Who or What Caused the Rise of Populism?

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Abstract: *The article deals with who or what led to strengthening populist politics and its agents. This is a mutual combination of structural, cultural, political, media, etc. factors whereby one must recognise specifics in each country. However, the author pays special attention to the role of established elites, mainly political, but also others – i.e. business, intellectual and media in this respect. He claims that these elites bear a large part of the responsibility for the rise of populism because their irresponsibility, unresponsiveness and inefficiency in solving key social problems caused a sharp decline in trust in established politics and its leaders. This 'lack of leadership' offered populists a political 'niche' that some took advantage of.*

Keywords: *populism, elites, leadership, political developments, Europe*

Introduction

Few phenomena in the context of the political dynamics of modern democracies receive as much attention as populism (see, for example, Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Tarchi 2016). The label 'populist' is used for political leaders, parties, movements, actions and regimes (Vittori 2017). Populism is connected with events considered major political upheavals, such as the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential elections and the victory of Brexit supporters in the referendum on the United Kingdom's stay or exit from the European Union in the same year. Both happened against the predictions of most political analysts and opinion polls. Many have declared them to be the result of misinformation, manipulation or even lack of judgment on the part of the masses (Hume 2017). The rise of radical right-wing parties in many European countries is also in the category of events that upset mainstream

politics and the public, particularly since, in some places, these parties are part of government coalitions. Two relatively recent examples are the relative victories of the Party for Freedom of Gert Winders in the 2023 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and the Freedom Party of Austria of Herbert Kickl in the 2024 Austrian parliamentary elections. According to the prevailing belief of politicians and other opinion leaders, it is problematic for the stability and development of Europe and the expansion of the European Union. We heard similar warnings before the 2024 elections to the European Parliament when a concrete shift to the 'right' was expected to occur, with the strengthening of far-right and Eurosceptic parties in particular.[1]

Populism is not new; the first political parties and movements declared 'populist' appeared in the 19th century.[2] The phenomenon became more frequently thematised in the second half of the 20th century. It is worth noting the large conference organised in 1967 at the London School of Economics, where they sought to clarify the key dilemmas and conundrums related to the conceptualisation of populism (Berlin et al. 1968). Research interest in this phenomenon experienced a real boom in this century. This relates to many changes in the functioning of democratic political spaces, especially with the emergence of new political actors, including those that cannot be unilaterally placed within the framework of existing political-ideological schemes. Populism is the subject of interest in various scientific disciplines (Hunger & Paxton 2021; Naxera et al. 2024; Zhang & Liao 2023) which deal with the types of populism, its characteristics, origins and regional peculiarities, as well as its impact on social and political dynamics.

In the latter context, populism's relation to democracy plays a vital role. More concretely, the dominant focus highlights its adverse effects on democratic life in Europe and worldwide. It is often even used as a label that members of established political elites and their supporters stick to their critics (Blokker & Anselmi 2020). Political leaders branded as populists are usually negatively portrayed by mainstream politicians and other opinion leaders. It is no secret that populist politics is directed not only against the established political elites but also – at least some elements of – against the institutional structure itself. The rejection of pluralism, neglecting the rule of law, and the negative attitude towards various social minorities are most often highlighted (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Mueller 2016; Mounk 2018; Urbinati 2019). This is supposed to be especially true of new

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1   This was only partially realised. The right-wing parties – both moderate and radical – indeed grew stronger. However, the three largest political groups (the centre-right *European People's Party*, the centre-left *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats*, and the centrist *Renew Europe*) remained a comfortable parliamentary majority.

2   This was the case of the *American People's Party* (a left-wing agrarian political party that was particularly strong in Western and Southern parts of the country) or the *Narodniki* (a political movement specifically advocating the interests of the Russian rural population that strongly opposed the tsarist regime) in Russia.

democracies, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe since it is said their versions of populism are characterised by a high level of exclusivism (higher than its Western version) and associated with tendencies to introduce 'illiberal democracy' or even overt authoritarianism (Bugarič 2019; Halmai 2019; 2024).[3] However, on the other hand, some in the minority perceive populism more positively, as they see it as an egalitarian impulse against oligarchic tendencies (Borriello et al. 2023) and a possibility for the rejuvenation of democracy (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2016), increasing political participation of the citizenry and giving voice to ordinary people whose opinions are often neglected by established elites (Canovan 1999).[4]

A mutual combination of factors caused the rise of populism. In this, we cannot ignore the role of political decision-makers. We are talking about members of the political elite whose actions direct political events and thus strongly influence people's lives. An important role is played by the attitude of the political elite towards the citizens and between individual factions of the political elite. Some authors, such as Higley (2021), believe that the rise of populism in the West is connected with undermining consensus within the elite. In this regard, populist political actors, with their destructive actions (mainly constant attacks on the system's institutions and their holders), are said to be among the main culprits for such events. This is expected to lead to political and broader social destabilisation. Also, other authors like Levitskyand Ziblatt (2018) and Bartels (2023) highlight populist political leaders as contributing to the erosion of the democratic system. Much less attention is paid in the academic research to members of established elites, or more specifically, to their responsibility for the rise of populism. However, during this time (when populist parties and movements were gaining popularity), they were firmly in power most of the time in most European/Western countries.

This article seeks to fill this gap. In dealing with factors that contributed to the rise of populism in Europe[5] in the last couple of decades, its primary goal is to explore the impact of the established elites, i.e. traditional political forces that still hold the most power positions within European polities. It thematises their conduct, particularly in crises, and the perception of the elites by the citizenry. The central thesis is that these elites bear a large part of the responsibility for the rise of populism because their irresponsibility, unresponsiveness and inefficiency in solving critical social problems caused a sharp decline in trust in established politics and its leaders. This 'lack of leadership' offered populists a political niche, which some took advantage of to build their appeal and spread their political agenda.

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3   Such practices can easily lead to human rights violations and degradation of democratic political culture (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022).

4   For example, the recent study of Huber and Van Hauwaert (2024) shows that populist-oriented citizens are more prone to participate in politics beyond the electoral arena.

5   The focus is on developments in the European Union in this century.

The character of populism

When discussing populism, we must remember that we deal with a divergent political phenomenon in various respects (Tomšič 2023). Despite its global occurrence – or perhaps because of it – it isn't easy to give a single and universally acceptable definition. The ambiguity of this concept is one of its main characteristics (Petri 2023). Suppose there is no consensus within the academic community about what populism is. There is even less of that in political circles and the general public, as it often adapts to political and other needs.

Populism can be thematised at least from the following perspectives: political ideology, political conduct, political strategy and style of political communication (Tomšič 2022). As an *ideology*, populism is quite inconsistent and diverse. It cannot be easily placed on left/right continuum (Kaufmann & Haggard 2019). However, what it has in common is that, according to Mudde (2004: 534), it considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people versus the corrupt elite' and claims that 'politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'. *Political conduct* refers primarily to how political organisations are managed and political processes are directed, with a special emphasis on the relationship between the leader and his followers. According to some (Pappas 2016; Urbinati 2014), populism is related to the personalisation of politics, which means strengthening the role of political leaders vis-à-vis other actors within political parties (Cabada & Tomšič 2016; Tomšič & Prijon 2013). Although populist politics is often associated with a strong role of leaders, we cannot say that the existence of dominant leaders is its only characteristic.[6] The *political strategy* is primarily intended to mobilise supporters of the populist agenda (Weyland 2017). This is especially relevant before each election. It is primarily a matter of choosing topics that appeal to 'ordinary citizens', whose protectors the populists present themselves to be. This strategy is strongly related to the *style of political communication*. Some authors see populism primarily as a specific way of expressing and disseminating political messages (Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Moffit & Torney 2014; Krämer 2017). Populists are characterised by a simple way of expressing themselves behind unequivocal messages, which often paint a pronounced 'black and white' picture of the situation in politics and society (where it is clear who the 'good guys' are and who the 'bad guys' are). Discourse is generally designed to play on people's emotions. Populist communication rests on strong 'face-to-face' contact between the leader and his supporters and intensive media communication (Tomšič & Prijon 2013). Regarding the latter, social media plays a vital role (Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018; Prior 2024). This kind of politician is keen

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6   One shall refer to French President Emanuel Macron's party *Rainessance* which has strong personal character but cannot be labelled as populist.

to present themselves as 'men of the people' who deeply understand the needs and wishes of ordinary citizens. They nurture the image of 'self-made men' who, regardless of their wealth, feel with and for ordinary people.

Populism is thus not something unified. We can discuss 'varieties of populism' (de Radt et al. 2004; Gidron & Bonikowski 2013; Ivaldi et al. 2017). It is diverse in terms of *ideological orientation*. Both in academic circles and the general public, the most talked about is right-wing populism when parties are mentioned, such as *the National Rally in France, the League in Italy, the Freedom Party in Austria* or the *Party for Freedom* in the Netherlands, as they have the greatest weight in general in terms of election results. However, in some places, we also deal with strong left-wing populism, like *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain and *Left* in Slovenia. There is also a so-called centrist populism, as with *ANO 2011* in Czechia. Some populists even reject political positioning, claiming to be 'above ideological divisions'. Further, populists differ regarding their *thematic focus* – that is, their central theme – with which they wish to gain the electorate's support. Some raise the issue of migration; others raise the issue of regional autonomy or national sovereignty and still others focus on the fight against capitalism. There are also differences in their orientations in terms of *international alliances*. In the European environment, this mainly refers to the attitude towards Russia. On the one hand, we have populists who are pro-Russian and who show sympathy for the regime of President Putin. On the other hand, we have those who are anti-Russian. They were the first to dominate until the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but then some of them began to renounce their support for Putin (an example of this is the French *National Rally*).

Despite all these differences, we can talk about the conceptual specificity of this phenomenon. Specific characteristics are common to different variants of populism. When we talk about these features, it is necessary to point out, in the first place, *anti-elitism*. This is typical of right and left, pro-Russian and anti-Russian populists. This is expressed in their ideas, rhetoric and how they address citizens. As Vachudova (2021: 474) observes, populism is a mechanism for appealing to voters by promising 'to defend the people against establishment elites by arguing that these elites are protecting and expanding their own privileges at the expense of ordinary citizens'. It is a clear opposition to the established elites. Populists are not only against the political elite but also against other influential groups, such as the business or intellectual elite. Elite circles are often understood as a unified entity with group values, goals and intentions. Members of these elites are presented as selfish, incompetent or even exploitative. These elites are often accused of acting in concert with external forces, neglecting the interests of the 'native' population and giving 'others' (international corporations, migrants) priority over them.

Populists also have in common that they generally understand political and social life in a distinctly collectivist way (Forgas et al. 2021). They address wider

collectivities (nation, religious community, class – depending on the ideological sign) rather than the individual. They perceive the *political community as a single and indivisible entity*, as a community with its own values, ideals, desires and interests (Lavi 2022). In their political appeals, they refer to the people as a whole. That is why they do not favour pluralism (or are at least sceptical of it), as it leads, according to their belief, to undermine people's unity. This is also related to rejecting the separation of powers (in the sense of the 'checks and balances' principle). They portray the populist agenda as an 'emanation of the popular will'. Therefore, once in power, a leader, party or movement following this agenda should have a 'free hand' in making mutually binding decisions. Populists see the existence of institutions that could hinder this as an unnecessary distraction. Thus, when populists come to power, they generally favour the concentration of authority in the hands of the executive branch.

And finally, in the context of the European Union, populism is linked to *Euroscepticism*. Almost all populist parties are also Eurosceptic and vice versa (Conti 2018). However, it is necessary to distinguish between harder and softer variants of Euroscepticism, the former advocating the exit of their countries and the European Union, while the latter merely a loosening of the European political connection (i.e. the return of powers to the hands of the member states). At the global level, populists are usually *anti-globalist* oriented, meaning that they reject global neoliberal capitalism, criticise transnational corporations and oppose the authority of transnational political organisations. In their opinion, 'globalist' institutions and their holders undermine the sovereignty of national states by their actions, especially by their tendency to establish uniform mechanisms and binding rules for regulating matters in critical social areas.

However, populist policies and measures depend on a country's specific circumstances. Relationships with other political protagonists and their positions (mainly whether they are in the government or the opposition) also play an important role. If populists are in power, they often adapt to the new situation and adopt a more pragmatic stance.

We can say that the very phenomenon of populism largely defines the attitude towards the established elites, in the sense of a clear rejection of their character and way of conduct. In this regard, it is paradoxical that some leaders that are often labelled as populist, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump or Andrej Babiš, were very rich and influential before entering politics. This means that they were already part of the elite at that time. However, they managed to communicate this fact in a way that make it irrelevant in the eyes of many voters.

Differences in the strength of populist actors

Despite the numerous claims that populism is rising in Europe, there are significant differences between countries. This is related to different socio-

-economic circumstances and relationships within the political space. In the latter, relations within the political elite and the relationship between political decision-makers and citizens play an important role (mainly the perception of the former in the eyes of the latter).

On the one hand, we have a country like Italy, which some call the 'promised land of populism' (Tarchi 2015). The phenomenon of Silvio Berlusconi, the multiple-time prime minister, was associated with populism, and his politics characterised the last decade of the previous and the first decade of this century. Also, in the current Italian government coalition, there are two parties (*Brothers of Italy* and *League*), which are usually labelled as populist (only with the third coalition party, which Berlusconi once led, this label is no longer associated as a rule); it is similarly considered one of the main opposition parties (*Five Stars Movement*) (Pettrachin & Paxton 2021). On the other hand, in some countries populism is not very perceptible. However, for most European countries, at least one of the parties represented in the parliament can be characterised as populist.

This is related to considerable differences in the power of populist politics in terms of electoral support for populist parties and movements as well as the strength of the latter in the decision-making process (i.e. to what extent are they integrated into government structures). Populists are the strongest in Hungary, where the *Fidesz* party of Prime Minister Viktor Organ has been a *de facto* ruling political force since 2010. A similar situation was in Poland until the 2023 parliamentary election ended the eight-year domination of the national-conservative and traditionalist *Law and Justice* party. In some countries, populist parties form a coalition, as in the case of Slovakia (*Direction – Social Democracy, Voice – Social Democracy, Slovak National Party*) or have a majority in the government coalition, as is the case with Italy[7] or the Netherlands (*Party for Freedom, Farmer-Citizen Movement*)[8]; a similar situation existed in Czechia between 2017 and 2021 (with *ANO 2011* as major coalition partner). In others, they are junior partners in government coalitions, as with Spain (*Podemos*).[9] Even when populists are not in power, their political 'weight' varies significantly. In certain countries, populists are not in government but have some political influence, as in France (*National Rally*) and Sweden (*Swedish Democrats*).[10] However, there are also countries where populists are almost insignificant, playing

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7   In 2018–19, the Italian government comprised two populist Italy parties/movements (*League* and *Five Star Movement*). This was a unique case of an all-populist ruling coalition at that time.

8   At the time of writing this article, the new Dutch government has not yet been officially formed. However, an agreement has been reached on a joint coalition between the *Party for Freedom*, the *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy*, the *New Social Contract* and the *Farmer-Citizen Movement*.

9   This was also the case in Austria during the former government, where the *Freedom Party* was a junior partner.

10 Although not in government, the Swedish Democrats support the current centre-right minority government, which allows them to influence its orientation and policies.

the role of a weak opposition at best (for example, Ireland). However, it must be said that even some parties which are not usually characterised as populist contain evident populist characteristics, both in terms of the way they communicate and in terms of political decisions.[11]

We must also be aware that support for populists (as well as other non--populist political protagonists) is changing. Thus, after Trump's presidential victory and the referendum victory of Brexit supporters in 2016, support for populists began to decline (not least, Trump lost the election in 2020). Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of populists in many European countries. This was partially demonstrated by the 2024 elections for the European Parliament.

We can state that manifestations of populism are specific to each country. They depend on the historical heritage and the characteristics of the national political culture, i.e. dominant values and ideological orientations. Different national traditions are among the leading causes of the above-mentioned earlier of populism, i.e. the existence of several types of populism in Europe. As mentioned, an important role is also played by the socio-economic circumstances in which the individual country is located. In principle, it is considered that aggravated conditions, defined by uncertainty, hardships and frustrations of a certain part of the population, create an opportunity for the rise of populist parties and movements that exploit these sentiments to promote their agenda, mainly by blaming established politics for such a situation. However, this depends on one's political skill, the charisma of populist leaders and the reaction of established parties to the challenges posed by populist politics.

Despite this, we can talk about certain regional patterns. There are differences in the manifestations of populism in the European 'West' and the 'East', i.e. between established and new post-communist democracies (Tomšič 2022). In general, populists in the East represent a stronger political force than the rest of Europe. Populist politicians more often become part of the political mainstream, occupying government positions. There are several examples of so-called populist 'niche parties' that reject traditional class-based orientation of politics, transcend socio-economic cleavage, and are – unlike traditional 'catch-all parties' – focused on a narrow set of non-economic issues (Meguid 2005; Wagner 2012) usually with a strong personalised character that succeeded in their march to power (*Direction – Social Democracy* in Slovakia, *GERB* in Bulgaria, *ANO*

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11   An example is the *Freedom Movement* in Slovenia, which convincingly won the parliamentary elections in 2022, and its leader, Robert Golob, became prime minister after them. His discourse before the elections was distinctly populist; it was based on uncompromising accusations of established politics, especially the party/government in power at the time, and grandiose promises that he would free people from the tyranny of the previous government and reform almost all areas of society. He continued with this rhetoric even after he ascended to the head of the executive branch. He made many promises (for example, he promised judges and prosecutors a salary increase of 600 euros), which turned out to be unfulfillable.

2011 in the Czechia). However, this trend later appeared in several established European democracies (Netherlands and Austria are the most evident recent examples). Certain phenomena, especially a high degree of political polarisation and citizens' dissatisfaction with the behaviour of established political elites (more on this below), which were once characteristic of the so-called 'new' democracies from the Western part of Europe, are now becoming more and more prominent in the 'old' democracies from the Western part of the 'old continent'.

'Eastern' populism is often highlighted as a particularly problematic version. It is associated with tendencies to introduce 'illiberal democracy' or even overt authoritarianism (Bugarič 2019). The ruling populists are accused of introducing (post) authoritarian practices like exerting control over media and undermining the principles of the rule of law (Bugarič & Kuhelj 2015; Lengyel & Ilonszki 2012). Populism in Central and Eastern Europe is characterised by a high level of exclusivism (higher than its Western version) in terms of a negative attitude from ethnic and other minorities and opposition to mass migration. However, to understand populism in East-Central Europe, and especially the popularity of populist leaders and their parties, it is important to understand the collective memory of the people in this region, which stems from the experience of the communist era. Due to its long-standing subordination to the regional hegemon (the Soviet Union at that time), the importance of maintaining national sovereignty is significantly higher than in the West. Due to this, in these countries, the main focus is on the protection of national self--determination from external interference (Verovšek 2019). What is understood from the side of the liberal established elites as populist nationalism is seen by a large part of the population in Central and Eastern European countries as defending the hard-won right to decide on matters of vital importance to them within their national institutions.

Factors in the rise of populism

There are different explanations for the causes of the increasing popularity of populists in the West. Various meta-analyses that deal with research on them (Berman 2021; Scheiring et al. 2024) establish the co-influence of multiple factors, with their relevance varying for different forms of populism. In general, we can talk about four interrelated sets of factors: a) economic, primarily related to the nature of globalisation; b) political, related to the crisis of democracy, c) cultural, related to changes in values and the role of certain ideologies, and d) actor-related, mainly related to the activities of political elites. The first three will be presented in this section, while the last will be discussed in the following section.

Economic explanations of the rise of populism usually link it with the *consequences of globalisation*. The tensions resulting from the globalisation processes

in the economic (and also the political and cultural spheres) strengthen people's susceptibility to the messages of populist politics. Some authors, such as Rodrik (2017; 2021), believe that globalisation has gone too far and that the emergence of populism should be understood as a reaction to an insufficiently regulated free trade system. The globalisation based on neoliberal platforms brings about phenomena such as outsourcing, which means the migration of specific economic sectors from the West to the so-called Third World (where labour costs are lower), threatening job security in these industries. In many countries, people fear the loss of sovereignty due to being flooded with foreign capital, which raises the fear of dependence on large foreign corporations. In addition, the relaxation of the flow of people has led to mass immigration, which raises the fear of job loss (due to cheaper foreign labour) and loss of cultural identity, since many immigrants also come from environments that are very culturally different. Indeed, the effects of globalisation are contradictory: they are beneficial for some countries, regions or social groups and harmful for others. This is especially evident during economic crises, such as the one that erupted in 2008, since they always affect a particular part of the population. The social hardships caused by the crisis lead to frustration and dissatisfaction with the situation; populists take advantage of and play on this dissatisfaction by emphasising that established politics is responsible for their hardships.[12]

The rise of populism occurred in a situation characterised by many problems democratic polities are dealing with. Some even speak about the *crisis of contemporary representative democracy* (see, for example, de Benoist 2011; Torney 2014; Moises 2019). It seems that the citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with mainstream politics (Moffitt 2016) and even support for democracy as a system of government has weakened (Przeworski 2019). The increasing representation gap between traditional political parties and electorates in many democracies (Keman 2017) indicates the alienation of the former from society. The decreasing trust in political institutions is evident in many Western democracies. However, it is even more profound in the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. It is in these democracies that political parties are among the most distrusted institutions (Makarovič & Tomšič 2015). The result of this is a growing apathy among citizens, which is expressed in an ever-decreasing willingness to actively engage within the framework of established political institutions. Several public opinion surveys, which measure people's attitude towards democracy and various types of management and leadership (European Values Survey, World Values Survey, Pew Research Centre, European Social Survey), offer data showing that a considerable part of the European popu-

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12 Of course, the effects of globalisation processes depend significantly on the characteristics of the system arrangement. These characteristics also affect the scope and character of populism. According to Roberts (2019), different variants of populism have structural and institutional foundations in distinct patterns of capitalist development.

lation is disappointed with the political elite and the parliamentary form of democracy (Adam & Tomšič 2019). At the declarative level, people still respect democracy, but it is not the first choice for many, some of whom even support non-democratic forms of government that they believe would be more effective (e.g., a strong leader who operates outside of parliament). Some observers (for example, Foa & Mounk 2016) even warn against the deconsolidation of democracy, which should be brought about by the withdrawal of support for democratic institutions and the growing popularity of radical 'anti-system' political forces.[13]

Populism can also be understood as an expression of *resistance to the ideological currents* that advocate transnational integration and question the primacy of national identity. Authors like Norris and Inglehart (2019) speak about the 'cultural backlash' in terms of the defence of traditional values (which are supposed to be 'under attack' by progressivism). Others discover specific 'populist attitudes' (Schulz et al. 2018; Akkerman et al. 2019). However, different (not only progressive) ideologies are targeted by populists. This refers to the aforementioned neoliberalism, which represents the ideological basis of globalisation – especially in the economic field (Cayla 2021).[14] The latter rejects the need to maintain social equality in its distinct individualism. It advocates the deregulation of financial and other relations, thereby reducing the role and importance of the (national) state in ensuring social well-being. As a result, this also means neglecting the importance of collective forms of belonging as a framework for maintaining social cohesiveness. However, the most common target of populists is multiculturalism, which is accepted and even promoted by a significant part of established elites. As an ideology,[15] multiculturalism rests on the notion that cultural diversity is almost inherently positive. It claims that individual culturally specific communities must have the right and the opportunity to cultivate their values, customs and lifestyles (Heywood 2012). Multiculturalism related to the rise of post-materialist values, as described by authors like Inglehart (1977; 1990), argues for equality among these communities, focusing on protecting the rights of minorities (for example, immigrant communities within European societies) *vis a vis* cultural majority. Some even perceived it as something universalistic. However, many people blamed the multicultural views of (a segment of) the elite as the reason for poor handling of migration, particularly from the Third World. In particular, the right-wing

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13 One needs to state arguments that oppose the thesis of decreasing support of democracy (see, for example, Bartels 2023).

14 It has to be noted that in certain regions, we can witness neoliberal versions of populism (Weyland 1999).

15 Multiculturalism can be seen both as a policy strategy (settling relations between different culturally specific entities—ethnic and religious communities) and as an ideology (promoting the positive nature of intercultural differences). Here, we are focusing on the second aspect since it is the one that is particularly related to the rise of populism.

populists utilised these sentiments, blaming established elites as those responsible for these problems. They have been claiming that, based on their multiculturalist ideology, elites became alienated from the needs and wishes of ordinary 'autochthonous' people (Adam & Tomšič 2020; Tomšič 2022). This led many of them to align with strongmen like Vladimir Putin, who is perceived as a traditionalist and stringent fighter against 'moral decay'.

Various factors must be considered when discussing the reasons for populism's rise. As Baro and Todal Jensen (2024: 18) claim, there is no single model for explaining support for populist parties. The drivers behind the electorate's motives are diverse and derive from specific combinations of conditions and social forces in particular countries. However, the common point is rejectionism. Populism can be understood as a rejection (or at least a strong critique) of the established political and economic order (global capitalism, the European Union) as well as established ideologies (globalism, neoliberalism, multiculturalism). All of this is reflected in the rejection of established political protagonists, i.e. political and other elites perceived as their creators. The following section will discuss the latter's role in its rise.

Responsibility of established elites

Regardless of the importance of systemic factors, it is necessary to realise that in the final stage, political actors are the ones who play a crucial role in making decisions on common matters, thus significantly influencing political and general social dynamics. In this, the political elite plays a key role, which can be defined, according to Higley and Burton (2006: 7), as 'persons who are able, by their strategic positions in powerful organisations and movements, to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially'. The regime's character largely depends on the composition of the political elite (Higley & Burton 1998; Higley & Lengyel 2000; Best & Higley 2010). Other segments of the national elite also play an essential role in this. 'The configuration of elites, i.e. relationships between different factions of the political elite as well as between the political elite and other elite segments (business, cultural elite), along with the elite's profile in terms of prevailing cultural patterns, exert a strong impact on the course of societal development' (Adam & Tomšič 2012: 54). When we talk about established political elites, we consider mainly the leaders of traditional political parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, and people (mainly from these parties) who occupy critical positions in government institutions. People's well-being largely depends on their performance, i.e. the effectiveness of their policy measures, especially when dealing with crucial social challenges.

In recent years, many European countries (as well as the USA) have seen changes in the elite configuration. We are witnessing growing ideological polarisation in politics and society, which means a widening gap and increasingly

frequent conflicts between political groups. This reduces governability in terms of the ability to make appropriate decisions regarding solving key social problems, resulting in suboptimal policy solutions. This, in turn, threatens social cohesiveness, strengthens frustrations among people and undermines trust in the institutions of democratic polity.

The rise of populism occurred in a situation characterised by the poor performance of traditional political parties and their governments (Tomšič 2017; 2022). Their failure to solve key social problems is accompanied by their lack of responsibility, which significantly contributed to the aforementioned weakening of trust in politics and politicians. Many elements are associated with the behaviour of established political parties, such as ideologisation, clientelism, nepotism, corruption, and other dysfunctional practices that contribute to such negative sentiments.

There is a widespread perception of the ineffectiveness of democratic political institutions and the lack of leadership, i.e. the incompetence and irresponsibility of established political elites, both at the national and European level (Adam & Tomšič 2019). This was especially evident in crises. First, we witnessed the poor handling of the first financial crisis in 2008, when the European institutions could not respond in time to some members' high indebtedness and economic weakness, especially Greece. These members had apparent problems with financial discipline and the inability to ensure financial control. However, the deception of some of the Union's leading countries was revealed, and they knowingly allowed it since their private banks (which lent money to these countries) also benefited from it (Mahnkopf 2012). The irresponsibility of the business and political elites, who were primarily responsible for the outbreak of the crisis with their speculations, came to the fore.

The performance was even worse later with the great migrant crisis of 2015. At that time, it turned out that the European Union had no plans to effectively deal with the many people from its near and far surroundings who wanted to settle within its borders. As envisaged by the so-called Dublin Regulation, the migration management system *de facto* collapsed, as it turned out that it could not be put into practice under the given conditions, as some members of the Union (Poland, Hungary, Czechia) explicitly refused to implement it. Each country at whose borders the migrants appeared had to find their own way. This has led to tensions and frustrations on the part of both migrants and the local populations. The approaches of the member states were opposed: one (Germany) invited migrants (especially those from Syria, where a civil war was raging at the time), while another (Hungary) erected fences on their borders. To this, we can add that the integration of migrants, especially those from Muslim countries, has largely failed, which is reflected in many social problems, such as the low level of education and the high level of unemployment in these communities. The migrant crises brought about security problems like an increase

in crime and the rise of terrorism (particularly in the years 2015 and 2016),[16] which created not only resistance to migrants but also feelings of threat among the citizenry. Many saw the cause of this as the incompetence of the ruling elites.

However, it is not only the inaction and inefficiency of the elite. Even their value orientations are often the target of criticism and the object of increasing rejection by a significant part of the electorate. As said, it is about neoliberalism and especially about multiculturalism. The former is defended by a large part of the business elite, while the latter is widespread among both the political and cultural elite (academics, journalists, celebrities, civil society activists). The latter is an integral part of progressive ideological currents connected to the new left (besides multiculturalism, genderism, lgbt-ism, etc. belong to this category), which highlights the rights of various social minorities, advocates value relativism and is generally sceptical of the European cultural tradition. While left-wing populists mainly attack neoliberalism, right-wing populists oppose said progressivism. There is a growing gap between the values of elites and ordinary citizens (with the latter mainly being more traditional – or at least less prone to support a progressivist agenda – than the former), which manifests itself in concrete differences in terms of political orientations. Perhaps this is most evident in the field of migration, where the citizens of the European Union are, in general, significantly less inclined to mass migration – especially from the Third World – and members of the elites.[17] Ignoring the value orientations of 'ordinary people' by the established elites leads to an additional erosion of trust in them.

Conclusion

Established politics, the mainstream media and a good part of the academic sphere characterise populism as problematic, let alone a threat to the future of the European democratic order. It is true that populists often paint the situation in society in a distinctly black-and-white way and offer simplified solutions to very complex social problems. Moreover, demonising the 'enemies of the people' contributes to political polarisation and the worsening of the social climate. However, it can be said that populism is not a cause but a symptom of the crisis of established politics and the deficiencies of mainstream political elites. Populism can be perceived as a reminder of the lack of representation and responsiveness in the democratic system or, as Mudde (2021) provocatively claimed, as 'an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism'.

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16 See, for example, Riham Alkousaa, 'Violent crime rises in Germany and is attributed to refugees', Reuters, 3. 1. 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-germany-crime-idUSKBN1ES16J

17 For example, the research BVA Xsight for ARTE Europe Weekly, a project led by the French-German TV channel ARTE GEIE, which was part of the countdown to the European elections in June 2014, showed that seven out of 10 Europeans believe their country such as too many immigrants (Peregil, El Pais, 7. 5. 2024).

With its analysis, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the importance of (mainly political) elites and their responsibility for the ever-increasing popularity of populist political actors in Europe. We are talking about established political parties, regardless of their ideological sign, which are still in power in most European countries and have key decision-making levers in their hands, particularly during (financial, migrant) crises. Of course, certain social circumstances created favourable conditions for the rise of populism. However, the key representatives of the European countries and institutions of the European Union have often not shown themselves with appropriate decisions. Populists were the ones who merely utilised their flaws and wrongdoings.

Populism has divergent effects, particularly on democracy. According to Schmitter (2019), one can speak about the virtues and flaws of populism, i.e. its positive aspects like the opening of political space and the deconsolidation of sclerotic party systems, the mobilisation of previously passive individuals and groups, the expansion of the range of possible political solutions; as well as negative ones including destabilisation of the decision-making process, raising unrealistic expectations among citizens, creating mistrust in the political system, introducing exclusivism and intolerance into political life, and professionalisation of politics. It depends on the specific political, economic and social situation and prevailing value patterns in a concrete environment which characteristics will prevail and what populism will manifest itself.

Populism is not a uniform phenomenon, so its different variants have different effects on democratic life. We can discuss different degrees of intensity regarding the populist approach and behaviour. On the one hand, we have the so-called 'soft' populism, mainly about harsh rhetoric. However, constitutional principles such as the separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms are not questioned. On the other hand, there is 'hard' populism, which is anti-system-oriented and rejects these constitutional principles. While the first does not have any fatal effects on the functioning of democracy, the second can be problematic from this point of view – particularly if it relates to authoritarian leadership, which rejects pluralism and tends to monopolise power in the hands of the one at the top of the power pyramid. In any case, populism represents a significant challenge to established politics, but at the same time, it also potentially encourages its 'self-transformation'. Populists have been utilising deficiencies, flaws and wrongdoings committed by traditional political elites. This happens quite often in times of crisis when people are subjected to various – real or imagined – fears and frustrations. If the established elites cannot address it adequately, the populists' door is 'wide open'.

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