

Martin Kastler

## Central Europe on the road to a new type of populism

Although widely considered as stable democracies, countries in the Region of Eastern and Central Europe have experienced a surge of populist political parties which were successful in the elections taking place over the last years. This article will attempt to trace underlying political, economic and social reasons for populist support in the region. It will further discuss the concept of populism and its specific regional characteristics and provide an outlook taking into account the latest political developments in Central Europe.

Schlagwörter:

Populism - Visegrad - Hungary - Slovakia - Czech Republic - Central and Eastern Europe - Democracy - Illiberalism

# Central Europe on the road to a new type of populism

|| Martin Kastler

The Brexit, the US presidential election, and the so called migration crisis could be seen as a breaking point in the history of „mainstream“ politics. New waves of populism emerge in societies that were defined as stable and open democracies. The phenomenon also hits the region of Central Europe to an unprecedented extent, and after more than 27 years of democratization and consolidation, it looks like as if Central Europe redefined its position not only on the geopolitical level but also changed its course away from liberal democracy.

This means that, at the moment, the region of Central Europe is in the spotlight – on the one hand because of its position towards quotas for refugees, and on the other hand for its potential transformation towards illiberal systems. The foreign press is disturbed about the current events in the Central European region (an article published in *The Economist* called these countries “Big, bad Visegrad”, while a Reuters article stated, on a more positive note, that “Fears of illiberal Central Europe axis may be overblown”).

This article will look at a set of interrelated aspects: First it will discuss the concept of populism; second, it will look at the underlying reasons for populist support in the region. It will conclude with an outlook taking into account the latest political developments in Central Europe.

## **Definitional issues and specific characteristics of populism in Central and Eastern Europe**

This is not a scientific article; the main aim is to pave the way for a broader discussion focused on the success of populist political parties in the Central European countries, and provide the capacity to be able to differentiate between various populist parties.

Defining the term populism and its position in the political market is problematic. One of the main reasons is the fact that the term has not attached a specific set of values and misses a coherent doctrine; definitions of populism range from neutral to negative. Another problem is the overgeneralization of the term, as it is currently used to describe authoritarian leaders all around the world.

Unclear definitions and different typologies are unable to cover populist movements and parties, not only in Central Europe. As an example, well known scholars like Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris made a list of populist political parties, some of which we would not classify as populist. According to their methodology, and their calculation from the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey in Slovakia, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) is a populist right party and Slovak National Party a populist left party.<sup>1</sup> This might not be enough: populism could be seen as an ideology engrained in the party structure; however, every political party striving to be successful has to use some elements of populist rhetoric at the right moment during

electoral campaigns. Thus, we can also view populism as a political strategy during the campaigning period. In Central European countries, we can see that these two types – populism as a campaigning instrument and populism as an ideology – are both observed. However, many analyses and predictions of populist parties' successes were correct. Already in 2008, the current Hungarian and Polish governmental political parties were correctly placed on the populist side, only that the analyses were not able to predict their shift to even more authoritarian tendencies.<sup>2</sup> This leads to the question: Can Fidesz and PiS in Poland still be defined as populist movements? At the same time, can we define Slovak parties Direction-SD and Freedom and Solidarity as populist, while Ordinary People and Independent Personalities not? And in this unpredictable environment, neo-fascist political parties in Hungary (JOBBIK) and Slovakia (Kotleba's L'S-SN) operate at the parliamentary level.

### The nature of populism in Central Europe: from moderate to extreme

Populism occurs in various forms, but what we experience these days is a type of populism that is able to radicalise the society. Nowadays, this specific type of populism is successfully spreading around the world and could pose a risk to liberal

democracies. Populist leaders are defining themselves as taboo breakers or fighters against political correctness, and are promoting themselves as the legitimate leaders, protecting the “people” from corrupted and manipulated foreign elites, migrants and intellectuals.

We must also draw attention to the perception of populism in this region. From this perspective and also according to the latest results in “Nations in Transit” by Freedom House (compare picture 1)<sup>3</sup> we must confirm that moderate populism is not able to survive over a long period in societies where it is acting illegitimate. The case of Hungary could serve as an example. There, the populist trend came up with the election in 2010 and the government of Viktor Orbán. He managed to change not only the external view on Hungary but was also able to change the internal constitutional and structural realm of society and politics. As also confirmed by the Freedom House report, Hungary made a shift from a consolidated democracy to a semi-consolidated democracy and is now placed in “one political basket” with Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria.

As the numbers clearly show, populism is a driving political force in the World, and the region of Central Europe is gripped as well. According to a report by the Tony Blair Institute of Global Change (2017) the

**Picture 1: Freedom House report on the democracy scores and regime rating (highest and lowest democratic progress, January – December 2016)**



Source: Freedom House 2017

European political landscape changed dramatically, and the main actors were populist political parties. Since 2000 the total number of active populist political parties has almost doubled. According to the institute it rose from 33 up to 63 (populist) parties<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, the countries from Central and Eastern Europe are mostly marked in “red” (compare Picture 2) and could be defined as countries that are closing a new ‘iron curtain’ in Europe.

**Picture 2: Changes in democracy scores since 2007 in EU Member and candidate’s states**



**Source: Freedom House (2017) “The European Union at the Breaking Point”**

### What is driving support for populism in the region?

There is a lively discussion about the real drivers of populist support, but it faces the same problem as an overall definition of populism: We are not able to determine a “final” trigger for the permanent rise of populism in liberal democracies, especially in Central Eastern Europe. Possible reasons for the success of populist parties could be:

- economic development and globalization as causes of inequality;
- citizens are becoming more sceptical about the development of their states, causing changes in electoral behaviour;
- crisis (financial, economic and migration) and growing feelings of insecurity;
- less homogenous societies and lower level of trust in state institutions;
- in Europe, the rise of populist parties could be seen as a backlash against the stagnation of the Euro, the interference of

EU institutions in national affairs and particularly also to high unemployment rates.<sup>5</sup>

According to the report by Freedom House (2017) the democracy score average declines in Central Europe, the main shift becoming visible after 2006. The major concern at the moment is that the Central European countries could abandon the democratic path they followed after 1989. The global trend is obvious and also the World Values survey 2010 – 2014 adds evidence, as less people in the Central European Region replied positively to the question “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically”.<sup>6</sup>

These patterns should not only be regarded as global trends and a new wave of global populism. We need to see this change through the historical trajectories that appeared after 1989 and that were connected with the transformation period and the “westernization” of political systems in Central Europe: According to Samuel Huntington, every democratic wave in the 20th Century has been followed by a reversed wave<sup>7</sup>. Similar patterns are visible in the region of Central Europe. These changes can be seen not only at the societal level, but also at the institutional and structural level. And these changes can be seen as the main trigger for the support and success of populist political parties in this region. Institutional and constitutional changes that occurred in Central European countries and which might spur populist movements could be divided into five main groups:

- limitation of constitutional court power;
- direct and indirect actions against freedom of press and its independency (regulation of the media);
- constitutional changes and lack of transparency;
- control of public administration;
- changes in the electoral system / gerrymandering.<sup>8</sup>

Changes are also visible at the structural and societal level, and are related to general behavioural changes, as:

- a) mainstream political parties tend to move to the extreme to gain more popularity (“brown liberals”)
- b) anomic behaviour of the society and emerging authoritarian values.<sup>9</sup>

These particular societal changes could be seen as the main trigger that opened up Pandora’s Box for all different forms of populism in the Central European countries.

If we can assume that this trend is mostly visible in countries with a weak democratic culture and missing democratic roots, then Central Europe has a problem. We noticed in the past that the transition period in this region was not without problems:

As Tomas Kavaliauskas (2012) noticed, “the evolutionary 1989 is famous for the transition from the socialist’s economy to a capitalist market, but not for the Aristotelian golden mean between extremes of for the search of the soul or for Christian economy”<sup>10</sup>

All Central European countries were able to adopt the economic transition, but ignored the need for a cultural one. They were overrun by global trends but might have thought that a cultural transformation would follow suit if only the political system is corresponding to western trends and models. This assumption was clearly wrong.

A transition period with successful democratization and economic transformation needs to go hand in hand with a cultural transition – if the cultural transition doesn’t come first. If not, it can lead to problems that can be currently observed in the Central European countries. Political elites are not able to run the country based on underlying democratic and liberal values and ideas. Society is often unable to understand the main and basic fundamentals of a liberal democratic system, not only with its fundamental rights but also fundamental duties. This period of

uncertainty gave wings to populists to gain power on the parliamentary and governmental level.

Populist political parties also influence the performance of established political parties. These were pushed to adopt populist elements in their political structure and performance in order to compete. With this, populist parties were able to shape the political market to serve their own purpose. In the end, all political parties are “moving” to the extremes of the political spectrum, their behaviour tends to be more populist and their rhetoric more right extremist.

## Outlook

After this short overview, we must draw attention to the fact that some of these countries are moving, not only waiting. They are moving away from a democratic path, this is obvious. But they are also “playing with the question to established a new efficient and effective political regime that can promote on one hand the quality of their citizens and on the other hand help secure some rights of the ‘special’ elites”.<sup>11</sup> And these patterns are the same in every country of the Central region; the driving force is populism, centralization of the system, melting the liberal constitutionalism, occupation of Constitutional courts, media and civil service, including the rising xenophobic, radical and anti-otherness tendencies.

The populist wave could be seen as a global trend with different inputs, but with the same output. The 21st century and periods after the economic crisis open up a new era of political market. We are one step away from a new revolution in political and societal change. We can assume that the rise and success of populist political movements and parties is just the beginning. Or this movement is the last warning for political elites and societies to wake up and try to build up liberal democracy from scratch, not only put more makeup on it, to cover the wrinkles. This is only the last call before the

train will be moving in the global world, but where is Central Europe? Still waiting at the railway station or slowly moving forward to the new revival?

These days, Central Europe is becoming a crucial battleground for authoritarian leaders and technocrats trying to gain control over the political discourse and to limit pluralism and liberal values in their societies. At the end I agree with Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser that “populism often asks the right question but provides the wrong answers”<sup>12</sup>. This means, we do have to agree with some statements of Babis, Orban, Fico and Kaczynski, but also disagree with their activities in their countries.

Has the global wave of populism reached its peak? What will come next? The only thing we can be sure about, and according to the latest research results and analysis we know that something changed in Central Europe, which is the performance of political parties. They are becoming more and more populist in their structure, while the traditional division between right and left is disappearing. Only the media still uses this old-fashioned term. A possible new dividing line between political parties in Central Europe could be drawn between liberal vs. illiberal political parties. Also, the societal behaviour changed. For now, the political landscape in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic is set. However, people are able to pull the emergency brake and refuse illiberal or extremist tendencies, as the last regional election in Slovakia showed.

**|| Martin Kastler M.A.**

Auslandsmitarbeiter Mitteleuropa, Prag

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Inglehart F. Ronald and Norris Pippa (2016): Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash, Available online <<https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/uploads/files/Event-Papers/Inglehart-and-Norris-Populism.pdf>> [30.10.2017].
- <sup>2</sup> Mesežnikov Grigorij, Gyárfásová Olga, and Smilov Daniel (eds.) Populist politics and liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, IVO: Bratislava, 2008, p. 132.
- <sup>3</sup> Nations in Transit (2017): The False Promises of Populism, Available online <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017> [26.11.2017].
- <sup>4</sup> Eiermann Martin, Mounk Yascha, Gultchin Limor (2017): European Populism: Trends, Threats and Future Prospects, Report of Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, available online <https://institute.global/insight/renewing-centre/european-populism-trends-threats-and-future-prospects> [30.01.2018].
- <sup>5</sup> Vašečka Michal, Žúborová Viera (2017): Explaining the Rise of Illiberal Populism in Central Europe, ASN 2017, New York.  
See also: Shekhovtsov Anton (2016): Is Transition Reversible? The Case of Central Europe, Transitions Forum – working paper, Legatum Foundation, available online: <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/is-transiting-reversible-the-case-of-central-europe-january-2016.pdf?sfvrsn=8> [39.10.2017].
- <sup>6</sup> World Values Survey 2010 – 2014, available online <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp> [30.10.2017].
- <sup>7</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. (1991): Democracy's Third Wave, in: Journal of Democracy, Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 1991, pp. 12-34.
- <sup>8</sup> Žúborová Viera (2017): Illiberalism in Central Europe published by CENAA as policy paper, available online <http://www.cenaa.org/data/cms/illiberalism-final-1.pdf> [05.11.2017].
- <sup>9</sup> Vašečka Michal, Žúborová Viera (2017): Explaining the Rise of Illiberal Populism in Central Europe, ASN 2017, New York.
- <sup>10</sup> Kavaliauskas Tomas (2012 p. 95): Transformations in Central Europe between 1989 and 2012, in: Geopolitical, Cultural and Socioeconomic Shifts, New York: Lexington Books, p. 208, ISBN 9780739174104.
- <sup>11</sup> Zuborova (2017).
- <sup>12</sup> Mudde Cass, Kaltwasser R. Cristobal (2017): Populism: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford: Oxford University Press.