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# THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN UNDERSTANDING THE POPULISM

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**Abstract:** *Populism has become a well-defined attitude-movement in Central and Eastern Europe, integrating this region into a more widespread European phenomenon. Populist politicians in most European countries, through their speech, exploit social frustration generated by economic problems, indicating the main culprits: corruption, political elitism and immigrants. Against this background, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, they systematically attack democratic institutions, the parliament, court decisions, the justice system, central banks, the political neutrality of civil servants and media independence. The challenges faced by democracies and social organizations in the current context are extremely complex requiring appropriate and effective solutions. Since the changes occurring in the social and political environment are extremely dynamic and with hardly predictable effects, the political factor, through its decisions, becomes crucial for a coherent articulation and for the offered and taken solutions. Populism has not emerged ex-nihilo, but after a long period of cultural and ideological exhaustion of the elites in power. The fact that the populist phenomenon draws attention to the corrosion of democratic governance being able to generate movements of social rebellion without an articulated program and without clear objectives, requires a theoretical approach based on understanding the phenomenon from a multidimensional perspective. The identification and presentation of populist manifestations from the perspectives of various fields of research (historical, sociological, ethical and communication) is the main objective of this research. Thus, the section dedicated to a short history of the populist phenomenon synthesizes the main theories through which the understanding of the phenomenon, the relationship between the leader and the people he is calling for, as well as the evolution of neo-populism in general. The next section, Multidimensional approaches of the populist phenomenon, briefly presents a theoretization of populist manifestations in a historical, sociological, ethical and communication context.*

**Keywords:** *populism, populist cycle, ideological inconsistency, populist rhetoric, neo-populism*

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## Introduction

Understanding the populist phenomenon involves a profound theoretical documentation. Thus, the presentation of populist manifestations from the angle of view of sociology, ethics or act of communication is an added value to the complete understanding of this phenomenon. If populism is understood and explained through research tools belonging to different research domains, it can be prevented or diminished more efficient.

Most experts recognize the difficulty of achieving a consensus on the imposition of a definition or a clear and complete understanding of the populist phenomenon as it can be understood differently in different situations. Such populist behaviors can be expressed in a diverse political spectrum, whether right or left-wing, can trigger reforms, can coagulate masses or induce a general perception that develops various socio-political behaviors. Simultaneously, these behaviors can be manifested either in urban or in rural areas and can engage energies both in the progressive or conservative camp (Pantelimon, 2012, p. 15 – 29). What characterizes these events is that they do not have an invariant, a specific constant, being multifaceted, multidimensional and poorly organized (Puhle, 1987, p. 88).

According to Alexandre Dorna, we find ourselves before a new populist cycle<sup>1</sup>. The continuous attrition of the democratic mechanisms has facilitated the return and the consistency of populism and the political elites are proving to be incapable of managing this growing phenomenon. Following this escalation, the intellectual elite tends to withdraw from the political life in a context that favours the confusion between ideology, on the one hand, and economic and electoral calculations, on the other one. Against this background, political strategies are becoming increasingly personal and the interest in a collective ideal dilutes more deeply.

Kurt Weyland (1999, p. 381-384) considers populism a political strategy that reminds three cardinal properties: (a) a leader who addresses a heterogeneous mass of adherents who feel excluded and are willing to mobilize; (b) the leader who interacts directly, in a familiar, almost personal manner to adherents, eliminating the intermediaries in a non-negotiable way, especially the implied parties; (c) if the leader has a political party, it will be used as a personal vehicle, with a low level of institutionalization, being called leadership party. In this definition the focus moves to the populist leader and to his role, and by neutralizing the concept of "people", the social basis of populist phenomenon is eliminated.

## A short history of populism

It is a fact that populist movements can belong to a diverse political spectrum, becoming manifest for both right and left doctrines, can be conservative or progressive, or both at the same time, can keep certain customs, norms, structures or initiatives or

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<sup>1</sup> Betea Lavinia (2007). Crizele democratiei și fetele populismului, *Revista Cultura* no. 63, Secțiunea: Cultura interogației [http://revistacultura.ro/cultura.php?articol=983]. Accessed on August 2015.

sometimes reform them radically and brutally. Sometimes these movements can revolutionize society and could have originated both in urban and in rural areas. Thus, these movements generically known as "populism" does not have a specific character class, being multifaceted, with a low degree of organization, and which want to promote social changes, oriented in a particular direction. (Puhle, 1987, p. 88 – 89)

The term populist has its etymological origin in *populus*, it refers explicitly to the people, to its will of expression. (Knight, 1998, p. 224). By extension, its area includes semantic ideologies, doctrines, movements, regimes, political parties, human groups, leaders and leadership styles that are in a certain relation to the people or show some affinity with it. Terminological confusion is amplified because the very notion of "people" is not precisely defined and understood. Ernest Laclau (1977, p. 166) argues that although "the people is a theoretical concept with a defined status, and, despite its frequent use in political discourse, its precise conceptualization does not exceed the metaphorical or allusive level".

The evolution of the concept in time, drew new nuances and meanings, derogatory, in addition to the recognized ambiguity and elusive character, that of the anathema, undesirability or insincerity. (Dorna, 1999a, p. 4-5.) The appearance and the evolution of populism can be explained by the combination with different periods of crisis, of intense socio-political activism, but only partially, as it was demonstrated that this phenomenon can occur naturally in periods of normality or relative social stability. In response to the populist manifestations, political elites, and not only these, foresee a rather pessimistic attitude that encourages this phenomenon rather than disintegrating it. This explains why populist movements, or their leaders are increasingly present and active in European political space, although it does not cross a crisis of great complexity.

In fact, the growth and expansion of populist phenomenon do not result in the end of democracy as a form of government, but rather force it to an up-to-date, an update and readjustment in accordance with the specific developments of (post) modern societies.

The hermeneutical approach of the concept reveals that the closest meaning to the essence of the phenomenon is given by identifying populism with a subtype of heterogeneous political movement, with a social basis imprecisely defined, "characterized by a leader more or less charismatic," (Pantelimon, 2102, p. 226) performing (or trying to) a direct, unmediated contact with the masses by applying a specific style of politics combining the emotional appeal to the people as a whole, consistent criticism and rejections of existing policies, on the one hand and the promise to solve fast, easily and efficiently various social issues, early identified.

Although, generally, the emergence of populism was associated with periods of stress and social anxieties, with a special kind of social enthusiasm that causes popular mobilization, it is empirically demonstrated that populist manifestations also occur in periods of social, of relatively smooth functioning of democratic mechanisms.

Peter Wiles, (1969a, p. 11) trying to capture more the characteristics of the syndrome rather than those of the doctrine of the populist phenomenon, has developed a list of characteristics of this concept. Thus, populism is more moralistic, with reference to

obtaining ethical or moral reactions rather than programmatic, with a vision or direction of evolution which is stated or fixed in a program. This feature emphasizes less the logic and the efficiency of movement (mandatory through planning and program) and more the attitudinal aspect or the subsequent reaction of this aspect, reaction which proves to be accurate in terms of moral, national and spiritual aspect.

In all forms of populism, the contact between leaders and masses, besides the familiarity, sometimes unnatural, of the leader compared to those with whom he comes in contact, has more a magical-mystical dimension, maintained by a thematic and metaphorical speech, while its manifestations have an agglutinated, unorganized character that lacks internal discipline. From an ideological perspective, populist ideas and concepts associated with its overall vision, its interests and aspirations are weak, inarticulate, emotional, and any attempt to identify, define or clarify them typically receives a hostile response. Another characteristic of populism, worth mentioning, is its explicit opposition to the inequality produced by institutions, while it supports or is neutral towards structural inequalities. (1969b, p. 12)

The onset of populist manifestations consists in more consistent, more emotional and more personalized criticism of the establishment. The amplification of populism is generated by (a) the citizens' awareness of the differences between the speech of those who govern and reality (b) the absence of the effective ways of being heard, (c) the realization that political elites are not concerned or are unable to mitigate or eliminate the present crisis (c) the numerical increase of the dissatisfied citizens up to the achievement of a critical mass whose tension can erupt at any time. The accumulation of the uprising masses may remain dormant, but against this background, populism is rapidly growing, shaping itself as a warning and not as a violent explosive reaction against authority.

The whole populist phenomenon, from a certain perspective, revolves around its leader, with his activism, charisma, personal style, attributes by which he considers himself the savior of the nation, the mythical hero, or providential man appeared at the appropriate time as necessity. This paternalistic aspect turns his relationship with people into a direct, understanding, living, familiar and spontaneous one, which transforms him from the bearer of the message into the living symbol of it. The Speech is more rhetorical than demagogic, because it is extremely emotional, related to facts and consequently arises and maintains hope.

Many researchers summarize their explanations of populism, the leader's personality, the way he imposes in front of people. (Dorna, 1999b, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>

Populism also features a multi-faceted nature. Consequently, the phenomenon itself is as a powerful integration and coagulation engine of popular expectations, which may give rise to a moderate nationalist attitude. Since it lacks a structured organization and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Alexandre DORNA, *Le Neopopulisme et le charisme*, Text, colloque – Université de Grenoble: La tentation populiste, September 2001; Alexandre DORNA, *La democracia: un espejismo?*, Lumen, Buenos Aires-Mexico, 2003; Alexandre Dorna, *Quand la démocratie s'assoit sur de volcans: l'émergence des populismes charismatiques*, *Amnis Revue de Civilisation Contemporaine de l'Université de Bretagne Occidentale*, No. 5, Caen, 2005.

the mass movement is defined by a lack of unity, the binder which ensures its functioning is to be performed by the leader and not by intermediate, structural levels.

Through a comparative analysis of populism with other populist political movements that are centered on an articulated doctrine, populism reveals an ideological indetermination, its vision on governance being and in a permanent construction. When populism acquires political power, its vision of governance is strongly imbued with popular pragmatism. The ideological inconsistency is determined by the dichotomous approach by which the nation is placed against the momentary elites and its claims are simplistic and concrete. Because of the absence of an ideology and a coherent and programmatic political program, the leader remains the main catalyst of popular grievances.

Analyzing the symbols that appeal to populist discourse, it appears that the founding myths of a nation are intensively used which leads to inciting the collective imagination and enhancing the credibility of populist discourse.

The propagation of the message and the populist symbolism is through direct contact with people and not mediated by institutions as in the case of political elites. In this case, populist message can contaminate in a nondiscriminatory manner large and varied masses of social categories, hence its multi-classed character. The lack of political program or ambiguity is compensated by emotion and recourse to social moral, aspects that may generate some programmatic issues. (Puhle, 1987, p. 91)

In its classic version, the populist leader gains partisans and elections based almost exclusively on his charisma, his ability to attract and charm, the hypnotic impact that he has on the masses. He appears as a self-made support which does not require any power structures, relying solely on his convictions and ability of persuasion. (Dorna, 2004, p. 58.)

By attitude, the classic populist leader behaves fraternally or paternally depending on the context, promoting contact and dialogue with the masses. Horizontal communication creates the illusion of naturalness, spontaneity, sincerity. Non-verbal language accompanying management dialogue often has large, open, welcoming gestures exposed as an invitation. Para-verbal perspective reveals a deep, soothing, non-imperative but persuasive voice. This perfect actor creates lasting impressions of sympathy, stress relief, pleasure of conversation. Enthusiasm is continuously revived and maintained through many forms of contact: blink or friendly handshake in situations of direct interpellation.

Neo-populism, besides the charisma of the leader, also has easy access to modern new technology (Internet, social networks, the blogosphere, audio-video online platforms). The IT environment and the wide range of facilities represent one of the characteristics of the new populism, being also an important element of differentiation from the previous populist experiences. But neo-populist strategies seek to capitalize and overcome this elective routine.

Once in power, neo-populist leaders have the ambition to expose publicly, using their personal style of doing politics, bringing on the public agenda issues rejected by earlier political parties. (Burgos-Vigna, 2005, p. 2)

The neo-populist leader increasingly relies on and uses innovation in mass communication and, especially, on television and on the Internet. This requires some technical skills, availability and successful use of these new tools in order not to turn their potential into their disadvantage. Considering the interdependence between the leader and the media, with a focus on television, many authors have labeled neo-populism as being, in fact, a tele-populism.

The new medium of information and publicity resulted in a cessation or reduction of direct address, supported by a technological media contact, thanks to these instruments of mass communication.

The conclusions arising from the theoretical approach and the marking of the evolution of the concept of "populism" support the view that it (a) uses a generalizing and exalted language. It makes the apology of an ideal past or future – which is to be found. Populism is moralist par excellence, activating intentions and feelings, being less pragmatic and actionable; (b) people, communities are designed either as a whole or as the leader property. The political solutions proposed by populism (historical or advanced) are simple, reductionist and not infrequently utopian; (c) it is xenophobic in different degrees and intensities. It rejects the minimalist justification, "the other", rejects foreigners, migrants, disadvantaged groups, change, novelty, innovation policy; (d) it is anti-elitist, based on the belief that the political decision must be of reach of ordinary people and represent their will. The ruling elite intermediates unnecessarily, corruptly, or according to its interests between the populist leader and the masses; (e) it is based on economic clichés of ignoring laws and constraints of collective actions of rational agents, reducing explanations to emotions, feelings and intentions.

## **Multidimensional approaches of the populist phenomenon**

For a deeper understanding of populism, one can start from the idea that there are many dimensions from which this phenomenon could be addressed and interpreted for a more complete and scientifically valid understanding. The empirical finding that populism has various forms of manifestation in all political regimes and all social subsystems, influencing broad masses of population and administrative structures or affecting the functioning of state institutions as administrative and politic democratic intermediaries between elites in power and the people, determined the approach of the phenomenon from a multidimensional perspective.

### **The historical dimension of the populist phenomenon**

In a historical paradigm, one can speak of two great populist traditions, American populism and respectively Russian populism, having as sources the Russian Narodniks and the American populists of Jeffersonian inspiration. Both forms of populism

marked in one way or another, the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The differences between the two populist paradigms consist primarily in the attitude towards private property.

**Table 1. Characteristics of populist ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

	USA	Russia
1. Mass movement	yes	no
2. "Intelligentsia" as leader	no	yes
3. Supports individual property	yes	no

*Source: Peter Worsley, 1969, Concept of Populism, in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.), Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics, Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, London, p. 212.*

From the American perspective, populism appears as a movement or as a mass ideology of independent farmers from the 19th century and other modest social categories, with lower mobilization, seeking the fulfillment of the real interests of its members, even though they are often defined in an unclear, imprecise way. The essence of this type of populism is pro-capitalist and directed against the state in a reticent, reserved and cautious manner. The 19th century populist discourse appears as a combination between the anti-statism of principle and the needs of government intervention (social assistance, financial assistance, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. The bases of this type of populism is rooted in the idea of Jeffersonian democracy that imagined a patriarchal society of farmers-citizens and the existence of a vaguely outlined state whose interventions must be minimal, such as subsidies or other forms of collective support.

*“American populists, whose political expression was the People's Party, had a different social base. The independent farmers constitute the core of the movement, and private ownership is for them the basic economic principle.”*<sup>2</sup>

The populist discourse shapes its opponents in the big trust-holdings of the time, banking or rail, which became more active and present in social life, affecting or disrupting small businesses.

The political vision of American populists calls for an increase of federal power to defend the interests of "the people." It is noted that in the American version, unlike in Russia, populist mobilization is triggered from people and not from the elite.

The Russian version of populism is the product of urban "intelligentsia" fueled ideologically with ideas from the German Romanticism and which has no access to political decision. Consequently, the central element of Russian populist lies in the criticism of capitalism, naturally supporting anti-capitalist ideas.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://bogdanmandru.wordpress.com/doctrine-politice—populismul>

<sup>2</sup> [www.revista22.ro/22-plus-nr-339-populism-o-tipologie-16019.html](http://www.revista22.ro/22-plus-nr-339-populism-o-tipologie-16019.html)

<sup>3</sup> Idem

The analysis of the historical dimension, summarized that (a) populism is not just xenophobia, dichotomy, sidedness in speech and political attitudes like fascism, which it totally eliminates from the speech, but firstly, the populist utopian claims to resolve hic et nunc major social issues and the taking of some risks which it does not know and cannot manage; (b) contemporary populism is a product of social division and is fundamentally different from that of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. It is not a reaction to the phenomenon of immigration or globalization, but a result of social dynamics. It is a speech, an attitude, a reaction to anxiety and social insecurity; (c) Current populism, regardless of how it happens, does not appeal to ideology but to identity.

Here is the explanation that national identity is a major theme of cultural populism, radically different from the old populism in that it does not highlight superiority, but specific differences.

## **The sociological dimension of populist phenomenon**

The sociological dimension crystallizes the idea that this attitude has gradually become a relatively well-shaped movement in Central and Eastern Europe, integrating this region into a more widespread European phenomenon. Populist politicians in most countries of Europe through their speech, exploit social frustration generated by economic problems indicating the main culprits: corruption, political elitism and immigrants.

Currently, the most representative democracies face serious problems caused by the erosion of values, the inedited ideological partisanship, widespread migration policy and a strong distrust of voters towards political parties.

The growing presence of populist topics both in speech and in attitude in EU environment policy shows that populism appears, takes shape and develops more rapidly in countries where representative democracy lacks solutions to partial failures, providing the illusion of those who cannot elaborate answers within their power of understanding and adaptation.

Considering the size of populism as a political phenomenon, coupled with the fact that populism is a call for direct democracy and populists can only protest, but never govern - this view must be challenged. Populism, unlike liberalism, lacks a coherent policy of distinct ideas. But it cannot be simply defined as any political movement that stirs up the masses by promoting simplistic policy proposals. More appropriate to say is that populism cannot be understood at the policy level, being more a particular way of political image.

A populist leader who promotes a purely moral image of an elite, directs voters to a set of expectations. Voters who support populist movements accept this because they believe that the current elites truly fail to represent them.

In fact, they are not against representative democracy as such, but they just want their representatives to be changed and replaced by people they consider as close to the image of moral purity proposed by the populist leader.



This feature of populism - such that people want one thing and that only their elected representatives can satisfy this desire - evokes a symmetry between populism and technocratic governance. Similarly, technocrats assume that there is only one correct solution to every social challenge and therefore a political debate is no longer necessary. But the democratic exercise involves the opposite: political alternatives and varied solutions arisen by different perspectives.

On the other hand, the populist rhetoric tends to be a collection of assertions belonging to both right and left, with a strong focus on leadership, on the one hand, and on popular equality, on the other hand. Usually, the sent populist message is illiberal and intolerant to traditional civil liberties. One can say that the populist leader appeals to people, positioning himself against the existing political system in an attempt of a project, usually utopian.

By A. Dorna (2004, p. 230) current society is faced with a new populist cycle. The viral expansion of populism was possible due to the globalization of the market economy which became the most immediate and most effective contamination.

The scarcity of trust in political parties and politics in general, can be understood in classical terms of political science, as a consequence of the unfavorable economic environment that boosts populist manifestations. But, from a sociological and socio-economic point of view, the retention and not infrequently the rejection of population for parties becomes understandable if one considers the asymmetric distribution of resources, whether material or otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, there are to be seen obvious ruptures and distances between symbols and elite culture, and society.

Populist parties succeed in mobilizing citizens, by introducing in their speech negative assessment of the political system and issues concerning integrity, competence, elite responsiveness and the efficiency of the political system taken as a whole. On the other hand, the relative ease in mobilizing citizens is based on valuing their dissatisfaction seen by the very structural elements of the ideology of populism: (a) the notion of monolith people whose will is expressed through the actions of a political leader, (b) acute aversion against political intermediaries (political parties and traditional elites) and (c) institutional and bureaucratic procedures that interpose between political intermediaries and direct expression of the will of the people. (Canovan, 1999, p 46)

Thus, highlighting the failures of representative democracy and questioning the ability of the elite to deal with social problems, by actions, behaviour and populist speech, one succeeds the orientation of the undecided towards the group of dissatisfied citizens.

Currently there is a resurgence of populist phenomenon in Eastern Europe that transcends this space, having the same consistency in Western socio-political environment. Thus, there is an increase of the visibility of Western populist parties and movements, their success being due to the exploitation of the social concerns related to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://revistacultura.ro/cultura.php?articol=983>

the phenomenon of immigration, socio-economic insecurity, but also of manifestation of political elitism and corruption.

**Table 2. Results of European elections from 1979 to 2014**

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Left-wing populists	1,7	2,3	2,1	1,5	2,7	2,9	2,9	3,6
Left-wing	39,7	38,8	39,3	36	33,3	33,3	29,2	26,5
Total of left-wing	41,4	41,4	40,9	37,5	36	36,2	32,1	30,1
Right-wing	51,1	46,6	38,6	42,2	39,8	39,2	44,5	37,8
Right-wing populists	2,1	4,6	6,2	7,7	6,8	8,1	6,6	6,6
Total of right-wing	53,2	51,2	44,8	49,9	46,6	47,3	51,1	44,4
Others	5,4	7,7	14,3	12,6	17,4	16,5	16,8	25,5

Source: <http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0315-ascension-of-populist-parties-but-relative-stability-in-the-balance-between-the-political-parties>

As shown in the table above, although the rise of populism in the European elections is uncertain, especially in some Member States, it remained relatively at the same European level. Left-wing populists have gained a slight advantage (+0.7points) across the EU, compared to 2009, achieving their greatest result in European elections. Right-wing populists stagnated at 6.6%. Although the populist progression is real, it is relatively weak in the EU as a whole but it is stronger in some countries. Left-wing populism focuses on attacks on social and economic policy in Brussels and the right-wing populists focus more on a rejection of immigration, even when it comes to EU citizens, especially Central and Eastern Europe, namely, Romania and Bulgaria.

Although the effects of populism on democracy are indirect, they are mediated and augmented by the manifestations of public opinion under the form of extremist anti-minority attitudes sympathizing with conservative and authoritarian social behavior patterns. These behavioral attitude patterns can generate, through their non-democratic expression, risks to liberal democracy institutions and practices. Although the spread of populism in Europe is recognized, there is still no consensus on its impact on European companies.

Ivan Krastev (2007, p. 63) believes *"populism is a direct consequence of the tension between liberalism and democracy, derived from an increasingly acute need for a direct democracy, on the one hand and the growing of charismatic leaders, able to clot popular discontent and frustration."*

Tackling populist sociologically revealed that (a) populism is not synonymous with "radicalism" or "extremism", but they correlate rapidly and may condition each other especially in times of socio-economic and political crisis when one also notes a decline in public confidence in parties and their leaders; (b) there is a "soft" populism condemning only certain aspects, certain failures of social systems, but which is manifested in a constitutional framework and a "hard" one that threatens the entire constitutional framework and the whole democratic construction; (c) identity-

nationalist strategies are used by the populists to increase their influence and attract popular support. These strategies are more efficient in former communist countries since they are associated with the communist ideology still present in the collective memory; (d) Eastern populism is directed more against the new elite who benefit of a more prolonged transition to a market economy, and against the illegally enriched people, than against a democratic regime; (e) populism is specifically focused on the media and political figures in the region, being dependent on them but also on issues fighting corruption, the immorality of justice or politicians;

In Southeast Europe populism is the subject of civic and political environment, especially of the parties with institutionalized structures in the territory, by requiring minimal 'isolation' of populist parties or by weakening their influence resulted from the redistribution of popular support.

## The ethical dimension of populist phenomenon

The ethical dimension of existence has both cognitive and human ontological valences. Ignoring, treating with indifference, trivializing or defying frequent truths about the social-cultural human nature with balanced physical and moral support, may be diminished, corrected, resized through continuous general systematic and moral education in order to train and internalize those values that are acceptable and largely desirable socially and in terms of community, i.e. those who found the civil society and democratic state of modern type, in which the separation of powers and the fundamental civil rights are guaranteed, protected and promoted.

If politics is understood as an extension of what is moral, focused on objectives aimed at the common good, then the presence in this sphere of some duplicitous, populist, demagogic characters who see the act of power as a tool to access the human resource and who calls for a politics deprived of moral conscience and ethics, is undesirable and requires the identification of democratic filters through which the access to top power be limited or stopped. (Sârbu, 2005, p 59)

The political, economic, cultural elite should be concerned with the establishment of new, accessible and understandable truths; should have true opinions and enhance understanding explanatory understanding. To appeal to the emotion of the audience, to simple solutions resulted from complex solutions, to the expression of particular views, which, by generalization are converted into universal truths or explanatory limitations and confusion, is to fertilize the populist soil.

The insistence on entertainment, speculation, amateurism and improvisation, egocentrism and self-esteem advertised in any circumstances and at any price to the detriment of a minimum regulatory context provides a vast fertile territory for the populist rhetoric, demagogic manifestations, nationalism and authoritarian, dictatorial tendencies.

In such a context, such a construction *"some people refuse to do the job, while others indulge in situations of beggars, or becoming more individualistic, more selfish and petty"*

(Sârbu, 2005, p. 62), making way to free and non-vectored impulses and behaviors associated or directed against self and / or others.

The acute moral deficit, the almost generalized moral depreciation in our society have visible effects: the rejection of personal cultural values, the language despises, customs, traditions and the whole history. New media can produce mutilating effects on people and their becoming. All these online means of persuasion promoted from a certain angle, can stimulate aggression, sexuality, pornography unless they oppose a moral stability or firm character consistency. In the current society there is no longer a question of information or access to information, but of sorting the information, of selection between what is good, useful, uplifting and what is distorted, toxic, ephemeral, transitory or useless. The constant and insistent centering on consumption, regardless of the way it takes place, tends to robotize the individual and clouds the major human meanings of social life. (Krastev, 2007, p. 56-61)

Moral autonomy, to be morally independent or to freely express yourself, is determined by internal, subjective factors and external, objective factors, independent from the individual.

The objectivist perspective considers the existence of the objective moral order being independent of consciousness, meaning of people's beliefs, ideas and feelings.

In a society regarded as normal there are possible even manifested deviations from the principles and rules. Accepting rules requires a free conscience expressed through will and observable in the behavioral act. On a subjective level, however, the same idea of rules refers to conventional and free will by which one can justify their circumvention of its enforcement. For describing and understanding such situations, one proposed the notion of constitutive rule defining events, facts, circumstances not related only to the subject but also to various social institutions. (Jones, 2007, p. 39 - 44)

These rules are more than mere conventions, enrolling in the socio-cultural constructs in continuous becoming, with greater objective value. From this perspective, ethics senses how the legal system components are or are not respected, systems which can be understood as one of the ways of morality.

The formation of an autonomous personality by assuming a value system necessarily to personal development involves the existence beyond normativity, of that system of values that is to be assumed. In other words, the moral conscience appears as a formed structure composed of cognitive, emotional, volitional and practical-action elements and its apparent objectives lies in the formation of both moral conscience and moral conduct.

The ethical dimension of populist phenomenon increases further hope in humanist values, ethical virtues, moral values that define or should define contemporary man and his actions, either individual or community, political or spiritual. The investigation of the ethical dimension revealed, inter alia, that (a) in Eastern Europe, issues of political, legal and moral philosophy are avoided, misunderstood, ignored or treated lightly. The absence or truncation of the moral structure of the individual and the community creates behavior and social environments morally impaired, promiscuous, favorable or

used as opportunities of populist affirmation and (b) the necessary imposition for a major change in contemporary democratic societies contemporary-oriented toward a moral thinking correlated with a new political thinking, correlation understood as a stable reference against any form of political or social slippage.

## The communicational dimension of the populist phenomenon

Political communication is defined as *"an interactive process that involves the transmission of information between politicians, media and the public"*. (Norris P., 2002, p. 127). The procedural dynamics of this type of communication is directed "top down" and contains messages considered of major importance for citizens, and "bottom-up", consisting of individual opinions and attitudes of politicians. (Franklin, 1995, p. 586)

The main way in which the audience's, more precisely the electorate's, opinions are influenced and formed has always been and will continue to be political discourse. Any form of political discourse is centered on an interest and concerns, in a pragmatic manner, the reaching of a predetermined goal.

Every politician, without expressing their motivations, interests and objectives, in the long or short term, tries, through his speech, to be "the man we need," the one that promotes the public and the national interest, beyond small or personal interests.

The difference between political speech and other types of speech lies in its manifest pragmatism, in its determination to explicitly targeted action for gaining and maintaining political power through the consent of the electorate, the people. It is pointed out the strong inclination to masses of people and their feelings, present in the populist discourse.

Unlike other types of discourse, politics has certain characteristics: (Sălăvăstru, p. 19-21) (a) intentional ambiguity (invigorates influence and incites to action by insisting on certain representations and beliefs); (b) the hidden character of the message (masking the real intentions of the speaker); (c) imperative tone (beyond the understanding and acceptance of the message, it claims instant action from the subject, excluding deliberation); (d) explicit polemic substrate (competitiveness with other speeches of other movements, parties, interest groups, relying on the public interest and adherence)

The analysis of this dimension revealed a number of conclusions that can be definitive for understanding the populist phenomenon: (a) political speech is the main tool used by politicians to obtain voters' support or other social categories of people; (b) political communication and therefore, the populist rhetoric use, at a large scale, non-verbal communication elements that are consistently present in the general behavior and concrete actions of the politician.

The analysis of the communicative dimension highlighted the strong cultural importance of gestures and the strong verbal support of verbal communication, which it nuances and potentiates and the focus on the essential aspects of the physical and publicized presence of the politician; (c) by identifying the key characteristics of persuasion and manipulation, heavily used in populist political communication, and not

only, we concluded that, while persuasion has to do with the conscious and voluntary participation of the persuaded one, in the case of manipulation, the individual is forced to do something against his will, by exploiting a shortage of information or a permanent or momentary affective incapacity; (d) in populist communication, the central theme becomes more important than the sent message, the emphasis being shifted to define an occupied position and to obtain recognition to fill that position; (e) generally, in every communication exchange, particularly in the political one, there are interests that will guide behavior towards obtaining an advantage over the other, meaning an attempt to impose a possible reality that is guaranteed to satisfy the involved interests; (f) through communication and populist discourse there are produced discernable effect on the constraint level of what to believe, to think or to act as a result of the interdependence between communication and action, context in which may appear negotiations, consensus, conflicts, blockages or polemics.

## Conclusions

The main features of populism extracted from the historical, ethical, sociological and communication perspectives identified by our research are:

- a. Populism has a generalized and exalted language, deeply emotional, the main references of populist discourse referring to (a) the return to a glorious, harmonious, non-conflictual or deeply moral past or (b) the design of an ideal future, characterized by solving current problems, achieving social harmony and respecting the will of the many, the future that is to be identified and directed to.
- b. Populism par excellence, is strongly declaratory and moralist, having the power to (re) activate the desires, needs, intentions and feelings and to contaminate the broad categories of the population. In counterpoint, populism is less pragmatic and actional, sometimes even utopian.
- c. The people, the electorate, the auditorium, the community are perceived or deliberately designed either as a single, compact, monolithic unity or as the leader's property, constantly at his disposal. The political solutions proposed by populism (historical or advanced) to solve the problems it identifies at the "corrupt power" or to fulfill the promises it makes, are usually simple, reductionist and not infrequently utopian. The solving methods by which the populists undertake change, have a familiar character, willfully friendly, methods that they see possible to resolve any kinds of problems: community, national or international.
- d. The speech is directed critically and radically against the institutions, political, cultural, economic elites in power and considered a priori, incompetent, corrupt and illegitimate. Their change is demanded "urgently", and the suggestions are radical and follow a simple scheme: the total change, "fundamental change", populism blatantly showing contempt for gradualism, processuality and compromises of any kind.
- e. Populism, through discourse and action, is xenophobic in different degrees and intensity. It rejects, with minimalist justification, "the other", rejects foreigners,

migrants, disadvantaged groups, the change, novelty, political innovation. Throughout its attitude, populism is reluctant to change. By the variable radicalism of the demands, depending on the context and interest, populism refers to the recovery of a harmonious, original, moral and worthily condition.

- f. Populism criticizes, attacks, despises, proves hostility and positions against the political intermediaries of the ruling elites and the people (political institutions, parties and movements, administrative structures, etc.). The distrust in democratic mechanisms and structures provides "energetic support" to fight state institutions. By disposing as many of possible from these intermediaries, populism promotes a direct, unmediated, almost familiar connection between leaders and the people.
- g. Populism is anti-elitist, regardless of the elite type: political, cultural and economic. Populist belief expressed by its leader is that the political decision should be at common people's hand and to represent their will. For populism, mediation between elites and the people is unnecessary and opens opportunities for corruption or for satisfying personal interests.
- h. The control or the seduction of the masses is through the induction of fear or feelings of rebellion, by resorting to conspiracy themes, common in populist discourse. By stating possible conspiracy, populism succeeds in binding and attitudinally mobilizing the masses.
- i. Populism is immobile, and resistant to change, adopting a monolithic type of politics that excludes dialogue or on other participants. From the height of this vision of unilaterality, it postulates the existence of a national interest and criticizes, ridicules, vulgarizes or demonizes other interests which oppose it.

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