

# The Rise of Populism: Democracy's Way Back to the Heart

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“[...] head and hands need a mediator. The mediator between head and hands must be the heart.”

*Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang, and written by Thea von Harbou.

Society in Fritz Lang's dystopian sci-fi classic, *Metropolis*, is undoubtedly oversimplified. In *Metropolis* the city, the working-class builders (*hands*) are exploited by the city planners (*head*). Without mediation (*the heart*), the two sides inevitably clash into conflict. *Metropolis*' imagery is in fact prevalent in social contract theory as the metaphor of the *body politic*: “heads” of state are chosen to govern for the entire “body” of people. In democracies, people directly choose their leaders by voting, and the fairness of that process determines whether a democracy is, respectively, liberal or illiberal – and liberal, or Western-type, democracy was until recently believed to be the undisputed champion of good governance. Lately, however, a growing majority of people in the West have felt increasingly disconnected with their leaders, a trend captured in the promises of populists to “re-connect” with them. Populism, notwithstanding its negative manifestations, addresses a paradox of contemporary liberal democracy – free people feel powerless and excluded from the *body politic*, and their equally powerless leaders fail to become fully representative of the whole *body politic*. Its verdict is clear: the liberal order in its current form is doomed – because it lacks a *heart*.

Key to our understanding of “populism” is the term's etymological tension with the concept of democracy. Whereas the Latin *populus* and the Greek *demos* are interchangeable words for a political assembly of people, populism is the rule of “ordinary people” who feel misrepresented by their political elites (despite having elected them democratically). It is the feeling that *a people* are no longer *the people* who are sovereign in a democratic state. Henceforth, populism is inherently confrontational in regard to democracy, which has failed to rightfully fulfill its purpose. Elites' temptation to dismiss any failure of liberal democracy, and to

put the blame on the people, is a mistake – because a democracy has certainly failed if its people feel disillusioned with it. Bulgaria's own experience with democratic disillusionment perhaps best captures the essence of the populist specter haunting the Western world today.

In 2001, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a former Bulgarian king deposed by communists, became the first political outsider with a populist platform to capitalize on people's disillusionment with Bulgaria's transition to democracy. Up until that point, the Bulgarian transition had been marred by an unstable two-party political system, rampant corruption, and worsening economic conditions. However, the government immediately preceding Simeon was different. The United Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition, led by Ivan Kostov, came to power in 1997 in response to the economic collapse and hyperinflation caused by the pro-communist Videnov government. In fulfilling its full four-year term, the Kostov government managed to stabilize the Bulgarian economy, and establish Bulgaria as a perspective Western state – part of NATO and the EU. Why did then a voting majority of 43% choose a political newcomer with a populist platform filled with insincere and impractical promises over the most successful government of the transition period during the 2001 parliamentary elections?

The UDF leadership's half-baked response to Simeon's victory, as former UDF leader Philip Dimitrov notes in *The Myths of the Bulgarian Transition*, was symptomatic of Kostov's failure to satisfy the Bulgarian people. In their failure to grasp what had gone wrong, the UDF and many of its supporters opted to explain their defeat by reinvigorating the myth of the “stupid Bulgarian people.” Unsurprisingly this further exacerbated public trust in UDF leadership, which was widely viewed as complacent and disdainful, and the coalition never won an election again. Regardless of all the accusations of corruption the Kostov government had to suffer during its mandate, the underlying reason for its downfall, Dimitrov asserts, was its proclaimed disbelief in

political morality. Kostov spent the years in opposition to the Videnov government in prescribing Machiavellian practices in an attempt to achieve some populist appeal. Ironically, that went contrary to Machiavelli's original advice of his magnum opus, *The Prince*, which postulated that political leaders should always appear dignified, generous, and virtuous to the majority of people (even when one was not, and Machiavelli argued that great leaders usually weren't). At the end of Kostov's term, the majority of Bulgarians felt neglected by its complacent leaders, and stripped of the promise for just democracy and prosperity which had brought Kostov to power in 1997. The UDF was meant to provide an alternative to the communist kleptocratic model of governance, which plagued the Bulgarian transition, but ultimately failed to show enough willingness to tackle corruption. Kostov's strict economic policy, albeit successful, produced many "losers" who in the end felt abandoned by their uncompassionate elite. In such context the majority of Bulgarians elected a populist newcomer like Simeon – not because they were stupid or immoral, but because they protested against a democratic elite stripped of any morality or humanity. In her post-election analysis, Diana Ivanova of *Radio Free Europe* best captured the zeitgeist of 2001 Bulgaria: "Bulgaria does not want to be understood – she wants to be hugged."

Whereas cases of populism like Bulgaria's were previously believed to be strictly national in character, the populist problem today appears to have transcended national borders to now threaten the entire Western world. The 2015 European migrant crisis triggered an outbreak of populist waves most apparent in Central and Eastern European countries, yet two particular events in 2016 took the West aback: the British people's choice to say "yes" to Brexit, and America's shocking decision to elect its worst president in over a century – Donald Trump. In both cases, the majority of voters supposedly embraced irrationality, and chose to endanger the future prosperity of their homeland. Were the majorities of British and American people blatantly

stupid to make such disastrous decisions – something supposedly explained by the voters' demographics (most of whom voted in favor of either Brexit or Trump were in fact predominantly uneducated)? Unfortunately, Western elites and media were quick to deplore these very same majorities (just remember how Hillary Clinton infamously called Trump supporters “deplorables”), which further exacerbated existing divisions within British and American societies – essentially a repeat of UDF's fatal mistake to put the blame on the Bulgarian people. Growing democratic disillusionment, appearing simultaneously on each sides of the Atlantic Ocean, signals that there are serious shortcomings in the current liberal international order. Populism manifests these shortcomings in its critique of hyper-globalism and multiculturalism, as well as in its unforgiving hostility towards meritocratic elites.

The sheer complexity of today's world is what really makes the rise of populism so hard to explain, and so hard to deal with. To illustrate, an attempt to study globalization's sociopolitical and socioeconomic implications is doomed to failure due to the simple fact that it is humanly impossible to know the whole world. Globalization is, of course, to a large extent the reason for populism, and regularities in the distribution of populist votes help us reveal some of its fundamental downsides. For instance, the 2016 United States presidential election distinguished two deeply divided Americas: of people living in conservative rural areas in continental states, and of people living in big cosmopolitan cities in coastal states. When a democracy produces not one but two *bodies* of people, then in its failure it gives birth to populism.

David Goodheart observed a similar fault line in post-Brexit Britain: between the “somewheres” and the “anywheres.” The “somewheres” were “those who come from Somewhere – rooted in a specific place or community, usually a small town or in the

countryside, socially conservative, often less educated” – and the “anywheres” were “those who could come from Anywhere: footloose, often urban, socially liberal and university educated.” Goodheart’s categories are useful in recognizing the “somewheres” as the paradigmatic group of populist voters, but are ultimately insufficient in explaining populist animosity towards elites (“anywheres”) and migrants (“others”). Distrust in the “anywheres” is best seen in Central and Eastern Europe – where the majority of young people leave their homeland in search for a better life. The freedom of movement brought about with the fall of communism has been the region’s greatest blessing and biggest curse. All 10 fastest shrinking nations are located in Eastern Europe, and the majority of people who get to stay look down to the “anywheres” as national traitors. That’s precisely the reason why populists like Hungary’s Orbán and Poland’s Kaczyński embraced xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric during follow-up to the refugee crisis: populism promises to protect the remaining “somewheres” from being replaced with despicable “anywheres” coming from the outside, and from being governed by untrustworthy “anywheres” from within. Unsurprisingly, Trump’s two biggest campaign promises were to “build the wall” (to protect America from an influx of illegal migrants), and to “drain the swamp” (to rid the American government of a self-interested political establishment). Such “swamp” unfortunately exists in the West, and herein lies the main takeaway from Bulgaria’s experience with populism – if a government fails to display moral imperatives such as responsibility, empathy, and honor, it will be inevitably doomed in the face of a populist threat.

Two historical events stripped the liberal international order of its original sense of morality and purpose – the embrace of neoliberal economic policies in the 1970s and 1980s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. According to James Montier and Philip Pilkington in their joint commentary *The Deep Causes of Secular Stagnation and the Rise of*

*Populism*, neoliberalism, which came about as a response to the phenomenon of “stagflation” experienced in the United States and the United Kingdom after the 1973 oil shock, produced “a broken system of economic governance.” This neoliberal system was characterized by four significant policy goals:

1. “the abandonment of full employment as a desirable policy goal and its replacement with inflation targeting;
2. an increase in the globalisation of the flows of people, capital, and trade;
3. a focus at a firm level on shareholder value maximisation rather than reinvestment and growth;
4. a pursuit of flexible labour markets and the disruption of trade unions and workers’ organisations.”

Montier and Pilkington argue that the West was quick to abandon the employment-centered policies that brought about the Golden Age of capitalism, and what we have now is a neoliberal system blemished by low productivity, lower growth rates, and most importantly – soaring wealth and income inequality. Neoliberalism as such could be popularized only in the context of the Cold War, and the same goes for its philosophical foundation – Ayn Rand’s writings. Her philosophical system of Objectivism embraced excessive individualism and egoism, and produced an American society of self-indulged narcissists. Therefore as a moral imperative, neoliberalism made sense only in opposition to the USSR’s totalitarian communism (one is immediately reminded of Raegan’s “evil empire” speech). The West had been the preferred side in an ideological deadlock with the Soviet Union. With its collapse in 1991, however, the liberal international order lost its last moral imperative.

Today’s context of low capitalist morality and increasing inequality in the distribution of wealth closely echoes the bourgeois society Karl Marx describes in *The Communist Manifesto*, yet now we know for a fact that communism will not be the force to bring it down. Populism, while a significant threat in its own right, also has a long way to go to present a real threat to the liberal international order. How does one tackle it, however, if it is systemic product of various

shortcomings of globalism and the current neoliberal economic order? For starters, Europe's mission is to simply live through it, and adapt its political order to satisfy more people at the same time. The brightest beam of hope for the EU's future was the election of Emmanuel Macron as President of France in 2017. He ran as a political outsider, very much like a populist, but with a pro-European and liberal agenda and won the majority of France. He correctly understood that the French people did not want to be detached from the rest of Europe, but rather to be part of a better, different Europe. Much of President Macron's political ambition has yet to become reality, but crucially Macron has learnt an important lesson in his handling of the street movement *gilets jaunes*, which shares many characteristics of a populist movement of the "somewheres", and is also anti-establishment. After some shaky months, Macron has eventually managed to restore political momentum by initiating his *le Grand débat national* – a platform for interaction between Macron, government representatives, and the "ordinary people." Liberal leaders should copy the success of Macron's *Grand débat* – for it has proven to be a novel yet effective way of mediation between *the head* and *the hands*.

Populism is a catalyst for change. It changed America for the worse, but brought hidden tensions to the surface of society, where they can now be addressed. It changed Bulgaria for the worse, as we suffered through increasing corruption and diminishing freedom of speech. It is about to decisively change Europe after the European Parliament elections at the end of May. Yet, I am optimistic that populism will change the Western world for good, because it brought its attention to the historically high level of income, and the frailty of national and European identities. Because America and Europe can do more than just fumble in trying to understand their woes – they show the big *heart* of liberal democracy, which will finally hug its people.