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Populism - what does it mean?

Populism is a notion for too many different things. The notion “populism” itself already seems to be a part of populist disorientation.

Different words should be coined for different variants of populism as they have different motivations, different political intentions different views of this world and they are in a different way a threat to democracy and to non-violent ways of treating conflicts.

Right wing populism can be observed in all European countries (except for Greece) and in the USA.

Left wing populism can be observed for example in Greece, Spain (Podemos), in Venezuela. And they are very different.

Religious populism of different variations in Iran and Turkey, Saudi Arabia

There may be other variants of what is nowadays called populism.

If this view is a about correct, then the discussion should be focused on right wing populism as a main threat in Europe and the USA. Religious populism tends to be imported for example from Turkey and Saudi Arabia into European Democracies.

Right wing, left wing and religious populism all have three phases:

- a good phase, when they pinpoint on deficits the liberal democracy has not cared about,
- a bad phase, when they propose their solutions to the identified problems
- an ugly phase when they come to power and execute their proposals.

How quickly populism can turn a democracy into a dictatorship can be observed in Turkey and could be observed in Germany in 1933 finally resulting in a world war. In both cases populism seized power by democratic methods. This demonstrates the responsibility of the voter for the development of a country. And it demonstrates, that the voter can be very wrong.

Yet the common democratic agreement is that the outcome of an election is to be executed, no matter how the balance of advantages and disadvantages finally looks like and no matter if it meets in the end the voter’s expectation. Once a dictatorship is installed, a democratic corrective vote is not possible any more.

Donald Trump is not a democratic minded personality. It is the strong democratic system of checks and balances in the USA, which prevented that Donald Trump could remove obstacles like “so called judges” or not obeying Senators and behave like a CEO of the USA or the President of Turkey. Both can fire whomever they like.

This is the scope of threat which we have to bear in mind, if we talk about populism – a word which by no means reflects nor associates this kind of danger.

On the other hand, there is the populist Brexit movement, which does not appear to be a threat for British democracy, independent of the amount of disadvantages the Brexit decision may have for the British people. For this type of populism, the word populism seems to be adequate even though it is hostile to foreigners.

There is also a democratic populism, which refers to the voter as to be always right, which sounds like “the communist party is always right”. How wrong! The voter distributes power. Correctness is not a matter of a majority decision.

Another word is needed for a “democracy threatening populism”.

What are our weak points to be captured by populism?

You can always find crazy politicians. But why can they at all gain more than 5%?

Why can “right-nationalistic populists” like the AfD in Germany gain 25% in some parts of the country?

Why could Marine Le Pen reach the final ballot at all? Her victory is the highest possible risk for Europe.

What makes populism attractive for so many voters? And why are the historical examples, which populism brought about not deterrent and repulsive enough to push “democracy threatening populism” below 5%?

What is the interest of a voter when voting for nationalistic populism?

The answer is not a “one reason answer”.

It has to do with an unsettled identity in an over-challenging situation and the strong desire to re-gain a stable and well-respected identity in a well-controlled situation, in which the state can protect against external threats and uncontrolled changes.

What makes a situation over-challenging?

Basically, it is a lack of orientation and/or a felt uncertainty about what will come next and/ or a felt expectation that it is getting worse in future and no one even not the state can do anything about it.

All this is well understandable. Yet following nationalistic populism is not the only nor the best strategy to cope with this uneasiness.

It seems that the main reason to follow nationalistic populism are not economic shortcomings in the first place. It is a longing for a respected identity. However, a bad economic situation can increase uncertainty and fears, yet this leads not automatically into the arms of populism. And a good economic income can make a situation more stable. But it cannot remove all uncertainties and fears caused by global developments like the climate change and technological changes. Also, populists cannot do anything about it.

Donald Trump for example prefers to deny the human influence on climate change, as his political methodology has no answer to it. Populism is shrinking to meet the most alarming challenge of our time. This populist behavior may be the death sentence for many achievements of human society in the near future.

So, the first personal question is:

Do I request for politicians, who give to me a reliable and understandable explanations for the challenges of our time, and do I want them to make meaningful proposals how to solve or mitigate a problem and who can and should help to do it?

Or do I request for populist politicians who promise protection and shielding from challenges and shifting them to others or ignore them. They will also identify who is guilty for a problem and offer as solution the bashing of the guilty ones. However, without a solid and understandable explanation no solution can be expected, and the problem will remain.

This is everybody’s choice. It may be a choice for or against human rights and for or against democracy. And it is a choice for a possible solution of a problem or for hot air and also violence around a lasting problem.

Populism destroys the cohesion of a democratic society

The cohesion of a non-democratic society is based on the unconditional loyalty to its leader and the necessary pressure and fear to suppress resistance.

The cohesion of a democratic society is based on respect for human beings, their freedom of thought and believe, their political participation and their social wellbeing.

Thoughts and opinions can be right or wrong, more or less. They determine what we do and what we want to be done. So, different opinions can lead to conflicts. Yet different opinions must be respected.

If we do not commit to and if we do not request (especially from our leaders) to take reality as guiding scale for justifying our imaginations, we destroy the only means, the only base on which humans can come to a common understanding of their situation and their perspectives and hence to fair agreements. This common understanding and the will to achieve fair agreements is a key to the cohesion of a democratic society and a key to non-violent methods of conflict treatment.

Disregarding scientific knowledge, and the reluctance to verify the own opinion by reality, destroys a democratic society. It destroys democracy. It is preparing for an autocratic society with a cohesion based on loyalty and violence. And this will happen if too many people are not willing to accept reality as guiding scale.

This (country wide) erosion of truthfulness and reliability is of completely different quality than just lying, a quality which has no notion.

Populism in the European Context

Most nationalistic populist parties in Europe try to prevent a European Integration. This is to their advantage as European democracies will fail if they want to meet common challenges on their own. European countries on their own will not have enough resources. Measures will often only be effective, if they are taken Europe wide. And it is not economically to build up a competence 27 times. Populists will have reasons to say: the democratic system failed.

In fact, nationalistic populists are no patriots. They leave their country weak and open to be blackmailed by stronger countries. It was good luck, that European governments already handed in the responsibility and competence for trading issues to a European institution. So, Donald Trump hesitated to start a trade war with Europe. Germany or the UK on their own could not have provided such a protection for themselves. Having handed in the trading competence to the European level was a high gain of sovereignty for each single European country, as all of them are better protected by their joint economical capacity and negotiation power.

Taking back the competence for trading issues from the European to the national level will be a big loss of sovereignty caused by Brexit populism. The slogan "take back control" is falsified by this example.

This is an example for only one competence where the sovereignty of 28 countries increased when the competence and responsibility is handed in on European level.

In a globalized world nationalistic populism and patriotism turns out to be a contradiction. The reason is, that for global players current European countries are not more than provinces. And a global player nation is of the size of Europe. In this view nationalistic populism assumes the character of a provincial populism.

Populism is in a dilemma. If it is true, that the main motivation to follow nationalism is (see chapter above)

a "strong desire to re-gain a stable and well-respected identity in a well-controlled situation, in which the state can protect against external threats and uncontrolled changes"

then a strong European global player is an adequate answer, but not a nation of provincial size and significance.

The dilemma is that then populism must give up the hostility to foreigners. On the other side, challenges can be better met in a democratic European Federation and nationalistic populists will not have many chances to say: "the democratic system fails".

What is in the political tool box of populism?

Populism is using a simple stereotype of society.

Like in a Western film there are the good guys (wearing white hats) and the bad guys (with black hats).

Good guys (examples)	Bad guys (examples)
The poor	The corrupt rich elite, the bosses
People of the own country	Foreigners
The white race	Jews, black people, Mexicans,
The communist party members	The class enemy
The believers in my religion, in my God	The believers in no God or the wrong God
People who share my opinion	People who criticize my view

Populists have no view on the entire world as base for their narrative and their justifications. They focus on single problems without a broader context from which the problem can be understood. Also, they are not willing to derive explanations from a broader context.

This is enough for a temporary single project campaign like the Brexit.

This is not enough for a populist party which has to treat “many problems” consistently. Populistic parties will seek and adapt to a more general ideology with broader scope like e.g. Communism of what variant ever on the left side or extreme right views. UKIP seeks orientation on the right side, the AfD in Germany already has right extremists controlling and leading the party organization in some parts of the country.

Populists cannot afford to justify systematically their politics and the underlying explanation by facts of the real world. Fact checking is an obstacle for populist justifications.

Populist can identify problems in a society and request to remove them.

Populists have no base nor will to analyze and explain the nature of a problem and therefore cannot propose suitable means for a solution or mitigation of a problem.

Presenting the bad guys who are guilty and bashing them is a typical populist pattern for problem solution. If no bad guys can be announced, because they would be the own followers, then Donald Trump decided to deny the human influence on the climate at all. Where there is no problem, you can hide the bad guys.

It seems that nationalistic populism has to present an “alternative world” with “alternative facts” to justify their politics. Reality is not important, it’s the story which matters if it is impressive for followers.