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Populism in Central Eastern Europe

Andrej Skolkay¹

Populism is one of the most controversial and fuzziest terms used in the social, and more specifically, political sciences. The term populism was used for the first time in the USA at the end of 19th century to describe a form of political language and a form of political participation (populist movement) - according to Urbinati (1998, 110) - specific but consistent with democracy.

The majority of contemporary analysts of populism agree that the term populism is highly ambivalent, both in theory and in practice. Some have even suggested that the term not be used in the social sciences (see De la Torre, 1992, 387). Nevertheless, the term populism is used in the social sciences with increasing frequency. However, we can find the term 'populism' being used in academic texts without ever being defined (see e.g. Boulanger 1999). This is also especially prevalent in

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journalism. Further, populism is seen as something undesirable, if not entirely negative, by most analysts and journalists. Labeling somebody as a populist is common both on the political right and left. Ironically, populist parties like to define themselves to be in the center, in the "main-stream".

Populism is not limited geographically or culturally, although in some regions and in some periods we can notice its more pronounced or wider presence. One can find populist parties or movements and of course leaders labeled as populists in Europe, Canada (see Harrison and Krahn, 1995, Jenson and Papillon, 1998) as well as in Australia and New Zealand and the USA, not to mention many Western European countries (see Betz and Immerfall, 1998). To complicate matters even further, some authors consider Mussolini's fascism to have been populist (e.g. Urbinati 1998, 113), or describe the Nazi drive to power in 1920s as involving populist political discourse (Fritzsche 1990).

It can be helpful to consider populism as the total opposite of liberal and representative democracy (Urbinati 1998, 116), as an attempt at popular democracy, based on appeal to and support from primary, urgent and by other political elites largely ignored needs of voters, during crisis of legitimacy of the "old" elites. This perspective will be argued in what follows.

In the following argument I would like to focus on some key terms related to populism, and causes of its origin in general, especially in Central Eastern Europe and in Slovakia. Although I will try to separate analytically most important arguments, there still may remain significant overlap. Slovakia, which had and still has serious problems with populist politics, is an ideal case for evidence that argues "populist political culture", as a source of populism, can and should be refused.

Definition

Populism is a form of sharply antagonistic political rhetoric and politics, which extremely simplifies problems and offers seemingly easy, painless, sometimes very concrete but most often vague solutions. The populist politician presents himself as a common man who understands people, in contrast to the corrupt elites, incapable and/or unfit to govern. He claims to represent all non-privileged or underprivileged, underrepresented, or any other relatively large vaguely defined group. Differences between societies necessitate corresponding difference in political rhetoric, with the consequence that the term 'populism' is rendered systemically ambiguous. That populism is difficult to define more concretely, and that there is often disagreement whether somebody can be called a populist, reflects ambiguity of un-

written rules of what is permissible and possible to say and to do and what is not in a society. Under normal circumstances, there is a general tacit agreement on what the politician is permitted to say, but during and shortly after a short or long term crisis, people tend to be more sensitive to extreme and seemingly easy solutions. In addition, there is often a difference between what a populist politician says before the public and what he in fact does. Populism clearly divides society into two groups, those for and those against the leader. Populism rejects violent revolution. It is based on popular support, and respects the basic criteria of democracy, including market economy, but at the end a charismatic leader through a subjugated party-state structure plays the decisive role. In contrast to known ideologies, populism rejects all existing ideologies as insufficient for that particular society and tries to find its own “new” way. Due to international political and economic limitations, even if a populist politician has a plan, this approach leads in practice to utilitarianism, opportunism, eclecticism, and, at the end, to a more or less authoritarian style of politics. Populism sooner or later adopts in rhetoric and possibly in its policies nationalistic elements, or religious elements, or any other hostile rhetoric, i.e. a negative style of creating a common cultural definition which can unite the largest possible group of potential voters for and especially against something or somebody. However, another major feature is a lack of any coherent and clear set of ideas, or any consistent ideology and policy for the long run.

All other political leaders, parties and movements which do not share all mentioned features but accept populist rhetoric as a part of their political communication, are primarily ideologically oriented (e.g. populist liberalism or conservatism, but also communism or fascism). Populism is only a part of their rhetoric and politics, not the essential feature.

Therefore, the difference between use of the terms 'populism' and 'populist' is significant, if not crucial. If the word populist is used, it means that the qualified term is more important, it is the substance of it. For example, the difference between 'left-wing populism' and 'populist left' is the following: The first expression means the use of leftist rhetoric by a populist party (and it often implies contradictory, as a matter of course, practical policies, in this case right-wing), the second expression indicates a left-wing party which uses empty rhetoric and/or makes difficult to fulfill promises. Similarly, 'populist nationalism' can be found in the party in which nationalism is and will remain the determining idea for its policies and the role of the leader is insignificant. On the other hand 'nationalist populism' can reflect nationalism as a temporary policy of a populist party, which can be

changed, disregarded or even suppressed, if necessary --at least for a while by a leader and at almost anytime.

Why have been there different success stories of populism in Central Eastern Europe immediately after the fall of communism?

The most significant and successful populism in Central Eastern postcommunist countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia) is to be found in Slovakia. Why was populism so successful in Slovakia? In general, the most typical populist charismatic leaders have been elected first time by and large by an average voter. This was case of Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia in 1992 and Andreas Papandreu in Greece in 1981.² Similarly, Polish President Walesa was elected in 1990 by and large by an 'average voter. ' ³ The Greek prime minister Andreas Papandreu who governed in the 1980s, and Polish president Walesa are other examples of charismatic populist leaders, the former being the more "ideal type" of a populist leader.

Why did an average voter in Poland, Greece and Slovakia vote for a populist leader? The following discussion will be focused on Central Eastern Europe and especially on Slovakia.

Was it the legacy of communism?

Some argue, directly or indirectly, that populism is a legacy of the ideology and/or practice of communism.⁴ American-Romanian political scientist Tismaneanu (1996, 514) defines a postcommunist man as an individual unwilling to take

² There were some regional differences in success of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS), but there was no significant difference in voting in rural and urban areas. What was perhaps significant, was that protestants and Catholics voted significantly more for MDS, while atheists and members of the Greek Orthodox Church significantly less so. The MDS had also bigger support among less educated voters (Krivý 1999).

The electorate of Greek PASOK in 1981 represented Greek middle class, with identical ratio of rural and urban population, with equal representation various professions, and with insignificant difference between more and less developed regions (Axt 1985).

³ Exit polls have shown that President's Walesa electorate represented an average Pole. This means there were no substantial differences between supporters of Walesa and his opponet. Nevertheless, it is true that Walesa's voters were, on average, a bit less educated and older (Jasiewicz 1997, 133, Tworzecki 1996, 67).

⁴ Greskovits (1998, 106) has found seven fundamental similar features between communism and populism in economic policies.

risk and unfriendly towards fair play and pluralistic values. Slovak intellectual Štefan Markus (1997, 151) believes that relicts of communism are pessimism, passivity and weak moral values. Czech intellectual Erazim Kohák (1997, 24) sees the totalitarian mentality as a vision of the world exclusively in terms of the friend-enemy distinction. Melich (1997) considers the mental legacy of communism to be intolerance and hypocrisy, strong statist (paternalistic) authoritarian rules of behavior, doublethink in public and in private, atomization of society, relative information isolation, a trap of political illusions and resulting unrealistic expectations. Political scientist Schöpflin (1992, 41) adds to the communist legacy depolitization, which can be seen in a lack of patience with politics and in natural tendency to search for easy, radical solutions.⁵ But the legacy of communism itself as described above apparently does not explain populism, or its strength and duration, because Greece was not communist (nor was Argentina before Juan Domingo Peron). In addition, there was an almost identical (and in fact a bit stricter) communism in the Czech Republic as in Slovakia, with a somewhat different transition from Slovakia.

Was it lack of an independent statehood?

Hungarian political scientist Ágh (1998, 62-69) argues that in the early 1990s authoritarian tendencies after the fall of communism resulted in neo-traditionalism and national populism in politics. The first group is different from the other in sociological terms, argues Ágh, primarily because it represents the historical middle class. Parties representing extreme right-wing populism reflect interests of the least powerful, the poorest, and least educated people. Both groups have common values: Nation and people. But they place different emphasis on each term, and there is correspondingly a different meaning in each case. Ágh distinguishes populism in Central Europe from populism in the Balkans. The latter is mass based, with charismatic leaders, but not with real institutions guaranteeing participation in politics, and without a democratic pattern of political culture. Ágh accounts for this phenomenon through appeal to the absence of a prior experience with statehood, i.e. national independence. In the Balkans, claims Ágh, national populists are to a great degree part of the elite, or indeed in extreme cases they form the elite itself, as was

⁵ It should be noted that these evaluations of the legacy of communism, although in general correct, are not always consistent with the results of opinion polls (i.e. with self-declared attitudes).

case in Slovakia. A Slovak political scientist Szomolányi (1999) also adopted the lack of prior statehood as a leading idea in her explanatory framework.

There was indeed long-term Slovak dissatisfaction with their status in a common state. However, it is clear now, as it was to many at that time, that Slovaks did not want to and in fact at that time did not break the federation. What they wanted was equal status with the Czechs, to be fulfilled not so much formally (they already had formal equality), but more symbolically, or, if you will, emotionally. Hence followed various ‘hyphen wars’ and other seemingly non-sense ‘word games’ that one could observe in the then Czechoslovakia. In March 1993, a majority of Slovaks thought that the split of Czechoslovakia was the result of the unwillingness of the Czechs to reach equal partnership with Slovaks (Bútorá and Bútorová 1993, 127) and that half of the Slovaks would probably not vote for an independent Slovakia (Bútorá and Bútorová 1993, 134). On the other hand, at the end of 1992, a majority of citizens of Slovakia preferred a sovereign Slovakia in the sense of a subject of international law (Krivý 1992, 4). That this was indeed long-lasting desire can be seen in opinion polls from 1968, when there was discussion about federalization of the state. In that year 93,6 % of those asked in Slovakia believed that relationships between Slovaks and Czechs should be put on new basis, ideally in the form of federation (Connor and Gittelman 1977, 95). Although in January 1969 the Czechoslovak federation was created, this was indeed a communist, politically unitary federation. In short, the desire for real equality significantly complicated political life in the first period after the fall of communism and eventually lead to separation. However, this, to repeat, is not the best explanation because Greece (as well as Argentina) had had statehood for more than 100 years before the “populist decade”. Similarly, Slovenia with no populism present, never had independent statehood, not even as Slovakia did, even if in the form of quasi-statehood during WWII.

Was it legacy of authoritarianism?

Tökes (1991, 230) finds three specific features which distinguish communist regimes from right-wing authoritarian regimes. These differences should, it goes without saying, complicate the real transformation from communism to a democracy and capitalism. First of all, Tökes sees distinctions in the institutional and ideological penetration of communist regimes. Secondly, key economic, social and cultural elites in communist regimes had to a much lesser degree legally guaranteed or de facto autonomy as was the case with similar elites in right-wing dictatorships. Lastly, non-state actors (entrepreneurs and individuals) in communist regimes had

less freedom of decision concerning economic resources. Certainly, all three factors could have complicated the post-communist transition and made the emergence of populism easier. Deeper institutional and ideological penetration of communism, if it indeed was deeper, could have left a paternalistic legacy and passivity, reflected in the people's searching both for a common enemy and a popular savior. It is reasonable to believe that the lower autonomy of key elites as well as restricted freedom in decision making about key economic issues could have produced elites and citizens unprepared for a democracy and market economy. But again, populism was not simply a result of authoritarianism, because Papandreou got to power in Greece seven years after the fall of a military regime, in the third free elections held. There had to be something more at work than an authoritarian or totalitarian legacy.

Was it political culture in its various features?

Slovak political scientist Szomolányi, among others, argued in this way in 1994. In Slovakia more than half of those asked in 1992 supported the claim that there was a need for a strong leader (Krivý 1993a, 32). According to other research, Slovakia belongs to six out of the nine post-communist countries surveyed in 1992/1993 (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Ukraine) in which citizens who rejected strong leaders constituted a majority. In the case of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia it was even a substantial majority (Rose and Mishler in Taras 1998, 104). Although there is no clear correlation between authoritarianism and strong leadership (Krivý 1993a, 32), a significant part of the Slovak society longed for a strong leader and a partly authoritarian government in the key period of transformation. However, the Slovak population by and large rejects authoritarian forms of government. Krivý (1993a, 32) indicates that in March 1993 only 21 percent of those asked preferred a strong personality in politics. Opinion polls document a relatively significant presence of more positive attitudes towards authoritarian forms of government in all post-communist countries, on average a third of the population. However, again, in the case of Slovakia the level of positive attitudes towards authoritarianism was the second lowest, after the Czech Republic in the second half of 1990s (Rose 1997, 104 and Rose 1998, 291). If this conclusion was correct, then, again, there had to be something more that enabled Vladimír Mečiar to dominate politics in Slovakia for such a long time and so successfully.

Carpenter (1997) argues that post-communist countries can be split into two groups, two political "orders". The first one is "national populism" and the second one is "social democracy". The first type, national populism, is a result of a specific

historical experience. Here we can include, argues Carpenter, Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Yugoslavia. Of course, this categorization is too historically or "environmentally" deterministic. We can (or could) find strong populism in Austria, Italy and Poland. Although Carpenter is aware of weakness of the historical determination approach, his explanation of the causes of populism ends with political culture. Carpenter (1997, 206) underlines importance of different, i.e. higher, or long-term levels of "foreign dominance" and "economic backwardness". This helps us to explain the similarities of the post-communist transformation in Slovakia with those in Bulgaria and Romania, as is visible in the form of an absence of relatively experienced non-communist elites and, in case of Romania, the poor economic results of the communist regime. But still, why then did the Czech Republic turn to Václav Klaus, and Slovakia to Vladimír Mečiar? Or, an even better example, why did Slovenians or Macedonians with long-term dominance of foreign rule - and in the case of the Macedonians with a poor economy - not vote for a populist leader? One key factor which was unique for the Czechs was a different experience with communism, for the Czechs saw the communist regime more negatively – and for a good reason – than the Slovaks. In addition, there was a relatively stronger alternative elite in the Czech Republic (partly simply due to its bigger population). This elite succeeded to change political discourse in the Czech Republic in 1990-1991. Thus, the new Czech elites were able to occupy space that was emptied after the retreat of the compromised Communist Party. Václav Klaus, and the people around him promised painless and fast transformation, while in Slovakia this could not work. The first experience of transformation hit the Slovaks harder than the Czechs, and their experience with the communist economy was, overall, positive. Therefore, a call for their own transformation was seen as the least thing acceptable. However, this was only one factor (or a set of factors) which distinguished Slovakia.

According to Bútorá, Bútorová and Gyarfášová (1994, 233), repeated surveys confirm that in 1990-1992 the new elite was not in tune with the perceived needs of citizens (see also Fric et al 19991). Bútorá et al. (1994) tried to explain the discrepancies through appeal to the following factors: the dilemma of Unitarianism vs. federalism, the existence of a quasi-independent Slovak state during the WWII, the communist type of federation, an asynchronical process of industrialization and urbanization in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic and a softer "normalization" as well as weaker resistance toward communism in Slovakia. It is clear that there were too many contradictory factors in play which complicated the position of the first Slovak postcommunist elite. However, Klaus and Mečiar took the opportunity and

promised to solve all issues, quickly, and efficiently. Certainly, the future of populist leaders might have been different if there would have been more time in Czechoslovakia (e.g. general elections to be held not in two years, but in four years), or if elites would have been able to find solutions to the most pressing problems earlier.

It is significant that differences between Czechs and Slovaks on the authoritarian scale, the egalitarian scale and their combinations were minimal even before the unexpected problems of the Czech transformation in 1997 (see Rosko 1995). Slovak historian Zemko (1999, personal interview) explains the power of populism in Slovakia through an appeal to a combination of a certain civilizational level (overwhelmingly rural-urban society), with the economic level and a state of crisis in society. Hungarian sociologist Pál Tamás (1998, personal interview), divides populism in Eastern Europe into nations without a historical middle class, without an urban class and in those with an upper-middle class, but in the latter case the real masses are not populist. Tamas sees the real differences in the origins of populism, in social bases and in style and in main ideologies. I assume that the Hungarian scientist attempted to generalize the Hungarian experience for the experience of (post-communist) Central Eastern Europe.

As was discussed above, although the style of populism in Slovakia was and is to a significant degree similar (though different in its scope) to that in Hungary, more detailed and comparative analysis suggests that although the Slovak political culture has some peculiarities, it is nonetheless very similar to Czech political culture (see Machonin 1992, 108; Krivý 1993b, 318; Musil 1993, Machonin 1994, 333-337; Stena 1994, 371). In most cases it possesses either superior better or else the same self-declared pro-transformation and prodemocracy attitudes as those in Polish and Hungarian society (see Tamási 1995, Janík 1997, Markowski 1997, Rose 1997). Gantar (1996), even before the crisis in the Czech Republic in 1997, doubted claims about sharp cultural differences between Czechs and Slovaks. His argument was based on the changes of attitudes of the Czech electorate under the pressure of transformation. Fric (1996) did not find significant differences in attitudes with respect to liberal issues. Only moral and religious criteria played a greater role in Slovakia. Tuček (1996) similarly argued that approximately half the respondents in both republics were without a fixed opinion on the transformation of society. Tuček believed that some tendencies could have led to very similar attitudes in both nations. Political and economic developments have apparently confirmed this hypothesis.

Markowski (1997, 227) compared attitudes and opinions in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and in Hungary. Markowski argues that only in the Czech Republic, in distinction from Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, is it possible to mobilize politically alienated voters on the basis of traditional criteria of the left and the right. In Hungary, Slovakia and Poland it is more likely possible on the basis of populist over-party calls. Markowski (1997) explains this difference on the basis of the experience with transition and with the existence of political institutions. Markowski supports the thesis that there are in fact minimal differences between Czech and Slovak societies.

It can be concluded that political culture in itself does not cause populism, but it certainly shapes its form and contents.

Was it the result of economic advancement during communism and negative experiences with economic reforms after the fall of communism?

The answer to this question is 'perhaps', as the above analysis suggests, but an analysis of purely economic factors itself does not much explain why there was such a strong and relatively long lasting populism in Slovakia. It is true that Slovakia progressed immensely during communism. According to OECD statistics (Elster, Offe, Preuss et al, 1998, 42), while in 1948 GDP per capita in Slovakia was 40 percent lower than in Czechia, in 1988 this difference was only 13 percent. Economic expert Valentovic (1999) argues that during the transformation the falling standard of living was seen in Slovakia in a much more negative light than in the Czech Republic for three reasons: First of all, the social costs of transformation was higher than in the Czech Republic, second, in contrast to the Czech Republic, Slovakia did not have a democratic tradition which would soften social opposition towards transformation, and, thirdly, there were practically no economic experts that would understand principles of reform and were able to explain the necessity of economic costs.

The comparison of various economic data in the first years in transition in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia provides evidence that the majority of key socio-economic indicators (GDP, inflation and unemployment) worsened in Slovakia exactly in years 1990 and 1991. These elements of the economy were in a majority of cases the worst among the four countries (especially so unemployment). However, the majority of countries in the Balkans and in the former Soviet Union witnessed even worse results which persisted for a long period. Similarly, Poland witnessed even worse economic results in 1989-1990 (see Blazyca 1998). To a certain degree this tendency helps to explain a distinctive kind of populism in Hun-

gary, a country which was in economic crisis for a long period before the year 1990. It also helps to explain a distinct populism in Poland, when Walesa proved to be able to lead workers against the communist regime which was unable to provide economic benefits for working Poles, but was less capable as a powerful politician in a democratic state.

Hausner (1992, 108-120) sees the danger of populism to consist mainly in an unsuccessful or too burdensome transformation. Hausner refers to Wnuk-Lipinski and other authors according to whom economic transformation in postcommunist countries faces inner contradiction, which can result in a populist form of government. The contradiction is evident in attempts of elites to keep the support from voters, which leads to a prolongation or even to a halting of reforms. However, continuation in reforms leads to the alienation of political elites. This paradox lays the ground for populism. Hausner quotes Hans van Zon's prognosis. Van Zon has predicted a populist-authoritarian alternative as one possible variant of the postcommunist transformation. Its basic features would be attempts to introduce market economy together with significant isolation from world markets, with support from the state and the weak bourgeoisie, with nationalism as an ideology and with economic etatism through immense bureaucracy. According to Hausner (1992, 120), the most important conclusion from the van Zon theory is the complete dependence of this alternative on the failure of liberal reformators. It is surprising how Slovakia fit these criteria exactly.

Was it the result of missing or too weak or perhaps too strong institutions?

Zhang (1994, 126-127) explains the phenomenon of populism in democratic social movements in postcommunist states as the result of institutional factors. There were no independent or semi-independent organizations in communist regimes, in contrast to corporatist authoritarian states in South America. Therefore, new social movements did not have solid organization and institutional control and the leaders of movements had to use populist and even demagogic symbols for unification and control. Zhang refers to Pakulski, Comiss and Oberschall, who underline the necessity for the new movements to accept radical, but very general and strongly oppositional policies, and to search more for enemies than to search for common positive aims. In the case of postcommunist movements, it was, logically, in the first round, anti-communism. The second generally unifying feature in multinational states was nationalism, argues Zhang, with reference to Linz and Stepan. Opposition elites in corporatist states did not have to be demagogic, because democratic transition in these regimes was based on exclusion of masses through

strong corporatist organizations. Yet Malová (1997) argues that in the case of Slovakia as well as Czechia, corporatism was established before 1989 and survived the fall of communism. It is more than likely that this corporatism did not reflect (before and after the fall of communism) sufficient representation of the interests of its members. It is more than likely that it was Vladimír Mečiar who most successfully claimed to represent interests of the people, even from the point of view of corporatism. Bozóki and Sükösd (1993, 236-237) argue that it is precisely the disorganization of civil society, including the weakness of farmers' workers' and employees' organizations that enables the emergence and intensification of populism.

In contrast Greskovits (1998, 100-109) argues that political parties in Central Eastern Europe – in contrast to South America - did not exclude a part of the electorate, and represented a more stable system of political parties. In addition, argues Greskovits, there were limitations coming out from the international situation and the need to follow certain rules of the game.⁶

Was it the result of specific structural factors?

According to Greskovits (1998, 100-109), one of the facts explaining the lack of populism in Central Eastern Europe was exactly the fact that there was no sharp difference in income level with a corresponding contradiction in the interests of exporters of traditional agricultural commodities, as it was in South America with its strong populist movements. But, again, in this respect all communist countries were similarly egalitarian.

Kopstein and Reilly (1999) have developed a more elaborate hypothesis. They argue in their comments on M. Steven Fish's article on the dynamics of economic reform in postcommunist states that geography played a certain role in the economic outcomes. More specifically, they believe – with some skepticism regarding the limitations of their own research approach – that the choices available were determined by an international context in terms of geography. In short, they support the idea that a state will be influenced by its neighbors wherever it is located, that geographical proximity to the West may help a country and that geographical isolation in the East or proximity to other, non-democratic, weakly marketized states, may hurt a country. The influences of geography can include cultural diffusion, institutional diffusion, cross-border trade, immigration, shared knowledge, or historical legacies.

⁶ Also, in Slovenia the labor movement did not play any significant role in transition.

Further, Kopstein and Reilly believe that Fish was right in arguing that the initial political, institutional and policy choices shaped the economic outcomes, at least in the mid-term. These arguments have validity for political choices and certainly overlap with the following ones (and maybe they should be included into the “rules of the game”).

Was it the result of available "rules of the game"?

Greskovits (1998, 110) explains the greater success of populism among political parties in Poland, in contrast to Hungary, through appeal to election rules. The election rules in Poland enabled entry into the parliament for a large number of small parties. Consequently, argues Greskovits, populist rhetoric was more successful. In the former Czechoslovakia, where one could witness similar phenomena as in Poland, argues Greskovits, the main fragmentation of political parties was along ethnic and national lines. This tendency was strengthened with negative economic consequences of reform and with unemployment.

Perhaps more importantly, in the case of Czechoslovakia the important factor was the fragmented right wing and civic political parties, which caused almost every fourth vote to be lost in the elections of 1992. In contrast, when there was a minimal waste of votes due to coalitions and a more rational, experience based voting in 1998, opposition parties were able to win a constitutional majority with about the same number of total votes for HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) and SNS (Slovak National Party), as in 1994. Certainly, additional factors played a role too. It was a new alternative, SOP (Party of Civic Understanding), long-term experience with the Meciar regime, and a higher participation in the 1998 general elections in general and among younger and urban voters specifically.

Was it the result of a contrast between exaggerated expectations and a very gloomy reality as well as various internal and external threats?

It is obvious that many people expected in the near future a combination of the most positive features of capitalism, democracy and communism: Full employment, a high standard of living, prosperity and productivity, freedom and low level of crime, etc. In addition, the media in most cases strengthened these utopian expectations and feelings with strong and permanent criticism of new governments. However, instead of expected prosperity, citizens had to face new or stronger challenges. According to opinion polls, (Haepfer, Milosinski and Wallace, 1999) in period 1992, 1996 and 1998, citizens of Slovakia felt threatened with various

domestic and foreign threats much more than the majority of the other nations which were studied (ten, later eleven countries). Is it an accident that the level of threat they perceived as coming from Russia, Germany and USA, as well as minorities, immigrants and refugees and from neighboring countries was in most cases very similar to Poles and Czechs and significantly different from Hungarians?

It is interesting to note that in the majority of surveyed countries, including Slovakia there was a decreasing trend in the perception of this threat in most categories. However, Slovaks became more afraid of Russia and the USA and of immigrants simultaneously. It can be argued that the rhetoric of the governing coalition and opposition, and perhaps of the media itself, was more important in this tendency than the real threat, judging accordingly to development in other countries.

A significant difference in perceived threats among Hungarians, in contrast to Poles, Slovaks and Czechs can help us to explain a less developed populism in Hungary. Only in 1993 were Hungarians more afraid of immigrants and, significantly, neighboring countries than the Czechs and Slovaks, although this attitude towards neighbors was about the same as the Poles (Taras 1995, 247). We can assume that people are more likely to turn to strong leaders when they perceive various threats which they are unable to deal with efficiently. Therefore, the role of charismatic personality could be higher in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Certainly, this longing for a charismatic leader was either strengthened or weakened with some additional factors, such as electoral rules.

Historical comparison reminds us that populism in Greece was also fed with the perceived threat of Turkey by the majority of Greeks.

Was it the result of non-Protestant religions?

This is the well-known hypothesis about "Protestant ethic" versus Catholic dogmatism. Certainly, it looks quite persuasive at the first sight. Argentina has always been a very Catholic country, with over 90% claiming to be Catholics in the 1990s, and even more under Perón in the 1940s and 1950s. This is almost the same ratio as in Poland, with its first non-communist populist President. Slovakia is less Catholic, but Catholic nonetheless, with 60 percent of its citizens attached to the Catholic faith. However, this is similar to Hungary, 68 percent of which is Catholic and 25 percent of which is Protestant. The Czech Republic is predominantly atheist (40 percent) mixed with Catholics (39 percent). Greece, with the dominant Greek orthodox church (over 95 percent) seems to fit into this picture. However, the picture is more complex. On the one hand, it is true that Catholics voted significantly more for MDS in 1992 (as well as later). However, this was also the case

for Protestants in 1992. On the other hand, Greek Orthodox voters, as well as atheist voters voted much less for MDS in 1992 (Krivý 1999). The question still is, why was there no such successful dominant populist leader in Poland and in Hungary, in the long-term, as there was in Slovakia? Even more, why are there no successful populist leaders in other Catholic European countries like Ireland or Spain at the moment? In addition, why was there populism – or at least what some called populism - in the USA in some relatively large areas at the end of 19th century? Further, the very idea of progressive protestantism has been recently cast into doubt by some historical counterarguments (see Stone 1981, 115-116).

Was it the result of more factors?

This is the most likely explanation. Tökes (1991, 232) argues that the key to the understanding of the post-communist transformation can be a simultaneous confluence of elites, a succession of leadership and dissident politics--and much more than it holds in the case in Spain, Portugal and Greece. We have discussed Greskovists arguments throughout the text.

In the case of Slovakia, the most likely explanation is a combination of the role of populist leaders, in this case Vladimír Mečiar, Czecho-Slovak constitutional debates, relative social conservatism of the older and less educated voters (who indeed were later to be found in greater numbers among voters of Mečiar), survival of a preference for authoritarian parties in some regions, and asymmetrical economic development in the Czech and Slovak parts of Czechoslovakia in years 1990-1991, and especially so in years 1948 –1989. To this list one could add the contrast between positive economic and civil security experiences with the communist system on the one hand and sudden unemployment, price liberalization and crime, various perceived and real threats, and various competing small right-wing parties active until 1998.

An additional key factor is the form of the communist regime in the last decade or two before the collapse of communism. In contrast to Hungary and Poland, in Slovakia there was neither strong dissent nor relatively liberal communism. This was the result of the occupation in 1968 and the subsequent 'dogmatic' communist regime. Although the same regime existed in both parts of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia enjoyed much more economic stability and growth in those years. That the regime was really more dogmatic, and that popular dissatisfaction with the rulers (not so much with the regime) was strong, was evident both in its sudden collapse towards the end of 1989 and in opinion polls that simultaneously showed – yet – a dominant preference for socialism or a mixture of socialism with capitalism, amongst

both Czechs and Slovaks in the initial months after the collapse of communism. The relatively lesser success of populism in Hungary can be explained through appeal to a longer period of crisis, a longer period of peaceful transition led by intellectuals, the non-existence of a capable populist leader and a low interest in the people in political practice. The Polish case is similar to the Hungarian case in most of above-mentioned points, as is clear from the low turnout. That Hungary had the most liberal communist regime can be seen in later opinion polls. Hungarians constitute the only nation among the seven surveyed that evaluated the former communist regime positively for a long time (Rose 1998, 285).

It seems that the success or failure of populist charismatic leaders in the post-communist countries can be found in a number of interrelated factors, where the *first* general important *variable* was *time*. Important was the timing of the first and the second free elections, of the economic deterioration and how long the transition lasted before the first free elections.

The *second* general important *variable* was presence or absence of an able *charismatic leader*, and his personal features (tendency to populism or not, and what kind of populism, i.e. essentially a matter of degree).

Then there were following important factors:

- Type of communist regime in the last period before its end (see Bozóki 1994, 121);
- Strength and form of resistance against communism in the last period of its history;
- Relative success or failure of the economy and its initial GDP level per capita at the start of transition (see Bruszt 1994);
- Readiness (and availability, if at all) of alternative political elites, including easy possibility to gain access to media and/or to join a new elite;
- Form of transition to first free and democratic elections, including election rules and available alternatives;
- Presence of suppressed or not satisfactorily solved issues from the previous period (e.g. status of minorities, of borders, of constitutional arrangement, etc) and the impact of any other perceived crisis (in a sense of crisis with trust in the relationship between population and political elites) or real crises;

Due to the dominant role of the workers movement in the struggle against communism in Poland, Walesa was able to succeed as a populist leader. That the anti-Communist movement in Poland was present in the form of a workers' movement was related to a less productive agricultural sector which was unable to feed the population, and the consequent import of food which led to high foreign

debt. For this reason, but also because of the role of the Catholic Church and traditional Polish patriotism, the regime was relatively liberal (Gregus 1999).

In Hungary, agriculture was much more successful, and the communist regime attempted to introduce—partly due to necessity and partly as a form of compensation for lack of political freedoms—partial economic reforms after 1956. The regime towards its end tolerated intellectual opposition and agreed to negotiate with the emerging opposition. Consequently, the whole process was under the control of intellectuals, who preferred Antall as the leader of the “umbrella” movement. Progress in both countries was slow, and political progress was almost simultaneously connected with economic decline.

In the former authoritarian Czechoslovakia, one could witness two increasingly divergent processes. In Czechia, with strong dissent and in Slovakia with weak dissent, change came first of all from below, and as a consequence of international pressure.

The regime collapsed and dissidents came to power. However, the negative economic, social, security and political experiences of both populations with dissidents in politics, and more successful rhetoric of emerging populist leaders, as well as the timing of the second regular general elections, and (in case of Slovakia split among pro-reform and pro-democracy parties) contributed to the victory of Klaus in the Czech Republic and Meciar in Slovakia.

Causes of Populism

What are then, general causes of populism? The universal answer to this question is simple: populism is a result of a socio-economic, political, cultural or discursive crisis or crises in a society. According to the standard rhetoric, the political elites are either unaware of the crisis or unable or unwilling to find a solution. This situation can lead to the following consequences. If there is an authoritarian charismatic leader who can play the role of a charismatic leader in a particular society at a particular time, populism can emerge.

If there is a charismatic populist leader who, besides the above mentioned set of features, brings his own ideology, a new political movement can emerge, e.g. nazism, fascism, Chinese or Russian (Soviet) communism (Maoism, Leninism, Stalinism), and the Khmer –Rouge.

If there is a charismatic populist leader who, besides above mentioned characteristics will adopt an already existing, but, in that particular environment, new ideology, the result is often a cult of personality and the long-term rule of a leader con-

firmed in democratic and often fair elections which have the form of plebiscites (e.g. Fidel Castro, presidents in African states), i.e. a form of illiberal democracy. The form of the adopted political system depends mainly on the international situation. This tendency to a cult of personality can be explained exactly by the adoption of an ideology, instead of creating new one. In other words, the leader is more important than the ideology. Certainly, this does not exclude a cult of personality in the previous case. However, the perceived and/or manufactured role of a leader is stronger in this case. If a charismatic populist leader is not available, or an existing ideology overpowers him, or new elites dominate politics, part of voters can turn either to the ideology, new or old, or to the reliable leaders, or, alternatively, they need not take part in the elections.

Conclusion

What happened in Slovakia in 1992 is the following. There was an extremely able authoritarian populist politician who could play the role of charismatic leader. His opportunity was partly the result of his own abilities and skills and much more the result of the real and perceived deep economic, social and political crisis, and indeed of the experience of strong shocks in a short span of time, and failure of ruling elites. There was a much stronger perception of a difficult situation than in other neighboring Central Eastern European postcommunist countries, but there was also a promising able leader. The politics of elites was seen as a total failure amongst substantial parts of the population. The next elections were scheduled only after the two year preliminary period. It was still possible that the results of elections in 1992 might have been different. However, self-confident right wing and some others smaller parties did run independently. Consequently, Meciar, who in his skillful rhetoric represented interests of the average voter, won and was able to create a tacit coalition with SNS, and later in 1994 a coalition with the SNS and AWS (Association of Workers of Slovakia).

There might have been reasons in addition to those discussed in this paper for Meciar's success, but the key point why he won is unlikely to be challenged. In addition, some older and recent theories of the rise of populism in Slovakia (e.g. political culture hypothesis, lack of statehood hypothesis) and, consequently, of populism in general, have been invalidated. There are many sufficient causes leading to populism, but only three of them are necessary: crises, failure of the old elites and a charismatic leader. .

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