

Mgr. Klara Kohoutová PhD

Institute of Social Sciences CSPA Slovak Academy of Science

Email: kohoutova@saske.sk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51918/ceh.2021.2.4>

## **Abstract**

Populism is one of the most commonly used terms in political and journalistic practices. Political leaders use it to gain votes or power. The main goal of populism is to mobilize the society for electoral victory. Electoral gain is therefore an essential criterion for success. In recent years, the number of populist movements has been rising around Europe at a rocket pace. While at the beginning of the millennium populist movements did not enjoy great popularity, today, a quarter of the European population believes in them. What has changed? Why are populist views so popular today? Many Czechs and Slovaks would be willing to leave the European Union and give up part of their freedom for stability. How to protect democracy? How to prevent political systems from falling back into the clutches of undemocratic forces? History has many lessons for us.

## **Keywords**

populism, democracy, power, populist movement, freedom, authority

Klara Kohoutová

# Approaching the Relationship between Democracy and Populism: Grass-Roots to Literature<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Populism has become a dominant element of politics over the time. Statistics shows that while populist parties in Europe gained 9.6% of the votes at the beginning of the millennium, in 2008, it was 17.2% and nowadays this rate is almost 25%. The European Union (EU), established in November 1993, was supposed to guarantee economic progress. EU member states enjoy many of its benefits today, for instance the freedom of movement, the possibility to work outside their country of origin without a labour permit, and so on. However, almost a quarter of the European population have to live below the poverty line or they are threatened by social exclusion. Many of them are worried about their future, others are afraid of stagnation and lose confidence in the political system. Instead of believing in a common future, notions like nationalism, xenophobia and self-closeness are expanding and this is what populists are looking for.

Populism controls the political directions of several states. One of the premises of this paper is that populism is a risk for democracy, since populists speak to their potential supporters the words they want to hear, offering quick and appealing solutions that are hardly feasible, and sometimes even harmful to society as a whole. This potential supporter is mostly disappointed with the current developments and feels

1 This paper was supported by VEGA project no. 2/0065/21 Social a psychological correlates of populist attitudes

that the ruling group is not interested in him. Populists divide societies by presenting two imaginary groups that are supposedly diametrically oppose each other: people and the elite. While the “people” group has exclusively positive qualities, the elite is corrupt and only defends their own interests or the interests of foreign masters. Populists pretend to represent the people. It is plausible to say that it is because of populist politics that less than three decades after the Iron Curtain got rid of the Soviet supremacy, democracy is struggling to survive in Budapest, Prague or Warsaw.

Before going further, it is important to stress that there is no clear definition of populism. Populism has lost its original meaning. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the term populism did appear first time in USA, it meant rebellious. Originally, the term referred to a language style and a form of participation in politics. However, this specific way of expression did not deviate in any way from democratic principles. From a historical point of view, we can divide the development of populism into three periods:

1. *Agrarian populism*, which appeared in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Russia;
2. *Latin-American populism* flourishing in Argentina and Brazil in the 1940s and 1950s;
3. *the new right-wing populism*, which appears until the 1970s.

Today, literature refers to the term as something negative: it has a pejorative meaning and functions as a label in most languages. One might argue the fact that their main aim is a desire for power already distinguishes populist politicians or groups of politicians. Arguably, Marian Kotleba and his promises serve just this purpose in the Slovak environment. Recently, many, including the author of this paper, have been losing confidence in classical political parties and looking for alternative solutions. Thus, people like Andrej Babiš or Tomio Okamura (Czech Republic), Marián Kotleba or Štefan Harabin (Slovak Republic) appeared on the scene. After all, Czech President Miloš Zeman, a social democratic politician, also changed his rhetoric and turned into a populist with an anti-immigration stance that leads the country eastwards.

Political scientist Vlastimil Havlík, devoted to Czech populism, tried to find the common features of the three biggest Czech populist parties:

- the centrism of the people as a homogeneous group of common interest;
- anti-elitism or anti-establishment, which manifests itself in demarcation from traditional parties;
- implementation of elements of direct democracy.

According to Havlík, a common feature of Czech populists is also the effort to depoliticize politics. One of the most famous slogans of November 1989 was *We are not like them*. It was a clear signal that the protesters would not take revenge. It was this motto that the political party Public Affairs (*Věci veřejné*) and the YES Movement (*Hnutí ANO* – ‘ano’ means YES in Czech) used in their campaigns. By using the term *they*, these actors refer to the representatives of traditional political parties. *Public Affairs* wanted to exchange traditional politics for healthy regime policy’s common sense, the YES Movement came up with the idea of running the state as a company. Here we can see a similarity with a former president Donald Trump.

In Slovakia, the most visible populism has been in Kotleba - People’s Party “Our Slovakia” (*Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko*). Their populism is manifested by Euroscepticism or misinformation and hoaxes about covid-19. Former Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico is not a populist at first sight, but in his speeches, he uses populist rhetoric, which is characterized by anti-elitist appeal and takes the role of a people’s representative.

Others, such as Slovak political scientist Samuel Abraham, go as far as to say that “*Populism is a partner of democracy. An undemocratic regime does not need populism, it negotiates respect and recognition by other means.*” Abraham also posits that populists do not have strictly set goals and attitudes. They have no problem changing their ideology or promising the impossible. These promises, or “solutions” are presented in simple terms so as many people as possible can understand them.

In her well-received book *Populism*, English theorist Margaret Canovan points to the fact that we cannot perceive populism in precisely defined negative or positive contexts. One should rather consider the extent to which a given political subject is populist. The basic premise of populism is a leader who claims that she speaks the language of all, who understands and solves common problems as an ordinary citizen. Margaret Canovan also underlines that populists do not present their leader as an exceptional person. Rather, they picture him/her as an ordinary person – representative of the people who understands the needs of citizens. The strengthening

of populist politics is one of the most discussed social phenomena in the transforming countries of Central Europe in the period after their admission to the European Union. Today, the work of populist politicians is a challenge for liberal-democratic systems because it exacerbates existing problems in the society and erases new ones. In some post-communist countries, populist forces have become part of the political systems. In some places, they are even in a dominant position (for example the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary ...).

In fact, there are several other ways to approach populism. One can talk of it as an ideology, a political strategy or a way of political communication. Admittedly, today, due to the rich literature and diversity of positions, even political scientists may get lost in the quest for defining populism. There is an even more important set of questions, however: why do people believe in populist visions? Why do they associate themselves with views of the demagogue who shouts slogans? Why do the citizens of the countries of past totalitarianism or authoritarianism regimes take the side of populists?

According to the Slovak politician and sociologist Ferdor Gál, the underlying problem of democracy is not populism but the lack of citizens with developed critical thinking. She also argues that citizens are – paradoxically – the result of the links between long-term democracy and prosperity on the one hand and erosion of values, responsibility and consumerism, on the other hand.

### **Citizens, populism and democracy lessons / Moral of a workshop**

The author of this paper participated in a programme that addressed the relationship between democracy and populism in a non-academic format. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, in cooperation with other organizations set up the *Science and Technology Week*, on an annual basis. The objective of the program is to improve society's awareness of science and technology in order to stimulate young people's interest in studying scientific and technical disciplines and also to address global challenges. As part of the Science and Tech Week at the end of 2019, with my colleague Lucia Heldáková, we organized a series of workshops with the title *Is democracy at risk today?* We discussed different topics with high school students:

- Historically, what were the periods when democracy in Czechoslovakia was in danger?
- What are the ways to promote democracy?

We divided the students into four groups:

1. The first group consisted of students who time travelled back 74 years to 1945, when World War II ended, Europe was in ruins while in the Soviet Union, a system called communism had been working for several years that seemed to be a suitable solution for post-war Europe. The students in this group had the task of coming up with 12 moves that could have helped Soviets and their supporters push through this political system in Czechoslovakia.
2. The second group also went back in time, but not so far, only until 1989. They had to take the role of those who were satisfied with the socio-political situation in Czechoslovakia. That is, they were to imagine that they perceived the communist regime as good and supported it. However, from January 1989, protests began and totalitarian regimes began to be looser in neighbouring states, some collapsed. We asked the students to point out specific ways that would have helped the system to stay in place.
3. According to our design, the third group of students also travelled back to 1989. However, unlike the second group, they felt suffocated under the communist regime. Therefore, they tried to find ways to help establish democracy.
4. The last group were students who simply had to stay in the present and find focus on the fact that they live in a time when populism is on the rise and sneaks into politics. We asked them to point out what phenomena deserve attention and what actions support democracy?

There were ten points that students considered important for the preservation of democracy:

- we must protect public space from hoaxes and misinformation, as well as protect space for media;
- take responsibility for the past, prevent people who had acted against democracy in the past making decisions about our future;

- observe the Constitution;
- secure freedom of speech;
- improve education;
- ensure fairness, for instance, a functional system of checks and counterbalances;
- reduce regional differences because they set a good ground for extremists;
- reduce unemployment;
- defend the independence of the judiciary;
- express one's political opinion (appreciates one's own opinion).

How do these points compare to pathways that academics have reconstructed or projected about the rise and fall of democracies? It seems that the members of the young generation we asked and the well-known authors share a lot about the content of threats and about the kinds of responses that would probably advance the cause of democracy.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that single steps or moves do not seem so serious or dangerous at the time they are made, but in the end, they can be. According to authors, democracy is not dying nowadays due to gunshots, revolutions and coups but because the 'watchdogs of democracy', mainly the judicial system and the press, allow them to fall. Fortunately, people still have the opportunity to leave the authoritarian regime. The book aroused a great response immediately after it was published. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt show the rise of populism in a global context discussing historical and contemporary examples of states where democracy has collapsed or greatly reduced. The book was published in the USA after Donald Trump became the president of the country.

Although it was intended primarily for American readers, subsequently, it was translated in many languages. Erik Tabery, Czech journalist and editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Respekt* wrote an introduction to the Czech translation of this book: *'It does not happen too often that Czechs are in advance of Americans. It is a sad advantage in this case, but we have it. While Americans have never experienced the collapse of democracy, we went through it several times. Therefore, we have experience with what they just fantasize ... Therefore, more and more journalists, experts or historians are explaining to the American audience that each democracy that people lose interest in is at risk. Is the experience really stronger than studying? If so, why does democracy collapse in Europe so often? How is it possible that the*

*generations that experienced the World War I could not resist Adolf Hitler in time? Are the Czechs more instructed by the Democrats after they went through the forty-year era of totalitarianism?’*

American historian Timothy Snyder’s published his considerations in a book *On Tyranny, twenty lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. His status warned against increasing populism and provided guidelines about the features and tenets of democratic behaviour, times that have the potential to become a totalitarianism. Some of his ideas are consistent with the opinions of the students who participated in our workshop.

*‘History does not repeat, but it does instruct,’* Snyder writes. The book is a handle, a manual for defending democracy against tyranny primarily embodied by Donald Trump. As Snyder reminds, the history of Western democracies is not only a history of triumph, but also of decline and decay, which resembles the current situation. Authoritarianism, demagoguery and mass organization were the answers to the degree of globalization, which eventually led to the rise of fascism and communism. But what can be done about it? Timothy Snyder offers defiance – the courage not to submit, to defend institutions, to accept responsibility and to oppose both militias and the one-party government. A significant feature of his defence is ethics, a strong desire for truth, charity and the building of civil society. In short, freedom stands against tyranny. Wherever freedom is threatened, non-democratic regimes abound.

## Conclusion

In 2019, the former Eastern Bloc countries celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Communist regimes in Central Europe. Democracy emerged victorious! Has it really? Democracy cannot function without public space, without the support and interest of citizens.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began and ended with the same exclamation: *We want to join Europe* – in other words, the West. The first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk spoke about the fact that our historical place lies right there. The last Czechoslovak president Václav Havel had the same intention as his predecessor. Several decades of a journey in the opposite direction went by between the first (1918) and the last (1989) exclamation about democratic Europe passed– to the East. Is it in the power of a small state to change direction so often without losing itself?



## Bibliography

Abrahám, Samuel. *Resetované Slovensko: čistá teória vs. politická prax*. Bratislava: 2012.

Canovan, Margaret. *Populism*. Nex York: 1981.

Havlík, Vlastimil. “The rise of party populism in the Czech Republic in the shadow of political and economic crises.” In *Populism in the shadow of the great recession*, edited by Kriese, Hanspeter and Pappas, Takis. Colchester: 2015. 199–216.

Jagers, Jan and Walgrave, Stefaan. “Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties’ discourse in Belgium.” *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (2007): 319 – 345. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x>

Kapusta, David. “Sľuby vs. realita. Odpovedáme na výzvu Mariana Kotlebu.” *Bystranské veci*. <http://www.bystrickeveci.sk/odpovedame-vyzvu-mariana-kotlebu/>

Kmenta, Jaroslav. *Rudý Zeman*. Praha: 2019.

Kosatík, Pavel. “Platí Levitského a Ziblatova kniha o záchraně demokracie pro celý svět?” In *Aktuálně.cz*, 2 February 2019. <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/literatura/levitsky-ziblat-jak-umira-demokracie-kosatik-recenze-kniha/r~ac-1c913e26d311e9b869ac1f6b220ee8/>

Levitsky, Steven and Ziblat, Daniel. *Jak umírá demokracie*. Praha : 2018.

Levitsky, Steven and Ziblat, Daniel. “This is how democracies die.” *The Guardian*, 21 January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2018/jan/21/this-is-how-democracies-die>

Mesežnikov, Grigorij and Gyárfášová, Oľga. *Národný populizmus na Slovensku*. Bratislava: 2008.

Snyder, Timothy. “20 Lessons from the 20th Century on How to Survive in Trump’s America.” In *these times*, 21 November 2016. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/20-lessons-from-the-20th-century-on-how-to-survive-in-trumps-america>

Snyder, Timothy. *Tyranie. 20. lekcí z 20. století*. Praha:2017.

Školkay, Andrej. "Populism in Central Eastern Europe." In *Thinking Fundamentals*, edited by Shikiar, David. IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences 9. Vienna: 2000. 1–23.

Šnidl, Vladimír. "Kotleba poznal človeka, ktorý zomrel na covid. Je odporné, ak chorobu zľahčuje z kalkulu, hovorí Benčík." *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/2190458/kotleba-poznal-cloveka-ktory-zomrel-na-covid-je-odporne-ak-chorobu-zlahcuje-z-kalkulu-hovori-bencik>

Tabery, Erik. *Opuštěná společnost: Česká cesta od Masaryka po Babiše*. Praha: 2017.