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The Siren Song of Populism

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Abstract- Populism is not a fad or an epiphenomenon. As the election results prove, populism is increasing almost all over the world, and populists rule the four most crowed democracies. Populist parties are gaining ground in the majority of the EU countries and in the two latest American presidential elections two populists – Donald Trump and Bolsonaro – achieved the power stage of the USA and Brazil. In the European Union, after a long period, while populist parties assumed an anti-system position, most of the populists changed their strategy trying to reach the power, and they are already the third political force. This increase has been constant. However, the economic recession and the large flow of refugees and immigrants were at the roof of the most recent rise. The essay analyses the populist parties' strategic change and the reaction of the mainstream parties. It also explains that right-wing populism is using the nationalist rhetoric and some policies of social democracy into the service of nationalism, and it is increasing faster than the left-wing one. Moreover, the essay shows that populist governments stay in power longer than non-populists do. Finally, it proves that the populist discourse works as a new siren song because populist leaders say what the citizens are keen to hear.

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The Siren Song of Populism

José Pinto

Abstract- Populism is not a fad or an epiphenomenon. As the election results prove, populism is increasing almost all over the world, and populists rule the four most crowed democracies. Populist parties are gaining ground in the majority of the EU countries and in the two latest American presidential elections two populists – Donald Trump and Bolsonaro – achieved the power stage of the USA and Brazil. In the European Union, after a long period, while populist parties assumed an anti-system position, most of the populists changed their strategy trying to reach the power, and they are already the third political force. This increase has been constant. However, the economic recession and the large flow of refugees and immigrants were at the roof of the most recent rise. The essay analyses the populist parties' strategic change and the reaction of the mainstream parties. It also explains that right-wing populism is using the nationalist rhetoric and some policies of social democracy into the service of nationalism, and it is increasing faster than the left-wing one. Moreover, the essay shows that populist governments stay in power longer than non-populists do. Finally, it proves that the populist discourse works as a new siren song because populist leaders say what the citizens are keen to hear.

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I. Introduction

According to Martinelli (2018, p. 13), populism is "a catch-all word that is applied to different empirical realities". The wide variety of meanings confuses, but even those scholars who see populism as a political strategy, an ideology or a style, consider that is necessary to pay attention to the discourse of the leaders to identify the marks that one can see as populism. However, this analysis requires a previous task: building a dictionary of populism with the words connected with it. That was the mission of Adela Danaj, Kornélia Lazányi, and Svitlana Bilan (2018) before analyzing Orbán's discourses[1].

However, this proposes it was not born in Hungary. In fact, the code-book of populism had already been Teun Pauwels and Rooduijn's idea, in 2011. Later on, this code-book, as well as the code-book for sub-state nationalism, was "amended by researchers based on their reading of the corpus: some words were added, while others were suppressed" (Pauwels, van Haute, and Sinardet, 2018)[2]. Other scholars have followed the model, and, for example, Przyłęcki (2012) offered a "long list of prototypical indicators of contemporary Polish populism", including "Poland's political and economic sovereignty, Euroskepticism, a negative attitude toward Germany, anti-communism, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and a positive image of «the people»" (Stępińska et al, 2016).

Moreover, populism code-book is present in many studies about the true extent of the phenomenon in a specific country. It was the case of the research conducted by Nikos Nikisianis, Thomas Siomos, Yannis Stavrakakis, Titika Dimitroulia, and Grigoris Markou in Greece. However, Nikisianis et all (2019, p. 269) accept Laclau's original thought, as they consider that the populist discourse should include two elements. The first one consists of prominent references to the «the people» (or equivalent signifiers, e.g., the «underdog») and the «popular will», and to the need to truly represent it". The second element is connected with an antagonist perception of the socio-political ground, divided "between «the people»/the underdog and «the elites»/the establishment". Both right and left-populist leaders "build themselves up as an embodiment of the true people" (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018).

Quite apart from the meaning, we must recognize that populism is increasing almost all over the world, and it sets the current political agenda.

During many years, the populist parties presented themselves as anti-system[3] because they considered that the existing system was unfair, and they wanted to destroy it. Then, the mainstream parties looked at the populists as a threat for democracy, and they refused any government coalition with them. In

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[1] According to Populism – indicators of people-centric and elitism expression, and indicators of exclusionism and anti-immigration policy; Conservatism - indicators of Christian and Nationalistic values, and indicators of protectionism as economic policy; and Euro scepticism - indicators which are used to identify the occurrence of the European Union topic as such, and indicators which measures the existence of negative aspects and expression about The European Union and the European Integration process.

[2] The code-book of populism included: anti-democratic, aristocra*, autocra*,buddies, capitalis*, cartel*, connection*, common sense, coopted, corrupt*, elit*, enslave, slave*, establishment, eurocra*, exploit*, fed up with, greed, guardianship, imperialis*, impose, loot, mainstream parties, governing parties, monopoly, oligarch*, plutocrat*, political class, political games, electoral games, power hungry, power cenacles, power grip, propaganda, sold to, technocrat*, unelected, us (designating: the people), and them (designating: elite, establishment, mainstream parties).

[3] Kyle & Guldchin (2018) identify three types of populism, "distinguished by how populist leaders frame the conflict between the 'true people' and outsiders": cultural populism, socio-economic populism, and anti-establishment populism. Some years ago, Jagers & Walgrave (2005) identified four types of populism: empty populism, exclusionary populism, anti-elitism populism, and complete populism. Their criteria were the construction of the people, the anti-elitism, and the exclusion of outside groups.

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Belgium, for example, the mainstream parties build a *cordon sanitaire* against Vlaams Blok (VB). In the same way, according to De Cleen & Van Aels (2001, p. 103), the mass media "have not treated the VB as an ordinary party" because in 2003 electoral act, the newspaper *De Standaard* "gave five potential reasons to vote for each political party, but explicitly mentioned that there were no reasons to vote for VB" (Pinto, 2017, p. 143).

Actually, the situation has undergone considerable transformations, except in Sweden, because the mainstream parties signed an agreement in 2014-15 to isolate the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, and this agreement is still in effect, as "neither of the two main party blocs has been willing to work with SD" (Widfeldt, 2018, pp. 22-23).

According to Timbro's Authoritarian Populism Index, among the 33 countries presented by the index, there are 11 where populist parties are in office, and there are four countries – Portugal, United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Czech Republic – in which populist parties support the Government while they do not participate in it.

This evolution requires knowing the behavior of populist parties both while in opposition, and when they rule over the country. Kyle & Mounk (2018) presented a paper which gives a response to the second point, as Kyle & Guldchin (2018) had previously analyzed "46 populist leaders or political parties[4] that held executive office across 33 democratic countries between 1990 and 2018". It was a paper prepared to measure "the impact that past populist governments have had on democracy". This paper is also useful to find out the differences between right and left populism, despite the presence of a populism typology beyond that dichotomy. However, it also matters to identify the reasons explaining the change of populist parties' strategy and the reaction of mainstream parties to this alteration.

Cas Mudde (2016, p. 3) affirms that we "can differentiate between three academically distinct waves of scholarship of far-right parties since 1945", and he recognizes that scholars need to move towards a fourth wave. Mudde only mentions far-right parties, but the change can relate to populism as a whole.

II. The Evolution of Populism in Europe

As Margareth Canovan (1999, p. 16) says that populism "accompanies democracy like a shadow", this common road has experienced peaks and troughs, even accepting that "until the beginning of the 21st century [...] there were only a handful of successful populist radical right parties in Europe" (Mudde, 2016, p. 14).

The actual phase is undoubtedly a peak. Timbro's Index presents the evolution of populism in 33 European Countries – all the members of the European Union and five other countries: Switzerland, Norway, Montenegro, Iceland, and Serbia – comparing 2008 and 2018. The data show a stable increase in the majority of the states, mainly in Italy – from 15.3 to 56.7, in Hungary – from 45 to 68.9, in Latvian – from 8.4 to 25.5, in Sweden – from 8.9 to 25.8, in Spain – from 3.9 to 21.4, in France – from 13.1 to 28.1, in Finland – from 5.1 to 18.2, and in Denmark – from 16.1 to 28.9. Besides, in some countries, the populism average was already very high, and it still increased, as it was the case of Poland where populism rose from 35.9 to 46.4.

The data also show thirteen countries where populism came down, but it was a very little fall, except in Serbia – from 29.5 to 13.1, and in the Netherlands – from 33.6 to 26.

Concerning the relationship between right and left populism, during the 80s, in the initial year, left populism represented 9.6%, and it was higher than right-wing populism because the latter one only reached 1.1%. However, during the 90s, the situation has changed. After a period of slight advantage of left-wing populism, the average of right-wing populism became superior since 1998 until now.

Common sense usually states that the economic crisis and the arrival of immigrants and refugees are responsible for the rise of populism. However, it should be noted that after the financial crisis of 2011, left-wing populism increased but right-wing populist parties kept the dominant position, and, during the arrival of immigrants and refugees, they reached their uppermost position with an average of 15.1% while left-wing populism only represented 6.4%.

At the first moment, left-wing populism reached the power in Greece, through Syriza, and in the South of Europe, Podemos in Spain, and Left Block in Portugal got an increasing political influence. It was the phase of a socio-economic populism in which "big business, capital owners and actors [were] perceived as propping up an international capitalist system" (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). In the second phase, right-wing populism enhanced its position appealing to nationalism, and it increased both in the North and in the East of Europe, but also in the South M5S and the League got a clear election victory in Italy thanks to the hostility towards immigrants. This reality explains that Paolo Magri (2018,

[4] The leaders are: Carlos Menem, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Alexander Lukashenko, Evo Morales, Collor de Mello, Boyko Borisov, Milos Zeman, Andrej Babiš, Abdalá Bucaram, Lucio Gutiérrez, Rafael Correa, Mikheil Saakashvili, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, Joko Widodo, Benjamin Netanyahu, Silvio Berlusconi, Junichiro Koizumi, Nikola Gruevski, Daniel Ortega, Fernando Lugo, Alberto Fujimori, Joseph Estrada, Rodrigo Duterte, Lech Walesa, Traian Basescu, Vladimir Putin, Aleksandar Vucic, Vladimír Meciar, Robert Fico, Jacob Zuma, Mahinda Rajapaksa, Chen Shui-bian, Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck Shinawatra, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Donald Trump, Rafael Caldera, Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, and Michael Sata. The political parties are Five Star Movement/League coalition, Syriza, and Law and Justice.

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p. 7) mentions the "national-populist parties". Although it should be said that populism is not an ideology[5], populist parties use the ideology of nationalism when they consider that it can serve their interests. It is a strategy suitable for two moments: in opposition, and power.

In the first phase, it helps to ruin the public image of the mainstream parties, blaming the elite and its aliens for all the problems. Subsequently, this strategy is useful to gain support from the citizens when populist governments decide to take political and social measures against ethnic minorities. This situation is already occurring in the European countries ruled by populist parties and in some countries where populists are members of the governing coalition, but as a junior party.

Presently, in Europe, the populist parties can be placed in four levels. In the first one, they govern alone – Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary – or in coalition with another populist party – M5S and League, in Italy, and Syriza and ANEL in Greece. In the second level, populist parties are part of the ruling coalition, but they do not run it – Freedom Party in Austria, Swiss People's Party in Switzerland, Progress Party in Norway, Blue Reform in Finland[6], Bulgarian National Movement and National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria in Bulgaria, National Alliance in Latvia, and Slovak National Party in Slovakia. The third level includes four countries – Portugal, United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Czech Republic – in which, at least, a populist party supports the government, but does not integrate it. The last level is composed of the countries in which exists at least a populist party in opposition.

There are still two situations requiring special attention. The first happens in Hungary because both the party in office, Fidesz, as the party leading the opposition, Jobbik, are populists. Hungary is a Frankenstate in point, according to Kim Scheppele (2013), despite the non-populist opposition attempt to organize itself as a whole. The second occurs in Spain because as Podemos, a left-wing populist party, falls, Vox, a new right-wing populist party, rises. Vox affirms that its goal is recovering Spain, keeping the national unit and the social values, and its program is a melting pot of patriotism, nationalism, and conservatism. In contrast to Germany where the populist AfD is increasing, but it does not participate in the Government, Vox is already part of the coalition ruling over Andalusia.

Given this, we can conclude that mainstream parties' option is rather an accommodation or co-optation than isolation of the populist parties. This option shows that they do not consider populist parties as an acute danger to democracy, as anti-establishment populism that "was once most prevalent" has been replaced by "cultural populism [...] the commonest form of populism across the globe" (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). The following points will prove if mainstream parties are right.

III. Populists in Power: Leading the Office

In Hungary, three years under Orbán were enough to approve a new Constitution, and "more than 400 new laws" (Scheppele, 2013b, p. 5). During his government, Orbán has taken a lot of populist and nationalist measures, and he is already preparing the road to capture the power because if the non-populist opposition wins the election "Orbán's people will be dug into every office that must approve what a new government does next" (Scheppele, 2013b, p. 8). In an APSA conference, in 2013, Scheppele pointed an undoubted example, as Orbán created a budget council, "filled entirely with party loyalists", and having the power "to veto any budget passed by the Parliament if that budget adds to the debt". Besides, the Constitution specifies that "if the Parliament cannot reach agreement on a budget, the national President [...] can dissolve the Parliament and call new elections".

As a way of controlling the mass media, Orbán signed a decree to shield the foundation from Hungary's media and competition watchdogs, after the owners of 480 newspapers, magazines, broadcasters, and websites have announced they "donate" them to the Central European Press and Media Foundation, run by Gabor Liszkay who is an oligarch, and, obviously, Orbán's ally. This media empire will allow him to broadcast inside and outside a gilded image of his political and social measures, and this strategy will be dangerous for press freedom. It is an ongoing process since many critical media outlets had to close or lost their editorial independence because they depend on the funds provided by the oligarchs who support the Government.

Hungary ranks 73rd out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, with a very weak global score – 29.11. In 2010, when Orbán returned to power, after the electoral defeat in 2002, following which he said that "we, here in this square, cannot and will not be in opposition, because the nation cannot be in opposition" (Bozóki, 2015, p. 19), Hungary ranked 23rd position, and this tumble also represents a democracy backlash.

In fact, in the Democracy Index by country 2018, Hungary ranks 57th out of 167 countries with a 6.63 score, and the political participation is its worst parameter – 5.00. The quality of democracy is constantly decreasing, as it was 7.04 in 2011 and 6.84 in 2015.

[5] For example, Bonvicini (2019, p.2) says that M5S "is supported by a mixed left - and right- leaning electorate".

[6] Finland's Government resigned in March 2019, over failed healthcare reforms.

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Orbán said that Salvini was a hero for his anti-immigration stance and that the Warsaw-Rome axis will be one of the most wonderful developments. These two statements prove that a project linking the main European right-wing populist parties is already ongoing. At last, it must be recognized that Orbán takes some policies to please the people. For example, "both parents have the right to claim extra paid leave based on the number of children they have, which amounts to *two days for one child, four days for two children, and six days for three or more children"*[7].

In Poland, Stępińska et al. (2016) questioned if the country was facing a fourth wave of populism, as populist actors became communicators. Three years later, the answer is positive. Besides, nobody must forget that "populism's roots in Poland are embedded in the country's history, culture, and economic and social structures", and that the "moralizing discourse is bolstered by the strong institutional position of the Catholic Church and media organizations like Radio Maryja". It is a conservative vision because "the Church and right-wing populists share a defense of the patriarchal family, a rigid moral order, and an ethnocentric concentration on the nation, including the roles that the people and their traditions play within it" (p. 4).

The prevalence of such model explains the social rejection of immigrants, mainly if they come from Africa. In Warsaw, during the demonstrations, people chanted a racist slogan: «Pure Poland. White Poland». That slogan shows the ambition of the right-wing populism: "it is crystal-clear who is «one of us» and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion" (Bauman, 2001, p. 12).

Poland, under the government of the populist PiS, ranks 54th in 2018 with a 6.67 score, and the political culture is negative – 4.38. Like Hungary, Poland lives a democracy backlash, as the index was 7.12 in 2011 and 7.09 in 2015. The evaluation made both by the Human Rights Watch report[8] and by Freedom House are damning. In the first, PiS is charged of eroding checks and balances due to its interference "with the independence of the judiciary and the administration of justice". Moreover, the report accuses PiS of undermining freedom of expression, as it controls "public media". The title of the second report[9] is «Hostile Takeover. How Law and Justice Captured Poland's Courts», and it proves the politicization of justice, as PiS "enjoys direct control over the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Council of the Judiciary (the body that appoints Polish judges) and is set to take control of the Supreme Court".

The name of the party is Law and Justice, but under PiS, Poland threats no longer be a state of law, and the justice is less and less independent of the executive.

In short: Poland and Hungary, PiS and Fidesz are reshaping state institutions in their own and particular interest.

In Greece, Tsipras leads the first ever governing coalition of a left-wing, Syriza, and a right-wing, Anel, populist parties in Europe. After an initial period, while the alliance seemed to challenge the supranational institutions and the international creditors, through a rhetoric discourse, the conjuncture tamed the left political verbosity. Syriza moderated its discourse, and this change has ruffled some of its ancient foreign allies, namely the Portuguese Left Block, and the Spanish Podemos. Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos, and Tzagkarakis (2017, p. 40) consider that Syriza "failed both ideologically and practically".

In Italy, it is worth noting that the 2018 general election counted on four populist leaders: Berlusconi, Di Maio, Meloni, and Salvini, whose posts were analyzed by Bobba & Roncarolo (2018, p. 56). The findings proved that the two winners of the election took advantage of social media, as Salvini "published more posts (around 15 per day), and Di Maio received more likes (9.446)".

After the election, and once in office, it is crucial to watch the unity and strength of the populist coalition because the League "can be interpreted as one of the first political entrepreneurs of xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment in the Italian arena", while its partner, the M5S, "represents a perfect example of strategic investment in the topic of immigration, with its fluctuating position" (Bulli & Soare, 2018, p. 129). As Salvini became the interior minister, it did not take long to prepare a decree about the issue. He presented that document to the parliament, and this political body approved it with 396 votes in favor and 99 against, proving that a great majority of the deputies agreed with Salvini's idea of abolishing humanitarian protection for immigrants who were not eligible for refugee status. Moreover, as it will easier to strip migrants of Italian citizenship, Italian Refugee Council is seriously concerned by the consequences of the new law.

These consequences are already responsible for a democracy backlash. The index was 7.85 in 2014, and 7.98 in 2015, and 2016. Now, according to the Index of Democracy 2018, Italy is a flawed democracy, as it ranks 33rd, with a 7.71 score, and the worst category is the functioning of government – 6.07.

These data give cause to believe that joining two populist parties as incumbents seems rather a problem than a solution, but this is not the Italians' opinion, as the more recent pools for the next EP

[7] Available inhttps://wtsklient.hu/en/2019/03/05/familybenefits/.
[8] Available in https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/24/eroding-checks-and-balances/rule-law-and-human-rights-under-attack-poland.
[9] Available in https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/hostile-takeover-how-law-and-justice-captured-poland-s-courts.

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election suggest. In fact, Bonvicini (2019, p. 3) says that "Salvini's chances of becoming the leader of the European right" are strong, and remembers that Luigi Di Maio "gathered [...] representatives of four small populist parties [from Croatia (Zivi Zid), Poland (Kukiz'15), Finland (Liike Nyt) and Greece (Akkel)] in Rome", on 15th February, "in an effort to forge a more homogeneous parliamentary group in the next EP".

IV. Populist Capture of the Power

In a report conducted by Kyle & Gultchin (2018), one of the findings points that "between 1990 and 2018, the number of populists in power around the world has increased a remarkable fivefold, from four to 20". This phenomenon included "countries not only in Latin America and in Eastern and Central Europe – where populism has traditionally been most prevalent – but also in Asia and Western Europe".

Some decades ago when populism assumed power over the governments across Latin America, the explanations emphasized the government system. According to some scholars, the presidential system explained the success of a charismatic leader when he was able to forge "direct connections with the people" (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018), and the economy led redistributive policies. Nowadays this explanation sounds flawed. In fact, in some countries of the European Union, despite their parliamentary systems, populist parties raised the power. Moreover, in several cases, even when they do not hold governing responsibilities, populist parties set the political agenda and the social life, as it happens in France where the electoral system does not allow the populist National Front to occupy the parliamentary seats corresponding to its increasing number of votes.

When populism started rising, Niall Ferguson said that populist governments are usually so incompetent that they prove short-lived. However, the second part of the statement is far from consensual because, some populist leaders seem(ed) glued to the chair of power, and they are – or were – resilient in holding governing responsibility.

In Argentina, Menen ruled for ten years, and Cristina Kirchner held the presidency for eight years. In Bolivia, Evo Moral arrived at the power eleven years ago, Rafael Correa was Ecuador President for ten years, and we could point other examples: Ortega, Fujimori, Putin, and Berlusconi.

These data prove that when populist leaders are in power they capture the state apparatus, and they organize it according to their interests. When their popularity falls, they use their efficiency. The opposition can consider populist incumbent parties incompetent to solve the problems of the people, but they prove that they are skilled at staying in power. We can say that their strategy is very similar to the model created by the communist parties during the cold war. Then, the communist parties were totalitarian and populist because, despite being organic, they considered themselves as the vanguard of the people, and they transformed the intermediate social bodies aiming at controlling not only the state apparatus but also the civil society. That was why under a communist party government press freedom was replaced by the «freedom» to say what the government enjoyed hearing.

Many populist parties set aside their anti-system soul when they understood that they could reach power. They bet on topics like corruption to jeopardize the reputation of the political elite before posing as the saviors and defenders of the people.

Once in office, they transform the model they have found. They explain all their changes as a result of meeting people' will. This fallacy becomes a threat for the democratic institutions and the state of law. In 2015, Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner asked if democracy was in decline. Four years later the answer is worrying.

The scholar's approach to populism requires a change of strategy. The research needs "a paradigmatic shift, in which populist radical right [and left] parties are no longer seen as new outsider-challenger parties, but also as institutionalized and integrated members of the political system" (Mudde, 2016, p. 16).

V. Conclusion

Populism is increasing around the world, and this evolution cannot be explained only by conjuncture factors. The economic crisis and the arrival of immigrants and refugees played a paramount role in the phenomenon, but we need to take into account other reasons. The mainstream parties forgot that democracy must be representative, and they changed it into a partitocracy. As Mounk (2018, p. 2) affirms, "party systems have long seemed frozen" because "it seemed, the future would not be much different from the past". This perspective proved to be an enormous mistake.

The populist parties took advantage of the social discontent. They were able to delegitimize the political elite, and their proposals sounded like the siren song around the world. That's why, according to Timbro, "the average voter support for authoritarian populists in the 33 countries included in TAP is 22 percent". It is a high average, but "since populist parties are more successful in populous countries the total voter support is 26 percent".

The data prove that mainstream parties failed to prevent the growth of populism. Moreover, democracy backlash in all the countries ruled by populist parties highlights a severe threat to the democratic system.

Some decades ago, there were parties which entered into the system committed with intent to transform or to destroy it. There was no need for watching the long-term effects mainly of populism on

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domestic affairs. Populist parties pay attention to the advice given by Machiavelli to Lorenzo de Medici. When they rule a country, their strategy needs domestic and outside enemies to keep people's support. Meanwhile, they take measures in the name – but not always in the interest – of the people.

Mudde (2014, p. 217) affirmed that "populist radical right parties have not fundamentally changed party systems in Western Europe". Five years later, this statement requires reflection and particular concerns, mainly in the European countries where populist parties are already in office.

To sum up, populist discourse is the new version of the siren song. Now as before, the results are worrying. , some social scientists believed that populism could represent a chance to improve the political system. Nowadays, the data prove that both right and left populism is a real threat to democracy..

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