Communicating Populism
in Post-communist Romania – A Literature Review[1]

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Abstract: *The literature review is part of the larger research project IS1308: Populist Political Communication in Europe, reviewing extant research within the participating countries that addresses each of the three key themes: Populist actors as communicators, the media and populism and Citizens and populism. This literature review aims at identifying the traits of the local populist discourse, the means and degrees of disseminating the discourse by the media, and its effects on the public opinion and ultimately on voting. Identifying populism traits starts from discourse analysis, but it cannot be entirely relevant without a thorough research on how populism is disseminated in the media and by what tools, as well as what are its effects on the public in terms of identity – the degree to which the public feels represented by the populist discourse and the ways and degrees to which it influence the voting decisions. For the purposes of this literature review, the authoritative literature in Romania has been identified by searching into the database of the Central University Library in Bucharest, the Central University Library in Cluj-Napoca and the Metropolitan Library in Cluj-Napoca.*

Keywords: *populism; populist; media bias; electoral discourse; political lie.*

Introduction

The local research on populism starts from the multiple definitions of the term proposed by international authors, such as "the growing tension between liberalism and democracy, [...] increasing demands for direct democracy, and the proliferation of charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing public anger" and "emotional, simplistic, and manipulative discourse directed at the "gut feelings", of the people or to opportunistic policies aimed at 'buying' the support of the people" (Krastev, 2007), "a rejection of the cartel-like power of entrenched political elites" (Jones, 2006), "an amalgam of anti-democratic, statist, xenophobic, ethnocentric trends, which oppose representative institutions, free initiative, competition, and a number of 'Western values' like diversity, tolerance, and freedom of expression" (Dimitrov, 2009). Most Romanian authors aim at identifying the local instances of the populist practices (political movements, discourses, symbols and mythologies), while a few of them find singular nuances and local exceptions.

One of the latter is Michael Shafir who introduces the notions of "neo-populism from above" versus "neo-populism from below". The author compares the political evolution of two apparently almost opposite politicians, president Traian Băsescu and the leader of the marginal and the more extremist party PNG-CD (The New Generation Party Christian-Democrat), businessman Gigi Becali. Gigi Becali increased his political influence through donations, by employing a Christian orthodox and antisemitic discourse, by making use of traditional symbols - alluding in his electoral speech to a „shepherd of the crowds", with reference to the Bible and to how he made his fortune as a shepherd, and self-proclaiming „Warrior of Light". Traian Băsescu started his political career in Ion Iliescu's National Salvation Front in the nineties and shifted to a center-right positioning with his political party, the Democrat Party later renamed the Liberal Democrat Party. Both parties manifested catchall tactics, both leaders have a communist past, and they both use an informal register to increase their popularity. Among others, the author shows, a major difference between the two resides in the populism they practice; Băsescu is the incumbent President, while Becali is the extremist populist trying to gain popularity and to obtain more votes. With Băsescu, Michael Shafir notes a premiere in the Romanian populism, the Romanian president managing to gather around him at the peak of his popularity the intellectual elites of the country, that helped him strengthen the appeal of "the charismatic and strong leader" among the voting population, one of the main anti-liberalism traits of populism (Shafir, 2008).

Local traits of populism discourse

Author Mihail Chiru pens his chapter[2] on populism under a title alluding to a popular Romanian comedy directed in 2002, Filantropica. The film depicts a beggar-infested urban Romania of racketeering and get-rich-quick schemes. His thesis supports the model of "the new centrist populism", represented by non-radical parties, capable of mobilizing large segments of voters through an anti-establishment discourse and to dominate government coalitions. He analyses the "anti-state" and pro-market populism of the political platform of the Justice and Truth Alliance: demonizing the establishment, the promise of depoliticized management, an attitude of keeping distance from polity, a discourse based on morals – the promise of a moral revolution – justice by anti-corruption, and painting the enemy as the only and final obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve national fruition. The author deems the Alliance's nationalistic and aggressively patriotic theme the "master-frame fit for any political color, from red to brown". He ultimately argues that the populist parties have become mainstream in Romania, causing the extremist populists parties and leaders to become futile and loose most of their voters.

In the same volume, author Sorina Soare makes an inventory of the populist parties analyzing the distinctive breed of populism displayed by each of them. According to her, the Romanian populist array includes paternalistic populism, specific to the National Salvation Front; an anarchistic populism displayed by the Miner Movements in the early nineties, when the miners were summoned to Bucharest by Iliescu to Bucharest in the name of the newly found democracy , to re-establish order and protect it, and they made use of force against the government opponents; a radical populism specific to the Romania Mare party and its leader Vadim Tudor; a regionalist sporadic populism of the minor nationalistic party PUNR; and the messianic populism of Gigi Becali's party PNG. The author concludes that the Romanian genus has experienced numerous and transitory species thriving on the fertile ground of post-communism, all based on the common political style of enthralling by emotion to the detriment of reason.[3]

Author George Jiglau notes in the same volume, that all the discourse of all parties of the post-communist Romania mirrored almost every time their leaders'

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2 Mihai Chiru, "Only the Begging Hand that Tells a Story Receives... the Vote. An Analysis of Electoral Populist Discourse in Romania. 2004 – 2008", in Gherghina, Sergiu/ Miscoiu, Sergiu/ Soare, Sorina (ed.), *Populismul contemporan: un concept controversat şi formele sale diverse*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2012

3 Sorina Soare, "The Genus and Species of Romanian Populism. An Incursion into the Realm of Eternal Youth and Immortality", in Gherghina, Sergiu/ Miscoiu, Sergiu/ Soare, Sorina (ed.), *Populismul contemporan: un concept controversat şi formele sale diverse*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2012.

discourse. He evaluates the degree of populism in Romanian parties based on two main criteria: the party in question must try to mobilize the support of as large a number of voters as possible and to oppose the status quo. One of the conclusions of his chapter is that of all the parties that have displayed populist trends, the most catchall party is Traian Băsescu's Democrat Party, renamed the Liberal Democrat party after 2007.[4]

Populism in Media: the audiovisual authority – a tool for populists

Author Florina Crețu (2012) analyzes the significantly different manners of various TV channels of broadcasting the same event: the final presidential debate between Traian Basescu and PSD candidate Mircea Geoana. She presents the different visual perspective of the two channels: "Antena 3 and Realitatea TV have had different cameras in the debate setting, generating distinct interpretations of the political event that was happening. Thus, instead of a single debate, the public saw two actually, each of them indicating a different visual perspective over the candidates." The author argues that the difference resided in a visual bias, generated by the use of certain visual regimes: dog-eyed shots and long shots in the case of Mircea Geoană, and extreme close-ups for Traian Băsescu and his supporters, coupled with various non-synchronizations in his case. These tactics were meant to create a positive image for Geoană and a negative one for Băsescu. In terms of media populist discourse, the same author presents the controversies around the TV channels favoring one or the other of the candidates. She cites, on one hand, the ActiveWatch report showing that B1 TV was favoring the views and image of president Traian Băsescu. And presents, on the other hand, the controversy around two of the channels favoring the PSD candidate Mircea Geoană, Antena 1 and Antena 3, that created and broadcast a clip titled "Be careful how you choose your masters", featuring the image of the Romanian electorate as a mass of faceless robots, marching to the Palace of Parliament to elect the president. Among the flag of the communist Romania and photos of previous presidents with a negative image in the Romanian society such as Nicolae Ceausescu, Ion Iliescu and Emil Constantinescu, the clip included the image of Traian Băsescu. The author notes that in 2012, Antena 3 and OTV, Dan Diaconescu's private TV channel (another controversial albeit minor populist) were fined by the National Council of the Audiovisual for promoting political candidates before the local elections. She concludes that, while the 2009 voting decisions seemed not to have been significantly influenced by the bias, the result of the research

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4 George Jiglau, "Do We Know What We Are Talking About? A Theoretical Perspective on Populism", in Gherghina, Sergiu/ Miscoiu, Sergiu/ Soare, Sorina (ed.), *Populismul contemporan: un concept controversat şi formele sale diverse*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2012.

raise some deontological issues regarding the performance of Antena 3 and the overall Romanian mediated sphere.

Another perspective on the use of the National Council of the Audiovisual by populist politicians comes from author Dragoș Dragoman. He argues that the consolidation of the populism in the region has been noted by the Freedom House Nations in Transit report in the years after Romania joined EU, showing a decrease of the quality of democracy in Romania. According to his conclusions, the authority regulating the audiovisual has become a main instrument used to intimidate and punish the press hostile to the party in power and to the incumbent president. He maintains that Romania has the most altered election practices in the region and that the precarious state of the press has been recognized even by the opinion leaders close to the president.[5]

An analysis on the microblogging in political communication on three coordinates: community, communication and conversation asks how major a factor of change in electoral campaigns, such as the one in 2009, is the online presence in 140 characters. The authors argue that the 2009 election campaign was all the more significant to research giving the fact that it took place after Romania joined the EU and after a 5-year presidential term, without coinciding with elections for Parliament, and within the context of a mature social media, both on dedicated sites and or blogs/microblogs. Half of the presidential candidates had microblogging accounts during the electoral campaign. The study indicates that the microblogging's role was limited in that campaign, most probably its immediate role being strictly to mobilize people to go out and cast their vote. (Holotescu, Guțu, Grosseck and Bran, 2011).

The populist appeal among citizens

Author Dragoș Dragoman dedicates his chapter mentioned above on measuring the populism appeal in the public opinion. He notes from the start that research dedicated to populism and public opinion in Romania are scarce and only tangential to the topic, investigating other attachments and values of the public such as social intolerance, religiousness, nationalism and political extremism. He bases his research on a survey conducted in September 2003 by Gallup Organization Romania, at the request of the Institute for Public Policy. Although the purpose of the survey was not to measure populism, the author considers that the items in the questionnaire can be used in that direction. He considers anti-corruption and anti-elitist discourse, and attacking the political parties as

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5 Dragoș Dragoman, "Populism, Authoritarianism and Democratic Values in the Public Opinion in Romania", in *Populist Parties and Personalities in Post-Communist Romania*.

legitimate representatives of the citizens, as the very core of populism that can be expressed through a list of public themes approached by the IPP research. A set of items was aimed at measuring the frustration of the Romanian citizens with regard to the arrogance and corruption of the wealthy elites. The author notes that all the items became populist themes of the election campaign in 2004. Another set of items in the questionnaire was aimed at measuring the nationalism, intolerance and extremism of the Romanian citizens. The author correlates them with the populist trait of redefining the people and its role in a democracy, as well as with the conservative manner of redefining the nation, in which the Romanian living abroad are excluded. He considers the most worrying findings of the survey to be the attitude against the ethnic minorities, especially Roma and the presence of a stereotype image of the Jewish population. Evaluating another set of items on issues such as the gay minority, abortion, the attitude towards drug addicted persons, capital punishment and military service, the author notes that conservatism is a relatively spread social phenomenon in Romania. He concludes that some of the basic social ingredients in the country are populism, conservatism and nationalism, both moderate and extremist, and that their combination paired with the emergence of charismatic leaders may trigger a latent element in the Romanian society, the consolidation of authoritarianism. Analyzing another set of items in the survey, with regard to subordination and obedience to the authority of the family and of the state, he identifies two latent dimensions of the phenomenon: a family authoritarianism and a state authoritarianism, reinforced by the image of strong leader. He emphasizes the importance of this last variable, which expresses, alongside a military regime and a dominant singular party, an alternative to the democratic regime. In the general conclusions of his chapter, he appreciates that, while Romania's case is not singular in the broader picture of the region, the degradation of the quality and standards of Romanian democracy raises serious questions. In terms of transparency of the electoral process, the civil society, the freedom of press and justice, and the standards of governing, he places Romania closer to Serbia, Albania and Macedonia and further from the Visegrad group and the Baltic countries. He considers that the attack of the populists in power to the liberal democratic institutions has stronger effects and is potentially more dangerous than in Western Europe. He argues that the danger becomes apparent when the two forces that can protect the democracy in Romania are considered – the public opinion and the opposition of intellectual elites. While the former relatively favors populism, the latter doesn't show any signs of seeing populism as an opponent or of being willing to fight against it. (Dragoman, 2010)

Conclusion

The specific traits of Romanian populism are a large variety of species and there has been a continuous flow of populist figures rising to various degrees of power in the past 25 years of post-communist transition. Populism in Romanian has evolved from a more extremist and violent forms in the nineties to a centrist, moderate and mainstream populism in the recent years. The three elected presidents after the fall of Ceausescu's regime, Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu and Traian Băsescu are all considered populists. Traian Băsescu, the incumbent president of Romania makes the most debated case of populist leader, while his party and its alliances are also subject to several studies on Romanian populism.

Most of the Romanian authoritative literature after 1995 focuses around the three presidents elected after the fall of the Ceausescu regime, Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu and Traian Băsescu, and around their parties, pointing out populism traits in all three. The largest part of the Romanian literature focuses on populist discourse, symbols and myths, and there is less systematic knowledge about how populism affects the media and the public opinion. The quantitative and qualitative research measuring the impact of the populist actors on the society is scarce. There is no authoritative knowledge on any critical view of citizens' reaction to populist practices in Romania.

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