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Populism and Its Democratic, Non-Democratic, and Anti-Democratic Potential

Abstract: The starting point of this paper is the acknowledgement that the DNA of populism is democratic. At the same time, it may bring undemocratic or even counter-democratic consequences when it questions and contests liberalism and pluralism. This paper maps the key arguments on the relations between populism and authoritarianism, and discusses the risk of democratic backsliding as a result of authoritarian populism gaining power. This topic is critically important and growing urgent with the rising wave of populism across the Western world. Due to its chameleonic nature, populism (as a "thin-centered" or "empty-hearted" ideology) manifests itself in various (re)incarnations and intertwines with nationalism, libertarianism, and also radical left-wing ideas or any other ideology from across the wide political spectrum.

First, the author reconstructs the historicity of populism as well as the most important ways of defining it. Second, he reflects on the major arguments about the consequences for democracy of populist politics. Finally, in conclusion, he discusses the threat of authoritarianism that populism brings to liberal democracy and democracy as such.

Keywords: populism, democracy, authoritarianism, illiberalism, anti-elitism.

Introduction

Populism has become an important political force in Europe and the Americas. Populist movements appear to be gaining momentum and populist politicians win elections or referendums by stressing the need to return power to the people from the corrupt elites. Such politicians propose the rejection of liberal institutions and democratic deliberation. They share an ideological core that consists of authoritarianism in combination with a specific form of nationalism (or nativism, an ideology that holds that non-native elements—persons, institutional solutions, norms, or ideas—are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous "people"[1]). And as they have been attracting more and more support, populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back at the very top of the agenda. This makes the question of populism of critical importance both for scholarly reflection and in real politics. As it has become a key feature of the contemporary political landscape, populism has also become one of the most contentious concepts in the social sciences (Rupnik 2007). Studying populism can provide important insights into the range of issues challenging contemporary

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[1] Nativism is by definition illiberal, but not always racist; it can be based on ethnicity, religion, etc. Nativism includes both racist and non-racist arguments, showing that the exclusion of groups can be made on cultural or religious grounds as well as ethnicity (Wills 2015).

societies: democracy and democratization, legitimacy and political representation, questions of leadership, relations between the majority and the minority, and many other issues, including the politics of international relations.

Negative assumptions about populism are grounded in positive normative assumptions about liberal democracy. Scholars who sympathize with consensual versions of democracy tend to be more critical towards populism, whereas those in favor of more majoritarian variants of a democratic regime display much more acceptance for populist politics. But a subjective approach to the object of research must not be an excuse for watering down scholarly conceptualizations and their analytical operationalizations.

The term populism is used as an epithet and such stigmatization reproduces its original sin since it reduces the complex reality to a demonological dichotomy. This is why it requires scholarly investigation: to help clarify and explain the phenomenon rather than simplistically evaluating and judging it. Otherwise populism as a concept suffers from semantic instrumentalization.

Populism on the ground (as a "thin-centered," or "empty-hearted" ideology) needs to be supplemented with additional values and beliefs. In doing so it cohabits with other more comprehensive ideologies, depending on the context. This is why populism's power (and danger at the same time) lies in its chameleonic nature, which adapts its outer appearance to the context and connects itself with other political ideas or ideologies. Consequently, it is difficult to find one political arena free from populist actors, tactics, or statements. We can identify agrarian populism, nationalistic populism, neoliberal populism, radical left-wing populism and so on.

A stroll through the literature allows us to identify the many ways of seeing populism: as ideology, as a movement, as a specific political culture, as a moralistic conception of politics, as a socio-technique, as a syndrome, as logic, as demagoguery, as electioneering, as a style, as a post-fascist contestation of democracy (maybe neo-fascist), as a symbol, symptom or pathology of democracy, as a kind of political expression, as a mode of persuasion, as a mode of political practice, or as discourse (Hayward 1996; Mudde 2001; Rupnik 2007; Pelinka 2010; Nicholson 2012; Shields 2012). It seems as if all politics is populist, but such a conceptual confusion requires reconstructing and mapping this category, which is the subject of the section below.

So What is Populism in the End?

In the last decades, studies about populist policies and politicians mushroomed both in quality and quantity (Laclau 1977; Hayward 1996; Mudde 2001; Rosanvallon 2006; Tilly 2008; Stavrakakis 2014; Taggart, Kaltwasser 2016). Despite a rich interdisciplinary discourse, students of populism still disagree not only about how to explain it, but more fundamentally, about what it is. We seem to be witnessing a conceptual cacophony. The existing literature on populism has been plagued by conceptual confusion, deficiency, and disagreement. Populism remains notoriously difficult to define and the word may be used to refer to ideologies, movements, political tactics or experience, styles, frames, and many other things. Few terms have been defined with less precision. Few categories have relied

more on intuition rather than solid scholarly conceptualizations. The utility of populism is precisely in its embrace of a range of diverse and sometimes contradictory political beliefs.

The most common ways of understanding populism contain its minimum components: "the good people" that are endangered by "the evil others." Such an alignment runs across established party lines. This definition of populism correlates with the general everyday usage of this word whenever—usually for journalistic purposes—we refer to a person, party, action, or decision that makes claims by appealing to ordinary (non-elite) people. In public discourse it is often used as a pejorative epithet implying that the accused is corrupt, cynical, opportunistic, or even undemocratic. The term lacks the necessary precision for scholarly inquiry and does not allow the features of this flexible method of animating politics to be grasped.

The etymology of the term goes back to Ancient Rome where the *populares* were the politicians looking for public support. The early uses of the term "populism" were to describe nineteenth-century European (predominantly Russian and French) and American phenomena. These movements were connected with a desire for a more egalitarian role for the masses in the context of elitist politics (in Tsarist, Napoleonic, or even early American versions). However, the more liberal democracy was established, the more populism evolved towards more and more regressive positions.

One of the first analytical works on populism appeared in 1929 in *The American Economic Review*, where John D. Black published an article on "The McNary-Haugen Movement." He discussed the political and economic aspects of the relations between the agricultural sector and commerce and industry. This field of analysis correlates very well with the populist ideology of the agrarian revolt in the USA in the 1890s and the accompanying concept of two nations: the nation of the producers (the exploited) and the nation of the well-to-do elites (Black 1928). This distinction gave birth to the political cleavage present in populist politics: that is, the confrontational relation between the authentic people and the parasitical elite.

Populism cannot be fully understood outside of the historical continuum. The current form of populism is an outcome of a specific historical process. It emerged as a form of authoritarian democracy, which could accommodate the sentiment for a totalitarian version of politics with the post-war hegemony of democratic representation. Framing populism historically helps us understand why its return to Europe actualizes this continent's past xenophobic and anti-democratic characteristics. Modern populists are surprisingly open to its pre-democratic foundations. At best they are ambivalent about democracy; at worst they want to destroy it (Finchelstein 2014).

In the general understanding, populism is a set of ideas or an argumentation that is catchy and attractive based on emotional and irrational grounds, the longing for simple solutions to complicated problems, and a direct connection to the will of the majority. It very often manifests itself in a simplistic, equalizing democracy where the will of the majority is unlimited (the "tyranny of the majority" thesis). Populists claim that the majority is— by democratic logic—"right" and must be respected. Such idealization and romanticizing leads to political claims that the only source of moral truth is "the people." However, such claims ignore the fact that when populism appears—usually in rapidly modernizing soci-

eties—it represents a revolt by reactionary, backwards groups. A populist politician gladly uses society's mood of discontent and claims to be the spokesman of the unsatisfied. However, as Lawrence Goodwyn states in his influential work, *The Populist Moment*, populism was never simply protest politics. At its origins, it was a struggle on behalf of popular government, especially when democracy appeared threatened by corporate gigantism and an increasingly powerful, alien state (from the very beginning, populism focused on matters of vital importance for political economy) (Goodwyn 1978).

The core components of populism are highly flexible: the definitions of the people, the imagined "others," and the general, unified will. This triangle may take various shapes depending on the context. It also affects many important questions of democratic theory: the relation between the authorities and the governed; legitimacy and representation; and many connected issues involving modes of decision-making, redistribution mechanisms, relations with the international community, and so on.

For Jansen (2011: 82) a political project is populist when it is a sustained, large-scale project that mobilizes ordinary, marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalistic message that valorizes ordinary people. It is therefore difficult to imagine democratic politics without populism. The dominance of a predominantly anti-populist logic—consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally—may reduce politics to an administrative enterprise with over-proportionate input from colleges of experts and technocrats (depoliticized democracy or post-democracy) (Stavrakakis 2014).

Some scholars claim that populism is best seen as a strategy in which government power is exercised based on direct, unmediated, and very often non-institutionalized support from a large number of mostly unorganized followers (Weyland 2001). Populism as a political strategy employs rhetoric that appeals to the emotions, and is very often used cynically and opportunistically (Bourdieu 1991). As such, populism is relatively close to demagoguery, which tends to promise (or overpromise) people whatever they want to hear. For Jan-Werner Mueller, populism is a particular moralistic imagining of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that places a morally pure and fully unified people in opposition to small minorities—elites in particular (who are located outside of the authentic people) (Mueller 2015: 83). The populists claim that only they can properly represent the real people (the real people extracted from the people). The moralist component of this definition is highly dependent on distinguishing the moral from the immoral. And the criterion for the distinction is often manipulated by populist politicians. Given a passive political culture in which very few citizens take an active role in politics, the extracted "people" may sum up to an actual minority—a well-organized minority. Populist politicians, acting in the name of the people, may in fact oppress the majority under the moralizing flag of radical democracy.

The most recognized and cited contemporary researcher of populism, Cas Mudde, defines it as a "thin-centered"[2] ideology that focuses on the antagonism between people and

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[2] It is "thin" due to the fact that its particular ideas are of limited scope, complexity, and ambition; it is not a complete ideology in contrast to full ideologies such as nationalism, socialism or liberalism. Michael Freeden explains that a thin-centered ideology arbitrarily serves itself from wider ideational contexts; it flexibly removes or replaces some concepts. It lacks internal integrity and coherence (Freeden 1998).

elites against the backdrop of popular sovereignty. Such a conceptualization has become the dominant position in the literature. It considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde 2004: 543) and politics is supposed to be an expression of the general will of "the pure people." This places populism in opposition to elitism and pluralism. In populist politics there are less spaces left for minorities and they are often presented as traitors to the real will of the nation or even as marionettes of foreign powers. The idea of the general will of the people resembles Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts on a specific form of democracy which has at its core a conviction or assumption about the existence of a homogeneous demos—a mythical and equally utopian nation. In the populist understanding, democracy means the power of the people and only the power of the people, without any other nuances.

There are, however, rising concerns about assigning populism's genus to ideology. The controversy on populism as an ideology stems from the fact that it falls short of the status of a clear ideology. As a concept, it has undergone a dynamic evolution, having been variously associated with fiscal irresponsibility (there is no uncontested clear line between responsibility and irresponsibility), neo-liberal extremism, and xenophobic stances. It lacks a stable program (it is an "empty-hearted" ideology). As a result there is little agreement on how to conceptualize populism. The category has been so widely used that it has lost part of its analytical value and explanatory potential.

Undoubtedly Mudde's works have had a significant impact in advancing the scholarly analysis of populist politics. However, there is growing scepticism about claims that the ideological connotations of populism are ill-centered or misclassifications. Instead, proponents of frame theory contend that frame analysis reveals a strong fit between populism's discursive elements and cognitive features. Therefore, the term "discourse" is believed to be better suit the conceptual genus of populism. And populism itself is defined from this perspective as a discourse, invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding "the People" of their rightful political authority (anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign people) (Aslanidis 2016). This approach considers populism as an "anti-status-quo" discourse by symbolically dividing society into "the people" and "the other" (Moffit and Tormey 2014), validating the "them-and-us" mentality. When populists claim to speak in the name of the people, they attempt to bring "the people" into being and it gives them unlimited freedom to manipulate who "the people" are and what characteristics they have. The same with "the other"—its creation, features, and performance are highly subjective and can easily be adapted to the current needs of populist politics. The relation between the imagined "people" (the nation, the poor, the natives, the "let down," the "badly governed," the "left alone," etc.) and the imagined "other" (migrants, refugees, traitors, experts, the establishment, technocrats, the system, etc.) reveal major components of the specific populist perspective.

Over the course of history populism has appeared in a variety of political parties and movements on both the left (*Peronism*) and the right (*Chiracquism*). Regardless of political positioning, the historical perspective makes it possible to identify some central features of populism: the core of the populist message is the rhetoric that sets up its solidary (usually national) "people" as if existing in antagonistic relationship to some kind of anti-popular

"elite," often identified as an economic or political oligarchy (Sommer 1982). Typically the elite is portrayed as having disproportionate and unjustified control over conditions affecting the rights, well-being, and progress of the "people" (Jansen 2011). It is usually an extremely sacralizing understanding of the political sphere; it is a political theology that considers "the people" to be those who follow a unique vertical leadership. Populists identify themselves with the very heartland of the imagined political community they want to serve, and this identification intertwines with the idea of political antagonists as enemies who are potentially traitors to the nation. Populism is characterized by an understanding of the leader as the charismatic embodiment of the voice and desires of the nation as a whole. A strong executive and the discursive (often also practical) dismissal of the legislative and judicial branches of authority is another feature of the populist concept of the world. This feature often goes hand in hand with radical nationalism and an emphasis on popular culture—as opposed to other forms of culture that do not represent a "national thought"—and this resonates very well with the anti-elitist rhetoric of populists (Auer 2010). Populists prize vertical forms of democracy (while rejecting dictatorial forms of government in practice) (Finchelstein 2014: 468). Populists almost always offer a dichotomous vision of society and socio-economic relations. They usually use a tabloid style of communication—simplified, emotional, and distrustful of others. Growing populism is usually a reaction to a crisis of the political system, a salient social change, or a serious challenge that is expected.

Various disciplines suggest various explanations of the determinants of radical populism. Socio-psychological factors include authoritarian personality traits and value orientations which are, in turn, associated with social disintegration coexistent with radical change (such as a period of transformation, a crisis, etc.). This way of thinking correlates with modernization theory, in which it is suggested that rapid socio-economic change (post-communism, post-industrialization, risk-society, etc.) makes individuals and groups aggressive and hostile. Rational-choice logic points to the mechanism of scapegoating and group-interest conflicts, suggesting that prejudice, discrimination, and sometimes outright conflict are the natural results of competition over limited resources. Identity studies focus on the perceived threats to the nation and its culture from migrants. Socio-structural models explain support for the populist far right by the aggregate level of immigration in a given country or locality (its height and the increasing trend), economic conditions (unemployment, wage levels) and the level of support for the political system (political discontent). Last but not least, it is the media that plays a decisive role in formulating people's—especially young people's—attitudes toward migrants and migration. Young people's support for nationalist and far-right ideologies consists of negative attitudes towards minorities, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, and exclusionism in relation to migrants. Ethnic nationalism, financial problems, and economic insecurity (perceived competition and pressure on socio-economic resources) are among the most important factors behind the relatively high prevalence of anti-migrant sentiments. Additionally, scholarly research has shown that low interest and poor understanding of politics, together with high exposure to the media (which, instead of educating and dispelling prejudice, further worsens attitudes towards minorities and migrants), go hand in hand with accepting a far-right, populist message (Mierina, Koroleva 2015).

The Threats to Democracy from Populism

For some scholars populism constitutes a democratizing response to a widespread crisis of representation (Laclau 1977). However, it must be acknowledged that authoritarian populism represents undemocratic limitations to democracy as such or at least its liberal version (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2012). Populism happens to make democracy less pluralistic in political rights and more inclusive in the realm of social rights. Populist democracy tends to be more nationalistic and less cosmopolitan. Populism, with its totalizing view of society, is also in conflict with democracy. In more contemporary reincarnations it is a fusion of nationalism (with its notion of the unified people) and authoritarianism (with its lack of tolerance for any alternative discourses). This is quite paradoxical, when it is considered that the core of populism is democratic (but not liberal). Such a historical approach makes it possible to see even fascism as emergent from democracy (in spite of questioning it in the end). At the same time, neglecting the diverse historical meanings of populism often leads to the broadest definitions, in which populism is understood as a movement or ideology defending popular sovereignty and opposing the people to the elites.

For Margaret Canovan (2005), populism is a legitimate member of the democratic club, but Pierre Rosanvallon (2006) regards it as a perversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy. For Rosanvallon populism is counter-democratic as it degrades democracy in a pathological way. He proposes a definition of populism as a form of political expression in which the democratic project allows itself to be absorbed and fully vampired by counter-democracy. Such a definition correlates very well with the framing ideas of analysis on populism. It is attentive to populisms' symbolic dimension, its imagination, and projections (Canovan 2005, Rossanvallon 2006).

Populism is an undemocratic response to the undemocratic tendencies of technocracy and globalization, and the distrust generated by the permissive-consensus type of politics so much present in post-war Europe. It is also a response to, and symptom and consequence of, the lack of true citizens' participation. It is important to remember that populism is not a simple external response to elites (or the establishment) but rather a criticism and contestation of democracy from within. Populists often claim that this criticism is a radicalization of democracy by returning power to the people. The core component of populism rests with the claim to represent or act in the name of the people, understood as the "common people" or the "silent majority." When minority rights are in conflict with majority rights, populism leads to coercion aimed at oppressing the values and interests of the minority.

This characteristic makes populism illiberal and anti-pluralist. The most spectacular case of a democracy that failed under the weight of illiberalism was the Weimer Republic (Kubik 2012). Illiberalism is understood as a political option that is based on populism, (organizational) anti-pluralism, and ideological monism. Anti-pluralism is a set of strategies that aim at the elimination (or de-legitimation, the denial of legitimacy) of all potential and actual competitors in a given political field. Ideological monism attempts to impose a single ideology on the society, or at least to promote the only "proper" ideology, and discriminates against all ideological competitors, especially those sympathizing with the principles of plurality and tolerance, since they are problematic or even threatening to the "cultural substance" of the "heartland people." Theories predict that the appeal of illiberal-

ism increases with the worsening of the economy and declines when the economy improves (Kubik 2012; Mahoney 2001).

Populism is not just anti-elitist, it is anti-pluralist—and herein lies its profoundly undemocratic character (Mueller 2015). Populist actors promise protection against the insecurities of pluralism. The "united people" rhetoric offers some kind of harmony of interest. It goes hand in hand with the overestimation, idealization, and romanticizing of one's own nation and is accompanied with stereotyping and stigmatizing "enemies of the nation"—other nations, international organizations, capitalists, or minorities. Populist politicians exploit persistent patterns of prejudice. The regular problems of everyday life are supposedly related to the presence of foreigners or minorities or other forms of aliens. This results in questioning universal norms and amplifying authoritarian tendencies at the cost of democratic pluralism. The authoritarian personality studies of Fromm, Adorno, and their followers teach us that nationalism strongly correlates with ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, militarism, and authoritarianism. This can be explained by the populist assumption about the homogeneous people, the heartland. Intolerant, anti-pluralist visions of democracy reveal the authoritarian syndrome of populism. Xenophobia and anti-Semitism have reappeared, resembling ghosts from the past. The nationalist-authoritarian orientation is becoming dominant over cosmopolitan liberalism (Weiss 2003). Populism is a biting critique of the limitations of democracy; it rejects all barriers on the expression of the majoritarian will, most notably the independence of key institutions (the guardians of democracy).

Populism seeks to build a political system devoid of the rule of law and therefore is a pernicious phenomenon. It is itself chauvinistic and fundamentalist, and aims at dismantling checks and balances (as being the work of non-representative, unelected bodies). Populists do not respect the fragile equilibrium between non-majoritarian institutions and the power of the people. If necessary they will question the constitutional order (explicitly or implicitly), and challenge international treaties and obligations by various forms of mobilization or pseudo-representation (e.g., a plebiscite) (Kaltwasser 2014). Populist actors make politics more polarizing. By perceiving representative politics as corrupt and divorced from ordinary people, they spread the vision of an exclusivist nation (Jasiewicz 2008). Anti-democratic authoritarianism may be to a large extent explained on the basis of the latent insecurity developing as a result of the democratic rules of institutionalized conflict, the struggle of interest groups, and power shifts (Keane 1994; Weiss 2003). The transformation from non-democracy to democracy is a particularly fragile period in which the enthusiasm for democracy-building may rapidly evaporate in the face of social and economic unrest. Populist, nationalistic, and authoritarian attitudes can be interpreted as an emotional reaction to the "shock of modernization."

Populism grows very fast on the fertile ground of political discontent. At the same time populists, once strong, fuel such discontent (Rooduijn, van der Brug, de Lange 2016). Populism is thus both the source and the consequence of political discontent. This mechanism creates a vicious circle. The rise in populism may be explained by the reaction to the previous apolitical or non-ideological politics. Technocratic, expertise-driven decision-taking, deliberation, and a consensual political culture—all these have been associated with a high quality of democracy. Any country emerging from a non-democratic regime undergoes

a process of transition and transformation aimed at consolidating the above-mentioned attributes in its democratic system. Populist politics challenge this aspiration.

Conclusion

Populism, both as a political practice and as an object of scholarly investigation, raises important and challenging questions about its relation to democracy and democratic qualities. Some observers, especially those with liberal views, are increasingly worried about illiberal forces—those questioning liberal democracy—gaining power (Aslanidis 2016). They sometimes equate populism with xenophobia or plain nationalism (although it should be remembered that populism is not always nationalist). However, there is one feature that is integral to both populist politics and ethno-centric nationalism: it is the assumption that the "essential people" constitute a monolithic unit that has an authentic and homogeneous will of its own (Hechter 2000). On the other hand, there are observers who are concerned with the rise of what they see as "liberal technocracy" (or outright oligarchy). In these two opposing camps, populism can be seen as dangerous for democracy, its corrective mechanism, or indeed its essence. All these views cannot be right, or else we need to distinguish between good and bad populism (Mueller 2015). Such judgments, though, carry some serious risks of arbitrariness. Qualifying a politician, party, or statement as "bad populist" or "good populist" requires an ideological point of reference, which is questionable in itself.

It is noteworthy that in the first conceptions of populism as an ideology, populism was already portrayed as a threat to the rule of law and democracy (Allcock 1971). Populism is accused of corroding democratic institutions and above all the democratic spirit—the belief in democracy. It is supposed to undermine the system of checks and balances (such as the constitutional court) and thus to pave the way for some form of authoritarianism. On the other hand, supporters of populism as a progressive notion can also be found in the political arena—they will more often use the word "popular" instead of "populist" when describing themselves (popular democracy, popular sovereignty, etc.). For Laclau, populism is the ultimate agent of democratization. By returning to populism's roots among agrarian populists, this school of thought defines populism as a structural element of systemic calls for equality and against domination—it leads to political emancipation (Laclau 1977). The benefit of populist politics is that it gives voice to the excluded or marginalized sections of society as well as putting issues on the agenda that have normally been ignored by the political establishment.

Populism can be both corrective as well as devastating for democracy (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2012). Maybe it is democratically productive in the early stages of democratization when political emancipation is at stake, but it shows its destructive potential in the phases where democracy is being consolidated and improved. Less and less populism is required for the enhancement of a mature democracy. This distinction makes the de-demonization of populism as such possible. It can be treated as an unavoidable element of democracy that contains the very essence of this form of government, while being at the same time poisonous in large quantities or at the more advanced stages of the demo-

cratic process. For populists, though, the political sphere is not an open space for the contest of conflicting ideas and interests, which seems to be the core of the democratic vision.

There is also the hopeful idea that populism has self-limiting features. Accordingly, populism is extremely effective when it comes to protest politics or to mobilizing against some entity or idea (the elites, an enemy, contested values, etc.), whereas it usually scales down when its leaders gain office (Taggart 2004). However, such a claim is doubtful in relation to authoritarian populism. As is observable in many locations around the democratic world, once in office populists consolidate their position by further questioning the norms and institutions of liberal democracy. It is considerably more difficult to construct an anti-elitist narrative when the populist politician becomes part (or core) of the establishment. Nevertheless, populists manage to focus the public attention on discrediting the existing order (leaders, the party system, values, etc.) while not promoting an alternative one (Riedel 2010). Populism does not offer clear ideas about popular sovereignty, legitimacy, or leadership. It is in essence a protest ideology focused on questioning and contesting and lacks constructive and stable ideas. It feeds on the deficits of democratic practice (rather than ideas). It is received wisdom that representative democracy in Europe is in crisis. This is obvious in the rise in abstentionism, the drop in party identifications, the increase in the number of floating voters, and the growing lack of trust in the political elite and politics as such (Charlot 1996). Lack of interest and participation, which can develop respectively into apathy or increasing extremism, do not seem to be complementary. Some of the phenomena that are now regarded as threats to democracy were once perceived as necessary to the preservation of democratic stability. Using the example of the Weimer Republic, it can be argued that a high level of political participation may overload the democratic system with highly politicized and polarizing controversies (Andeweg 1996: 145).

Already half a century ago Hans-Dieter Klingeman (1967) claimed that we should not treat populism as a sickness of democracy but as a regular pathology of the Western type of democracy. Such a statement obviously stems from the acknowledgement that populism is both a democratic norm and at the same time it may be a syndrome of democracy's dysfunction. There is no question but that populism challenges democracy while at the same time being its constitutive element. Or the other way around: it could be said that democracy is a system that is naturally exposed to the threat of populism. Therefore, populism is unavoidable (Crick 2005) in the democratic process. For a long time, populism has been part of the political mainstream. Politicians can no longer afford not to use populist rhetoric. Moreover, it is the citizens who have been accepting a more and more populist discourse. In the end, political scientists have become more tolerant towards populism in their critical analyses. Consequently, the mainstreaming of populism is observable in political as well as academic discourse. It coexists (and correlates) with the crisis of liberal thinking in both domains. Its anti-elitist and anti-pluralist character is hardly imaginable as a corrective for democracy, especially in its liberal version. Consequently, populism should be seen as a two-edged sword—it may be refreshing for democracy in some circumstances but in other contexts it may be undemocratic in essence. When populism adopts authoritarian traits, it easily leads to counter-democratic outcomes.

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