

# Chapter 1: Introduction: Populism and ‘Periphery’

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## *1. Introduction*

How has populism influenced political developments in European countries further east and southeast, such as Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia? To what extent do populist patterns in a region which many consider to be on the European ‘periphery’ resemble populist patterns in the political and economic core countries of Europe? These were the guiding questions for the authors of this volume, who have taken on this research and shared their perspectives. This book contributes to the growing literature on populism, as it addresses the political systems that have often received only marginal attention from the international public and within the scholarly community. It intends to add to the existing literature in two important ways. First, it discusses country examples with an eye toward the role of populism in both Western and Central Europe, two regions that have received the most scholarly attention to date. Second, the various country studies are presented from an analytical and theoretical perspective that reflects the viewpoint of the country specialist(s). However, it also explains where there are similarities and differences regarding the theoretical approaches used to analyze populism and its impact throughout Western Europe.

## *2. Why focus on the ‘periphery’?*

The interest of political science in the rise of populism in Western democracies and, more recently, in Eastern and Central Europe, was accompanied by the relative neglect of similar developments elsewhere. The extent to which other areas have come into focus, theoretical explanations and frameworks that worked well in established democracies raise questions about their applicability in different political and historical contexts. The Western Balkans was one such area that, despite its geographic proximity to

Central Europe, fits neither the Western nor the Central European political mold. In fact, it was poorly understood outside the community of regional specialists and had long been considered a hotbed of nationalism. The region has been associated with the ethnic and religious conflict ranging from the Balkan Wars of the early 20th Century to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Ethnic tensions, a lack of economic opportunities, cultural traditionalism, and public corruption were considered endemic features (Jenne and Bieber 2014; Bieber 2018; Pržulj and Kostadinović 2014) and therefore not seen in the context of the rise of radical populism in other parts of Europe.

Another area of Europe that has largely escaped the attention of populism research is the Caucasus region. It has also been marked by considerable instability since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like the Balkan countries (see Linden 2008; Pajnik et al. 2016; Krasteva 2016), the Caucasus region aspires to varying degrees to join the European Union and to be closely linked to Western Europe. However, the greater geographic distance to Western European power centers and the latter's all-important relationship with Russia have further overshadowed how this region is perceived. Moreover, the integration of much of Central Europe into the European Union (EU) in 2005 and 2007, respectively, has resulted in new political and sociocultural divisions in the EU, raising apprehension about absorbing new members. As a result, the appetite for expanding the EU into areas that are politically and culturally even less well understood by most Europeans has diminished. The former EU Commissioner Olli Rehn once remarked about the EU's Eastern and Southeastern neighborhood that it was Brussels' policy goal to make the region such as the Western Balkans as boring as Western or Northern Europe (EN Info 200). This comment sums up the perception of these lesser-known parts of Europe in the sense that they require pacification of sorts and a transformation.

The Balkans and the Caucasus form a kind of 'periphery' in the minds of many Europeans, as they seem to demarcate an area of transition to the world beyond Europe. These notions are, of course, constructions that reflect the reality that the centers of political and economic power in the present day are located in Western and Northern Europe, so that developments away from there receive less public and scholarly attention. Indeed, this 'periphery of Europe' is routinely viewed as troublesome but culturally and politically inscrutable, economically backward, and the site of "ancient hatreds" (Majstorovic 1996; Schwartz 1999). Since former Yugoslavia was neither part of the West nor the Soviet bloc, with relatively open borders

and a limited private sector, it remained an enigma to some, because it did not fit into the binary understanding of the world during the Cold War and immediately thereafter. In contrast, Georgia and Armenia are best known for their important but separate Christian traditions. They are also distinct from other countries covered in this book because of the former's long inclusion in the Soviet empire and thus their political systems are even less well-known outside the region.

Some have therefore accused the EU of approaching its Southern and Eastern neighbors with normative imperialism (Pänke 2015). In many ways, this has also been Moscow's justification for its own expansionism, which it frames as a necessary step to push back against a Western (European) encroachment. Whether through the pursuit of strategic interest or a sort of administrative stumbling forward, moving Western Europe closer to Europe's frontier in the East and Southeast is seen as inviting trouble by important voices in the West (Mearsheimer 2014), who feel vindicated after Russia's war of aggression against the Ukraine. Others may draw precisely the opposite conclusions, stressing the necessity to integrate these countries as soon as possible into a common European framework.

### *3. The challenges of the concept of populism*

It has not been easy to situate the EU's eastern and southern neighbors within the literature on populism. For one, populism in the region has not been treated as a particularly pressing problem that required special attention. Instead, the politics in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were defined by these countries' relationship with the EU, with special attention placed on their shaky political institutions, the rise of ethno-politics, and the role of oligarchs. Armenian and Georgian politics have also made headlines in the West in the context of national political instability and conflictual relations with Russia and, in Armenia's case, also with its neighbor to the East. Instead of populism, the political challenges across Central and Eastern Europe appear to come either from radical right populism (Minkenberg 2002, 2017) or, more generally, creeping authoritarianism (Bieber 2018). In fact, populism as a threat to democracy seems so deeply entrenched that it hardly appears to merit separate attention (but see Stanley 2017). In any case, the mainstream literature on populism has devoted its focus mainly on those former Communist countries that have since joined the EU, particularly the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, and to

a lesser extent, Bulgaria and Romania (for an overview, see Gherghina et al. 2021).

Research on populism has been characterized by a variety of approaches, which makes the uniform application of such conceptualizations to emerging political systems difficult. To this day, there is sometimes passionate disagreement about whether populism is a style, a mode of expression, a political strategy, a discourse, an ideology, a zeitgeist, a political logic, or the like (Roberts 2006; Stanley 2008; Barr 2009; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). As a result, controversies about which criteria should be used to identify and classify populism persist. To some extent, these disagreements are rooted in different political experiences with the phenomenon of populism. For example, whereas populism is a relatively recent phenomenon in European democracies, it has a longer tradition in Latin America. The influential theorist and Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1977; 2005) noticed the connection between populism in Latin America and modernization pressures, as various political systems had failed to channel this pressure into a stable democratic institutional development. In its absence, charismatic personalities shaped the political discourse to create a popular hegemonic bloc through which populist leaders could mobilize and achieve their political ends.

In Europe, the most influential approach in empirical research to date was pioneered by the Dutch scholar Cas Mudde (2004). In the article “The Populist Zeitgeist,” he conceives of populism as “an ideology that ultimately divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite,’ and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté énérale* (general will) of the people.” This conceptualization is at the heart of the so-called ideational approach to populism (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). It views populism as a ‘thin’ ideology or set of ideas that can be activated in people and combined with ‘thick’ ideologies to form radical right and radical left populism (Heinisch et al. 2021).

Other scholars have developed different approaches to defining populism, such as Aslanidis (2016)—populism as a discursive claim—, Moffitt (2016)—populism as political style, performance, and representation—, and Pappas (2019)—populism as illiberal democracy. Some scholars view the ideational model as ‘too reductionist,’ especially when grappling with political conditions outside Western Europe that do not allow for the clear demarcation between populist and non-populist (Aslanidis 2016; De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019).

The underlying concern about the application of a conception that has worked well in Western Europe has to do with the peculiarity of how populism initially manifested itself in Western Europe. It first appeared in the form of *Poujadism*, a powerful mixture of anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-parliamentarism (Heinisch et al. 2021). It combined the anti-dirigist tax revolt with a sociocultural agenda in which state bureaucrats and ethnic minorities were 'the villains' and small shopkeepers 'the heroes.' Tax protests and anti-partisan and anti-corruption sentiments were characteristic of the early populist parties also in Austria, France, Italy, and Denmark, where the perception of established parties holding a monopoly on power has had a long history. In these countries, the involvement of the established parties in high profile cases of political corruption ultimately laid the groundwork for political outsiders and new alliances to take on the political establishment. In other cases, populist parties emerged in the context of secessionist protests against 'corrupt' or 'unresponsive' national governments, such as the Flemish Bloc (VB) in Belgium and the Northern League (LN) in Italy. The perception of the erosion of national sovereignty through accession to the European Union is another factor in the rise of populist protests, as exemplified by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), which championed the anti-European cause early on. As populist parties mutated from bourgeois protest parties to parties representing voters who felt threatened by modernization and internationalization, especially lower-educated men in traditional and nonprofessional occupations, populists adapted their agenda accordingly. Identity politics, anti-immigration positions, Euroscepticism, criticism of globalization and free trade, as well as topics like law and order became permanent fixtures in the programs of almost all populist parties across the continent (Van Spanje 2010; but: Rooduijn et al. 2014).

Populism in Western and Northern Europe thus formed in the context of ultra-stable political systems whose very entrenchment fueled the radical opposition. Thus, there was a clear division between the political mainstream and typically one outside challenger. This is not the case in Eastern and Southeastern European countries, whose political systems underwent several transitions and where institutions remained unconsolidated and politics remained much more in flux (Kitschelt 1992; Schöpflin 1993; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Evans 2006; Enyedi and Bétoa 2018). What Minkenberg (2015: 34) dubbed the 'under-institutionalization' of the party system is reflected in voter fluctuation and frequent splits and reconstitutions. This makes parties "disconcertingly fluid" and contributes to the "porous boundaries

between the radical right and the mainstream right” (Minkenberg 2015: 34).

#### *4. Populism as a symptom of a crisis of legitimacy*

Populism in Western Europe appeared as a symptom of a crisis of legitimacy and a failure of representation on the part of established political institutions and mechanisms. Later on, socio-cultural issues such as immigration and cultural identity became more salient, fueling the rise of the radical right. Both issues, political legitimacy and cultural identity, are also important factors explaining the surge of populism in Eastern Europe. Thus, the populist radical right across Europe mobilizes its supporters on the basis of the alleged illegitimacy of those in power and their complicity in undermining the sovereignty and status of the native population, which is threatened by elites and dangerous outsiders. These cultural ‘others’ include, for example, immigrants and ethnic minorities or the European elites, who are blamed as scapegoats and villains of economic modernization and political integration for the problems of the native populations in the EU accession countries. Since the economically weaker countries on the periphery of Europe are particularly dependent on the EU and the political goodwill and economic support of Western Europe, it is propagandistically easy for populist actors to portray political reform requirements for accession candidates as an attempt to ‘impose’ a foreign agenda on traditional population.

A closely related factor that sets post-communist transition countries apart from those in Western Europe is party system development. In an effort to emulate the archetypes of the West European political model, the political parties throughout post-communist Europe initially followed the traditional pattern of socioeconomic cleavages by establishing parties of the center right and center left. While this development made sense in Western Europe in the industrial age, when the conflict between labor and capital was the defining experience, it was far less relevant in conditions where almost everyone agreed on the need to integrate the emerging economies into the European market. Because the creation of a market economy and closer economic integration with Europe were almost universally accepted and resources were scarce, there were few economic policy differences over which the parties could credibly compete.

In those CEE countries that first acceded to the EU, the major right-wing parties had to decide whether to compete with a socioeconomic agenda by pushing for more market liberalism, or rather focus on sociocultural issues by claiming to defend sovereignty, national interests, and the established order (Buřtiková and Kitschelt 2009; Minkenberg 2015; Pirro 2015). While left-wing parties became eastern versions of liberal social democracies, the mainstream right often moved much further to the right, so as to distinguish itself from centrist and center-left positions (Harmsen and Spiering 2004: 28; Riishøj 2004; Minkenberg 2017). Thus, in CEE, we encounter a political context shaped by transition and post-transition from Communism, fluid social structures, and the weakness of civil society (Evans 2006: 258).

It stands to reason that we expect similar political processes to take place in the countries studied in this volume. Although they are not members of the EU, they all aspire to acquire membership or are shaped by their economic and political relations with the EU. As in other parts of Eastern Europe, socioeconomic contestation is largely off the table. A focus on sociocultural issues therefore seems more promising to right-wing parties. Where linguistic and ethnic differences were not sufficient, such as in the former Yugoslavia, religion and cultural traditions became instrumentalized for radical mobilization.

The CEE countries that are now member states, which include the Visegrad countries, the Baltic states, as well as Croatia and Slovenia, have struggled to some degree to combat corruption, develop stable and well-functioning political institutions, and contain authoritarian impulses, despite receiving significant political and economic support from Brussels. We can only imagine the challenges faced by political systems in which there are fewer resources and thus opportunities to develop stable and lasting institutions. In such a situation, political personalities can play a paramount role. They act as 'change agents,' individuals who make a credible promise to the electorate to bring about significant change (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2021). These personalities may come from outside politics, such as from the world of business or entertainment and are uniquely able to convert their economic or communications capital into political capital.

Studies of populism have shown that public corruption, political fragmentation, a weak party system, and the excessive personalization of politics have contributed to the rise of populism (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). In addition, we also know that insufficient consolidation of democratic and legal institutions are risk factors for democracy. Therefore, the combination

of these two developments is an important factor in shaping the state of democracy in the countries discussed in this book.

Of course, all of the above developments can be observed in one form or another in Western democracies as well, but they are more prominent in transitional and post-transitional societies because of the conditions prevailing there. We notice, however, that political trends in Western political systems are moving in the direction of politics that we know from Eastern and Southern Europe, in the sense that party systems are becoming more fragmented and more polarized with respect to sociocultural issues. Therefore, understanding the ‘periphery’ can also be a means to understand recent developments in established democracies (Lane and Ersson 2007; Enyedi and Bétoa 2018).

## *5. Introducing the book’s authors and chapters*

In Chapter 2, Daniel Smilov and Ruzha Smilova provide a conceptual link between analyzing populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The chapter presents populism as a form of democratic illiberalism, which combines a commitment to procedural democracy with a critique of some substantive liberal values such as pluralism, separation of powers, constitutional limitations, and minority rights. Populists advocate the direct and efficient transmission of the undistorted, genuine will of the people to the public arena. By claiming that the political establishment does not represent the ‘true’ interests of ‘the people,’ the populists are able to position themselves as an anti-corruption party that breaks with politics as usual. The populist logic entails that politics is inherently corrupt and hijacked by private interests on behalf of a few.

Citizens of CEE countries are accustomed to this anti-establishment discourse, in part because the transition to liberal democracy was generally elite-driven and fraught with painful experiences. During this period, populist parties have not only gained prominence in virtually all post-communist countries but have become governing parties in many of them. This development links those post-transition countries in the EU with those stuck in the perpetual waiting process for accession. In that chapter, the authors also argue that a conceptual distinction between radical and centrist populists is useful for analyzing both the supply and demand sides of populism. They argue that the latter type of populism should not be con-

sidered a radical challenge to liberal democracy, but rather as reflecting the post-ideological views of large segments in society in a catch-all manner.

Chapter 3 by Ashot and Nane Aleksanyan connects directly to the previous segment by discussing the success of populism throughout the European peripheries of the post-Soviet states in the context of the EU's Eastern Partnership. The chapter argues that differences in stability and effectiveness of the regional order impact how populism manifests itself in these countries. The EU's Eastern partnership creates a cleavage, especially concerning the relations of other post-Soviet countries vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. As a result, new populist forces emerge, claiming to represent the people's views on this matter. While domestic factors and political culture shape populism, that chapter argues that the populist agendas in post-Soviet societies are also influenced by those countries' respective geopolitical positions and relations with the EU and Russia. What makes this analysis different from other explanations of populism is the focus on external causes in the form of political constraints created by great power relations between rival blocks.

In Chapter 4, Simon Clarke argues that the political environment of post-Soviet countries, particularly Armenia, is compatible with, and conducive to populism. In particular, the chapter takes issue with arguments that the former Soviet states, with their authoritarian and patrimonial structures, are anti-populist and shows that the opposite is true. In fact, personalistic leadership styles, clientelism, and patronage have proven to be conducive to populist politics, by neglecting the role of ideology and political position-taking. The lack of clear ideological positions among political parties makes them more likely to adopt populist positions. The analysis assigns two prominent political leaders in Armenia to coordinates on a left-right axis and democratic-authoritarian axis to illustrate that they exhibit authoritarian tendencies despite making claims to the contrary. Finally, the chapter also explores the question of whether left-wing populism has a similar or different impact on democracy than right-wing populism, as studies of other political systems suggest.

Chapter 5 by Ruben Elamiryan analyzes the development of populism in the process of the democratic transition in Armenia. While populism can be found on both sides of the ideological spectrum, or moving between left-wing and right-wing ideology, the case of Armenia illustrates the lack of clear ideological fault lines in post-communist societies and exemplifies populism without a defined ideology. The analysis includes three of the most prominent parties in Armenia that were quick to garner public sup-

port but have witnessed a significant decline in recent years. Importantly, they all emphasize the central position of the populist leader within the party. Although they have successfully capitalized on economic issues or soft nationalism, their agendas have failed to indicate their ideological positions. The chapter argues that the personalization of politics and the lack of clear ideological stances have contributed to the short-term effect of populism as a mobilization strategy in Armenia. Populism appears as a feature of political parties in government, not for the purpose of gaining power through mobilization, but rather to keep it through other means for which populism is best equipped.

Chapter 6 by David Matsaberidze analyzes populism in Georgia using a discursive-historical approach. The chapter compares populist discourses expressed in the rhetoric of presidents and prime ministers. It analyzes the nationalist or populist appeals in which these political leaders appropriate the concepts of 'the people' and 'the nation.' Post-Soviet Georgian political discourse is thus a mixture of rhetorical populism and ideological nationalism. All of these narratives place the Georgian nation and the Georgian citizen at the center of the discourse and use populism and nationalism as central axes for legitimizing their political projects and the politicians that pursue them. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of populist rhetoric that shows how the discourse is divided into master and sub-frame structures and how expectations are raised but remain unfulfilled. It also explores the discrepancy between promises and the failure to meet expectations, which has led to the downfall of various incumbent presidents—a feature that has characterized Georgian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Chapter 7 by Avdi Smajljaj analyzes the trajectory of the populist political party Lëvizja Vetëvendosje or Self-determination Movement which saw its primary mission as being a radical opposition to the political establishment before becoming itself part of the government in Kosovo. The account focuses on this development, which risks strengthening authoritarian practices and limiting political competition as this formerly populist opposition party suddenly finds itself grappling with governmental power. The chapter provides an overview of the historical context in Kosovo and the causes for the success of Vetëvendosje while discussing its shifts in populist rhetoric and practices upon switching its role from opposition to government. The text expands more generally on the dilemma of populists in power, such as the struggle to keep the sweeping promises they made while in opposition and their limited capacities while in government. We

see how the recourse to the familiar practices of their opponents, such as the pursuit of their own form of clientelism, eventually becomes their mechanism for legitimizing power, which in turn has further negative effects on democracy.

Chapter 8 by Nemanja Stankov is devoted to Montenegro and analyzes the conditions that would seemingly allow for populist parties to emerge. He concludes, however, that none of the parties in Montenegro can be considered populist according to the definition of populism as a 'thin ideology,' but that several can be classified as selectively populist. His analysis shows that opposition parties are unable to clearly distinguish themselves as anti-establishment. We see that the dominant establishment party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), has successfully monopolized the issue of Montenegrin independence from Serbia and Montenegro, by turning an anti-establishment message into an attack on the state and national independence. This chapter also examines the populist attitudes of the electorate by providing an analysis of individual-level data.

Chapter 9 by Klaudia Koxha and Reinhard Heinisch examines populism in the political mainstream in Albania. As a case study, Albania is useful for understanding populism in a context that is somewhat different from the rest of the region in terms of political stability, fragmentation, and nationalism. The chapter shows that Albania, like other countries in the Balkans, has in recent years established a regime of competitive authoritarianism that combines authoritarian leadership with populism and legitimization through an upcoming EU membership. First, this chapter discusses the literature on populism in transition societies in the Albanian context and examines what facilitates populism as a feature in mainstream political discourse. After examining the broader political landscape and the 2019 local elections, this chapter highlights European Union integration as an important component in the populist rhetoric of Albania's main established political parties. It also shows the close association of populism with an authoritarian leadership style.

Chapter 10 by Despot Kovačević and Slaviša Orlović provides an analysis of the main political actors in Serbia, the political parties and their leaders in connection with populism. Focusing on the causes of the surge of party-based populism in Serbia, their main argument is that changes in the party system have turned political parties into direct enablers of this development. The chapter proceeds from historical and contextual analysis, beginning with the breakup of Yugoslavia. The general framework explaining the surge of populism is centered on the conditions created by

a polarized society, the existence of a strong political leader and party, and a state of permanent crisis. Their analysis focuses on the parties that exhibit the highest levels of populism and highlights the consequences of this development. These include the decline of democratic values, threats to media freedom, and a crisis of parliamentary politics.

Chapter 11 by Aneta Cekikj on North Macedonia shows how the dominant national political figure, Nikola Gruevski, leader of a mainstream conservative political party, relied largely on populist strategies to remain in power. The author shows how Gruevski successfully exploited the precarious conditions of a protracted national transition—from political uncertainty about the country's future in Europe to internal ethnic and political divisions—to his own advantage. The chapter presents different conceptualizations of populism and shows how they apply to the North Macedonian case. It analyzes the discursive construction of 'the leader' and 'the people,' the identification of enemy groups, such as 'the elites' and professional classes, all of which contrast starkly with earlier efforts to project a more progressive, pro-European, reform-oriented image. As in other countries in the region, populist actors have politically profited from creating and maintaining a sense of crisis in order to present themselves as 'defenders' of 'the common people.'

Chapter 12 by Maja Savić-Bojanić emphasizes the leader-centered nature of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the personalization of politics, and the establishment of a partocracy. Populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily informed by ethnonationalism and the country's religious division. Populists reinforce the construction of the people along these lines while keeping a certain distance. They do not necessarily rely on the personification of the people they claim to represent, but rather construct a higher authority derived from their family heritage, such as fame and inherited charisma, which is desirable as such and provides a political norm for what or who a leader should be. The revolt against the past and 'the Others' presents itself in the form of anti-establishment discourse but remains embedded in an emotional and robust yet simple language that overemphasizes heroism, historical myths, and symbols within a single ethnic group in a divided society.

This book offers a variety of perspectives on populism and makes clear that the conceptualizations prevalent in Western academic discussions may not apply or may not fully apply to conditions in post-transition Europe, particularly in the regions furthest from the European Union. In most of these countries, populism combines ideology, discourse, and political

practice. In this sense, it is linked to measurable political realities in terms of conditions of opportunity, choice of strategy, and choice of policy, but it is also often purely rhetorical, resorting to empty signifiers. In all cases, populism constructs notions of friend and foe, of people who are threatened or in crisis, and who need to be saved. The dominant ideological component is nationalism, which demarcates 'the people' along ethnic and cultural lines from the internal 'other' and the external 'enemy.' The internal 'other' may be another ethnic group or a perceived political enemy that threatens the larger national project such as liberal NGOs. The external 'enemy' may be the European elites, an expansionist Russia, a neighboring state, foreign NGOs or George Soros.

Clearly, the discussion of populism continues to resonate in both the social sciences and in public debate. Populism research must remain open to the perceptions and experiences of people and scholarly communities that are typically less able to shape these international debates. Despite local differences in the way the phenomenon manifests itself, populism everywhere has many familiar features that remain constant across national and political boundaries. It is primarily a reaction to political change that undermines the legitimacy of existing institutions and established rules while opening opportunities for political entrepreneurs. Typically, populists use their available resources to appeal directly to citizens. In many cases, populists are wealthy individuals who have benefited from economic change, or they have had privileged access to the media, or they have in some way emerged as figures in the chaotic political upheavals that followed the fall of Communism and the period thereafter. In their appeals, they often follow a narrative that constructs a people in need of salvation or defense from 'others,' or from the perceived enemies of the 'sacred' community. Populists either promise radical changes in a supposedly intolerable situation or present themselves as the only possible defenders of 'the people' against nefarious forces.

Typically, the world of populists is black and white, and their style is full of hyperbole and emotional language. Their political and communicative modus operandi is responsive but less responsible. They often try to evoke a permanent state of crisis in which they present themselves as the only saviors. However—and this is the difference to other political radicals or pure nationalists—populists can often change their tune, appear more moderate, and claim to do everything to secure their country's future in the West or in an integrated Europe. Populists are able to adapt flexibly and do not

seem to cling to ideological dogma when it suits their political agenda and ensures their hold on power.

Political ideologies or political agendas are often temporary affairs that can be sacrificed when convenient. While in many cases, populists are not the champions of authoritarianism, they are perceived to be, their policies and influence have nevertheless negatively impacted fledgling democracies and prevented them from consolidating and thereby undermined the rule of law. In all of these countries, populism has found extremely favorable conditions in the form of high levels of political distrust combined with weak institutions and enormous economic disparities. Under these conditions, it was easy for populists to find their villains and scapegoats.

The decades following communist oppression and economic inefficiency, when many ordinary people felt the sting of economic insecurity as they watched others achieve phenomenal wealth or saw the enormous influx of foreign capital and culture pouring into previously more insular societies, must have left many citizens confused and frustrated. Nevertheless, the ever-adapting populists managed to make credible promises and secure the support of significant segments of the population, who in the end were always disappointed. Then, either the people had to be convinced of the culpability of ‘the enemy’ in why the populist government’s promises had failed to materialize, or other populists emerged who reformulated the nationalist narrative and appealed to a different form of salvation. Nevertheless, all forms of populism claim to defend or restore sovereignty in the name of ‘the people.’ In this way, populism in the ‘European periphery’ fits easily into the broader literature on populism in general. We now invite our readers to delve headlong into these *Perspectives on Populism* and experience the *Diverse Voices from the European ‘Periphery.’*

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