

## The new Europe: respectable populism and clockwork liberalism

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*An emotionally-appealing populist politics is returning conservative, anti-progressive nationalists to the centre of Europe's political arena. Why are pro-European liberals not more anxious? Ivan Krastev offers an intriguing set of answers.*

Populism is on the rise all over Europe. Populist parties of left and right are winning more votes than ever. A populist *Zeitgeist* is blamed for the "no" votes in France (29 May) and the Netherlands (1 June) and France that killed the European constitution in 2005. Moreover, a populist agenda is prevailing at the centre of many countries' national politics, and establishment parties are trying their best to recapture the outright populists' themes and messages.

If the trend is Europe-wide, the capital of the new populism is central Europe. The populist party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc* (Law & Justice) won the October 2005 parliamentary elections in Poland; a populist party is expected to win in Slovakia in June; and populists are on the rise in Bulgaria. A populist style is ascendant in most of the other post-communist countries.

The magic formula of the populists' success is not a secret. It consists of ten elements:

- authentic anger
- unrestrained hatred of the elites
- policy vagueness

- economic egalitarianism
- cultural conservatism
- compassionate radicalism
- measured euroscepticism and anti-capitalism
- declared nationalism
- undeclared xenophobia
- anti-corruption rhetoric.

This is the new, electoral version of the Molotov cocktail.

The mystery is why liberals are not really worried, scared or even outraged about the prospect of populists winning power. They are a bit ashamed, quite uncomfortable, somewhat nervous – but not really worried. Liberals' sanguine attitude towards populism is very similar to their attitude towards prostitution – it is low and dishonest, it is inevitable and it could also be a lot of fun. Have liberals simply lost their ability to be outraged, or is there another explanation for their complacency?

In examining the problem more closely, five possible explanations for liberals' silence in the face of the populist wave come to mind.

First, the problem could be that liberals simply have lost their language. Liberals spent the last decade locked in the assumption that democracy and liberalism are identical twins, and expended much of their energy attacking their enemies for being undemocratic. This worked against communists and religious fundamentalists, but it does not work with populists.

Second, it could be that democracy and populism are difficult to distinguish – as difficult, it might be said, as distinguishing between the new Polish president Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother and party leader Jaroslaw when they wear the same tie.

Third, it could be that liberals were simply unable to challenge the appeal of populism on the ground of democracy itself. In current media debate, the term "populism" is used in two senses: referring either to an emotional, simplistic and manipulative discourse that is directed at people's "gut feelings", or to opportunistic policies aimed at "buying" people's support. But an appeal to people's passions is not forbidden in democratic politics, and the decision over which policies are "populist" and which "sound" is open to debate (as Ralf Dahrendorf noted, "one man's populism is another's democracy, and vice versa"). Thus, unless we perform a Brechtian gesture and abolish the people, populism is and will remain a part of the European political landscape. In this sense, it could be the very democratic nature of populism that renders liberals silent.

Fourth, it could be that liberals are indifferent to the rise of populism because they refuse to accept that populists are intrinsically anti-liberals. Populism can be seen as a marketing strategy for political newcomers in the age after the "end of history". In Latin America it has been called "violin politics" (you hold it with the left hand but play with the right); in Europe, it means you win the election as a populist but govern as a centrist liberal.

In a political world dominated by fake socialists, fake conservatives and fake greens; populists are – according to this explanation – merely the newest and best-selling fakes. When in 2001 former Bulgarian king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, founded a political party and after just three months of campaigning

caused an electoral earthquake by winning a majority in the Bulgarian parliament (and among every age, education, and income group), most observers viewed this as the ultimate triumph of populism.

The king's messages were indeed vague, "populist" and dangerously opportunistic. His party vehicle's approach was moralistic, not programmatic. Yet several years on, the king's party joined the Liberal International and was a critical factor in bringing Bulgaria into accession talks with the European Union (with membership scheduled for January 2007.) The "trick" has now been repeated by the mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov (once the king's bodyguard); he won election as a radical "populist in uniform" and a day later started governing as an ordinary liberal.

The logic of this explanation is that liberals might not need to worry much, since populists can turn out to be liberals in disguise.

Fifth, it could be that liberals' dispassion in the face of growing populism is related to the omnipotent, yet ambiguous, "European Union factor". Liberals see the EU as a deterrent of last resort in containing populism (similar to the Turkish army in

controlling political Islam) and as itself a source of populism, since the constraints embodied in EU-wide agreements make European voters feel that they can change governments but not their policies.

#### The politics of anti-corruption

These five possible explanation for liberals' silence about the rise of populism can each draw on compelling evidence. But they tend to leave out of account a feature of populist politics that deserves more attention, and which may provide the elements of a sixth explanation: the fact that populists are winning elections as anti-corruption movements.

What is striking here is that anti-corruption rhetoric once belonged to the liberals, shaped by them to appeal to the "gut feelings" of voters, and passionately endorsed by their liberal friends at a multinational level (in liberal institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, newspapers like the New York Times, and NGOs like Transparency International). Once, liberals seeking to identify the blame for and solutions to post-communist social crisis lighted upon the anti-corruption narrative as a simple, popular story. Liberal-minded foundations supported it by spending large sums of money on anti-corruption

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programmes, reinforcing the idea that this was the liberals' "smart weapon". Instead, anti-corruption politics has become the liberals' Frankenstein.

There were good reasons in the mid-1990s for liberal politicians to pick this narrative as a way to mobilise support. In central Europe, public discontent with the policies of the Washington consensus was then palpable on the streets as well as in opinion polls. Most people felt profoundly unhappy, they were sick and tired of official messages asking for "patience" until the "reforms" started to work, and they found anti-capitalist (and particularly anti-privatisation) sentiments attractive.

In this climate, post-communist citizens who had experienced a collapse in their social status and their income came to see accusations of corruption as the only way to express their disappointment with the political elites, mourn the death of their post-1989 hopes, while rejecting any responsibility of their own for their present conditions of life. For liberals, this was a political opportunity: an anti-corruption agenda looked far more congenial than competing narratives of anger ("lustration", or legal exposure of those complicit in communist-era repression, and xenophobic nationalism).

Corruption was, after all, a real problem that seemed to demand an emergency response. The former (1987-2000) head of the IMF, Michel Camdessus, justified the policy of "structural adjustment" in almost religious terms: "You cannot denounce the structural adjustments and be against the structure of the sin. If you are against the structures of the sin that plague our world – corruption, nepotism, collusion, protectionism – you must go for structural adjustment, like it or not". The politics of anti-corruption, including privatisation, became an opportunity to resell to voters the policies of the Washington consensus.

But in the end, this politics took revenge on its architects. Liberals in power themselves came to suffer from accusations of corruption even more than from unpopular economic policies. This is probably not because liberals actually were more corrupt (empirical studies so far do not find a significant correlation between incorruptibility and party membership). Rather, in four distinct ways they profoundly misread the anti-corruption sentiments of the population they governed (a trend I was depressed to discover in researching my sceptical study of anti-corruption politics, *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption* [Central European University Press, 2004]).

First, liberals perceived corruption as an institutional issue requiring a response focusing on more transparency and institutional reforms. But in the eyes of the public, corruption was a moral issue ("God does not take bribes") requiring honest politicians in power.

Second, liberals regarded anti-corruption discourse as being about *fairness*, whereas for the public it was a discourse about growing social inequality.

Third, liberals believed that corruption was caused by the state being too powerful and large, and advocated rapid privatisation and a small state. But a majority of people thought the power of the market was to blame, and came to expect a revision of the most scandalous privatisation deals.

Fourth, liberals saw anti-corruption discourse as a chance to legitimise capitalism. But the conspiracy-minded majority saw it as an opportunity to delegitimise it without the risk of being accused of communism or other infectious diseases.

The research data on Bulgaria, for example, indicates that people's judgment about how corrupt their country is does not reflect their own personal experience: petty corruption seems not to matter, whereas political corruption does. It also turns out that the more governments make fighting corruption a priority, the more people are inclined to view these very governments as corrupt. The anti-corruption imagination of society displays its own dialectics: people begin by believing that corruption is everywhere, then come to believe that everybody in power is corrupt, and graduate to the view that everything the government is or does is pervaded by corruption. Governments that talk about transparency create even wider suspicion in the eyes of the public – who then choose to vote not for "transparent institutions" but for "honest politicians".

### Liberals and populists

The last decade in central Europe has seen liberals caught in a trap that they themselves constructed. The war on corruption made populism respectable – and thus to attack populism today can be made to seem like defending "bribesville".

Liberals should have understood better that populism is primarily neither an appeal to the gut feelings of people nor an attempt to buy voters' support with opportunistic policies. Rather, it is a worldview that considers society ultimately separated into two antagonistic groups, the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" – and that anti-corruption politics is the ultimate embodiment of this worldview.

Liberals' attempt to depoliticise the war on corruption, turning it into an instrument for institutional reforms, was a doomed exercise. A corruption-centered political discourse moralises policy choices to the extent that politics is reduced to the choice between the corrupt government and the not-yet-corrupt opposition. Meanwhile, the war-cry of the anti-corruption crusade is: "get rid of them all!"

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It is not hard to guess who "they" are. What remains interesting and still not fully clear is: why are "they" not worried? Could it be – a seventh explanation of the problem I started with – that "they" strive to be the next populists?

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