

Introduction

This book is the result of papers that were presented during the first conference organized within the scope of the Poprebel project — *Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism*. Poprebel is a Horizon 2020-funded research project that analyses the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe and is run by a consortium of six universities: UCL (coordinator), Jagiellonian University, Charles University, Tartu University, Corvinus University of Budapest, Faculty of Philosophy Belgrade University, and thinktank Edgeryders. A conference entitled *CONTEMPORARY POPULISM AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES: Discourses and Practices in Central and South-Eastern Europe* was held in Belgrade in December 2019 and, apart from colleagues from the Poprebel project, it gathered scientists and experts interested in populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Populism is one of the most frequently used terms in contemporary political and public debates. In many ways, it frames the public understanding of our current personal and collective political experiences. The use of this (almost magic) word became increasingly popular after Brexit and Trump's election in 2016, but in Central and South-Eastern Europe it was already present and growing for quite some time. However, until then, it didn't provoke enough curiosity as it was observed as a kind of local anomaly. The socialist post-1945 experience of former Warsaw Pact countries and socialist Yugoslavia led to the establishment of a system that was dominated by a single party and powerful party politburos. The collapse of communism and the demise of the Warsaw Pact led to a transition that, in the cases of some countries, still hasn't finished. Some former communist states like Poland were considered the champions of transition while others like Yugoslavia broke up in bloody wars that lasted for 10 years.

All the countries that emerged since the end of the Cold War are considered democracies, yet they cannot be defined as consolidated democracies, but at best as democracies in the process of consolidation or even backsliding and de-consolidation (Greskovits, 2015). In these countries, populism has developed in parallel with the building of democratic institutions and has become the mainstream (Lutovac, 2017: 61; Beslin et al., 2020: 7).

While populism in Western Europe has emerged because of a slow-burning crisis of political representation, growing alienation between elites and citizens, and challenges such as social inequality, migration, and multiculturalism (Mudde 2016),

in the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, the situation is quite different. It would be a grave mistake to address those former socialist countries as homogeneous, as there are significant differences in their experience in the development of democracy after the fall of communism (Kubik, 2013). Both Serbia and Croatia, the biggest states of the former Yugoslavia, in the post-2000 period provided very fertile ground for the development of populism due to the dominance of catch-all parties that incorporates both left and right ideological messages so they could appeal to the widest possible groups in the electorate (Beslin et al., 2020: 8).

One of the constitutive ideas in various countries of the former Yugoslavia was that the nation was exclusively an ethnically homogeneous group, and the only legitimate political framework within which individuals can act. Consequently, leaders should be nationalistically oriented and insist on a rhetoric aimed at preserving national consciousness, national values, internal coherence, etc. The foundation of such values and policies was perfectly conducive to the development of authoritarianism and the rise of populist leaders who would make discursive distinctions between “us” (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks) and “them” (those who are not ‘our nation’) (Dajc et al., 2022:5).

The situation in Poland and Hungary, on other hand, was very different. Apart from not experiencing the so-called socialism with a human face, their post-socialist transition was not affected by the violent dissolution of the former state.

Characteristics of populism in CE countries (like Poland and Hungary) are different in some aspects when compared to the Western Balkans. Poland illustrates what Krastev (2007: 58) defines as “the Central European paradox”, where the rise of populism is “an outcome not of the failures but of the successes of post-communist liberalism”. (Beslin et al., 2020: 8)

In Poland, populism is led by parties and organizations on the right side of the political spectrum. Their favorite rhetoric is anti-elite (both internally and externally), and their claim to represent the “the people” — these features make Polish populists not only Eurosceptic but also Europhobic (Beslin et al., 2020: 9).

Populism in Hungary is dominated by Fidesz, and its central feature seems to be an anti-Western rhetoric that paradoxically has no roots in Hungary pre 1989 (Beslin et al., 2020: 9). The frustration of Hungarian society caused by the economic lagging behind the West can be seen as one the main *spiritus movens* for the successful flourishing of populism steered by Fidesz.

As there is no generic model of post-communism in Central and South-Eastern Europe, it is important to have collections of papers that can compare the very different causes and consequences of contemporary populism in this part of Europe.

II

The book is divided into three sections that examine the populist impact on three aspects of societal reality — economy, politics, and various discursive practices that chart and reshape our everyday experiences.

In the first section of the book — entitled economy — three papers are presented. In the first paper, Ljubomir Madžar analyzes the convictions of public opinion relating to the alleged superiority of the socialist institutional order in the contemporary development of the Serbian economy. He argues and proves, in the Serbian case, how the collectivist system of the socialist past has its destructive legacies. In the second paper, Paulina Lenik identifies several policies introduced under the Fidesz government in the years 2010-2019, which were supposed to advance wealth redistribution and assist the poorest strata of society in Hungary. She concludes that the politics behind state interventionism in the country seemingly follows the populist narrative of the governing party. However, the long-term economic rationale of such a centralisation of market power may have detrimental effects on the competitiveness of the country, essentially reducing its potential for economic growth. In the third paper, the authors Ognjen Radonjić and Rosana Antoni Kotorchevikj focus on providing a clear definition and political classification of the term populism in a political and economic sense on a global scale. Likewise, the authors also focus on a comparison of the populist experience between the EU and the Western Balkans. Authors refer to the concept of economic neo-feudalism understood as “a distinct pattern of capitalism, which describes the emergence of personal dependencies providing security, that occurs alongside the capitalist mode of production” (Benczes et al., 2020: 9).

The papers in the central part of the book — entitled politics — trace the roots of populism and its contemporary political consequences in the Western Balkan region. Authors analyze populism focusing on a longer period — since the 19th and 20th centuries — and explain how specific historical circumstances accompanied by other social factors led to the success of populists in the region. The first paper by Milivoj Bešlin and Petar Žarković focuses on the continuity of populism in Serbia from the late 19th century until the present time. They explain the transformation of leftist and pro-Yugoslav populism into a predominantly right-wing Serbian populism with an ultranationalist content. The second paper, by Nikola Samardžić, addresses Russia and the Western Balkans in the first two decades of Vladimir Putin’s rule and explains the rise of populism and hybrid warfare, and its consequences not only for the Western Balkans but also for the EU. Samardžić analyzes the failure of EU politics in the containment of Russia, especially after the First Ukrainian war in 2014 that contributed to the rise of populist politicians in the Western Balkans and in the EU. He explains the methods there were used in Russian hybrid warfare and the main collaborators and beneficiaries in the Western Balkans. Since

February 2022 and the newest Russian aggression on Ukraine, the conclusions of the author provided to be farsighted. His work on this topic in the Poprebel project contributed to the working paper published in December 2021 that showed Russian (hidden and overt) economic, political, and cultural influences in Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro (Dajc et al 2021: 4). The next paper written by Haris Dajč and Nataša Jovanović Ajzenhamer explores the populist left and populist right through socio-economic programmers of mainstream parties in Serbia and Croatia. The authors analyzed the main legal documents of four parties in Serbia and Croatia, with the of examining whether the hypothesis constructed for Western European countries can be applied to former socialist countries like Serbia and Croatia. This research also shows that there are no major discrepancies between the economic programmes of left-wing and right-wing parliamentary parties in Serbia and Croatia, and that these are in fact catch-all parties. In the fourth paper of this section, the author Alexander Mesarovich uses a Social Network Analysis to analyse the coping strategies of national minority parties within Serbia and Croatia, attempting to understand how these parties view their political space and under what conditions they cooperate with populists and sometimes even oppose populist politicians. Branka Galić is the author of the next paper that examines some sociological elements of neoconservative politics in populist movements in Croatian society. She also analyzes the very important phenomenon of clericalism in the Croatian educational system, giving a new awareness of what attempts were made to impose clerical influence on the educational system and secular society in Croatia, with a special focus on the University of Zagreb and the imposed integration of the Catholic Faculty of Theology and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences that eventually failed. Aleksandar Weisner is focused on Serbia and proposes a new theoretical perspective, arguing that state capture should be replaced in modern theory by a new term that better explains the real political and socio-economic situation — contaminated society. As a case study, he examples the militarization of public space. In the last paper of this section, Marko Tmušić shows how the pursuit of political identity in Serbia, especially after the beginning of the transition process, influenced the inability to create a long-term sustainable growth model. The author concludes that the authoritarian dimension of politics — and consequently of the economy — has withstood the numerous changes that have accompanied the historical development of the political and economic system of Serbia and, as such, has provided fertile ground for the flourishing of political and economic populism.

The papers presented in the third section of the book try to rethink different discursive practices mostly related to (both old and new) media which in various ways support the rise, launch and promotion of populist narratives within different societies and media systems. The authors Isidora Jarić, Danica Balaban, and Sneža-

na Bajčeta examine the usage of a classic journalist tool — unnamed sources — in contemporary journalistic practices in Serbian print media. The research shows how unnamed sources are misused in the promotion of populist political discourse among the ruling party and the political discrediting of opposition leaders.

The next three papers explore the consequences of media practices that promote particular discourses that question LGBT human rights in different cultural and societal contexts. In her paper, Caroline Hill examines morality policy-framing strategies employed by officials of the Russian Orthodox Church related to LGBT Rights and contemporary debates in Russia and the interplay between church and state morality policy concerning the same issue. Slobodanka Dekić aims to contextualize the contemporary same-sex partnership advocacy efforts of Serbian LGBT activists within the wider context of family policies and family reality in contemporary, neoliberal, conservative Serbian society with a populist political elite in power that promotes “anti-gender” narratives on the family. Olena Yermakova examines the way how the current ruling Polish party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), frames its anti-LGBT rhetoric and uses it for its political gains.

Two papers rethink populist reactions to contemporary migration flows. Teodora Jovanović analyses the structure of the arguments within contemporary anti-migrant rhetoric, and shows that they are intellectually rooted in the European New Right and cross-national far-right networks. Elodie Thevenin discusses parliamentary debates of members of the parliament from the ruling Law and Justice party in Poland, and shows how the migration issue is politicized and mediatized in the Polish parliament. The research points to different layers of critique, as well as their articulation used by Law and Justice MPs as a strategy to construct their vision of what they want for Poland and of what Europe ought to be.

In the last paper, Péter Molnár and Gyula Balázs Csáki-Hatalovics examine the role of social media in the Hungarian elections in 2019. The authors compare the results from the 2019 elections in Hungary with the use of social media during the campaign by the various political forces in order to understand the effective influence of social media on the electoral results.

Since early 2020, we experienced several waves of the Covid-19 pandemic that showed how incompetent populist and authoritarian leaders are despite their image of strongmen. And when one of the many waves of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to lose strength, we witnessed a new full-scale war declared by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022. Since the war started, we have analyzed and read numerous articles and reports concerning the causes of the war — in particular, the diabolic speeches of the Russian president to his scared and silent audience at home. He has shown that he believes himself to be a historian and sees himself suitable for a messianic plan of rewriting history. He has omitted not only security

guarantees that Russia gave to its neighbor Ukraine but to the international community, too (which he's violated without much punishment in the last two decades) and has also shown that the time of Catherine the Great and Peter the Great belongs only to trained historians, and not to statesmen that believe themselves to be a messiah.

All these world-changing processes have also contributed to the publication only being published now.

Haris Dajč

Belgrade, September 2022

References / Bibliography

- Benczes et al. (2020). conceptualisation and theorisation of the demand side of populism, economic inequality and insecurity. Poprebel Working Paper 5 <https://populism-europe.com/poprebel/poprebel-working-papers/>
- Beslin et al. (2020). Political populism from the fringe to the mainstream: A conceptual framework. Poprebel Working Paper 4 <https://populism-europe.com/poprebel/poprebel-working-papers/>
- Dajc et al. (2021). Russian (hidden and overt) economic, political and cultural influences in Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro. Poprebel Working Paper 10 <https://populism-europe.com/poprebel/poprebel-working-papers/>
- Dajc et al. (2022). Populist political parties of former Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Poprebel Working Paper 11 <https://populism-europe.com/poprebel/poprebel-working-papers/>
- Greskovits, Béla. (2015). "The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe". *Global Policy* 6 (S1): 28-37.
- Kubik, Jan. (2013). "From Transitology to Contextual Holism: A Theoretical Trajectory of Post-communist Studies." In *Postcommunism from Within: Social Justice, Mobilization, and Hegemony*, edited by Jan Kubik and Amy Linch. New York: SSRN/NYU Press, 27-94.
- Lutovac, Zoran (2017). "Populizam i demokratija u Srbiji". In: Lutovac, Zoran (eds.), *Populizam*, Beograd: Institut za društvene nauke, 49-66.
- Mudde, Cas (2016). "Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making". *Foreign Affairs* 95 (November/December): 25-30.