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MA in the Politics and Economics of Contemporary Eastern and
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Populism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe

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CONTENTS

'If the decision to burn witches came after discussion and majority vote,
I call it democratic'.
Iain McLean on the Salem witch trials, quoted in Canovan (1999: 8)

INTRODUCTION – The quest for Cinderella's slipper

Almost every political scientist today seems to concur that populism has risen back to prominence in the realm of European politics. Interestingly enough though, there is not much agreement on exactly what the central notion stands for. 'Unusual', 'elusive', 'impalpable', 'slippery', 'mercurial', these are all words attached to the concept of populism within just one book (Taggart 2000). The list grows longer the more you read about and researchers seem to have utterly exhausted the thesaurus. To add to the complexity, populism appears to be largely influenced by the context wherein it emerges and out of which it cannot survive (Arditi 2004), taking different forms according to its surroundings, in a chameleonic fashion. From the *narodniki* back in 19th century Tsarist Russia, to the *People's Party* in the United Stated and the Latin American archetypes of Peron and Chavez and further on to the 'new populism' of the radical right in Western Europe, scholars are eager to apply the selfsame label to movements and leaders across time and space. Others go as far as including Thatcher, Reagan and Blair in the same lot. Are we then overusing the term and in effect rendering it useless?

It is equally common to see authors starting off with proposing a frugal definition for populism which they later unfortunately tend to forget, indulging in conceptual overstretching, essentially undermining their own position. What is the use in taking pains defining a concept if you are not able to falsify an assertion accordingly? After all, '[t]o define is first of all to assign limits, to delimit' (Sartori, quoted in Mudde 2007: 11). On the other hand, critics who denounce such attempts as more or less futile, as Ernesto Laclau has done, are not being necessarily fair. Even though you can find 'an avalanche of exceptions' (Laclau 2005: 117) when it comes to a proper definition of populism, the same could probably be argued for many other political movements or ideologies. An insider look on socialism or liberalism would undoubtedly reveal severe friction regarding what exactly comprises 'true socialism' or 'true liberalism'.

The defect that populism carries is that it has not, at least yet, been blessed with a widely acclaimed 'biblical' account of its basic premises in a 'master narrative' style, as with Marx's *Das Kapital*, or Mill's *On Liberty*. And it can never possess such a piece, since populism is *not* a concrete ideology; to have an 'enlightened' theoretician managing to articulate its assumptions in a solid manner seems like a project highly unlikely to prove successful at the moment or in the future. Socialism or liberalism are taken as adhering to at least some basic tenets, while populism carries an 'empty heart' (Taggart 2000: 4) which renders it at best a 'thin-centered' political ideology (Canovan 1981) without a comprehensive vision of society (Abts & Rummens 2007).

As it should now be obvious, the analytical trouble populism has given political scientists is notorious. Traditionally, every study on populism starts with an introduction of the history of these various attempts, usually citing the acclaimed works on the subject by Ionescu & Gellner (1969), Laclau (2005), Canovan (1981) and Taggart (2000), with Mudde (2007) as the most recent member of this privileged group. In order to make room for a more fruitful discussion on the intertwining of populism with liberal democracy, as well as for an analysis on the East European case, we will not follow the same logic in this study; instead of yet another historical account, a peek 'under the hood' of populism seems to us both more interesting and useful. To best serve these goals, the essay is divided in two sections, where the first undertakes theoretical issues and the second focuses on the populist manifestations in the Eastern part of Europe. The essay closes with some concluding thoughts.

1. Main features of populism

In order to be more productive, we consider that a good starting point is to settle, as many have, for populism as political strategy, as a dimension of political mobilization and discourse which can be attached to a variety of ideological frameworks (Taguieff 1995). Still, that does not mean that descriptive reasoning is precluded. We all, more or less, claim to know who the populists are, even if we do not necessarily agree on which values exactly they stand behind. Despite the ongoing debate, an academic consensus seems to be forming lately around two cardinal features of populism: the appeal to 'the people' and a passionate condemnation of the 'élites'. More often than not, the existence of a charismatic leader is added as a third property. Of course there are many other characteristics that one can deem elementary for a populist party or movement, but in most cases they only seem to have a strictly contextual validity which does not travel along universally.

Essentially, populism feeds on this rather 'Schmittian' dipole: *us* and *them*. The pure, noble, hard-working, tax-paying, law-abiding, moral people are beguiled by a self-interested, arrogant and corrupt domestic and foreign business and/or administrative élite; or this is at least how the populist narrative goes. The 'people', *das Volk*, the 'heartland' in Taggart's (2000) view, are the populists' hobbyhorse. They are seen as a monolithic entity, self-aware and indivisible (Abts & Rummens 2007) while differences within their membership along the traditional cleavages are played down if not ignored altogether (Mény & Surel 2002).

Populism affects both sides of the political spectrum, as long as there is a foothold on which to sustain. On the Left, the foothold is provided by a class-based representation of society where 'the people' stand on the underprivileged side, while its rightist equivalent employs nationalism, religion or ethnicity to define its populist core. This somewhat peculiar accommodating feature of populism is feasible because, as we shall later see, the economy is not the primary focus of populist discourse; it is rather issues such as culture and reaction to the establishment that underline its appeal and act as forces of mobilization. What matters is that the people need to reclaim their

sovereignty and command over issues of public policy which have been lost to unaccountable ranks of élites such as bankers, managers of multinational companies, technocrats, politicians, plutocrats, Westernized intellectuals and supranational institutions such as the EU, NATO, the IMF, the World Bank and so on. These corrupt entities are accused of creating a cartel party system and promoting a sometimes secret master plan of free market globalization which pays no respect to cultural differences, national sentiments and the welfare of the ordinary people who are put under its stranglehold. Conspiracy theories regarding the origins of this agenda abound, be it either American imperialism or Zionist plots and counterplots to take over the world by financial means or, more conveniently, an amalgam of both.

Along these lines, Mudde (2004: 543) defines populism as 'an ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt élite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' [emphasis by the author]. However, frequently, and especially in the case of populist radical right parties of Western Europe, this vertical distinction cuts at both ends; apart from the élites at the top, social groups at the other end who are considered as *protégés* of globalization and liberal democracy emerge as enemies, namely immigrants, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, drug users and welfare abusers. What legitimizes populists in their own eyes is their claim to be talking on behalf of the 'silent majority', not just a random social group promoting its own interests in the market of political horse-trading (Canovan 1999). This is why they can get away with unlawful or undemocratic behavior, since they claim to evoke an overruling notion, the will of the people (Arditi 2004).

Populist parties and leaders claim to originate outside the political system and speak in the name of the common man, using simple notions which are easier to be taken in than the complex 'new-speak' of technocrats and other intellectual élites. Political and economic problems are not as elaborate as they seem; they can be given simple, commonsensical and straightforward solutions by a charismatic leader whose integrity, ability and patriotism is a guarantee of upholding the interests of the people and not succumbing to the appetites of 'capitalist vultures' such as multinationals and their domestic bourgeois disciples.

2. Sociological profile

Populist voters usually 'do not know how to name what they are lacking' in their relation to power (Panizza 2005: 10), giving rise to a new cleavage not along ideological or class axes, but merely between continuity and change (Arditi 2003). 'Change' as the all encompassing yet non descriptive electoral motto for Fox in Mexico (2000) and Papandreou in Greece (1981) are famous examples of how populists take advantage of this cleavage and project it upon a cult of personality. Populist voters want a change in the system, without having a clear view of viable alternatives to build upon its ruins. They share a collective instinct which is based on a common substrate, most frequently of cultural nature, such as ethnic kin, or traces of a common content forged by language and history as Lowndes (2005) asserts, but the main force behind their mobilization is their antithesis to the establishment, their reaction to rule. It is kind of a feedback system, where animus against the cosmopolitan élites unites the people around their imagined 'heartland' which in turn makes the cleavage even more distinct. Opposition enhances alienation and the other way around.

An analysis that can be of value is to determine the social characteristics of populist mobilization at the grassroots level. The empirical research on the identification of the sociological profile of the populist electorate leads to a great degree of skepticism. The intuitive view would be that it is formed by the lower class stratum, especially blue-collar workers with a predominance of males, but conflicting views abound. Usually, scaling from the working class to the middle class is observed in studies of Latin American populism. The opposite trajectory is noticed when it comes to Western European 'neopopulism', where the proletarization of the populist electorate has been thoroughly documented (Betz 2004). In Eastern Europe, the target pool would thus be the 'losers of modernization', but many researchers have come to the conclusion that it is not the lower classes that vote for populist parties since they usually exit the political system altogether, but the middle classes who have managed to acquire a stake and become increasingly afraid of losing it (Bustikova 2009). Apart from 'modernizations losers', also winners can be part of the populist electorate. The reason is that the sentiments of alienation, fear, anxiety and powerlessness are commonly shared among those who are stressed by socio-economic transformations,

regardless of their current financial standing (Zaslove 2009). For others, working class voters flock to radical populist parties together with the lower middle class strata of society. In tune are findings that point to the counterintuitive realization that populist parties are more successful in countries with lower unemployment (Mudde 2007). The evidence suggest that we should be very reluctant in assuming a specific profile for populist voters, since their membership is fluid and it derives from a larger spectrum of the population than the one initially taken for granted. Class has given way to identity and institutional or cultural factors might help in elucidating the issue better, as we shall later see.

3. Economic jingoism

Populist parties, if they are to eventually assume power, need to devise a plan for the economy. The implementation of such programs in Latin America during the past decades has provided us with some insight. 'Economic populism' has been defined as 'an approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income distribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies' (Dornbusch & Edwards 1990: 247). The results are initially a wave of optimism, followed by a cloud of doubt and eventually catastrophe in the form of hyperinflation, protectionism, monetary devaluation, high unemployment and huge sovereign debt and current account deficits (Edwards 2010).

However, in the case of European 'neopopulist' parties, we see a clear deviation into neoliberal and anti-welfare demands. Kitschelt and McGann (1995) have even coined the term 'winning formula' for the combination of social conservatism and neoliberal economics that many successful populist parties have employed. Explanations for the 'unnatural vote' range from direct manipulation by the populist leader, to the irrationality and weak political education of the masses, the force of nativist symbolization and even the power of the *habitus*, that is, the tendency to keep voting for the leader that provided socialization for subordinate masses in the recent or distant past irrespective of her current economic agenda (Filc 2011).

A closer look into populistic programmatic commitments reveals that even though many populist parties (but surely not all) in Western Europe engage in neoliberal

rhetoric such as the need for lower taxes and deregulation, their nativist instincts check on these ideas and lead to Keynesian interventionism and measures such as protecting the national economy from foreign takeovers and diminishing the risks of 'turbo-capitalism' through means of 'welfare chauvinism', not to mention declarations for the need to achieve autarky, especially in the agricultural sector. So, as Mudde (2007) has convincingly argued, even though they do sometimes advocate for free markets in order to capture the petty bourgeois, their practice in essence resembles a *social market* ideology, a mix of pro-market ideas and state protectionism, much like what mainstream Christian democratic parties adhere to. In other words, they do desire a free economy, as long as it only benefits the natives and keeps foreign businessmen and multinationals away from 'stealing national wealth'; a mercantilist view of the workings of global economy is common in this party family.

However, it is crucial to note here that the economy is a secondary *milieu* for populists, overshadowed by their core nativist concerns (Bornschier 2010; Mudde 2007). As Jansen (2011; 91) asserts, populism should be understood as 'flexible practice' which can be employed *à la carte*. There are no populists with a solid ideology which would prevent them from employing neoliberal or statist policies according to their whim of political interests, since populism is a dimension of political practice which can be ascribed to ideologically variant mobilizations (Worsley 1969). The reason why economic policies of populist parties are context-dependent is that the anti-systemic nature of populism entails an antipodal reaction to the establishment. In a welfare state, populists will tend to have neoliberal ideas, while in a country dominated by the free market, their demands will carry a protectionist flavor (Canovan 1999).

4. Causes of populism

Populists do not carry much respect for the institutions of liberal democracy. Their 'strong anti-establishment ethos' (Arditi 2003: 19) goes hand in hand with their urge to bypass time-consuming formalized democratic procedures and translate what is lawful according to circumstances and always with respect to popular will. The leader evokes sentiments of belonging and identification by presenting himself to the people as 'one of them', while personal success in his private life is often portrayed as

evidence of his superior qualifications vis-à-vis 'ordinary' politicians who have never made an hour's wage in their whole lives (Panizza 2005).

But when did 'the people' lose their confidence in their own institutions and how did this come about? There is a range of explanations for the emergence of populism in the literature, out of which one can make better sense by dividing them into analytical groups. One such group is structural explanations that emanate from the sociology of modernization which serves a double role since it also works as an inquiry on the sociological profile of populist voters. According to this viewpoint, globalization, modernization and postindustrialism on a worldwide scale has increased the insecurity felt by domestic workers and employees who suffer from the fear of losing their jobs to better skilled or lower wage immigrants within their own countries, thus gradually acquiring an acute siege mentality. Our knowledge intensive civilization has increased the significance of labour mobility and economies of scale, undermining the potential of small, family business owners who thus become more vulnerable to populist appeals, the so called 'losers of modernization' (Kriesi, cited in Papadopoulos 2000: 10).

A second family of opinions converge to an institutional delegitimization. The blame is broadly attributed to the technocratic nature of modern policy making, the reduction of the political to the administrative and the substitution of government with governance (Mudde 2004). Ideologies have been sidelined and the 'liberal consensus' in favour of the dictates of the market has convinced a part of the electorate that they can only change the policy makers but not the policies themselves. Their real chances of participation in important decisions seem severely compromised (Mouffe 2005), a fact that generates widespread ressentiment. Politics seem to follow a predestined course under a globalized system where supranational institutions reign heavily upon national interests.

In the same vein, albeit on the supply-side, populism is for some researchers a side-effect of the transformation of the mass party into the 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer 1966) or is at least greatly facilitated through it. Since parties have put aside the effort for 'encadrement' on a strictly ideological basis and turned to the more fruitful approach of recruiting from a wider audience with the ideological discount that comes

with it, citizens inevitably became dealigned. If they haven't been convinced by the virtues of liberal democracy they either withdraw from politics altogether, or they find refuge in fringe parties that take advantage of the political opportunity and supply them with a populist cradle on which they can be safely rocked to familiar tunes.

A third class asserts that populism mobilizes sentiments that are born at the grass root level. Insecurity is felt due to the identity crisis which is brought forward by liberalism, multiculturalism and globalization, when centuries-old collectivist refuges such as ethnicity and religion are sidelined or even violated in favour of a 'colourless' and 'unspiritual' competitive individualist worldview. An 'ethnic backlash' (Mudde 2007: 210) is formed and voices that try to cling on the fading ideals resonate strongly in the hearts and minds of citizens in societies undergoing such rapid structural and cultural transitions; treason and conspiracy become common keywords, nationalism and xenophobia lay the groundwork for populist success (Tismaneanu 2007). Following this rationale, Mouffe (2005) claims that populist parties are successful exactly because they supply the people with the opportunity to rally behind collective identifications, a natural human tendency which does not find proper means of expression in the individualistic landscape of hegemonic liberal democracy.

Looking again at the demand-side, the successful populist appeal on lower income strata of society has been related to 'working class authoritarianism' (Derks 2006; Di Tella 1997; Lipset 1959). This explanation seems plausible and it can be also utilized to further explain the tendency of such groups to vote for populist parties that promote neoliberal agendas, i.e. contrary to working class desires. The populist critique on the large welfare state is also in tune with their voters' predispositions, since its complexity and opaqueness permits accusations of corruption and surrendering of public funds to immigrants or other social groups that are not entitled to such aid. Here again, simple and direct solutions are preferred (Derks 2006).

The demystification of the political is another factor contributing to the rise of populism. With it comes anti-intellectualism; the cognitive power of the élites is no longer considered superior to the 'ancestral wisdom' of the common man (Taguieff 1995: 33). Moreover, the level of education that the mean citizen now enjoys, permits her to judge more freely the wrong-doings of politicians, since she believes herself

competent enough to assess their capacity; people do not take for granted the arguments or the academic credentials of the 'illuminated' anymore (Mudde 2004). Until the social sciences evolve into 'hard' sciences, their conclusions will always be open to question and politicians will not be able to claim that their solutions are optimal.

5. The role of the media

Not a cause, but definitely a strong catalyst for populism are the modern media. The existence of accommodating cleavages, the malaise of liberal democracy and the effects of modernization taken together would seldom prove adequate in mobilizing large segments of society in a coherent way if it wasn't for the media to act as the channel through which the messages are to be disseminated.

Vargas may have used the radio in Brazil, but the pinnacle of this phenomenon came with nationwide TV channels. Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, Volen Siderov in Bulgaria, Yorgos Karatzaferis in Greece and so on, started off their careers as tele-evangelists or some other form of TV personas. On the other hand, the absence of a strong populist party in Germany is sometimes attributed exactly to the lack of access to the popular media that parties of the extreme right face in that country.

Media access can allow a populist leader to present himself as an outsider to the political system, since it is no longer mandatory to grow within the party apparatus in order for a person to enter the political scene (Filc 2011). Another fact is that media and especially journalistic coverage of political news have intensified anti-élite sentiments among the population, since their commercial interests dictate that they focus and invest on the 'negative and sensationalist elements' of current affairs (Mudde 2004: 553), especially issues like criminality and corruption.

The media supply the people with a second best of political participation. Being able to talk directly to show hosts and listening to their own voice on TV or seeing their comments published in social networks, alienated citizens satisfy their craving for the acknowledgement of their existence and the voicing of their opinions. At the same time, populist leaders are able to emphasize existing cleavage substrates and sculpt

them towards forming a consolidated body of anti-establishment rhetoric which will later be translated into votes on election day.

'Audience democracy' is a sign of the times (Manin, quoted in Arditi 2004: 141). Party systems are changing, and the role of ideologies is diminishing. In the words of Gerald Ford, we see 'candidates without ideas hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content' (Ford, quoted in Arditi 2003: 23). There is a trend towards political consumerism, which, together with the demystification of politics can occasionally create loopholes in the democratic process which can be exploited by 'charismatic' individuals in the frame of 'technopopulism' (Lipow and Seyd, quoted in Axford & Huggins 1997: 6). After all, it is not a coincidence that the populist appeal to 'the people' is so vaguely defined. Populists avoid comprehensive descriptions of who the people are, not only because this is not feasible, but mainly as a strategy which enables them to conscribe any individual that shares a grievance against the establishment.

6. A framework for populism's rise to eminence: The democratic paradox

So, why do people actually vote for populist parties? Why isn't populism simply absorbed by the mainstream actors and it had to breed a separate party family? Well, it seems that populist discourse is successfully tapping into the tension that arises from the way governments rule and decisions are taken within the realm of modern politics. Populist leaders take advantage of the ills of the system in order to portray themselves as clean outsiders who can deliver the much needed change. This institutional explanation of populism is interesting to the degree that it requires a section of its own that can fit its elaborate nature. First of all, when we talk about democracy nowadays in the Western world, we are essentially referring to liberal, constitutional democracy, in presidential or parliamentary form. The issue we therefore need to focus upon is the duality of liberal democracy and the problems it carries.

On the majoritarian level, ideally, power lies in the hands of the people who collectively decide on the way they are ruled. Images of ancient Athenian democracy in the years of Pericles are usually brought to mind as warm connotations. After all,

what is democracy, if not the triumph of majority will? *Vox populi, vox Dei*, that is how it started in the first place. However, the liberal aspect of democracy has institutionalized the rule of law and a system of checks and balances which severely curtail the supremacy of the majority, guaranteeing a certain set of unalienable individual rights for every citizen. While constitutions were initially employed as safeguards against the tyranny of those who were used to ruling by divine right, they are now increasingly perceived as shields against the tyranny of the majority.

Naturally, this evolution into constitutional democracy is not a product of sheer luck. As democratic societies matured, it became evident – at least for the liberal élites – that the individual had to be protected from both the arbitrary excesses of the state and those of the majority. The authoritarian takeover of 'Weimar' republics which culminated in the Second World War was a lesson to be learnt and remembered. Protection of individual rights and minorities, the rule of law, the division of powers and the need for government through representation necessitated the establishment of watchdogs, supervisory bodies and independent institutions such as regulatory authorities, central banks and most importantly a written constitution which guarantees a set of basic rights, impregnable even against the supremacy of the – at times – 'disillusioned' majority, under the strict supervision of a supreme constitutional court. Gradually, this composite model, loosely based on the American paradigm, would be adopted by every free nation in the Western world, proving to be a rather stable solution (Akkerman 2003; Plattner 2010).

Unfortunately, this development had its share of mishaps. It turns out that it is not always painless to maintain the delicate balance of the majoritarian and the liberal aspects of democracy. Scores of citizens feel that the liberal pillar is overbearing, giving birth to a growing distance between popular will and the governing élites, an alienation that undermines the legitimacy of the political system as a whole. Possibly, they hypothesize, we have gone too far in liberalizing our societies, to the expense of jeopardizing basic democratic givens (Mény & Surel 2002). Mouffe (2005) asserts that the ideal of popular sovereignty as a constitutive feature of democracy has nowadays 'almost been erased'. This is all fertile ground for backsliding. Enter populism, exposing 'liberalism's democratic blind spots' (Panizza 2005: 29), demanding respect for the *vox populi* and the (re)empowerement of the people

through direct participation in the decision-making process via referenda and the circumvention of mediating institutions which "impede[d] the direct and full expression of the people's voice" (Mény & Surel 2002: 9). Liberal democracy with its decentralized and institutionalized political processes is disapproved as easy prey for various self-interested agents, especially those of the corporate sector (Akkerman 2003). Negative feelings are amplified in times of crises of representation, when the legitimacy of the élites is further eroded; it was one thing to let them rule unquestioned while things were running fine, but now that danger, economic, diplomatic or otherwise is imminent, the gap between 'promise and performance' (Canovan 1999: 7) is even more infuriating and confidence in the ability of the political system to restore order becomes obsolete (Panizza 2005). Castigation is inevitable and it is clearly high time to restore power to its natural *locus*, the hands of the people.

The more we study the nature of populism, the more we stumble upon this intercourse with the toils of liberal democracy. This framework is gaining explanatory credit between scholars of populism in the degree that some have gone so far as to build a definition of populism on such grounds, as in Taggart (1997: 16), where it is cast as 'the agenda created around the negative reaction to the institutions of representative politics.' The 'crisis or representation' as the context wherein populism emerges is a powerful description that encompasses the underlying cleavages as well as the structural limitations of constitutional democracy (Arditi 2003).

Since the traditional parties of the left and right appear to be converging in a Downsian pattern, leaving ample space for mobilization to populist actors, we can confidently infer that their presence will continue to be felt in varying degrees across the European polity. In this sense, since we acknowledge its institutional nature we need also recognize a certain degree of inevitability to the phenomenon of populism, a conclusion with important repercussions.

7. Unsuccessfully successful

The passion with which populist parties support their arguments explains their continuing presence in the political landscape. After tapping into the cultural

cleavage, these parties struggle to widen or at least sustain the gap by employing a militant stance on the key topics that define it (e.g. traditional values, immigration, asylum policies). Constant political conflict with opposite views reinforces the collective identity of their voters and plays down internal disputes (Bornschier 2010). Additionally, acute lines of conflict provide a grid upon which new voters can locate themselves easier and associate with populist parties on specific themes.

But what happens when a populist party manages to gather enough votes to become important for the political system? There seems to be a self-limiting, transitory quality within populism (Taggart 2003). Most parties that have assumed power in Eastern or Western Europe on their own or as part of a coalition, have subsequently either failed or transcended themselves through victory (Weyland 2001). A populist party in the parliament having to conform to the ethos of constitutionalism is a contradiction in terms. This *non sequitur* is felt by the electorate, usually resulting in net vote loss. It is very hard for a party which denounces normal politics to have to sit at the same table with those against whom it is in essence defined; you can't be running with the hare and hunting with the hounds and pretend that all is well. At the same time, the inherently revisionist nature of populism does not license a complete breakup with democratic procedures, either.

The problems for the populists arise due to the fact that when they enter a coalition or form a government of their own, they have to face the reality of social complexity. The once monolithic 'people' suddenly become a set of conflicting interest groups. Those political actors demand simultaneous representation and the populist leadership is forced to enter a cycle of compromise which pulls it away from its programmatic identity and becomes a mechanism of inclusion in the traditional political system in order to satisfy as larger a part of 'the people' as possible. Market politics are invincible and the bitter fate of populists is to be placated through the political system. The only way they can 'sell' this compromise to their electorate is to claim that it is a dirty job that has to be done for the sake of the people. However, this is not always easy to achieve and once in power, populist leaders are routinely accused of becoming 'corrupted and bourgeoisified' (Wiles 1969: 168), getting a bitter taste of their own medicine.

8. A threat or a challenge?

Now that we have painted the big picture, can we manage to decide if populism is a threat or just a challenge to the democratic system? There is wide disagreement on this issue within the scholarly community. The tension inherent in the two-strand model of liberal democracy described in the previous paragraphs can be perceived as either constructive or deconstructive of democracy. In the first sense, populism is considered a 'shadow of democracy' which functions as the canary in the coalmine, raising an alarm on the frustrations of liberal democracy and the need for remedial actions which will 'cleanse' representative politics and renew the democratic promise of the system (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000; Mény & Surel 2002). Nascent social groups will be mobilized and socialized anew, resulting in added pluralism, a broader political agenda and an enhanced, consensual, comprehensive democratic process. Populism can thus be considered as 'the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such' (Laclau 2005: 67), a concept 'profoundly compatible with democracy' (Worsley 1969: 247). Proponents of a different view consider populism not as a mere challenge, but a serious threat that undermines the core of democracy and can lead to authoritarian deviation if left to roam freely, due to the incompatibility between populist ideals and individual freedoms (Abts & Rummens 2007; Akkerman 2003). In the first case, solutions are comprised of political efforts to incorporate populist parties into the democratic party system together with plebiscitarian concessions in the form of referendums or impeachments. In the 'threat' scenario, *cordons sanitaires* are employed to keep the 'venomous' populist rhetoric away from the sensitive ears of the democratic citizens and hold decision making mechanisms locked up against populist infiltration.

Mainstream parties confront these dilemmas when the option of forming a coalition becomes available and a decision has to be taken. On the one hand they denounce the nativist ideals of populist parties. On the other hand, faith in the promise of democracy has to be upheld, or else we would be running the risk of 'trying to keep a church going without faith' (Canovan 1999: 16). Even though there is no safe solution, it usually is the case that exclusionary measures by the establishment strengthen the position of the populists, since their outsider image is vindicated

beyond any doubt. The example of the French FN is typical in this line of argumentation.

1. The background

Up until some thirty years ago we would be talking of populism under the prism of modernization theory, mainly as an expression of the rural-urban dichotomy, a product of the instability which arises through the process of rapid urbanization and industrialization (Weyland 2001). This approach carries a historic significance but is not functional in the modern landscape. Populism today is ubiquitous even in advanced economies and it cannot be relegated to a fringe phenomenon. The catch-all nature of established political parties on the left and right forces them to acknowledge the vote-catching potential of populism as a communication style, magnified by the tremendous power of the media (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). It is not therefore uncommon to see a soft version of such rhetoric infiltrate their ranks in the form of what Mair has termed 'respectable populism' (Akkerman 2003).

On these grounds, many scholars would argue that populism is pervasive, that a 'populist streak' (Arditi 2004: 139) is a necessary feature of any political movement or ideology. Mudde (2004) asserts that it is now a feature of mainstream politics, a kind of 'Zeitgeist'. In this second section we will assess the current state of affairs in order to discover how populism manifests itself in the European political scene with a focus on the Eastern part of the continent. Along the way, a set of dissimilarities along the East-West divide will be identified and their origins and implications for the respective societies analyzed further.

A detailed enumeration of all populist parties across Europe is a task for the truly brave. Mudde (2007) recently managed to come up with a solid examination of the populist radical right party family, grounding his classification on the three core ideologies of nativism, authoritarianism and populism. The same group (more or less) is named 'national-populist', mainly in the French literature (Papadopoulos 2000). Unfortunately, there is also a whole host of non-nativist, quasi-socialist, neoliberal and many other hybrids of parties all of which, if we are allowed a small squint, do look populist enough to be included in our analysis. Our target is thus a superset of Mudde's inventory, including the so called 'centrist populist' parties of the center-left

and center-right. However, jumping into the fray and attempting to come up with a list of our own would be a hopeless case for the scope of this study. We will have to carry a broad brush and settle for working with the usual suspects, such as the French FN, the Austrian FPÖ and BZÖ, the Swiss SVP, the Hungarian MIÉP, the Romanian PRM and so on.

2. Eastern & Southeastern Europe

In Eastern Europe, the fall of communism was followed by a rapid implementation of an economically and politically liberal agenda upon the still bewildered post-socialist societies. Aspirations were high and as a consequence populists initially possessed insignificant leverage capacities. The 'liberal consensus' in the region carried the same transitional agenda: privatization of the economy, playing down of nationalist and regionalist differences, inclusion in Euro-Atlantic organizations (Smilov & Krastev 2008).

However, the days of optimism were numbered and developments undermined this potential if not halted it altogether. Today populism is a standard agent of the party system in many countries of the once unified socialist bloc. Populist parties have successfully altered the agenda and brought in 'taboo' issues, undermining the reforms by questioning the ideological authority of liberal political correctness as well as their efficiency. Capitalizing on transition fatigue and the programmatic convergence of the mainstream parties, they took advantage of the democratic deficit inherent in liberal democracy, portraying the establishment as a top-down mechanism made in the EU or the USA, alien to the traditional values of the homeland. They mocked topics such as human rights and respect for minorities, tapping into the dormant discriminatory instincts of a part of the population and supplying a seemingly legitimate channel to vent these feelings.

In Poland, the phenomenon of the Kaczynski brothers is a telling example, where the 'other' is depicted as the 'uklad', a secret network of former Communists that conspire in order to capture and exploit all positions of authority in the country. The PiS (Law and Justice Party) which they founded in 2001 teamed up with the Samoobrona (Self-Defence) of the infamous Andrzej Lepper and the strongly

Catholic LPR (League of Polish Families) in order to form a solid populist bloc and assume power in 2006, declaring the rise of the 'Fourth Republic'. However, the coalition broke up in 2007 and the PiS lost the ensuing elections to the more center-oriented Civic Platform; the Samoobrona and the LPR did not even score close to the 5% threshold. The last parliamentary elections of October 2011, where the PiS scored even worse than 2007 and the Samoobrona received 0.07% of the votes is evidence that a large portion of society has turned their back to populism, at least for the time being.

In Bulgaria, populism entered the political stage with a blast in 2001, with the return of the former tsar Simeon II and the victory of NMSII (National Movement Simeon II) in the June elections. In 2005, Volen Siderov's 'Ataka' came to the fore with its successful anti-Semitic, nationalistic and anti-establishment discourse. Again, in 2007, a third populist actor managed to gather strength, Boiko Borissov's GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). Led by a former bodyguard of Simeon II and subsequent owner of a private security firm, it is since 2009 the ruling party in the country. Bulgaria is a case where it is rather hard to discover non-populist powers in the political realm.

Hungary is currently facing a surge of 'goulash populism' (Kopits 2011) under the rule of the 'charismatic' Viktor Orbán, head of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, who is increasingly becoming comfortable with the habit of fiddling with the country's institutions. The party's motto in the 1998 elections is characteristic of its orientation: 'more than a change in government – less than a regime change'. In the mid-90s the country also featured a typical agrarian-populist party, FKGP (Independent Small Holders' Party), which managed to become a coalition member and then disintegrate in 2002. The most radical populist party is of course MIÉP (Hungarian Truth and Life Party) under the leadership of the 'Hungarian Le Pen', István Csurka (Uitz 2008), the same person who, back in 1992, advocated the solution of replacing 'economists' and narrow-minded 'financial experts' with 'national strategy thinkers' (quoted in Greskovits 1995).

Slovakia is the country where populist powers have ruled the most during the years of transition compared to other Eastern European countries (Mesežnikov et al. 2008).

Since the early 90s with small intermissions up to 1998, Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) was the dominant power of the political scene, ruling in coalition with other populist parties like the ZRS (Association of Slovakia's Workers) and the SNS (Slovak National Party). The HZDS and SNS were also part of the government that formed in 2006, after a populist party of the left, Robert Fico's 'Smer' won the elections. Fico is another charismatic populist leader who has the peculiar privilege of being the closest European counterpart of successful Latin American personas such as Chavez. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, even though Smer won by a wide margin to its second, Fico was not able to form a government due to the poor performance of its traditional coalition partners, with SNS barely reaching the 5% threshold and HZDS getting wiped out of the parliament altogether. However, the largely ceremonial Presidential office was won by the incumbent Smer/SNS candidate in 2009, Ivan Gašparovič, who was elected for the first time back in 2004 with the campaign slogan 'Think Nationally, Feel Socially' (Mesežnikov et al. 2008).

These four countries only serve as examples, they are not alone in facing the populist challenge in Eastern Europe. A more or less common thread runs through the whole region, with features including Euroscepticism, nativism and the revision of the transition process, intolerance of ethnic, sexual or religious minorities and a strong tendency to endorse conspiracy theories against Jews or the Communist *nomenklatura* and its offspring. All the main features of populism are prevalent. These parties habitually refer to 'the people' as a monolithic entity, but in truth they only include the dominant ethnic group. They present themselves as outsiders to the political system and attack the corrupt ruling élites. Almost with no exception, they revolve around a central figure of a strong, politically incorrect leader who is close to the people and speaks their lay language.

It is hard to discuss populism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe without bringing into focus the overarching effects of what Mudde (2001) calls the 'Leninist legacy'. Citizens of once socialist states still carry the ideal of an egalitarian paternalistic welfare state, an irrational nostalgic mentality which in the hands of agile populists can be easily molded into disaffection with the rules of the individualistic market dogma and a backlash against those who promote it. At the same time, ills of the

Soviet era such as the constant search for a powerful, charismatic leader and a dormant cult of personality still play their role in forming people's electoral preferences (Tismaneanu 2007). Moreover, the Leninist legacy instilled an 'anti-political' attitude to the citizens, which stems from their association of party politics with the machinations of the (Communist) Party. In the words of the Czech Civic Forum, "[p]arties are for party members, Civic Forum is for everybody" (quoted in Mudde 2001: 47). This feeling ties neatly with the essential anti-élite populist credo and the 'victimized majority' argument which is very popular in these societies.

A useful totem of Eastern populists is the 'stolen revolution' argument. According to it, former Communists have taken over positions of authority effectively rendering vain the whole revolutionary project, sustaining the *nomenklatura* in place and disguising the wolf with sheep's clothing. The new lustration laws in Poland and Romania are an example of this witch hunt, where officials are checked for ties with the former regime with the help of the secret services. Constitutional hurdles against such actions have been employed but are constantly under strain (Rupnik 200

Political issues may have weighed heavily on the populist turn that took Eastern Europe by storm, but the main issue was and still remains something even more crucial: *culture*. People living in practically isolated societies for almost fifty years now suddenly have to open their minds to novel ideas coming from the West, and become flooded with alien images so totally incompatible with the domestic customs. Not surprisingly, they consider it legitimate to raise barriers against this free flow of ideas. The necessary paradigm shift which will enable them to acquire a more open mindset in order to incorporate a globalized reality is difficult to take place within one generation alone.

The dangers of ensuing populism in Eastern Europe were apparent after the initial optimism at the start of the transition process, since it seemed that all the prerequisites were there (Greskovits 1995). Researchers in the late 90s were surprised that it took so long for them to materialize into something tangible. The turning point for many countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe was EU accession. It is now widely observed that populist parties have garnered strength after the official completion of the accession process of their respective countries in 2004 and 2007 (Møller n.d.). The

explanation is that in pre-accession times, EU eligibility used to be the ultimate goal of the political system and everything revolved around the success of this project. Conditionality entailed specific liberalizing policies in order for a country to be accepted into the European club, and as an outcome populist voices were deterred.

Country	Party Name	'92	'94	'96	'98	'00	'01	'02	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11
Bulgaria	NMSII						42.7			19.9				3		
	GERB													39.7		
	Ataka									8.1					9.4	
Poland	PiS						9.5			27		32.1				29.9
	Self-Defence						10.2			11.4		1.5				0.07
	LPF						7.9			8		1.3				
Slovakia	Smer							13.5			29.1				34.8	
	SOP				8											
	SNS		5.4		9.1			3.3			11.7				5.1	
	ANO							8.01			1.42					
	Free Forum										3.47					
	LS-HZDS										8.8				4.3	
	HZDS				27			19.5								
	HZDS-RSS		35													
Hungary	Fidesz										42				52.7	
	MIEP		1.58		5.47			4.4			2.2				0.03	
	FKGP		7.9		13.3			0.8								
Romania	PRM	3.9		4.5		19.5			13				3.2			
	PUNR	7.7		4.4		1.4										
	PSM	3		2.2		0.8										

Table: Electoral impact of populist parties in five Eastern European countries 1992-2011 (percentage of votes in parliamentary elections)

After the goal was reached, party members and functionaries felt confident enough to drop the eurocentric façade, since that was now considered an unnecessary politically correct prop. Euroscepticism came out of the margin and assumed a central position in political life, since it was cheap and greatly beneficial in terms of wooing disgruntled voters. The technocratic nature of the EU accession procedure led to a convergence of major party policies and stifled programmatic competition, thus emptying the space for identity politics to become central and be taken up by populist parties (Bustikova 2009). Scholars are now pointing to instances of backsliding from the initial achievements throughout the region and especially in countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia (Rupnik 2007).

Also, the nature of the transition process with all the legislative nuts and bolts that had to be twisted in order for it to work, led to heavy technocratization of public policy to the expense of politics. Powers had to be delegated to experts under strict timetables, putting aside for the moment any ideological disagreements in light of the almost unanimous agreement on the need to enter the wider European family as well as, in most cases, the Euroatlantic military partnership. Building capitalism took precedence over building democracy (Krastev 2007) and politicians just had to play along and watch the story unravel. As David Ost successfully describes, "by presenting their policies not so much as 'good' ones but as 'necessary' ones, not as 'desirable' but as 'rational,' liberals left their supporters no acceptable way to protest or express dissatisfaction." (quoted in Krastev 2007: 58) The speed inherent in the transitional process and the flaws that ensued became fertile ground for anti-élite declarations and, frequently justified, accusations of fraud, cronyism and corruption. Populists were fast to grasp the dynamics of the anti-corruption theme and have since kept it high in their agendas.

The current picture is rather somber according to many scholars. Greskovits (2007: 40) asserts that 'large groups of citizens have chosen to refrain from participation in newly established democratic institutions, and that the remaining active electorate has become radicalized'. Krastev (2007: 56) sounds even more dramatic when he writes that '[p]opulism and illiberalism are tearing the region apart'. These findings point to the usual suspect: the tensions inherent in liberal democracy. More than twenty years have passed since the communist collapse, but democracy is not yet entrenched in the hearts and minds of East European citizens, while civil society is fundamentally weak. The hardships of the triple transition left some serious loopholes in the development of stable institutions which now undermine the whole structure.

However, participation in the EU and NATO works as a safeguard against the possibility that populist parties or coalitions that assume power will proceed to excesses that could jeopardize their countries' course towards deepening constitutional democracy and risk a regression back to authoritarianism (Mesežnikov et al. 2008). Globalization and interconnectedness play a crucial role; no government, with the exception of Belarus, has turned to strict isolationism, even though the rhetoric would appear as desiring the dismantling of liberal democratic institutions.

3. A comparative analysis with the West

Undoubtedly, West and East Europe have a multitude of fundamental differences. Their respective recent history, ethnic origins, living standards, democratic tradition and many other factors point to the fact that it is difficult to assume a comparative perspective on populism, since they start with completely different premises. However, some conclusions can and should be made in order to better understand the multiplicity and adaptability of the phenomenon of populism. While it is redundant to reiterate the core features of populist parties, which are assumed to be existent in both parts of the continent (anti-elitism, appeal to the people, authoritative leaders), there are still points to be made that carry a significance of their own.

An ideological overlap between West and East European populist parties is their Euroscepticism. In both cases, their conception of community, based on ethnonationalist ideals is undermined by the increasing delegation of national authority to supranational institutions, threatening their autonomy of identity. Bornschier (2010: 29) claims that the threat arises from the realization that 'the higher the level of policymaking, the more universalistic the rules of decision and the principles guiding decision making must be', something which is of course incompatible with the populist worldview. The single market also exposes domestic workers and small businesses to the pains of competition with exogenous forces. East and West European populists despise the EU on different economic grounds but on the same political ones. As a supranational liberal structure laden with technocrats, the EU is a sitting duck for populist fire. The more its prestige wanes, especially with regards to the current economic crisis and the 'enlargement fatigue' that preceded it, the more people become vulnerable to accusations against it.

Bornschier (2010) also distinguishes the origins of populist parties between the East and West. He claims that the emergence of populist right parties in Western Europe can be seen as a delayed counter-offensive to the universalist ideals of the left libertarian parties which emerged in the 70s and 80s (Green parties, environment parties etc.). Traditional issues of identity are now brought back to the fore, this time not on an overtly racist, but an 'ethno-pluralist' ideological platform. He then goes on to assert that the traditional class cleavage has evolved into a state-market cleavage

which cuts across social groups, while the religious cleavage has transformed into a cultural one.

This last dimension is where Western European populist parties collect their powers, while they stand perplexed regarding the state-market cleavage, where neoliberal propositions are frequently contaminated with assertions of the need to retain and strengthen the welfare state, albeit only for 'our people'. The case of the Front National in France and the proletarization of its electoral basis despite the party's at least initially neoliberal economic outlook serves as proof of the supremacy of the cultural cleavage in post-industrial societies (Bornschier 2010; Papadopoulos 2000). In the East, even more so than in the West, the state-market cleavage is not so obvious. Talk about neoliberal reforms is almost non-existent, since it falls into the jurisdiction of the élites and is alien to the nativist approach (Mudde 2007). The most crucial cleavages in the post-socialist countries are culture (ethnic, religious or other, with nationalism reigning supreme) and regime (opinion on the value of the socialist regime). The left and right are divided along these lines, and not according to their socioeconomic programs. One will frequently observe leftist parties running with a neoliberal agenda and also parties on the right with solid welfare-statist views (e.g. MSzP and Fidesz in the 1998 Hungarian elections). This differing cleavage structure is usually coupled with a 'traditional' view of political authority instead of a rational one (Minkenberg 2002).

Mudde (2001) points to the difference in treatment by the political system of nationalist-populist parties. Take for instance political correctness which is dominant in Western societies. Taboo issues such as Nazism, racism and homosexuality are rarely discussed openly; bigots are usually condemned by the totality of the media and the political system. However, these same issues are or at least have been adequately discussed between intellectuals and the outcome of this discussion has to a certain degree spilled over to the public sphere. Contrast this to Eastern societies, where racism or Nazism have been excluded 'by decree' (Minkenberg 2002: 340) rather than defeated after careful and serious argumentation. This has built up a tension within the citizens of the socialist countries who now take advantage of freedom of speech to express their suppressed views openly. If the West has to feel bad about its Nazi and fascist past, and populist parties are always on the target, the Eastern counterparts

cannot be accused for such legacy. Anti-Semitic remarks which in the West are usually disguised as pro-Palestinian or anti-American views, are openly circulating in the media and political discourse of East Europe (Kriza n.d.). Even worse, one can point to the regular use of this rhetoric by mainstream prominent intellectuals and politicians in East European countries, even Prime Ministers or Presidents, such as Vladimir Mečiar and Václav Havel in the past or Viktor Orbán nowadays. While in the West *cordons sanitaires* are unrolled to put restraints on populist parties, in the East it is not rare to see radical and opportunistic parties become members of government coalitions with mainstream parties (Učeň 2008). Minkenberg (2002), apart from attributing to Eastern radical parties a greater degree of extremity and antidemocratic feelings, also points to the interesting issue of structures increasingly resembling mainstream parties, while in the East the respective phenomena are more properly characterized as social movements rather that solid ideological arrangements.

Coming back to the core of populism, even though populist parties share a deep anti-elitism, it is interesting to note that the set of élites is described somewhat differently. In the East they usually include the former communist *nomenklatura* and its offspring, not the liberal administration or the bankers as we see in the West, paying scant attention to the ethnic origins of the members of the élite circles (Deegan-Krause 2007). The same differentiation in definition can be seen it the secondary targets of populist discourse. While in the West the most recognizable theme is anti-immigration, in post-socialist countries immigrants are replaced by ethnic minorities. In the words of Anastasakis (2000: 29), 'Western European extreme right ideology generates a climate of xenophobia and racism against multiculturalism and immigration while Eastern European extreme right breeds a climate of ethnic intolerance'. These arguments are strongly suggestive of the contextual dependence of populism which while retaining its structure, proves flexible enough to alter its content according to the society in which it emerges.

The homogenizing impact of further Europeanization for East Europe's political system can gradually lead to a tighter convergence of Eastern and Western populist party agendas. Greskovits (2007) divides non-traditional parties of the East into two groups: neoliberals and illiberal, and believes that they will gradually converge to an image akin to the Western European populist family. While this is indeed a

possibility, the East seems to possess a comparative advantage for populist mobilization and so carries distinct features which will in the least delay this resemblance.

Populism is indeed an elusive term, much like other notions such as 'instinct', 'charisma' or 'culture'. We routinely use it in our speech, we acknowledge its manifestations, we don't feel like anybody has to explain its meaning to us, we can even describe some of its characteristics and point to its instances. However, if we are asked to articulate and define it in a few words, we always face an impasse. When we discuss it with people that are experiencing it in a different context, we realize that their understanding differs greatly than ours. A 'descriptive enumeration of a variety of relevant features' is as far as we can go (Laclau 2005: 3). Sometimes, this is more than enough to get the discussion going; as Justice Potter Stewart famously reasoned regarding pornography, 'we know it when we see it'.

However, a description that fits almost everything is not a description at all. If we want our label to actually make sense and communicate reality, we need to be very careful in assigning it. The number of parties deemed populist in scientific research increases with the number of papers read. It is so easy to be labeled a populist that even condemning populism as a menace for democracy might be considered a populist act. We need to stick to the central dipole, 'the people' versus the élites, where 'the people' is used in an emotive way, and the élites are not only politicians, but a wider set of individuals with strong administrative or economic positions, while their denunciation is always coupled with an aura of conspiracy.

There are a few points to be made on the actual 'ideology' of populism. Mainly, it rests on an anti-liberal worldview which detests diversity and lionizes homogeneity. In its heart lie the idolization of the masses and the suffocation of the individual. Populists do not accept a modern polity ridden with complexities, cleavages, opposing views and diverse mentalities. They visualize society as an 'essentially consensual and uniform' entity (MacRae 1969: 160) which encompasses and materializes the true will of the people through the mediation not of distorting institutions, but simply through the actions of a benevolent and trustful leader. The utopian community consists of close or distant relatives who have returned to the ideal way of life as it is depicted in the comfortably assumed collective unconscious. The emotional journey

starts with a sigh; a sigh that incorporates blissful images of the forefathers, the sacred motherland, the quiet refuge of rural life, the friendly neighbor, the Sunday mass of childhood. This deep conservatism is primarily reflected in the frantic reaction against social innovation and globalization.

Populism is a top-down approach with a strong touch of dirigisme and paternalism that dominates over every other characteristic. The state guarantees against the risks of pluralism and the individual loves the state since only through it can she materialize and acquire meaning. Populists cherish the golden past because they are terrified of the unknown future and vice versa. Nostalgia and a feeling of obligation to the forefathers and the offspring prevail. Trust plays a significant role in the relation of the leader with the people; this is why accusations of betrayal and high treason are so frequently launched against the ruling élites. Simplicity is appealing, so the outliers of society will just have to step aside and give way to the domination of the core societal matter, the pure popular soul which cannot be troubled with claims of differentiation and marginal viewpoints. In the populist world, freedom is relegated to being able to stand in unison with the community, to be morally identical to your fellowmen and not much more than that. Political will supersedes the rule of law, direct democracy is preferable to procedural democracy, and individual rights are dependent on the possession of ascribed characteristics.

Populist arguments are not always necessarily one-hundred percent false. They do sometimes contain a grain of truth. Even conspiracy theories might start off with a veritable core. The problems begin when populists bloat a fact into a disproportionate argument, deriving conclusions along the way that do not correspond to reality. The simplistic view of the world is easy to sell but does not fare well on the truth scale. A multitude of forces are usually at work, and when the effects of unintended consequences of intended actions are added, then it is more than obvious that there are no blanket explanations of social phenomena that follow a single successful master plan devised by vicious masterminds.

In Eastern and Southeastern Europe the promises of transition were not met to the fullest; corruption prevails and the standard of living has not come close to Western European standards. This grim realization supplies a strong foothold for populist

mobilization, regardless of the progress that has undoubtedly been achieved in most countries of the region. The socioeconomic complexity in times of crisis works as a fine excuse for indolence. Believing that there are simple solutions to the problems of the most complex structure in this world, the human society, is not mere *naiveté*. It is a primarily a way to divest yourself of the pains of trying to unravel its mysteries, by blaming the 'corrupt' and 'unintelligible' intellectual élites instead and become relieved of the democratic obligation of thinking, resorting to the safe havens of conspiracy theories and tribalism. Populism is a step back on the path to democratic progress and a step forward in the path to totalitarianism. The portfolio of populist mobilization around the world is evidence enough that its 'empty heart' can be easily punctured and what is left is a society which has fallen behind compared to other nations that decided or were lucky enough not to follow on the same course.

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