

Reinhard Heinisch | Aneta Cekikj | Klaudia Koxha [Eds.]

# Perspectives on Populism

Diverse Voices from the European “Periphery”



Nomos

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## Preface

### *1. Perspectives on Populism – Diverse Voices from the European ‘Periphery’*

Populism has been described as the most important new political phenomenon of our time. Its impact on Europe, the Americas and beyond, has been profound. Enormous attention has been directed toward the rise of populism in countries like France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and the United States. More recently, however, Central European member states of the European Union (EU) such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic have also come into focus, as their populist trajectories have presented serious repercussions for European integration. Despite the significant rise of populism across Europe, political systems further to the East and Southeast have largely escaped public and scholarly attention from outside the region itself. Therefore, the areas which many consider to be on the ‘periphery’ are generally less well understood. Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia all have aspirations to join the EU and forge closer ties with the rest of Europe. Their economies remain intertwined with Western Europe and the European Single Market as a whole. As Europe is embroiled in a new conflict, countries that either have a clear perspective on EU membership but find themselves on hold seemingly forever, or that are politically divided over their ‘European’ future, are particularly affected and internally polarized. Populism thrives under such conditions by creating or exacerbating divisions between ‘them’ and ‘us’ in order to assert or consolidate its power: Understanding these mechanisms is one of the main goals of this book.

First, we need to say a few words about the geographic terminology that we use in this book. It is difficult to clearly demarcate Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southeastern Europe, as various historical, political, and cultural factors determine how these countries are classified and through which lens they are perceived. The choice of which yardstick to apply remains a source of controversy as categorizations based on historical experiences clash with categorizations based on language and culture or with those based on future aspirations. It also goes without saying that even seemingly clear geographic classifications carry problematic connota-

tions and can lead to confusion when geographic and political conceptualizations are highly incongruent. Greece and Bulgaria, or Estonia and Finland, for example, are neighbors geographically, but these countries underwent different political developments in the 20th Century and are therefore distinguished as 'East' and 'West.' Moreover, Bulgaria, a Balkan country that, much like other countries in the region, emerged as an independent state following the decline of the Ottoman Empire later became part of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet sphere of influence. In contrast, the Western Balkans, much of which was once part of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, were considered closer to the so-called West because of their relatively open borders and strong economic ties to Northern and Western Europe. It is therefore ironic that Bulgaria became a member of the European Union already in 2007, while Western Balkan countries such as Bosnia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, as well as Albania and Kosovo seem to be perennially stuck in a waiting position. Thus, they belong to a kind of European periphery, in so far that they are still denied full EU membership some 40 years after the fall of Communism.

The cases of Georgia and Armenia are even more complicated, as both countries are former Soviet republics. The extent to which they qualify as European at all is sometimes contested since the Caucasus spans the space between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Even if the majority of Georgians and Armenians consider themselves European, it is not immediately clear that the majority of Europeans share this view. The long Christian traditions in these two countries and their differences with neighboring Muslim-majority countries have undoubtedly heightened the desire to seek a closer connection to the West and further political integration with Europe. Nevertheless, the ties to other societies in the post-Soviet space and especially to Russia itself also run deep. Thus, the westward orientation of Georgia and Armenia is fraught with complications and any simple categorization of these countries will inevitably fall short. What all these cases have in common, however, is that the boundaries between what is considered political mainstream and what is politically radical are blurry so that populism is often a common feature affecting national politics. As such, we will refer to the cases analyzed in this book collectively as Eastern Europe, while we refer to Eastern member states of the EU except for those in the Baltic as Central European countries. We are aware of this imperfect categorization given that Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are all on the Adriatic and thus to the West of several EU member states bordering the Baltic. Whenever we wish to denote the countries of the

Western Balkans as a subcategory, we will also refer to them as Southeastern Europe. Nonetheless, we want to acknowledge the problematic nature of such designations.

The countries featured in this volume differ as a whole from Western Europe, not only because each has experienced a difficult transition from authoritarianism and a planned economy to democracy and a market economy, but also because of how populism has manifested itself. While populist parties in Western Europe initially emerged as a form of protest by political outsiders who were opposed to ‘insider’ politics, or the effects of immigration and globalization, the European ‘periphery’ differs in this respect. Throughout both Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), party systems in transitional democracies were generally not sufficiently established to form a consolidated political mainstream, against which new political actors could present themselves as radical outsiders.

Nonetheless, there were political elites among the old intelligentsia and dissident groups as well as, of course, the former *nomenklatura* or privileged loyalists of the Communist Party, who, to the extent they survived the transition, formed an established elite of sorts. Then, there were those individuals who were able to take advantage of the rough and tumble ways of the transition and emerge as a new class of political operators. In their new political roles, they often sought to consolidate and protect the economic gains they made amidst the chaos of the economic transition. Thus, we have seen selective alliances form between former members of the *nomenklatura* and those representing the *nouveau riche*, who were intent on legitimizing their new positions. Populism as a style and a discourse often becomes a way to achieve this goal as it is able to shift attention from exiting problems to new symbolic issues and identify new public enemies. Alternatively, populism can serve as a strategy to mobilize people against those who were leading the transition and those who have emerged as elites after the transition.

Populism can do this more easily in Eastern Europe because, unlike in Western Europe, political institutions have not consolidated to the extent they have elsewhere, and voters generally have not yet established lasting political ties to parties. However, we must admit that this is also changing in Western Europe. Unlike the former transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe that are members of the EU, the cases discussed in this book are not and have to deal with radical populism outside the institutional framework of the EU, which offers strong political and economic counter-incentives.

Overall, the political landscape in Eastern Europe is less consolidated than in Western Europe. Thus, populism is more ubiquitous as the relationships between different groups of political actors tend to be fluid and diffuse. Because the political systems across the region are less institutionally consolidated, they also offer more room for the emergence of charismatic personalities, who are able to translate their economic wealth or their status as a public celebrity into political resources. There, populist leaders can often quickly establish a following because voters have not yet formed strong political loyalties. Despite the considerable political volatility in these countries, there is a tendency to pay them insufficient attention outside the region and dismiss them as politically less mature, where political 'pathologies' such as public corruption, authoritarianism and populism are expected as given and regarded as endemic.

Another concern is the unclear political future of these countries. The general orientation toward 'the West' and the prospect of developing a close relationship with Brussels and even acquiring EU membership have long been an incentive to encourage national political development in the Balkans and in the European post-Soviet states.

The numerous crises in the EU, accession fatigue, and growing internal dissent, as well as a more assertive Russia and rising authoritarianism have made the prospect of rapid EU membership even more uncertain. This, too, has led various political actors to call for a different direction, allowing Moscow and Beijing to expand their influence in the region. However, the war in Ukraine could again change the political and economic development of these countries and accelerate the pursuit of EU membership, which in turn raises other issues such as the questions of collective security and confronting Russia. The aim of this book is therefore to provide an informed assessment of the role of populism, its causes, and its political consequences in areas that often do not receive the attention they deserve and are generally less visible in the European political landscape.

The emergence of populism as a major research agenda in Western Europe has also led to the development of specific theoretical and methodological approaches that dominate mainstream research in Western academia, particularly in political science. The most commonly used approach in the study of populism throughout Europe is the so-called ideational school, which conceives of populism as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde 2004). Other schools of thought conceptualize populism more as a discourse or a 'strategy' employed by political actors or view populism as a style or even as performance. However, these debates are shaped by experiences derived



from Western Europe and, in some cases, the United States. By contrast, studies of populism undertaken in Eastern Europe by local specialists may offer unique approaches and nuanced insight but often do not connect well with the broader scholarly literature. Moreover, scholars steeped in the regional political history often overestimate the extent to which people outside the region understand the political developments in areas only covered selectively by Western news media.

The scholars studying Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have nevertheless the best opportunity to develop an understanding of how populism works in their respective countries and offer us as readers more than just a glimpse into these political systems. They contribute to our understanding of a phenomenon as variable as populism, which British scholar Paul Taggart (2000: 10, 15) described as chameleon-like. As the political problems and certain political pathologies once primarily associated with Eastern Europe are drifting westward, the insights by scholars intimately familiar with East European political systems may help readers elsewhere understand political changes that are likely to matter also in Western politics and beyond.

This book addresses these issues and existing gaps in our understanding of the European ‘periphery’ by focusing attention on both political developments and the analysis of these developments from the very perspectives of scholars working in the post-transition political systems themselves. The twelve chapters in this volume were written by experts on the political systems of their respective countries. Although they differ in their approach to populism and its perceptions, they also relate their work to frameworks that are generally well established in political science. This common focus was developed in an EU-funded authors’ workshop at the University of Salzburg in 2018, which formed the basis for this book project.

Lastly, it should be noted that the term ‘periphery’ is not meant to imply that these countries are marginal or ‘less European,’ but that they are peripheral in the perception of most Europeans. These countries are also further away from Europe’s political and economic power centers and are therefore much more exposed to countervailing forces. This, too, makes them different and deserving of special consideration.

The Editors



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## List of Names and Acronyms

English Name	Acronym	Original Name
Alternative for Germany	AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
The Red-Black Alliance	AK	Aleanca Kuq e Zi
Action of Dissatisfied Citizens	ANO	Akce nespokojených občanů
Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party	ARF	Hay Heghapokhakan Dash-naktsutyun
Alliance for Albanians	ASh	Aleanca për Shqiptarët
Ataka	Ataka	Ataka
Movement BESA	Besa	Dvizenje Besa / Lëvizja Besa
Prosperous Armenia	BHK	Bargavatch Hayastan kusakt-sut'yun
Communist Party of the Russian Federation	CPRF	Kommunističeskaja Partija Rossijskoj Federacii
Democratic Montenegro	DCG	Demokratska Crna Gora
Democratic Front	DF	Demokratski front
Enough is Enough	DJB	Dosta je bilo
Democratic People's Party	DNP	Demokratska narodna parti-ja
Democratic Party of Albanians	DPA	Demokratska partija na Al-bancite / Partia Demokratike Shqiptare
Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro	DPS	Demokratska partija socijal-ista Crne Gore
Democratic Union for Integra-tion	DUI	Demokratska unija za integracija/ /Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim
Serbian Movement Dveri	Dveri	Srpski pokret Dveri

United Russia	EP	Yedínaya Rossiya
Forward Italy	FI	Forza Italia
Hungarian Civic Alliance	Fidesz	Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség
National Front	FN	Front National
Freedom Party of Austria	FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria	GERB	Grazdani za Evropeyskoye Razvitie na Bulgaria
United National Movement	GNM	Gaertianebuli Nacionaluri Modzraoba
Armenian National Congress Heritage	HAK	Hay Azgayin Kongres
Heritage	Heritage	Zharangut'yun
Armenia Revolutionary Federation Party	HHD	Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun
Republican Party of Armenia	HHK	Hayastani Hayrapetians Kusaktsutyun
Armenia Alliance	HP	Hayastan dashink
People's Party of Armenia	HZK	Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Kusaktsutyun
Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	IMRO-DPMNU	Vnatreshna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija-demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo
IMRO – People's Party	IMRO-PP	VMRO-Narodna partija
There is Such a People	ITM	Ima takav narod,
Movement for a Better Hungary	Jobbik	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom
Civil Contract	KP	K'aghak'atsiakan paymanagir,

Communist Party of the Russian Federation	KPRF	Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii
Northern League	LN	Lega Nord
Democratic League of Kosovo	LDK	Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës
Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	LDPR	Liberal'no demokraticeskaya partiya Rossii
Libra Party	LIBRA	Lista e Barabartë
Together Movement	Lëvizja Bashkë	Lëvizja Bashkë
Socialist Movement for Integration	LSI	Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim
Self-determination Movement	LVV	Lëvizja Vetëvendosje
Round Table – Independent Georgia	MMTS	Mrgvali Magida – Tavisufali Sakhartvelo
National Democratic Party	NDP	Nacionalna Demokratska Partija
National Democratic Revival	NDR	Nacionalna demokratska prerodba / Rilindja Demokratike Kombëtare
National Movement for Stability and Progress	NDSV	Nacionalno diviženie za stabilnost i vāzhod
National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria	NFSB	Natsionalen front za spasenie na Būlgariya
We, Tirana	Ne Tirana	Ne Tirana
New Serbian Democracy	NOVA	Nova srpska demokratija
New Social Democratic Party	NSDP	Nova socijaldemokratska partija
# Initiative/Hashtag initiative	NTH	Nisma Thurje
Rule of Law	OEK	Orinats Yerkir
United Patriots	OP	Obedineni Patrioti

Democratic Party of Albania	PD	Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë
Party for Democratic Prosperity	PDP	Partija za demokratski prosperitet / Partia për Prosperitet Demokratik
Party for Justice, Integration and Unity	PDIU	Partia Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet
Law and Justice Party	PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
The Georgian Dream Party	PKO	Partia Khartuli Ocneba
Socialist Party of Albania	PS	Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë
Movement for Change	PzP	Pokret za promjene
Revival	Revival	Vazrazhdane
The Party of Democratic Action	SDA	Stranka demokratske akcije
Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	SDUM	Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija
Direction – Social Democracy	SMER	Smer – sociálna demokracia
Citizens' Union of Georgia	SMK	Sakhartvelos Mokhalakheta Kavshiri
Socialist People's Party of Montenegro	SNP	Socijalistička narodna partija Crne Gore
Serbian Progressive Party	SNS	Srpska napredna stranka
Alliance of Independent Social Democrats	SNSD	Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata
The Socialist Party of Serbia	SPS	Socijalistička partija Srbije
Serb List	Srpska lista	Srpska lista
Serbian Radical Party	SRS	Srpska radikalna stranka
A Just Russia — For Truth	SRZP	Spravedlivaya Rossiya- Za pravdu
Swiss People's Party	SVP	Schweizerische Volkspartei

National Liberation Army	UÇK	Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare
Flemish Bloc	VB	
Way Out Alliance	Yelk	Yelk Dashik





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