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# Why Populism and Nationalism is a Successful Combination?

## A Theoretical Explanation

### ABSTRACT

*Contemporary nationalism and populism in Europe have been referred as a "powerful cocktail" or "the cancer of Europe". Both nationalism and populism claim to represent the people, if nationalism states who is in and out of the people, populism stresses on down and up representation, blames illegitimate and corrupted elite by claiming that populists do instead represent the people. On the eve of inflow of non-European immigrants and refugees to Europe awakening of national sentiments became a good strategy for populists. The paper will provide a closer theoretical look at concepts of nationalism and populism and more importantly will explore the interplay between populism and nationalism by suggesting the three "the people" concept: (1) defining what is/ who is "the people," (2) building an image of "other" vis-à-vis "the people," and (3) anti-establishment movement against the "other" in the name of "the people." The paper considers later an empirical case of Hungary with its anti-immigrant discourse which secured continuation of Orban's regime until 2022, to discuss closely a "powerful cocktail" of nationalism and populism in Hungary.*

## INTRODUCTION

The high number of non-European immigrants' inflow into European countries resulted in the rise of combination of nationalism and populism, which was labeled as a "powerful cocktail". Both nationalism and populism claim to represent the people. If nationalism states who is in and out of the people, populism stresses on down and up representation, by blaming the illegitimate and corrupted elite and claiming that populists are the real representatives of the people. Thousands of immigrants reaching Europe awakened negative national sentiments among the public of recipient countries against non-Europeans. Risen national sentiments as practice demonstrates became successful agenda for populists. The paper will provide a theoretical look at nationalism and populism and will seek to explore the interplay between populism and nationalism. To do so, the paper makes a theoretical review of nationalism and populism with an attempt to explain why nationalism and populism if put together become a "powerful cocktail."

## NATIONALISM, AS "IN AND OUT THE PEOPLE" DIMENSION

Despite nationalism is a vague phenomenon and has no universal definition, the paper sticks to a very simple definition by Thomas Eriksen which also covers the political aspect of the term, according to Eriksen, nationalism is an ideology or "ideological construction" of contemporary nation-states (2010).

Mainstream classic theories of nationalism are *primordialism*, *modernism* and *ethno-symbolism*. Primordial nationalism, also referred to as *organic* or *nationalist* nationalism is developed in the works of Anthony Smith (1998). Primordialists suggest, that at all times, including pre-modern times organic or natural nations existed. Modernist theories or constructivist theories of nationalism in opposition to primordialism, contend that nationalism emerged as a response or need to historical developments, such as industrialization, modernization, emergence of mass print and literacy (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006). Modernists claim that industrialization increased human mobility, and thus, created similar economic and political organization that later led to the emergence of a new ideology for creating social cohesion – nationalism (Eriksen, 2010). According to Gellner nationalism is a "political principle" where national and political units have to be harmonizing (1983, 1). Gellner explained nationalism through sentiment and movement:

> *"Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind"* (Ibid.).

In contrast to Gellner's interest in nationalism as a theory of political legitimacy, Benedict Anderson (2006, 4) studies "emotional legitimacy" of nationalism. In other words, Anderson is puzzled to understand the strength and importance of national sentiments and national feelings, such as readiness to die for the nation's well-being, etc. Anderson proposes the notion of "imagined community" when defining a nation. He believes that members within any community or country can only *imagine* other community-members as they are not able

to get to know, see or meet each other. Therefore, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6).

Finally, ethno-symbolism as its name says focuses on the role of myths, symbols and memories in a study of nationalism. Unlike to primordial central claim on the common sense of "physical kinship ties", ethno-symbolic central claim is on the common sense of "cultural affinities" (D.Smith, 1998, p. 192). The myth of a common ancestry or kinship ties is crucial for ethnic groups, as it records a history of ethnicity, by making it distinctive and justifiable. Smith notes that ethnic records were especially crucial for later nation-states, as they sought for "a rich and well documented 'ethno-history'", "myths of origins", "golden ages" and national heroes to nationalize or re-construct ethno-history (1998, 192).

Nationalism bifurcates between two opposite groups: voluntarist versus organic or non-voluntarist, inclusive versus exclusive, moderate versus aggressive, ethnic or genealogical versus civic or territorial, Western versus Eastern, etc. Regardless of differences in terminology proposed by various scholars, the ideas presented in these terms are similar. For instance, voluntarist and organistic or non-voluntarist distinction was made by Hans Kohn. He classifies nationalism as voluntarist if society members are free to choose on an individual basis and enter a society. Meanwhile, non-voluntarist nationalism does not have a freedom of choice, but imposes membership/non-membership to a society based on "fixed and indelible character which was stamped on its members at birth and from which they could never free themselves" (D.Smith, 1998, p. 146). Identically, Rogers Brubaker points out two types of nationalism: "civic nationalism, characterized as liberal, voluntarist, universalist, and inclusive; and ethnic nationalism, glossed as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist, and exclusive" (2004, 133). If the civic nationalism implies common citizenship, the ethnic nationalism builds common ethnicity.

Based on the theoretical explanation of nationalism above, we can assume that nationalism as an "ideological construction" and "political principle" defines who is in and out the society or the people. In other words, nationalism promoted by a state defines membership or non-membership to the society based on linguistic and ethnic or citizenship characteristics. Nationalism seeks to use and to reinforce a linkage between a society and a state to create an imagined community. If a state creates an imagined community by promoting inclusive or liberal policies, the community's membership is civic or citizenship-based. Whereas, if a state promotes imagined community through exclusive or illiberal policies, the community's membership is ethnic-based.


## POPULISM AS "UP AND DOWN THE PEOPLE" DIMENSION

Populism similar to nationalism has no universally accepted definition. What is populism is still vague and contested in academia: it is defined as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), political style (Moffit, 2013), pathology (Mény and Surel, 2002), hybrid regime (Muller, 2016), alternative form of political representation (Caramani, 2017), etc. However, despite many approaches in analyzing populism, what is clear is that populists tend to defend the interests of the ordinary people against the corrupted and privileged elite. The paper sticks to a definition proposed by Mudde, according to him, populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure

people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of *the volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (2004, 543).

Populists claim that people's sovereignty is violated by the constitutional democracy, the governments are no longer accountable to its constituency, but to the international community. Populists claim to be the legitimate representatives of the people defending their united common interests against the corrupted bureaucratic non-transparent elite or the other. As Margaret Canovan noted populism "can have different contents depending on the establishment it is mobilizing against" (Canovan, 1999, 4). The core legitimating notion for populists is "the people," which tends to change depending on the context. Therefore, she claims populism is not an ideology as it changes depending on context. Canovan further elaborates the notion of "the people" and she differentiates three forms. The first is *appeal to the united people* which represents the nation in general and which is more integrative. The second is *appeal to our people* which excludes immigrants, and finally *appeal to the common people* which implies ordinary people against corrupted politicians. Another important feature of populism according to her is that it is anti-establishment mobilization. Populism is an anti-elite phenomenon, as it aims to fight against the established status-quo in the name of people (Canovan, 1999). Populists claim that political elites are not bothered with what bothers ordinary people.

A very similar approach was developed by Mény and Surel (2002), they highlight instead three key features of populism. First is the importance of "the people," where an emotion of community is emphasized. Both horizontal and vertical divisions are used to exclude certain groups, whether elites or immigrants. The second feature that populists state is that "the people" were deceived by the corrupted privileged elites. Third, they claim for restoration of "primacy of the people," which means that the populists who are the real representatives of the people and their grievances should replace the current elites and serve the people (Ibid, 13).

Scholars also studied conditions promoting populism, according to them the most mentioned conditions are *social or economic crises*, *problems within political institutions* (problems within democracy or political representation) and *presence of charismatic leaders*. As it was stated above populism has an ability to unite the people against the corrupted privileged elite or other. Social crises or economic and financial crises as practice has shown are favorable conditions for populism emergence. Indeed, social unity or cohesion happens in extraordinary situations or crises, however, it should be noted that populists tend to use extraordinary situation rhetoric in everyday politics.

According to Canovan, there are problems within political institutions, because there is an unavoidable gap between actual performance and the promise of democracy (1999). Referring as "two faces of democracy," Canovan differentiates redemptive and pragmatic faces of democracy and concludes that when the system loses its legitimacy populism appears. The pragmatic face refers to the mechanisms, the institutions of a democracy, whereas the redemptive face points to promises of salvation. Identically, Peter Mair states that populism is a result of a broken promise of democracy. According to him, the voters' trust towards the system declines, and the people become detached from the politics, which results in a legitimacy or linking gap. The gap he continues, is fulfilled by populists who link "depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance," as parties become centric (Mair, 2002, 84). Finally, in populist politics presence of charismatic leaders is key to mobilize people around and to present themselves as real voice of the

people. Most of populist leaders tend to present themselves as pure representatives of ordinary people, and try to connect themselves with common people. In addition, it is important to note that populist leaders could gain their own prominence with the help of media (TV, radio and internet) which allowed charismatic leaders to find their own supporters. The increased mediatization of politics as Mudde rightly noted could also explain why populism became a habitual practice in Western politics (Mudde, 2004).

Based on the theoretical explanation of populism above, we can conclude that populism is an ideology according to which a society is divided into two antagonistic vertical groups – corrupted elites and common people. In other words, it represents the "*up* and *down* dimension" of a society by deciding who has a claim for membership in the up and down direction. Similar to nationalism populism defines membership or non-membership to "the people" based on the presence of pure public representation and pure public interests. Populists seek to use a legitimacy gap between "the common people" and "corrupted elite," and to serve as alternative true linkage between the two sides.

## WHY COMBINATION OF NATIONALISM AND POPULISM IS A "POWERFUL COCKTAIL"?

In contemporary politics of European countries, populism is on a rise as a reaction to inflow of high number of non-Europeans. Especially, a combination of nationalism and populism, a so-called "powerful cocktail" becomes a modern-day trend, which deserves a special attention. As theoretical examination above stated both nationalism and populism claim to represent "the people" - a core idea of democracy. If nationalism states who is in and out of the people, by including or excluding particular groups (ethnicities, gender, etc.), populism stresses on down and up representation, by blaming illegitimate and corrupted elite and claiming that populists are real representatives of the people.

Why is a combination of nationalism and populism a "powerful cocktail"? A possible answer to the posed question lies within *the three "the people"* concept. As it was mentioned above, populists first, identify what is/who is "the people," they try to create a homogenous society by excluding non-members and unite members. Second, populists construct an image of the "other" or "enemy" against "the people." The "other" is here key and decisive, which defines a context, as Canovan rightly noted. Depending on populists' agenda, the "other" can be an individual politician, the entire political leadership, businessmen, transnational corporations, foreign financial institutions or immigrants. Finally, in the third stage populists claim to fight against the "other" as anti-establishment movement in the name of "the people."

Building an image of the "other" (the second stage) is a phase when nationalism intervenes. Populists construct immigrants as "other" vis-à-vis "the people." Thousands of immigrants reaching Europe awakened negative national sentiments among the public of recipient countries against non-Europeans, to which media also contributed. Risen national sentiments as practice demonstrates became a winning agenda for populists to mobilize people around its charismatic leaders (the United Kingdom Independence Party, the National Front, the Alternative für Deutschland, Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség etc.). Therefore, most of contemporary populist movements in Europe and the rest of the world tend to use a successful duet of nationalism and populism. It should be noted that the combination of nationalism and populism is also a dangerous "cocktail," because when "the people" is considered through the lenses of a specific culture or race, it can easily grow into racism.

Finally, it can be added that the immigrant inflow to Europe is also presented as a social crisis or extraordinary situation, which is theoretically is one of conditions driving to the rise of populism. As suggested by a recent study, social crises, in particular economic or financial crises contribute to tensions between the Europeans and immigrants, which is used opportunistically by populist charismatic leaders to mobilize people around themselves in everyday politics (Yann Algan, 2017).

<div align="center">NATIONALISM AND POPULISM IN ACTION: A HUNGARIAN CASE</div>

In this part of the paper, a Hungarian example of combination of nationalism and populism is discussed through suggested in this study *the three "the people"* concept: (1) defining what is/ who is "the people," (2) building an image of "other" or "enemy" vis-à-vis "the people," and (3) anti-establishment movement against the "other" in the name of "the people."  The concept of *the three "the people"* is as elaborated above is a key concept explaining a powerful formula of nationalism and populism. The analysis and discussion below is based merely on information provided by key foreign media sources.

In Hungary, since the refugee crisis of 2015, anti-immigrant rhetoric became a top-priority political agenda under Viktor Orban's authoritarian leadership. He succeeded to build a fence along Hungary's borders with the Baltic States to block immigrants flow mainly from non-European countries. Moreover, this rhetoric became a successful electoral campaign strategy for the Hungarian Prime Minister to sustain longer in power. In April of 2018, the electoral victory (133 out of 199 seats in the Parliament) of ruling Fidesz party in alliance with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) secured for Orban the fourth term of Prime Ministry in Hungary until 2022. The Guardian notes that Fidesz won April 2018 parliamentary elections "exclusively on the threat posed to Hungary by migration." The Guardian continues that, in a closing campaign speech prior the parliamentary elections day, Orban warned, "If they open the borders, if migrants enter the country, there is no way back." Orban's anti-immigration posters during his party's agitation campaign were widely displayed around Budapest and the entire country in general, including in social media (Facebook). In 2018, after re-election, Orban publicly announced establishment of the "Christian democracy" in Hungary shaped by European traditions. The "Christian democracy" introduced by Orban as its name stands for, obviously would serve to solely Christian culture ignoring or non-tolerating other cultures living in Hungary. Based on this statement, in Hungary "the people" could be defined as a community consisting of a Christian culture. Contemporary understanding and the imagination of "the people" in Hungary is presented by the government as a merely Christian society which does not accommodate other cultures or values. Thus, it could be noted that in the contemporary Hungarian context, the concept "the people" is presented in a more exclusive rather than inclusive manner.

The ruling leadership in Hungary succeeded to create several enemy-images linked to each other. According to Orban's rhetoric, the "other"/ "enemy" vis-à-vis "the people" in Hungary, are non-European immigrants threatening Christian culture, European values and traditions. Another institutional "enemy" of "the people" is non-governmental organizations funded by George Soros, in particular Open Society Foundations, which is accused for actively encouraging immigration and supporting refugees. Finally, another the "other" vis-à-vis "the people" are supra-national businesses and institutions, including Brussels (the European

Union) sympathizing to non-European immigration and supporting refugees from non-European countries. These enemy-images are built mainly around non-European immigration issue, as a response to refugee crisis in Europe since 2015. Therefore, it can be stated that in Hungary a contemporary central "other"/ "enemy" vis-à-vis "the people" is non-European culture threatening to European and Christian culture.

As a counter-activity or anti-establishment movement against the "other" in the name of "the people," Orban's government is about to adopt a "stop-Soros" law in the Parliament which introduces high taxation (25% increase) towards NGOs that support immigration. This initiative, in general is expected to limit civil society's activities in the country. It is widely campaigned by Orban that Soros has a conspiracy for fall of Hungary by interfering into its domestic affairs, despite Soros's Open Society Foundations in Hungary have played a key role in fall of Communism since 1984 and independence of Hungary, by supporting youth through education scholarships. To note, Viktor Orban himself benefited from Soros's education scholarship program prior the Communism's collapse in Hungary. Another ambitious counter-activity or anti-establishment movement the populist leadership now tries to take up is building a like-minded anti-immigrant block around Hungary, which would eventually include Poland, Slovakia and other smaller European countries, to counter-balance France and Germany. In the first victorious speech in April 2018, Orban stressed that Hungary will be defended by him and his government against the constructed "other." The Hungarian example suggests that constructing the "other" vis-à-vis "the people," and the combination of nationalism with populism in general is often a successful combination for illiberal, authoritarian and corrupted political regimes' durability.

## CONCLUSION

Both nationalism and populism claim to represent "the people" - a core idea of democracy. If nationalism states who is in and out of the people, by including or excluding particular groups (ethnicities, gender, etc.), populism stresses on down and up representation, by blaming the illegitimate and corrupted elite and claiming that populists are the real representatives of the people. A possible answer to the posed question lies within the concept "the people": (1) defining what is/ who is "the people," (2) building an image of the "other" vis-à-vis "the people," and (3) anti-establishment movement against the "other" in the name of "the people." The paper later considered the empirical case of populist nationalist leadership of Hungary. Namely, the Hungarian case was discussed though *the three "the people"* concept suggested by the paper to discuss closely a "powerful cocktail" of nationalism and populism.

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