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Populism in Eastern Europe

by Lenka Bustikova
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The politics of exclusion and contestation is closely linked to populism, which is often defined as the rule of the ‘pure many’ mobilized against the ‘corrupt few.’ It is an ideology that pitches the people against the elite and calls for greater congruence between the general will of the people and politics. Some have studied it as a ‘thin’ yet coherent ideology, a rhetoric, an ethos, an ‘empty signifier’, whereas others see it as a social movement and an expression of contentious politics.¹ Following the will of the many is sometimes antithetical to democracy. Along these lines, some view populism as a disfigurement of democracy because it reifies the popular will by suppressing democratic procedures and restricting the plurality of opinion. Populism, on this count, “is a politics of exclusion” (Urbinati, 2014).

The standard bearers of populist appeals are radical right parties that represent those who are most outraged by ‘the betrayal of the people.’ As a result, radical right mobilization that revolves around the exclusion of minority groups, and not the economic destitute, represents a populist revolt against a political system that allows minorities to legitimately gain political power and advance their causes. Politics differ in how far they are willing to go to resolve the tension between ‘the people’ and ‘the other’ by curbing the pluralist dimension of representative democracy. In most cases, niche radical right parties endanger the ascent of minorities, but not the system of representative democracy. That honor belongs to large, mainstream parties, capable of thwarting electoral laws, institutions of oversight, independent courts, and free media.

Radical right parties mobilize to keep minorities from advancing (Bustikova, 2014). The ire of radical right voters is thus not directed at any minority, but specifically at minorities (and their allies) that aspire to change the status quo through the political process. Radical right mobilization does not originate in the demons of xenophobia (group hostility), but in policy shifts that reflect political competition (Dancygier, 2010). Since resources are finite and prestige originates in hierarchy, any change in the status quo of minority-majority relations implies a status loss, which results in a grievance that can be politicized in the right hands.

Radical right parties are not interested in the annihilation of minorities, but rather in suppressing their desires to wield greater political power, influence policy, obtain governmental resources, and acquire positions of prominence. In sum, radical right support is not fuelled by prejudice and xenophobia, but by dissatisfaction with ascending minority groups.

I. Sister from Another Mister: Populism in Western and Eastern Europe

Populism in Eastern Europe is largely a revolt of the titular group against the political parties and politicians that ‘betrayed’ them by shifting the status quo in favor of minorities. Using Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde’s (2013) typology, it most closely resembles “exclusionary populism...[which] focuses on the exclusion of non-native groups.” There are some subtle differences between the ideal type of exclusionary populism, as outlined by Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde, and the populism on the ground in Eastern Europe. Populism is exclusionary, but the anger of ‘the people’ is not targeted at minorities per se, but at their advances — that is, at the shift in the balance of power between the majority and the minority. Second, populism in Eastern Europe is economically left-leaning, blurring the boundaries between exclusionary and inclusionary (economic) populism. Third, populist mobilization affects democratic consolidation (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015; Vachudova, 2008).

The contemporary radical right is also a relatively new phenomenon in Eastern Europe, but has been steadily gaining in prominence. Although many radical right movements today embrace the legacy of the fascist movements from the inter-war period, their novelty lies in their adherence to the rules of electoral competition and — at least on the surface — their rejection of outright violence as a solution to internal political conflicts. Given the diversity in terms of ethnic heterogeneity, economic performance, and cultural legacies across East European countries, it is not surprising that radical right parties reflect this heterogeneity. In some countries, such as Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Latvia, ethnicity and language create cleavages that clearly structure radical right politics. In more ethnically homogeneous countries, such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, the ethnic cleavage is less pronounced and radical right politics

¹For an overview, see Gidron and Bonikowski (2013).

are focused either on mobilizing against the Roma or on social and religious issues that map onto particular party systems. Despite the new-fangled radical right in Eastern Europe, the authoritarian legacy of the inter-war period is becoming an acceptable reference point due to the elevated sense that liberal democracy is not compatible with a vision of societies ruled exclusively by titular majorities (Carter, Bernhard and Nordstrom, 2016).

The radical right in Eastern Europe is similar to its Western European cousins in its emphasis on mobilization against minorities. Until 2015, however, that mobilization was exclusively against minorities with electoral rights who have been settled in Eastern Europe for centuries. The million plus influx of refugees into Europe from Syria expanded the portfolio of minorities to rally against and, paradoxically, somewhat “Westernized” the Eastern European radical right in its opposition to Islam and migrants with non-European backgrounds.²

Radical right support is not fuelled by prejudice and xenophobia, but by dissatisfaction with ascending minority groups.

Older democracies are more resilient, having lived through cycles of political contestation and successfully absorbed (some) ascending minorities into the mainstream. The danger of contestation in post-communist democracies is that the parallel processes of building democratic institutions and the ascension of minorities to power might entice voters to take authoritarian shortcuts. Emboldened illiberal leaders can then use the process of ‘shutting out’ minorities from access to power channels as smoke and mirrors to eliminate political opponents from within the titular group.

In the post-communist context, democratization has often interfered with the process of minority accommodation. It empowered the titular group to search for its expression of national identity but, at the same

time, it emboldened the titular group to exploit the banner of the ‘people’s will’ to curb the plurality of voices that minorities can use to advance their causes. Given the relationship between policy shifts and radical right mobilization, it is not surprising that a backlash often ensues after referenda or following the adoption of laws and policies that pertain to ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities.³

II. *The Anatomy of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe*

The radical right in Eastern Europe has three unique characteristics that distinguish it from its older, Western European cousins: (1) left-leaning party positions on the economy; (2) linkages between identity and democratization, which leads to the association of minority policies with democratization; and (3) the coexistence of radical right parties with radicalized mainstream parties.

First, notwithstanding their label, East European radical right parties are left leaning on the economy when compared to other parties in their respective political system (Bustikova and Kitschelt, 2009). Their policy platforms stand for protections against market volatility, more social spending, and greater state control over the economy, along with less foreign involvement and ownership. Despite their overwhelming left-leaning economic stance, it does not follow that the parties have a clear socioeconomic profile at the micro-level that links poverty to radical right voting (Tucker, 2002). There are two reasons why individual economic and sociodemographic profiles with the (mild) exception of gender, do not map on to the economic policy platforms of radical right parties in Eastern Europe. The first reason is the diffuse nature of economic risk that obscures the links between voting, income levels, and occupational profiles. The second reason is because economic grievances are tied to identity issues, such as concerns about the loss of national sovereignty and the perceived unfairness of the economic system, which undermines the legitimacy of wealth acquired by the winners of the economic transformation. The perceptions of unfairness generate grievances that trump objective indicators of wealth.

²Eastern Europe was home to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were of Muslim faith. Yet rallying against refugees from the former Yugoslavia was never comparable to the mass demonstrations in the summer of 2015 against Islam that swept Eastern Europe and mobilized both mainstream and fringe parties against settlement policies for migrants. As one mainstream Slovak politician noted: “They would not have been happy here since we have no mosques for them.”

³Economic crises can be a double-edged sword for populist mobilization. In Eastern Europe, the crisis of 2008 has increased citizen participation but also the growth of a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ civil society. See, for example, Guasti (2016).

Democratization in Eastern Europe has empowered minorities and politicized the protection of minority rights (Kelley, 2010). In some instances, the backlash against diversity and inclusiveness was immediate, and reflected the growing pains of post-authoritarian politics. In other cases, nationalism emerged in the subsequent era of normal politics. After being preoccupied with the establishment of basic electoral institutions, resentment towards opportunities that the new liberal democratic order opened up for minorities resulted in the counter-mobilization of the radical right (Pop-Eleches, 2010). The distinctiveness of Eastern Europe's development therefore stems, in part at least, from its concurrent transitions: the economic transformation, the democratic transition, and the redefinition of both the state and ethnic boundaries.

The primary targets of radical right parties and groups are empowered minorities but, in some more important ways, also political parties as well as domestic and international organizations that are associated with the promotion of minority rights and minority accommodation. The process of democratization and political transformation, as is well known, frees ethnic and social minorities to pursue their demands, but also unleashes the mobilization capacity of actors who wish to pursue hostile acts against minorities.

Dissatisfaction with policies undertaken during the process of democratization, especially the expansion of ethnic and social minority rights (by politicians that are viewed as unaccountable), is increasingly linked to anti-democratic attitudes in the East (Minkenberg, 2015). Although corrupt political practices are certainly present in Western Europe at the highest levels, they are not associated with calls that question the core rules of democratic governance (Warner, 2007). In the East, responsiveness to the demands of minorities and democracy are bundled together, such that the backlash against establishment politicians and parties feeds off the intensity and depth of a deeper identity-based cleavage. Given the relatively higher levels of aggregate xenophobia in the East, attempts to modify ethnic relations, which are wrapped in populist calls for a more direct relationships between voters and leaders, can be interpreted as covert calls to revisit inclusive democracy as a form of political representation. The ability of new liberal democracies to survive hinges on their ability to contain this backlash against the expansion of minority rights.

Nationalism and sour attitudes towards liberal democracy have three interconnected sources in Eastern Europe. The first is the European Union, which is associated with rights for ethnic, social, and sexual minorities, along with restrictions on national sovereignty (O'Dwyer, 2012; Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010). Opposition to these principles of liberal democracy in Europe conveniently provides a pathway to increasing sovereignty in domestic affairs. Second, opposition to liberal democracy is often disguised as opposition to diversity, and goes hand in hand with advocating for further restrictions on civic life. Third, since the democratic and economic transitions occurred simultaneously, voters associate the introduction of free markets with democratization. The corrupt nexus of politics and economics, which was born and raised in this dual transition, has cast a dark shadow over democratic institutions that have often failed to establish adequate regulatory and oversight institutions to curb political corruption (Grzymala-Busse, 2007).

Paradoxically, the historical legacies of authoritarian, fascist interwar regimes are more relevant after twenty-five years of democratic consolidation than they were in 1989.

The third aspect of radical right mobilization that distinguishes the East from the West is the presence of radicalized mainstream parties. These parties are typically left leaning on the economy and advocate greater state involvement in the economy, but might have even originated in anti-communist movements prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The most prominent examples are Fidesz in Hungary, the Law and Justice Party in Poland (PiS), and in Slovakia both major past and present social democratic prime ministers Meciar (HZDS) and Fico (SMER) (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009). Although many Western European mainstream parties embrace tough policies on immigration and home-grown terrorist networks, Eastern European mainstream parties are, comparatively speaking, much more comfortable with their radical right cousins. Therefore, radical right parties operate in a much more permissive environment where they are often incorporated into governing coalitions.

III. The Economic Leftism of the Radical 'Right'

In the East, the boundaries between the *radicalized* right and the *radical* right are remarkably blurry. It is becoming increasingly difficult to determine whether prominent mainstream parties, such as Fidesz led by Viktor Orban in Hungary, PiS unofficially led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland, and Smer led by Robert Fico in Slovakia can still be classified as not radical. On the surface, radical right parties in the East are a rare phenomenon and, on average, they are less electorally successful than their Western counterparts. Their weakness can perhaps be attributed to the presence of radicalized mainstream parties that siphon away their electoral potential. Therefore, whether mainstream parties cooperate with radical right parties or distance themselves from the ideological extremes (or even support the prosecution of the extremes) has had a mixed effect on the electoral fortunes of radical right parties (Pytlas, 2016; Pirro, 2015; Meguid, 2008).

Higher aggregate levels of self-reported xenophobia in the East contribute to the permissiveness of radical right rhetoric and to the authoritarian tendencies of many postcommunist democracies. Given their presence in governing coalitions, radical right parties in the East indicate a deficiency in liberal democratic consolidation. Paradoxically, the historical legacies of authoritarian, fascist interwar regimes are more relevant after twenty-five years of democratic consolidation than they were in 1989, since some politicians are now looking for new ways to organize political systems. Glorification of the interwar regimes ultimately benefits both the radical right and the radicalized mainstream right, for they claim to be the political successors of these undemocratic, nationalist movements that are associated with state independence, territorial re-unification, and self-rule (Hechter, 2013).

Voters and politicians have begun to contemplate possible substitutes because Eastern Europe is experiencing democratic fatigue, low levels of trust in deliberative institutions, and dissatisfaction with democratic governance. Unlike in 1989, when democracy was the only game in town, at least in Central-Eastern Europe, there is no agreement on what an alternative form of governance might look this time around. Liberal democracy, with its appeal to inclusiveness, has its opponents. Since the communist parties that preceded the democratic experiment have largely been discred-

ited as well, some voters and parties are looking to the distant past of the interwar period and reviving nationalistic heroes with dubious democratic credentials.

This helps to explain the resurgence of t-shirts offered for sale of the Polish interwar authoritarian statesman, Pilsudski, who unified Poland (and protected minorities), or the controversial interwar leader of the Ukrainian Nationalists, Stepan Bandera, and the similarly controversial leader of the Romanian Iron Guard, Corneliu Codreanu. A newly elected member of the Slovak parliament, Marian Kotleba, occasionally wears symbols of the Hlinka guard, associated with the clerofascist (and short-lived) Slovak state during WWII. The third largest political party in Hungary, Jobbik, uses symbols similar to those of the authoritarian and anti-semitic WWII Arrow Cross Party.

IV. Conclusions

The narrative that rejects communism (which diminished national sovereignty) and criticizes liberal democracy (which has increased the power of ethnic and social minorities at the expense of the titular nationality) is compelling because fascism is both an alternative to democracy and antagonistic towards communism. Countries with a nationalist legacy of communist rule are in a unique position to relate to populist legacies either via mainstream or extreme political mobilization that evokes interwar authoritarianism. If there is a reversal in liberal democratic governance in Eastern Europe, it will most likely not be initiated by a small radical right party, but by a large radicalized mainstream party. Whether the presence of a radical right party will facilitate such a turn by introducing new issues and ideas into the mainstream, or will alleviate pressure on the democratic system by offering an alternative electoral channel for discontent, needs to be explored further. Most of the research on Eastern Europe has treated post-1989 radical right parties as a Western equivalent of pathological normalcy, but if radical right parties contribute to the dismantlement of democratic governance by undermining constitutional checks and balances, such an approach would prove imprudent.

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Profiles in Populism: Southeast Asia

by William Case

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Populism has made a comeback, both as a real-world strategy of political mobilization and a mode of political analysis. And it thrives today in the regions where it was most practiced and studied before, Europe and South America. In vexed socioeconomic conditions, leaders have emerged in these regions who arouse 'virtuous' masses against 'corrupt' elites. Further, they select from 'varieties' of populism through which to identify followers and map strategies.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) characterize these varieties of populism as exclusive or inclusive: leaders either challenge elites by promoting 'native' constituencies over 'alien' minorities or they try more collectively to activate and uplift social forces. By way of explanation, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser invoke levels of development. In rich Europe, populist leaders issue exclusivist appeals, defending hard-earned welfare gains against 'interlopers'. In poorer South America, leaders are inclusionary, proposing new programs that embrace all comers.

Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) also conceptualize populism in dyadic terms of 'moral boundaries' between 'us and them'. And they broadly agree with the distinctions made by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) that populism can be practiced and analyzed along exclusive and inclusive lines. But in breaking