

Editorial: Current Populism in Europe

DOI: 10.5817/PC2016-2-92

The present issue of the Czech Journal of Political Science consists of the papers that were presented at the First International Prague Populism Conference, organized in May 2015 by the Institute of International Studies at Charles University in Prague and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut Prag.

The intention of the conference was to analyse and examine the growth of contemporary European populism which represents one of the most topical problems that liberal democratic regimes are facing today. To understand the nature of populism, researchers from all around Europe discussed the various faces and causes of this phenomenon during the period from the outbreak of the economic crisis to the present (55 researchers from 20 countries presented their research and findings).

The recent electoral boom of populist political parties and the scholarly interest that soon followed has turned populism into one of the most developed topics of contemporary comparative political research. Hundreds of studies have been devoted to the conceptualization of populism; it has been seen as an ideology (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), a discourse (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 2004), a communication style (Canovan 1999; Jagers, Walgrave 2007) and/or an organizational or a political strategy (Weyland 2001). Despite the 'obligatory' introductory sentence related to the 'awkward conceptual slipperiness' (Taggart 2000) of populism, there has been growing agreement on the so-called analytical core of populism, including people-centrism, anti-elitism/anti-establishment appeal and calls for the restoration of popular sovereignty (Rooduijn 2014) with particular emphasis put on the moralist/Manichean essence of the divide between the pure people and the bad corrupt elite (Hawkins 2009). The theoretical discussion on the nature of populism was accompanied by a body of empirical studies dealing with different types of political actors including the populist radical right (Mudde 2007; Pirro 2015; Widfeldt 2014), populist socialist parties (March 2012), centrist populist parties (Pop-Eleches 2010; Učeň 2007) and studies comparing different types of populist actors in the region (Kriesi, Pappas 2015; Pauwels 2015). Despite the rapid growth of research interest in this area, there are still 'white spots' allowing for the continuation of the study of populism.

The special issue of the Czech Journal of Political Science seeks to contribute to the seemingly complex and complete study of populism in several ways. First, the excellent theoretical study *Populism: Ideology, political style, mentality?* by Marco Tarchi addresses the difficulties of defining the essence of populism and shows how the range of application of this concept has resulted in a long-lasting controversy in the academic field. Besides a

summary of the discussion, Tarchi raises the question of whether populism can really be considered a (thin) ideology (as it is in the prevalent approach to the study of populism) or if it needs to be reduced to a political style which can be attached to any ideological background. Referring to Juan J. Linz's notion of *mentality* distinguishing authoritarianism from totalitarianism, and on the basis of the empirical evidence, Tarchi suggests that populism has to be seen neither as an ideology nor as a political style, but as a mentality related to a vision of the social order that is based on a belief in the innate virtues of the people, whose primacy is claimed as the source of legitimacy for the government.

Second, the special issue includes several empirical studies that either provide readers with the cross-national comparison that has been somewhat lacking in the contemporary populism research dominated by case studies, or case studies which cover political actors/regions that were not previously investigated by specialists in the field.

Maria Grazia Martino and Konstantinos Papasthatis analyse the radical right and religious discourse in a comparative perspective, including cases of the Golden Dawn in Greece, the Northern League in Italy and the Sweden Democrats. Their research aims to understand why the 'people of the church' might constitute a potential electorate of the radical right parties, comparing actors with a common set of core ideological features but with distinctive electorates (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox). The study by Edma Ajanovic, Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer deals with right-wing populism and anti-Muslim racism in Austria. The main argument of the study is that the current right-wing social movements in Austria are building a right-wing populist hegemonic project relying on anti-Muslim racism, anti-immigration sentiment and xeno-racism. The authors also argue that recent right-wing populism is successful because it manages to 'diversify' spaces of action and to colonize all levels of social life with its idea of antagonistic politics. The next paper, written by Tanja Wolf, contributes to the very recent discussion about the nature of a newcomer on the German political stage – The Alternative for Germany. Applying Thieme's model distinguishing between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism, Wolf concludes that AfD is definitely neither right-wing extremist nor a conservative party but an example of a right-wing populist political party.

The last two papers analyse populism in the Balkans. Emilia Zankina offers a new theoretical approach to the empirical study of populism that allows for a better understanding of the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. Zankina argues that populism is a political strategy utilized by personalist parties to reduce the transaction costs of politics by increasing the use of informal political institutions, which have an association with 'direct' and 'immediate' action, and decreasing the use of formal political institutions seen as slow or ineffective. The Bulgarian case is used to illustrate and substantiate the theoretical proposition and to stipulate the effect of populist movements and parties on democracy. The paper by Ljupcho Petkovski and Dimitar Nikolovski deals with populism and progressive social movements in Macedonia. The authors investigate and compare the discursive strategies of Macedonian social movements from the 'anti-populist rhetorical trap' to appeals to 'the people' based on strong anti-establishment ethos managing to mobilize larger, heterogeneous groups of disaffected citizens. They also address the reasons why the social movements in the first period failed to succeed in mobilizing a substantial number of citizens while in the second period they surely did, given that the circumstances were similar.

All in all, we strongly believe that the present issue of the Czech Journal of Political Science contributes to the current research on populism in both theoretical and empirical ways by offering fresh and innovative insight into one of the most discussed topics of contemporary political research. The editors of the special issue of the Czech Journal of Political Science would like to thank both the organizers of the conference, the panellists and the authors of the articles for creating a very inspirational and fruitful discussion about the faces and the future of European populism.

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