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**By Ivan Krastev**  
Centre for Liberal Strategies (Bulgaria)

Populism is such a slippery term that it's used by everybody about everybody. Name one political party in your country that has not been accused by somebody of being a populist party. When expressing a dislike of something or some policy, it has become very common usage (though not among political scientists) to go with populism, which is different than the extreme parties.

An old Soviet joke goes like this: *'There's this guy standing in front of the building of the central committee of the Soviet Union communist party, distributing leaflets. The police came and arrested the guy and looked at the leaflets. The leaflets were blank. The policeman said: What are you asking for? And the guy answered: Well, why write anything? Everything's obvious, everything's clear.'*

I'm saying this because part of the appeal of the different populist parties is exactly this: we're not telling you anything that you don't already know, but we're telling you that all your secret fears about the political class are true.

Obviously, there is a widespread populist movement in European politics, which cannot be reduced simply to certain political actors but has something to do with the changing style of how politics is done and the changing of the nature of people who are related to politics. In my view, we're talking about change in our democratic system in general. In 2003, the UK polling agency YouGov conducted a magnificent study. It was a comparison between two groups of people: political junkies, who follow the work of the British parliament very avidly, and people who follow Big Brother very avidly, a highly popular show in the United Kingdom at the moment. The survey sought to observe how these groups felt represented. The study is called 'The tale of two houses'. The people who had been watching Big Brother felt much more represented than the political junkies. They said: *People on TV talk like us, they discuss the same problems that we have, and, for us, it's much easier to identify with them. It's much easier for us to imagine being a part of the Big Brother show than of the British parliament.* When somebody who is not a member of the parliament enters the British Parliament, he's called a stranger. They call outsiders 'strangers'.

There are four aspects, which I want to talk about when we focus on the rise of populism and not simply the rise of the extreme right.

The first aspect is that, in my view, the problem of populism also has to do with a certain way of understanding the major conflict of modern politics. Traditionally, the conflict has been between the left and the right. With the decline of the ideological confrontation, now the populist parties, populist actors and populist debates are very much defined by viewing the major confrontation and conflict in society as a conflict of an elite (perceived as a homogenous player) versus the people (also perceived as a homogenous player). So, if you're speaking on behalf of the people and attacking the elite (which is one of the major kinds of rhetoric that identifies populist parties), then populism is turning politics. It's very much the revolt of the represented against their representatives. This is important, because people perceive the populist parties as being antidemocratic. To be honest, most of them are anti-liberal, but they like democracy, and this is why they like elections – and they're going to like the elections even more because they're winning them. The clash between democracy and liberalism is, in my view, at the centre of this type of transformation.

The second aspect of populism is the major collapse of support for the mainstream parties. In various national elections, the winning parties come from the far- left or far- right (with the exception of Germany), or they are parties like the Five Star Movement, which is not easy to identify (far-left or far-right). Now, even Germany is changing. The results of the last European elections show that the percentage of votes controlled by the mainstream party has declined dramatically. People don't feel represented enough by the mainstream parties. In many countries, the mainstream parties do not represent the majority any more. And I do believe this is a major change. This type of collapse among the mainstream parties has led to a decline in turnout, especially among younger people, the unemployed and low-income earners. There is also a perceptible dramatic decline in political party membership in most of the countries. This change in the nature of political representation in Europe is very important. And here come the newcomers. I'm sure that very few of you follow what goes on in Bulgaria, but it's an interesting place. In the last twelve years, a newly- founded party (a party that had been founded just before the elections) has won the elections on two different occasions. Until the last election, no governing party had ever won the following election for the last 25 years. In Bulgaria, it was easy to resurrect and to be elected. Members of parliament and members of the government constantly rotate and change. People in Bulgaria joke that everybody is a former, current or future minister, because basically it's a lottery.

Now, moving on to the third aspect of the rise of populism in Europe: Normally, people who talk about populism and people who have written about it over the last 20 years have very much focused on the extreme parties - and more on the far-right than on the far-left – for reasons which are easy to explain. But now we have a new phenomenon - the mass political protests, which have shattered many European democracies. You have the Indignados in Spain. In my own country, two major protests were held in the course of one year by two different groups of people. Then there's the United Kingdom. Protests are taking place virtually everywhere. What is interesting about these very different protest movements is the very strong anti-institutional message coming from the people on the street. In the case of Bulgaria, people took to the streets last year and protested for more than 300 days. Sometimes the crowds were huge, and, in other cases, comparatively small. They marched on the streets, but not a single political speech was delivered and not a single politician was there. For them, being on the street means: *I'm here for myself, I don't allow anybody to speak on my behalf.* From this point of view, this crisis of representation does not solely emanate from the extreme parties and the bad actors that we're focused on. Some of the movements that many people are absolutely fascinated with are part of the model that questions how political representation works – a distrust of the political parties, distrust within the mainstream media, and strong endorsement of the different types of classical anti-institutional politics. This means that people prefer to be organised by social networks and others. They don't believe in organisations any more, and they really don't want leaders.

I am trying to imagine how much the democracies of today and tomorrow are going to differ from the classic democracies, especially from the Western democracies of the 1970s and 1980s. We should be very careful not to sell the model that does not exist any more. I'm sorry for saying this, but I do believe that this is the problem. One of the reasons why it is difficult to view Germany as a model political system is that Germany is not a success story coming from the future but a success story coming from the past. Germany is one of the European democracies that used to work ten or fifteen years ago. You have mainstream parties, which are still trusted. You have media, which is still trusted. And you have a very high level of trusting institutions. From this point of view, Germany is an exception – a very positive exception. This is good for the Germans, but it makes it much more difficult for them to understand some of the problems that other countries are facing.

The fourth aspect of the rise of populism that I see is different and, in a certain way, more dangerous. It's not simply that there has been a change in the way our democracy functions, but a kind of alternative model is emerging that basically talks about itself. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, gave a famous speech on illiberal democracy. And, for the first time, we have a leader of an EU member state speaking about illiberal democracy as self-identification. Orbán is an extremely gifted politician, who succeeded in becoming re-elected and is now rearranging the system in a way that makes it very difficult to hold elections.

Basically, you have somebody declaring that he is an illiberal democrat because he wants to speak in favour of the demos. It's about national interest; it's about national community. Democracy cannot be anything else but national. You can argue that this model also works in a country like Turkey where you have a very strong, modernizing and emancipating actor like the AKP party, speaking on behalf of the majority. Being a minority, a political minority in some of these countries, is not a lot of fun. Propose change in times when democracy model is in crisis starts to become quite attractive. It's my assertion that Mr Orbán is probably the second most important European politician today, after Mrs Merkel, because he offers an alternative. And this alternative is quite attractive, especially for Central and Eastern Europe where you have governments facing protests and where people are asking major questions about independent institutions: what is so good about an independent court, what is so good about an independent central bank? You have these questions on the table and most of the political leaders that are trying to give an answer have in mind the following: how would you solve it? They're looking to scoop up important political trends. It's very important to understand what people are getting. And part of what they're getting is that, as a result of this liberal design of democracy, people cannot understand who governs any more. Just to give you an example, which I know you're going to like.

During the protests in Bosnia, the biggest problem that Bosnian protesters faced was deciding which government building to stand outside to hold their protest – because in Bosnia you have too many governments and you don't know where the power is. People have the feeling that the power is everywhere and nowhere. You ask the government why they're doing this, that or the other, and the government replies: *But it's not up to us, it's the European Union*. Go to the European Union and you'll hear: *It's not up to us, it's the market*. Then the citizens start to feel like they're in Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express", where there's one dead body but ten potential murderers and you don't know who did it. And then along comes somebody like Mr Orbán who says: *Give me full power because I'm willing to be accountable to you. If you want me to be accountable, give me control over the central bank. If you want me to be accountable, give me control over the judges*. And people are ready to give him such control because then, at least, they will know who is guilty and who is to blame.

I do believe it is extremely important to look at this type of illiberal democratic regimes which are emerging and which, under certain conditions, could pose a fundamental problem.

Traditionally, when you have right populist parties/extreme parties, you are dealing with three approaches that have all competed with each other in the past.

One is the militant democracy approach – this is based on the idea that, when you have some of these parties, the democratic regimes should be ready to defend themselves (see how democracies worked from the 1930's onwards, for example). In 1956, a very important constitutional argument presented before the German Constitutional Court led to the communist party of West Germany being banned. In 1952, they did it with the far-right fascist party. The moral behind these decisions were: *this is what we have learned from Weimar*. One of the ways that Turkish democracy functioned before the Erdoğan era was by banning the Islamic parties from coming to power. So, as a leader of such a party, the very same Mr Erdoğan found himself in prison. The problem with militant democracies is that, in order to function, you should have extensive first-hand experience of society with this type of democratic transgression. It was much easier in the 1950s to explain to Germans why the extreme parties should not be tolerated as they still remember Weimar than it is to the Europeans today who basically take freedom of expression and so on for granted. The militant democracy approach is often put forward as argument - for example why the European Union is not there for Hungary and others. It is supposed to be a certain type of public consensus, which is absent in exactly those countries where you would expect it to be.

The second type of traditional approach was used in the case of the National Front in France - the cordon sanitaire. Chirac's idea was never to enter into coalition with them, not even to talk to them, but to try and isolate them. Three years ago, Le Monde conducted a public opinion poll on ten of the major demands and ten of the major positions of the Front Nationale to find out whether people supported them or not, but the newspaper didn't reveal to its readers that these were the demands and positions of Front Nationale. The survey showed that more than 50 percent support all of the ten positions. It is very difficult to isolate a political party if they're not isolated in society.

The third approach for dealing with extreme parties is to integrate them - to incorporate them in government and to corrupt them. Put them in power and they will stop being as attractive as they were. The problem is that when you include these parties in government, it means that you are giving legitimacy to their ideas. The result is a discredited actor but, at the same time, a legitimization of the platforms.

I don't believe that European politicians today can apply militant democracy, isolation or integration to deal with extreme parties. The problem of rising populism is different on the European Union level. I do believe that democracy and political leadership have enough resources and also the political talent to help with this transformation crisis. But this type of populist illiberal democracy cannot sustain the EU. Which brings me to another story. It's not a story simply of the rise of the Eurosceptic parties but about the rise of the Eurosceptic consensus – and this is the real problem. On the national level, these populist cycles are probably less risky than many people believe because everything disappoints, even populism. It's fun to watch all these people shouting for a while, but when it goes on and on you become slightly exhausted. On the European Union level, you need two or three countries in order to start blocking certain decisions. The more dysfunctional the European Union looks, the more legitimate Euroscepticism becomes – but this time from the mainstream and not from the extreme.

A study carried out by Demos, based on the digital followers of an extreme party, showed that cultural insecurity is driving the followers more than economic insecurity. Another important aspect is the demographic problem. In many European societies, you have ageing populations and majorities, which are beginning to fear that they will find themselves in the minority. The Bulgarian debate, for example, is rife with talk of the Bulgarian nation disappearing and of demographic projections that, in year 2050, there will be four million Bulgarians but five million Roma, Turks and others. And this creates a very particular form of demographic fear, which is creating space for the defensive majorities just as much as harsh economic realities are. This has become an obstacle for the European project because, strangely enough, the European project is very much based on optimism. It's based on the assumption that you can move forward together. When there is this defensive, pessimistic mood in society, it's much more difficult to integrate. When it comes to policy responses, I do believe that the interesting challenge for everybody (from politicians to the analytical community) is how to negotiate a common approach on the European level to deal with the rise of populism that takes into account the very important contextual difference. Because the way you handle populism within Bulgarian democracy can also be the way to increase populism on the European level. And the UK can also be an example. Conservative parties may well be able to diminish support for UKIP at home by talking about Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants. On the European level, however, these aren't immigration policies that create a precedent that is going to be repeated. On the other side, Bulgarians and Hungarians are trying to attack foreign investors from the countries into which they are not allowed to immigrate, and this is creating a dynamic of its own. In my view, the biggest political issue is how to cope with this? From this point of view, dealing with populism is like cooking. It's a very local skill. I'll stop here.