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POPULISM – A FACTORY OF MYTHS

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Abstract: Review of Mihnea S. Stoica, *Populismul în Europa. Dezvoltare istorică, discurs politic și susținători ai dreptei radicale* (*Populism in Europe. Historical development, political discourse and supporters of the radical right*) (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017).

Key Words: political myths, Populism in Europe, populist discourse, new mythologies, ideology, strategy, Mihnea S. Stoica.

The political sphere can be perceived as a playground where different actors operate with myths to gain supporters. Perhaps the very idea of the possibility of a human community is one of the most powerful of these myths. Nonetheless, the ongoing international crises put into question the traditional political myths, yielding a need for new mythologies and symbols for people to believe in. In the aftermath of phenomena as terrorism and immigration, the political discourses have become providers of certainties and reassurances for people that can no longer believe in the establishments, as they problematize the current issues as an affidavit of the failure of the standard way of doing politics. The political phenomenon (since it cannot be called an ideology) that seems to have all the answers to the concerns of the masses is populism, which operates with a violent rhetoric that leaves no question unanswered. The populist leaders have given themselves an imperative mandate to save the people from the evil elites, operating on a clear friend-enemy distinction that Carl Schmitt has identified to be the basis of politics: the good, common people are the friends, whereas the elites are the enemies that promote evil.

In the context of a Europe which has become a fertile ground for populist parties not merely at national level but also at Union level, as the 2014 European Parliament elections have proved, there is a pressing need of a thorough analysis of the way populism succeeds in gaining increasing numbers of supporters. In the wake of this call, Mihnea Stoica's book *Populismul în Europa. Dezvoltare istorică, discurs politic și susținători ai dreptei radicale (Populism in Europe. Historical development, political discourse and supporters of the radical right)* comes as an analysis that does not limit itself to assessing populism from an interdisciplinary point of view, but identifies the causes that lead to the success of populist strategies relying on the profiles of the electorate of the successful parties. The book embarks on a theoretical and empirical analysis structured in six chapters which first explains the evolution of the concept of populism and its main themes and then provides an insight into "populism in action" in seven European countries (France, Austria, Italy, Romania, The Netherlands, Finland and UK). After the theoretical foundations are laid down, the author portrays the stereotypical opinions of the populist enthusiasts using statistics gathered from the 2014 European Parliament elections. Stoica puts forward the thesis that populism is not a political ideology, but also rather a super-strategy (Stoica 2017, 67), hence the populist parties are defined by ideological inconsistencies and display a high degree of clientelism. Relying on the contradictory policies of several European populist parties, he proves that these parties cannot be placed on either side of the political spectrum, showing that populism does not imply an established political agenda. The question that poses itself is how can political organisations that fail to run on an agenda obtain considerable

support, taking into account that the traditional parties run on clearly defined policies. The empirical analysis placed after the theoretical considerations reveals that the supporters of the populists share some common traits: they come from areas which are affected by unemployment, immigration and criminality and, as a consequence of their basic education, they feel underrepresented in the political process.

Combining these elements, the study becomes a portrait of the European populist scene, offering the readers not only an unbiased radiography of the populist strategies, but also a portrait of the populist enthusiasts. Stoica offers the socio-demographical profile of the typical populist voter, which he created through analysing statistically the data provided by EUVox, an application meant for counselling for the European Parliament scrutiny in 2014.

Even though the author does not hesitate to point out the negative aspects of the populist ideas (e.g. neo-racism), he emphasizes that, hence populism is not an ideology but a strategy, it cannot bring about passions: it would be wrong for one to admit a hatred for populism, as only ideologies can nurture passions. Populism, however, is a super-strategy which employs communicational strategies so as to win the blind trust of a weak, underrepresented electorate. In order to support his thesis, the author relies on the myths produced by the populists and on their claim to solve the problem of the underrepresentation. Though, being a mere strategy, populism cannot be categorized as being inherently negative: the author admits that populism should be administered “in doses” (Stoica 2017, 16), as every political strategy needs to operate with the needs of the people and to provide them with reassurances and promises for a hypothetical better future. Stoica even underlines that the complete lack of populism has detrimental effects on political candidates, as it was in the case of Ed Miliband who ran on an “underpromise and overdeliver” campaign instead of delivering the people promises which would bring him voters.

Admitting that populism is merely a strategy and should not cause passions (Stoica 2017, 16), the author analyses the mechanisms it uses in order to gain support. These strategies prove to be nothing more than a clever use of political myths which create the illusion of perfect representation of the people that were neglected by the elites. The populists come with a logic of their own: only those who properly belong to the people as defined by them should benefit from the regime. This discriminatory ruling method seems to re-equilibrate the polities, as those who do not share the universal values postulated by the populists are unworthy of any benefits, as they support evil policies that only harm the polity.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of populism is that the myths which it employs are, in fact, non-existent. Stoica takes a diachronic look back and points out that populism emerged in the aftermath

of the strikes of the farmers and peasants in the second half of the 19th century in Russia and the United States of America. At that point, it was legitimate to speak of a segment of population that has a rural, religiously oriented life and thus does not feel represented by the progressive elites who lead the political speak. However, nowadays the concept of a homogenous, moral people whose axis mundi is the village and its pure life can no longer be employed. As the author has shown, the electorate of the populist parties today fails to form a clear-cut category and is rather defined by what it is not than what it is: they are usually nationalists, anti-establishment, euroskeptics and anti-multiculturalism. The provocation of the populists is to create new myths, with which people can identify, so as to be able to create an electorate in the name of which they can claim absolute representation. The author has pointed out the fact that myths are a sine-qua-non condition for the development of a political community in his article *Political Myths of the Populist Discourse*, in which he underlines the fact that people need myths around which to create a national identity. The artificial myths produced by the populists are studied in detail, as the cases of the countries in which populism is uncannily performant are analysed. For example, in France the Front National – the most efficient European far-right populist party – has created the myth of a people which is simultaneously an *ethnos* and a *demos* (Stoica 2017a, 113), i.e. they are ethnically pure and at the same time untouched by the flaws of the political class (out of which the most striking is corruption). Consequently, the political battle becomes a mythological war “good” versus “evil”, in which the people are the good and the elites are the evil (Stoica 2017; Stoica 2014). Claiming to be representatives of the weakest which are exploited by the out-of-this-world elites, the populists seem to be flawless in the eyes of their electorate. Nonetheless, the French *ethnos-demos* myth is not singular. The author identified in the case of Italy a myth that he refers to as a “geographically-administrative fiction”, i.e. the existence of a new Italian region that has no historical justification but would be fatherland of the good and honest Italians that are fundamentally different from the corrupt and lazy politicians. It is underlined that the strategy of this party mirrors what the French populists do (and in fact all the other): the isolate a segment of the population and label them as the authentic people; however this imaginary community is not the result of a sharing of common traits but of their being different from all the others. Taking into account that the political elites are pro-multiculturalism and support the European Union, the supporters of the populists are the ones that believe the exact opposites; and even though there is nothing more to unite them than their mutual disapproval of the establishment, the populists succeed in yielding the idea that they belong to a privileged category.

According to the author, the use of fabricated fictions is combined with relying on the idea of political underrepresentation. Populism builds

on the poor understanding of democracy of the masses with low levels of education. Unable to grasp how the political representation works, they feel completely left out of the democratic decision making process. Stoica speaks of an “educational cleavage” between the supporters of the populists and the rest of the electorate: the fans of populism are usually less educated, whereas the electorate with superior studies is sensitive to the processes of representative democracy and thus does not feel wronged by the decisions taken by the establishment. This leads to strong anti-establishment feelings that do not stem from solid reasons but from a mere lack of understanding of the political system. Underrepresentation itself becomes a myth that creates a fertile ground for the (yet another) myth of the populist party that provides exclusive representation, as if the “real” people have given them an imperative mandate to represent them.

The author points that, despite the anti-establishment, anti-elitism policy and the opposition to everything commonly perceived as “powerful”, the populists display an ideological fragility that becomes evident through the analysis of the empirical data. Especially in the economic field, the opinions of the populist supporters show inconsistency: on the one hand, they support higher taxes for higher incomes but, on the other hand, they oppose the redistribution of wealth. This proves that populism fails to provide an ideological core, as it just uses the dissatisfactions of the people and creates the image of a perfect alternative to the establishment that is the very source of all the discontent.

To conclude his analysis, Stoica raises a few problems that the populist super-strategy raises on the international level. The fundamental question posed by the author is how can political communication survive without employing populist strategies. This is highly problematic, as the people are avid for political fictions which they can believe to solve the crises that the classical ideologies yet failed to solve. The author perceives these crises as a call for post-ideologies, able to cure the mistakes of the traditional ways of doing politics, albeit without deceiving the masses into believing in political fictions. One possible solution, the author notes, would be an emphasis on the mechanisms of democratic representation. But, as the book has shown, this would erase the need for only one problem solved by the populists, namely underrepresentation. Whether or not the stringent hunger for certainties and reassurances can be ended without populist mechanisms is a question that the author leaves and unanswered- perhaps we have to wait for a prospective work of Stoica’s to get an answer. Yet, after having read the book, one becomes sensitive to the populist mechanisms and able to distinguish their electorate. Hopefully, the gained ability to perceive the populist strategies might also lead to immunity towards them.

Acknowledgments: *The work of Teodora Groza has been supported from the project “Bursa Tânărilor Cercetător”, financed by UEFISCDI, project number PN III-P1-1.1-BT-*

2016-0017, project title: “Construcția și deconstrucția dreptului internațional între autonomie și heteronomie”.

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