of populist politics is also changing. More leading intellectuals and mainstream party leaders are abandoning overt populist rhetoric, leaving it, like in the West, increasingly to the parties on the political fringe. According to Daniel Chirot,[72] the "forces of reaction" simply cannot find viable intellectual models in the West. This is highly debatable though, as for example, many national populist parties in Eastern Europe, including the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) and the Slovak SNS, are inspired by the ideas of the French National Front (FN).

Rather than a lack of ideological inspiration from the West, I believe a more down-to-earth political reason lies behind this recent conversion. As most East European countries are highly dependent on financial support from western-dominated organizations and consider membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to be their highest foreign policy goal, they have to abide not only by the West's economic but also by its political rules. Obviously, this only works when the institutions do not lower their standards and when EU membership is considered feasible in the short or medium term by local elites. In countries that will not make the first wave of EU candidates, most probably including Bulgaria and Romania, a populist backlash at both the mass and elite level is very likely.[73]

71. Petr Kopecky, *Parliaments in the Czech and Slovak Republics: Party Competition and Parliamentary Institutionalization* (London: Ashgate, 2001).
72. Daniel Chirot, "Why East Central Europe is Not Quite Ready for Perón, but May Be One Day," *East European Politics and Societies* 10 (1996): 536–540.
73. See also Stelian Tanase, "Changing Societies and Elite Transformation," *East European Politics and Societies* 13 (1999): 358–63.

## Conclusion

> If one is going to turn to the past at all to help explain present events in this part of the world, then surely the most relevant years are the most recent ones. It is the immediate past—the period since 1945—together with the way in which the communist era has been subsequently handled, that holds the key to an understanding of current developments.[74]

As is true in many other areas of study, invoking an age-old legacy to explain contemporary populism in Eastern Europe is not particularly useful. What several scholars still seem to underestimate is how profoundly communism has changed East European societies and, consequently, their politics. But that this Leninist legacy is not as straightforward as some other scholars assume can also be seen in this short survey of different forms of populism in the region.

*Agrarian populism* was the leading political ideology among the people in precommunist Eastern Europe. While the collaboration of leading figures of agrarian populism with both right-wing authoritarian and communist regimes harmed its positive image among the people, the communist policy of collectivization changed the people so deeply that hardly any breeding ground for agrarian populism now exists in postcommunist Eastern Europe. Today, farmers in the region are "rural workens" rather than "peasants," consequently supporting (former) Communist parties rather than populist peasant parties.

*Economic populism* was not very relevant in precommunist Eastern Europe, given the rural and backward character of most of the region. Communism changed this, not just through its radical industrialization policies, but also through its welfare provisions and egalitarian rhetoric. At the same time, the reasonably equal division of (a lack of) goods among the people (excluding the *nomenklatura*), as well as some other socio-economic features (e.g., the so-called grey economy), put up certain barriers to economic populism. But some of these barriers are already crumbling as the market is rapidly dividing the people into winners and losers, haves

74. Jonathan Sunley, "Post-Communism," *National Interest* 44 (1996): 3–16.

and have-nots, while it puts increasing strains on the old extensive welfare state system. This evolution, in combination with the strong support for equality and a strong welfare state at the mass level, is creating a fertile breeding ground for economic populism in postcommunist Europe.

*Political populism* is not new to the region, though it was not that prominent in precommunist times. As in the West, Eastern European populists of the 1920s–1930s generally fell prey to more specific ideologies, fascism and communism, which both used populism only to establish elitist regimes. Nevertheless, the communist period left an important legacy with regard to political populism in the form of the antipolitical politics of the dissident movement. This intellectualized form of popular resentment against the communist regime and its totalitarian politics only gained real notoriety in the *post*communist period. There, it blended perfectly with another Leninist legacy, the myth of the victimized majority, culminating in the rhetoric of the stolen revolution.

Despite the rather fertile breeding ground for both economic and political populism, both forms have been only moderately successful in postcommunist politics. The main reason can be found neither in historical legacy nor in the character of postcommunist politics, but to a large extent must be sought outside the geographic boundaries of Eastern Europe itself. The postcommunist triple transition is a formidable task, in constant need of the support of regional leaders, of regional masses, and of the international environment. Most notably, the economic transition can only succeed with extensive funds from western states and international financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In return for the financial support, East European governments have to follow a rather strict economic and fiscal policy that leaves little space for economic populism. A similar dynamic is at work in the political arena. Most East European governments pursue EU membership as the highest foreign policy goal, accepting severe limitations in their political actions and style.

This said, populism does play a role in contemporary East European politics, a more prominent one than in the West. The main problem in assessing its current role in more detail is twofold: first,

there is still a lack of clear-cut definitions that could be used in empirical research; second, there is a lack of empirical studies of populist praxis. For example, though Meciar's regime in Slovakia has almost unanimously been described as populist, the few studies available of the phenomenon of "Meciarism" use no clear conceptual or theoretical framework.[75] And this is typical of the approach to populism in general: populism is the static label that vaguely qualifies, and more often clearly disqualifies, a political actor. Yet, much could be gained if populism were approached as a dynamic political phenomenon that can reveal much about both its political and cultural milieu.

75. M. Steven Fish, "The End of Meciarism," *East European Constitutional Review 7* (1999): 47–55; Marián Leskó, *Meciar a meciarizmus* (Bratislava: VMV, 1996).