The behavior of mainstream political parties and the politcal elite. Indispensable factor for understanding the rise of contemporary populism

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**Introduction**

It is no longer new that populism occupies a central place in the debates of the academic community, at least in the last decades. Even more, the rise of some political parties labeled by the media as populist, but also the programs and policies promoted by them manage to draw the attention of society in their direction. For example, it is well-known that the populist UKIP (United Kingdom independence Party) played a crucial role in supporting Brexit, with the party displaying this aspect right on the front page of their website [1]. Also in France, the national Front (FN) is a classic and intensely studied example of the political party calling for a number of populist elements in its speech. The presence of these examples of populist parties or populist leaders throughout the European space, but also of the other continents, makes populism a global phenomenon, which is currently manifesting with a fierce intensity on the political scene [2].

These parties, leaders and populist movements do not appear out of nothingness. Like any phenomenon we want to study, we must try to highlight the causes for which populism succeeds in enjoying such success throughout the world. But this is not easy, because the way populism fits into different societies sometimes differs substantially depending on geographical area, culture, society, religion [3]. Another aspect for which the study of populism is difficult is the triviality and ease with which this concept is used by the media, politicians, academics, etc., and this excessive and distorted use eventually lacks the concept of populism of any semantic, theoretical or empirical value. The researchers drew attention to the abusive use of the term populism, with Paul Taggart finding that “populism is one of the most widely used but also the least understood concepts of our time [4].”

**Populism – conceptual delimitations**

I mentioned earlier that the label of populism easily applies to a multitude of ideological formations, but these formations hardly bear conclusive similarities, especially if we want to compare populism on different continents. Besides the fact that populism can occur on any point of the political spectrum from left to right [5], we also notice that it combines and has the ability to merge with numerous other ideologies, philosophies or currents present in an active or latent state in a society, and we can list: nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia, euroscepticism, anti-immigration, racism, nativism and the list can go on [6]. There has been no general consensus on populism and probably never will be reached on the theorizing of populism. From his first attempts at theorizing, and I have here in mind the work of Ionescu and Gellner, the question was whether populism should be considered either an ideology or a political movement or, why not, both [7]. Along the way, several attributes have emerged alongside populism, from discursive style, mood, political program, etc. In a simple manner, we can understand populism as an appeal to the people, an appeal from political leaders or parties, against the current structure of power and the dominant ideas and values in a society [8]. In most definitions dedicated to populism we see that there is a discussion of an opposition relationship between the people and the elite, which may be tint as “the people versus the few and the powerful [9].” Within themselves, the vast majority of populisms involve some form of appeal to the people, and besides this, they are all anti-elitist [10]. Basically, populism manifests itself in a society as a criticism of the powerful minority/elite that, in the sense of populists, tries to subjugate and pervert the general will of ordinary people. Leaving aside, for the moment, the conceptual difficulties raised by populism, in this study I will focus on identifying and explaining the causes that made it possible for contemporary populism in Central and Eastern Europe to experience a considerable momentum in the post-89 period. The fundamental question I want to answer based on this work is: What factor/factors generated the right ground for populism to infiltrate, relatively easily, Central-Eastern European societies immediately after the revolutions of 1989? To answer this question, i will start from the following hypothesis:

1. The societies of Central and Eastern Europe, in full transition, have taken from Western societies the characteristics, the particularities of their political system and, implicitly, populism. But if I raise this assumption, I must also see what caused the rise of populism in Western Europe. There are three new assumptions that state that:

2. Populism in Western Europe emerged by being forced by mainstream parties and the political elite.

3. Mainstream political parties have become catch-all parties and have lost their ideological substance.

4. Smaller ideological party formations were able to ensure their survival on the political scene, dominated by the main-stream parties, only by becoming populists.

**Causes of the appearance of populism in Western Europe**

In Western europe, contemporary populism appeared on the political scene very late in the 20th century. In the years following World War II, the political climate stabilized, economic growth gave hope for the future for new generations, and support for extremes began to erode both to the right and to the left. However, this calm was short-lived because the revival of political and ideological unrest in the late 1960s, the intensification of social conflicts in the 1970s, and the spread of civic protest movements in the 1980s led to the reshaping of the Western European political scene. In Western Europe these changes took shape and became visible only in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The causes of these changes were multiple: From the decline of the great ideologies of modernity, to the fall of the Soviet bloc, to the destabilization of the entire political system on which the west was built [11].

Until the early 1980s, populist political parties in Western European countries were almost non-existent, with few exceptions, but the turning point came in the mid-1980s, when, on the European political scene, these parties begin to gain electoral support and lay their foundations. The most representative example and probably the first significant populist party to emerge in Western Europe was the french party, the National Front(FN). However, for populist parties to enter government cabinets it took another decade, and the first parties to join government coalitions were the Northern League (LN) in Italy in 1994 and the Austrian freedom Party(FPO) in 2000 [12]. In general, contemporary populism has been associated with the radical right, especially in the early stages of its ascent and development, and, in addition to the examples already mentioned, the first representative populist parties that have activated in the Western European political environment are Vlaams Blok (VB) of Belgium, the Swiss People's Party (SVP), Danish People's Party (DPP) or German Republicans [13]. Even though contemporary populism is almost entirely monopolized by radical right-wing parties, in terms of the European space of analysis, populism is also present on the ideological left, even if not with the same intensity. Parties such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain manage to gain massive electoral support among young voters, students or educated citizens in urban centers [14].

Political parties compete with each other and build their campaigns on various relevant topics and existing realities in a society. While some parties focus on a single issue, others, like mainstream parties, want to cover a wider range of topics [15], all of which are related to the size of the party, its members, the funds they hold, etc. Mainstream parties are political parties based on a moderate and easily recognizable ideological platform rather than on a charismatic personality or extremist rhetoric [16]. Mainstream parties can also be understood as dominant political actors in the center-left, center-right and center-right blocs of the left-right political spectrum [17]. After 1945, Western European party systems enter a phase of redefinition, and in the first elections, after World War II, more diverse party formations enter the competition. As I will show later, few political parties have managed to maintain their positions and remain relevant throughout the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This can also be attributed to ideological baggage, themes adopted or platforms related to parties, but I believe that another reason that can be correlated with the continuity of the success of some Western European parties, namely their transformation into catch-all parties.

Kirchheimer defined catch-all parties as parties that focus exclusively on co-opting as many voters as possible along the left-right political spectrum and manage to adapt their internal structure to strengthen the authority and autonomy of party leaders [18]. Being oriented only toward the capture of a large number of votes, these parties can and will resort to changing ideological positions when they consider that by this action they can attract greater electoral support from society or a significant group not represented on the political spectrum[18].In Kirchheimer's analysis of West Germany's political system, he noted that the German electorate opted to support conservative parties with moderate ideological platforms, so that, between the two major CDU and SPD parties, ideological differences became almost nonexistent in the 1950s and 60s. Kirchheimer also points out a crucial aspect of this analysis, namely that in this system of catch-all parties, on which there is a strong consensus about the role of the state and the personalization of politics, political opposition can be considered non-existent [19].

As Jean Blondel pointed out, the decline of Western political parties, at least since 1970, is based not only on the emergence of new political parties, electoral absenteeism or substantial decline of party members, but also on the failure of party systems formed in Western democracies after 1945, to cope with new social challenges[20]. The lack of presence of political opposition, identified as early as 1950-1960, in the German political system by Kircheimer, was a result of the construction of a general consensus by the CDU and SPD parties to overcome the social problems existing at the time. When new social, religious or other problems emerged and intensified in the late 20th century, the governing catch-all parties could not cover these problems because smaller party formations, with the help of a more radical and precise ideological positioning, were able to overcome these problems. They managed to take advantage of the citizens’ discontent with the anemia that the current system seemed to be showing in solving some acute problems of society. This turning point can be considered the 0-point of the emergence of contemporary populism in Western Europe.

**Mainstream catch all political parties in Germany and France**

The political scene of the newly established West Germany in 1949 was dominated, from the very beginning, by the classical left-right struggles. From 1950 to 1970 only three parties played relevant roles on the left-right dimension: to the right the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its smaller partner from Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and to the left the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Until the early 2000, Germany was governed either by CDU/CSU+FDP coalitions (1949-1969), SPD+FDP coalitions (1969-1982) and later by SPD+Greens (1998-2005), or by large coalition governments CDU-CSU-SPD. The overwhelming proportions that the two major CDU and SPD parties managed to win at each election, about 85-90% of the seats in Parliament, diminished the ideological importance of the parties, as well as the identity ties that the CDU and SPD parties had with their specific social sectors. For example, the SPD had a close connection with trade unions, and the CDU was supported by those social groups gathered around the values of the Catholic Church[21], but once these parties focused their discourse on a wider range of topics that traditionally were not in their appanage, the voter pool began to fluctuate, so some of those who had previously voted for CDU/CSU moved to the opposite side of the SPD and vice versa[21]. Just as Kirchheimer found, over time, these parties tend to leave behind their ideological characteristics to focus on seizing an electorate from areas that traditionally did not belong to them, which will label them as catch-all parties.

In France, it is interesting to note the course of the Gaullist parties that have stood out since 1958 as having a tendency to turn into successful catch-all parties. After becoming the main force of the French legislature in the 1958 election, the Gaullist party (UNR) allied with center-left and center-right political forces to support de Gaulle in the presidential election. Over time, these party formations, united under the Gaullist label, took advantage of the polarization of society and gradually managed to gain support both in the geographical and social areas that were favorable to it and in the areas less likely to vote for it [22], and through ideological flexibility they managed to coopt voters from both leftist and right-wing backgrounds [22]. Under the umbrella of the fifth Republic, the Gaullists managed to take advantage of the new political reforms of the new Republic, managing to attract, with the help of local party machines, numerous activists and a solid electoral base. Between 1960 and 1981, the party, named UDR after 1968, began to promote conservative policies, which received massive support from educated French society. Even though they were considered right-wing parties due mainly to the nationalist doctrine they advocated, the Gaullists promoted important social policies such as economic planning or welfare state, this ideological permeability capturing the catch-all character that these parties possess[23].

Following the analysis of the two cases, France and West Germany, we can draw a series of preliminary conclusions and also observe a pattern in terms of party behavior and the evolution of the party system. In Western Europe the pattern seems to be clear and we can draw a preliminary conclusion on the rise of populist parties in this geographical and political context. In the decades following World War II, the party system of the Western States underwent structural changes. On the political scene, well-consolidated and large-scale mainstream parties have emerged, some of them with important historical origins, which have helped in image and in ensuring electoral success. Moreover, the transformation into catch-all parties of some of these parties added to the coalition government, usually with the same partners and the presence of an extremely strong political elite at image level have made small or newly formed parties to have no chance in the existing political environment. An important factor to mention and which I have not highlighted is the importance of personalizing the policy. At least in the second half of the 20th century, political leaders in Western democracies gained crucial importance in terms of political communication and electoral campaigns. This is observed when the leader or political leaders take precedence over the parties in electoral campaigns or in the media[24]. Basically, once the old social and ideological conflicts “undergo” a normalization in the light of that general consensus we discussed previously, the relative power of the party begins to shift to the shoulders of the leaders, these are the ones who will represent the means by which the electorate will get involved in the political life and turn their attention to one party or another[25]. This phenomenon of political personalization is also seen in the cases analyzed, France and Germany, where at the top of each strong party were leaders who became extremely strong in image and leadership, the broad lines of the parties are drawn by the ambitions and ideas of this political elite rather than by the party’s ideology or program. Only if we mention names such as Konrad Adenauer(CDU), Helmuth Kohl (CDU), Willy Brandt(SPD), Gerhard Schröder(SPD) in Germany or Charles de Gaulle(RPF, UNR), Francois Mitterand(PS), Georges Pompidou(UDR, UNR) in France, we can deduce how powerful and present this political elite was.

The turning point came when small or medium, newly formed parties understood that they could take advantage of the existing political situation by attacking the mainstream and the elite. Basically, the only chance for these parties to assert themselves and survive on the European political scene was the need for transformation into populist parties. With zero chances to compete with the parties rooted in the system for many decades and no potential for negotiation or blackmail, these parties turned to the only door that was open to them, namely the attack of the current establishment and the political elite. These attacks were, in some cases, fruitful and brought significant electoral support also due to the anemia of the existing political system, which could not, but did not try to effectively manage the new social crises that emerged in 1970-1980, in this case noting the weaknesses of catch-all parties.

**1990. The beginnings of populism in Central and Eastern Europe**

After the collapse of such a vast system as the communist one, the states of Central and Eastern Europe had to undergo a political, social, economic and cultural transition to overcome the “old system” and to consolidate their new institutions or more broadly, the new society. In new democracies, such as those formed after the revolutions of the 89th, multi-party system is emerging. At first, a multitude of parties make their appearance on the political scene, but with time the party system stabilizes, relevant on the political scene managed to remain a small number of parties. A number of arguments can be identified to explain this state of affairs, but I believe that the most comprehensive argument is that the parties in the new democracies indirectly imitate the behavior of political parties in states that democratized early, and, in this case, the parties in the post-communist states model their behavior after that of the parties in western democracies. For example, in new democracies, the political environment is characterized by profound social, economic and political changes, at least in the early stages of the transition. In this context, characterized by strong pressures from certain categories of actors who want to participate in the political game, mass parties will appear to be able to control the access of these new categories of actors to the political system[26] and implicitly the entire political environment in that state. These mass parties will become the mainstream parties of the political system, and once they achieve their programmatic objectives, they will become redundant. So that their strength does not diminish and remain relevant, the next step will be to turn into catch-all parties, just as we have shown that it happened with their counterparts in Western Europe. Next, I would like to check, through an empirical analysis, whether the mainstream political parties emerging in the post-communist States have followed the same trajectory as the mainstream parties of Western Europe and whether they have forced populism in Central and Eastern Europe as well. I will apply this empirical analysis to three states: Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland.

**Slovakia**

Slovakia is a special case to consider because, since its formation as a fully independent state in 1993, political evolution has followed several paths, and populists have been present in government almost throughout the post-communist period[27]. For example, from 1993 to 1998, Slovakia was governed by a series of coalitions of nationalist and populist parties whose policies were sharply criticized by the international community for violations of minority rights, corruption and the misuse of secret services. Practically, the years 1992-1998 witnessed a presence of hard populism, namely a populism that is affirmed by the presence of authoritarian, nationalist parties, the SNS and HZDS parties being representative. With 1998 and the parliamentary elections that followed that year, this negative trend is set to be reversed, with a broad pro-democratic coalition coming to power whose reforms will put the Slovak state back on track to join the European Union and NATO[28].

However, it should not be forgotten that populism has also experienced a soft character in Slovakia since 2000, when political parties moderated their extremist positions and adopted some more central positions, but which later turned to the left (Smer/Smer-SD), and, starting in 2010, a new wave of populist forces, with divergent ideologies, have made their appearance on the political scene, such as the conservative, pro-European and anti-corruption party OL′ANO, the national-conservative and Eurosceptic movement SME RODINA or the neoliberal SAS. Due to the fragmentation and political instability characteristic of Slovak society through the lines of center-periphery, economic, religious and ethnic cleavage, the party system is in a continuous transformation. So when we want to identify mainstream parties in the political environment in Slovakia, difficulties arise. However, there is one party that corresponds to both the mainstream and the catch-all grid, namely Smer-SD. Apart from a small period after the 2010 elections, Smer-SD was the party that was constantly in charge of the governing coalitions, and between 2012-2016 it managed to form and maintain a single-party government. As for its rhetoric, Smer-SD stands out as a left-wing party that fights for disadvantaged groups and supports the implementation of the welfare state. In reality, its ideology is diffuse, rather center-oriented and characterized by an inconsistency in the party’s programs and policies, and by its appeals to an increasingly wider audience and by the pursuit of votes to the detriment of ideology, it falls into the category of catch-all parties[29].

**Czech Republic**

The post-communist period also brought about radical transformations in the Czech Republic of the entire political system. Like the other Central-Eastern states, the Czech Republic began to experience a multi-party system after 1989. The party system was built in the Czech Republic in three different ways: by transforming political parties established before 1990, especially the Czech Communist Party and Blockparteien, by the revival of historical parties or by the establishment of new political parties[30]. The party system in the Czech Republic gradually stabilized over the following decades, and the number of parties entering Parliament has significantly reduced from one electoral cycle to another. If in 1996, six parties entered Parliament, in the elections of 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010, their number fell to five. The index of the number of relevant parties shows us how in 1992 their number was 5.7, and since then it has been steadily decreasing, reaching a minimum of 3,1 in 2006, having, however, a certain increase in the 2010 elections, reaching 4.5.

With few exceptions, the Czech party system seems to indicate relative stability. This does not mean that there have been or will be no changes in the party system, but they will be minor. Surprisingly, in the Czech Republic there was a trend toward bipolar, with two major political parties developing on two opposing ideological blocks. At least between 1992 and 2010, the two major ideologically rival parties were the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) on the right and the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) on the left, these two parties being also the main-stream parties on the political scene of the Czech Republic [31].

In addition to these dominant political parties mentioned above, a parliamentary party with xenophobic and nationalist tendencies appeared in the 1990s, but which had a relatively minor success. It is the Czech Republican Party (SPR–RRč), led by Miroslav Sladek, whose electoral support came mainly from the mining districts of Northern Bohemia, a region suffering from acute economic problems and where there was a significant percentage of citizens belonging to the Roma ethnicity [30]. From the very first days of its establishment, the party began to support a number of authoritarian and chauvinistic elements. In 1990, the party managed to get just over 1% of the seats for the Parliament, but following the development of ultra-radical and ultra-nationalist elements, such as anti-elitist attitudes, chauvinism and racism directed toward the Roma population, it managed to reach in 1992 a percentage of about 6% of the votes. In addition to the attitudes listed above, the party also took on a diverse mix of issues and issues to increase its vote percentage. For example, they said they would improve public services, increase social benefits, cut red tape and reduce state intervention in the economy. as a result of these promises, in 1996 they managed to exceed their percentage since the previous elections and obtained popular support of 8%. 1996 was the best year of this party because since the early elections of 1998 they have not managed to get any seats in Parliament [3].

**Poland**

Even though it was the first state to emerge from the communist umbrella, in 1989 Poland and its new political system that was about to be built suffered, at least in the early stages, both intense fragmentation and instability[32]. The party system in Poland creates confusion at first sight due to the ideological and political profiles of the parties. Party programmatic statements tend to be vague, similar policies are often supported by different parties that have a completely different orientation and identify with totally different values, and positioning on the left-right political spectrum makes it more difficult to understand the party system. If we want to classify parties according to their origin, theoretical difficulties also arise because most parties come from the old structures of Solidarity and at the same time we see them dressed in all political colors[33].

With the change of electoral law and the adoption of the 5% threshold for parties and 8% for coalitions, parliamentary political parties fell to six between 1993 and 1997. The 1993 elections were surprising for the entire political environment both because of the clear victory that the post-communists SLD (37% of the seats), but also the Peasant Party (29%), as well as the catastrophic defeat of the parties coming from the structures of Solidarity. Public opinion has found a scapegoat for the clear defeat of the elections, blaming the elites of parties built from former structures of Solidarity. In the 1997 election, the “Solidarity parties” learned from their previous mistakes and formed a broad AWS coalition, with which they managed to win a clear majority in this election. However, the ecstasy did not last long because, due to internal ideological tensions, the coalition rapidly split, and from it three parties split: CO (Civic Platform) right-wing party, PiS (Law and Justice), right-wing conservative party and LPR (League of Polish families), radical nationalist party. Of all three, the CO and PiS will become the strongest parties on the Polish political scene, starting with the 2005 elections [30].

Populism has been an integral part of Polish society since its reform after the communist period. Mudde identifies no less than seven populist parties that have been on the Polish political scene[6]. Indeed, a significant part of them were small forces that failed to enter the Polish Diet, disappearing as easily as they appeared. But populism made its presence best felt through the PiS party, founded by twin brothers Jarosław Kaczyński and Lech Kaczyński. In its early days, PiS appeared with a conservative profile, a right-wing ideology, and its core values were built around the values of the Catholic Church. In fact, ever since Lech took the seat of Justice Minister in 2000, he has managed to increase his popularity, but also that of the party, thanks to anti-corruption rhetoric[34].Besides this aspect, central to the party’s view was the decommunization and the desire to “clean” the Polish political environment from any communist reminiscence[34]. The moment of radicalization of the party began in 2005, but with the winning of the 2015 elections, its populist and radical character became much more pronounced. Through the implementation of the “good change” program, PiS operated changes in a multitude of institutions: justice, public service, media, state companies, cultural institutions, etc. the purpose of these changes was to change the elites and the “bad” establishment with a “good” one, this rhetoric being central in populism. Kaczyński and PiS argued the necessity of these changes by arguing that the old ruling elite, made up of communists and structures that once belonged to Solidarity, monopolized the political, economic, religious and cultural life of Poland and reform can begin as soon as these structures are removed from power[35].

**Why did populism arise in Central and Eastern Europe?**

We started from the hypothesis that populism was forced by mainstream political parties, which turned into catch-all parties once the party system stabilized. In Western Europe, populism made its entrance relatively late, after political regimes and party systems were at an advanced stage in terms of institutional development, while in Central and Eastern Europe the emergence of the first populist parties coincided, in some cases, the period immediately following the revolutions of 1989. If populism in Western Europe grew because of the apathy of the party system and the poor management of the new social crises that have loomed on the horizon since the 1970s and 1980s, populism in Central and Eastern Europe was facilitated by the crisis represented by the collapse of communism. The emergence of multitudes of populist parties can be explained by the imprint that the communist regime left to these societies, because, in a first phase, communism created the perfect social environment through which contemporary populism managed to survive. Communist regimes created and bequeathed a dichotomy, which was perpetuated over the next decades, between the moral - non-communist and the corrupt - communist elites[4].Apart from this background that populist parties could use by attacking elites, as seen in the cases of Slovakia and Poland, another successful strategy was that populist parties took advantage of the catch-all character of mainstream parties. The populists took advantage of this and when mainstream parties were busy gathering a large voter base, becoming catch-all parties, they failed to cover sensitive topics that could easily be handled by populists for their own electoral success. We can also draw a line and find that the success of populist parties, at least in the states analyzed, could not be possible without the parties taking an authoritarian direction. In Central and Eastern Europe, the emergence of populism was intensified by two main factors: communism/collapse of communism and mainstream political parties. While the collapse of communism was a vehicle for the affirmation of political parties and for the expression of antipathy toward the political elite, giving rise to the first populist rhetoric, mainstream parties have created their own tools by which they were attacked by populist parties because of their transformation into catch-all parties.

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