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Populism beyond the nation-state:
inter- and transnational discourses

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Research objectives and dissertation overview

In recent decades, movements, parties, and political leaders have emerged in different political and regional contexts. They draw sharp boundaries between those in power and the “people” they define. Populism has become a global phenomenon. It has also undergone a partial transformation, making its previously less obvious features visible. Many researchers linked it to nationalism in the early 2000s. Recent political developments, however, have shown that populism is not confined to the nation-state framework. Populist discourses are present in the international political space, where they create cross-border political communities and new horizons of action. The doctoral dissertation explores and interprets these processes.

While comparative politics has focused primarily on the interaction between populism and political systems, research in international relations (IR) has largely neglected the topic of populism, and the international dimension of the phenomenon has long been neglected. In recent years, several significant studies have examined the interaction between populism and international political processes (McDonnell–Werner, 2019; Stengel et al., 2019; Verbeek–Zaslove, 2017; Zienkowski–Breeze, 2019). Most researchers interpret populism as an ideology and/or political strategy (Aslanidis, 2017; Rueda, 2021). However, in these approaches, the categories of “the people” and “the elite” are mostly taken for granted and are therefore not suitable for explaining how populism becomes an instrument for political community formation and the reorganisation of hegemony, which is one of the most important objectives of my work. Analyses that compare populist initiatives with different ideological backgrounds within the same theoretical and methodological framework are particularly rare, although exploring these differences is essential for understanding the international significance of populism (Wojczewski, 2023: 2–5).

The theoretical starting point is that populism is neither a political strategy nor an ideology, but a political logic. Therefore, it can be defined not by its content but by its form, which condenses heterogeneous demands into a single chain of signifiers (Laclau, 2011). Populism condenses social antagonisms into the dichotomy of the subordinate “people” and the “elite”, thereby marking the boundaries of the political community. The concept of populism refers to the empty form of political community formation (Vulović–Palonen, 2023); its structure is determined by the vertical opposition of “the people” and “the elite”, and its centre is the empty signifier of the subordinate “people” (De Cleen–Stavrakakis, 2017). The construct of “the people” plays a key role in the transnational manifestations of populism. In the case of international populism, the political subject remains fundamentally constituted within national frameworks,

and the nation-state remains the most important arena for shaping politics. Transnational populism, on the other hand, not only rethinks the boundaries of the political community but also imagines the fundamental arena of politics in a supranational form.

The theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) situates hegemony on a discursive basis and emphasises the contingent, provisional, and contested nature of the political order. The advantage of this approach is that it places the construction of the categories of “the people” and “the elite” at the centre of the analysis, thereby allowing populism to be grasped as a dynamic, context-dependent political practice that plays a significant role not only in political struggles within the nation-state, but also in the formation of international and supranational power relations.

The dissertation explores how populism is articulated in an inter- and transnational form, i.e., how it constructs its political subject, “the people,” in a political space beyond the nation-state. The questioning begins with the recognition that populist discourses offer narratives and collective identities in response to the crisis of liberal democracy and the international order, as well as to the experience of uncertainty (Ikenberry, 2018). The theory of ontological security highlights that geopolitical transformations and post-democratic governance tendencies have shaken the stability of meanings and the continuity of identities, which creates favourable conditions for populist community formation (Kinnvall–Mitzen, 2020; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Accordingly, the research questions examine these levels of analysis, as well as the mediating mechanisms operating between them.

The first research question is how a political community is created in populist discourse, that is, how the antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite” is constructed. The question relates to ontological security, since populist community formation offers a narrative amid social uncertainty and instability of meaning that serves as a guideline for the reordering of political community. As a continuation of this, the second question examines how this political subjectivity appears in a dimension beyond the nation and the nation-state, and how this transforms the spatial and normative coordinates of political action. The analysis then seeks to answer the question of the conditions under which populist logic becomes capable of creating transnational collective identities.

Since the formal side of the discourse has been in the foreground so far, the following research questions focus on the content articulated in populist form. On the one hand, we analyse the discourses from the perspective of post-democratic tendencies, asking whether the actors under study aim to democratise the political process or to gain positions of power. The fourth research question examines, in this context, whether political movements and parties offer an

alternative to the hegemonic liberal international order, or whether the challenge aims to delegitimise it.

The empirical starting point of the dissertation is that populist projects respond to structural crises by creating competing narratives along different political positions, but right-wing initiatives are apparently more effective in reinterpreting the boundaries of political communities. Few systematic empirical analyses have examined the different hegemonic-creating capacities of narratives; therefore, the presented cases are connected by this question, which I will answer in the summary.

Methodological Overview

The empirical investigation is based on six comparable qualitative case studies, whose analytical framework is provided by the above research questions and the procedures of post-structuralist discourse analysis. The case studies begin with the reconstruction of the crisis narratives of political actors, which reveal the relationship between those responsible for the crisis and those suffering from it, and outline paths out of the crisis. Discourse analysis seeks to bring to the surface the function of populist logic as a political community-building practice; accordingly, the analysis focuses on the discursive-affective processes through which the antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite” is established.

I have selected six parties and movements whose discourses feature the vertical opposition between “the people” and “the elite” and the transcendence of the nation-state. These organisations are located on both sides of the political spectrum and have different international perspectives. The distinction between populist left and right serves as an analytical tool in the dissertation to examine the outcomes that the same populist logic, when combined with different discourses, produces. The six case studies cover different regions, political positions and organisational forms, but they share the common characteristic of explicitly striving to transcend the nation-state. Among the cases of the populist left, Hugo Chávez and ALBA illustrate the regional extension of the anti-imperialist discourse, DiEM25 the attempt to create a grassroots, transnational European political subject, while Bernie Sanders and the Progressive International illustrate the limits of populist mobilisation towards the global political level. Cases of right-wing populism demonstrate different transnational patterns of nationalist discourse: PEGIDA and Fortress Europe are examples of grassroots mobilisation based on ethnocultural

border protection, Donald Trump's political project illustrates the internationalisation of nationalist populism, while Viktor Orbán and the Patriots for Europe initiative illustrate the European supranational institutionalisation of sovereigntist populism.

The empirical analysis relies on texts in which discursive operations are explicitly expressed. The sampling procedures were determined by a combination of temporal coverage and thematic diversity. The primary sources for the analysis are programming texts, proclamations, and public speeches, supplemented by interviews and media appearances, used to contextualise. The text corpus consists of 93 documents.

After the text corpus was created, the empirical analysis proceeded in multiple sequences. The applied methodological procedure fits into the open research program of discourse theory, which connects an exploratory and a structured analytical level. In the first stage of the analysis, I used an exploratory data generation technique based on Adele Clarke's (2005) situation analysis, during which I recorded all relevant elements of the discourses on unordered situation maps.

In the second stage of the analysis, I organised the elements I had uncovered in a tabular form, based on the post-foundationalist discourse analysis methodology of Thomas Marttila (2015) and Carl Cederström and André Spicer (2014). Marttila's analytical categories focus on the relations between discursive elements and discursive identities, allowing the reconstruction of the discourse's structural patterns and nodes. The analysis then examined the affective dimension of the discourse using the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework (Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1989). The aim of the analysis is to explore how discourses are organised around lack, desire and pleasure, and what fantasmatic scenarios enable political identification.

Main results of the research

Following the empirical analyses, the fifth part compares the cases against the research questions, aiming to explore the conditions under which populist logic becomes suitable for building hegemony in a political space beyond the nation-state framework.

Different patterns of populist logic

Populist logic is applied in different ways and with varying intensity across the discourses examined, which fundamentally shapes the construction of the political community. On the one hand, we can distinguish cases in which the opposition between “the people” and “the elite”

functions as the primary organising principle of the discourse, and those in which populist logic plays only a supplementary role in the articulation of a typically ethnocultural or civilizational discourse. In interpreting the differences, not only the form of boundary demarcation (the primacy of vertical or horizontal logic), but also its affective intensity is decisive: antagonism creates a sharp friend/enemy distinction, while agonistic political manifestations enable a more open, plural community by keeping the conflict within the political field.

In the case of the radical right, populist logic functions as secondary and complementary to an ethno-nationalist discourse, whereas for the left, the unity of the political community is not created through exclusion but through the extension of the chain of equivalence, which outlines a more open, pluralistic political subject. To all this, it must be added that the affective power of populist discourse is not independent of the intensity of antagonism. The affects and emotions that accompany identification, by mobilising fear, anger and grievances, create the chain of equivalence along a sharper us/them opposition. The increase in affective intensity thus goes hand in hand with the polarisation of the political space, since the unity of the imaginary community can only be maintained through the exclusion of a marked constitutive externality. The power of the populist narrative to promise ontological security is therefore ambivalent: while it strengthens the experience of collective agency and belonging, it also intensifies antagonistic divisions, making the boundaries of the political community more rigid.

Inter- and transnational political subject

From the perspective of ontological security, political action beyond the nation-state represents an attempt to re-establish national identity in a broader political space. Populist discourses, therefore, use the language of sovereignty in a specific way, while the vector of political action points beyond the state, which creates a fundamental tension in the construction of political subjectivity.

Comparing the case studies, we can state that left- and right-wing populist discourses connect the issue of political subjectivity beyond the nation-state in different ways, promising the restoration of lost identity and agency. In progressive-left cases, the political subject primarily appears as a response to the democratic deficit, in which populist articulations attempt to reinterpret the issues of sovereignty and political participation through a critique of post-democratic governance and global power relations. In right-wing discourses, political aspirations beyond the nation-state serve not to create a new, transnational political subject, but to strengthen the national community and preserve its fantasmatic homogeneity. The transnational dimension

here appears primarily as a civilizational framework, constructed against liberal hegemony, while the promise of ontological security is linked to the protection of sovereignty, borders, and essentialist self-identity. However, these political projects are interested in keeping the threat to ontological security on the agenda. Therefore, the experience of uncertainty and lack does not appear as a temporary state, but becomes a permanent resource for political mobilisation. The promise of ontological security thus paradoxically operates precisely through the postponement of security: the narrative reproduction of the crisis ensures the affectivity of the political community and the survival of antagonism.

The content of populist articulation: the question of (post)democracy

The content of left-wing and right-wing discourses can be interpreted as different responses to the multi-level crisis of the liberal international order, in which the legitimacy of democratic governance, the possibilities of exercising sovereignty, and the stability of political identities have all been shaken. While the populist left responds to the post-democratic state by promising to expand democratic participation and restore social justice, right-wing populism offers the promise of ontological security through ethnocultural exclusion and the reinforcement of national borders. The latter is part of a counter-hegemonic strategy that does not seek to eliminate democratic deficiencies and the representation gap, but rather serves to replace elites (Stewart, 2020; Wojczewski, 2023: 286). These populist projects, however, do not seek to eliminate uncertainty but rather to perpetuate it, so that narratives of crisis, threat, and lack become permanent resources for political mobilisation, while the promise of ontological security is continually postponed.

This dynamic fits into the series of post-democratic tendencies, in which political participation and grassroots political articulation are increasingly directed towards the symbolic and identity-political dimensions. In this context, antagonistic forms of populism do not appear as an alternative to the crisis of representation, but rather as a specific part of post-democracy: political conflicts are not structured around choices between political alternatives, but rather organised around collective identities, values, and differences in lifestyles. Identity politics bases political positions on an identity built on a historically suffered grievance, with the consequence that politics often becomes interested in maintaining the damaged identity, while the actual transformation of power relations and collective action are relegated to the background

(Brown, 1995). The aspirations of populist right-wing projects consequently do not seek to resolve the grievances that are at the centre of their narratives, but to continuously rearticulate them.

Post-democratic tendencies can be interpreted as one level of the crisis of the liberal international order. The political emptying of democracy and the rise of technocratic governance have both nation-state and international dimensions, which together contribute to the erosion of the legitimacy of the hegemonic order. In this context, the counter-hegemonic challenge arises from within, primarily in the form of populist right-wing projects that seek to rewrite the framework of international politics in light of the internal tensions of liberal democracy.

Challenge to the liberal international order

The crisis of the liberal international order is always associated with the weakening of the global hegemony of the United States, and the future world order is assumed to be multipolar – and the liberal narrative seems to count on this possibility (Ikenberry, 2020; Keohane–Nye, 2025). However, as Holm (2025) points out, the “internal challengers” of the liberal international order – and here we must clearly mention the populist radical right – do not propose an alternative, “de-politicized” international institutional system, their efforts are rather aimed at the selective dismantling of the norms and rules of the existing order, and at taking back the powers granted to individual international institutions. Their “alternative” is not coherent, but rather a sovereignist, nationalist, civilizational-values-based worldview that denies liberal universalism and mostly deals pragmatically with existing institutions (UN, EU, NATO). In light of all this, the populist challenge to liberal hegemony shows a peculiar duality. Although these discourses often promise a radical break with the existing order, there are many signs that a structural, institutional alternative is not emerging, and that actors are mostly trying to establish a counter-hegemonic political alliance within the existing framework.

According to Robert W. Cox (1983), in the hegemonic world order, the harmony of ideas, norms and international institutions associated with the dominant economic and political order ensures consensus, which regulates relations, legitimises the existing order, and neutralises counter-hegemonic challenges by reforming the functioning of crisis areas. However, the crisis of the LIO is not just a “relative decline”, but the collapse of the three pillars of hegemony: the economic performance of liberal democracy as a model is stagnating, its normative appeal has weakened, while its political institutions are increasingly less able to generate consensus (Babic, 2020; Crouch, 2020; Stewart, 2020). Following Gramsci, we should not see this as a simple

temporary disruption, a conjunctural crisis, but as a symptom of the disintegration of the normative order, where counter-hegemonic challenges are increasingly absorbing energy – and, more importantly, the former hegemonic actor, the current leader of the United States, President Trump, is the greatest enemy of this order (Keohane–Nye, 2025).

The crisis of the liberal international order does not yet foresee the emergence of a new order, but rather a long-lasting transitional state in which institutional and normative frameworks become open. In this sense, the LIO cannot survive because it has legitimate and convincing answers, but only because it has no conceivable, widely acceptable alternative. The role of the populist right in this constellation is not to articulate the new order, but to continuously destabilise the old one, which at the same time maintains the state of crisis from which the “nationalist international” can forge political capital. However, if the counter-hegemonic challenger has no viable alternative, then – to use Babic’s expression – the state of interregnum becomes permanent (Babic, 2020).

Conclusions

The doctoral dissertation concludes with a summary, in which I summarise the most important empirical and theoretical conclusions of the research, explain the issue of the different effectiveness of left- and right-wing populist projects, and address the limitations of the study and further research directions.

The thesis’s problem statement began with the observation that populism, which previously appeared mostly as a marginal phenomenon within the nation-state political field, has now become one of the essential mechanisms of the transformation of the international political order, while its significance is often exaggerated in public discourse. Some populist discourses construct transnational political subjects and enemy images, and they develop their positions explicitly against the existing international order. From this perspective, populism can be interpreted not only as a response to the crisis of political representation but also as a form of challenge to the hegemonic liberal order.

The broader context of the research problem is provided by the economic and social crises of the late 2000s, which mobilised masses outside the political institutional system. The anti-system, populist left-wing initiatives that emerged in the early 2010s attempted to offer political answers to these crises, but they encountered institutional constraints and governance problems relatively quickly. From the second half of the decade, however, the representational vacuum

was increasingly filled by the populist right, which translated the experience of social uncertainty into ethnic and identity political conflicts. Currently, this political trend also holds significant positions of power, while left-wing alternatives only exist in traces. As a conclusion to the empirical analysis, it is now worth examining the research question from the perspective of why the populist right has proven more effective at creating transnational political subjectivity and spreading its interpretation of the crisis.

For narratives of populist actors to become counter-hegemonic interpretations, it is not enough for them to make crises interpretable; they must also connect to already established meanings. One of the most important lessons of the empirical study is that populist articulation is not equally capable of hegemonising social demands, even when formally organised along similar logics. The success of the counter-hegemonic strategy does not depend on the fact that populist discourse antagonizes the empty signifiers of “the people” and “the elite” and, to this end, condenses more social demands, but on (1) the extent to which it is able to organize heterogeneity into a chain of equivalences, that is, to perceive the diversity of social demands and reflect them through a common symbol; and (2) to set in motion the myths and symbols that form part of the shared knowledge of the political community, which create the image of temporal continuity.

The research also highlighted that populism is not just a discursive organising principle, but a specific mode of identification in which the political community is structured by an empty signifier. This discursive node functions as a projection surface that allows heterogeneous demands to be arranged in a chain of equivalence. We have established that, in the process of identification, the empty signifier represents the values of the political community, offers an explanation of the world, and allows individuals to connect with each other and see themselves as part of a whole. The key to the success of populist articulation from this perspective is not that it produces a coherent program, but the extent to which it is able to direct affective energies towards the empty signifier. From this perspective, the effectiveness of populist logic cannot be separated from the intensity with which it addresses and binds the subject to itself.

Not only from an analytical point of view but also from an empirical perspective, we were convinced that populism, as a logic of political community formation, is not necessarily tied to the frameworks of the nation-state and, in some cases, may even be specifically aimed at transcending them. The populist political subject of “the people” can also be created in an inter- and transnational context, provided that the discourse reinterprets the boundaries and reference points of the political community. At the same time, the study also highlights that the appeal

and mobilisation capacity of such constructions differ significantly depending on how they relate to the hegemonic layers of meaning of other discourses.

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