



V4 EUROPE – “PIECES OF POPULISM IN EUROPE AND HOW TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGE”

**8 June 2017, Budapest – Hungary
Discussion Paper**

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***From Progressive to Reactionary Populism
The case of East Central Europe and the Balkans***

I. Theorizing populism: How to categorize East Central European and Balkans varieties?

This essay represents an attempt to historicize the concept of populism with regard to East Central Europe and the Balkans. With the present seen as a “populist moment” especially in Europe, recent discussion in academia about the subject has been vigorous, especially in political science. A dilemma frequently addressed is that of the proper classification of various “phenotypes” of populism, as well as the proper categorization of the term itself. It may be brought into play as a relational concept (people vs elites, direct democracy vs institutions, etc.) that can appear in tandem with a variety of ideologies (Mudde-Kaltwasser 2017), but also as a set of ideological tenets which may be circumscribed and made the subject of coherent analysis. (Ionescu-Gellner 1970b: 3.)

When the latter approach is followed, standard genealogies of the subject, current in political science, usually point to the Russian narodnichestvo and the Populist Party in the US as the earliest instances of emergent populist ideologies. (Ionescu-Gellner 1970a, Worsely 1970: 220-225., Canovan 1981. 5-6., Werz 2003a: 9-10., Müller 2016: 6.) Of the two, the former is often posited as the inspiration for East Central European and Balkans movements, which are then labelled a variety of “agrarian populism”, and it is a standard choice to classify these as constituting one of the two main branches. (Trencsényi 2014, Bartha 2014) The other main branch, middle-class reactionary and/or neo-populism is frequently associated with the US, Canada and Western Europe. The problem with this logic is that it treats the region, also referred to as the “lands in between” (Zwischeneuropa) as just that: an outgrowth an addendum of the two great cultures and empires to the East and the West. In this case, Russian populism, the narodnochestvo is seen as decisive. At most, an additional ideological layer borrowed from the conservative revolutionary and völkisch streams of the German history of ideas is acknowledged as having had a secondary impact after 1918. (Berlin et al. 1968, Mair 2002: 83-85., Spier 2006: 41-43., Held 1996a) The binary distinction therefore reproduces an east/west divide, and lumps all eastern “phenotypes” under the label “agrarian”, whereas Western Europe and the Atlantic world become the habitat of bourgeois populisms. This, inter alia, raises the question whether agrarian populism is to be regarded as inherently völkisch-right radical as its 1930s incarnations often were.

Closer engagements with the field (Dimou 2009, Trencsényi 2014, Bartha 2014) have provided ample evidence about difficulties of interpretation that arise when national and regional processes “native” to East Central Europe and the Balkans are not taken into consideration. Investigations into the sources of populism that impacted the small nations “stuck” between the two dominant powers in East Central Europe and the Balkans reveal a history that is simultaneously more autochthonous and more intimately tied to originary impulses from the European core – notably France – than current literature would suggest.

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Instead of accepting the thesis of determinative ideological transfers by virtue of proximity and cultural irradiation attributed to the large neighbors, the following represent an attempt at a more thorough historicization. Specifically, I will attempt to show how left-wing radical, oftentimes socialist movements arose out of similar historical circumstances in the late 19th century. It was these movements which represent an “original” regional variety of populism and which generated certain concepts that were later appropriated by the authoritarian and conservative revolutionary currents that dominated politics in the 1930s. The concepts appropriated from the first generations were recontextualized, “translated” into an authoritarian discourse and deployed to justify dictatorial regimes. To distinguish the two generations, I refer to the originary ideology as peasantist (Ionescu 1970: 99.), and the product of the authoritarian “translation” that took place in the interwar period I label reactionary.

Following the attempt at historicization by an investigation of how the rhetoric of early populism was appropriated by authoritarian movements, I argue that populism remains a meaningful term for political science and analysis, as long as progressive populism and reactionary populism are distinguished. In this regard, I argue for the adoption of the terminology used in a recent volume that provides much needed historical case studies on the evolution of populisms. (Abromeit et al., 2015b) The accepted agrarian vs “regular” populism distinction is both vague and misleading. (Canovan 1981: 4-5., 13.) On the other hand, progressive and reactionary represent two opposing sides of a cleavage and can be compared fairly coherently with the help of a few concepts. Also, agrarian populism as a cover term has been extended to refer to all historical forms of populism in East Central Europe and the Balkans, which, as this paper attempts to show, is misleading. It references the partially shared symbolic universe of peasantism and reactionary populism, lumps them into one category and it covers up important transmutations of populism in the interwar period.

I also argue that the peasantist variant of populism has been so thoroughly eliminated from East Central European and Balkans politics that the major political phenomena we encounter in the region today should be considered simply and squarely as representing the same reactionary type – with certain variations – that is making a cyclical return in Western Europe, as well. This does not mean that 19th century and interwar antecedents disappeared without a trace. It was due to the “populist” (i.e. anti-elitist, anti-institution, voluntarist and action-centered) character of peasantism that some of its axiomatic theses could be built into reactionary ideologies with relative ease in the 1930s and can make a return in politics even today. As a result, these legacies are in fact evoked by current populists in East Central Europe and the Balkans to justify various contemporary right-wing ideological constructs. It is by understanding (1) the original desire for radical reform, for overcoming backwardness and exploitation, (2) the hijacking of this popular impulse by authoritarian regimes and even fascists movements in the 1930s, as well as (3) the continuing political relevance of some of these original impulses, that we may gain a nuanced idea of the specificities contemporary neo-populism in East Central Europe and the Balkans. It is best described as belonging to the reactionary variant, but carrying certain concepts appropriated from earlier progressive populist currents, which account, at least in part, for its relative prestige and electoral appeal, as well as elite support.

II. The emergence of peasantism in East Central Europe and the Balkans

Ernesto Laclau's Schmitt-inspired claim equating populism with politics (2005:47) rests on the observation that populism calls for a decision about a fundamental characteristic of the prevailing order and seeks to re-constitute the polity in some aspect. A populist movement therefore is an instance of the political in the sense of making a claim on behalf of its referent object (the people, however understood) and against an enemy (the elites, the outside world, etc.). (Cf. Schmitt 1996) When Margaret Canovan distinguished between the pragmatic and redemptive aspects of democracy, she was relying on an Oakeshottian analytic of democratic politics to highlight that the day-to-day operations of democratic institutions should not be viewed as coextensive with democracy. This would mean *ab ovo* delegitimizing or even erasing awareness of popular sovereignty as an aspirational aspect of democracy. The redemptive dimension captures the desire of the sovereign democratic *populus* – the citizens – to aspire to better orders, to express dissatisfaction with and demand direct change of institutions from which they have become alienated. The greater the alienation, the more intense the aspiration for political redemption in the form of recasting a part or the whole of the political order. (Canovan 1999: 10-12) Laclau and Canovan, despite very different political philosophical points of departure, essentially agree in the drive behind and the character of populism: it is a movement in which an alienated multitude posits itself as “the people” and demands to reshape the polity by way of direct expression of its will.

The ideal case, referenced above, of the people-as-sovereign is intimately linked with the notion of modern European democracy. It has its roots (beyond some early modern Italian, English, Dutch and other antecedents) chiefly and most importantly in the French revolution of 1789 and French (proto-)revolutionary philosophy. Laclau's thesis only makes sense if populism-as-politics is buttressed by the concept of the people-as-sovereign. This latter notion staked its claim to replace other sovereigns in the radical political discourses about 1789 with universal, absolute and indivisible right. The incipient republic's Convention established not just the sovereignty of the French people, but offered up the communitarian ethics of the “people” as sovereign. Instead of the royal decree and the common or positive law of the realm, the *volonté générale* became the only legitimate source of political order, and the natural law of the *jusnaturaliste* tradition the framework within which that order was to be constructed. (Voss 1991)

Populism could not have existed in much of East Central Europe before 1848, but the conditions were there after the great revolutionary wave, excepting perhaps Bulgaria. Returning to Canovan's reasoning, populist ideologies may emerge if there is a perception especially amongst poor intellectuals and other politically conscious groups (including peasants with experience or memory of political participation) that the ideal of the people-as-sovereign has been abandoned by the elites. In or after 1848, most peoples of East Central Europe and the Balkans experienced such a mobilization, invited to political participation by bourgeois liberals and radicals. This implicitly democratic moment animated the elite-*populus* cleavages that emerged decades later. Following the establishment for various non-democratic, but in several aspects liberal post-1848 orders in Eastern European and Balkans countries, popular and – more importantly – intellectual dissent and dissatisfaction had recourse to the narrative about the “betrayal” of liberal elites that accepted the support from, but never properly repaid, the rural masses. A democratic imaginary was born, with

an aspirational element (political and social justice for the majority of society), and the original, late 19th century populist discourse was woven around these ideas in the individual countries.

The emergent ideology, peasantism, was positioned by its proponents as the final phase of the movement towards independence, after an initial “promise “of radical democratic transformation (Jacobinism) that had been “broken” by former revolutionary elites. In most cases, non-Marxist socialist tendencies were dominant in these ideologies, and even where Marxism played an important role, there tended to be a drift away from orthodox versions in the course of the development of the populist parties. (Trencsényi 2012: 296-297.) Depending on the time of its emergence and its cultural context, the ideological inspirations of course showed variation. Closer to the West European heartland, parallel socialist and bourgeois radical influences were more determinative. In the Balkans, the Russian narodnichestvo seems to have had greater (but by no means exclusive) influence. To equate the Balkans phenomena with the latter would be overlooking important socialist inspirations for instance in the case of Serbia and Svetozar Markovic. Romania represented a middle case, saddling the two trends with its double ideology and divergence between agrarian socialism and poporanism. (Dimou 2009:10.)

Despite the influence of the narodnichestvo in the Balkans, this first phase was not anti-Western in the sense of theorizing a fundamental and perpetual conflict between East and West. In East Central Europe, only limited discussion occurred about a national Sonderweg that should be chosen to circumvent stages of social development and overcome backwardness. If anything, the social structure was thought to be in need of better approximating Western patterns of development, while adjusting for the large share of the agricultural population (typically around two-thirds of the population before World War I, with the exception of the industrialized Czech lands). In the Balkans, various Sonderweg ideas were clearly more prevalent, also explained the extreme backwardness if compared with Western European societies. (Dimou 2009:20.) Ionescu termed this tendency in theorizing development the notion of a “somersault”, which consisted in the claim that an already given democratic substrate had been preserved in the people and the villages, representing the seeds of a more advanced and harmonious state of social development than bourgeois society and capitalist competition. The old-new harmony could supposedly be reached via a return to rural tradition as the model of a future socialist society. The metaphor of the somersault refers to the circularity of this family of ideas: what exists outside of the state as popular tradition has to be made the foundation of the state, since it is already more advanced than the present age and it already provides what society, and also the Western European masses of poor people, aspire to with regard to the future. (Ionescu 1970:116., Trencsényi 2012: 298., 317.)

There is certainly a rupture here with both the liberal tradition and mainstream socialist theory. Yet even the Balkans variant did not represent a denial of the notion of social progress. Its anti-progress connotations varied in strength: for the early Radicals in Serbia, avid readers of socialist theory, it was relatively weak, while in Bulgaria it was rather distinct in Stamboliyski’s thought. At the same time, at least two readings of this tradition are possible. It can be argued, that anti-capitalism, refusal of the Western model and liberal institutions represent a reactionary nationalist stance. This, however, is a decontextualized reading. It needs to be at least complemented by the observation that these same intellectuals accepted the socialist premise that the West will overcome the capitalist phase of development and will attain a just social order in the future. (Mishkova 1995, 1999,

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Walicki 1970: 65-66.) The overcoming of class-based society and the communal reorganization proposed for the agrarian countries of the Balkans were to synchronize the social orders of the two halves of the continent. Therefore the historical thinking of Balkans populist may have been circular in character, rather than linear (as in the case of Marxism or liberal positivism), but it was not backward looking in the sense of denying progress. And the ultimate goal remained overcoming backwardness by a great leap towards the just society. (Ionescu 1970: 99.)

Anti-Western sentiment, if and inasmuch as it was present, was usually a corollary of this logic, with the refusal to accept a bourgeois and capitalist path of development at its core. Incidentally, the theorizing about overcoming class division in this manner also reflects the socialist inspirations of peasantism in the Balkans. (Trencsényi 2012: 297.) It had two components: one merely refuted the orthodox Marxist (and positivist) unilinear theory of social change; the other expressed a civilizational resistance towards Western models.

To the concepts of development were added the figure of the peasant as the repository of the common man's values: commitment to work, common sense and cultural traditions. Being also the majority of the individual national societies, peasantist leaders demanded that political systems be created where the peasantry is proportionally represented as a class, and with peasant leadership, other classes can be called upon to work towards a harmonious post-capitalist society. Class consciousness, the demand for political leadership represented a key element of peasantist discourse both in the more developed East Central European lands and in the Balkans.

In the wake of World War I, peasantism seemed to triumph. The agrarian union came to dominate Bulgaria, the Peasant Party emerged as one of the two major forces in Romanian politics, the 1920 elections gave Hungary's Smallholder Party over half of the seats in the national assembly. The Polish parties were important forces, and peasant leader Wincenty Witos was prime minister in three governments between 1921 and 1926, while Czechoslovak agrarians also formed part of the ruling coalition. The new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes seemed to be dominated by two formerly peasantist parties, the (Serb) Radicals and the Croatian peasant party. It seemed that the dissatisfaction that generated populist political momentum in the two decades before World War I translated into political triumph in the wake of the war, as a result of having mobilized the masses and discredited the old elites.

III. Reactionary populism and the appropriation of the peasantist heritage

In the course of roughly a decade and a half, the peasantist movement had failed across East Central Europe and the Balkans. Either the peasantist parties were paralyzed, even integrated into various establishment factions through politicking (Poland, Hungary), or they became the victim of new authoritarian regimes (royal dictatorships in Yugoslavia and Romania, an officer's coup in Bulgaria). Only Czechoslovak agrarians, a centrist force persevered in power, with their coalition partners, in the lone democratic state of the region. (Dimou 2009: 143-144., Stefanovic 2015, Biondich 2015, Davies 2001:119-114., 121., 131., Bell 1996: 133-135.)

It is important to remember the frequently violent fate of the pre-Great War peasantist movements, because a cursory look might otherwise lead to the conclusion that their ideologies simply morphed into the conservative revolutionary authoritarian doctrines of the 1930s. After all, the peasant was the subject of a veritable cult, deployed as the symbol of the “purity” of the Volk and the soul of the nation. Social policy reforms were announced and justified by the need to ameliorate the lot of the rural population. Anti-elitism became even more pronounced, with a distinct anti-semitic and xenophobic elements – capitalizing on the fact that urban middle classes in these countries were often culturally distinct from the peasantry.

Why theorize a rupture then and why think in terms of two distinct streams of populism? It is important to observe the changes. The class character of peasantism was, for one, lost. The figure of the peasant, in these authoritarian ideologies, was seen as the representative of the völkisch essence to which the state and social order need to be adapted, rather than as a subaltern figure whose advancement will benefit the evolution of society at large. Also, by “inventing” the ahistorical figure of the peasant, the embodiment of pure ethnic character, anti-Western civilizational attitudes were perennialized. The peasant was seen as a force to overcome backwardness as compared to Western countries – instead, it now became the cause and the justification to refuse democracy and justify authoritarian rule. (Trencsényi 2012: 324.)

It is also up to discussion to what extent the adopted programmatic elements of the original populist agenda were symbolic or had actual social reform potential. There certainly was a genuine adoption of social thought. It was, however, inextricably linked to the essentialized concept of the people as an atemporal reality. (Ionescu 1970: 116.) In practice, this was reflected in how the redrawing of the boundaries of the nation occurred in the same movement of thought as did the formulation of a moral duty to care for society – meaning those who were within the boundaries. This is eminently palpable in how “true” Romanian or Hungarian rural poor were to profit from the new social policies, while “aliens”, especially Jews, were to be prevented from doing so.

In the face of the appropriation and recontextualization of the original populist agenda, the levels of resistance populist leaders and intellectuals demonstrated varied not just from country to country, but from person to person. A key element was whether they were in principle prepared to accept the reinterpretation of the class-conscious figure of the peasant to a classless symbol of ethno-essentialist unity and the replacement of the original development discourses with those of a timeless national character that had to be defended.

In Hungary, supporters of Gyula Gömbös, a would-be charismatic leader with fascist leanings tried to convince populist writers in 1935 to enter parliament or the government, and, more generally, to offer each other mutual support. After a short period of limited cooperation, only a small minority stayed in the government orbit. Those that did, however, became important innovators while radicalizing progressively. A number of other intellectuals became increasingly anti-Semitic and committed to various theories of race, while retaining a class-based outlook at the same time. Successive governments, while drifting towards the right, increasingly opened up to the ideas of social reform, not contrary, but complementary to the shift to a radical communitarian ideology within the right-wing establishment. The bulk of the Hungarian populist writers refused cooptation, but were nevertheless affected by the shift in modes of interpreting the world. Their refusal,

however, did not mean that successive governments did not experiment with appropriating populist ideas, even though at the level of actual policies this was only becoming clear after 1939. (Ungváry 2015)

In Poland, moderate peasantists close to Wincenty Witos stayed away from Marshal Pilsudski's 1926 coup (which ousted Witos as prime minister from his office), and even left-wing peasantist withdrew their support in the next few years. Polish peasantism could never regain its power and appeal afterwards. Instead, the real opposition to the authoritarian regime was made up of Roman Dmowski's followers, especially in the National Party after 1928 and in the radical faction that split to form the National Radical Camp in 1934. They formulated an ideology that could be considered the archetypal version of East Central European reactionary populism. Emphasizing Catholic identity, national purity represented in the ethnic Polish peasant, resistance to liberalism and capitalism, while also promoting a hierarchical state, the ideology was a textbook example of how some agrarian ideals could be translated into a master text of conservative revolutionary political theory. ()

Parts of the respective national populist movements originating from the turn of the century did join the post-agrarian, authoritarian political establishments in Romania and Bulgaria. The right-leaning minority group around Alexandru Vaida-Voevod split from Iuliu Maniu and the peasant party in the mid-1930s, aligning itself with King Carol II, relinquishing class theory (so fiercely defended by the other party founder, Ion Michalache) and focusing increasingly on the pernicious influence of Jews in the country.

In Bulgaria, anti-Semitism became much less a central issue, the society having both lower number of Jews and little to no traditions to build on. The overarching process of appropriation and partial cooptation, however, occurred in a manner structurally similar to what unfolded in other countries. When the moderates of BANU joined the officers of the 1923 anti-peasantist coup and chose to remain in politics, their movement did impact political discourses across the board. The officer organization Zveno and the monarchic dictatorship, the key centers of power up to 1934 and after that date, respectively, both sought to shape an all-encompassing ideology for the country. Corporatism, as elsewhere, gained widespread acceptance to overcome "class society" and the ruler also sought to construct a large, popular movement while keeping parties forbidden. While Bulgarian peasantism had made class its basis (if also seeking to temper class opposition), and conceived of a multi-party system based on general suffrage (while also using violent means and a paramilitary when in power), the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s replaced these with the vision of a single party, top-down system of rule into which the figure of the peasant was integrated, once more, as a symbol rather than a political actor.

A general evaluation of the changes of the 1930s tentatively extended to the whole of the "lands in between" would have to conclude that both agrarian populist program points and elites were partially appropriated/coopted into the emerging authoritarian orders of the region in their minority, but overall peasantist populism was more displaced than it was integrated into the old/new hegemonic elites. (Trencsényi 2012: 314.) This was possible not least because peasantism never achieved lasting success in these countries. It is important to distinguish between the success of peasantism in the 1920s and the never-attained status of peasantist hegemony. Agrarian populists

never conquered, in any country, the political class and the state in such a manner that would have permitted the long-term imposition of fundamental institutional changes to the political system. (Canovan 1981: 116.) Far more fundamental transformations were effected by authoritarian regimes inspired at least in part by the ideas of the New Right, the conservative revolution. Some of the old peasantist slogans may have remained current through the interwar period, but in actuality, the *Zwischeneuropa* of 1938 was very different from that of 1920-22, the high water mark of peasant populism in many ways.

The mechanisms of translation and appropriation discussed above show how authoritarian right-wing political orders attempted to increase their societal base by integrating various elements of old and new elites, as well as portions of ideologies represented by (former) political challengers representing subaltern strata in society. The “primordial” description of these mechanisms was given in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, by Karl Marx, writing about a fairly comparable emergence of an authoritarian leader in the wake of short-term successes by a popular movement. Marx considered the tendency of such movements around a strong leadership figure to adopt ideologies that broaden the popular appeal of the leader without ensuring the realization of the goals contained in the appropriated ideas a recurring feature of such transitions. He therefore incorporated it as a prominent aspect into his analysis of the political phenomenon he termed “bonapartism”. The interwar years surveyed here give no grounds to consider his analysis anything but highly productive for the interpretation of later eras – the fundamental dynamic seems to have been at work in the 1930s across the region.

IV. Reactionary populism and neo-populism in East Central Europe and the Balkans: Continuous or contiguous?

East Central European and Balkans neo-populisms rely to this day in multiple aspects on 1930s legacies of reactionary populism. It is all the more important to specify, by way of historicizing the genealogy of populisms in the region, the transformations of populism, which, as I have tried to show, occurred not through linear evolution, but through appropriation of peasantist ideas by reactionary populism, as well as the displacement and destruction of the original movements.

At this point, the history of ideologies in East Central Europe and the European core reconnect. The 1930s saw the rise of the new right with an emphasis on “organic society” and “productive work” in the majority of the countries on the continent. The German and Italian, and to a lesser extent the French “new right” in fact provided at least part of the inspiration behind the ideological evolution of the authoritarian regimes in the Eastern half of the continent (most prominently through the ideas of the perennial Volk, corporatism, the organic state). These ideologies have left a lasting imprint: while discredited as the era of fascisms ended, portions have been making periodic returns in the form of neo-populisms. These have largely shed anti-parliamentarism, but preserved its traces in their anti-elitism and critique of mainstream parties.

In Western Europe, the resentment of Jacobinism gave rise to and fear of socialism sustained a new kind radical right. In France, boulangisme, the Croix-de-Feu/Parti Social Francais, Poujadisme, even aspects of Gaullisme and recently the Front national all have exhibited a tendency to draw on

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pre-1789, supposedly “national traditions”, and a petty bourgeois producerist ethos. (Abromeit 2015) The fact that the figure of the smallholder peasant has been appropriated in Eastern Europe by right wing populisms, rather than that of the petty bourgeois, is a result of different patterns and speeds of modernity and development, rather than a difference that merits separate categorization. If one were to consider Eastern European populisms agrarian by default, two genealogies would be created without reason. East European reactionary populism incorporated agrarian/peasantist elements into its ideological horizon, but the resulting ideologies were more intimately related to Western contemporaries than to the peasantist progressivism of the late 19th- early 20th century.

Real differences – looking to the present – consist more in the relative weakness of representative liberal regimes in the post-1989 democracies, and their resulting vulnerability to populist challenge. While Western European institutions enjoy more trust and populism finds less traction in society, in Eastern Europe populist attitudes seem to resonate much more. At least part of it is due to weaker and less trusted institutions of “pragmatic” politics, which – as Canovan observed – predisposes the dissatisfied strata towards populist ideologies.

A second, not unrelated difference is that the geographical aspect of populism in *Zwischeneuropa*, which manifested itself as anti-Westernism and which understandably has been missing in the European heartland from comparable movements, has not lost its relevance. Instead of the jump into a just society, Eastern European societies fell into authoritarian and/or fascist rule followed by an extended period of imperial domination. As the 20th century ended, not much had changed in terms of geoeconomic and geocultural relations: the West was more developed, the East largely dependent on the West and the Western model of development. The domination of mainstream and “respectable” political imaginaries by borrowed Western European and Atlantic liberal ideas ensured that discontent by parts of society or mobilization by elite groups could always very easily take on anti-Western aspects.

The current revival of neo-populism has swept into power anti-institutionalist elites in Hungary and Poland, but has also affected elite attitudes in Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Czechia, Slovakia and Bulgaria. These elites – in different ways – have been instrumental in mainstreaming the questioning of the European orientation of their respective countries, thought settled even a decade ago, of the liberal model of development accomplished through national economies integrated into the Single Market, as well as the primacy of rule-based institutional processes in day-to-day politics. Their producerism is less vocal than in some Western cases, and the libertarian strand is missing from the streams that make up the movements (Kitschelt 2002), but emphasis on “honest work” combined with welfare chauvinism relates them to the opposition populisms of the old EU member states, as well.

The similarities of Eastern and Western neo-populisms trump the differences not by virtue of some arbitrary “weight” assigned to them, but by their hierarchy. The fundamental aspects are similar, from challenging institutions to the distrust of detached elites. The historical and accidental features differ: Eastern Central Europe had different populist antecedents in terms of agenda, and these configure not the ideological stance but the concrete political imaginary. In the bluntest of terms, the neo-populist story is the same across the continent; the setting does vary with a notable cleavage separating East Central Europe and the Balkans.

Comparative underdevelopment, lasting social antagonisms in a specific historical situation produced in *Zwischeneuropa* originary agrarian populist movements. The first generation of these, at the very least, was a reaction to a *révolution manquée*, as I tried to argue in this paper and reflected the alienation of the previously mobilized rural masses from the prevailing order. Against big capital, including large estates, distrustful of the nationalizing liberal regimes of the late 19th century, it was a progressivist phenomenon. At the same time, as in the case of the Popular Party in the United States, it also mapped prejudices and other resentments onto its political agenda, including in many cases varieties of anti-Semitism and anti-Westernism. (Trencsényi 2012: 318-321.) It was in no country, however, the anti-Semitic force as such – those were taken up by various urban parties of the right drawing on artisans and other petty bourgeois elements first and foremost. These elements were appropriated, decontextualized and radicalized by conservative revolutionary-reactionary actors especially in the 1930s, but to some extent throughout the interwar period. Reactionary populism was not an outgrowth or evolutionary next stage of peasantism, but part of the ideological arsenal of authoritarian regimes deployed against peasantism, as well as socialism and liberalism. Understanding this rupture in the seemingly continuous, in reality only contiguous history of populisms in East Central Europe and the Balkans is important as much to avoid unhistorical theorizing, as much as to developing a coherent classification of varieties of populism.

Allowing for imperfect fits and even unclassifiable cases in other countries, this historical survey considers progressive populism an original form and reactionary populism as an appropriated secondary form of populism. This logic appears adaptable to interpretations of fairly distinct cases. These include the transition from agrarian other radical movements in Latin-America to charismatic authoritarianisms, and at least some aspects of decolonization and the transformation of independence movements into dictatorships. (di Tella 1965, Veliz 1965, Paige 1975, de la Torre 2015) Even in the US, the same chronology prevails, as the Greenback Party and the Popular Party evidently predate Southern reactionary populisms and McCarthyism. (Canovan 1981: 226-230.) The similarities extend to progressive populism's tendency to yield specific movements, and reactionary populism to appear as an ideological component of right-wing authoritarianisms.

What is the lesson of all of the above for students of populism today? At the risk of engaging in thoroughly unscholarly speculation, I will risk two remarks. One the one hand, it is certainly important to remember the unresolved dilemma of backwardness and catching up in East Central Europe. New member states of the EU has made spectacular progress if viewed in a historical perspective, but they are still relatively underdeveloped both economically and socially – if a West European and largely liberal yardstick is used. These two aspects – *de facto* underdevelopment and the sense of being measured by the more developed West (the *superego* of the East) – contribute to political psychological processes that sustain *Sonderweg*-theories to deflect a sense of collective insufficiency. At least since the conservative revolution of the interwar period, such theorizing tends to converge around a myth of perennial difference, rather than on the narrative of catching up. It would not hurt, therefore, to have – as peasantism once attempted to formulate it – a native grand *récit* of development, of catching up. *Sonderweg* or not – a homegrown variety of promise about the future would likely constitute the most credible antidote to reactionary neo-populism and its insistence of “we are who we are” and the resentment towards the liberal “West” that it fosters.

Also, as Trencsényi observed, the peasantist and overall populist legacy has imparted on neo-populist elites a measure of legitimacy up to the present. (Trencsényi 2014) It is easy to appear folksy, homespun and “native”, if compared to the suits of technocrats. This is a card consciously and consistently played out against pro-European platforms in current politics. It is important to remember that the origins of populist intellectual pride lay in the opposition to domestic ruling classes and it was this class opposition that was appropriated and redirected towards xenophobia and a rejection of the outside by reactionary populism. To claim the intellectual heritage and anti-elitist mantle of the late 19th and early 20th century progressive populists would be the task of a left-wing platform that is currently missing from the political map (and even from East Central European political imaginaries in general). A left-wing populism might be uncomfortable to share the common European home with, as the example of Syriza would suggest, but in terms of value systems would represent competition for the neo-populists of the region. Populism is strong in those Eastern member and accession states where the left-populist and post-material left part of the political spectrum is vacant. It may well be the case that the best antidote to reactionary populism is still what Gramsci suggested observing the rise of fascism: a national left-wing coalition of workers, the agrarian population and sections of the urban lower middle class. (Gramsci [1926] 1978) Society has changed, the urban lower middle class may today be the workers in factories and the workers of yesterday the current wage-earners of the service sector, but the fundamental idea remains the same. The proposition is one of offering genuine representation in terms of both interests and identities to the producerial class, i.e. blue-collar workers and other vulnerable strata in the broad sense, including, crucially, the countryside. Such representation could – and should - exist outside of, but not necessarily hostile to the organizational network of its centrist and progressive liberal allies.

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With the financial support of the European Parliament

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