# Economic populism between charismatic and authoritarian leadership

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**Abstract:** *Populism and its new forms, labelled as neo-populism, have become political practice lately with major consequences that exceed the political discourse sphere and have an impact on the content of representative democracies and parliamentarism.*

*The analysis of the leadership of those following this direction shows a tendency in changing the relations between the leaders and the citizens they target, evolving from charisma to authoritarianism. Under these circumstances, the support of the majority of the electorate legitimizes unilateral decisions that damage the desires of the same majority and the trust in the representative democracy. Influencing the vote through generous economic and social programs has become the core of the electoral discourses.*

*An important dimension of populism is the economic populism. The ones who will hold the power, will also have power over the resources allocation. Thus, the national interest can be replaced with the personal interest of some social categories that can also influence subsidiary categories of citizens. Therefore, the political populism is justified by the cultural populism, with emphasis on the ethnicity issue and the access to economic resources (only certain categories are entitled to access these limited resources, the rest*

*of categories are considered inappropriate). The mimicry of representative democracy will bring the denial of some fundamental values of democracy: tolerance, fight against racism, equal opportunities etc. In the name of general welfare, the charismatic leadership leads to authoritarianism within deeply divided societies, which are affected by economic and social inequalities in uncertain times which are considered to be threatening, especially regarding the resources.*

*Our research aims at bringing forward the relation between populism and leadership, and emphasizing the evolutions of populism in the political discourses towards legitimization of economic and cultural populism.*

***Keywords****: populist discourse, economic populism, charismatic leadership, authoritarian leadership, reprezentative democracy*

### Introduction

Given the economic crisis in the USA and Europe, we can state that the second decade of the 21st century is marked by populism. The rise of the conservative Viktor Orban in Hungary or that of the charismatic Alexis Tsipras in Greece, were only the beginning; the climax was reached in 2016 when the Great Britain adhered to the anti-European populist discourse of Nigel Farage and voted to leave the EU and Donald Trump became the 45th American president. The fact that Norbert Hofer, the Freedom Party candidate to the presidential elections in Austria, lost the elections should not make us forget he actually won the first round of voting and that the difference between him and his rival in the decisive round was of less than a percent. In the same way, the fact that Marine Le Pen lost the presidential elections in France should not make us forget that her score in 2017 in the second round of voting was double compared to the score obtained in the same type of confrontation by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jacques Chirac in 2002. This rise of the populist leaders confirms the observation of Heather Grabble who said that in May 2014, around one in

four Europeans voted for protest and anti-establishment candidates in the first pan-European poll since the euro crisis began (2014:79).

This is only the tip of the iceberg; in the last decade, the populist movements – right-wing populism targeting migrants and minorities in the North, left-wing populism rooted in the communist period, in the South [1]- has found considerable electoral support both in Western and in Eastern Europe. Yet, Minkenberga argues that there are some differences: while in the west part of Europe conservative parties tamed the populist's electoral success, in Eastern Europe the populist contagion towards mainstream parties has certainly happened.

The quick seize of the public sphere, the ambivalent relationship with democracy as well as the ubiquity of this concept, has attracted a considerable interest from scholars as well as from public stances (politicians, journalists, analysts) and inspired much debate and much confusion (Stanley, 2008: 95). It has been studied from various theoretical

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[1] Not only post-communist countries, but also democratic countries dabbled the communist ideology (Greece, Italy, Spain)

perspectives, including structuralism, post-structuralism, social movement theory, political economy and democratic theory etc.; there were several methodological approaches employed, including archival research, discourse analysis, content analysis and formal modelling; its political, economic, social and even discursive futures were taken into consideration up to the point where the mercurial nature of populism has often exasperated those attempting to take it seriously (idem:108).

### Theoretical Dimensions of Populism

However different, all scholars' perspectives on populism agrees on the Manichean dichotomy between Good – „the people" and Evil –"the elite" that oppresses it. On the left side of the political spectrum, one might place Latin American populist who favour state-led economies, employ inclusionary rhetoric and relied upon nationalism and charismatic authority to weld together various and often conflictual social constituencies (Collier&Collier, 1991) while on the right side, populism targets migrants as in the West and in the North of Europe (Mudde 2007) and minorities in Central and Eastern Europe (Pirro, 2015). Although often overlooked, nowadays Southern Europe populism blended inter-war far-right populism (Surugiu 2009) and left-wing populism rooted in the communist period.

According to Margeret Canovan one might trace several dimensions of this dichotomy: united people, an entire nation or county, in opposition to fractions and parties that divide them; our people, sharing the same „blood", in contrast with "the others" who do not belong to the group; ordinary people, who are mobilized against highly educated, cosmopolitan elite. Both „the people" and „the elite" are homogenous unities, fully formed, self-aware and identifiable.

There are four dimensions of populism in use in the social sciences nowadays: structural, economic, political-institutional and discursive. In this article, we'll focus on the first two approaches, even if until recently they were associated with the Latin America and the west-European political scientists had a condescending view on them in the context of the economic crisis in the United States and Europe. The structural and economic populism have started to show in this side of the world also. As Carlos Vilas stresses out, the structuralism approach claims that populism was a product of the historical conjecture which affected Latin America after the 1930's crisis busted. According to this view, populist regimes are those using cross-class coalitions and popular mobilization to support import-substituting industrialization (Malloy, 1977, Germani, 1978, Hamilton 1980, Kitching, G, 2010). This type of populism incorporated workers and capitalist within broad, multi-class political coalitions baking social reform and state-nurtured industrialization. It strongly relied upon nationalism and charismatic authority to weld together various and often conflictual social constituencies. It also made special appeals to urban workers and labour unions, who were bound to the state by corporatist mechanisms for the distribution of benefits and the exercise of political control (Conniff, 1982, Collier&Collier, 1991). Classical populism, as Cardoso&Helwege call in, links the working class with the industrial bourgeoisie and minimized interclass antagonisms through the propagation of a broadly nationalist ideology.

The economical approach of populism identifies it with output's policy appealing to a certain economical category (Dornbusch&Edwards, 1991). It sees populism as a political strategy used to signal to voters their inclusion (left parties) or other's exclusion (right parties) to/from the economical outputs apportionment. For above mentioned authors, "economic populism is an approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and de-emphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket politics" (idem).

The populist leaders that promote economic arguments start from the existence and perpetuation of the conflicts based on economic dissatisfaction and social inequalities. The conflict has arisen and arises wherever there are people, ideas, values, circumstances, styles and standards that can create conflict, which means that anything can become the source of a conflict: objectives, goals, aims, unconfirmed expectations, customs, prejudices, personalities and ideologies, competition, sensitivity and offense, aggressiveness and many more. (V. Păuș, 2006: 261) Sam Deep and Lyle Sussman (1996:120-121) say that some of the causes of conflict perpetuation might be that in a world that is more and more complex and diverse, different persons want different things and there a few things that can satisfy everyone. Moreover, we live and work in a world that sets limits on our resources; we rarely get exactly what we want or, better said, we try to get the most we can given the options provided and limits imposed.

In this context, the leader who presents the most generous economic and social programs and can prove to also have the means to develop them, can influence the voters' choices. For instance, some mayors' success in the elections, who have successive mandates and without any critical perspective, promise a continuous town development, becoming themselves the guarantee of the project achievements that will improve the citizens' welfare. We can also consider to be economic populism the political success gained at some point by Gigi Becali through the generous donations and charity works and also through his discourse marked by Christianity and mercy.

The economic populism is more noticeable in the poor countries. For the northern countries, these rights are in the normal order of things, as part of the national income is shared. They rarely appear as populist arguments. Nonetheless, without being considered a populist discourse, the economic and social programs presented by Emmanuel Macron, the new president of France, that supposedly gained him votes, start from a point in which France already has an economic rise, even since Sarkozy and Hollande were in office. From this point of view, we can consider Macron's political communication to be effective, legitimate and consensual, aiming at „gaining the trust and approval of the voters to achieve the established direction" (Antonio Momoc, 2014: 67).

Dominique Reynié, professor at Sciences Po Paris, explains in his book Les nouveaux populismes, (Nouvelle édition augmentée, Pluriel, 2013) the success of the current populisms through the inability of the political elites to respond to the economic issues in those countries and the effects of multiculturalism through the exponential increase of the workforce migration from the poor

areas to those with developed economies and that of the refugees in conflict zones (apud Chantal Tauxe, (2015) Peu de pays européens y échappent, le populisme, fils de la crise, fleurit telle la mauvaise herbe. Mais pourquoi prend-il une telle ampleur? Décryptage en huit points. http://www.hebdo.ch/hebdo/cadrages/detail/comment-les-nouveaux-populistes-nous-manipulent).

The political scientist Dominique Reynié speaks about a patrimonial populism with two great dimensions: the conservative and fierce defense of a material patrimony, represented by the standard of living, and a non-material patrimony, which is the lifestyle. The populism uses forms of impugnment in order to defend these two dimensions that are threatened in Europe by the aging population and immigration (Dominique Reynié, 2011).

### The populist leader

If we define the leadership as influence on communication (Teiller, Y., 1999: 126), and take into consideration the specificity of political leadership which aims at deliberately influencing the voters on a short term, especially in the political campaigns; we appeal to an enhancement of the charismatic and polemic features of the programmatic discourses, while the receiver is not necessarily aware of the fact that he is being influenced intentionally.

If we refer to the theories of emotional intelligence, the purpose of these leaders is to obtain, through charisma and empathy, a "state of simultaneous vibration", an emotional harmonization which makes people vibrate in contact with the optimistic and enthusiastic energy of the leader. One of the main features of the leadership based on emotional intelligence is that the resonance amplifies and extends the emotional impact of the leader. When people resonate better among themselves, their interactions become less and less static. The leaders who have a superior emotional intelligence create resonance instinctively (Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, 2007: 42).

The populist leader uses different discursive strategies in order to create a charismatic image. Patrick Charaudeau identifies three discursive hypostases: building the self-image, so that he becomes credible (credibility ethos) and, at the same time attractive (identification ethos) to his voters (Charaudeau, 2005, apud Charaudeau, 2011), as well as the strategy of values presentation, so that the citizen embraces them enthusiastically. The important thing in the political discourse is not simply the truth, but also the persuasion force of the discourse and its truthfulness (Charaudeau, 2011:105).

The core of the populist discourse is the natural antagonism between the "pure, virtuous people" and the "corrupt elites" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004). The one who is summoned to solve the issue and restore the people's rights and sovereignty is the populist leader. He criticizes the elites for hampering the centrality of the people (Roodujin, 2013) and wants to grant the people its power and voice (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). As Daniela di Piramo avers in the preamble of her article stress:

"The charismatic populist leader fascinates, mystifies and excites. Populist leaders etch their mark deeply and indelibly on the canvas of national and global history; often colourful and flamboyant, they are successful at forging a bond with their followers that

rarely fails to include moral or religious overtones. Populist leaders affirm to be speaking for and with the people; beyond mere representation, they claim to personify the people and to be prepared to faithfully follow something relatively similar to what Rousseau referred to as the "general will". In the midst of this tumultuous identification and bonding process, institutional boundaries and conventions are often disregarded, if not derided, in favour of unmediated contact with their citizens."

In order to resonate with the citizens' feelings, the populist leaders create scenarios using three discursive moments, as Patrick Charaudeau says: 1) to prove that the society is in a disastrous social state and that the citizens are its first victim; 2) to determine the source of the evil and who is responsible for it, therefore the rivals; 3) to announce the solutions he forecasts (P. Charaudeau:105).

As Canovan (1999) argues, populist leaders reject backroom deals, complicated procedures, secret treaties, coalition-building, or technicalities. In the meantime, they advocate an unmediated, transparent, and simple link between the people and their government favoring direct democracy and referendums as well as directly elected leaders and reduction of powers of the parliament and other intermediary bodies (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Also, populists reject constitutionalism and representation (March, 2012) as well as other institutions or procedures "which impede the direct and full expression of the people's voice" (Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 9). In their rhetoric, the established political parties "corrupt the link between leaders and supporters, create artificial divisions within the homogeneous people and put their own interests above those

of the people" (Mudde, 2004) and, therefore, any collaboration with them is forbidden. In contrast, populists are one with the people and instinctively know what the people wants (Albertazzi &McDonnell 2008). The populists see themselves as the voice of the people and emphasize the idea of popular sovereignty (Meny & Surel, 2002, Rooduijn, 2013).

One of the features of the populist leadership is putting the representative democracies between brackets and referring directly to the "political elites".

In our opinion, this is the origin of the transformation of charisma into authoritarianism. The argument invoked by these leaders is that the desires and aspirations of the majority of citizens will be accomplished only through the legal authority they will be given and authoritarian measures. Here we find a paradox that the civil society does not seem to notice: the authoritarianism as political practice means denying or ignoring the political opposition and also the opinion of the civil society. Under these circumstances, the populist leaders promise a non-coercive, manipulative leadership, while the civil society assumes the role of gatekeeper of the law and censor for applying the electoral programs, assuming a collective coercive leadership with the elected leader and his government.

Sometimes, winning positions through populism is followed by authoritarian measures imposed by the results of the vote. For instance, the populist discourse of the leader Farage who has tilted the balance of the referendum towards the Great Britain leaving the EU; also, the discourse and authoritarian position of the current prime minister, Thereza May, who has to meet the challenges

of Brexit and its consequences for the United Kingdom.

Another issue we can discuss is that of Donald Trump winning the elections in the USA. Although his discourse is mostly populist, the structure of his personality is authoritarian. An American magnate with a fabulous fortune, he has promoted all along the competition, lack of tolerance and harshness in decision-making (also see the American series The Apprentice (2004), a reality show produced by NBC whose star was Donald Trump himself). To a certain amount, the Americans' vote denied the fundamental values of democracy: tolerance, cultural anti-racism, ethnic non-discrimination etc. On the other hand, his discourse has awoken the American Dream in the common citizen, who could live in a flourishing America. Trump's choice was the society's need for authoritarianism in uncertain times, perceived as threatening, especially regarding the resources and the individual chances at success in a genuine multicultural society. If we were to label the most recent three leaders who had an impact on the United States, we can state that Barack Obama was a democratic-charismatic leadership, Hillary Clinton a democratic-uncharismatic leadership and Donald Trump, an authoritarian-charismatic leadership.

### Conclusions

Regardless of its origin and form, the populism (ideological, economic or cultural) is a product of the crisis, which can be political, economic, of identity or of any other kind, a product of the economic globalization, of multiculturalism with its consequences and globalization of communication. Considered to be an ideological melting-pot, it is the answer to the dissatisfaction and frustrations of large categories of citizens. New media and free communication on Facebook give the opportunity of not only expressing ideas and opinions, but also to gather in real time large groups of protesters that adhere, sometimes through manipulation, sometimes out of conviction, to the populist ideas conveyed; here is where we find a new tendency – not necessarily a formal or informal leader or a political group, but a plurality of voices, more or less disparate, which manage however to unite and form large-scale protests, which are then monopolized by populist leaders. Charlene Li, in Open Leadership: How Social Technology Can Transform How You Lead (2010), talks about "openness, transparency and authenticity" as the fundamental precepts of leadership. In this work, Charlene Li provides resources for leaders willing to use social media while maintaining control. It ensures communication and social media connectivity and leads to a shared communication (culture of sharing) (apud V. Păuș, 2013).

We think that we can talk about a new kind of leader, the savior leader (P. Charaudeau, 2011), recognized not through representative or elective democracy, but through the polymorphic voice of some large collectivities, whose voice and influence are visible in both public and online markets. We talk about a generalized empathy that goes beyond the geo-political borders and finds convergence and support, among other things, in all types of populism that impregnates the political and media discourse from Europe to the Latin America.

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