



Ivan Krastev

The populist moment

Unlike the extremist parties of the 1930s, new populist movements worldwide do not aim to abolish democracy: quite the opposite, they thrive on democratic support. What we are witnessing today, writes Ivan Krastev, is a conflict between elites that are becoming increasingly suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming increasingly illiberal.

"A spectre is haunting the world: populism. A decade ago, when the new nations were emerging into independence, the question asked was: how many will go Communist? Today, this question, so plausible then, sounds a little out of date. In as far as the rulers of the new states embrace an ideology, it tends more to have a populist character."¹ This observation was made by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner forty years ago. A period of time long enough for "populism" first to disappear and then to re-emerge as the global phenomenon it is today. Now, like then, the significance of populism cannot be doubted, though now, like then, it is unclear just what populism is.

On the one hand, the concept of "populism" goes back to the American farmers' protest movement at the end of the nineteenth century; on the other, to Russia's *narodniki* around the same period. Later, the concept was used to describe the elusive nature of the political regimes in the Third World countries governed by charismatic leaders, applied above all to Latin American politics in the 1960s and 1970s. This transformation in the concept's use only re-enforced Isaiah Berlin's claim that it suffers from the Cinderella complex: there is a shoe in the shape of populism, but no foot to fit it.

What is striking about the current use of the term is the almost incalculable diversity of policies and actors it attempts to cover. Is it not an affront to common sense to lump together Hugo Chavez's leftist Bolivarian revolution and the ideology and politics of the current anti-communist government in Warsaw? What could be more confusing than to describe the politics both of Silvio Berlusconi and Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as populist? But commentators and political theorists who insist on using "populism" as a generic name for such diverse political players have a point. Only a vague and ill-defined concept such as "populism" can enable one to grasp and the radical transformation of politics underway in many places around the world. More than any other concept currently circulating, "populism" captures the nature of the challenges that liberal democracy faces today. These emanate not from the rise of anti-democratic and authoritarian alternatives, but from dangerous mutations within liberal democracies themselves.

Clearly, populism has lost its original ideological meaning as the expression of agrarian radicalism. Populism is too eclectic to be an ideology in the way that liberalism, socialism, or conservatism are. But growing interest in populism has captured the major trend of the modern political world — the rise of

democratic illiberalism.

Be it the proliferation of populist revolutions in Latin America, the political turmoil in central Europe, or the political logic behind the "no" vote in the referenda on the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands — it is the accompanying rise of democratic illiberalism that worries us. The new populism does not represent a challenge to democracy, understood as free elections or the rule of the majority. Unlike the extremist parties of the 1930s, the new populists do not plan to outlaw elections and introduce dictatorships. In fact, the new populists like elections and, unfortunately, often win them. What they oppose is the representative nature of modern democracies, the protection of the rights of minorities, and the constraints to the sovereignty of the people, a distinctive feature of globalization.

We try to account for the rise of populism today by the erosion of the liberal consensus that emerged after the end of the Cold War on one hand, and by the rising tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism — the two fundamental elements of liberal democratic regimes — on the other. The rise of populism indicates the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions in the fields of politics, economy, and culture, and the growing popularity of the politics of exclusion.

The populist condition

It would be a major mistake to view the rise of populist parties as a victory for anti-democratic attitudes. In fact, the rise is a by-product of the wave of democratization during the "long" 1990s. "Voice of the People 2006", a global opinion poll conducted by Gallup International, found that 79 per cent of people the world over agree that democracy is the best form of government available, but that only one third agree that the voice of the people is heard by the governments of their countries. It is precisely because current populists cannot be portrayed as anti-democratic that liberals are confused, and this makes them appear helpless in the face of the populist challenge.

In the current debate, "populism" is mostly associated with an emotional, simplistic, and manipulative discourse directed at the "gut feelings" of the people, or with opportunistic policies aimed at "buying" support. But is appealing to the passions of the people forbidden in democratic politics? And who decides which policies are "populist" and which are "sound"? As Ralf Dahrendorf has [noted](#), "the one's populism is other's democracy and vice versa".² Unless we take Brecht's advice and dissolve the people in order to elect a new one, populism is and will remain part of the political landscape.

At the heart of the populist challenge is not the rise of political parties and movements that appeal to "the people" against the people's supposed representatives, thereby challenging established political parties, interests, and values. Populism is also not appropriate for describing the transformation of the democratic political system in Europe and the replacement of party democracy with media democracy. Populism as synonym of post-modern politics, as flight from class and interest politics towards a new centre, is old hat.

At heart, the defining feature of populism is the view that society falls into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the people as such" and "the corrupt elite". It proceeds to argue that politics is the expression of the general will of the people and that the social change is possible only via the radical change of

the elite.

Two tendencies correspond to this: the implementation of populist majoritarianism and growing manipulation by the elite. The revolutionary regime in Venezuela — a textbook illustration of Tocqueville's notion of the tyranny of the majority — and the manipulation-based regime in Moscow are just two sides of the same populist coin. The goal of populist revolution in Latin America is to block the return to power of the corrupt minority; Putin's system of "sovereign democracy" prevents the dangerous majority being represented politically.

The central European dilemma

The dangers of democratic illiberalism can be observed in the political dilemmas that central Europe faces today. The formation of the populist coalition in Poland following the elections in September/October 2005 was an early-warning signal that something strange and unexpected was taking place in central European politics. It sounded even more loudly when Jaroslaw Kaczynski — twin brother of president Lech Kaczynski — replaced Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz as prime minister, bringing with him other populists such as Roman Giertych onto the cabinet [Giertych was dismissed in August 2007 — ed.].

The Slovak election on 17 June 2006 and the formation of a new government in Bratislava was an indication that what had happened in Poland was not just a one-off episode but part of a trend in central European politics. The cabinet formed by Robert Fico united his moderate leftwing populists, Jan Slota's extreme nationalists, and the party of former prime minister Vladimir Meciar. The coalition offers a mixture of illiberal and leftist economic promises, most of them never implemented, and a conservative cultural agenda, an expression of rising insecurity and xenophobia.

The reasons why pro-European liberal reformists lost the election are not hard to pinpoint: they are above all high unemployment and rising social inequality. It is more difficult to explain why populists and semi-fascists were the sole available alternative. Is something wrong with central Europe — or could it be that something is wrong with democracy?

On the same day that Fico formed his government, the Slovak constitutional court announced that a Slovak citizen had filed a suit demanding that the court annul the results of the election. The claimant declared that the Slovakian Republic had failed to create a "normal" system of elections and had therefore violated Slovak citizens' constitutional right to be governed wisely. In the eyes of the claimant, any electoral system that could bring to power as motley a crew as the new Slovak government could not be called "normal".

The lone Slovak claimant had a point. The right to be governed wisely can contradict the right to vote. This is traditionally what makes liberals nervous about democracy. One might almost say that the Slovak citizen was a reincarnation of the influential nineteenth-century liberal François Guizot (1787–1874).

It was Guizot and his colleagues, "the doctrinaires", who used all their eloquence to argue that democracy and good governance can coexist only under a regime of limited suffrage. In their view, the real sovereign is not the people but reason. Thus, voting should be discussed in terms of capacities

rather than rights. In the nineteenth century, capacity was translated as property or education; only those with the right education or enough property could be trusted with the power to vote. Today, nobody would dare to argue for restricting voting rights. Nevertheless, a respected liberal professor in Poland recently suggested introducing a test for political maturity. Putin's sovereign democracy offers another solution: the project is not to limit the number of people with the right to vote, but to limit the choices for whom to vote. Kremlin's political technologists thus manage a political system that *de facto* excludes the chance that undesired party or candidate might win elections.

The elites vs. the people

The paradox of current European politics is best captured in the question: "How is it possible to have elites that, simultaneously, are legitimated globally and locally?" European politics fails to provide an answer. After all that has happened recently in Poland, Slovakia, and elsewhere in eastern central Europe, no wonder it takes confidence and imagination to remain a Euro-optimist.

It is perverse but true that, in the current epoch, European elites secretly dream of a system that will deprive irresponsible voters of the power to undermine rational politics, and that they are more than ready to use the European Union to realize this dream. At the same time, most citizens are convinced that they have the right to vote but not the right to influence decision-making, which is why they oppose further EU integration.

In this sense, central Europe today can be compared to the France of 1847, before the great wave of national-popular revolution in 1848. In 2007, the major protagonists of European politics are elites who dream of a politically correct form of limited suffrage, while the people are convinced that they already live under a regime of limited suffrage.

The new populist majorities perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities — in the case of central Europe, elites and a key collective "other", the Roma. In the rhetoric of populist parties, elites and Roma are twins: neither is like "us"; both steal and rob from the honest majority; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners — Brussels in particular. Anti-elite sentiments were an important element in central Europeans' motivation to support EU accession; now they are turning against the EU. Opinion polls demonstrate that during the accession process the majority tends to view Brussels as an ally in controlling corrupt elites. When these countries are in the EU, however, Brussels is perceived as an ally of the elites that provides a way to avoid democratic accountability.

The outcome is politics where populists are becoming openly illiberal, while elites secretly harbour anti-democratic resentments. This is the real danger of the populist moment. In the age of populism, the front does not lie between Left and Right, nor between reformers and conservatives. It is more the case that we are witnessing a structural conflict between elites that are becoming increasingly suspicious of democracy, and angry publics that are becoming increasingly anti-liberal. The fight against corruption, the "war on terror", and anti-Americanism are just three manifestations of the new politics of populism.

Western liberal democracies promote the anti–corruption agenda in an attempt to channel anti–elite sentiments into support for democracy and economic liberalism; it is not the system that is the problem, but corrupt governments. In return for support the global "war on terror", Washington allows discredited but politically useful governments to label their domestic opponents "terrorists" and to curb civil rights. In the case of anti–Americanism, corrupt and illiberal governments try to win legitimacy by convincing frustrated publics that the US is the root cause of everything going wrong in their own countries and worldwide.

Liberal democracy is in danger when the structural conflict between "the elites" and "the people" is no longer seen as a liability but a major asset. The current generation of European liberals have been educated in a political tradition that wrongly assumes (historically and theoretically) that anti–liberal parties are also anti–democratic. This is no longer the case. The real challenge that liberal democracy is facing today is the rise of democratic illiberalism. Whoever wishes to save democracy is called on to fight on two fronts: against populists and against those liberals who hold democracy in contempt.

¹ Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.), *Populism: its meaning and national character*, London 1969, 1.

² Ralf Dahrendorf, "Acht Anmerkung zum Populismus", in: *Transit* 25 (2003), 156–163.

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