

## "Popular or Populist Democracy in Central Europe?"

**Thursday, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014**, from 10:00 till 15:30

Venue: The Great Hall, Czernin Palace,  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague

Cooperation: FES Prague and the Institute of International Relations Prague

### Opening remarks

**Mirko Hempel**, Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office in Prague for the Czech Republic and Slovakia

**Ondřej Horký-Hluchář**, Head of Research Department, Institute of International Relations, Prague

#### **Mirko Hempel**

The conference was opened by Mr. Mirko Hempel, the Director of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office in Prague, who posed several questions.

With only three months to go before the European elections, political analysts all over Europe expect a new European Parliament, which will consist of at least 25 % of extremist parties. One third of the European Parliament will be represented by parties and individuals described as extreme, nationalistic, intolerant and populist. This could mean a different Europe altogether. What do we know about these parties and their messages? Who are their voters? Is democracy as we know it at stake? The aim of this conference is to offer some answers to this controversial issue.

#### **Ondřej Horký-Hluchář**

The second opening speech came from the Head of Research Department at IIR, Mr. Ondřej Horký-Hluchář. In the context of the conference, Mr. Horký-Hluchář wished to bring up two important dates: The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Eastern enlargement and the approaching elections to the European Parliament. Since witnessing the euro-crisis and the rise of the populist parties, the big question remains how well will these parties succeed in the elections? As an example of populist parties succeeding at a national level, Mr. Horký-Hluchář mentioned Marián Kotleba, a neo-nazi, who won the elections last year and became the head of a region in Slovakia. What can be concluded from the recent developments in Central Europe but also Ukraine is that very often the populist movements are fuelled by low political accountability.

## Panel I: Central European populism in a comparative view

Chair: **Volker Weichsel**, Editor of the journal “Osteuropa”, Berlin

**Bálint Magyar**, former Minister of Education, Budapest: *Populism as a response to the crisis of traditional party systems*

**Tanja Binder**, member of the “Wahl-O-Mat” scientific team, Germany: *Right-wing Populism and European Democracy - Lessons from Austria and France*

**Kai-Olaf Lang**, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin: *Populism as a response to the trust crisis in the public affairs governance and/or good governance failure*

### Discussion

#### Chair Volker Weichsel

Mr. Volker Weichsel, Editor of the journal “Osteuropa”, wished to start the first panel by some conceptual work and basic questions: What do we understand with the word populism? Where is the dividing line between populist and democratic parties? Standard or non-standard parties? Is it better to distinguish between populist, democratic and radical parties? Does it make sense to talk about right-wing and left-wing populist parties? Is populism about new ideas and alternatives? And finally, is populism the sign that democracy is declining or rather a sign that it is alive? These are some of the questions that will hopefully get answered during the conference.

#### Tanja Binder

Ms. Tanja Binder presented the results of her research conducted in Austria and France. Her research focused on the effects of right-wing populist parties and more precisely on how governments and established parties react to the increasing pressure of these populist parties. What she found out wasn't very positive. She explained that although the research focuses on these two countries, there are parallels and similarities in other countries too. The first right-wing populist parties occurred in the 1980s and since the 90s we have also witnessed the emergence of far-right and populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Nowadays these parties can be found all over Europe and on average they receive between 10-20 % of the votes, thus competing for the place of a dominant player in the system. For the upcoming European elections, the recent polls in France for example predict that the French National Front will become the strongest national party. This means that a growing part of the European Parliamentarians will be sceptical or even against the European Union and integration. These types of parties are a challenge to democracies, not only because of their anti-European Union sentiments but also their fundamental principles.

*Which are the major mobilising issues commonly shared by right-wing populist parties?*

Right-wing populist parties share a strong anti-elitist sentiment; they accuse the elite of being corrupt, not following the interest of the people and of being anti-democratic. For example in France the National Front is always accusing the “gang of four”, meaning the big established parties. They make demands for reforms of the political system, preferably towards a direct democracy, always mentioning the Swiss democracy as their ideal. All issues touching the national identity, the preservation of a national ethno-cultural identity and a sovereign nation state are also very common. Migration related topics are used intensively to invent scenarios of a threatened community and identity; right-wing populists reject the idea of a multicultural society and deny civil, social and political rights for migrants. Migrants are also discriminated against and portrayed

as those who “import” crime and cause unemployment. Free movement of EU-citizens is rejected and even certain groups within the European borders find themselves racially attacked. It is no surprise that European integration is a major target for populists, who frequently attack the EU bureaucrats for not acting on behalf of the people. The EU is blamed for many problems in their respective countries. However, many right-wing populist parties argue that they are not fundamentally against Europe and European cooperation.

*What are the effects of right-wing populist success?*

They weaken established parties and gain influence in the political discourse. It is also worth having a closer look at migration policy, because we can see that the discourses on migration launched by the right-wing populist parties are almost completely negative, except regarding the economic purpose of migrants. These negative views are becoming mainstream, when established parties are approaching right-wing populist positions to get more votes. This is resulting in even more restrictive migration policies.

*Are we heading towards a reformed and exclusive democracy?*

We can observe that the discourse about the political system, the political elites and parties has become more and more negative. The major elements of representative democracy are under permanent suspicion and the distrust is growing. The manner the established parties react to the right-wing populist parties and the demands for direct democracy are not very convincing and are highly problematic for democracy itself, because governing parties in particular tend to hold on to status quo. Established parties also promise reforms, but they tend to exaggerate their promises. Frequently reforms get stuck or do not fulfil these promises.

*As a conclusion, what are the effects of increasing right-wing populist pressure on democracy?*

First of all there is a growing acceptance of right-wing populist issues and aims. Democracies tend to become more exclusive, the democratic institutions are instrumentalised to preserve power and we can observe something, which Ms. Binder would call a cartelization of politics. This means that the growing responsiveness of governing parties who adapt issues of new competitors is paid by a high price: an increasing lack of responsibility and accountability. She is hoping that established parties will realise that following the steps of new competitors is not necessarily the way forward.

## ***Discussion***

Chair Mr. Weichsel:

You said that the success of right-wing populist parties started in the 1980s, but these parties existed before. How do you explain this success in the recent years?

Ms. Binder:

The parties I’m talking about are not these old-fashioned far right-wing parties. It’s more of a new phenomenon which started in the 80s, when some of the parties dropped some of their extreme ideologies, started to accept democratic procedures to gain power and presented themselves as anti-elitist and as appealing to national or ethno-cultural communities. They knew how to take advantage of people’s fears in a globalising world.

Chair Mr. Weichsel:

You were talking about an exclusive democracy. Who is excluded?

Ms. Binder:

From my point of view we can talk about an exclusive democracy, when it is very difficult to get full citizens’ rights even though one is a long-term resident in the country. This is for example the case in Austria, where the period of residency before a full citizenship is very long.

Chair Mr. Weichsel:

My impression is that at least in Germany and in France democracy has become more inclusive, meaning that nowadays it is easier to get citizenship, but harder to become socially included. And now my third question: you said that when established parties are becoming more and more responsive to the issues of right-wing populist parties, they lose responsibility and accountability. Can you explain this?

Ms. Binder:

When I say that responsibility is threatened, I'm talking about the responsibility of democratic actors towards the democratic system. This is damaged when parties use democratic institutions simply to preserve power.

## **Bálint Magyar**

Mr. Bálint Magyar shared his views on the “Hungarian octopus”, or in his words the post-communist “Hungarian mafia-state”. After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, many lived under the illusion that dictatorships were going to be replaced by liberal democracies. Deviances from the norms of liberal democracies seemed to be children's diseases rather than characteristics of adulthood. However, the chronic symptoms of such deviances caused analysts to re-interpret the political processes of certain post-communist states and describe their systems, which got stalled and even turned back on the road, along the liberal democracy-autocracy axis.

Perceiving the conceptual framework of deviations, Hungarian analysts searched for historical analogies. The process of centralization and nationalization were suggestive of the soft-communist stages of the Kádár regime until 1989. The reincarnation of the ideology, cultural models and language of the Horthy regime between the two world wars gave way to fascist and corporative interpretations whereas the loss of personal integrity in administration and governance was reminiscent of feudal systems. After 2010, Fidesz annihilated the system of liberal democracy and created an entirely new system. In his speech at Kötcse before the 2010 election, Orbán declared that he would not simply change the government but create a new model of governance. This new model was based on an ideology of “national war of independence,” which he called “The System of National Cooperation,” and, true to his promise, he established this system as a “central field.”

The “mafia state”, the organized criminal underworld is far removed from the world of anomalies of party funding and the organized underworld's attempts to influence political decisions – the relationships have now been reversed: it is no longer the case that private wealth is acquired to help a party's need for financial support to be gained from illegitimate sources; rather a political party's decision-making potential is used here to requisition private property. It is no longer the case that a hidden underworld seeks to corrupt decision-making processes; rather inherently purposeful illegitimate special interests are aligned here with legislative measures and governance. There are hardly any areas where activities would not be subject to power and wealth accumulation considerations of the adopted “political family”. The “mafia state” is a privatized form of a “parasite state”.

The nationalism of the “mafia state” is not targeted at other nations, but rather at the expulsion from their own nation of all those who are not a part of the adopted political family, or who are not built into the order of vassals. The “Hungarian octopus” creates a collectivist, nationalistic ideology under the pretext of the so-called national and social justice, which is just a tool to justify their egotistic aspirations for concentrating power and wealth. This being the case, it boggles the mind that the main dilemma of the opposition still is whether to regard Viktor Orbán's reign as a legitimate government or an illegitimate system.

## Kai-Olaf Lang

The third speaker of the first panel, Mr. Kai-Olaf Lang from the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin highlighted “the shades of grey” in his contribution and shared his definition of populism. According to him, there are three key points, which mark populism. Firstly, the so-called populist groups work under the principle of simplification, which is highly efficient on the electoral market. The second element of populism is an anti-status quo and anti-establishment posture, in a radical form a general anti-system promise. This has a more ambitious and a more limited range, ran mainly against the existing elite, based on the appeal of a “them vs. us” dynamic. Not all populists are very radical, but they promise a break from the current situation. The third important element of populism is that it has no hard core content, no real substance. In Mr. Lang’s opinion, populism is more of a style how to flexibly address current problems, a method, which can be combined with various issues. This is a comparative advantage, because it makes populist groups more versatile than others.

Fourthly, populism, which for Mr. Lang is not a political label but an analytical category, can be a positive corrective of the political mainstream, discourse and process in a given country. Very often certain issues are neglected by the mainstream parties and these populist groups bring the issues back on the table – without offering a solution, though. Therefore it might make more sense to talk about challenging and contesting parties or even unconventional parties, rather than populist parties.

Three questions should be discussed:

### 1. Which are the four main reasons behind the rise of populist parties?

- After 1989 the social dimension of the system changed and this led to the success of post-communist parties in some countries such as Poland, Hungary and Lithuania. This social dimension or socio-economic populism was maintained until the middle of last decade.
- The second reason Mr. Lang calls “the political economy of time”. If people have a prospect of convergence, they are more or less satisfied with their governments. However, if the gap between the country’s performance and the individual’s experience/expectations is too big it creates frustration. The year 2004 marked symbolically a time when we entered the affluent part of Europe, yet individual people did not feel the profits of the reforms.
- During the first period of successful implementation of the reforms, the political space narrowed. After 2004 the challenges arrived together with the prospects of new choices in terms of identity politics and policies; the time of imitating the West was over. This is something, which is still being witnessed for example in Hungary with the “crusade” against the forces of globalisation.
- The fourth and probably most powerful reason behind the rise of these challenging parties is the growing distrust and disgust with the political elites as well as the broken promises of transformation. Therefore the growing trust in challenging and contesting parties in the last years is represents a rebellion directed against clientelism and corrupted networks. These challenging parties claim to offer a new beginning, calling for “the real transition” (Victor Orbán).

### 2. Who are the voters attracted by populist parties?

Mr. Lang identifies three social segments or three kinds of voters for whom these populist groups are appealing. First there are the losers of the reforms, who however, rather opt for the exit (instead electing new leadership) when they are not satisfied with the political situation. The second group is formed by the frustrated would-be middle classes or lower middle classes, people working in the public sphere for example, who do not have a real chance to take a step to the same level of success that the modern and urbanised middle-classes have reached and whose social status is constantly under threat. Finally the third group are graduates without prospects on the labour market and who have invested a lot in their education but get nothing back. Judging by the current trend, this is a growing group.

### 3. Who are the populists?

As opposed to Western Europe, populism in the younger democracies in the Eastern part of Europe is much more heterogeneous and colourful. Whereas in the West the debate and research about populism since the 70s and 80s is mainly focused on right-wing nationalist populism, in Central Europe there is a much broader array of populist groups. The new developments have made the situation even blurrier; the new parties and movements are mainly focused on the corruption issue and they are often highly personalised around one leader (Orbán, Palikot, Babiš...). These new populist groups no longer come from the margins but from the middle and they represent the average member of the society. In this sense, the “soft populism” (non-extreme) is more dangerous than the extremist one and transform more and more catch-all parties. According to Mr. Lang, Central Europe is now standing in the third wave of a mobilisation of embitterment and a broader disappointment with the lack of responsiveness of the political class. In both Western and Central Europe the populist scenery is becoming more and more fuzzy as the populists are no longer the extremists from the far right. They come from various parts of the political scenery and only share one sentiment: their resentment against corruption and the elite.

#### *Discussion*

Chair Mr. Weichsel:

Ms. Binder said that with their anti-immigration policies the populist parties have detrimental consequences for established parties and the whole political system. Mr. Lang said that these populist parties are a corrective force because they bring up neglected issues. We need to discuss about these two arguments.

Ms. Binder:

The argument that right-wing populist parties may be positive and corrective was actually the starting point of my research. However I found out that the established parties tend to instrumentalise many issues in order to remain in power and that the right-wing populist parties do exactly the same when possible. Therefore it is true that the *responsiveness* increases when the parties bring up issues such as immigration and political reforms, but the final results are by no means coherent with *responsibility* (implementing painful reforms) and accountability in democracy.

Mr. Lang:

If mainstream parties are not able to regain the discursive hegemony, it is not the populists' mistake. They do not deserve to have the majority of the votes if they are not able to convince the majority of society that a given issue has to be dealt with in a certain way.

Mr. Magyar:

Victor Orbán merged social and national populism. As a result, Hungary turned into a “Belorussia in the EU”. The same will follow if Kaczynski wins in Poland or Basescu in Romania – the countries will turn into “mafia states”.

Mr. Lang:

Hungary does not represent “Belorussia in the EU” but an “antagonistic majoritary autocracy”.