

Neja Bergant

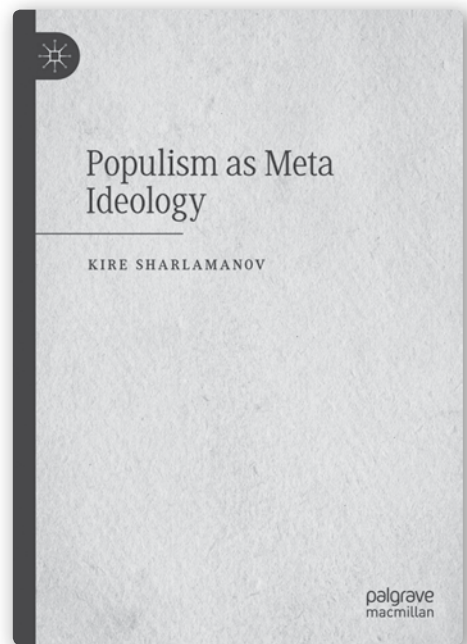
Kire Sharlamanov
POPULISM AS META IDEOLOGY

Palgrave Macmillan; 1st ed. 2022 edition (May 7, 2022), 242 pages
ISBN: 978-3-031-03933-1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60073/euper.2023.4.07>

The study “Populism as Meta Ideology” by Professor Kire Sharlamanov could probably not be read at a better time. The global situation is getting challenging and increasingly unstable. We are witnessing new and re-emerging international conflicts, volatile economy, and unpredictable climate phenomena while also simultaneously following the social and cultural clashing over issues like migration, racial disparity and gender roles. Tensions are growing and due to the constant changes, the situation is ripe for the rise of populism.

The rise of the latter is reflecting in recent changed political landscape of many countries. New political parties and people’s movements are on the rise and the political direction, particularly in Europe, is noticeably leaning towards the populist right, though is by no means exclusive. In some countries, the populist left has persistently been maintained (i.e. Venezuela). Nevertheless, looking at the Western world and Europe in particular, we see that recent elections in some countries brought significant chang-



es. In liberal democratic strongholds, we witnessed longstanding traditional political orientation changed by decisively turning radical right. In some European Union Member States, radical right parties even became ruling parties (e.g. right-wing populist Party for Freedom in the Netherlands). From broader European perspective, national results in European countries are important as they can serve

as precursor for the upcoming European elections.

A comprehensive study of the populism by Kire Sharlamanov is therefore more than timely in view of the turbulent environment. Populism is the most persistent phenomenon in politics that steadily keeps being re-established. In his book, the author innovatively approaches to populism as a Meta ideology, hence the title. This differentiates from typical approaches to seeing populism as a clear one-set idea. Instead, populism is actually more fluid in its ideology structure and can mix ideas, values and concepts of other ideologies. Defining the phenomenon is therefore anything but unambiguous. Additionally, populism is largely a product of its direct environment. Populism does not look the same everywhere. Populism in Africa or Latin America is not the same as in Europe as it is driven by different needs and circumstances stemming from the local environment. To further the complexity of the phenomenon, there is no full universal consensus on what constitutes populism. Populism to great extent depends on subjective assessment. What one considers as a populist behaviour, others do not. Moreover, populism can appear not only as an ideological phenomenon but also as a strategy. Many populist politicians rely on populist discourse and behaviour as a tool to reach power, but do not necessarily embody populist ideology. All these factors build up the complexity of populism as phenomenon.

The book “Populism as Meta Ideology” follows a reasonable logic of presentation of the populism with an aim to unveil to the reader all layers of complexity pertinent to this phenomenon. The first part of the book focuses on the fundamentals, such as definition of the term, historic development, and analyses the scientific approaches to studying populism. By reading the first part of the book, the reader will not only understand the fundamentals of this phenomenon, but will mostly get the sense of how complex populism truly is. Already the historical review shows that populism has constantly been transforming in the light of changed social context. In 19th century, the US People’s Party and the Russian social movement “narodniki”, though on different sides of the Atlantic Ocean, fought for better living conditions of the farmers. Populism at that time was predominantly an anti-elitist movement on the margins of the political sphere. Later, in the mid-20th century and specific to Latin American context, the populism was seen as positive and emancipatory force. In the late 1990s, the “new populism” developed in the context of the globalisation and new technology trends. The “new populism” focused mostly on questioning legitimacy of the mainstream political parties. The more recent new populism, the populism of the 21st century, on the other hand, seems to reject globalization trends and oppose overall socially agreed and dominant trends. Moreover, populism shifted significantly from being an ideology of the margins to now

occupying central political debates. Such overview thus shows that populism has been very persistent through historic developments and that the context is crucial to understand the formation of it.

Following the historic overview, the author delves into the explanation of the meaning of the term populism, which as a term is widely used, but it is also simultaneously one of the least understood concepts in politics. The author presents various definitions trying to find the common denominator to all of them concluding that the populism as a concept inherently includes the belief that people should be left to govern directly and not through the representatives as intermediaries. Such claims have taken ground in today's global scene as many populists tend to praise systems such as meritocratic system in Singapore or China's market-Leninist system for their economic competitiveness and fast reactivity as compared to "slow and ineffective" democratic systems that rely on the demos representativeness.

The continuation of the book focuses on the analysis of elements that constitute populism and how populism relates to the trends of modernization and globalisation. The latter is of particular relevance as globalisation features predominantly the populist discourse. The author rightly so claims that globalisation is one of the main factors for the observed growth of populism. What makes globalisation particularly interesting is

that both sides, left-wing and right-wing populists, claim results of the globalisation. Globalisation is thus one of the most butchered concepts in political and social discourse. Left-wing populist can use globalisation by claiming that global economic integration produced domestic decomposition in many countries and lead to growing the divide between the winners and the losers of global market competition. Right-wing populists on the other hand tend to focus more on the cultural dimension of globalisation, with immigration and multiculturalism at its core. Recently, the cultural dimension is prevailing in the discourse. Especially in Europe, where the discourse of failed multiculturalism and growing security risks, brought significant changes to the political landscape.

In addition to globalisation, the author then explores two other factors crucial for the growth of populism: crisis of political parties and transformation of the public sphere. The decline of traditional mainstream political parties, a large share of voter non-participation and changing electoral beliefs have become a constant of political reality. Another reality is a new changed media landscape. Increasing socio-cultural heterogeneity and subsequent increases in the number of media, blurred lines between professional journalism and activism, and the rise and immense influence of new digital media, is transforming the public sphere. For modern populists, the use of social networks is the only means of communication.

Doing so, they are directly conveying their messages and interacting with voters without any possibility for critical public to denounce their claims (e.g. Donald Trump). In such manner, the populist leaders are creating their own narrative and changing the political reality in accordance with it.

At the end of the book, the author discusses the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. The author boldly presents two interpretive views on this connection. The generally accepted interpretation is that populism threatens liberal democracy, while another view presents the argument that populism is not an anti-systemic phenomenon and which is actually interconnected and dependant to liberal democratic systems. Populism flourishes when there is a prevailing feeling that the representativeness or legality of the political leadership handed over by the demos to elected representatives is no longer guaranteed. To put it simply, populism arises when people feel that the political elites are moving away from them. Despite its contradictions, populism can thus act as a corrective force. Populism, even if established, typically leads to disappointment over time, because it is fundamentally based on an emotional rather than a rational impulse. As such, populism may represent an opportunity for political renewal.

Nevertheless, how effective is the corrective force depends largely on the level of development of liberal democracy. In countries with an established long-standing tradition of liberal democracy and strong democratic institutions, the attempts of populists can be rejected more easily.

The book "Populism as Meta Ideology" is a comprehensive reading of populism as phenomenon. The author presents all the key aspects surrounding this phenomenon, from the terminology, to the historical review, to the study approach, and all the way to the factors that contribute to the growth of populism. The reading of the book requires a concentrated reader, but as a whole, the book truly presents an insight into the unfathomable complexity of this phenomenon. Additionally, the author supports the theoretical assumptions presented with practical examples, which usefully reinforce the reader's understanding of the populism. In the light of growing global tensions and the resulting rise of populism, reading Professor Sharlamanov's book is highly recommended, as the book analyses one of the hottest political phenomena at the moment. Ultimately, the book will enable the reader to empower himself with the necessary knowledge to be able to recognize the first revealing signs of populism in the future.