If we were to look for one concept that has come to the fore in recent decades and has seen its heyday in academic circles and discourses on the political situation, it would certainly be populism. With the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 and the subsequent impact it had on the Republican Party, Brexit, and a rise in the numbers of anti-establishment leaders and political parties in Europe, Latin America, and Asia, this concept has moved from academia to public discourse. Populism seems to have become a central concept for anyone interested in politics. More than 55,000 academic works (monographs, journal articles) and millions of newspaper articles, blogs, and posts on social media (Boros et al. 2020) in the last decade only further support this claim.

Even though populism received a breath of fresh air during and after the global economic crisis following 2007/08 and especially after the three shocking events in the three oldest democracies (the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of populist parties and leaders), we must realize that populism is nothing new; it has accompanied democratic politics for a long time, and its activity and success have experienced ups and downs. Before the mid-1950s, the term was associated with two phenomena: the Russian Narodniki, who assumed that revolution comes from the people, and the rural politics of the Populist Party in the U.S. Midwest (Deiwiks 2009; Gidron and Bonikowski 2014; Mendilow 2021). Despite promising starting points about the origins of populism, the definition of populism has changed, fragmented, and coalesced into a hodgepodge of different concepts throughout history, particularly due to the era and the political and social context in which populism manifested itself at the time (more in Mendilow 2021, pp. 6–9).

Moreover, populism is difficult to define, even among academics (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The variety of definitions offered reflects the disciplines of scholars from political science, sociology, cultural studies, political psychology, communication and media studies, economics, and, more recently, business and leadership studies, as well as the attributes on which they focus (communication strategy, style, form of discourse, ideology, political strategy). The latter also explains why the content analysis of published scholarly articles has failed to classify the concept of populism into
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some common and generally accepted categories. Nevertheless, scholars have emerged (e.g., Jensen 2011; Moffitt and Tormey 2014) who felt that some kind of common use of the term populism would be necessary for academic purposes. This attempt was rejected by scholars because, in their view, such a definition would assume that populism is a single phenomenon, which would reduce complexity, could not explain mass-based parties, and would not account for the dynamics of particular environments. Moreover, populism cannot be isolated from the circumstances in which it emerged. It must therefore be viewed in terms of waves that are geographically and temporally contingent (Houven 2011).

Years later, there is still an academic debate about how to categorize the concept: Is it an ideology, a style, a discourse, or a strategy? Throughout all these debates, however, scholars agree that populism has two basic tenets. First, it must claim to speak on behalf of ordinary people, and second, these ordinary people must stand in opposition to an elite establishment that prevents them from realizing their policy preferences. Moreover, people are “pure and good” while the elites are portrayed as “evil and corrupt.” These two core principles are combined in different ways by different populist leaders, parties, and movements. In any case, populism is found on both wings of the political continuum, the right wing and the left wing. While the cases of populism on the right have been more intensively covered by academic research and publications so far, there are also some cases of left-wing populism. In general, left-wing populists’ ideas about “the people” and “the elite” focus on socio-economic grievances, while right-wing populists’ ideas about these groups generally focus on sociocultural issues such as immigration. It should be noted, however, that it is sometimes difficult to categorize left- or right-wing populism, not only because there are parties that cannot be classified along traditional political divides, but also because some political parties espouse political programs that are close to the ideology of the opposite pole of the political spectrum. Despite the fact that so-called centrist populism has not been studied so frequently in general, there are several studies focusing on this phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe as many political parties and movements in the region avoid the classical left–right divide (e.g., Havlík and Voda 2018; Pop-Eleches 2010; Učeň et al. 2005).

Populism refers to a particular pattern of anti-establishment ideas, styles, or strategies employed to gain or maintain power. As such, it has neither negative nor positive connotations. We must emphasize, however, that populism has gotten a bad rap in recent years because it is often associated with authoritarianism and anti-immigrant ideas, which is particularly true of right-wing populists, even though these characteristics have more to do with the ideology of the radical right than with populism itself. Moreover, some authors (e.g., Bryant and Moffitt 2019) argue that populists are disruptive because they
position themselves as outsiders who are radically different and distinct from the existing order and environment. From this perspective, populists often advocate for change in the status quo and can make the case for the need for urgent structural change. They often do this by spreading a sense of crisis, whether true or not, and presenting themselves as the solution.

There is considerable tension between populist forms of political mobilization, which tend to focus on the charisma and individual appeal of the leader, and the traditional understanding of representative democracy, which favors the role of political parties in representing the will of the public. The fact that populists often seek to change the status quo, ostensibly on behalf of the people, means that they can pose a threat to the democratic norms and social practices that many people value (Bryant and Moffitt 2019). Moreover, extensive analysis shows that many populist leaders use various tools to change the constitution or parts of it and make profound structural and institutional changes when they come to power. Landau (2018) finds that a number of populist leaders and parties have recently either replaced the existing constitution entirely or adopted far-reaching amendment packages. Moreover, he argues that all of these amendments within populism serve three core functions: (a) the deconstruction of the existing political system, (b) an ideological critique that promises to overcome flaws in the previous order, and (c) the consolidation of power in the hands of populist leadership. To prevent these harmful actions, Landau (2018) suggests two avenues of inquiry. The first step is to stop the most enduring negative effects of populism by placing limits on forms of legal and structural change that hold on to power for long periods of time. The second step is to prevent populists from making antidemocratic changes and to respond to the political forces that empower them.

POPULISM AND POPULIST LEADERS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Populism— and its effects— are therefore a growing problem. Among the general public, populism is seen as an ideology, a strategy, a discourse style of political mobilization, or a political practice based primarily on the antagonism between us, the “pure people,” represented by the populist leader, and them, the “corrupt elite” (i.e., the political opponents), supported by the argument that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). In recent years, populist leaders have won elections in many Central and Eastern European countries, from Hungary to the Czech Republic, Poland, Austria, and others. It is undeniable that both populist parties and populist leaders have emerged in politics, and many of them have begun to successively win elections and/or establish themselves as major political forces in their respective political systems. We substantiate this
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with the findings of Boros et al. (2020), who found that the assumption that populists are incapable of governing and would soon fail once they took over government has been proven wrong. Although populists often pursue harmful and even dangerous policies, they usually remain popular in government and tend to be re-elected, especially when they govern without a coalition.

But why did Central and Eastern Europe become a Mecca for populists? To find the reasons, we need to get a broader picture of this particularly turbulent region. One of the most important factors is undoubtedly the historical trauma of non-democratic regimes and the path dependency shared by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The second reason could be the social and economic situation, which worsened during and after the global economic crisis and led to growing insecurity in the labor market. The next trigger for growing populism could be the migrant crisis that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been struggling with for several years. This was the perfect time to create strongly xenophobic, anti-EU and nationalist parties, which subsequently found strong popular support.

The traditional center-right and center-left parties suffered an unprecedented decline in support, while alternative political parties attracted increasing numbers of supporters and voters. This has led to a crisis of traditional political parties and institutions, and a challenge to liberal democracy. Moreover, the influence of social media has increased enormously, as so-called charismatic leaders who have penetrated the political space through online tools have become much more popular than technocratic parties. It seems that the politics of attack, strong language, and confrontation have become more attractive than the politics of collaboration. Moreover, Boros and colleagues (2020, p. 6) argue that emotions have become more important than facts and that respect for the elite has been replaced by anti-elitism. The still ongoing global coronavirus pandemic is not helping to improve the situation. The rapid spread of the virus is causing severe illness among those infected and claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands. Social isolation and lockdown measures have had a tremendous impact on individual and societal mental health, quality of life, the economy, standards of living, and welfare. Trust in political parties in Central and Eastern European countries continues to decline. All of this has led to populist leaders and parties becoming even more influential as people become desperate and look for pleasant motivational speeches as well as sympathetic policies. In this sense, populism is a mirror that spurs us to confront and respond to the weaknesses of liberal democracy (Panizza 2005).

It seems that this book was written at just the right time – at a time when populism is paving the way – even though the original idea is several years old. The experts gathered in the Central European Political Science Association have already organized a whole series of discussions and presented national practices at various international conferences, symposia, and congresses. As
Introduction: setting the scene

Guardians of liberal democracy, obliged not only to observe the processes in the political systems of our respective countries and wider afield, but also to understand, predict, and warn against potentially harmful political practices and dangers, we have joined forces and prepared detailed analyses on the changes that nation states and societies are experiencing on the wings of populism.

This book examines and analyzes the growing influence of populism, and we raise the question of the continued relevance of political parties and leaders in a populist political environment, including case studies of individual political leaders and political parties and movements. We have attempted to define populism as broadly as possible, leaving the authors free to define populism themselves, as doctrine dictates. We have followed this practice in order to contribute to the understanding of the complexity of the concept of populism. This helps us understand the context in terms of appropriate conditions and shed light on the triggers that enable the rise of populist leaders, political parties, and movements in the contemporary era.

If it is true that knowledge about populists helps us better understand them and ultimately defend the values of liberal democracy and solidarity, we believe that this book will contribute to the scholarly debate on the rise of populist leaders, political parties, and movements not only in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but also among scholars and practitioners concerned with the current paradigms of emerging populism around the globe.

The structure of this book

Chapter 2 by Matevž Tomšič, serves as a theoretical foundation and addresses the role of established elites across the political spectrum in the process of the spread of populism in post-communist countries, with the author arguing that populism is not so much a cause as a symptom of the crisis of democracy.

The following chapters examine populism in selected Central and Eastern European countries.

Chapter 3 by Karin Liebhart reconstructs right-wing populist political trends that have influenced both political discourse and politics in Austria. The author focuses on both historical and current trends, paying particular attention to corresponding developments under the coalition governments between the Austrian People’s Party and the Freedom Party of Austria and between the Austrian People’s Party and the Green Party.

Chapter 4 by Petr Bláha, Jakub Charvát, and Pavel Maškarinec presents an analysis of the electoral success of populist parties in the 2013 and 2017 Czech parliamentary elections, using grievance theory to explain the rise of populist parties in the Czech Republic. The authors focus on the determinants of electoral support for ANO2011 and two radical right populist parties, Dawn...
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and SPD. The Czech case continues in Chapter 5 by Vladimír Naxera, who focuses on the issue of corruption in the communications of Czech President Miloš Zeman. The author compares Zeman’s communication style with the communication of previous Czech presidents.

Evidence of Hungarian populism is addressed in the next two chapters. First, an attempt is made to examine the complex relationship between renationalization and Europeanization. In Chapter 6, Boglárka Koller explains that the Hungarian government successfully engaged in identity politics by constructing new national symbols and identity elements and also inventing new narratives related to the European Union. Chapter 7 offers a closer look at Hungary’s foreign policy in comparative perspective with neighboring Romania, which was a former comrade embedded in the Soviet Union ecosystem. Zoltán Vörös and Zoltán Bretter focus on the foreign policy of selected countries through the lens of nationalism.

Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė analyzes the significance of populist political leadership and political parties in Lithuania in Chapter 8. The author reviews the development and changing environment of populism in Lithuania since the early 2000s, examines the electoral material of populist parties and messages in the media, and discusses recent events related to populism in Lithuania in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

Populism in Poland is examined in the following two chapters. In Chapter 9, Agnieszka Turska-Kawa highlights the factors responsible for the development of populist attitudes in Poland. The author contends that one of the main causes of the rise of populism in Poland has been social fears and anxieties related to three main areas, namely (a) the consequences of Poland’s membership in the European Union, (b) the role of the Catholic Church, and (c) social inequalities, also understood as relative deprivation, fomented by political parties. In Chapter 10, Agnieszka Kasińska-Metryka and Rafał Dudala present the roots of the phenomenon of nationalism in Poland through the so-called concept of “Polishness.” The authors analyze the activities and speeches of politicians from the ruling party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość and hierarchs of the Catholic Church, who stigmatize certain social groups (e.g., LGBT, refugees, women) and cooperate with nationalist groups and movements.

In Chapter 11, Jaroslav Ušiak and Petra Jankovská focus on the links between political (national) populism and radicalization in online communication and address the situation in the Slovak Republic in the period leading up to the February 2020 parliamentary elections. The authors analyze the gradual change in the online communication statements of the government and parliamentary parties to identify their national populist discourse on selected topics. Slovak populism is further analyzed in Chapter 12 by Petr Just, who focuses on the nationalist populist party Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia as
a legitimate political actor and its coalition potential. The chapter captures the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, as mainstream parties initially sought to exclude this far-right party from any relevant participation in politics and government, which has changed in recent years.

In Chapter 13, Simona Kukovič reveals the secret of success of populist political parties in Slovenia, which gained momentum in the times of global economic and migration crisis in the late 2010s. The chapter analyzes the growing influence of party-based populism and raises the question of whether political parties and their leaders remain relevant in a populist political environment. The author explores (a) whether populism poses a challenge to traditional forms of political action in Slovenian democracy and (b) whether populism could contribute to the reversal of democratic processes.

Ladislav Cabada focuses on the legacy that influences national populist actors in Central and Eastern European countries in Chapter 14. The author claims that these legacies are related to the struggle between “urban liberals” and conservative currents with strong anti-liberal tendencies, as well as to the situation of “fake modernity” as one of the crucial determinants of the continuation of anti-modern and counter-cosmopolitan tendencies in the region.

Chapter 15 by Miro Haček concludes the book. It highlights the findings of the 13 chapters and attempts to answer the crucial question of why Central and Eastern Europe is a hotbed of European populism. In addition, the author also addresses the political patterns that the old democracies of the West sometimes (rightly or wrongly) want to impose on the countries of the Central and Eastern European region, without recognizing that the latter helps to reinforce populism in everyday political life.

The authors of this volume will continue to promote, explain, and develop political science in their respective countries and globally through their research, educational, and consulting activities and efforts.

NOTES

1. Populism is mainly associated with the left in South America. Hugo Chavez, the former president of Venezuela, was probably the best-known left-wing populist leader because of his rhetoric. In addition, Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Bolivian president Evo Morales are also considered left-wing populists. Left-wing populism is not limited to South America, however. In Europe, contemporary examples of left-wing populist parties include Spain’s Podemos and Greece’s Syriza, which have enjoyed enviable success in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Bryant and Moffitt 2019).

2. For example, presidents Fujimori in Peru (1995), Chavez in Venezuela (1999), Correa in Ecuador (2008), and Morales in Bolivia (2009), and Prime Minister Orbán and his Fidesz Party in Hungary (2011) (Landau 2018).

3. Among them, President Erdoğan in Turkey (2007).
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5. The Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) was founded in 1994 as a common forum of Central European political scientists. The basic idea behind the establishment of CEPSA was to create links between political scientists from post-communist countries who were trying to establish political science in their respective countries. However, the idea of a common Central European identity also played an important role in discussions about the need for a common political science association in the region. Today CEPSA brings together political scientists from Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

REFERENCES


