The Good, the Bad and the Populist. Rethinking the Relationship Between Populism and Liberal Democracy

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Abstract
The first half of the year 2018 brought about a new player on the Romanian political scene, Mișcarea România Împreună (the Romania Together Movement), initiated by the former technocratic prime-minister Dacian Cioloș. Built on the foundations of the civic initiative Romania 100, the new political formation proclaims itself to be a moderate party, pro-European, and center-left. In this paper we aim to demonstrate that, despite this self-identification, MRI illustrated a particular political model, initiated in France by the current president, Emmanuel Macron, La République En Marche. Unlike other authors, who speak about “anti-populist populism” in order to define this particular political formula, we consider that, on the contrary, it should not be considered as a special category in the taxonomies regarding the populist phenomenon, but as a formula by which the demo-liberal political order understands to adapt itself to the challenge of the populist phenomenon. Consequentially, the so called liberal populism inspired by Macron, professed in Romania by MRI, must be looked at from a different perspective, namely that of a contextualized political reaction from the liberal civil society which, fundamentally, chooses to mobilize itself in front of the populist challenge through an adaptive strategy capable, finally, to produce a consistent and coherent reaction to the populist discourse – Manichean, anti-establishment and nationally self-centered. Methodologically, we aim to examine qualitatively the fundamental documents of MRI, as they can be accessed on the official website of the aforementioned political movement. We will try to identify the central elements of the identity and political discourse of MRI, in order to offer a better understanding of the populist phenomenon in general and, also, to propose a new model of interpreting this phenomenon which should include the demo-liberal adaptive formulas.

Introduction
The populist phenomenon has become already a central preoccupation of the studies that cover the contemporary politico-ideological families of the Western world, as an effect of the political developments that took place in the advanced democracies of the 21st century. There is a real and concrete need for explaining and interpreting the political evolutions of the last decade, fact which brought, with necessity into the spotlight the study of populism, which were marginal up until now. Probably carried by the extremely dynamic evolutions of the moment, they do not seek to pay a lot of attention to the contemporary causes of the phenomenon but, by virtue of habit, they try to articulate a definition and categorization of the populisms as faithfully as possible, by way of collecting the data obtained through study cases, but also through comparative endeavors.

Populism, although fundamentally oriented discursively against the establishment, has become, in the last few years, hegemonic. This seems to be another fact which is overlooked by analysts in this field, but which seems to us to represent an explanatory variable regarding the emergence of a particular type of movements considered from an analytic point of view as populist, such as that of president Macron. How do we know that populism has become hegemonic? It went from the position of perpetual opposition to that of currently governing.

In other words, we can clearly state that, with the winning of elections by populist parties, we can talk about a “populism in power”, fact which has to reflect, in our opinion, in the way in which it is analyzed. This is the more so as the analyses in the field keep starting from the pernicious assumption according to which the adept democratic forces of the demo-liberal “system”, identified by the populist discourse as being the “enemy” par excellence, finds itself in a defensive position and has yet to identify a viable survival strategy on the new political scene. The “anti-populist populism”, as it is called by Fabio Bordignon, the political model initiated by Macron, represents a false category of populism, in so far as
we can accept the thesis that categorizes populism as an ideological current. Regarding the three macro-approaches of populism (strategic, discursive and ideological [1]), we consider that this distinction should be approached not analytically, but rather intersectionally. Thus, in our view, the three do not exclude each other; instead they complete each other [2]. A populist discourse can be strategically instrumentalized (e.g. in order to attain power) and cannot be articulated except ideologically (even if in an incongruent manner regarding the classical distinctions, such as right-left).

In this context, we state that, on the contrary, we can identify a model of political reaction to the populist mainstream, characterized by the adaptation of the old structures to the new discursive order by adopting some of the populist discursive elements to the classical demo-liberal ethos. The researchers’ confusion in this respect is well illustrated by Fabio Bordignon’s argument, who considers that “according to some observers, Macron is living proof that “the system” can resist the populist wave. More and better, he is living proof that a political leader can oppose populist insurgents, like Marine Le Pen, using opposite arguments and opposite recipes. But Macron’s profile and words tell, at the same time, a different story: quite the opposite, in fact. If we analyze Macron’s discourse and project, we find all the symptoms that mark today’s democratic malaise, and populists’ responses to it.”[ii] Bordignon fails to understand the way in which the accommodation of the “system” takes place at a discursive level, more precisely in the way in which the populist themes and motives are taken over, reinterpreted and rearranged in order to create an apparently similar narrative, but which brings back the old demo-liberal values into the political debate, this time in a positive manner. And here, unlike Margaret Canovan, we consider that, although populism can be, undoubtedly, approached by way of Oakeshott’s distinction between “politics of faith” and “politics of skepticism” [3], it is more than “a shadow cast by democracy itself” [5], it is an intrinsic dimension of democracy. From this perspective we will try to approach our case study, by trying to argue that, once populism gains power, the political forces of the liberal status-quo adapt and reinvent themselves in order to handle this new order, by integrating populism (or its dimensions) into the liberal democratic process. More precisely, the old political forces are reinventing themselves organizationally and discursively, bringing back into the public space the fundamental demo-liberal tenets by appealing to a populist rhetoric, whose main themes and motives are reinterpreted through a demo-liberal perspective. From this perspective, MRI illustrates in our opinion a distinctive political model, initiated in France by La République En Marche of the current acting president Emmanuel Macron [iii]. Unlike other authors, who speak of “anti-populist populism” in order to define this particular political formula, we consider that, quite the contrary, this should not be considered as a separate category in the taxonomy of the populist phenomenon, but as a formula by which the demo-liberal political order understands to adapt itself to the challenge of the populist phenomenon. In consequence, the so called liberal populism of Macronist origin, prophesized in Romania by MRI, must be looked at from a different perspective, namely that of a contextualized political reaction from the liberal civil society which, fundamentally, chooses to mobilize itself against the populist challenge by using an adaptive strategy capable, in the end, to produce a consistent and coherent reaction to the populist discourse – Manichean, anti-establishment and nationally self-centered. We aim to investigate prospectively this thesis by way of a case study, which is represented by the newly formed MRI of the former Romanian technocratic Prime-minister Dacian Ciolos. With the help of the discourse analysis of the main texts of this newly formed political movement, we will try to observe to what extent we can talk about a populist movement in the classical sense or rather about a liberal reinterpretation in the context of mainstream populism.

In the first part of our text we seek to discuss about the main theoretical approaches to populism and to
refine a set of coherent dimensions according to which we can approach our case study. In the second part we will examine the main texts of MRI, in order to try to clarify the political model proposed by it and to which extent it illustrates the point previously formulated, regarding the adaptation of the political establishment to the populist mainstream.

**Theoretical framework**

If we are to draw any sort of understanding from using the concept of “populism”, we should look to a more thorough and methodical approach to defining it, and avoid the easy traps laid before us in the public discourse. While it is erroneously used to refer to political actors in search of popularity, in reality it describes a specific understanding of the relationship between the people as sovereign body and the elite that holds power (be it political, economic or even cultural). This relationship is the key to understanding the link between populism and democracy and the problems that the former pose to the latter. Because populism is concerned, first and foremost, with the sovereignty of the people, it sees itself as an instrument in taking power back from the elites and giving it to the people. However, the tension arises in liberal democracies because of systems of checks and balances. The will of the people is no exception to this. These checks and balances often take the form of unelected institutions that sometimes override this general will, in order to protect the pluralist character of liberal democracy.

In this article, we will first try operate with the definition of populism put forth by Cas Mudde as an “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 volonté générale (general will) of the people” [4, p. 543].

When looking at populism, Rosanvallon draws attention to the threat that populism poses to (liberal) democracy. By creating an ideal of homogeneity when it comes to the people, “(populism) radically rejects whatever it assumes to be inimical to such unity and homogeneity: foreigners, enemies, oligarchy, and elites.” [5, p. 266]. In fact, however, if we try to get a general look at the national democratic model initiated by the French Revolution, we notice that the ideal of unity and homogeneity doesn’t represent exceptions but, on the contrary, the rule of thumb of constructing the political community, as inspired by Rousseau. From this perspective, contrary to what Rossanvallon states, either populism should be understood as a constitutive element and implicitly positive for the democratic construct (and, in a Laclauian sense, as we will speak later, one of the dialectical paths through which the democratic phenomenon refreshes itself and manages to become enriched), or we can consider that this inheritance represents the embedded (as a structural built in element) persistence towards authoritarianism present within any authentic democratic phenomenon. In our opinion, the populist phenomenon can illustrate, ideologically, both perspectives, by virtue of the fact that democracy represents an extremely dynamic locus of the permanent discursive-ideological confrontation between distinctive groups and interests, in a continuous search of the societal accord over the issues that are perceived as being of public-citizen interest, phenomenon which reflects, finally, in institutional changes and in public policy which reforms its own demo-liberal ideal at the level of its functioning.

As stated above, there are some that suggest that populism can, in fact, have a positive impact on society. Laclau, for instance, argues that because “the people” is an empty signifier, meaning that it can take different forms depending on the host ideology, populism can appeal to different constituencies, generating “a shared identity between different groups and facilitating their support for a common cause” [6, p. 9]. This ideological versatility is what turned it into a global phenomenon which can be encountered in many
different political and social contexts. Furthermore, Laclau describes populism as an “emancipatory force” that can mobilize “excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo” [6, p. 3].

There are three ways in which the people can be understood: as sovereign, as ‘the common people’, and as nation. Perhaps the most common one used by populists is the first one, because it “(...) functions as a reminder of the fact that the ultimate source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body, which, if not taken into account, may lead to mobilization and revolt”. The ‘common people’ serves to empower and restore the dignity of groups that have been excluded from power on social, economic or cultural basis. Last but not least, the ‘nation’ refers to the native population of a particular country or community. Being part of the ‘in group’ can be done in either civic or ethnic terms, which tends to present some difficulties when drawing clear boundaries around ‘the people’. [7, p. 10] We can start to see that some of the ways in which we define the people present some legitimate problems. But in order to understand these more clearly, I will summarize the distinction made by Mudde and Kaltwasser between exclusionary and inclusionary populisms.

The exclusion and inclusion from and into ‘the people’ has three separate dimensions: material, political and symbolic. In material terms, populism can try to exclude groups based on the criteria that it uses to define the people [8, p. 158]. For instance, the majority of populists in Western Europe tend to exclude immigrants from the redistribution of public resources. In France, Marine Le Pen’s Front National is a recent and relevant example, who views immigrants as one of the main reasons why the worst-off members of the native group are in that position. Similarly, FPÖ in Austria, PVV in the Netherlands, and UKIP in the United Kingdom have used the same argument in their recent political campaigns. On the other hand, inclusionary populism does not have this division of ‘native’ vs. ‘alien’ that we see in exclusionary populism. Two relevant examples of this are the SYRIZA in Greece, and Podemos in Spain. Both parties try to define ‘the people’ as heterogeneous, by including groups regardless of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or others. They view the elite as the sole responsible of the socioeconomic hardships that the weakest members of society are going through. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis say that “it is crucial to stress here that since its constitution SYRIZA has been one of the most consistent advocates of the immigrants’ equal rights and their full inclusion in Greek society” [9, p. 132].

The second dimension on which the distinction exclusionary-inclusionary is manifested is the political. In these terms, “specific groups are prevented from participating in the democratic system and they are consciously not represented in the arena of public contestation” [8, p. 161].

For instance, Marine Le Pen’s presidential campaign slogan, “Au nom du peuple!”, alludes to the desire of taking back political power in the name of the people. However, due to the fact that ‘the people’ is meant to refer to the native group, it excludes all other groups that are seen as aliens. Lastly, the symbolic dimension refers to the way in which public discourse includes or overlooks specific groups. If they are not «specifically included in the definition of ‘the people’», says Mudde, «into the ‘we’ or ‘us’ instead of the ‘them’ or ‘they’» they are not symbolically part of ‘the people’ [8, p. 164].
We can see that there is a difference in the way in which inclusionary populism and exclusionary populism relate to liberal democracy. While it remains true that exclusionary populism has an internal conflict with liberal democracy, it seems that inclusionary populism, by acknowledging the social heterogeneity of democracy, it manages the same tensions that can take exclusionary populism towards the ‘tyranny of the majority’. In Ernesto Laclau’s words, inclusionary populism can be seen as an attempt to “democratize democracy”.

Along with Ben Stanley, we consider that, despite the high variety of the forms of manifestation of populism in the world, they can be synthesized – discursively – a series of common dimensions: anti-elitism and the critique of the establishment; the Manichean dimension; the direct call to the people through appeals to their absolute sovereignty [10]. This represents, in our view, the fundamental matrix through which we can understand the way in which populist movements and parties manage to gain the attention of the electorate, to mobilize it and thus to seek access to power. Moreover, these dimensions, once power has been gained, become an integral part of the mainstream political discourse. With this, the typical populist position – marginal (at the fringes of the political system), critical towards the establishment and the traditional political forces, exclusionary towards certain social, economic or cultural groups – becomes part of the establishment itself. You cannot conceive of the political struggle, nor of the electoral success in the absence of at least one of the aforementioned dimensions.

The analysis

In the following, we propose to explore analytically the political discourse of MRI, as it is found in the texts posted on the official website of the party. We will follow, as part of our analysis, the three dimensions of populism as a specific discourse of democracy critique, identified in the previous section of this paper – the anti-elitist/anti-establishment discourse, the Manichean dimension, and the sovereignty of the people (the call to the people). Thus, we will aim to identify and analyze expressions used to negatively reference an “elite” or a political class, the way in which it is defined by appealing to the people/nation, the type of crisis which MRI addresses and its origins (in particular, if it is or not the correlated expression of aggregate action of the elite and of other factors or agents, external or internal, such as economic, cultural and others). The texts analyzed are the party manifesto, the code of ethics, and the press releases section. As analytical approach, we will follow the model initiated by Teun van Dijk in 2006 [11], respectively in the model elaborated by Ben Stanley, which we previously mentioned.

Mijărea România Împreună? (MRI) – case study

The logic of the formation of MRI – as that of the Romania 100 Platform, which appeared a year earlier – is one eminently reactive towards the Romanian political class, identified by a single defining trait: corruption.

The Romania Together Movement considers itself the rightful successor of the Romania 100 Platform, as a natural development of a civic movement into a political movement, reminding of the political model of President Macron. Romania 100, in turn, tried to position itself from the beginning as being a legitimate institutional emanation of the anti-government protests of the winter of 2017, unfolded under the #rezist brand. In other words, the civic-political constructs initiated by the former Prime-minister Ciolos aim to legitimate themselves by their grass-roots origins, at the civil society level, the people themselves, fed up with the rampant corruption that governs Romania ever since 1989. That is why in the manifesto the authors express themselves with extreme detachment: “We believe it is the moment in which grass-roots
democracy should prevail and give substance to specific institutions.”[iv]

The examined texts sketch the portrait of the corrupt politician, member of the political class that MRI contests. The language used in order to construct a representation of this political ideal-type is extremely plastic, violent and not at all colloquial. For example, in the text that presents the party, posted on the first page of the MRI website, we find out that the politicians are “liars”, “ill-mannered”, “trained to throw filth and have filth thrown at them”, “aggressive” and “slick”[v]. It is a well-chosen vocabulary that can also be found in the discourses of other European populist movements, particularly from the right side of the political spectrum. It is not a partisan anti PSD position, as it can be easily mistaken for at first glance. All politicians are guilty, regardless of their orientation: “On the lists of most political parties have been many corrupt people, incompetents, local swindlers, regardless of the name of the party.”[vi]

Undoubtedly, the image of the political class is built on the Manichean logic of friend-enemy and, as a consequence, the members (potential and real, and so ideal-types in their own way) of MRI define themselves by contrast: “Most of our convictions and our desire to do well is based on a solid set of ethical values that are thoroughly internalized. Not on the desire for power.”[vii]

What strikes us as extremely interesting is the implicit dissociation from the idea of access to power. Any simple citizen clearly knows what the purpose of his participation within the electoral process is – to give his explicit consent (expressed on the ballot) for a political formation to gain access to power (understood as a parliamentary majority that can formulate public policies, to manage public goods and resources by means of an executive, and so on), that power represents the central stake of the democratic political process. A similar strategy was adopted by the populist candidate of USR during the local elections of 2016, Nicusor Dan, who asked voters to help him rid Romania of ... politicians, stating that power is not his central objective, but the purification of the political class[viii]. In other words, he did not wish to do politics, by doing politics, and in this way trying probably to capitalize on the votes of the huge mass of undecided non-voters. MRI visibly uses a similar strategy, in which it makes the clear distinction between the political domain (as a space of manifestation par excellence of the corrupt politicians that are disconnected from reality, from the people, by virtue of an egotistical and petty agenda of private interest) and the vision of a new political space, that is dominated by values and principles that are specific only to MRI. Identifying itself, in the aforementioned Manichean logic, as the “apolitical party”, MRI tries to give back meaning to the concepts of political/politics, rethinking the role and function of the political human and the democratic process itself. All of this is done in the name of democracy.

As a consequence, first of all, the establishment politicians seem to be anti-democratic and populist, masking their petty material-individual interests behind a fake anticorruption speech, meant in fact to legitimize corruption itself: “It’s not the huge financial investments in campaigns meant to present corruption as acceptable, and the corrupt as victims, that will make Romania prosperous. The disappointing populism, the manipulation, the half-truths, the aggressiveness are used to save a few political careers and to keep the richest corrupt people free. For them, the television and the papers transform themselves into propaganda mechanisms dominated and controlled by people lacking a backbone. But all of this weakens us as a people. Aberrant promises make us poorer. Lies and improper education growing up keep us apart and force us to despise or to hate each other.”[ix] By all of this, the MRI populism is evidently one that is ... anti-populist.

We consider however that this fact doesn’t represent an eccentric element but, on the contrary, one that comes to illustrate clearly the way in which the classical elements of the populist discourse are taken and used, in order to fight against populism, by political organizations that, in fact, wish to save the
representative democracy and its institutional mechanisms against a populist-authoritarian threat. In the name of the people, MRI wants to save democracy by using the populist discourse logic. In the second place, MRI wishes to be more than a party that is reactionary and vituperative towards the corrupt political order, by adopting a pro-active attitude, based on solutions. From this perspective, the previous quote regarding grass-roots democracy gives a first image regarding the meanings which the founders of MRI give to the idea of reforming the political class, to their anti-establishment position. Democracy must be reinvigorated by turning it back towards the sovereign people, which represents the main way to overcome the current political crisis. But the simple conjuration of the people as a positive agent of political change is not sufficient. What is necessary is also to rethink the idea of political class, more precisely the status, role and function of the politician within society. After the first level, of real democratization, politicians must understand what the founders of MRI have already proved (within the short technocratic government of Ciolos), namely that the politician must be understood as a provider of public services: “There is no difference between politicians, public servants, more generally, people in positions of power in relation to public goods and any other service providers. Politicians and public servants are service providers in terms of representation and governance and must be selected, appreciated and remunerated according to their capacity to provide them in the public interest and to the results of their performance, starting from assumed objectives.” [x] Here we can identify a profoundly dissonant element, which targets the self-assumed position of center-left and the neo-liberal discourse (maybe even libertarian) professed de facto. The authors of the text seem to choose knowingly not to use the classical expression “public service”, specific to consolidated democracies, instead of it preferring that of “service provider”, which places the politicians and public servants directly into the logic of the free market, an approach which is typically neoliberal. In other words, discursively, MRI chooses to privatize the public space, by replacing the representation function with that of service provider.

Conclusions
Our paper was an attempt to explore in a limited manner the discursive model of the Romania Together Movement, in hopes of contesting the thesis according to which this is just another populist movement, more precisely a manifestation of the so called “anti-populist populism” that was initiated by the current French president, Emmanuel Macron. Our endeavor coagulated around the investigation of the three dimensions of populist discourse identified by Ben Stanley – anti-elitism, the Manichean dimension, and the people’s sovereignty respectively.

We saw that, regarding the MRI discourse, all three dimensions are present, reflecting the mainstream populist discourse that is present both internationally (global in general, and European in particular), and nationally. Despite this, the central goal of MRI is fundamentally demo-liberal, in order to reinvigorate the Romanian democratic process by appealing to the values and central institutions of citizenship, participation and rule of law. As a consequence, we consider that it is necessary to rethink the theoretical debates around populism through the perspective of the capacity of modern democracies to integrate discourses and challengers into the liberal logic of the traditional demo-liberal system.

Notes
[ii] Idem.
[iii] Fact which could be seen in the Romanian public space on several occasions, see
REFERENCES

TAG: populismo, proceedings, Diritto comunitario, Diritto dei Paesi dell’UE
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