

Elections and Fears in the European Periphery: Populism and Euroscepticism¹

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Elections in many EU member states are being decided on the basis of wide-spread fears. Successful parties and candidates are normally those, who best express and probably even fan such fears. As a result, the political mainstream is under significant pressure: more and more voters distrust pro-European, supra-national, progressive type of politics which relies on the coordination among a plurality of equal actors. Instead, there is a tendency to support more clear-cut chains of command and authority, expedience, narrowly defined national interests. This, I argue, is the platform of what could be called ‘populism of fear’ – a specific type of ideology, which becomes more and more successful as a tool for voter mobilization. Recent events – the crisis in the Eurozone, the refugee crisis and the terrorist acts are only going to amplify this tendency.

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‘The Rise of Populism’ has become an umbrella concept used to explain political developments in a striking variety of contexts.² The brand ‘populists’ is associated with political actors as diverse as the Tea Party in the US, Berlusconi and his associates in Italy, the UKIP in the UK, Fidesz in Hungary, Smer in Slovakia, PiS in Poland, and the former tzar of Bulgaria Simeon Sax Coburg Gotha and his body guard/successor Boyko Borissov. Therefore, it is understandable that many fear that the concept of populism is simply meaningless: at best, it might connote the existence of concerns (of different nature) about the state of democracy in different settings. As the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai put it, the fact that we are in the same hospital does not mean that we suffer from the same illness.

In this paper, against the background of mostly Eastern European examples, I argue that the concept of populism might turn out to be more substantial than that and more useful as explanation of current developments in democracy. For this purpose, however, it needs to be clarified analytically by allowing for different varieties of populisms. On the basis of such an analysis, I argue that the current version of populism is essentially negative, constraining and disabling vis-à-vis the state, since it is an expression of a growing public disbelief in the possibilities for positive collective action in the public interest. Popular majorities fear that state action could produce more harm than good, and led by these fears they elect representatives, who disable the instruments of the state to change the status quo, to introduce

¹ Work in progress, please do not cite without permission.

² For an introduction to the phenomenon of populism see Meny Y. and Surel Y.(ed.), (2002), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave, New York

substantial policy changes. Further, the current type of populism has largely abandoned the idea of elections and political representation as an essential tool for emancipation: it does not strive to extend the scope of rights to new groups. On the contrary, it is protective and conservative in nature: it aims to guarantee largely the same level of rights and entitlements to existing majorities. And finally, the contemporary variety of populism is not essentially antagonistic to a certain version of constitutionalism, understood as constraints on power. It has often been thought that populism and constitutionalism are irreconcilable enemies in the framework of liberal democracy. Thus, a rise of populism – as expressive of the will of the people – is expected to bring troubles for constitutionalism – understood as a set of constraints on the will of the majority, and vice versa. The dominant liberal fear from dictatorship of the majority has shaped much of the thinking about constitutionalism from Mill to Dworkin. Judith Sklar, for instance, has famously argued that the main motivation behind constitutionalism has been the fear from majoritarian abuses, and indeed cruelty.³ Paradoxically, the contemporary populists do not strive to create an unconstrained majoritarian democracy or to augment and concentrate state power: thus, by and large, they have not been opposed to constitutionalisation of constraints on majority powers. The hybrid that is born I refer to as ‘populism of fear’.

Below, after a more general discussion of populism (especially in East European perspective), I address the main three features of its contemporary variety, and then discuss political and constitutional implications for liberal democracy.

1. Elections in Eastern Europe and populism

The concept of ‘populism’ in Eastern Europe is used – in scholarly literature - primarily to depict the rise of democratic illiberalism in the region.⁴ The new turn to illiberalism has been especially evident in the mainstreaming of nationalism, and the excessive zeal in the fight against organised crime and corruption (which is not necessarily correlated with tangible positive results in these areas). This specific reorientation of public policy has happened at the expense of traditional liberal values as freedom of speech, expression, and religious belief, privacy and security of personal data and communication, constitutional presumptions of innocence, etc. The gradual undermining of these core liberal values has put to the test the principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law.⁵

As far as the mainstreaming of nationalism is concerned, the trend is rather universal. The rise of parties like Ataka in Bulgaria, and Yobbik in Hungary, is of course the most visible part of it, but probably more important is the infiltration of nationalistic agenda in ‘mainstream’

³ "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, edited by Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴ Grigorij Meseznikov, Olga Gyarfasova, and Daniel Smilov (eds.), *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, IVO (IPA) working paper series, Bratislava. Available at: <http://www.ivo.sk/5353/en/news/ivo-released-working-paper-populist-politics-and-liberal-democracy-in-central-and-eastern-europe>

⁵ On populism as an ideology see the work of Mudde, C (2002) “In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populism in Eastern Europe”, in Meny and Surel, (eds.) (2002) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave; (2004) “The Populist Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, Blackwell Publishing, 4/2004; (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

parties, like Fidesz, GERB, PiS in Poland, Smer in Slovakia, and so on. The illiberal turn in this regard is seen in general widespread negative attitudes against ethnic and religious minorities, but also in concrete policy changes in citizenship laws and voting rights acts, for instance. In Hungary, although it is hardly an exception, the very concept of constitutionalism has come to the test with the Fidesz 2011 rather radical revision of the whole constitutional framework of the country, including such issues as the freedom of the media, the scope of constitutional review, the independence of regulatory bodies, etc.

The excessive zeal in the fight against corruption and organised crime is more apparent in Romania and Bulgaria, reputed to be more affected by these phenomena. But there are region-wide trends in this area as well, as the attempts to denigrate and criminalise the opponent, to refocus politics on issues such as personal integrity and morality, and to introduce forms of a *preventive democracy* - limiting citizens' liberties on security grounds. In terms of public policy, these have found expression in renewed interest in lustration, widespread wiretapping and other excessive security measures, laws of seizure of assets which depart from the traditional presumptions of innocence and burden-of-proof standards, introduction of specialised courts and investigative bodies with not clearly defined powers and responsibilities, and so on.⁶

The recent refugee crisis in Europe made clear the extent to which security-obsessions and paranoia have damaged the political and constitutional infrastructure of the Eastern European countries. Central European states refused to take even small numbers of refugees, which could not have presented a significant burden for them in any way.

2. Populists and Eurosceptics

Populism has been presented in the literature as a specific type of aberration, pathology of contemporary democracy, which affects both its ideological and organisational dimensions. And indeed, if we look at all the different political actors presented in the introduction, they do share a feature: they are very light in terms of ideology and organisation. First, in terms of ideology they are not easily definable in traditional left-right categories. The best that we can say for all of them is that they are an exercise in ideological minimalism: they are simply strongly committed to follow the will of the people (whatever that might be). As such, they easily borrow policies across the ideological spectrum. Today, this is rather easy since, as observed by Peter Mair, a major merger of themes from the left and the right did happen back in the 1990s with the Blair government in the UK (the third way) and Clinton in US.⁷ The populists are sensitive to shifts in the mood of the majority: they could adopt more leftist or more rightist stance depending on current perceptions, as the evolution of Fico in Slovakia towards 'social-democracy' demonstrates. What is important, however, is not so much the

⁶ The following discussion is based on: (2008) Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev, "The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper", in Grigorij Meseznikov, Olga Gyarfasova, and Daniel Smilov (eds.), *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, IVO (IPA) working paper series, Bratislava. Available at: <http://www.ivo.sk/5353/en/news/ivo-released-working-paper-populist-politics-and-liberal-democracy-in-central-and-eastern-europe>

⁷ Mair, Peter (2002) "Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy" in Meny and Surel, (eds.) (2002) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave.

essence of the ideas, but the appeal to the majority, the claim to express the ‘will of the people’.

Thus, contemporary populism is a *mainstream* phenomenon: these are players who have a plausible claim to express the will of the majority. Take for instance the UKIP: at first sight, it might appear as a marginal, fringe force, but it has been able to successfully imprint its central policies on the mainstream conservatives: the themes of EU membership referendum, the concerns about immigration, etc. have taken centre-stage and will determine politics in the UK over the next several years at least. Thus, even in systems in which mainstream parties are well-entrenched and guarded against new comers (as UK, the US and Hungary), populism has been able to infiltrate some of the existing mainstream parties. In more open party systems, such as these of Bulgaria and Poland, populists have risen (and declined) as new parties displacing some of the existing parties. In both scenarios, contemporary populism should not be confused with the existence of relatively small, radical and extremist parties on the fringe of European party systems. Although populists may use such parties to accentuate certain public fears, they themselves are not radicals or extremists.

Secondly, in terms of party organisation populists are very light and adaptable, providing the minimum infrastructure for the expression of public sentiments. The populist parties are essentially the secretariat of charismatic leaders, and rely much more on the media, than on traditional forms of party communication and organisation (like membership, local structures, elaborate programmes and manifestos, party think tanks, institutionalised relationships with trade unions, NGOs, etc.). In fact, as the Italian case demonstrates, populists may come to the scene after a collapse of the traditional mainstream parties. But this is not necessary: they may co-exist and compete successfully with them, and may actually take over some of them, as the case of the rise of the Tea Party backed by the mighty Fox news network illustrates. The cross-fertilisation and hybridisation between political actors and media is another aspect of the contemporary populism which is worth studying more closely. There have been parties emerging on the basis of TV programmes (as the party Ataka in Bulgaria, for instance); it will be difficult to explain the success of UKIP in the UK, without the major support from the tabloid press for the agenda of this organisation.

The ideological and organisational lightness of contemporary populists is probably sufficient to give substance to the concept of populism, as applied to contemporary realities. Understood in this way, it connotes a certain transformation in liberal democracy, which raises concerns for its quality. Political parties have become less programmatic and more mediatic, there is a growing personalisation of politics, and a diminishing difference between the platforms of political parties.⁸ As a result, politicians have to rely much more on PR, scandal and the media in order to mobilise the voters, who are increasingly convinced that voting does not make much of a difference.

It is possible to define all these phenomena under the all-encompassing term of ‘populism’, but then it will hardly be a very interesting concept. One of the difficulties is that defined in this way populism covers all political players – everybody becomes a populist in a certain sense. And indeed, Peter Mair has argued that the Blair ‘third way’ is essentially populist; the conservatives now are affected pretty much by the same malady, so then who are the non-populists in the UK? The second difficulty is that the ideological and organisational lightness

⁸ Toka, G. (1997), “Political Parties in East Central Europe”, in *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies*, eds. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-mao Tien, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London.

of political parties, and the mediatisation of politics have been well studied in their own right: it is not clear what grouping these phenomena under the label of ‘populism’ contributes to their critical analysis and understanding. Some of the literature on political parties, for instance, may offer a better insight into the studied phenomena by depicting them as a popular disenchantment with excessively cartelised party systems.⁹ The alienation of the people from traditional forms of political representation has also been in the focus of scholarly attention for many years: rebranding this characteristic of contemporary politics as ‘populism’ also does not carry any specific analytical value.

Thus, the conclusion from this analysis is that the concept of populism could be coherently reduced to ideological and organisational lightness of politics, but in this way it may become over-inclusive and to a large extent useless as a sharp analytical tool. Therefore, if it is to be employed, it must be given further substance, which ties it closer to the will of majorities, the state, empowerment, emancipation and entitlement – the key notions which are commonly associated with it.

3. Populism and the disabling of policy change

Despite the lack of elaborate programmes and predictable ideologies, all of the parties and political actors mentioned in the introduction have advocated and pursued policies which disable the state in the sense of limiting its capacity to radically change the political course. Therefore, contemporary populism is not transformative, it is essentially constraining and conservative. Paradoxically, it claims to empower the people, to express their will, but vis-à-vis the state it is rather disempowering.

This is most visible in the area of fiscal policy. Practically all new populists are supporters of low levels of taxation, no new taxes, strict fiscal discipline, etc. In the case of the Tea Party this has been turned almost into a religion, but probably East and Central European countries – such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia – have gone furthest in the lowering of the taxing capacity of the state. Bulgaria, for instance, collects ten percent flat income tax, Hungary 16%. In Slovakia, until 2013 there used to be 19% flat income tax, which after the ‘social-democratic’ turn of PM Fico was increased to 23% for companies, and 25% for individuals with higher income - again levels that are comparatively rather low. Thus, new populism is not an ideology of big state – on the contrary, it tends to limit and constrain the state in terms of taxing and borrowing. New populists are not opposed to fiscal breaks, for instance. Boyko Borissov in Bulgaria, Fico in Slovakia and Orban in Hungary have all endorsed the EU fiscal compact, which introduces elaborate ceilings on budget deficits and levels of public debt. On top of that, they have implemented domestically various legal and constitutional fiscal limitations. The most striking of these was probably a proposal (which ultimately failed) by the Bulgarian finance minister to make any tax increase subject to a 2/3 majority vote in Parliament. Thus, paradoxically, new populists have a self-restraining tendency: they willingly limit the capacity of the state to collect higher taxes, take more debt, etc. This may be understandable for economies which are heavily indebted, but interestingly it applies also to countries like Bulgaria, which have levels of public debt around 15% of GDP.

⁹ Katz, Richard and Peter Mair. (1995) “Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy”, *Party Politics*, 1/1, 1995

Secondly, the empowerment of the people through new populism has not led to empowerment of popularly elected bodies like the parliaments, for instance. In contemporary liberal democracy power is dispersed horizontally among a variety of bodies in the legislative, executive and judicial branch. There are independent central banks, independent prosecutors, reviewing and monitoring bodies as audit chambers, powerful independent courts, etc. All of these bodies take part in the policy process, and each of them has de jure or de facto veto powers in many areas. New populism has done practically nothing to change this picture and to concentrate state power in bodies directly accountable to the people. On the contrary, this polycentric and poliarchichal environment is skillfully used by them to pursue their political agenda, to block their opponents, or to shift responsibility to other actors. The Tea Party-supported challenge in the US Supreme Court against Obamacare (or the power of congress to make health insurance obligatory) is a good case in point: generally, the Tea Party would rather limit the capacity of democratically elected bodies to pursue certain types of policies. Most spectacularly, Viktor Orban in Hungary did carry out a major constitutional reform in the country in 2011: the new Fundamental Law which was adopted can hardly be described as empowering the Hungarian parliament. Together with a very long list of fiscal constraints and veto players, it features a requirement according to which all important legislation is to be passed by 2/3 majority. Many have argued that there are strong undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies in this document, but at the very least, it is an attempt to sabotage any future political majority (short of 2/3) willing to implement substantive policy changes.¹⁰ From this point of view, it is quite apparent that new populism aims to disable substantial policy changes. It is trying to achieve stability at the expense of the capacity of the state to change course.

It is hardly surprising that the rise of new populism is associated with an increasing number of political deadlocks, uneasy coalitions, regular reverses in the course of state action, policies which cancel out each other. This is another aspect of the incapacitation of the state which could be attributed to the rise of populism. Even if state majoritarian bodies formally preserve their powers, they may be incapacitated by incoherent and internally contradictory majorities. Contemporary populism tends to create such majorities, since it brings together very different people unified by the charisma of a specific leader. (According to Weber, one of the features of charismatic leadership is the ability to create impossible coalitions). When the leaders start to address the claims of their voters, they necessarily fall into trouble. Two scenarios are possible: deadlocks and reversible experimentalism. Under the first scenario, state action becomes largely impossible, or the status quo turns to be the lowest possible denominator: in any case, substantive change of policy becomes highly unlikely. The US seems to be into this category largely because of developments within the Republican party. Under the second scenario, politicians may risk to introduce certain reforms which then are reversed under popular pressure: the Bulgarian government of GERB has illustrated the case abundantly.

Last but not least, empowering the people by the contemporary populism has been linked to a certain instrumentalisation of instruments of direct democracy, as referendums. These are used essentially to veto political decisions of representative majorities. The failed EU constitution referendums in 2005 (France and Holland) were a case in point: they were both an expression of a general distrust in politicians and their capacity to pursue meaningful political projects. Apparently, the Cameron conservatives in the UK aim to tap exactly the same attitudes at the upcoming general elections in 2014. The likely victory could be Pyrrhic,

¹⁰ See the Venice Commission, Opinion 663/2012, March 19, 2012; LÓRÁNT CSINK, BALÁZS SCHANDA, ANDRÁS ZS. VARGA (eds), *The Basic Law of Hungary: A First Commentary*, Clarus Press, Dublin, 2012.

however: it will most probably signal not a resurgent confidence in domestic democratically elected majorities, but a deeply entrenched distrust in the possibility of any positive, ambitious, politically-driven policy change.

This distrust in elected representatives and their capacity to work in the public interest has a number of other expressions in the politics of contemporary populism.¹¹ Two of the reforms which are most often advocated by populists are: the reduction of the number of MPs (put in practice in Orban in Hungary, much discussed in Bulgaria), and the introduction of imperative mandates for MP, forms of recall, etc. It is true that these are popular in countries of lower general political culture, but they are also indicative of the fears and attitudes instrumentalised by populism.

Finally, it needs to say that the disabling of policy change and the resulting incapacitation of the state linked to new populism does not imply a triumph of the libertarian ideas of a small state or Hayekian market fundamentalism. All of the states under discussion feature quite sophisticated welfare systems in comparative perspective: the incapacitation of the state to introduce major policy changes is driven largely by desires to preserve the status quo as it is. It is not the case, that people are happy with the status quo: they simply fear that a change could be for the worse. Most tellingly, even in the poorest countries in our selection – Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary – populists have not tried to dismantle the welfare state. The damage on the healthcare, pensions, and education systems in these countries was done mainly in the 1990s and had little to do with the rise of contemporary populist players. Today, they have the popular mandate to largely preserve what is available, without having the people’s trust that they could actually change things for the better substantially. This is probably the explanation for the apparent paradox that the empowered people may opt to incapacitate and constrain their representatives, and thus the democratic state more generally.

4. Representation without emancipation

Contemporary populism is distinctive because it has changed traditional notions of political representation. Historically, populism has been associated with emancipation of the less privileged: the expansion of the suffrage created the hope that political equality will generally produce societal equality more generally. Representation was seen as an egalitarian instrument, which promised to make the status, entitlements and privileges of the few available for all. In contrast, contemporary populists are driven by the fear¹² of majorities that

¹¹ Bernhard Wessels (2011), “Performance and Deficits of Present-day Representation”, in Sonia Alonso, John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel (eds.), *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Cambridge UP.

¹² Table. The most basic fear is that the state is not run in the interest of all/the majority. See the following data from Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Question: Generally the state is run for the benefit of most of the people 2009 <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2009/11/Pew-Global-Attitudes-2009-Pulse-of-Europe-Report-Nov-2-1030am-NOT-EMBARGOED.pdf>

Country	Strongly agree Mostly agree	Strongly disagree Mostly disagree	DK
Bulgaria	16	83	2
Poland	40	45	4

their entitlements might be reduced in order to accommodate the claims of minorities and future majorities. In Eastern Europe this is most visible in the stance of populist parties vis-à-vis the Roma minority, in Western Europe it is against (Eastern European) immigrants, while in the US it is the more general category of the poor which is seen as a source of unjustified claims over the taxes of the rich. Probably the US argument is the generic one, while the Europeans have added a certain ethnic flavour to it.

Much has been written about the growing gap between the (self-perceived) middle classes and the superrich over the last decades, and data to corroborate this finding do exist. One of the more tangible effects of this gap in the political process is that it changes the political imagination of the masses. In circumstances in which everybody's wealth increases, and the gaps between different income-groups decrease (in real terms or as a matter of perceptions), it is possible to see political representation as a tool for achieving emancipation: gradually, benefits are being extended to groups which never had them. Contrary to that, in circumstances in which the wealth of a few steadily continues to increase, while that of the great many decreases or stays roughly the same, it will be obvious that political equality will not be sufficient to produce further emancipation. At best, voting could be rationally seen as an instrument preventing further degradation. I believe that this rational choice calculation depicts the attraction behind the political package offered by new populism. It has abandoned the universal egalitarian ideal of emancipation, and treats representation as a defensive tool of insecure and unconfident majorities. These majorities have lost hope that they could be emancipated in the sense of receiving status, privileges and entitlements of the superrich. They do not want a further loss of status caused by the emancipation of other groups: minorities, new comers, the poor, etc.

The contemporary populist party is designed as a defensive instrument. It has shed most of the traditional policy expertise of political parties in elaborating complex governmental programmes, sophisticated reforms, etc. The people generally do not need them for ambitious and complex policy making. In turn, the populist party is very efficient as an instrument allowing the people to say 'no': to the EU, a change in the electoral system, the construction of a nuclear power station, etc. Quick mobilisation, quick response, sensitivity to changes in public attitudes and perceptions is the bread and butter of populists: they do not claim to be able to educate the people - they just reflect and amplify their will.

In Europe the situation is complicated by the process of European integration in which national majorities feel threatened that newcomers to the EU may become a reason for the reduction of their entitlements (jobs, welfare benefits, etc.). Such fears have led a number of established parties to fall into the populist modus of making politics, advertising themselves as defensive tools against diminished status. Not surprisingly, this whole situation revives

Czech Republic	70	28	2
Slovakia	33	63	4
Germany	41	58	2
UK	52	45	3

nationalism as a political language and a form of political imagination. While nationalism has always been in the fringes of European party systems, some of its themes are becoming mainstream with the rise of contemporary populists. Thus, in many countries there is a more moderate, centrist, mainstream party, which coexists happily with something as a (bad) sister party of much more radical and outspoken nationalistic hue. The model was probably pioneered by Berlusconi and the Northern League, and could be seen in Hungary (Fidesz and Jobbik), Bulgaria (GERB and Ataka), UK (Conservatives and UKIP), etc. The argument in favour of such pairings is usually that this keeps radicalism at bay and allows for a safe ventilation of certain public frustrations. There are reasons to doubt that such pairings could work only in one direction, however: what if the smaller parties start to dominate the agenda?

5. Implications for liberal democracy

Populism has acquired a negative connotation in contemporary political parlance. The term implies a certain defect of democracy, diminishing of its quality, but there is no agreement as to the precise character of the damages. It is incorrect to see the rise of contemporary populism as a threat to democracy as such. All of the parties in the focus of our analysis are not anti-democratic, anti-systemic, radical or extremist parties. Thus, there is no need of some new type of 'militant democracy' doctrines designed to exclude populists from the political process. In other words, analogies with the 1930s or the 1950s are inept: the contemporary populists do not have an alternative, non-democratic vision for society. Democracy is truly the only game in town.

Secondly, it could be argued that still the rise of populism is defective, because it affects badly electoral competition. As the Hungarian case illustrated, populists outbursts may result in a self-entrenching effort by specific parties. But the evidence for this danger is rather thin: while attempts of self-entrenchment are unavoidable in today's politics, the Hungarian example is rather extreme and exceptional. Moreover, it is too early to tell whether this attempt will be successful at all: popular movements have overcome much higher anti-competitive measures than the ones employed in Hungary (think of the rise of Political Islam in Turkey and the 10% electoral threshold). Also, quite spectacular partisan and bi-partisan gerrymandering has been common for US politics, but the heavy incumbent bias has not relegated it to a second-league democracy. Moreover, the link between contemporary populism and self-entrenchment and anti-competitive measures is spurious. Populist parties have arisen in very competitive systems (Poland, Bulgaria), and in Italy they have emerged after the demise of a long-standing party cartel. Thus, increasing electoral competition, introducing curbs on self-entrenchment efforts may be good in itself but is not a response to contemporary populism: populists could live and flourish in a competitive environment as well.

Thirdly, populism is often seen as illiberalism. And indeed, populists have tapped on illiberal attitudes towards the Roma and immigrants. They have mainstreamed some of these attitudes. This definitely is a serious danger for the quality of democracy, which should be closely monitored. The traditional remedy against such illiberal outburst has been more constitutionalism, more constraints on the will of the majority. I am not sure that this is the right response in the current circumstances, however. In any event, all democracies under discussion are heavily constitutionalised (even super-constitutionalised) and there is not much room for further constraints. Moreover, most of the populist parties live happily within very sophisticated constitutional constraints. And finally, a call to amend the constitutions in order to fight populism might be spectacularly counterproductive: as the Hungarian case shows, it could just lead to an opportunity for some of them to engage in serious self-entrenchment.

Fourthly, in a similar vein, I do not believe that deliberative democracy is the right response to the rise of populism either. It could be argued that the political minimalism of the populists – elementary ideology and elementary party organisation – simplifies and degenerates political debates. People lack information and cannot appreciate more complex and sophisticated arguments. If this were really the case, it could be argued that populism undermines the deliberative capacity of contemporary democracy. But are really not-knowledgeable people supporting mainstream populists? After all we speak of the majorities in the most advanced countries in the world in the age of global information, the Internet, and spectacular advances of mass communication. Further, the rise of populism has highlighted the political role of the media (Fox news, tabloids, etc.) and has focused attention on issues such as media concentration, media independence and so on. Finally, most of the countries under discussion have sophisticated media markets and very successful public broadcasting services: to argue that the rise of populism has diminished political deliberation in such an environment is hardly convincing. Just an example from an unlikely place: every morning on all major TV channels in Bulgaria there is an hour and a half (at least) of political programmes in which politicians, journalists and analysts discuss current political matters; every Tuesday on the public TV there is a programme called Referendum, which employs a methodology inspired by leading theorists of deliberative democracy (deliberative polling).

Finally, sometimes the quality of democracy is measured through the integrity and transparency of the political process. From this perspective as well the rise of populism cannot be seen as damage to democracy. Populists have turned integrity issues into central themes in their political campaigns. If anything, there is a synergy between the transparency movement which started in the 1990s and contemporary populism: they reinforce each other.

So, the conclusion that follows from this analysis is that the link between the rise of populism and the quality of democracy is far from obvious. From traditional perspectives such as democratic competition, constitutionalism, integrity and transparency and deliberative value it is not at all clear why populism has acquired a negative connotation and is seen as pathology of democracy. It might appear that populist parties are a successful adaptation to circumstances of low trust in authority in general, and the electronic mediatisation of public communication. Whenever there is abundant information, it might be normal to have less trust in authorities, since people believe they have sufficient knowledge to solve the problem themselves. (This is an explanation for the paradoxically higher trust in the media as information outlets vis-à-vis politicians). Thus, populist parties may be just an efficient adaptation to the situation: they become much more vehicles of peoples' preferences rather than authorities.

Yet, the analysis offered in this paper may suggest a different explanation as to why populism could still be seen as a problem for democracy, as a deficient version of democratic regime. In the first place, it produces governments incapable of changing policy. In this sense, it de-capacitates the state, dis-empowers it in the long run through the use of various constitutional constraints and complex power-sharing mechanisms in surprising coalitions. This will not lead necessarily to the self-entrenchment of specific *parties*, but to the entrenchment of a specific *socio-economic status quo*. In this way democracy becomes deeply conservative, and its value for specific groups (habitually the young) sharply decreases. Secondly, and related to that, contemporary populism has shed the typical for historical populism claims to universal emancipation. Certain (minority) groups of citizens cannot hope to benefit from the political process, since despite the changes of government gaps between the super-rich, the middle classes and the poor have only grown. In these circumstances, democracy becomes the defensive tool of the majority squeezed in the middle: it cannot hope to move upwards, but

could defend itself against relegation to the lower strata. And interestingly, the mainstream populist parties that were in the focus of our analysis are not parties of the poor striving for newer entitlements: they are rather a revolt of the unconfident people in the middle of society, who see their entitlements and privileges threatened.

Thus, at least two large groups are structurally disinterested in the democratic process: the marginalised poor, and the globalised elites for whom the protection of one nation state could be easily replaced by the services of another if need may be. If this is the case, democracy starts to be undermined in a much more fundamental sense, which was captured by Aristotle's verdict against some ancient democratic forms: government of the many in their own interest, and not in the interest of all. Notice, that this is not the worry of liberals of majoritarian oppression of minority rights: it is rather the worry of a majoritarian systemic neglect of certain interest. After all, democracy *is* an egalitarian project in its essence, and a democracy which has abandoned its claim to emancipation is conceptually deficient.