

Populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional trends in comparative perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the populist phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) by highlighting the key similarities and differences compared to Western Europe. Both regions are marked by the widespread presence of right-wing populist parties, which exist in nearly every European country. However, the two areas differ in two important respects. First, left-wing populism is virtually non-existent in CEE countries. Second, unlike Western Europe, CEE is a fertile ground for the success of valence populism, a distinct populist variety that has emerged in various countries of the region. This paper also sheds light on the controversial relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, as well as the underlying tension between populism and liberal democracy. By examining these topics, it provides insights to understand the populist phenomenon in CEE, and its broader implications for the European political landscape.

Keywords

Populism, Populist parties; Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

Since the fall of communism and the establishment of liberal democracy, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have witnessed significant electoral volatility and political instability. Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause (2020) accurately described this pattern as “enduring disruption”, which is characterized by the sudden collapse of seemingly established parties, the emergence of new parties and their equally rapid disappearance. This cycle of instability has contributed to a turbulent political landscape in the region. CEE has also registered the rise and fall of several populist parties that gained significant electoral support, entered national governments, and even became dominant players in the political arena in various countries, as exemplified by prominent cases in Bulgaria and Hungary.

This article provides a comparative overview of the essential ideological features of populist parties in CEE, contextualizing them within the broader European context. It aims to offer insights on populism in CEE, highlighting its key similarities and differences compared to Western Europe. By the means of this comparative exercise, it becomes evident that both the East and West of the Old Continent are characterized by the widespread presence of right-wing populist parties, which have achieved success in a majority of European countries. However, two important differences emerge.

First, left-wing populism is almost non-existent in contemporary CEE, with the exception of Slovenia. This sets CEE apart from Western Europe, where successful left-wing populist parties can be found in countries such as Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, and Spain. Second, CEE proves to be a fertile ground for the emergence of valence populism, a distinct form of populism that has gained traction in various countries within the region. This is different from Western Europe, where valence populism can be identified only in Italy.

By conducting a comparative analysis, this article provides valuable insights into the diverse characteristics and manifestations of the populist phenomenon in CEE, while placing it within a broader European perspective. It also explores the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, as well as the controversial interaction between populism and liberal democracy.

Defining populism

Populism is certainly one of the buzzwords of our times (Hunger and Paxton 2022). However, despite the multitude of perspectives found in the literature (for an over-

view, see Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.* 2017), the so-called “ideational approach” to the study of populism has become increasingly popular among scholars. As Cas Mudde (2017: 47) underlines “even though it is still far too early to speak of an emerging consensus, it is undoubtedly fair to say that the ideational approach to populism is the most broadly used in the field today”. According to this approach, populism is understood as a particular set of ideas characterized by a moral and Manichean conflict between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” that glorify the “general will of the people” (Mudde 2004: 543). The key point is that populism essentially refers to a moral struggle between the goodness of “the people”, on the one hand, and the evil nature of “the elites”, on the other. Most notably:

populism is moralistic rather than programmatic. Essential to the discourse of the populist is the normative distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’, not the empirical difference in behavior or attitudes. Populism presents a Manichean outlook in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it ‘corrupts’ the purity (Mudde 2004: 544).

Populism essentially refers to a moral understanding of politics and society, and is commonly attached to other additional ideological features (“thick” or “thin”) that are crucial for its capacity to convey political meaning to the voters (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). While populists always emphasize the moral and Manichean conflict between the people and the elite while exalting popular sovereignty, the specific meaning taken by these terms is shaped by its interaction with other, additional, ideological and/or programmatic elements. This is possible because of the “protean” nature (Stanley 2008: 100) of populism itself, which is only a “thin-centred”, incomplete, ideology (Mudde 2004). Consequently, from populism alone does not necessarily follow a pre-determined political agenda or program:

while populism should be conceived of as a specific set of ideas, it is distinct from classical ideologies such as fascism and liberalism because it has a limited programmatic scope[...] In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1669).

The ideational varieties of populism

The thin-centred nature of the populism explains its capacity to be “highly chameleonic” (Taggart 2004: 275). In the real world, populism never exists in isolation, and is always found in combination with other ideological and programmatic elements. Accordingly, populist actors are found across the political spectrum, and it is appropriate to speak of varieties of populism (e.g. Caiani and Graziano 2019; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Norris 2019). Although it is possible to identify more specific sub-types, it is sufficient to note that from an ideological or ideational point of view, contemporary European populist parties can be divided into three main groups: right-wing, left-wing and valence populism (Zulianello 2020; Zulianello and Larsen 2021; Zulianello and Larsen 2023). Each of these three groups displays the core “the people vs the elite” distinction at the heart of populism, but they do so in very different ways, according to the interaction between the “thin” ideological feature (populism itself) with other ideological and/or programmatic elements.

Following Norberto Bobbio (1996), the major distinction between right and left can be operated on the grounds of their different propensity towards egalitarianism. Right-wing populist parties are themselves a broad church, and are characterized by an exclusionary notion of “the people” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Inequality is seen as something natural, and is legitimized in either socio-economic or cultural terms, according to the specific interaction of populism with other ideologies, such as nationalism or neoliberalism. Within the broad group of right-wing populist parties is found the populist radical right sub-type, which blend nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). These parties are “the most successful new European party family since the end of the Second World War”, and the most-studied European party family as well (Mudde 2013: 4).

In comparison to right-wing populism, left populism is still relatively little-studied. This variety of populism is often analysed in its radical left manifestation (March 2011; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 2018), which presents an inclusionary understanding of the ‘pure people’ and combines it a critique of capitalism (March and Mudde 2005). As Luke March underlines (2011: 122): left-wing populism ‘emphasizes egalitarianism and inclusivity rather than the openly exclusivist anti-immigrant or anti-foreigner concerns of right-populism (i.e. its concern is the demos not the ethnos)’. Left-wing populists embrace some vague form of socialism and include in their understanding of the “pure people” the “socioeconomic underdog” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1670).

Finally, a third variety is represented by valence populism (Zulianello 2020; Zulianello and Larsen 2021; 2023), While left-wing and right-wing populism are, by

definition, positional in nature, valence populists are intrinsically “non-positional”. Most notably, valence populists are characterized by deliberate positional blurriness on key economic and cultural issues (Zulianello and Larsen 2023) because they lack a ‘thick’ ideology (e.g. nativism or socialism). Indeed, their ideological core is a ‘thin’ one, being constituted by populism itself. Hence, valence populists primarily engage in non-positional competition and focus on (valence) issues that are widely shared by voters, such as the fight against corruption, moral probity in politics and the call for democratic transparency and performance (Yanchenko and Zulianello 2023; see also Pytlas 2022).

Varieties of populist parties in CEE

The previous section has suggested that populist parties come in different shapes and forms. At this point, it is useful to assess the geographical diffusion of the different varieties of populism in Europe, especially by comparing CEE with Western Europe. Are there substantial differences between the two regions? This question can be tackled by using the dataset by Zulianello and Larsen (2021), which provides fine-grained information on the electoral results of populist parties in European elections (1979-2019).

By focusing on the results of the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections some very interesting patterns about the geographical distribution of the three main ideational varieties of populism can be identified. Table 1 shows that right-wing populism was, at that time, present in the vast majority of EU countries, with Croatia, Ireland, Latvia and Romania being the only exceptions. Right-wing populists also obtained two-digits results in seventeen countries out of twenty-eight, and managed to get at least one per cent of the votes in eight out of eleven countries in CEE. In the 2019 EP elections, Hungary emerged, by far, as the most fertile ground for right-wing populism in Europe, as this populist variety obtained a remarkable 62.2%. Such an outcome was due to the success of Fidesz (Hegedüs 2021), the party led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, which collected 52.6% of the votes, but also to the performance of the two smaller right-wing populists found in the country (Goldstein 2021), that is Jobbik (6.3%) and Our Homeland Movement (3.3%). While Italy takes the second position (49.5%) among the countries with the strongest performance of right-wing populists, especially because of the performance in that occasion of Salvini’s League (34.3%) (Albertazzi *et al.* 2021; Zulianello 2021), Poland is another country from CEE to get on the podium of right-wing populist success (49.1%), thanks to the result of Law and Justice (45.4%) and, to a lesser extent, Kukiz’15 (3.7%) – see, respectively, Gwiazda (2021) and Lipiński and Stępińska (2019).

Table 1 - Aggregate electoral performance of right-wing populist parties in the 2019 EP parliament election (decreasing order). CEE countries are shown in *italics*.

| Country | Vote share (in %) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Hungary</i> | 62.2 |
| Italy | 49.5 |
| <i>Poland</i> | 49.1 |
| Great Britain | 34.9 |
| <i>Slovenia</i> | 30.3 |
| France | 26.8 |
| Austria | 17.2 |
| Sweden | 15.3 |
| Netherlands | 14.5 |
| Belgium | 13.8 |
| Finland | 13.8 |
| <i>Bulgaria</i> | 13.5 |
| <i>Estonia</i> | 12.7 |
| Germany | 11.0 |
| Denmark | 10.8 |
| Luxembourg | 10.0 |
| <i>Czech Republic</i> | 10.0 |
| <i>Slovakia</i> | 7.3 |
| Greece | 6.2 |
| Spain | 6.2 |
| <i>Lithuania</i> | 2.7 |
| Portugal | 1.5 |

Source: own elaboration from Zulianello and Larsen (2021)

While right-wing populism is widespread in Europe, both West and East, table 2 shows that left-wing populists were found only in six EU member states. Among them, the top performer was Greece (28.4%) thanks to the combined result of three left-wing populist parties (see Tsatsanis *et al.* 2021): SYRIZA (23.8%), the European Realistic Disobedience Front (3.0%) and Course of Freedom (1.6%). Beyond the Greek case, left-

wing populist parties obtained more than 10% of the votes only in Ireland (11.7%) and Spain (10.1%), thanks to the Sinn Fein and Unidas Podemos, respectively (Stockemer and Amengay 2020). Table 2 also signals an important point: with the exclusion of Slovenia, left-wing populism was absent in CEE at the time of the 2019 EP elections. Indeed, the only instance of a left-wing populist party in the region was represented by the Slovenian The Left (6.4%), which “combines a strong ideological core of democratic socialism with a light populist appeal” (Toplišek 2019: 89). The very limited appeal of left-wing populism in CEE is confirmed by extending the perspective to cover the entire history of EP elections in the area (2004–2019). Indeed, if we exclude Slovenia, the only country in the region that had a relatively successful left-wing populist party was Poland, with Self-Defense (10.8% in 2004, for details, see Krok-Paszowska 2003).

Table 2 - Aggregate electoral performance of left-wing populist parties in the 2019 EP parliament election (decreasing order). CEE countries are shown in *italics*.

| Country | Vote share (in %) |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| Greece | 28.4 |
| Ireland | 11.7 |
| Spain | 10.1 |
| <i>Slovenia</i> | <i>6.4</i> |
| France | 6.3 |
| Germany | 5.5 |

Source: own elaboration from Zulianello and Larsen (2021)

While left-wing populism is virtually non-existent in CEE, table 3 suggests that the region represents a fertile ground for valence populism. Most notably, six out of the seven countries where valence populist parties took part in the 2019 EP elections are located in CEE: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The only contemporary exception to this geographical trend is represented by the Italian Five Star Movement (see Angelucci and Vittori 2021; Manucci and Amsler 2018; Mosca and Tronconi 2019), which was described as “the purest form of populism” (Tarchi, 2015: 338).

Within the CEE context, in the 2019 EP elections valence populists proved to be particularly successful in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. In the Bulgarian case, valence populist success was due to the performance of Citizens for European Development

of Bulgaria (GERB, 31.1%), which had been in power for more than a decade, between 2009 and 2021, and that of the small National Movement for Stability and Progress (1.1%, see Stoyanov and Ralchev 2021). Interestingly, GERB is a paradigmatic example of this populist variety as it “is not based on a specific ideology or political profile, even though it is a part of the European People’s Party (EPP) and defines itself as ‘centre-right’ and ‘Christian-democratic’ party” (Todorov 2018: 52). In the Czech Republic, valence populism was embodied by the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011, 21.2%), founded and led by Andrej Babiš. Most notably, especially during his period as Prime Minister “Andrej Babiš represent[ed] the ‘ordinary man’ who can get things done by running the state as an ‘efficient’ political firm, doing away with democratic deliberation, pluralism, and compromise” (Buščíková and Guasti 2019: 303). In line with defining features of valence populism, ANO 2011 focused on presenting itself as “a technocratic and competent party, successfully managing the state finances and acting to resolve people’s problems effectively” (Hloušek *et al.* 2020: 52). In this respect, it is important to underline that valence populists in CEE often relies on messages grounded on technocratic appeals to problem-solving (Havlík 2019). Finally, in the 2019 EP elections valence populism was successful in Slovenia too, thanks to the result of the now defunct List of Marjan Šarec (LMŠ, 15.4%). Marjan Šarec was Prime Minister between 2018 and 2020, and his party benefitted, in its initial phase, from a message focused on “the need to fundamentally revise the political game” (Krašovec and Deželan 2019: 317).

Table 3 - Aggregate electoral performance of valence populist parties in the 2019 EP parliament election (decreasing order). CEE countries are shown in *italics*.

| Country | Vote share (in %) |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Bulgaria</i> | 32.2 |
| Czech Republic | 21.2 |
| Italy | 17.1 |
| Slovenia | 15.4 |
| Croatia | 10.4 |
| Slovakia | 5.3 |
| Lithuania | 5.1 |

Source: own elaboration from Zulianello and Larsen (2021)

The tendency of CEE countries to present right-wing and valence populist parties but not left-wing ones is confirmed by adopting a longer-term perspective encompassing

the history of EP elections held in the region (Zulianello and Larsen 2021). In this respect, while right-wing populist parties managed to obtain at least one per cent of the votes in at least one EP election in all CEE countries (with the exception of Croatia), valence populists had been present in six CEE countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Finally, it is worth to spend a few words on a persisting misconception, namely that populist parties are Eurosceptic (almost) by definition even though the literature has stressed the importance of avoiding treating populism and Euroscepticism as synonyms (Rooduijn 2019). Following the conceptualization by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (2004), Euroscepticism can be used to refer to the parties that:

express the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration. This includes both 'hard Euroscepticism' (i.e., outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU) and 'soft Euroscepticism (i.e., contingent or qualified opposition to European integration) (Rooduijn 2019: 2, online appendix).

In this respect, it can be noticed that populist parties in CEE tend to be more Europhile than their counterparts in Western Europe. Using data from Matthijs Rooduijn *et al.* (2019) it can be seen that while 59.3% of populist parties in CEE are also Eurosceptic, the results are much different in the rest of Europe, where a remarkable 85.5% of populist parties embrace Euroscepticism. A possible explanation for this divergent pattern between the West and the East is the concentration of valence populist parties in the latter area which tend to favour non-positional competition, such as anti-corruption appeals, call for political transparency and competence, rather than positional competition, for example socio-cultural, economic and EU-related issues (Zulianello and Larsen 2023; see also Engler *et al.* 2019). Finally, it is worth adding that, similarly to Western Europe, various parties in CEE are Eurosceptic but not populist, such as the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in the Czech Republic (Kaniok Hloušek 2018) and the extreme right Kotleba in Slovakia (Kluknavská and Hruška 2019).

Concluding remarks

This article outlined the main features of populism in CEE, especially by comparing them with the other European countries. It suggested that in CEE the populist phenomenon primarily manifests itself in the form of right-wing and valence populism,

while a third variety, left-wing populism, is virtually non-existent in the area. At this point, it is useful to briefly discuss why the rise of populism remains a challenge to “real existing” democracies (cf. Schmitter 2011).

Populism is in tension with key elements of liberal democracies, particularly the legitimacy of intermediate institutions, the foundational value of pluralism, and the protection of minority rights (e.g. Bartha *et al.* 2019; Blokker 2019). This is due to the predominant emphasis placed by populism on the glorification of popular sovereignty and its hyper-majoritarian conception of democracy. As Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 17) underline, “after all, ‘the general will of the people’ cannot be limited by anything, not even constitutional protections, that is *vox populi, vox dei*”.

However, despite the intrinsic tension between the core ideational features of populist parties and that of liberal democracy, such actors are no longer just “new outsider-challenger parties, but also as institutionalized and integrated members of the political system” (Mudde 2016: 16). In fact, more than two-thirds of contemporary populist parties are integrated into their national party systems, and only one-third are still perceived as not coalitionable (Zulianello 2020). The pattern is even more pronounced if we focus on CEE countries, where 82.6% of populist parties took part in coalition governments and/or electoral coalitions with mainstream parties (*ibidem*). Populist integration in CEE is even more frequent and rapid than in Western Europe, primarily due to the emergence of new parties that experience tumultuous electoral performances shortly after their launch. In particular, these parties can become pivotal players in government formation during the very early phase of their lifespan. (see Bergman *et al.* 2020; Houghton and Kevin Deegan-Krause 2020).

While until a few decades ago populist parties, especially populist radical right ones, were at the margins of their national party systems, they are now increasingly accepted as coalition and/or government partners throughout Europe and have become “mainstream” in many European countries (Zulianello 2020; see also Moffitt 2022; Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018). In other words, the incorporation of such parties has enabled the extension of the area of government (see Ieraci 1992; see also Ieraci 2021), making possible the inclusion of actors that were previously considered as being unfit for coalitions. Nevertheless, differently from the past (e.g. Sartori 1976) the integration of antagonistic parties has not been accompanied by their throughout ideological reform: on the contrary, populist parties remain different from more traditional, established parties. Tjitske Akkerman (2016: 268; 277), explains that right-wing populist parties have often changed “their anti-establishment behaviour”, meaning that they have abandoned “their lone opposition and increasingly cooperate with other parties”; however, they usually do so while maintaining their radical positions and without “moderat[ing] their anti-establishment ideology”.

The integration of populist parties in fully-fledged liberal democracies is, by definition, ‘negative’ (Zulianello 2020), precisely because of the enduring tension between populist ideas and the values of liberal democracy. This is the predominant pattern found in Europe: however, precisely CEE suggests that populism can also undertake a different path of integration as shown by the Hungarian case. In 2018 Hungary took the “final step towards a (competitive) authoritarian regime” (Mudde 2018) following the abolition of independent judicial control over the government. Indeed, the illiberal values of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz, the dominant party in the country, are fully enshrined in the Hungarian political regime (Batory 2016; Kim 2021), despite being in open contradiction with the fundamental values of the European Union (Kelemen 2017). It is important to underline that the use of the adjective “positive” does not imply a judgment of value (just as it does not the concept of “negative integration”), but it simply refers to the mutually reinforcing and symbiotic relationship that can unfold between the ideas of the populist party itself, on the one hand, and the key values, and practices enshrined in the political regime, on the other. This what happened in Hungary, where Orbán’s Fidesz has altered “the sources of legitimation upon which the political regime itself is built” (Zulianello 2018: 660) transforming the system and shaping it to match an illiberal model. Certainly, Hungary is an extreme case in Europe, but it should remind us that liberal democracy cannot be taken for granted, not even in the very heart of the Old Continent.

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