Populism – a threat or a challenge for the democratic system?
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**Introduction**

From the beginning of 1980s, an emergence of a new populism movement began. In short notice they managed to not only organize itself in political parties but within some western democracies achieved a great success in the elections. From 1990s, it has become a regular occurrence in Western Europe. According to Cas Mudde, we are now experiencing populist Zeitgeist, in which government parties, as well as, opposition are expressing some of populist features in their discourse. (Mudde 2004). Taking all of this into account, one cannot be surprised that so many articles, books, columns and editorials were devoted to understanding this phenomenon. In this paper, firstly, I will concentrate my considerations on possible understanding and definitions of populism. There is a lot of controversy around using this term as well as on characterization of parties than can be rank among populism one’s. To better apprehend the complexity of this movement, I will introduce its main features and reasons why it is so hard to create one, clear vision of its nature. One problem especially attracts attention of scholars, who explore this phenomenon. Should we perceive populism as a threat to liberal democratic system or a challenge, that once overcome can even engender the strength and stability of western democracy? Can parties like Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), Dutch List Pinn Fortuyn (LPF), or Forza Italia (FI) be perceived as a pathology of democratic system, or maybe their claims and demands concerning renewal of democracy are truly a salvation for elitist and a bureaucratic system, which no longer is seen as representative by its subjects. As Cas Mudde said “maybe the arguments of populist are true and that could explain why they are so successful” (Mudde, 2004: 553). In main part of my work I will consider both of these aspects. One should not forget that, even though, in this paper I concentrate my considerations on Western European countries, populism is also present in Central Europe (for example: Poland, Slovakia, or Czech Republic), and Eastern Europe (for example: Russia) with a similar intensity. Elections in 2005 and 2006 in this region have shown, that new established democracies are threatened by populism phenomenon as well. Something strange and unexpected is happening in politics of these countries and it is not a one-off episode, but a trend that is not only hard to define but even more difficult to embrace (Krastev, 2008). However, the main research question that I ponder upon remains: Can populism be perceived as a threat to democratic system, or a challenge that Western European countries need to face and find a way to respond to?
Defining populism

A term “populism” originates from Latin “populus”, meaning “the people”, what implies strong connection to democracy itself. We can assume that where is democracy, there is populism. (Decker, 2003). Ambiguity and ambivalence of populism make it impossible to create one, single definition of this phenomenon. According to British sociologist, August Stewart “a certain shapelessness in ideas and organization is inherited in populism”(Held, 2001: 63). Isaiah Berlin says that “there is a shoe in shape of populism, but no foot that will fit into” (Karstev, 2008:43). Paul Taggart emphasized similarly that “populism has an essential chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment in which it occurs” (Meny, Surel, 2002: 6). Berlin’s comparison and Taggart’s statement aptly illustrate how difficult defining this phenomenon is.

However, one cannot say that there was no attempts to create such definition. Firstly, following Akkerman, one can distinguish three possible approaches in defining populism. One can identify populism only as a radical right wing parties, but it is too narrow understanding of this term. One can also see populism in a “respectable” way, parties which use populism’s tactics to their advantage, but do not pose a threat to constitutionalism democracy. Finally, populism can be perceived as an ideology. In contrast to other ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, conservatism, it does not, however, presents complete and cohesive overview of human life. It concentrates more on some aspects of it leaving another matters unnoticed (Akkerman, 2003). One can also understand populism as a social movement. Regardless that, it often emerges from the protest of social groups and uses some of methods associated with protest movements, it also conducts its political action via elections or referendums, which are the channels provided by political system (Meny, Surel, 2002). It is then neither a pure social movement, nor a political party. Although there is no consensus in academic world what populism is and how should be described, most definitions of populism have two points in common, “the elites” and “the people”. For example, Cas Mudde see populism “as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonte general of the people” (Mudde, 2004:544). In my paper I agree with Mudde’s definition, it explicates nature of this phenomenon and provides a solid background for farther research.
3. Characterization of populism movement:

Populism is a modern, complex and variegated phenomenon. Thus it cannot be simply put into a classic typology or understood without the a context of contemporary socioeconomic and sociocultural reality. In this chapter, firstly, I would like to present circumstances in which populism emerges. Secondly what are its main features, and finally what are claims and demands upon which populism builds its ideological dimension. All of issues mentioned above, will allow one to get a complete overview of what this phenomenon really is and how to recognize it among other ideologies.

Circumstances of emergence:

Populism is a phenomenon which can emerge in all forms of a democratic system. The most exposed to its influence are political systems which experience an institutional transition. Success of Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi’s party, being the best example. According to “Voice People 2006”, a global opinion poll, 79 percent of people agree that democracy is the best form of government. In contrast, only one third agree that voice of people is heard and followed by authorities of their countries (Krastev, 2008:44). This situation implies people deep dissatisfaction of ruling elites and is a fertile ground for populism emergence. Meny and Surel among political factors, which constitutes appearance of this phenomenon, name: the crisis of the structures of a political intermediation; the personalization of political power and increasing role of media in political life. (Meny, Surel, 2002:Ch.2) All these issues influence people view and perception on condition of democracy in their country. One can notice so-called “political malaise” present in today’s political life. Decline in party membership, lack of interest and distrust in politics and politicians, increasing number of de-aligned and disillusioned voters open to radical alternatives (for example, in the shape of populism), are consider to be symptoms of these “democratic disease”. Media, in this situation are no help, on the contrary, the way in which they present facts and opinions create even more anti-political atmosphere and contribute to popularization of populism parties (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008:1). Leader willing to exploit existing socio-economical situation to his advantage, is also needed for populism to emerge. Some scholars see a reason for populism appearance in crisis of intermediate institutions. When party, politician, or administration starts to treat local government as their own property, rather than as a public trust (Crick, 2005: 631).

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1 Italy, according to Albetrazzi and McDonell, is going through never-ending institutional trasition
Emergence of populism parties depends on social factors as well. Population is forced to adapt to a drastically new situation, where unemployment, vulnerability, precariousness are everyday reality, and where identity crisis and social exclusion are spreading (Adolfo, 2005:38). Undoubtedly, one can blame globalization and post-modernization for aggravation of this atmosphere. Intensified integration of global markets, competitive pressure from Third World countries with large pools of human labour, decrease in demand of semi-skilled workers and in the same time large immigration from the undeveloped countries are giving rise to the feelings of uncertainty, fear and despair among Europeans. This situations is exploited by populism parties which assure popular longings for security and predictability (Betz, 2008).

To better understand, why democracy is so vulnerable to populism challenge, one need to look at this system as a meeting point of two contrasting styles. Canovan named it as a pragmatic and redemptive style of politics, Meny and Surel as a tension between ideology (power of the people) and functioning of democracy (the power of the elites chosen by the people (Meny, Surel, 2002), and Abst and Rummens as a conflict between liberal and democratic pillar of constitutional democracy. Whatever one will name these parts, essential idea remains. Populism emerges because of out of balance state between two factors: liberal constitutionalism and democratic majoritarianism, amid idea that law should be perceived as a supreme authority and a notion of will of majority as a main source of legitimization. Populism emergence in heart of democracy itself. According to Margaret Canovan this “tension [...] provides the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow” (Canovan, 1999:9).

Main features:

Knowledge about main features of populism movement can help to better understand its rapid development in present times. The best summary of populism characteristic aspects was presented by Paul Taggart. He includes six features that describe the core of populism movement: hostility to representative democracy, “the people” as a heartland - center of

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2 Distinction between these two styles lies in different views where power should reside. For pragmatic style of politics democracy is a system ‘coping peacefully with the conflicts of modern societies by means of a highly contingent collection of rules and practices’, while redemptive style sees it mainly as a government of the people, by the people and for the people; the people are the only source of legitimate authority. (Canovan, 1999:10)

3 Paul Taggart tries to clarify the meaning of people for populism, instead of using term “the people”, he use “heartland”. It is a place “in which, in the populist imagination, a virtuous and unified population resides”. This concept illustrates that people in populist propaganda are not real, but mythical. (Taggart, in Meny and Surel, 2002)
populism ideology, lack of core values⁴, tendency to be highly chameleonic, emergence as a reaction to sense of extreme crisis and finally self-limiting quality of populism⁵ (Taggart, in Meny, Surel, 2002). Albertazzi and McDonnell point out that populists see themselves as a ‘true democrats”, who voice popular opinions and grievances systematically ignored by authorities and fight to reclaim people sovereignty from elites in power (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008:4). For many populist parties, a local level of governance remains the first field of gaining experience. Many of them limit their activity only to the regional ground, others treat it as a showcase for the nation. Even though populist long for a past and “lost paradise” that disappeared due to machinations of corrupt elites, they also unfold the vision of new rights, guarantees and liberties which will be introduced, if only they gain enough power. (Mudde, 2007:279). Populists are targeting special kind of voters and because of that need to use specific language, simple and direct. In this way they emphasize the difference between them and bureaucratic politicians jargon, which can be hardly understood by ordinary people. Populists love transparency, they opposite backstage deals and compromise, as well as complicated legislative procedures. Their voters are usually people feeling isolated politically and alienated by society, they are members of neither cultural, religious, nor professional organizations, people who have difficulties in finding their place in capitalistic, post-modernistic reality, so-called “losers of globalization”.

There are two main characteristic aspects that distinguish populism parties from mainstream political parties: populist understanding of term “people” and type of leadership. According to Margaret Canovan one can notice three appeals to the “people” in populism discourse: united people, meaning a nation or country in opposition to fractions and parties that divide it, our people contrasted with the "others", who do not belong to our group (f. e. immigrants) and ordinary people, who are mobilized against highly educated, cosmopolitan elite. As we can see people are not only citizens and workers which have the same rights and duties but most of all they are identified upon sharing the same “blood”, or inhabiting the same territory (Canovan, 1999:4). More than demos, they are ethnos (Albertazzi, McDonnel, 2008:16). For populist “the people” are homogenous unity, fully formed, self-aware and identifiable. Although the theory is quite clear, in practice one can hardly recognize the population, or the group that populists are talking about.

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⁴ Variety of versions of populism fluctuate from the Right to the Left, thus its core values differ depending on which ideological position it will start to occupy.
⁵ Populism can mobilize they voters only in a sense of crisis, it is difficult to sustain populist appeal. In the moment when from marginal, nonpolitical party, they become institutionalized in politics, they face loosing large part of people support.
For example, two British parties understand this term in completely different way, for British Conservatives, the heartland used to be “Middle England”, for British National Party – “the native British people”. Something much clearer is who populist are opposed to. In populist Manichean outlook, there are only friends and allies. People that do not fit in these categories are evil, corrupt, amoral force (Mudde, 2004:544). We can distinguish two groups that populists mainly see as their enemies: from “above” – elites, and from “below” – immigrants, or other groups that in their belief threatened the unity of a community.

Deeply connected with populist definition of “the people” is a type of leadership established in populism parties. Populism leaders, like Berlusconi or Haider, are charismatic personalities, which while remaining one of the people (one of “us), manage to enter the sphere of politics in attempt to save the democracy. He or she combines and articulates people will and by knowing exactly what people want becomes their one, real representative. Leader is perceived as a man of destiny who can provide simple, understandable solutions to problems experienced by ordinary citizens (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008: 5, 25).

Promises and demands:

Populists, as was already mentioned above, see themselves as true democrats. One cannot say, however, that they are representatives of anti-democratic ideology. More like anti-political one. They do not want to abolish democratic system, on the contrary, they want to restore and reform it in such a way that will bring back the fundamental principal of its existence – direct rule of sovereign will of people. Populism challenged established structures of power, elites and their values. They emphasize people and their role in a political decision-making process. In populists view those in charge betrayed people trust, by taking care of their own interests and goals, forgetting for what purpose they were elected and who they are supposed to represent. Because of that, power of people should be restored. Elites need to be replaced by a charismatic populist leader, who claims to understand directly and embodies the will of people. Populist are impatient with complicated democratic procedures. The only one that they find useful are tools of direct democracy, for example, referendum or elections (Crick, 2005: 626). Populist postulate that a classic intermediary institution should be eliminated and replaced by a direct link between government and electorate (Decker, 2003:50). Populist are convinced that representative institutions perform worse that direct democracy once, “narrow interest of career-minded officials[..] and interest groups”, is more important to them than public interest (Haskell, 2001:151). Populism parties can easily adapt to new circumstances in the particular state. That is why one can see this movement as a opportunistic. The same party in a short matter of time can change its attitudes toward
European Union from strict antagonist one to strong supporter. In the same manner, it can be pro or anti-global, according to their interest and leaders moods. Sometimes parties that represented extreme and radical views change their ideological face into more moderate and compromise-oriented while when in power (Meny, Surel, 2002). Populist, in consequence of their view on society and “the people” in particular, are opposed to minority rights, pluralism and basic individual rights. One can sometimes get confused by populism tendency to shift from one side of political spectrum to another. Especially when, like in the case of FPO, programmatic objectives where decided according to Heider’s personal ambitions and preference, without farther internal discussion and consensus. He adapted FPO’s ideology and programme to current political expediency (Albertazzi, McDonnel, 2008:79-80). As parties that have nothing to lose and, with some exceptions, little chances to win the elections they are not reluctant to make shallow promises. It can be, as Forza Italia statements, promise to bring politics closer to the real needs of the people, or reduction in the number of parliamentarians and cost-containments in the ministries. They can as well promise some more general things like: security, prosperity, identity, return to the scepter of democracy to its rightful owners among others. Finally they promise “to make the people, once more, masters in their own homes, in the widest sense of the term”(Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008:96, 219).

4. Populism as a challenge or threat to democratic system.

Democratic system, as Gianfranco Pasquino notices, have no automatic barriers against populism. In consequence, it easily becomes vulnerable to populism propaganda and criticism (Pasquino in Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008:22). But should one treat this phenomenon as a challenge or a threat to democratic system? Should one see it as a dangerous force that can destroy stability and stop the development of modern society? Or a challenge that mainstream parties need to face and response to it, in a way that will eliminate this problem definitely?

Analyzing the phenomenon of populism, one should firstly understand that populists want “more leadership, less participation” in contrast with populism in 1960, which proposed “more participation, less leadership”. People nowadays are not interested in politics and thus want a charismatic leader who “knows” them and voice their will. Current heartland of populists does support democracy, but does not want to be bothered by political machinations (Mudde, 2004). In the same fashion, one need to understand that populism does not oppose to democratic system per se, on the contrary it needs its support and tools (elections, voting) to
achieve its goals. It is a representative democracy and even more into detail, idea and institutions of liberal democracy that populism criticizes.

According to Fareed Zakaria, populism is one form, of what he calls “illiberal democracy”. In its most extreme interpretation, populism rejects all limitations on the expression of popular will, such as protection of minorities rights and independence of key institutions (Mudde, 2004). In this perception populism appears as a serious threat to democratic system. It seems even more dangerous when we look on how democracy in populism view should look like. Based on Schmitt vision of democracy, populist build their own ideal political system. One cannot say that it is clearly a reflection of Schmitt’s theory, but some common ground can be found. Populism democracy is “in the firm grip of the people, nourished by elections and referendums, adulterated by the machinations, pedantry, corruption, clientilism and pluralism typical of official politics” (Pasquino in: Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008:35). One can assume that the real threat for liberal democracy nowadays is a rise of illiberal democracy and consequences of this emergence.

Another factor in which populism appears to be a threat for democratic system is populism exclusive nature. It their political discourse they are often intolerant, racist and xenophobic they legitimize the exclusion of “others” that do not fit to their definition of “the people”. Common ground for populist parties such as Front National or Vlaams Block is clear antagonism between friends and enemies. On one hand, populist parties usually oppose to immigrants, single mothers and criminals. For example, Lega Nord takes especially hard-line position towards Muslim foreigners and multiculturalism. On the other hand, populist presents hostility towards intellectual economic and political elites. Delegitimization of their political opponents implies that they are not seen as a adversaries but evil enemies. In other words populists reject a symbolic framework in which political stage for a democratic political struggle is defined (Abts, Rummens, 2007). This situation creates a permanent situation of conflict, which is not conductive to an accepted democratic outcome. Law notion of individual and civil rights, devotion to conspiracy theories, sharing some inspirational themes with communism and fascism, and most of all foreign policy based on isolationism can be seen as a dangerous ideas for democracy maintenance (Held, 1996:63-65).

According to Jens Rydgren presence of populism parties, especially these radical ones, can lead to increase in racism and xenophobia because of its influence on people frame of

6 Schmitt defines democracy as a „substantial identity” of all citizens”, which suits with populist vision of political community as a homogenous political body with a common, single will of people (Abts, Rummens, 2007:415)
thought as well as on political actors. It is assumed that this parties are responsible for an outburst of racist violence and attacks on immigrants. Even though one can present some examples of violent behavior from members of populist organizations, there is no proof that the parties as such were involved in these activities. On the contrary, their reaction (expulsion of perpetrators), demonstrates that party distanced itself from this occurrence (Eatwell, Mudde, 2009:206). According to Pasquino, populism can resort to violence measures when weighed down by excessive expectations, which it cannot deliver. On the other hand populist radical right parties can be seen as a “channel of frustrations of would-be perpetrators of nativist violence” as well. Unfortunately data gathered by European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia are inconsistence and thus cannot be treated as confirmation or negation of this theses (Mudde, 2007:285, 286).

Populism can be also seen as a threat to democratic system in its political assumptions. Ancient Greek politicians, Pericles said one that the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated. Populists parties because of theirs plebiscitary view on democracy inevitably become victims of this truth. Influenced by public opinion and mood, populist decision can become more responsive and in the same time more irresponsible. Favoring decisions more than patient negotiations, they diminish the quality of decision-making process (Decker, 2003). Populism as anti-pluralistic ideology, if in power, can seriously threaten the fundamental rules of democratic system. The same applies to populist theory of voting, which can lead to tyranny of majority. Institutes of direct democracy rarely can capture the complexity of public opinion. It is hard to believe that votes arraigning the last minutes, expressed in ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer cannot reflect elusive nature of public interest (Haskell, 2001:16)

Despite all of issues mentioned above, one should not forget how populists express these attitudes. They do not use physical violence, only verbal one, and in this matter they formally respect democratic procedures. Lega Nord, however; presents hostility towards Muslim and immigrant, when Italian government did not have problems with seeking dialogue with these minorities. According to EMUC, there is no strong evidence that a regular connection between racism violence and populism parties exists. Populism parties try to establish people democracy and in this way are challenging representative democracy that we

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7 Firebombing in German town Solingen in 1993, in which five Turkish women and girls were killed, or assassination on president Chirac in 2002 conducted by Maxime Brunerie, member of national Republican Movement of Bruno Megret (Eatwell, Mudde, 2009:206)

8 Outcome of an election Or a referendum reflects the popular will, which should be implemented immediately into public policy (Haskell, 2001:12)
currently live within. Some scholars connect emergence of populism with indication that particular democratic regime is not working properly. Thus its appearance is perceived as a warning signal about defects, limits and weaknesses of a representative system. In the same manner, it can be treated as a reminder that democracy is not something given, but should adjust to changing circumstances and needs of people. Usually, it is also an indicator that linkages between citizens and government is not functioning in the right way and in consequence, enough space is created to populist entrepreneur (Akkerman, 2003:156-158). Populists more than anything try to challenge the status quo. By introducing new issues of political agenda or by breaking the political consensus on old ones populism repoliticizes and brings revival to dull and stagnant political discourse of mainstream parties. To bring such thing back is not necessarily a bad thing to do. Some issues as immigration, crime, or consequences of farther European integration need a redefinition with change of circumstances which occur in a particular country. The challenge post by populism parties can promote and stabilize democracy. This potentially good effect can be perceived as functional for health democracy because it forces elites to open for party competition and broadens their political agenda (Akkerman, 2003:154). Canovan argues even, that populism’s function is to ‘redeem’ representative democracy. According to Decker, populism challenges forces elites to deal with matters that obviously have been neglected, and by resolving them within the system, prevents to channel this discontent into violence and sectarianism measures. One can suppose that after fulfilling their task, populism parties will disappear, cause their “resoin d’être” are not existing any more. Practice in case of right populism parties, appeared to be different. They started to become present in political systems on the regular basis, attracting even more voter in some matters than mainstream parties (Decker, 2003:49). Populism post a challenge not only to democratic system as a whole, but for party system within democracy as well. In populism discourse elimination of parties is one of the main postulates they want to establish. Although they organize themselves in parties as well, it is only forced by current situation, in which if they want to compete with mainstream parties, some form of an association is needed. The action conducted by Jean Marie Le Pen, leader of Front National, confirms this attitude. By defeating candidates from Right by helping of the candidates on the Left, he openly condemns cartelization of party system. Some populist parties can also try to “join the club” or “take over” weakest members (Meny, Surel, 2002:19). Parties such as Belgian Vlaams Block, or British populist radical right party – Veritas – gain 20 percent of votes and approximately twenty-seven seats in parliamentary elections respectively. Most of this political force they took away from mainstreams right wing parties (for example,
conservatives). As an answer to that tendency, populist tactics, style of leadership and form of organization (direct relationship between leader and followers) are often copied by political parties, from the Right as well as from the Left part of political scene. It is believed that it will help to regain lost electorate. Miroslav Sladek, ex-leader of SPR-RSC comments this situation in such words “the big parties have plundered everything. The referendum on EU membership which was proposed by us. Our answer to immigration and foreigners”. Politicians such as Tony Blair or Steve Steavaert\(^9\) in their speeches voice some of the most pure examples of contemporary populism. Sometimes mainstream parties are using populist challenge to outvote stricter law, which in normal circumstances will not be possible to establish.

Populism parties post a challenge not only by being on the margins of a political scene, in case of achieving success in election, they also become official force in the parliament and thus cannot be completely ignored. European countries respond to this situation in many ways. On two antagonist poles are: rejection of any cooperation with populist parties as a most adversarial (creating so-called “cordon sanitaire”) one and formulating coalition being the accommodative option. First response was put into effect in Belgium against Vlaams Blok, or in France against Front National. This approach appeared to be not a good solution. Despite “cordon sanitaire”, the parties manage to achieve a long-term electoral success. The second response could be observed, for example, in Austria where FPO joined the coalition and become one of government’s parties. This way of dealing with populism party proved to be more effective, causing splits and subsequent electoral defeat (Mudde, 2007:290-291). In case of FPO it caused also (because of European Union pressure as well), a change on leader position – Jorg Haider’s resignation and Susanne Riess-Possen nomination. Populism party in this situation need to face so-called adaptation dilemma. Choosing between moderating their programme and in consequence becoming accepted by the mainstream parties, or staying extreme and facing repression and isolation, however stratifying they hard-core members. In Germany response to right wing populism parties is influenced by country’s previous encounters with radical movements, especially before and during World War II. It is officially called streibare or wehrhafte, which can be translated as ‘militant democracy’. In this case not only anti-democratic action are severely punished but also any idea that oppose to democratic values are prohibited (Eatwell, Mudde, 2009:193, 196). Surprisingly, countries response to populism challenge differ, depending on the kind of ideology populism parties represent. Usually right-wing populism parties are treated with

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\(^9\) Former vice-premier of Flandres and current leader of Flemish Socialist Party
much more hardness than left-wing once. In France, Communist Party of France was accepted as a coalition partner of Socialist, while Front National is rejected by both left and right-wing parties. Although the most effective strategy for mainstream parties to compete and possibly defeat populism challenge is a combination of cooperation, confrontation and marginalization. According to this theory, in most cases parties will exclude the populist parties, naming them the ‘enemies of the system’ and refuse to cooperate with them at any political level, and in the same time include their solutions, issues and ideas (Mudde, 2007: 288-289).

**Conclusions**

Populism emergence and success is usually connected with crisis of democratic system and most of all its representative nature. People do not feel any more that they can voice their dissatisfaction effectively, or that their interest is the important factor for elites in power. According to Abts and Rummens, democracy is based on the idea of open and diverse society, integrated on a political stage and populism is based on closed, collective identity, which represents individuality (Abts, Rummens, 2007: 415). In this brief description it appears that populism can be seen only as a threat to existence of democracy. But in what situation, on should start worrying? It is believed that populism parties while in opposition and acting only as a protest parties are not able to do much harm. Situation changes when they become part of government and acquire power that enable them to implement their idea of plebiscitary democracy. However, cases of Austria and Italian experience, in which populism parties formulated the government, prove that these fears are groundless. Yet new populism does not post a threat in and of itself. Maybe then a threat emerges only when populism demands become radicalized by a leader, who uses his position and support to infringe gradually upon the rights of all citizens (Adolfo, 2005: 37). Austria and Netherland are examples of countries where populist gained power and even then they were not able to establish rules or even basic ideas of their program, not to mention limiting the civil rights. Populist also do not oppose to the democracy as a whole, which was mentioned before in this paper, they negate its representative nature. Their goals is then not to outlaw elections and introduce dictatorship, on the contrary, in some cases populists can be seen as a redemptive force. Although it is also known that populist, especially those from radical right-wing, propose values that are opposed to these contained in liberal democratic system. The danger lies then in further erosion of openness and solidarity of democracy by influence of prejudice, intolerance and self-righteousness introduced by populism. In this case, society and its self-awareness plays the important role. All of above proves that there is no simple, single answer to the question
which I present in this paper. Populism can be seen as a threat, pathology, a challenge or even salvation for democratic system according to one’s point of view, ideological background and understanding of this term. While some of its elements can renew democracy stability and prosperity, other can undermine democracy core values. Thus governments need to observe this phenomenon carefully, and in consequence treat and react to it in a suitable way.

Total number of words: 5087
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