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# Populist Strategies of Non-Populist Mainstream Parties in Western Europe: An Introduction to the Consideration of "controlled populism"

**Abstract:** The article deals with the phenomenon of controlled populism in contemporary Western European party systems. The problem addressed is considered at the theoretical level as well as in the dimension of selected case studies. The author's main objective was to characterise a specific set of ways in which selected Western European mainstream parties react to the actions of populist parties and to present these reactions in the context of the theoretical framework of controlled populism. For the purposes of the text, a side objective was also pursued, which was to identify the theoretical framework of controlled populism. The case study analysis concerned the exemplary actions of selected European political parties qualified as mainstream party (Germany, France, Spain). Within the framework of the research conducted, it was determined that the analysed parties employed a populist discourse and strategy in the context of controlled populism.

**Keywords:** populism, controlled populism, populist strategy

## Introduction

For several years now, successive elections to European national parliaments and to the European Parliament have been accompanied by an atmosphere of apprehension and expectation regarding the potential and actual success of groupings which are labelled populist. Increasingly, public debate has focused on the issue

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of populists crossing successive barriers, which are identified not only with winning parliamentary seats at the national or EU level, but also with participating in real (Poland, Hungary, Italy) or potential (Spain) governance both within government coalitions and on their own.

Taking this issue from a broader perspective, we are therefore dealing with a phenomenon that can be described as the colonisation of party systems by populist party, which can be measured by the percentage of votes they receive in successive elections over the years, the number of seats they take or, finally, their participation in the aforementioned governance (Stefaniak, 2019).

Moreover, the activity of populist groupings resonates with all participants in party systems. Populist groupings are obviously in interaction with parties that are considered to represent the mainstream in party systems and the question of how they react to each other becomes relevant. At the level of model reactions from mainstream parties, a continuum of behaviour can be proposed, situated between blocking and seeking to isolate populist actors to accepting their presence and even adopting populist methods and modes of action and discourses. In between these two attitudes, there may be a variety of reactions that fall within a spectrum of behaviour that will be a kind of adaptation to the situation, which in turn may be manifested, for example, in the formation of electoral and governmental coalitions.

The author's main objective is to characterise a specific set of ways in which selected Western European mainstream parties respond to the activities of populist groups in party systems. This set of reactions will be placed in the category of controlled populism. The secondary aim of the article is to define a theoretical framework for the phenomenon of controlled populism and the populisation of party systems similar to it. The author makes selected cases of political party activity in Western Europe the subject of the study.

The structure of the text consists of three main parts: a) a theoretical framework on the essence of populist style of politics as a feature of political groupings; b) an elaboration on the concept of controlled populism discussed in the context of populist political parties; c) the presentation of selected case studies.

## Populism and the populist strategies of political parties

One of the key requirements for scientific discussion is the need for a precise grid of research terms. The categories used in political science that require particular precision in today's debate are populism and the closely related category of the populist party.

The very notion of populism, which arouses the interest of both scholars and commentators of political life, loses its scientific qualities in the thicket of

discussion, but at the same time loses its substantiality. The essence of this problem is aptly characterised by Tymoteusz Kochan (2024, p. 8), who observes that “the concept of populism has been generated, exploited and exploited almost *en masse* in recent years. It has been transformed into an insult or – symmetrically – into a seemingly rebellious declaration”.

In addition, the confusion surrounding the concept of populism is exacerbated by the fact that the term is used to describe a wide variety of political phenomena and attitudes, often labelled as either left-wing or right-wing, which only adds to the ambiguity of the category itself.

This issue is also relevant in the context of the present text, in particular because it concerns the relationship between populism itself and non-populist parties which may itself be “controversial”. Additionally, the field of ambiguity intensifies when we consider that it fundamentally resonates with the demarcation of the space between populist and non-populist political parties.

Taking into account the above doubts, and the main objective of the article, it should be considered that reflections on contemporary populism become crucial for defining the essence of groupings that are described as populist. As a starting point for these considerations, the author considers going beyond the traditional understanding of populism as a political doctrine (or ideology) (Marczewska-Rytko, 1995; 2011); instead, the author considers it reasonable to look at populism in a multifaceted and multidimensional way, which allows for a characterisation of populist parties that goes beyond rudimentary programmatic or doctrinal features.

Based on the literature review, a distinction is thus made between understanding populism as: (traditionally) an ideology, as a discourse, as a political strategy or finally as a style of political action (Gidron, Bonikowski, 2013, p. 6; Moffitt, 2018; Lipiński, Stępińska, 2020). It is possible to treat the above approaches as separate (Moffitt, 2018) and to make reflections on political reality in their context or to consider them as interrelated which in turn leads us to a hybrid approach (Lewandowski, Polakowski, 2023).

In the case of an orientation towards populism in the sense of ideology, the new insight will direct us towards populist micro-ideologies (Freeden, 2003, pp. 78–102; Stanley, 2008, p. 99; Polakowski, 2023, pp. 362–364). Micro-ideologies, as opposed to macro-ideologies, are as a rule characterised by a much narrower political vocabulary, they are less elaborate and exhaustive in their description of the socio-political world, and thus remain less definable and therefore more easily enter into marriages with other ideologies (Freeden, 1998, pp. 748–751; Stanley, 2008, pp. 95–96; Aslanidis, 2015, p. 3). In this sense, the populism that we will recognise as a micro-ideology will be identified by only a few key distinctions, which are: the existence of two homogeneous analytical units (the people and the elite), the presence of an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, the emphasis on the idea of the sovereignty of the people, the

positive evaluation of the people and the criticism of the elite (Stanley, 2008, p. 102). As additional manifestations of the micro-ideologicality of populism, we can add the strongly outlined perspective of rivalry and conflict between elites and the people, coupled with an unequivocal stand on the side of the people and not on the side of corrupt elites as well as an appreciation of the notion of the sovereignty of the people, which should have its expression in the possibility of expressing and implementing the “popular will” (Abts, Rummens, 2007, pp. 408–409; Mudde, 2007, p. 23; Vittori, 2017, p. 45).

Going beyond the template of thinking about populism as an ideology opens up new interpretative possibilities but also, it seems, is more relevant to the political reality around us. Consequently, it becomes possible to include populism as a political strategy in the analysis of political party activity (Przyłęcki, 2012, p. 22). This approach focuses on the ways in which a variety of political resources are organised by, for example, a charismatic leader supported directly by a mass of devoted followers. Following Moisés Naím (2022, pp. 122–123), this relationship that occurs between a leader and his or her followers can be likened to fandom and the emotional attachment of voters to a political leader.

Political strategy understood as a form of political mobilisation is, in this case, almost always to lead to attempts to shift the emphasis of the policies pursued, especially economic policies, from privileged groups to the lower strata (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). A populist party pursuing this type of strategy thus becomes, in its view, a representative of the interests of “the people”, but it needs an appropriate populist language to articulate this issue, as well as to adequately communicate its intentions. The populist discourse itself represents a third possible interpretation of contemporary populism.

A discursive understanding of populism also, as well as presenting it in terms of political strategy, and in contrast to populism understood as ideology, emphasises understanding the phenomenon in dynamic processual terms rather than fixed and established ones. A discursive understanding of populism draws attention to the influence of other social actors in shaping the phenomenon and focuses primarily on issues of language and political rhetoric (Moffitt, 2018, pp. 3–4). Populist discourse is thus the initiation of specific topics within the political agenda or a reactive reference to the actions of other, often competing, actors. The essence of populism as discourse is captured by Marcin Polakowski (2023, p. 365), characterising it by reference to language itself: “[...] language in this case is not seen merely as a tool for gaining power, but as a way of constructing certain identities, of interpreting the political situation, and thus as a starting point narrowing down the range of specific solutions and practical decisions”.

In distinguishing the above-mentioned fundamental understandings of populism, I assume that each of them may manifest itself in the actions of individual actors separately or they may occur together. The latter situation would refer to a hybrid understanding of populism as a specific style of political action

(Lewandowski, Polakowski, 2023, p. 3). In such an understanding, populism is not just a purely linguistic phenomenon allowing for the discursive construction of a proposal for the people against the elites but is rather a specific set of specific political demands aimed at inferior groups or those considered excluded and, at the same time, a way of doing politics that appeals to the cultural, social and intellectual background characteristic of these very groups.

In this view, populism is therefore not only, or primarily, a purely ideological phenomenon, realised in specific political ideas (ideological approach), nor is it limited to the creation of a new linguistic discourse that builds solidarity of the excluded and disadvantaged (discursive approach), nor does it argue that the issue of charismatic leadership is central to the phenomenon, and thus that it is a top-down rather than a bottom-up organised phenomenon (strategic approach). Instead, the hybrid understanding of populism as a peculiar political style indicates that it is a phenomenon that is realised not only in the form of universal political ideas or in populist discourse, but in the form of gestures, behaviours, responding to the expectations of a specific electorate inclined to support populist forces (Lewandowski, Polakowski, 2023, p. 3).

Adopting a “new”, non-classical interpretation of populism brings with it concrete consequences in defining populist parties and defining the relationship between populist parties and populism itself. What is most significant is that it opens up the possibility of recognising that populism need not be a feature of populist parties alone (Canovan, 2008, p. 96). The relationship between populism, as defined above, and political parties is defined by two key assumptions (Table 1 presents the relationship in detail):

- firstly, that the populist party should be identified not only by its ideological aspects but also by its strategic and discursive aspects (populism in hybrid terms);
- secondly, that a non-populist party can employ a populist strategy and/or populist discourse without becoming a populist grouping.

Adopting the above perspective opens the way to applying a gradation of the relationship between the phenomenon of contemporary populism and political parties. It also allows us to distinguish the minimum we should use when classifying specific groups as populist. This minimum is the ideological or programmatic dimension (in the sense of micro-ideology). It should be clearly emphasised that what characterises populist parties is not so much a criticism of elites (this can be contextual and is often used by opposition parties), but more broadly an opposition to the exploitation and humiliation of the people by elites of various kinds (political, business, media) (Canovan, 2010, pp. 284–285). On the other hand, a populist style and, in particular, a populist discourse will also be possible for non-populist parties. In other words, populist discourse can become a tool for non-populist parties to implement non-populist policies.

Table 1. Three dimensions of contemporary populism versus populist and non-populist political parties (model)

Dimensions of populism / Party types	Populist parties	Non-populist parties
populism as discourse	YES	YES/NO
populism as a strategy	YES	YES/NO
populism as micro-ideology	YES	NO

Source: own study.

The above attempt to define a definitional minimum for populist groupings in terms of populist micro-ideology is one possible variant of the demarcation line between populist and non-populist political parties. Among other criteria, it is possible to use, for example, twin methods to those used to characterise anti-systemic groupings. Indeed, in the literature we can find methods of considering a grouping as anti-system based, for example, on the profile of the electorate that supports a particular party (if the electorate is anti-system then the grouping is also considered to be anti-system) or on the attitude towards a particular grouping of other participants in the game within the party system (an anti-system is a grouping that is defined in such a way by political competitors and, as a consequence, is, for example, politically isolated) (Fennema, 2005, p. 16; Lewandowski, 2017, p. 183). Expert opinion can also be a method to support the delimitation of a set of populist groupings.

In the context of the above examples, however, it seems that basing the divide between contemporary populist and non-populist parties on a micro-ideological core is effective from a researcher's perspective. At the level of theoretical considerations, it represents the "safe" minimum to avoid nuancing and delving into the meandering imprecisions of the category of populism.

## Populationisation of parties and party systems

Adopting the perspective that it is not only populist parties that can use populist tools is consistent with the phenomenon of populisation of the political sphere described in the literature. One aspect of this phenomenon is the populisation of mainstream political parties, which should be understood as a modification of the ways in which groupings operate in a changing environment, particularly in the context of the increasing activity of populist parties. In this context, various scholars use, among others, the notion of post-populism (Eatwell, Goodwin, 2020, pp. 290–295) or controlled populism (Hermet, 2010, p. 47) to describe these changes.

The phenomenon of controlled populism refers to the issue of the “shift” of mainstream parties towards populism which, at the level of political practice, we can interpret as the use of populist tools or the “capture” of protest slogans and “anti-system” slogans by mainstream politicians and parties (Przyłęcki, 2012, pp. 22–23; Eatwell, Goodwin, 2020, pp. 290–295; Wieviorka, 2022; Sadura, Sierakowski, 2023).

Nearly a decade ago, Guy Hermet (2010, pp. 42–44) saw manifestations of populism characterised by “good manners”. By using this term, he meant a softened form of populist strategies and, in particular, discourses, as those that are ambiguously anti-elitist, but at the same time appeal to the support of the people. Hermet (2010, p. 44) quite accurately described the meaning of this populist turn stating: “[...] the change was to borrow certain weapons from the populists, not just to resist them more effectively, but this time also to include them openly in the usual arsenal of political competition”.

Researchers of the issue interpret this process as a kind of response by mainstream parties to: firstly, the changing playing field on the party scene signifying the increasing activity and success of populist groups; and secondly, the search for ways to compete effectively in the changing social conditions associated with the trend towards the growth of the demand side of populism.

It is important in the context under discussion to emphasise the socio-political dimension of the indicated changes, i.e., the aforementioned demand populism of a bottom-up nature (Canovan, 2008, pp. 92–97; Borkowska-Nowak, 2021, p. 332), embedded in social attitudes and inclinations (Kuzniak, Obacz, 2020, p. 31), in other words, the populism of the governed (Kasińska-Metryka, 2018, p. 126). Indeed, the rise of the demand for populism could not only go unnoticed but also unaddressed by mainstream parties in their political strategies.

An important environment for the process in question is also a change in the way political communication takes place (Mounk, 2019, pp. 168–174; Kamiński, Kamiński, 2023). The development of first mass media and later social media has meant that both populist and non-populist parties have moved closer together in terms of communicating with voters, often making their messages shallow and based on emotions.

The application of the category of controlled populism to a political party generates another important problem, namely that it requires linking it to the previously indicated issue of delimiting the set of populist groupings on the basis of clearly and precisely defined criteria. This issue is important insofar as we recognise the phenomenon of populisation of political parties as a dynamic process, often echoing the pragmatism of party strategies.

Modeling the problem as a process, I recognise that populisation manifested through controlled populism marks a transitional phase from mainstream party to populist party. However, an immediate caveat should be made that while it is true that for some parties the end result of the use of controlled populism will

be the attainment of populist party status, at the same time, party populisation itself can also take the shape of an intermediate stage in which mainstream parties, using populist tools in the form of, for example, populist discourse, do not ultimately achieve populist party status.

## Examples of populist strategies of non-populist parties in Western Europe

The theoretical framework of the problem presented in the first sections of the text provides the basis for the considerations in the last section, which includes illustrations of examples of the use of populist style of politics by groupings that are not considered populist. The individual examples concern parties and groupings in Western Europe, where, as in Central Europe, populists are increasingly breaking through certain barriers (Kasińska, Dudała, 2022, pp. 45–46).

The En Marche party, built in 2016 around the person of the later President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron, is often cited as an example of ‘good manners’ populism. The rhetoric used by the French president during his first term in office caused commentators on the French political scene to describe this political project as a kind of “experiment in soft populism” (Weber, 2024). Macron himself, when positioning himself on the political scene, also used the label of populist (MN, 2017). Prior to the 2017 presidential election, he created himself as a politician outside the French establishment, situating his programme offer in the political centre. He even began to be described as an “anti-populist populist” (Ursinski, 2020). This strategy was even a natural response to the popularity of the main populist force on the French political scene, the National Unity (Front).

Macron’s soft populism was, in a sense, a natural extension of the process that Hermet (2010, pp. 44–45) described as the ‘third turn’ of populism that also took place in France. In its effect, two populisms were at work on the political scene: a bad one, whose face was the National Unity (Front), and a second ‘forgivable’ one, used as a shock therapy applied to rescue democracy.

Macron’s controlled populism was mainly realised through a political discourse that took up slogans expressing, among other things, a critical attitude towards the problem of migration. Macron also positioned himself and his political base in opposition to the hitherto mainstream political forces and political elites, in which a soft expression of anti-establishmentism can be seen (Ursyński, 2020).

Another example of the use of populist discourse was the activity of the German Christian Democratic Union and its programmatic turn that took place in 2024. The new programme, described by commentators as a return to the conservative profile of the CDU (Frymark, 2024), is in a way a response to the



growing popularity of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) grouping among German voters.

What characterises in the longer term the programmatic, but seemingly mainly discursive turn of the CDU is a tightening of rhetoric towards immigrants (REN, 2023). This is also the result of the party's adaptation to changes in public sentiment in Germany (Świder, 2023). The change of programme is also a consequence of the personality of CDU chairman Friedrich Merz, who has sometimes been able to take an ambiguously negative stance towards the AfD in his statements (Linden, 2023).

An example of the original response of mainstream parties to the populisation of the party system can be found in Spain. The relationship between Spain's two mainstream parties, the People's Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), and the parties considered populist: the right-wing VOX and the left-wing Podemos, against the background of Germany and France mentioned earlier, appears unique. In the case of both the PSOE and the PP, a gamble was being taken to form a government coalition. These parties, therefore, were not so much making adjustments to their own political strategy or policy language but were going even further in their acceptance of populism by recognising populist parties as worthy of cooperation (Mazzini, 2023): PSOE co-founded a government coalition together with Podemos, while PP formed a coalition with VOX at the regional level.

## Conclusions

The examples of the relationship between populism and mainstream parties presented in the text provide illustrations for the phenomenon of controlled populism. The theoretical consideration of controlled populism undertaken in the article was intended to identify the basic characteristics of this phenomenon, and to provide a starting point for further considerations in this area. Controlled populism itself, as outlined, is the response of mainstream parties to the progressive populisation of party systems. The dominant parties in Western Europe so far have to respond in their actions both to increasingly active populist parties but also to changing conditions in the form of shifts in public sentiment and, for example, a revolution in political communication.

Controlled populism will therefore be the use of populist strategies and discourses by non-populist parties. An important aspect that distinguishes populist parties from non-populist parties, in turn, is the ideological issue, including the presence or absence of a populist micro-ideology.

Each of the mainstream parties presented in the article individually shapes the approach to both populist parties and populism itself, but it is nevertheless noticeable that these are contextual and reactive responses to a specific situation

in a specific setting. The presence of populists is recognised by mainstream actors; moreover, this presence determines specific actions at the discursive or strategic level. Within the cases analysed, it is possible to observe ways of reacting such as the use of populist discourse (e.g., the German CDU) or entering into coalition relations with populist parties (Spain).

At the same time, a review of the situation on party scenes in Western Europe allows one to conclude that in this region, in contrast to Central Europe and examples such as Poland's Law and Justice and Hungary's Fidesz (Muis, Immerzeel, 2017; Buřtíková, 2018; Engler, Pytlas, Deegan-Krause, 2019), effective populism does not occur. Instead, instrumental use of populist discourse and strategies, such as in Germany or France, can be observed more often.

It is also worth noting in the context of populisation within party systems that it occurs as a reaction to changes in social expectations. Indeed, alongside the increasingly strong position of populist parties within the party system, there is also a populist turn at the level of the electorate (the results of the 2024 general elections in France and the 2024 national parliamentary elections in Germany can serve as examples). This bottom-up populism poses a particular challenge to mainstream parties, while also opening up an opportunity for them to implement controlled populism in action. However, this issue requires further research over the next few years.

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