ⓘD http:/orcid.org/0000-0002-7423-6345

Paulina Lenik[1]

Jagiellonian University

ⓘD http:/orcid.org/0000-0001-5056-8241

Natasza Styczyńska[2]

Jagiellonian University

Defining and Researching Populist Parties in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract: One of the first constatations for those researching populist parties is the lack of one, universal definition of the concept of populism. That reads directly into the ways we try to capture populist parties. Certain features unify the populist actors, primarily the supply of rhetoric to safeguard the majority rule of the people, by some referred to as populist ideology (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2013). However, not only the definition of populism creates challenges to the proper identification of populist parties. Several other notions, such as ideology or left-right placement – and the misalignment in its general understanding – increase the complexity of studies that attempt to compare populist parties. The article focuses on theoretical aspects of populism studies, with a special focus on the populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that developed in a peculiar post-communist setting that influenced party performance in the region.

Keywords: political party, populism, Central and Eastern Europe, party politics

[1]   **Paulina Lenik** – post-doctoral researcher in the Taube Centre for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science and International Relations, Jagiellonian University. Her research interests include electoral behaviour, Central and Eastern Europe, populism, and survey data analysis. E-mail: p.lenik@uj.edu.pl.

[2]   Natasza Styczyńska – Assistant Professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Her academic interests include party politics, nationalism, populism and Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. E-mail: natasza.styczynska@uj.edu.pl.

Introduction

Populism is alive and well in Central and Eastern Europe, even though, according to some, this trend is slowing down, and the number of countries around the globe ruled by populists is the lowest it's been since 2003 (Meyer, 2023). Regionally, populist leaders enjoy stable support and are able to govern and realize their political agendas. The existing literature shows that crises bolster illiberal, antielitist, and sovereigntist rhetoric that is the foundation for most populist actors. In the European context, the economic and migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine created fertile ground for populist theories and policymaking. The well-known dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupted elite" has been distorted by populists in power according to their needs and possibilities coming from the specific domestic context (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017).

In this article, we pose the following question. What is the current state of academic literature concerning how to identify populist parties? A growing number of misconceptions about what populism is, and how we come to understand it, have led us to reconsider the most recent scholarly opinions on the topic. Our objective, therefore, is to recognize certain aspects of populist parties that warrant a feasible comparative foundation for scholars with an interest in the field. We also seek clarity on theoretical concepts that are pertinent to regional comparisons of populist parties. That influenced our selection, which is based on items that can be compared across regions.

This research is not without its shortcomings. We provide a literature review, which is strictly selective for the sake of feasibility. Furthermore, we indicate that our considerations are contingent on the definition of populism, which is a subject of an ongoing debate. Secondly, we follow existing research by providing a summary of the notable scholarly literature, which provides guidance for empirical studies. Therefore, we do not provide a stand-alone analysis of the concepts discussed here. We stress that our primary goal is to revisit the existing literature that provides guidance to scholars on how to compare local variations in populist parties. The last caveat is that the suggested selection is not the only way to compare populist parties. However, our choice was guided by the availability of cross-national data, which gives scholars an ability to compare parties across time and across political spectra (countries and regions), and thus facilitates further research into regional variations in supply of populism.

The article is structured as follows. In order to ensure clarity, we first discuss how we understand populism. We argue that political parties, including populist ones, are multidimensional issue competitors, and we elaborate on how they function. Then, we can enlist five ways that scholars use to identify signifiers of populist parties. We then explain a feasible way to compare populist parties across regions, which is based on two dimensions of party cleavages: issue

salience and issue ownership. In the discussion section, we also include reliable sources of data that provide standardised scores on issue salience and issue ownership for those who are interested in conducting a comparative analysis.

Defining populism

According to Cas Mudde and Cristobál Rovira Kaltwasser populism should be analysed as a "thin-centered ideology" that, as put forward by Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik (2019) and Paulina Lenik (2024), can be *thickened* by other ideologies or set of ideas. A brief discussion on what a populist ideology is and whether it should depart from the existing thick ideologies is necessary. We could consider a populist ideology to be a public discourse that emphasizes the us *versus* them divide and scepticism towards liberal ideology. Policies would be justified by creating a distance from the corrupt elite and a priority given to the pure people (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2013). Therefore, populist parties are likely to resort to cultural monism (opposing cultural plurality) and to economic nationalism, while not opposing democracy altogether (Totev, Kubik, 2017). On the organisational level, one could assume a dense concentration of power at the very top, cemented by strong personal ties with the party leader (Taggart, 2000, p. 100). Loyalty to populist party members is of the utmost importance, and personal ties would run deep (Schedler, 1996).

This definition has its limitations. For one, it is impossible to assure each party member is a populist, even if they belong to a party classified as populist. Moreover, populist parties may not always align with either the left or the right. We tend to agree that populism is found on both sides of the political spectrum (Guiso et al., 2017). Left-wing populist parties are thought to be more accommodating towards minorities, whereas right-wing populist parties tend to be more ethno-nationalist. However, according to Andrea Pirro (2015), populists explicitly refuse to be classified on the left-right continuum, as it would place them within the establishment, which they categorically reject. Therefore, we may consider them to be non-traditional or anti-establishment parties (Schedler, 1996). It can be inferred from the scholarly literature devoted to populism that there exists no universal definition of the term. That reads directly into the ways we try to capture populism parties. The definition of populism creates challenges to proper identification of populist parties, such as how to define their ideology or what lies behind left-right placement. Therefore, in order to ensure clarity, we must shed some light on how to understand these two important dimensions.

Let us start with political left-right placement. A lack of uniformity in what constitutes left and right results in discrepancies in party placement along this dimension. Paul C. Bauer et al. (2017) found that there was a significant variation

in respondents' associations with the notions of "left" and "right". The left is associated with communism or socialism, while others think of more specific cultural values and norms. There exists a group that associates the terms "left" and "right" with a particular set of economic policies, rather than any cultural, ideological, or historical attributes. Finally, some individuals would reservedly refer to the economic dimension, while others would refer to the cultural dimension. As per Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGann (1995), we concur that political parties operate within a two-dimensional political space that encompasses both cultural and economic aspects.

The anti-political-establishment component centers around populist political parties. Because of their anti-establishment nature, they tend to reject the idea of a political left-right placement entirely. Certain studies have employed an anti-political dimension (traditional versus non-traditional parties) as an alternative approach to construct the political space (Schedler, 1996; Lawson, Merkl, 2014; Husbands, 2020). This requires consideration of what constitutes a traditional and non-traditional party. While the former denotes a party that is likely to identify on a specific political spectrum (left or right), the latter typically encompasses parties that tend to exhibit a dismissive attitude towards such categorization, a phenomenon commonly referred to as anti-political-establishment. For example, when populist and non-populist parties mobilize their electorates, their concurrent narration is often identified along the anti-political-establishment instead of the traditional left versus right continuum (Schedler, 1996, p. 30). As a result, we anticipate the inclusion of anti-political establishment references in comparative analyses of populist and non-populist parties.

Given that our focus is on a comparative analysis of populist parties, we expect a degree of regional variation in their characteristics. For instance, literature devoted to Central and Eastern European region posits a link between populism and the transition (Kopeček, Wciślik, 2015; Holzer, Mareš, 2016; Stanley, 2017). Ben Stanley proposes a new approach to examine populism in Central Europe through two lenses: the radical and the centrist supply side populist theories (Stanley, 2017, p. 140). The radical theory holds that the populist backlash is an expression of dissatisfaction against the liberal policies associated with the transition. The centrist supply side theory says that popular support is won by leaders who condemn corrupt and incompetent incumbent leaders. Both theories aim to distinguish CEE populism from its Western variants in terms of ideology. An additional perspective is taken by a substantial body of literature pertaining to the economy in transition, including but not limited to the works of István Benczes (2016) on Hungary, Alena Kluknavská and Josef Smolík (2016) on Slovakia, Petr Kaniok and Vlastimil Havlík (2016) on the Czech Republic, and Stanley Bill and Ben Stanley (2020) on Poland. Recent research supports the notion that populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe are seasoned political actors seeking votes to leverage their majority in parliaments, rather than merely

winning elections (Gyulai, 2013; Krasztev, Til, 2015; Jaskiernia, 2017; Valeriu, 2018). Populist parties in the CEE operate on a wide range of issues, with attributable ideological specificity. This may be delineated by post-communist legacies unfamiliar to its Western counterparts (Fennema, 1997; Mudde, 1999; Pirro, 2015).

Party linkages

Let us look into the question of how political parties work together. Parties are a means of attaining political representation. A democratic process depends on them coordinating government work, recruiting and training political leaders, making policies, and pointing out ideologies (Schattschneider, 1942). Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (2014) suggested a good classification of parties' functional connections, which we summarized in Table 1. It can be inferred that the attributes of parties will vary across these levels.

Table 1. Levels of party linkages, adapted from

Party's linkage	Function
campaign linkage	recruitment and training of candidates for the electoral process
participatory linkage	mobilising electorate for the vote
ideological linkage	informing electorate about the policy choices
representative linkage	representing electoral preferences in the policy formulation process
policy linkage	delivering policies proposed during the campaign

Source: Lawson, Merkl, 2014.

The ideological linkage assumes that parties convey their beliefs by choosing a policy or making a public statement. Secondly, the representative linkage, which binds parties to meet voters demands and maintain electoral support in the following elections. We also recognize the importance of ideological, participatory, and policy links. These levels are also reflected in the nature of party cleavages, which pertain to matters in which parties engage in competition. We shall discuss these in greater detail further below.

Parties' cleavages

The nature of the issues that parties compete over is what defines party cleavage (Kitschelt, 1992). We argue that party cleavages should be examined by looking at issue saliences and issue positions. That allows us to understand how parties compete on political issues to mobilize their electorate. Issue positions are specific policy stance that shape party competition, usually in the form of party manifesto or enlisted in campaign materials. We may suppose that these are shaped by electoral demands and a mechanism to maximize vote share (Evans, de Graaf, 2013). The party leadership assumes a certain degree of voter rationality when drafting their political proposition, i.e., that the voters will be informed and able to distinguish between political rivals based on these traits. The potential for electoral success is influenced by issue positions, which serve as a form of voter menu. We would also anticipate a time-bound variation in the parties' positions. Parties are likely to change their positions in response to a mean voter change, party voter change, or electoral defeat (Neundorf, Adams, 2018). This change could cause issues within the party, making it harder for leaders to communicate with members. That, in turn, may bring changes to the organizational level, resulting in party dissolution, fractionalisation, and formation of coalitions (Bolleyer, 2011).

Issue salience is a non-codified component that is ingrained in a party's narrative. It is understood to be a sense of centrality that a given party attributes to a particular political issue. It typically acquires a symbolic status and is more related to ends than means (Dejaeghere, van Erkel, 2017). Jon A. Krosnick defines issue salience as the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude (Krosnick, 1988). We may therefore expect it to have a positive effect on personal emotional engagement, which activates a chain of biases (Miller, Mitamura, 2003). Bias refers to an arbitrary selection of information or an attitude towards the other side of the argument. That might affect the electoral behaviour. Parties that are agile in activating voters' emotional systems are likely to leave a lasting, memorable impression and attract voters to their political narrative. This will likely influence the final ballot.

Supply of populism: Five ways to identify populist parties

After having discussed the core functions of political parties, let us turn to ways how scholars try to identify populist parties. Five ways to do that are suggested. The first approach is to delineate policies that may serve as signifiers of a populist party. For instance, Dani Rodrik (2018) identifies two distinct dimensions of populist policies, one of which pertains to institutional restructuring and the

other to economic policymaking (Rodrik, 2018, p. 193). The first aims to undermine democratic checks and balances, mainly the judiciary and the media, while the latter restricts the autonomy of financial institutions and oversight agencies. These policies undermine economic growth by promising to provide immediate benefits to a vaguely understood group of individuals (left-wing populism) or by deliberately restricting the welfare of an 'antagonised group' (right-wing populism). The electorate is unaware of the seriousness of such backdoor restrictions, but they have important implications for the functioning of the market.

The second approach is to look at the party's ideology. One of the first modern studies of populist parties is Mudde (2007). He is particularly intrigued by the varying degrees of radicalism displayed by right-wing parties in Europe, specifically in relation to the following party characteristics: anti-democratic (extreme right), authoritarian (radical right), and xenophobic (nationalist) (2007, p. 24). Mudde asserts that populist parties, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, engage in a nativist economics that is challenging to comprehend in pure socialist or neoliberal terms. He goes on to say that populist parties have integrated features of the market economy into their operation at both ends of the spectrum, which is state interventionism in CEE and *laissez-faire* policies in the West (Mudde, 2007, p. 123). He posits that the degree of protectionism in CEE determines the distinction between populist extremes. These parties will not support deregulation and increased competition, which would cause tensions with the fundamentals of the EU's single market. It is also worth noting that Central and Eastern European parties tend to be more controlling and protective than their Western counterparts. The post-transition reforms, particularly privatisation, have portrayed politics as a vehicle for corruption and patronage (Mudde, 2007, p. 129). For Mudde, populist parties use the economy in a purely political way, namely, to attract voters to their agenda, which usually offers some degree of social welfare chauvinism. He also acknowledges that populists appear to lack a distinct ideology when it comes to economic policymaking, viewing it as a secondary rather than strategic component of their political practice.

Thirdly, the organisational structure. Some parties, such as the Italian Five Star Movement or the Hungarian Fidesz, have a highly centralised structure, with power concentrated in the hands of the party leader. Other parties have a more flexible structure, such as the Norwegian Freedom Party and Sweden's New Democracy. Organisational aspects of populist parties in a comparative manner have been explored by (Johansson, 2014; Havlík, Pinková, 2015; Albertazzi, van Kessel, 2021). For example, Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel (2021) seek evidence that an organizational mass-party model is particularly successful in populist right-wing parties ability to connect with the disenchanted electorate across Europe.

Fourthly, the discourse. According to Kai-Olaf Lang (2005) populism is a political tactic employed by political parties to challenge the status quo. In the

article, he divides populist parties into hard and weak populist parties, according to how radical they are politically. Hard and weak populist parties are classified according to how radical they are politically. The study indicates that weak populists are becoming more popular with the central electorate, based on this classification. Lang believes that populist parties in CEE are more diverse than their Western counterparts. Firstly, the stronger notion of agricultural populism has maintained a lasting influence. Second, the populist narrative in the CEE is characterized by a campaign against indigenous minorities, rather than a condemnation of multiracialism, as in the West (Lang, 2005, p. 14).

A different approach is to examine party programmes as suggested by: Jagers, Walgrave, 2007; Deegan-Krause, Haughton, 2009; Hawkins, 2009; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange, van der Brug, 2014. The introduction of classifications based on party programmes sparked a significant debate regarding whether a party could transition from a populist to a non-populist movement based on the proposed policies. For instance, Taggart (2000) articulates that the populist narrative aims to garner popularity and appeal to a diverse audience. Consequently, it may change over time, which should be reflected in the ongoing classifications of parties.

Discussion

Our standpoint is that dimensions of party cleavages are the most effective means to compare populist parties across regions. This argument requires further elaboration. As for instance, one may reasonably ask: is a populist party's cleavage any different from those we attribute to parties in general? There is a growing body of scholarship supporting this claim. Literature suggests that populist parties tend to distance themselves from the liberal mode of governance and adopt an anti-elitist narrative (Rooduijn, 2017). Typically, that involves opposition to immigration, minority rights, multiculturalism, or EU-integration (Akkerman, 2012). Occasionally, such narration is justified by economic grievances (Hutter, 2014). Parties may invoke a sense of urgency to halt the influx of migrants from low-wage nations (Guiso et al., 2017) or to advocate for excessive welfarism (Dornbusch, Edwards, 1990). Common populist supply traits are consolidated by these, while comparative analysis of precise differential traits of populist parties is less prevalent.

We should spare some attention to the data that allows to capture these attributes of populist parties. For issue salience and issue ownership, scholars tend to expert surveys that provide standardized scores on these dimensions. For example, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2002–2019), or the POPPA survey (Meijers, Zaslove, 2020; 2021). Recently, a group of scholars of populism set up a PopuList, a database presenting the overview of populist, far-left

and far-right parties in Europe from 1989 until 2022 (Rooduijn et. al., 2023) although with dynamic changes on the political arena (especially in the post-communist countries), the list requires constant updates. Furthermore, academics often look at the political landscape that the parties operate in. For that, several datasets measure the quality of democracy, and democratic backsliding, and thus also help to define which parties are populist and therefore contesting liberal democracy. One of the most popular is Varieties of Democracy – V-Dem. Utilising Bayesian Item-Response Theory (IRT) the results are calculated based on answers provided by 3700 country experts who regularly fill in online surveys (V-Dem, 2024). Illiberal democracy and populist politics are detected by looking at 5 high-level principles of democracy: electoral principles, liberal principles, participatory principles, deliberative principles, and egalitarian principles (V-Dem, 2024). The V-Dem, although not directly assessing the level of populism in a certain country, is a useful dataset to study populism in CEE where this phenomenon is directly linked to the democratic backsliding. In a similar vein, the Polity Project monitors regime changes in major countries and provides annual assessments of regime authority characteristics, changes and data updates through a living data collection effort (Center for Systemic Peace, 2017). Also, the Freedom House Index (2013) can be useful in searching for populist parties and their impact on the quality of democracy and policymaking, as it measures democratic principles such as freedom of expression and legal equality.

Interestingly, measuring populism in Europe is also looked at through the lenses of the relation to the European Union and the idea of European integration. The EU seems to be an obvious "target for populist resentment since it is a liberal project – supported by the economic and political elites in charge of the recent transition – and implies a redefinition of national sovereignty and identity" (Rupnik, 2007, p. 22). These are studies investigating the relation between Euroscepticism and populism in CEE (Kaniok, Havlík, 2016; Cilento, Conti, 2021; Csehi, Zgut-Przybylska, 2021; Styczyńska, Meijer, 2023). Most empirical studies dealing with political parties operate on at least one level of party linkage and discuss party cleavages. We therefore explain in more detail the meaning of these two concepts in the following section, as useful means for comparative research.

Conclusion

Classification of a party as populist is a major conceptual challenge. However, there are certain features that unify the populist normative, namely the supply rhetoric to safeguard the majority rule of the people, by some referred to as populist ideology (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2013). Such rhetoric seems especially fruitful during times of elevated economic uncertainty, which would indicate

a circumstantial interplay between the supply and demand for populism (Guiso et al., 2017). The interplay between the potential drivers of populism renders it more challenging to comprehend. That becomes yet more challenging for studies seeking to compare parties across the regional or country-perspective. We suggest that by looking at party linkages and party cleavages renders such comparisons more viable. In our considerations, we have elaborated on several ways scholars tend to capture populist parties. We also gave a summary of the various linkages that political parties operate in, including party's linkage, campaign linkage, participatory linkage, ideological linkage, representative linkage and a policy linkage (Lawson, Merkl, 2014). We also have enlisted several data sources that provide empirical scholars with sources for a comparative analysis of parties in Europe. We showed how to capture the supply of populism using data, and in particular how to understand the key two concepts that allow to grasp populist attributes of parties in a comparative perspective.

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