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STUDYING POPULISM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE CASE OF UKRAINE

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Abstract. *This article provides detailed analysis of populism in Ukraine on the example of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidential election victory in 2019. This case is analyzed in the context of the debate on whether populist and nationalist discourses should be distinguished. Populism is understood as a discursive practice and frame through which other kinds of political claims can be expressed, from those of the far left to those of the far right. As a discursive frame, it refers to the idea of popular sovereignty and "the will of the people." As a discursive practice, it constructs "the people" qua political actor and mobilizes the masses, claiming to represent the discontent and expectations of the "silent majority. Based on this theoretical framework, the author examines the image and pre-election rhetoric of Zelensky as an example of populist discourse opposing "the people" with "the corrupt elites" along the vertical axis of "powerful – underdogs." In contrast, the nationalist discourse of former President Petro Poroshenko promoted an exclusive ethno-nationalist, anti-liberal concept of the people that required homogenization based on a common language, culture, and faith. The Ukrainian case shows that it is worth making an analytical distinction between nationalist and populist discourse.*

Key words*: populism, nationalism, discourse, democracy, Zelensky, Ukraine*

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Populism has become a global phenomenon over the past decades. There is a growing number of research on populism around the world, from national populism in Eastern Europe to the third wave of populism in Latin America. In recent years, researchers have focused on populism in the EU and the United States, interpreting it mainly as a menace to liberal democracy and freedom, primarily due to the growing popularity of far-right parties.

Ukraine also has its own history of populism. During the 2019 presidential campaign, the question was discussed whether Volodymyr Zelensky was a populist (Rubinstein 2019; Umland 2019), as his rhetoric and figure in general met many of the criteria of populism. He came to power as a man of the people, using anti-elite rhetoric to mobilize the electorate. More than 73% of voters—the whole South and East of Ukraine, as well as most of the Central and Western regions—cast their ballots for the former comedian. Why was Zelensky so successful?

Populism in Europe is mostly associated with nationalist movements, largely due to the rise to power of right-wing populism in Central and Eastern Europe in recent decades. Was populism in Ukraine also right-wing? Was it a menace to representative democracy? This paper contributes to the discussion, analyzing the reasons for the rise of populism in Ukraine and its features.

Populism is a contested concept that lacks analytical clarity. There is a common consensus in the comparative literature that, as a transnational phenomenon, populism is controversial, fluid, culturally related and contextually dependent. It can take on various forms, from the right-wing populism of Alberto Fujimori in Peru to the left-wing populism of the "yellow vests" in France. Context dependency is one of the key features of populism. Political systems are complex; too many different factors, ranging from governance to key cleavages in society and voter expectations, influence the general configuration of populist movements. This makes the manifestations of populism highly variable, which gives Roger Brubaker the ground to define it as broadly as possible, namely as a "discursive and stylistic repertoire" (Brubaker 2017: 367). Refusing to formulate strict logical criteria for determining populism, Brubaker uses Wittgenstein's metaphor of "family resemblance," that is, a complex system of similarities overlapping and intersecting one way or another.

However, I find such a definition too vague and hardly applicable to case studies because too many political phenomena can be interpreted as populist. The various populist phenomena, despite all their differences, must have a common semantic core. In the absence of such a core, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate its manifestations and to identify the negative aspects of the phenomenon.

The other problem with the definition of populism is that it refers to the concept of democracy, which is no less contentious. Conceptions of democracy range from the electoral, according to which, democracy is simply "a system in which incumbents lose elections and leave office when the rules so dictate" (Przeworski 1991), to the liberal. Even more impressive is the variety of empirical forms of democratic governance.

It is therefore disputed whether populism threatens democracy or belongs to it as a democratic form of popular will.

This is also a part of the problem in defining populism, as it is often used as a weapon in political struggle because of its negative connotations. As Cathérine Colliot-Thélène (2019) notes, in the language of politics and the dominant media, the term "populism" is mostly used in a pejorative sense. It denotes everything that is opposed to the dominant doxa. It is useful to distinguish between assessing populism from a normative perspective, on the one hand, and assessing it in the context of concrete political systems and situations, on the other. These are two very different perspectives; it is important to understand the meaning and political context of certain manifestations of populism before assessing them from a normative point of view. Therefore, I will focus on describing the situation in Ukraine and analyzing the factors behind the rise of populism there, leaving aside its normative evaluation.

At the same time, given the principled contextuality of populist manifestations, case studies can contribute significantly to building a theory of populism and clarifying its semantic core. I consider the Ukrainian case in the context of the discussion on how to define populism and whether it is worthwhile to distinguish between populist and nationalist discourses. The study of the Ukrainian case can contribute to the discussion because, as will be shown, the distinction between nationalist and populist discourses is important for understanding what happened in Ukraine and can contribute to a clearer and more robust understanding of what populism is.

The research is based on the methodology of discourse analysis. First of all, I consider populism as a discourse, that is, as a unity of linguistic form, meaning, and action. Discourse goes beyond language and refers to the meaning that language acquires in the political, historical, social and cultural contexts. Accordingly, discourse analysis aims to relate a particular discursive event to "the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it" (Wodak 2012: 628). Therefore, in the case study, I do not limit myself to analyzing Zelensky's speeches, but also look at the social and political background in which Zelensky's populist appeal gained broad voter support.

Thus, the first section of the article is devoted to a brief review of the literature on populism; it provides a definition of populism suitable for the analysis of Ukrainian case. The second section analyses the features of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidential campaign, which were critical for his success, and which made it possible to qualify him as a populist. The last section describes the background of Ukrainian populism and analyses the difference between the populist and nationalist discourses using Ukraine as an example.

Literature review and methodological notes

There are a number of definitions of what populism is in the literature on populism. This variety of definitions is largely due to the fact that theories of populism often emerge from case studies and are therefore contextualized.

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For instance, the definition of populism as a shortsighted economic politics (Dornbusch & Edwards 1991) that is needed only for election goals and ultimately doing more harm than good emerged from the political studies of the first wave of Latin American populism. However, after the explosion of neoliberal populism in Southern America in the 1980s, the economic definition is not considered significant anymore. The second-wave populists there, led by the IMF, carried out neoliberal reforms by notably using the same strategies of vertical mobilization of the masses and anti-elitist rhetoric as the first wave populists did in pursuing an import substitution industrialization. This means that, depending on the situation and context, populism can combine very different economic programs and that these cannot be seen as essential features of populism.

The same applies to the definition of populism as a political strategy, "through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland 2001: 14). Emerging from a study of Latin American cases, this definition provides for the mandatory presence of a populist leader. As Bonikowski and Gidron (2019) note, this conception does not contradict other approaches but is easily combined with them in empirical studies. Although the presence of a leader is not the key feature of populism, the leader's role is still important in mobilizing the masses and representing the grievances and expectations of the "silent majority."

One of the most common definitions of populism in the literature is that proposed by Cas Mudde. He defines populism as a "thin-centered … ideology that divided society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' on the one side and 'the corrupt elite' on the other, and populism argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004: 543). This is an ideational approach to populism. Margaret Canovan shares the similar ideas believing that the conceptual core of populism refers specifically to the "popular component" of liberal democracy:

> Democracy, popular sovereignty, the people understood as a collectivity with a common will, and a majority rule. (Canovan 2002: 33)

In other words, populism ideologically refers to the basic principles of democracy—that is, to the idea of popular self-government, appealing to the horizontal dimension of politics. This pattern of thinking constitutes the ideological core of populism, shaping the way in which populist politicians appeal to their partisans and criticize their opponents.

In my view, the ideational approach to populism captures its ideological core, which relates to the idea of popular self-government and shapes the way populist politicians appeal to their partisans and criticize their opponents. However, it overlooks other important features of populist movements, namely the difference between nationalist and populist identity politics and the mobilizing potential of populist rhetoric. For example, Jan-Werner Müller (2016), recognizing the existence of "leftist populisms," nonetheless considers that

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this designation cannot apply outside the Latin-American continent. Müller says nothing about Podemos, Syriza, Jeremy Corbyn or Jean-Luc Melenchon, focusing mainly on right-wing populist movements.

Proponents of ideational approach (e. g. Margaret Canovan, Cas Mudde and Jan-Werner Muller) point out that populists' appeal to the people, based on an organic metaphor, constructs it as a kind of homogeneous whole, whereas in fact it consists of individuals and various groups, including minorities. This construction involves a clear dividing line between those who belong to "the people" and those who are beyond its borders, thus creating the prerequisites for the exclusion of the "others" from the imaginary unity of the people. In this sense, they argue, populism is a specific form of identity politics that is critical of elites and has a moral claim to representation. Being anti-pluralist, it opposes and threatens to liberal values and institutions.

Nadya Urbinati (2014) argues that populism distorts the very idea of representative democracy. The latter implies that political parties can represent the interests of different groups of voters. Populism ignores the differences between their interests, merging them together as "the will of the people" and opposing to generalized elites. According to Urbinati, populism distorts representative democracy because its essence is the intention to eliminate pluralism from the sphere of opinion and to form a single narrative in order to present it as the embodiment of the "general will." After taking power, populism tends to "centralization of power, weakening of checks and balances, strengthening of the executive, disregard of political oppositions, and transformation of election in a plebiscite of the leader" (Urbinaty 2014: 129). It uses state authority to punish and discriminate against minorities, and replaces pluralism with the rigid polarization of "we – they" in a denial of this very same pluralism. Therefore, from a normative point of view, it is a rather negative phenomenon.

In the context of real politics, however, populism looks somewhat different. Peter Mair (2013) sees the reasons for the rise and spread of populism in established democracies in the crisis of representative democracy. Waves of deregulation, privatization, and liberalization, as well as the growing influence of technocratic governance, have resulted in citizens losing control over policymakers through conventional electoral channels. Important policy decisions are increasingly made by "non-majoritarian" or "guardian" institutions; liberal democratic institutions appear to work formally for party competition and elections continue to be free but now prove useless. The left-right divide loses its coherence; parties begin to compete for the same amorphous electorate.

In such circumstances, the importance of populist movements in politics increases. For all its negative features, populism provides a real opportunity for voters to express their dissent when the normal party politics fails to represent their interests. This, at least, is a key argument of those researchers trying to conceptualize populism in terms of the leftist protest movements. Drawing on Laclau (2005), partisans of this approach consider populist appeal to the people as a discursive practice that constructs "the people" qua political actor. They argue that it matters how "the people" is constituted, and contrast populist and nationalist types of discourse, or

"inclusive" and "exclusive" populism (Stavrakakis 2014; de Cleen 2017). These scholars seek to "purify" populist discourse by clearly separating it from nationalist discourse, in order to apply the concept of "populism" exclusively to mass protest movements. They argue that the "majority" does not have to be constructed as homogeneous or as threatening the rights and freedoms of minorities. The "majority" can protest against child labor and poor working conditions, demand affordable healthcare or education for their children and require lower taxes or an increase in the minimum wage. In this case, "the people" consolidates vertically, while the "lower classes" are united against the "upper."

Therefore, what is important is not so much homogeneity of "the people" but its "Other," in opposition to which its identity is formed. The opposition can be built along both vertical and horizontal axes. In the first case, the elites are treated as the "Other" and the notion of "the people" is more inclusive, since "the people" is not limited to any racial, religious, ethnic or other characteristics and includes a wide variety of groups. "The people" remains an "empty signifier" without a fixed signified; it is open for the inclusion of anyone regardless of his or her religion or ethnicity. This inclusive populism contrasts "the people" and "the authority," but both remain empty signifiers, empty vessels, whose content depends on the characteristics of the political context and the cultural instruments applied. It is this discourse that is considered to be truly populist in contrast to nationalist discourse, which builds a horizontal dichotomy along the "friend – foe" axis, referring to a phantasmatic, transcendental signified (race, nation, etc.) and thus excluding from "the people" various minorities and groups that do not meet the criteria of the people. Thus, anti-pluralism is inherent not so much in the populist notion of "the people" as in the nationalist one.

Criticizing this approach, Roger Brubaker (2020) points out that, in practice, nationalist and populist discourse intersect due to the ambivalence of appeal to "the people." Populist discourse is not a one-dimensional style, rigidly structured by the vertical opposition between the 'people' and the 'elite', but at least two-dimensional, covering both the vertical axis of inequality (economic, political, and cultural) and the horizontal axis of disagreement (cultural, value, lifestyle, etc.).

It can be argued, however, that populism and nationalism are still different types of discourse with different goals and objectives. Although in practice populist discourse often overlaps with nationalist discourse, analytically it makes sense to distinguish between nationalist and populist discourses. Nationalist discourse does take an active part in the constituting of "the people." Nevertheless, the key feature of populist discourse is the demand to implement the "will of the people" through political agency. Populist discourse has the potential to mobilize masses against elites or dominant ideas in a democracy by addressing the issue of democratic legitimacy, which is closely connected with the idea of "the people" as a political sovereign.

This feature distinguishes populism from other types of discourse, including that of nationalism. As Kurt Weyland has aptly noted, populist discourse "suggests that the political sovereign can and should have political agency:

'the people' finally take the country's fate into their own hands and shake off domination by selfish elites" (Weyland 2017: 54). This means that populism subordinates the meaningful construction of people's identity to the task of constituting "the people" qua political actor. The former depends largely on circumstances and is much more variable.

At the same time, populist patterns of thinking provide a convenient basis for criticizing the authorities and organizing the protests against any aspects of the established system of power. As such, populism is inherent in modern societies and is an integral part of politics, as long as the legitimacy of power rests on democratic legitimacy. Populism presumably reveals hidden problems in society and raises the issues that are hushed up by "normal politics."

To recapitulate, populism can be defined as a discursive practice and frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those of the far left to those of the far right, can be expressed. As a discursive frame, it refers to the idea of popular sovereignty and "the will of the people." As a discursive practice, it constructs "the people" qua political actor; it mobilizes the masses and claims to represent the discontent and expectations of the "silent majority." All of these features refer to ideational and practical aspects of populist discourse, making populism complex and contextualized phenomenon, able to transform depending on circumstances and agendas.

From this perspective, populism as such is neither good nor bad, but rather a matter of context and degree. On the one hand, it is an inherent feature of any kind of democracy, and at some point, its rise was inevitable in the current circumstances. It provides a convenient framework for protesting against the system and the elites. With the decline of leftist movements, it is now populist actors who are giving voice to the groups that feel their opinions are not being heard. Peter Mair (2013) argues that the rise of populism in the XXI century is a result of the decline of leftist movements. By concentrating discontent and protest feelings, by constructing the mass as a temporary unity without any political class or "objective" social group behind it, it is now the populist actors who give voice to the groups that feel their opinions are not being heard.

On the other hand, populist claims to represent "the will of the people" can still threaten the democratic institutions themselves. I would agree with Benjamin Arditi that populism is the "internal periphery of democratic politics" (Arditi 2004: 143); it encompasses a spectrum of phenomena, ranging from those fully compatible with democratic politics to those threatening the very institutional framework in which democracy per se functions. He distinguishes three manifestations of populism, all of which are associated with democratic politics. First, populism can be a specific way of representation, compatible but not identical to a liberal-democratic understanding of representative government. This mode of representation is brought about by the transformation that party democracy is currently experiencing.

In its second manifestation, populism can appear as a grassroots reaction to the failures of elitist democracy or "politics as usual", which has the potential to both disrupt and resume the political process without necessarily going beyond the institutional conditions of democracy.

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Finally, populism can threaten the very institutional structure that provides a precondition for democracy itself. This is what Urbinati and Muller refer to when they treat populism as a menace to democracy. Having come to power as the only representative of the genuine popular will, populists can receive a mandate from "the people" for undemocratic reforms. In this case, populism ceases to be an internal moment of the democratic process and turns into its menacing contrary.[1]

It is therefore important to consider populist movements in context, in relation to the system against which they are revolting. Many European populist movements challenge certain aspects of the "system policy" of the European Union, from austerity measures to asylum policy, demanding the restoration of "lost national sovereignty." Both the national elites and international institutions can play the role of representatives of the "system," and for many European populists, the EU bureaucracy is "the system" that they oppose. This can be clearly seen in the example of Hungary. Its prime minister, Victor Orban, accused European bureaucrats of seeking to build the "Brussels Empire" and "to dismantle national decision-making, placing it in the hands of the global elite" (Orban 2020). This is why national populism, which combines anti-elite and nationalist rhetoric, now dominates Europe (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018).

On the contrary, the request for populism in Ukraine was clearly populist, as shown below. It did not contain any ethno-nationalist elements, and at some points even contradicted the nationalist tendencies in Ukrainian identity politics.

Volodymyr Zelensky as a populist leader

Volodymyr Zelensky used a populist strategy to mobilize Ukrainian electorate during his presidential campaign in 2019. Obviously, Zelensky's television activities as a showman played a significant role in the success of his presidential campaign. His studio, 95 Kvartal, specializes in political satire, and in the TV series "Servant of the People," where the actor played the role of history teacher Vasily Goloborod'ko, who unexpectedly wins the presidential election in Ukraine. Zelensky actively used the image of his hero during the campaign, identifying himself with Vasily Goloborod'ko. He was nominated by the party whose name was identical to that of the series, and a screen capture from the film illustrated the candidate's program on his website. The TV series "Servant of the People," which premiered in the fall of 2015, was re-aired ahead of election.

Vasily Goloborod'ko appears in the film as a simple and honest man "of people" who behaves like a "common man." In fact, Goloborod'ko is a populist ideal who represents and protects the interests of the people as opposed to the interests of corrupted officials and oligarchs. He can be called the embodied voice of the people. Goloborod'ko eradicated corruption, established peace in Donbass and re-united the country, refused to cooperate with IMF because of unsatisfactory terms of cooperation, and fought oligarchs. "Servant of the People" fed the social imagination of the voters, and in this sense, it was the best promotion for the former comedian.

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the different approaches to populism, see Shcherbak (2021).

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Not by chance, Zelensky rarely spoke in front of television cameras and promised almost nothing during the presidential campaign.

Elements of vertical opposition between "the people" and "the elites" have played a major role in Zelensky's campaign as well. His motto "Let's do them together!" (Zrobymo yikh razom) called for mobilization against the ruling elite during the presidential and then parliamentary election in 2019. In case of victory, the former comedian promised to "reset the power" and "reboot the system" meeting the challenge of fighting against oligarchs and corruption.

In a poll published by KIIS on February 14, 2019, respondents were asked a question about the reasons for their support for Zelensky (respondents could choose up to two variants of the answer). The main reason why his partisans supported the comedian was that 'he is a person outside the current system, a "new face" in politics (54.4%). Besides that, 29.8% believed in his honesty and independence from the oligarchs; 24.9% shared his views and liked his program; and 20.1% supported his idea of democracy: the adoption of key decisions through referendums (*Socio-Political Intentions* 2019). According to data of the Sociological Group "Rating" from March 3, 2019, changes in expectations and protests against the system were the most relevant reasons for the supporters of Zelensky (*Assessment of the Election Process* 2019).

During his presidency, Zelensky has repeatedly appealed to the image of the "servant of the people," both visually and rhetorically. He oftentimes addresses the topic of government by the people and the introduction of direct democracy tools.

Until early 2021, the abandonment of nationalist identity politics was a prominent feature of Zelensky. Zelensky's statements about Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians were rather conciliatory. He said that Ukrainian is the only state language, but that the Russian and other minority languages should not be suppressed either.[1] The topic of language in any sense, neither the defense of Russian nor the advancement of Ukrainian, was not a priority for Zelensky. In his speeches—for example, in the 2020 New Year's greetings—he abandoned the nationalist symbolic dimension of identity politics and proposed to build the unity of the nation on common practical interests rather than on the Ukrainian language and culture (Zelensky 2020). The president's address called for unity based on a common love for Ukraine and a common desire to make it a prosperous country, a common fight against corruption, and a common desire for peace. The multiculturalist, multilingual and multinational character of the Ukrainian nation based on common citizenship was emphasized. In other words, Zelensky offered an inclusive concept of "the people," which included all groups of citizens:

[1] For instance, he made such statement during the meeting with foreign journalists on March 21, 2019, although he began to speak out on this topic even more cautiously after taking office (Zelensky 2019).

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> Our passport does not indicate whether Ukrainian is correct or incorrect. There is no line of 'Patriot', 'Little Russian', 'Vatnik' or 'Banderovets.'[1] It says 'citizen of Ukraine.' Who has rights and obligations … And let us remember that loving Ukraine means loving all Ukrainians. Wherever in our country they were born. (Zelensky 2020)

The incumbent consistently emphasized the inclusivity of the Ukrainian nation and its political unity without abandoning the topics of protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which were central for his predecessor Petro Poroshenko.

Thus, Zelensky used populist discourse as a political strategy for electoral mobilization to come to power. He represented himself as the spokesman for the interests and aspirations of the "silent majority," which brought him to power as a result. Since becoming president, he had used some elements of populist rhetoric, which included fight against corruption and oligarchs; the image of Zelensky as a true representative and defender of the people's interests; the inclusive concept of the people.

Left-wing parties traditionally enjoyed relatively high support in Ukraine. In the 1999 presidential election, there were three leaders of the left-wing parties among the five candidates for the second round. Since 2015, the Communist Party has been banned in Ukraine, and left-wing parties are now in decline. After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, the social justice issues were taken up by centrist and right-wing parties, the largest of which was *Batkyvshchyna*. In December 2018, shortly before the presidential election, its leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, was still the favorite of the electorate, especially in the central regions of Ukraine, which used to vote for agrarian socialist parties (Portraits of the Regions 2018). Criticizing authority, Tymoshenko combined the left-wing rhetoric of social justice with ethno-nationalism. Western regions supported the then-president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, whereas Yuriy Boyko, the most pro-Russian politician, took the first position in Eastern regions.

Zelensky managed to combine both the left-wing rhetoric of social justice and the inclusive concept of the people via populism, contrasting the pure people with the greedy elite. Thanks to the image of Goloborod'ko, he succeeded in offering a "product" suitable for the vast majority of voters from nearly all the heterogeneous regions of Ukraine. He united Ukrainians with the populist appeal to the "will of the people," having created a temporary unity of underdogs against the corrupt elite.

Of course, the inclusive concept of the people in Zelensky's rhetoric cannot be interpreted as a purely populist appeal to mobilize voters. Rather, it refers to civic nationhood as a political identity based on shared citizenship within the state. However, it was an important part of Zelensky's populist discourse, in contrast to the ethno-nationalist identity politics of his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko.

[1] These terms go along the lines of the symbolic division of the population in Ukraine. "Vatnik" and "Little Russian" mean pro-Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, whereas "Banderovets" and "Patriot" refer to Ukrainians with anti-Russian attitudes.

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The comparison between Poroshenko's nationalist discourse and Zelensky's populist discourse provides a good illustration of why it is important to distinguish analytically between these two types of discourse.

Petro Poroshenko's presidency and the preconditions for the rise of populism in Ukraine

Petro Poroshenko came to power in the presidential election of May 2014. Given the anti-oligarchic spirit of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, an anti-oligarchic component was also present in his discourse. An oligarch himself, in the 2014 election campaign, he promised to sell his business after being elected president. In an interview with the Polish newspaper Wyborcza on December 17, 2014, Poroshenko said,

> I guarantee that the oligarchs will never have any influence on the Ukrainian authority. I will do everything for this. (*Poroszenko: Za sześć lat* 2014)

From the very beginning, Euromaidan, called the "Revolution of Dignity," was directed against the pro-Russian oligarchic clan in power headed by Viktor Yanukovych, then-president of Ukraine. Its discourse was rather populist, representing the Maidan as an uprising of the whole people, with the accent on its moral unity, against the violence and dictatorship of the corrupt elites (*Majdan vid pershoi' osoby* 2015: 56, 70–71, 108, 122–124, 135). As a rebellion against the system, it demanded a "complete reset of power" (Bekeshkina 2015). In this sense, the Maidan was open to everybody, and its discourse of "freedom, dignity and human rights" was rather universalistic (Yermolenko 2016). Despite the active participation of right-wing radicals in protests (Ishchenko 2018), many protesters did not perceive the Maidan as nationalistic, insisting on the inclusiveness of the protest discourse and on the formation of "civic nationalism" on the Maidan.

However, Oleg Zuravlev and Volodymyr Ishchenko have shown that this civic nationalism was not, in fact, inclusive; it drew clear boundaries "between the conscious patriotic citizens actively supporting the all-national revolution and the idealess bydlo, who lacked the qualities of an active citizen and resisted progressive changes" (Zuravlev & Ishchenko 2020: 237). Opponents of the Maidan thus found themselves outside the boundaries of the nascent nation. Given the country's regional heterogeneity, as well as the fact that support for Euromaidan waned from West to East, "civic nationalism" inevitably involved "the ethnocultural nationalistic discourse that articulated the differences between the 'West' and 'East' of Ukraine and between 'Russian' and 'Ukrainian' identities" (Zuravlev & Ishchenko 2020: 237). "Russia was rarely mentioned in speeches at the protest, but it was an implicit, adversarial presence in the demonstrators' political imagination" (Lebedev 2015: 8) that grouped Russia and Yanukovych together, thus building not only a vertical but also a horizontal axis, which became more pronounced after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the conflict in Donbas.

The point is that the seemingly universalist discourse of Euromaidan overlapped with the conceptual model of "two Ukraines" that emerged among influential Ukrainian writers in the 1990s.

> The concept envisioned a country divided by language (Russian versus Ukrainian) and history (European, that is, Polish-Austrian, versus Russo-Soviet). (Portnov 2014)

Andrey Portnov has collected statements by some influential Ukrainian intellectuals that reveal their longing for a homogeneous Ukraine and their negative attitude towards Eastern Ukraine (Portnov 2016). Accordingly, during and after Euromaidan, pro-European attitude became identified with the preferred language of communication, namely Ukrainian.

At the same time, Poroshenko's 2014 election program was rather inclusive. The presidential candidate promised "to take into account the specifics of each region" and "scrupulously respect the human rights of all national minorities." He also guaranteed the preservation of "the existing status quo in the language issue" in accordance with Article 10 of the Constitution, "which defines the Ukrainian language as the state language, but especially emphasizes the rights of the Russian language and guarantees the free development of all languages" (Poroshenko 2014).

Thus, Poroshenko picked up and continued the discourse of Euromaidan. On the one hand, he promised inclusivity and the "complete reset of power". Meanwhile, the national intelligentsia often criticized Poroshenko for his inclusiveness and insufficient radicalism in the language issue and demanded repressions against the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate (Romanchuk 2016). It is not surprising that the president's rhetoric had been gradually shifting to nationalism and exclusivity. In 2016, he established the Council for National Unity, aimed at "promoting further consolidation of Ukrainian society on the basis of the national system of values, spiritual and cultural traditions" (*Pro Radu* 2016). The Council was tasked with developing measures "to strengthen national unity and develop national identity" and had a conservative, nationalistic orientation.

The concept of "the people" that the former president referred to had changed over time as well. By the end of his presidency, Poroshenko designated "the people" as a unity based on linguistic and cultural identity. He wrote on his Facebook page on 9 November 2018:

> The strength and power of our state resides not only in our large army, highly equipped armed forces and developed economy. I am firmly convinced that the strength and power of our state resides in Ukrainian books, Ukrainian cinema, Ukrainian music, Ukrainian songs, and—most importantly—the Ukrainian language. After all, language is the very essence of our Ukrainian identity. (Poroshenko 2018)

Both nationalism and anti-Russianness were tightly intertwined in Poroshenko's discourse. Nationalism was based on the rejection of any ties with Russia, of a common political, economic, military, scientific, cultural, and linguistic space. To be Ukrainian meant to refuse the Russian language, Russian culture, and Russian identity. Not by chance, "the years after Euromaidan and the Russian aggression were characterized by a kind of bottom-up de-Russification of the Ukrainian population,

that is, a popular drift away from Russianness that included significant changes in identifications, language practices, and language policy preferences" (Kulyk 2018: 16).

In fact, the horizontal "friend – foe" axis had clear geopolitical coordinates that could be mapped along the East – West axis. President Poroshenko stated in his speech on granting visa-free travel to the EU in June 2017,

> This event marks the final rupture of our state from the Russian Empire and [the rupture of] the Ukrainian democratic world from the authoritarian "Russian world." … We are finally independent of each other, politically, economically, energetically and even spiritually. Finally, we are free from their 'bonds.' (*Poroshenko: Ukraiinskyi narod* 2017).

During his working trip to Lviv in February 2019, the incumbent clearly stated, "Ukraine moves to the EC and NATO," away from Russia, and "only the Ukrainian people will determine where to move" (*My zakhystyly kraiinu* 2019).

Faith became a part of the same politics. The independence of the Ukrainian church has obviously turned into a matter of national security and a precondition for state sovereignty. In 2018, Petro Poroshenko defined the independent Church as an essential component of the formula of "national identity" (*Vystup Petra Poroshenka* 2018). He viewed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as an instrument of Russia in the war with Ukraine. Therefore, he made a decisive contribution in creating a unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has received its autocephaly from the hands of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

In the end, "The Army. Language. Faith" became the main slogan of Poroshenko during the 2019 presidential election. Igor Gryniv, the political consultant of the ex-president, explained the logic of this slogan in an interview with Hromadsky TV:

> Language and faith are the foundation of the nation. The army is an element of protection. (Kamenev 2019)

Poroshenko himself commented on this triad:

> The army, language and faith are not slogans. They make up the formula for modern Ukrainian identity. The army protects our land. Language protects our hearts. The church protects our souls. (Presydent Ukrainy 2018).

In other words, language and faith had turned into weapons, like the army, in the fight against Russia.

Thus, Petro Poroshenko's discourse has shifted from more populist in 2014 to explicitly nationalist in 2018-19. His election campaign focused mainly on identity politics, with an emphasis on fighting Russia and trying to divert attention from corrupt governance. Zelensky emphasized the opposite. Ultimately, the former president built a horizontal dichotomy along the "friend–foe" axis and thus excluded non-Ukrainian minorities from "the people." Belonging to the people demanded a rejection of other languages and cultures, and above all, the rejection of everything connected with Russia. Otherwise, one risks finding oneself outside the symbolic boundaries of "the people."

In Ukraine's public space, there were different views on this issue, but the dominant view considered "the titular language to be an essential element of national identity" (Kulyk 2015). It was widely supported by the Ukrainian intelligentsia. In an article posted on the language policy portal, belonging to the Ukrainian nation is describing as incompatible with the Russian language, for "language is an internal essence of human being, the foundation of her/his worldview, culture, mentality" (Dekhtiievskyi 2015). Anti-colonial rhetoric complemented this discourse, which was, in fact, an expression of the conservative project of nation building (Kiryukhin 2016) aimed at the formation of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous community based on the model of "the (ideal) European nation-states" (Kulyk 2018: 2).

Meanwhile, sociological poll conducted by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) on February 28 – March 11, 2019, reveals the demand of a significant part of Ukrainians for a more tolerant policy in relation towards the Russian language and Russian cultural products (*Attitude of the Ukrainians* 2019).[1] A survey by Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner (2019) also found an increasing demand for a more inclusive concept of the nation based on civil identity in Ukraine.

Voting for Zelensky could thus be interpreted as a democratic uprising against the right-wing conservative project of nation-building and corrupt political system. It is notable that the patriotic Ukrainian intelligentsia refused to support Zelensky. During the presidential campaign, intellectuals were engaged in actively supporting Petro Poroshenko and repeatedly discouraged citizens from voting for the comedian (*27 intelectualiv* 2019). After Zelensky's victory, attacks on him continued. Yevhen Bystrytsky, up until recently the head of the Renaissance Foundation, spoke thusly about Zelensky and his partisans:

> He is certainly supported by a certain segment of the 73% who share … the advantage of purely political unity. Their arguments are well known: you can be a patriot, fight in the East and speak Russian; decommunization alone has not eradicated corruption; we should be pragmatic in building a modern country, based on the universal values of tolerance and human rights, which supersede the limitations of ethnicity. He has divided the political and cultural communities. … This is a big lie: political identity is inevitably based on the principles of cultural community. (Bystrytsky 2020)

Meanwhile, the anti-oligarchic request of the Maidan remained unfulfilled, mainly because Poroshenko was an oligarch himself. The press sounded accusations that the president had managed to use power and war for his personal enrichment. At the end of his presidency, he became involved in major scandals related to corruption in the army and theft of the military budget (*Stado, yakomu treba* 2019).

If for the national intelligentsia Poroshenko's politics of national identity seemed to outweigh everything else, this was not the case for the majority of voters.

[1] Russia's direct invasion on February 22 completely changed the political landscape of Ukraine, causing the vast majority of Ukrainians hostile to Russia, the Russian language and culture.

The demand for a more inclusive and equitable political system had not disappeared, and the vote for the non-systemic candidate Zelensky was the best evidence of this.

Conclusions

To summarize our theoretical reflections on populism, it can be defined as a discursive practice and frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those of the far left to those of the far right, can be expressed. As a discursive frame, it refers to the idea of popular sovereignty and "the will of the people." As a discursive practice, it constructs "the people" qua political actor; it mobilizes the masses and claims to represent the discontent and expectations of the "silent majority."

The Ukrainian case is a good illustration of how important the social and political context is for the understanding of the meaning of the populist phenomenon. The study of populism requires a detailed examination of the institutional and structural context in which it arose and which it opposes.

Zelensky's case is also an argument in favor for an analytical distinction between nationalist and populist discourses. They often overlap, and nationalist discourse actively participates in the constituting of "the people." Nevertheless, the key feature of populist discourse is the demand to implement the "will of the people" through political action, while nationalist discourse focuses on the identity politics. Populist discourse has the potential to mobilize masses against elites or dominant doxa in a democracy by addressing the issue of democratic legitimacy, which is closely connected with the idea of "the people" as a political sovereign. That is, populism subordinates the meaningful construction of people's identity to the task of constituting "the people" qua political actor.

As for the Ukrainian case, Zelensky came to power using a populist strategy of electorate mobilization. During his campaign, he contrasted "the people" with "the corrupt elites" along the vertical axis of "powerful – underdogs," referring to the ideal of popular self-government and presenting himself as the true defender of the people's interests. In his turn, Petro Poroshenko promoted an exclusive ethno-nationalist, anti-liberal concept of the people that required homogenization based on a common language, culture, and faith.

The question remains whether populism in Ukraine was a menace to democracy. The war has brought about changes, and it is difficult to make a definitive assessment of the phenomenon now. Nevertheless, I share the view of those authors, for example Nadya Urbinati (2019), who believe that populism, despite its ostensibly democratic character, is a threat to democracy, especially when it comes to power. While established democracies have mechanisms to counter populist politicians, in countries where democratic institutions are weak, the consequences can be severe. By undermining the institutions of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, checks and balances, freedom of speech and political pluralism, it sets the stage for an authoritarian turn in young and fragile democracies.

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