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***The Rise of Populism: what are the causes and  
what can be done against it?***

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The Rise of Populism: A Philosophical View

Populism is on the rise today with the emergence of ever more populist movements, many of which form governments across the globe. However, populism is not a new concept. It is thought to have co-existed alongside democracy since the inception of the political system<sup>1</sup>, though now it appears more prominent than ever, in part due to its higher visibility. In spite of the long history of populism and its recent revival, a number of problems surround the concept with lack of consensus among academics and practitioners on issues including the causes of populism, potential remedies for it and even the very definition of the term. This paper examines all of these problems and suggests an original solution in a response to what can be done against the rise of populism.

Populism is an inherently problematic term. Today, it is often associated with right-wing movements and it has acquired an increasingly negative connotation as a radical, extremist and even futile ideology. However, this is not necessarily the case. A standard definition of populism provided by the Oxford Dictionary describes it as “a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.” This definition clearly identifies two elements, common to all populist movements, with which academics have generally corroborated: one, appeal to ordinary people, and two, opposition to an elite establishment<sup>2</sup>. These two elements in and of themselves, however, are also ambiguous as they do not specify who forms the two groups at opposition with each other – the people and the elite – thus leaving significant room for interpretation according to the demands of the context. This implies that populism is quite flexible, and populists around the world have taken advantage of this, evident by the wide range of movements across the political spectrum. For instance, in Europe and the United States, populism is mostly confined to the right-wing, with elements of nationalism and in the case of Europe, Euroscepticism,

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<sup>1</sup> Rooduijn, Matthijs. “Why Is Populism Suddenly All the Rage?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Nov. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Bryant, Octavia, and Benjamin Moffitt. “What Actually Is Populism? And Why Does It Have a Bad Reputation?” *The Conversation*, 15 Mar. 2019.

exemplified by Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Luigi Di Maio among others. However, left-wing populism is on the rise too, most notably in Latin America, but also in Europe with Greece's Syriza as one illustration. For each of these movements, "the people" and "the elite" are comprised of distinctly different segments of society. Perhaps more importantly, their aspirations and policies also vary significantly from Rodrigo Duterte's orders to execute extrajudicial murders of drug dealers in the Philippines to Podemos' appeals to extend voting rights to immigrants in Spain<sup>3</sup>. The variance of populism invites the debate whether all populist policies are in fact malicious – after all, is it that bad to grant immigrants voting rights?

This paper takes the view that, regardless of the seemingly benign aspirations and policies of some populist movements and irrespective of their standing on the political spectrum, all populism is inherently dangerous to liberal democracy. This is based on an often overlooked distinction between the two elements of Western democracy as we know it – the democratic element and the liberal element<sup>4</sup>. The democratic element today simply refers to the rule of the people through free and fair elections in a multiparty democracy. It is a process which has been historically separate from individual liberties and the rule of the law – the two pillars which form the liberal element, also known as constitutional liberalism. Each of the two elements can exist on its own – in a liberal autocracy such as Singapore, or in an illiberal democracy like many of the countries led by populist governments today. However, the ideal of Western democracy which "protect[s] an individual's autonomy and dignity, [... and] rests on the tradition of the rule of law" can only exist when the two elements work in symbiosis – through elections and forms of direct democracy as well as checks and balances, and equality under the law<sup>5</sup>. Populism, then, is by definition democratic – it is the popular will of the

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<sup>3</sup> "What Is Populism?" *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 19 Dec. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6, 1997, pp. 22-43. *JSTOR*.

<sup>5</sup> Zakaria. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy."

majority. It, however, reduces liberal democracy to a minimalist version of itself which only respects the democratic element of the system at the expense of the liberal element – and by extension, at the peril minorities and the rule of law.

Fareed Zakaria, the political theorist who articulated the distinction between the two elements of liberal democracy in 1997 discussed above, has been able to foresee with an eerie, remarkable degree of accuracy the rise of populism and the illiberal democracies which it produces. In his work, he also offered an explanation about the causes of it which, however, has not stood the test of time. Zakaria argued that countries where constitutional liberalism developed before democracy have a strong tradition in the protection of individual autonomy and the rule of law which can resist the allure of the illiberal<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, countries where democracies were created without such a tradition could easily succumb to the populist appeal of power-hungry leaders. Zakaria mentions the United States, the United Kingdom and the states succeeding the former Austro-Hungarian Empire as examples of strongholds of liberal democracy, but the political landscape in these countries today dominated by figures like Donald Trump, Brexiteers and Viktor Orban reveals that this is not the case anymore. Thus, the cause cannot be merely the lack of a tradition in constitutional liberalism. For this reason, this paper departs from the views of Zakaria who looks at historical developments, and instead, turns to developments in the present as the causes of populism.

With recognition that the causes of populism are very complex with a high level of regional variance at the lower level of analysis (individual or cognitive, and institutional), this paper addresses the structural causes of populism and argues that recent developments have created a breeding ground for it. While a multitude of factors have contributed to the emergence of this breeding ground, globalization is among the most notable. In the West, globalization challenges the social and economic standing of “ordinary people” as increased immigration

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<sup>6</sup> Zakaria. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.”

flows demand the spread of multicultural values, and cheaper labor markets abroad cause higher unemployment among unskilled workers. At the same time, developing nations unable to take full advantage of the benefits of globalization face inequality and poverty at home where charismatic populists thrive with empty promises. While this simplified explanation of recent developments related to globalization may contribute to the rise of populism, the breeding ground which they create is not enough to produce such a significant rise of the phenomenon alone. Instead, populism requires a “credible populist challenger”<sup>7</sup> who, in turn requires something, or someone, to challenge. Since globalization is a structural phenomenon, it lacks concrete agency. As a result, the elites are assigned, rightly or unrightfully so, the responsibility for these developments and they become a target of the rhetoric and the attacks of populist leaders and their followers. This observation, however, begs the obvious question who exactly are the members of this elite – after all, “those seeking to diagnose the causes of the current wave of populism need to understand what populist voters are truly angry about.”<sup>8</sup>

In the opening of an article addressing the difficult question of who the elite is, *the Economist* starts with a whimsical joke which conveys the difficulty of this task and to some extent, the absurdity of the elite’s role in the rise of populism<sup>9</sup>:

An academic, a politician, a journalist, a film star, a nobleman and a banker walk into a bar. They order different drinks, and sit at separate tables each doing their own thing. There is no punch line; these people do not belong together in any sensible way. Yet members of these groups and others are regularly given the same label: “elites”.

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<sup>7</sup> Rooduijn, Matthijs. “Why Is Populism Suddenly All the Rage?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Nov. 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “The World Has Become Obsessed with Elites.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 15 Dec. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> “The World Has Become Obsessed with Elites.”

Though the article does not produce a concrete answer, it does provide some useful insight. For instance, it reports that the adjectives traditionally used to describe the notorious elite have expanded from “ruling,” “wealthy,” “monied” to include “secular,” “cultural,” “educated,” “metropolitan” and “bureaucratic”.<sup>10</sup> This points to a rise in the perception of the influence of a diverse social class of people who promote their particular values including those of globalization, secularism and diversity. Whether this influence has increased in reality or only in perception is practically irrelevant in this case (though an important subject in its own right), since at least one of them has contributed to the portrayal of the elite as a scapegoat for the current developments. Consequently, the established group became at irresolvable odds with the ordinary people – the necessary condition for populism. In addition to this, technological advancement has made this opposition of values and worldviews more prominent and more salient and thus, exacerbated the threat of populism. Both traditional media and even more so, social media have created echo chambers which facilitate radicalization on either side of the political spectrum with little exposure to nuanced perspectives. This not only further reinforces already held beliefs, but also makes polarization between the different groups more prominent. Thus, this complex picture can be summarized as structural factors which have created a breeding ground exploited by a populist challenger in opposition to the established elite and magnified by technology in a rapid unfolding which led to the dramatic rise of populism.

Such a complex problem would therefore require a very complex solution in turn. In the search for such a remedy, it might be useful to take a brief look at political philosophy. Thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, as many before them, have deliberated the right balance between state power and individual autonomy in a liberal democracy, and how to achieve it. According to Berlin, there is no single “final solution,” and society as well as its

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<sup>10</sup> “The World Has Become Obsessed with Elites.”

leaders should instead aim to solve problems through compromise and inclusiveness as per the demands of the context<sup>11</sup> (as opposed to populism which appears to favor “final” solutions for pressing problems over of compromise). Similarly, Karl Popper further argued that as new problems appear, new solutions which reconcile different ideas and different needs should be found, based on openness and tolerance. In fact, Popper went as far as to claim that “in order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must be intolerant of intolerance.”<sup>12</sup> But how to achieve that and how to create such a society?

Intellectual humility is a fairly recent subject of academic work in philosophy and psychology and despite its early stage of theoretical development, the concept can serve as the foundation for the re-building of more tolerant and inclusive communities in the two opposing groups which contribute to the rise of populism. Intellectual humility involves<sup>13</sup>:

having (a) insight about the limits of one’s knowledge, marked by openness to new ideas; and (b) regulating intellectual arrogance, marked by the ability to present one’s ideas in a non-offensive manner and receive contrary ideas without taking offense, even when confronted with alternative viewpoints.”

In other words, intellectual humility applies the traditional virtue of humility to knowledge and intelligence – a seemingly simple idea centered on open-mindedness and respect, but nonetheless, one with a great potential to lead to a tangible improvement of interpersonal relations among individuals and groups. This is especially relevant in the highly polarized political and social environment dominated by populism where both the elite and the “ordinary people” feel marginalized. In reality, however, both of them contribute to this mutual marginalization of communities, opinions and values, as neither group displays the

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<sup>11</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

<sup>12</sup> Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, Don E., et al. “Distinguishing Intellectual Humility and General Humility.” *Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 3, May 2016, pp. 215–224. EBSCOhost.

virtue of intellectual humility collectively. More intellectually humble elite would be less dismissive and arrogant of the needs and views of “ordinary people,” while the latter would be more open to hear alternative explanations for the decline in their living standard and other concerns. Gradually, this could facilitate an open dialogue, an atmosphere of trust and shared interest, and an environment where compromise would be possible in the way which Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper envisioned. Such developments would significantly undermine the fertility of the breeding ground for populism which it now enjoys in the absence of a truly open discourse. And while intellectual humility is not the “final solution” against which Isaiah Berlin warned either, it is the first step towards finding an appropriate response to this and any other problem as it emerges.

In conclusion, this paper attempted to clarify the concept of populism and its threat to liberal democracy, and it briefly traced the possible causes of the development as a prelude to offering a solution. Though each of these issues requires a multifaceted approach in its examination, the one which merits the most attention as well as practical action is the solution. Due to the multitude of factors operating on different levels in the rise of populism, any solution is likely to be insufficient on its own. It is nearly impossible to address effectively structural dynamics, and it is difficult as well as morally and politically dubious to regulate emerging populist leaders and the channels which they use to spread their messages. The only area of action is the individual. On a more personal note, I feel like every individual can and should practice intellectual humility in order to combat the rise of populism and protect the integrity of liberal democracy. In Bulgaria, the region and the European Union, the faculty, staff and students of the American University in Bulgaria would most likely fall into the elite group, at least in the perceptions of outsiders. As such, we can set the tone and be an example of an intellectually humble community – first and foremost, on a local level in the town of Blagoevgrad, but also on national and global.

When Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history after the collapse of communism, he might have been half right. Democracy appears to be the default position of many populists, but constitutional liberalism, once an inseparable element of democracy, is under constant attack on a global level. While the causes of the phenomenon are multifaceted and complex, the first step towards the restoration of liberal democracy can be simple: intellectual humility which facilitates tolerance, open dialogue and ability to reconcile the different values and needs of societies.

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