

POPULISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Populism became a significant factor of political debates in Eastern and Western countries of the EU and a new force in European party systems in the nineties. The frame for the discussion on populism is made by the representative form of democracy and responding to it dual system of media of communication. The popularity of populist parties and movements nowadays reflects the crisis of representative democracy. It is accompanied by the growing role of media in politics, which might be seen as the result of citizens' dissatisfaction with the existing models of intermediation. The media also play a crucial role in the process of identity creation, at the same moment they illustrate the difficulty of defining identity anew.

The search for a new identity must primarily be seen in the political meaning of the notion as the political identity of European societies. The decline of traditional parties and the shift from socio-economic to socio-cultural cleavages has changed the relevance of the classic left – right wing party systems.¹ Secondly, populism reflects the need for a new national identification as a result of the modernization process, and political and economic transformation as it is in the East. The national but also political identity seem to be crucial for defining populism, especially if we take into consideration the political situation in Europe in the face of the globalization process and with the enlargement of the EU in the background. Economically and politically integrated Europe requires a redefinition of identity. Populism is one of the responses to these trends in development, in fact, populism means refusal of any redefinition.

¹ Frank Decker, *Der Neue Rechtspopulismus*. Leske+Budrich, Opladen 2004, p. 238

In many countries it comes back to well known patterns of defining identity, rooted in nationalism– in opposition to the “other”.

In this paper identity will be understood as a collective phenomenon. National identity is a form of a collective identity, basing on the feeling of community shared with the members of a group which is identified as “we”, accompanied by the consciousness of being different than the other group, defined as “they”.² But the “others” are seen against the background of the history and tradition of the country and along with the values of its political culture. Many authors see national identity as a “nation’s relationship to “the other””.³ Such a perspective is typical for right-wing populists, as many of them are strongly against migrants and are anti – EU. In the latter case they see in the EU “the other” which threatens national identity, the “other’s” role is also played by minorities or asylum seekers. Populist parties in many countries, also in these, where the share of migrants in society is relatively low, make the identity policy a significant element of their political programs and political campaigns. Steffen Angenendt, who has made a comparative analysis of migration and right wing populism in Europe has come to the conclusion that the question of identity became an important slogan of populist political campaigns, aiming at winning the votes and based on the anxieties resulting from integration and globalization process.⁴

According to the multicultural explanation of populism, the dissolution of established identities, fragmentation of culture, “multiculturalization” top the list of factors which have contributed to the popularity of populist parties and movements.⁵ Populism is also seen as one of the responses to anxieties of societies evoked by globalization process.⁶ The uncertainty about the multicultural character of societies, as a result of fast migration, is one of them.

As Ilya Prizel observes in her book on “National Identity and Foreign Policy”, in the age of “mass man” “the transfer of the custodianship of national identity from an intellectual elite (...) to a popular level” has taken place.⁷ This takeover is reflected nowadays by national/ethnic populism. To go further with the discussion on the

² Piotr Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*. Znak, Kraków 2003, p.198, 256

³ Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy. Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 8

⁴ Steffen Angenendt, *Einwanderung und Rechtspopulismus. Eine Analyse im europäischen Vergleich*. “Internationale Politik”, 4, 2003, p. 3-12

⁵ Rene Cuperus, *The Populist Deficiency of European Social Democracy*. “Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft” 3, 2003, p. 84

⁶ *Handlarze strachu. Zygmunt Bauman w rozmowie z M. Bilewiczem, K. Iszkowskim i T. Ostropolskim*. “Krytyka Polityczna”, 4, 2002

⁷ I. Prizel, op.cit., p. 405

relationship between populism and collective identity the operational definition of populism is needed.

DEFINING POPULISM

In the studies on populism there is still no agreement whether it exists as an ideology or relates only to specific forms of political communication. In this chapter it will be understood firstly as a form of political activity, present in almost all parts of the democratic political spectrum in contemporary democratic systems in Europe. This form is activated under favourable circumstances and can be characterized by the short-term mobilization of the electorate. The mobilization as an aim of populist action is achieved by using simplified, emotional rhetoric. A populist message can be proliferated both by means of mass communication, as well as by such forms of public communication as demonstrations, meetings, blockades and riots. The necessary background for populist messages is provided by the 'mediatisation' of politics and – as a consequence – personalization of political campaigns.

Populism has become an essential part of the democratic system, the current development of which and current popularity has become a common feature of representative democracies in the West and in the East of Europe – even if it does not mean the same – and reflects a state of crisis of the system of representation. Despite the differences in defining the case the "burglar alarm" function of populism can be observed in both parts of Europe. The growing popularity of populist politicians usually signals the dissatisfaction of society with the institutions of representative democracy. The re-emergence of populism might mean the public's wish for more political accountability.⁸

Populist parties and movements are characterized by charismatic form of leadership, strong criticism of representative form of democracy (preference for direct democracy) and an anti – elitist (anti – establishment) stance. There is a tendency in political science nowadays to root contemporary populism in right wing ideology. This type of populism usually implements the issue of national identity in political campaigns.⁹

Populism might be seen as a warning signal for a political system that is not representative enough as it does not follow the rule of political pluralism. At the same time populism grows on no acceptance for cultural pluralism – it rejects multiple

⁸ See further in: Rene Cuperus, *op.cit.*, p.84

⁹ For right wing populism see Frank Decker, *Der Neue Rechtspopulismus*. Leske+Budrich, Opladen 2004

identities. According to the research done by De Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel populist parties can apply to a “nation” or to the “community of citizens”¹⁰. In the first case they define “the people” – the core element of populist ideology in a nationalist sense or in a regionalist sense, directing the people against the national elites, immigrants or European organizations. The appeal to citizens is typical for civic populism.

Basing on this typology we can differentiate between ethnic nationalist versus civic populism. In the latter case one could expect the populist parties to concentrate on internal policy and the political identity of voters.

In both cases nationalist slogans can emerge in political campaign slogans. Before the last enlargement of the European Union (2004), in the accession countries they pointed to the dichotomy: we – the candidates, they – the old EU.

THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A POPULIST MOMENT

At the beginning it must be stressed that any simple implementation of the populism definition elaborated in Western Europe can be misleading in Central and Eastern Europe. First of all, the phenomenon of populism in the region is greater than only right-wing extremism. Populist parties and movements have charismatic leaders and a central structure in both cases. Although populist politicians in Central Europe are often nationalists, the notion of “nation” is used instead of “people”, as the latter has a negative connotation coming from communist times. Central European populists differ in relation to the European Union: from a decisive rejection to – almost enthusiastic – support. And last but not least: they are not against migration as this problem is not (yet) relevant in the region. Instead of anti-migration slogans they use negative stereotypes relating to nationality, often as tools against countries and societies constituting the EU. As in Western democracies they are anti-elitist.

As it was stated above, populist movements and parties became important powers of political systems in the West and in the East of Europe. Populist parties exist in the old countries of the EU and in the new, which became members of the EU in 2004. The first glimpse at both parts of the EU shows that the old, agrarian type of populism is still to be found in Central Europe. Despite the differences, the research on populism from a comparative perspective makes sense since it reveals the weak points of representative democracy as a framework for European society.

¹⁰ Jasper de Raadt, David Hollanders, Andre Krouwel, *Varieties of Populism. An Analysis of the Programmatic Character of Six European Countries*. Amsterdam 2004, manuscript

In young democracies of the EU a crisis of collective identities, which were acquired before the velvet revolutions, might be observed. The accession to the EU deepened this crisis. The 2004 enlargement will be provided here as an example of a “populist moment” even if it did not bring the same reaction of societies in the West and in the East of the EU.

The enlargement must be seen in a frame made by globalization and especially by the transition from an industrial society to a postindustrial information society. The digital divide creates new divisions within society. The losers in the transformation process in the accession countries might turn into the digital divide losers. In them we find the frustration and fear, essential for populists’ performances.

The “populist moment” is a situation, “the specific constellation of conditions”¹¹, which evoke and support the presence of populist forms in the activities of politicians, and make the electorate respond due to the situation the public finds itself in. Populist moments bring the threat of collective loss of identity. The 2004 enlargement of the EU was seen by parts of the societies in the accession countries in such a way, and this is the way the coming accession of Turkey is seen by many members of the enlarged EU.

The process of enlargement potentially creates a field of controversy and conflict in the old and new member states’ societies. Yet at the same time, the comparison of the attitude of populist politicians to the enlargement of the EU and in Central – Eastern Europe shows difficulties in defining populism. According to a common opinion populist parties and movements would be against enlargement and would put the stress on the negative developments resulting from enlargement to Western societies. But in some old member countries of the EU, the 2004 enlargement was not relevant enough to activate populists. One could also expect that populists in candidate countries would use anti-European rhetoric in political campaigns. This hypothesis can be again easily shaken by some cases of political parties, populists in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, who were supporters of European integration (as Vladimir Mečiar in the referendum election campaign in Slovakia in 2003 as well as the Law and Justice party in Poland).

Thus now, the enlargement of the European Union, the last one and the coming one, potentially make a base for a populist moment both in national and political meaning. But generally the periodically growing support for populists in the East and in the West has more than one reason and differs from one country to the other

¹¹ Rene Cuperus, *The Populist Deficiency of European Social Democracy*. “Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft” 3, 2003, p. 84 The concept of “populist moment” comes from the book of Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise. The Populist Moment in America*, New York, 1976

with regard to the specifics of politics and culture of the country. Populism would then reflect the specifics of political culture of the country – as such the phenomenon could be used as a field for identity research in both mentioned above meanings. It can be implemented as a test which would indicate if in the given society the questions of political and cultural/national identity have become crucial for public debate or if they result in cleavages.

One of the common features, which can be traced in the discussion on the phenomenon of populism in the West and in the East of Europe is, that the existence of populist parties, movements and politicians would not be possible without media of mass communication. One could claim that the phenomenon is older than mass communication but the author of this paper concentrates on the forms of populism typical for contemporary, representative democracy. Neither representative democracy, nor populism as a phenomenon developing nowadays within it, could exist without the media. In public discourse the media are often blamed for the existence of populism as if it were the only and decisive factor having impact on it. The thesis of the blame of the media has its origins in the omnipotent media approach in media studies and in political science. In such an approach to the relationship between the media and populists, in which the media have the main power and in fact dominate the relation, it is easy to accept that the media also play a decisive role in the creation of populist politicians and movements. This approach must be seen as too radical and in fact it ignores the complexity of the political process.

The strong “media” image of populism has its roots in the charismatic forms of leadership and in the authoritative character of populist parties. The media presence of the charismatic leader of a populist party makes up for the lack of a political program which is supposed to be implemented after an election is won. Charismatic leadership means the substitution of internal communication by the domination of the leader and the lack of horizontal communication. Messages sent to the public take the form of the leader’s statements. The typical message of populism is understood as a form of communication which has a simplified form, and a more emotional than rational line of reasoning. The simplification and emotional stance of populist messages make them a good example of infotainment i.e. information sold to the public in an attractive, entertaining shape. Thus populist messages respond well to a modernist form of political communication. By using a simplified message populist politicians concentrate only on the level of symbols of the power, and avoid articulating explicit political and economic programmes. As the symbols are not sufficient for the execution of power after an election is won, populists tend to abandon populist messages or lose power. But also an opposite development is possible: the victory of a populist party in elections can lead to the proliferation and acceptance

of populist slogans, and their incorporation into the programme of non-populist parties or a governing coalition, as was the case in the Netherlands.

The background for populist performances in Western but also in Eastern democracies is brought about by the 'mediatisation' of politics. The term will be understood here as a feature of contemporary democracy, made by growing importance of television as the dominating medium of mass communication, opinion polls as the main source of information on public feeling and approval for politicians between elections, and political advertising as the main means of gaining support and building images of politicians and parties.

The sphere in which populists communicate was called "the national oppositional public sphere" ("nationale Gegenöffentlichkeit") by Thomas Pfeiffer.¹² The popularity of populist politicians is due to their perfect sense of public feeling at the time of a crisis or political controversy. In Western democracies economic crises resulting in growing unemployment rates evoke action against migration. That is one of the reasons why "EU – populists" concentrate on the anxieties of society against migrants. The economic factor is strongly supported by the fears evoked by unsuccessful identity policy towards migrants. It became obvious that "old European" societies are not – on the whole – ready to accept the multiculturalization. Even if the last enlargement of 2004 did not give rise to a debate on identity in the 'old' countries the accession of Turkey will surely bring on a populist performance rooted in the defence of European cultural values. This feature cannot be found in Polish populists' messages. For the time being it has been replaced by national stereotypes as a very strong positive auto stereotype of Poles as a unified (and often – unique) nation.

National populists claim that they represent the core values of national identity. In the case of Poland, populists implemented national stereotypes in the European referendum in 2003 campaign to mobilize the voters. This tactics was not successful but it illustrates the way populists draw their strength from public feelings based on old national resentments. Thus even if national clichés are important for defining one's own national identity, they do not contribute to an explicit declaration of political identity.

Observations of Polish populists' messages have lead to a conclusion that there is a difference in the issues typical for the "EU–populists", understood as populist politicians who were activated by the enlargement in the 'old' and in the accession countries of the European Union.

Taking into account tensions in society and stimulation of public opinion in the period of EU enlargement, one could have expected that the process of EU extension

¹² Thomas Pfeiffer, "Die Lügen der Systempresse zurückdrängen". *Zum Medienkonzept der "Nationalen Gegenöffentlichkeit"*. "Neue Gesellschaft Frankfurter Hefte", 3, 2002, p. 212–216

would have contributed to more activity of “EU populists” in the accession countries. Contrary to the expectation that populists in the accession countries would oppose the enlargement some of them cannot be defined as opponents of the process.

ARE POPULIST EURO-SCEPTICS?

A study of 2003 European referendum campaign in Poland was carried out to confirm or to reject the hypothesis that the 2004 enlargement of the EU would evoke the activity of nationalist populists and would become a populist moment in the accession countries.

The parties taken into account represent different types of populism and also differentiated approaches towards Polish membership of the EU. The parties are: Self-Defense (Samoobrona), League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR) and Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS, the Polish version of a “Law and Order” party). Already this choice might be seen as very controversial. All three parties have played an important role on the Polish political scene since 2001, and have used populist forms and messages in political communication. They do not all represent right wing populism and in some cases it might be a problem to classify them explicitly. The most important as a model party for Polish populism is Self-Defence, a party and trade – union, rooted in agrarian form of populism. The League of Polish Families must be seen in this context as a nationalist type, whereas Law and Justice is closer to the understanding of populism as a form of political communication than ideological stance. It is still based on charismatic leadership, a centralistic structure and, to some extent, an anti-elitist approach.

There are whole chapters on European integration in political programs of Polish parties, published before parliamentary elections in 2001 with Self-Defence being the exception, not mentioning the issue at all in its “Programme Thesis of Self-Defence for the Republic of Poland”. The League of Polish Families mentioned the integration in every chapter of its program “For Poland - Independence. For Poles – Work, Bread, Flats”. The references to European integration in the League’s program had a more persuasive than informative stance, with a negative connotation. European issues did not dominate the programs of the three political parties. Instead they concentrated primarily on unemployment, crime, finances of the state, and education as the issues most important for voters.

Law and Justice and Self-Defence could have been characterized as Euro-realistic parties in 2001 (in 2001 the parliamentary elections in Poland took place), presenting the approach “yes, but..”, whereas the League of Polish Families was decidedly against Polish integration into the EU. The main line of League’s reasoning against

Polish membership was based on the loss of national sovereignty. According to A. Szymanski, LPR presented “the rhetoric of compound invective” in its program, which is usually used by national-populist orientations. The program of LPR suggests the unity of communicator and receiver; it means the unity of “us”, all Poles united against the common enemy. (...) The EU is a “Tower of Babel”.¹³

The quotation illustrates one of the simplifications in political messages typical for populists. They claim the community of people is divided into enemies and friends whereas the criteria of division, as well as the border between the two groups change constantly. The fact is that populist parties use national stereotypes for the aim of integration of their own national group, and on the other hand they build an image of the enemy to the community, and this is an important feature when defining populism. National stereotypes play the role of political slogans in populist campaigns. As there are no politically significant national minorities in Poland, and because Polish society is more than 90% Roman Catholic the use of anti-immigrant slogans in political campaigns in the country does not make any sense. The same cannot be said about other national and racial prejudices which appeared in political campaigns in the nineties, and can be expected to be much stronger in coming campaigns. The feeling of a united nation in Poland has been built by populists by using anti-German clichés. The negative image of the European Union is identified with the negative image of Germans endangering Polish national identity. This negative image is strongly rooted in communist propaganda before 1989, and still used in political campaigns in Poland although there is no evidence that the attitude of Poles towards Germany results in any political cleavages. In the referendum election campaign of 2003 “traditional” anti German slogans were accompanied by new ones created for use in the European campaign and relating to the other countries and societies of the EU. Although there is no stereotype – neither positive nor negative – of Dutch people in Poland (Poles do not have much information about the country and the people), in the campaign negative information dominated. Even in the official information campaign of the Polish government, whose aim was to inform Poles about the EU before the referendum, the Netherlands was mentioned as the country of abortion and euthanasia, which were shown as totally unsuitable for Polish Catholic society.¹⁴ The Netherlands became a negative example of moral decline of which some sections of Polish parties warned Poles as a result of integration. The new feature of the campaign was a negative image of the French built by

¹³ Adam Szymański, *Unia Europejska w programach ugrupowań uczestniczących w wyborach parlamentarnych w 2001 r.*, [in:] *Polska scena polityczna. Kampanie wyborcze*. “Studia Politologiczne”. Vol. 6, p. 270

¹⁴ The message was broadcast by Polish public service television (TVP) in May 2003.

sections of the National–Catholic Movement party¹⁵ (making use of the famous speech of J. Chirac from the beginning of 2003). The French argument was to prove that EU represents only the interest of the old, and not of the accessing countries of the EU. It also signalled the shift from a traditional positive stereotype of the French in Poland to a negative one. Polish populists can be treated in this context as a part of an early warning system of the changes in public feelings. Summing up it should be stressed that national stereotypes are an essential part of populist messages as they make a very good example of “radical simplifications”, typical for populists.¹⁶

At the same time it must be stressed that the referendum campaign of 2003 was difficult for populists in Poland to use as a means of mobilizing the electorate. It was due to the fact that populists had to discuss explicit issues. Furthermore, during this campaign – unlike during the parliamentary election campaign – discussion on the internet had more importance. Internet messages were directed at the youngest voters.

The spots, presented by the parties on public service television during the referendum campaign were more issue than image oriented and it was Self–Defence, a model party for Polish populism which decided to discuss explicitly the effect that EU membership will have on some sectors of the Polish economy and social life (with the stress put on agriculture, as the core electorate of Self–Defence are farmers). LPR stuck to the notion of sovereignty and its loss after entering the EU, and based its message on anxieties of Polish society against the dangers for Polish national identity and culture. PiS again stressed the power Poland will gain as a member of the EU but avoided any explicit messages. Only in PiS spots did positive messages prevail on the negative: Self–Defence and LPR tried to operate with emotions and evoke fears. The EU was accused of fraud, cheating and taking over Polish property against the law. All three parties used nationalist rhetoric and symbols making an appeal to the unity of the Polish nation. According to the spots LPR made it was opposed to the EU, PiS supported Polish membership, and Self–Defence left the choice to the voter but in fact suggested voting “no” in order to start the next round of negotiations with the EU and to renegotiate the Accession Treaty. The positive attitude of PiS presented in the spots, was in contrast with other statements of party leaders and MPs at the time of the referendum, where the support was not so evident. In a parliamentary discussion about the referendum PiS declared that if a turnout of

¹⁵ National-Catholic Movement (Ruch Katolicko-Narodowy, RKN) got into Polish parliament in 2001 as a part of League of Polish Families, the RKN MPs left the League in 2002 and formed their own parliamentary club.

¹⁶ Karol Kostrzębski, *Kampanie wyborcze ruchów populistycznych w Polsce i Niemczech – analiza porównawcza*. [in:] *Polska scena polityczna. Kampanie wyborcze*. “Studia Politologiczne”. Vol. 6, p. 270

50% was not be achieved, the party would vote against the accession. According to Polish law, if the turnout in the referendum was not achieved, the right to decide was to be given to the national assembly consisting of the two chambers of the Polish parliament. In such a case, according to PiS, parliament would not have been able to decide, as it was a case for the people of Poland. PiS showed in this way its preference for direct democracy, but it could also have been understood as an attempt to escape an explicit decision by the party, which used to be seen as Euro-sceptic.

Polish populists during the campaign followed their programmes, and did not surprise either the electorate, or the media with their attitude as V. Mečiar in Slovakia did. Despite his direct and explicit anti-European stance at the time when he governed Slovakia, Mečiar did not decide to mobilize the Slovak electorate with an anti-European campaign, and voted for Slovak membership in the EU. Such behaviour can be explained by high support for accession in the country. The European campaign as such was not an easy performance for populists in Central Europe. Nevertheless they managed to introduce into it nationalistic slogans, which was most evident in Hungary. On the other hand, the agrarian Hungarian populist party, represented by Jozef Torgan was Euro-euphoric during the campaign. What strikes the observer at the time of the accession in Central Europe is, that agrarian populism, revitalised in the nineties, is now losing ground. It has been quickly replaced by nationalist populism.

Thus Central Europe as a case will be more similar to Western type of populism with the stress put on national identity. The question of Turkish membership in the EU will create the next opportunity for comparative research on the relationship between populism and collective identity in the old and new EU-countries.