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Populism and religion in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract

Populism is a re-emerging modern topic. Since 2015 it has been one of the most mentioned and analyzed issues in the political sciences, international relations, and sociological academic literature. Although populism is a worldwide phenomenon it is also highly regionalized. This research focuses on link between populism, nationalism, and religion in Central and Eastern Europe. Differences seen between this region, Western Europe, and United States are also examined. In this paper, we offer a novel understanding of populist phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe based on decisive impacts of geopolitical and geo-cultural status of the region. This populist phenomenon can be traced back to "nurture itself" on the traumatized collective identity and a special kind of mindset, which is termed as wounded collective identity in this paper.

Keywords

1. Regional understanding of populism and religion

Amount of scientific literature on populism is vast and can be judged comprehensively and also in contexts of different social, religious, and political climates of various regions of world. However, literature has remained silent in regard to some regions. Researchers typically examine populism in a specific area of the world, and then apply characteristics of populism regarding that region to other regions[1]. While researchers usually examine a region at a time, they generally try to make the claim that their work can extend to other regions, which is hardly justifiable.

To some extent this is not an accurate approximation. Every region has its own peculiar nature and attributes, so effects of populism could never be same between different regions. The study of populism is becoming a global disciplinary challenge for many researchers, including them from Eastern and Central Europe. According to Stavrakakis et al. (2017), populism is not a phenomenon limited to the government.[2] Populism is an insurgent force, which can be studied through various approaches involving other disciplines. It has been observed in current research that religious-based populism is becoming more popular in many regions of the world. Through this research paper we plan to contribute to this discussion.

Before 2015 the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) societies and political parties were described as populists[3] by the news. After the "migration crisis" in Europe began to dominate the general public discourse, populism was increasingly interpreted as a worldwide trend in public life. As far as populism is concerned, it is no longer possible to define a clear difference between Eastern and Western Europe. As Cas Mudde, a populism expert, stated in an interview (2018):

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[1]   Kaltwasser – Taggart – Espejo – Ostiguy 2017.

[2]   Stavrakakis 2004., Stavrakakis 2014.

[3]   Máté-Tóth 2019.

"there are many differences among the regions; Western and Eastern Europe". However, behind the rising tendencies of populism, we argue in this paper that there are differences in cultural and societal processes in addition to populist tendencies in the Eastern and Western parts of Europe. One of the differences often mentioned is that in the Eastern half of Europe people were socialized under communist ideology and circumstances.[4] This is a correct yet overly simplified statement. For an appropriate understanding of populism in the European region it is necessary to take the general geopolitical, geo-cultural, and cultural heritage of the region into account all at once when analyzing populist tendencies. Before this discussion can occur, the major cultural differences and characteristics of both regions need to be studied. Additionally, a clear understanding of the term "religion" in the context of populism is required.

2. RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULISM

The subject of religion in the context of the populism and political movements deserves attention. In the past two decades, Central and Eastern Europe has shown a greater tendency of religion and religious adherents leaning towards accepting populism[5]. In the populist rhetoric religion serves as a source of identification for "the people", the representatives of major religious organizations, and for the followers of these religions. Religion can be defined as being a method of personal contact to the Almighty, a set of values, and also the act of attending religious rituals. Populism and religion exist in many forms, and it is difficult to define them in simple terms. This makes creating links between the two challenging. The link between populism and religion as an identity factor is strong and general, but tensions between populism and religion arise due to private spiritual orientations and value-sets. One of the major differences is demonstrated by the statements of church representatives concerning populist xenophobia. Typical hate speech observed in Western and Eastern Europe involves the West making a critical comment typical, while in the East of Europe, a leader's critical comment often supports populist politics.

Religious populism is usually dichotomous. This can be illustrated by the historical concept of Manicheism; where light and darkness are clearly distinguished and are always in a struggle with each other. *Overtly* religious populism refers to when there is only a narrow sphere of possible interaction with the divine and Almighty, while *covertly* religious populism describes the sacralization of politics. These two subtypes are usually intertwined, making the study of religious populism an even greater challenge for researchers.[6]

3. REGIONAL TRENDS OF POPULISM

The characteristics of a region is important for both religion and populism. Until recently the definition of populism tended to be simplified in the literature. Simplification refers to the effort

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[4]   MUDDE – KALTWASSER 2017.

[5]   MARZOUKI – McDONNELL – ROY 2016.

[6]   SALGADO – ZÚQUETE 2017.

to define populism using only some central elements and taking few variables into account. Mudde for instance stated in his publications that he used only two main variables to give a general, valid, and appropriate definition to the complicated phenomenon of populism[7]. According to him, the two basic characteristics of populism include while speaking in the name of the people and elite critics. Both are political tools used to divide society into two parts: the people (*us*) and the elite (*them*)[8]. In the words of Muddes, populism is defined as:

A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people"[9]

Guth underlined the same simple approach, which analyzed the voting motivations and strategies after 2010 in Europe and in the USA.

Populists, first and foremost, are anti-establishment: they are intent on overthrowing a corrupt, insulated, privileged elite. Second, populists are anti-pluralists: they perceive the world in us–them terms, believing that they alone speak the mind of the people. And third, populists display authoritarian tendencies: they promise to simplify and make more efficient the exercise of power[10].

Going back to the question of the correlation between populism and religion, it is useful to recall the latest relevant international research. Marzouki described the important distinction between religion as a source of common identity and also as a value set. Through evaluation of several European societies Marzouki elaborated on this important distinction. The main theme of Marzouki is distinguishing the line between religion as an identity or a set of values. It has been suggested that the aim of populism is to motivate voters in an identity based religious approach. More specifically, a positive opinion on religion is created by the populist political entrepreneur with Christian roots. Cultural repercussions of religion promoted in this way could become dangerous, as little consideration is given in regards to the actual promotion of values of a religion[11].

Mudde's previously mentioned approach can be used in generating fine-tuned insight regarding the particularity of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. Concentrating on the radical right-wing political formations, Mudde highlights the strong link between right-wing parties and the Catholic Church representatives in Poland, Slovakia and Croatia and other Central European societies with an Orthodox majority. These societies all have mainstream denominations, and many of them has an especially national character. In the case of the Orthodox Churches this is often taken for granted, because they are national churches. But while the Catholic Church has clear national character, it also defines itself as extending over multiple nations (as a reminder, the Greek word "καθολική" means universal).

In Eastern Europe the link between (Catholic and Orthodox) Christianity and the populist radical right has always been very strong. The link is strongest in the Polish LPR, which combines Polish nativism with orthodox Catholicism at the core of its ideology, but parties like the

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[7]   e.g. Mudde – Kaltwasser 2017.

[8]   Mudde 2009.

[9]   Mudde – Kaltwasser 2017. 6.

[10]   Guth – Nelsen 2019.

[11]   Marzouki – McDonnell – Roy 2016.

Slovak SNS or Croat HSP are also staunchly Catholic. In the Orthodox countries the synergy between religion and nation is even more complete, as most Orthodox churches are national churches.[12]

The national interest in these societies is promoted and defended by the public statements of Church representatives too. In contrast to Western Europe, bishops in Eastern Europe have seldom criticized right-wing politics. The following observation was made by Mudde:

> *"However, religion does not always act as a buffer against populist radical right voting; indeed, in countries like Croatia, Poland and Slovakia religion seems to strengthen it[13].*

But Mudde's precise remark was that in CEE societies religion does not act as a buffer in front of radical right-wing arrogance and hate. Religion needs a deeper understanding of the region itself. This paper argues that a collective wounded identity of a region can explain why the main churches participate in comradeship with right-wing populism. This argument is constructed according to the self-understanding of the regional main actors and of the general population too. As social norms in this case, the critics of populist nationalism are generally viewed as betraying their country and also their church/religion.

Mudde's definition and description of the populism phenomenon is very important for international scholarly discourse. Regarding Central and Eastern Europe, we can ask what kind of special role is played by a nation in the regional populist mindset. It has been argued that the crucial impact comes from the promise of the establishment, or reestablishment, of the people of a nation in the region. For a deeper analysis of this idea of the nation, the theory presented by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe becomes relevant. In their theory the main target of the dynamics of societal discourse is the establishment of an equivalence chain among the different societal actors and entities characterized and motivated through very different aims and interests. This kind of unifying discourse process uses the term 'nation' as the main signifier. Populism as described in the approach used by Laclau and Mouffe can be equated to the foundation of the people, and in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, the nation. Because of the centuries-long lack of nation-state's autonomy, these societies have an especially high level of desire for sovereignty. A political rhetoric that highlights stability for the nation-state is especially popular. Successful politicians use populist rhetoric to appeal to this kind of desire.

4. WOUNDED COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The necessary theoretical context needed for the examination of the region's collective identity is articulated in the transdisciplinary intersection of historical studies, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and political science. Additionally, closely related to studying identity is the topic of differing nationalisms.

It is widely recognized that it was Hans Kohn and John Plamenatz, following Friedrich Meinecke, who contextualized the concept of diverging developments. They argue that while the Western model is a voluntary construction based on citizenship, the Eastern one is the ethnocultural expression of a historical community. The inherent value judgements of these thoughts

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[12]   MUDDE 2005.

[13]   MUDDE 2005. 115.

incited criticism from various scholars. Although, it is also true that many social scientists have been arguing for differentiation when considering the actual historical and social context, and abandoning the value judgements[14].

These theoreticians base their ideas on the fact the formation of nations in Western Europe happened earlier than those in Eastern Europe, and under different circumstances. In the West, these processes occurred within the framework of the state, while in the East nations emerged before the state did. The different modes of nation formation have strong historical implications for the relation between the individual and the state. If a given individual who has the right to vote in addition to a number of other rights and obligations participates in this relation as a *citizen*, the focus is on political participation. However, if the individual participates as a *member of an ethnic group*, the focus shifts to language and ethnicity[15].

Many other academics also criticized these distinctive theories, claiming that these traditional forms of distinction are outdated, schematic, and inadequate in understanding contemporary society[16]. These critiques postulate a different interpretation: in their view, distinction shall not be between different types of nationalisms, but instead between the different components of the same concept of nationalism, and that the ethnic dimension is present, albeit more intricately, within Western national concepts.

Academic literature is divided concerning dichotomies, but there is relative agreement that the elements of national identity are anchored differently in Central and Eastern Europe. The reason for this difference can be traced to historical development, and most likely has social-psychological consequences.

The distinction between different forms of nationalism contributes to the thought that a region's countries being different is not the only factor affecting their development as states and nations. Additionally, the decades of Communism have also left their mark on post-Soviet countries. Reflecting on this phenomenon, the term "post-socialist vacuum" has emerged in recent decades. This helps explain the eroded moral values of the socialist system, and also denotes the process of incoming value plurality from the West replacing communist ideological structures[17].

This concept received criticism from several Eastern-European scholars. According to Péter Niedermüller our interest should shift from the approach based on this "vacuum" to the fact that the construction of democratic societies began without experience in democratic political structures.

The strengthening of national identity is one of the main consequences of this post-socialist vacuum. Niedermüller states that this is overly reductive, as the re-emergence of the concept of nation in the social/political sphere is not self-evident. For him, the locus of this re-emergence is the cultural representation of the past, induced by the context of the regime changes in the region as it was formerly distorted by socialist historiography. His concept of *national discourse* is founded upon the reclaiming of "silenced" national history, and its reproduction and recontextualization. There are three strategies that tend to be applied in this process: the restoration, reconfiguration, and nationalization of history.

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[14]   Kántor

[15]   Dunn 2015; Romsics 1998.

[16]   Nagy 2004; Neugart – Hanelt – Peitz 2002.

[17]   Beyme 1994, Niedermüller 1996.

Further reflections are offered by (Kriza 2004) who primarily discusses the shortcomings of Romanian national discourse. He distinguishes between three characteristics: the idealization of history, the dissemination of anti-Western *clichés*, and the disregarding of actual, prevalent problems[18].

Salecl presents new perspectives for the exploration of nationalism in former Yugoslavian countries, and Eastern-Europe in general[19]. The central claim of her study is that these national-ist movements capitalize on the supposed threats looming over the nation. Salecl explains this from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, exemplifying the relation between "us" and the "the enemy among us" through Slovenian cases. She also elaborates on Jacques-Alain Miller's theory, stat-ing that the sense of being threatened is at its most intensive when the "other" enjoys his- or herself, and that the mere existence of the other is perceived to be a threat to the "ingroup".

These theories illuminate the fact that the ideas related to identity formation in the region are constructed in the conceptual triad of diverging historical development, the sense of being threatened, and collective history.

A similar perspective was offered much earlier by who argued for a historically situated re-gional sense of being threatened by external groups through his concepts of *communal hysteria* and *historical trajectory*[20]. The over-determination and social rootedness of the image of a threat-ening foreign power, and the consequent, trans-generational collective emotional patterns result in ambivalent, social-psychological consequences, such as unrealistic territorial attachment, the embedding of a permanent sense of insecurity, self-accusation, and self-aggrandizement.

The image of a threatening foreign imperial power, and the sense of historical loss, might justify the discussion of collective trauma and related psychological theories[21]. In these cases, major insights are related to transgenerational transfer, anchored and blocked states of identity, and permanent insecurity as the results of national hardships. The word "trauma" is more often used in connection with nationalism rather than with populism. Thus, theories of collective trauma allow us to describe the state of identity formation in the region through the metaphor of "woundedness", which we intentionally apply.

Wound 1: Lack of national state autonomy and sovereignty due to occupations by three big hegemonies. The in-between geopolitical and geocultural position of the entire region prohib-ited the building and/or rebuilding of sovereign national states for 100 to 400 years. Beginning with the historical period of the rise of modern nationalism among every bigger ethnicity, an irresistible desire for a sovereign national state arose, which was fulfilled in some cases only after 1991 (the Baltic states), 1994 (the Balkan states) and 2008 (Kosovo).

Wound 2: Prohibition of the exercising of human rights, especially of ethnic minorities. One of the main consequences of the lack of state sovereignty and of the loose overlap of the cultural/ethnic and nation state borders is the overall minority status of larger populations in the region. Because of the main logic of ethnicity based national states, the prohibition of the exercising of ethnic minority rights, and the public and official use of the ethnic language was a logical but negative consequence of the situation.

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[18]   Kriza 2004.

[19]   Salecl 1992.

[20]   Bibó 1991.

[21]   Erikson 1995.

Wound 3: Forced mobility: Under state forced mobility there were two kind of mobility took place in the 20th century. The first includes the mobility of ethnic minorities through ethnic cleansing and deportation[22]. The second includes the forced status mobility, such as a forced mobility between social strata and career paths according to the loyalty to a new regime. This second type of forced mobility includes deportations to labor camps as well.

Wound 4: Persecution of religion, churches and dissidents. In the period of state supported religion (mainly the Christian religion), non-Christian and small Christian denominations were not recognized and or were persecuted. This was not only due to the theological logic of the right religion, but also due to the strong connection between the state and the dominant religion and churches. In the long period of communist rule major religions and the dominant churches – especially the Roman Catholic Church, due to Vatican being a capitalist country – were considered enemies and were persecuted often in a brutal and violent way. Every perspective and institution that did not share the ideology and the goals of the communist rulers were seen as opposing powers and dissidents in the same way people of religious conviction were seen.

Wound 5: Genocides and other mass killings. Early in the 20th century the communist state was responsible for millions of deaths. Then the National Socialist dictatorship, and more recently the regular and irregular forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina were also responsible for mass killings. Totalitarian states are referred to by Rudolph J. Rummel as "mortacracies" and "megamurderers"[23]. Geographically, genocides and other mass killings occur with higher likelihood in Central and Eastern Europe than other regions in Europe.

A question for further discussion includes whether the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl should be included in the series of genocides, and whether it can be used as a metaphor for the wounds of the region. On 26 April 1986 a nuclear catastrophic accident labeled with INES 7 which is the highest level on the scale. Chernobyl is located 100 km north of Kiev close to the current border to Belarus, which at the time of the accident was part of communist USSR. The consequences of the catastrophe cannot be overstated. Not only because of the indirect health-related consequences but also because of the longtime effects seen in the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, and some of Asia too. Millions of deaths and an ultimate change of the nature, society, and economy of the region can be attributed to the nuclear catastrophy. Although the disaster was an accident and is fundamentally different from the Great War to the Second World War in Europ in the 20th century, and from the genocides initiated by the Nazi regime or Soviets, it was also not independent from the communist politics of the Soviet Union (SU, USSR) and the cold war.

Wounded collective identity could also be defined according to Anthony Giddens' term *"ontological security"*. In his opinion ontological means something with fundamental and general stability in social order, and the feeling this stability imparts on the general population. Giddens concentrated his famous theory of structuration on the individual dimension of security, and how ordinary people maintain their system of trust and feeling of security.

"Ordinary day-to-day life (…) involves an ontological security expressing an autonomy of bodily control within predictable routines"[24]

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[22] Furedi 2017.

[23] Rummel 1992, Rummel 1996, Rummel 2018.

[24] Giddens 1986.

The personal or social security system is not taken for granted given the conditions in CEE, but people must manage with it currently, and possibly permanently, especially if the system is threatened as it is nowadays from many outside factors[25]. Giddens called the process of re-establishing security as "tact".

"Tact is a mechanism whereby agents are able to reproduce the conditions of 'trust' or ontological security within which more primal tensions can be canalized and managed."[26]

Giddens' theory has been most recently used in the studies of international relations, where the main agents are not individuals but social units such as states. The original term Giddens invented is in the relevant literature and scholars are now speaking more about in-security as about security.

In the region CEE insecurity of state existence has been a historical fact for at least 200 years as the process of building national states started. This is the wound with the highest impact on societal norms and values, and everyday life of people in the CEE region overall. Insecurity on the state level leads to instability of the state borders, then to the occupation of the state by other hegemonies from abroad, and finally the subjection to military or economic powers. States in CEE after the fall of the Berlin Wall received new freedom for self-assertion as autonomous national state unit. Some states of the region like Poland or Hungary, or the member-states of Yugoslavia enjoyed the period of relative autonomy during the presence of communism. Some other states like the Baltic triad – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were included in SU and did not have any autonomy. Some others become autonomous state sovereignty for the first time such as Montenegro, Kosovo, and Moldova.

Insecurity on the state level has a strong effect on strengthening the state existence through ideologies, narratives and memory politics. Like the tact of individuals in handling or re-establishing ontological security, states living in a permanent insecure status are obligated to find and strengthen knowledge related to a purely autonomous existence. The choice to do this kind of collective mental work is not a real choice at all. It is an enforcement coming from the geopolitical given conditions. Therefore, all cultural sources who are capable of enforcing and stabilizing the general knowledge of state sovereignty and of the ontological security are especially welcome in the region of CEE determined by his in-between geopolitical status.

Subotic analyzed the post Yugoslav states in this direction by using the emotionally loaded notion of "dying".

When a state dies, all of the routine relationships a state has established and maintained with its significant others become immediately disrupted, and new ones need to be built from scratch. This external trauma provokes crippling anxiety in insecure successor states. Political memory of the old state no longer serves its legitimizing purpose; new histories need to be constructed to make sense to the new polity[27].

The deep and important mutual correlation between state insecurity – in the extreme case, the dying of the state – and the function of political memory in re-establishing a new state is a general characteristic of the states in CEE. Subotic analyzed the case of the post-Yugoslav states and her insights and arguments seem to be relevant for my argument as well as for the

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[25] Aging society, decreasing number of work force, political populism.

[26] GIDDENS 1986. 51.

[27] SUBOTIC 2019.

post-Czechoslovak states (Czeck and Slovakia), post-Soviet states (the three Baltic states), and in a broader sense for all states in the region. The terms "die" and "rebirth" should be understood partly as a rhetorical and symbolic characterization of the fundamental transformations of the state positions after the collapse of communism. However, the description of the correlations between the fundamental new political circumstances and the need for a new narrative are based on hard facts and affect the core dimension of the self-understanding of the societies in CEE.

5. Summary

Populism in its CEE trend is an ideology and a political strategy of interest for building and rebuilding national state autonomy and sovereignty. In Giddens' terms, a tact to re-establish the collective ontological security, or in Laclau's terms, to create the people. All collective mental sources, such as memory politics, framing of the history, national festivals and symbols have an important function in this securitizing work. The main religion and main churches belong to this ideological and symbolical arsenal as well for securing the new or the renewed state existence. The enforced intertwining of populist politics and religion has occurred in recent years after the refugee crisis created a new ideological and political coalition between nationalism and Christendom, as well as between the states and the main churches. To understand and to analyze this appropriately, it is very important to start by identifying the wounded collective identity markers of the region CEE. The way populism and religion are linked results from the realization of the created trauma. For a comparative sociological or political analysis on the European or intercontinental level, this special aspect of the region should be taken seriously.

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