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The Romanian National Populism Avatars in The First 100 years: From The Forty-Eighters Movement to the Legionary Movement

- Summary -

Research Supervisor:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Andrei ȚĂRANU

Ph.D. Student

Bogdan-Ion JELEA

The social transformations of the last decades, the international paradigm shift at the end of the Cold War, economic globalization, and the liberalization of communication have deeply marked all spheres of life. The new realities have brought about substantial changes not only in the morphology of the political mechanism but also in electoral processes, advancing new formats, new relationships, and new approaches. These came to replace old ideological dichotomies, bringing to the forefront more subtle, less visible, and less evident manifestations than in the past. These changes are facilitated by new social circumstances, especially media-related ones, bringing forth new actors and different types of players compared to what we all knew or were accustomed to seeing (from online civic movements to atypical *influencers*, and from overnight emerging political parties to various celebrities transformed into politicians).

An explicit and universally recognized definition of populism is difficult to identify. In a relativistic sense, perhaps the only certainty is the conceptual ambiguity stemming from its intangible nature, constantly characterized by fluidity. Although sometimes identifiable as a punctual or episodic phenomenon, populism demonstrates both its own strength to impose a *modus operandi* in the way politics is conducted and the ability to insert its own themes and content into public debate.

There is still debate over whether populism constitutes a standalone political doctrine or rather a meta-doctrine, a kind of highly general and recurring ideological structure that can parasitize other more well-defined doctrines, pushing them towards concentric positions. This is in the context where the majority of authors accept populism as the *primordial soup* from which all political doctrines originate.

What these aspects have in common, whether we talk about political beginnings two centuries ago or the present day, is precisely the exacerbation of the idea of the people. Centralizing identifiable characteristics, we can obtain a concise list of the essence of populism: the cleavage between the pure people and the closed caste of a corrupt elite, revolt against the *establishment*, the democratic claim of legitimacy, teleological discourse focusing exclusively on ends, not means, the exploitation of socio-emotional fears of any kind, amplifying and enhancing their effects in the collective psyche: identity crises, distribution crises, representation crises, and the threat of enemies (foreigners, conspiracies).

Beyond all these positions and theoretical perspectives, this present research aims to be an analysis of the Romanian space during a period of time that laid the conceptual foundations

for the present. Thus, as the title suggests, I have chosen the endpoints of a time interval (the 1848 Pasoptist Movement in the 5th decade of the 19th century and the Legionary Movement until the 4th decade of the 20th century) of nearly 100 years, within which the phenomenon manifested itself adapted to each era, in an ideational succession similar to a syllogism, containing 3 elements:

1. The first part or *hypothesis* – from the mid to the end of the 19th century, in which the elite speaks to itself: the Pașoptist current and the Cuzist developmentalism rely on the civic national idea of belonging to the State, respectively on the personal authority claimed from the people.

2. The second part or *articulation* lays the foundations for currents of ideas that will adapt to realities and consolidate at the confluence of the 19th and 20th centuries: although the elite continues to speak to the elite, thanks to the census vote, the Junimea movement reacts against the civic national populism of the Pasoptist period, aiming for a transition towards an ethno-centric approach, through the absorption of minorities, to provide the governance with a unified people. Meanwhile, from within Junimea, two other movements emerge: Poporanism, as a reflection of Narodnicism, where Stere blends "national socialism," pro-Western and open to industrialization but based on domestic capital, and Sămănătorism, which proposes a model of limited, self-centered and inward-looking development, making it more attractive to the large rural mass, interested in landownership.

3. The third part or *the exacerbated result*: the Legionary Movement - until the mid-20th century, represents the mystical and religious fascist populism, a culmination of the ideas of Sămănătorism, speaking directly to the people after the introduction of universal male suffrage through the Constitution of 1923.

For this extensive period, I will attempt to demonstrate, through an analysis that encompasses both historical and political aspects, the existence of the continuous and interdependent presence of two fundamental problems. These problems have served as both the fuel for populism and its cultural, political, and ideological expressions:

1. The combination of land and identity crises in relation to the evolution of the national idea for the proposed development model.
2. The morphological conflict during the period of updating and modernization of Romanian society: in the first 100 years of *aligning* Romania with Western political and institutional culture, there is an antithesis between the almost constant

instrumentalization by the political elite of a populist-conservative (right-wing) rhetoric, with the transparent goal of gaining popular support for developmental-progressive (left-wing) projects.

To verify both the existence of a political-historical succession resembling a syllogism and the permanent presence of the two problems, the methodology will employ two categories of instruments. The first instrument will involve identifying and analyzing, in Chapter 1, three models of incipient populism (American, Russian and French) and then developing, based on these models and the bibliography, a theoretical model containing a taxonomy of 12 points, as depicted in the figure below, in Chapter 2. The second category of instruments will consist of a comparative analysis, in Chapters 3 and 4, of the Romanian landscape of populism from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. Finally, the Legionary Movement will be treated separately but using the same model and comparative analysis in Chapter 5.

Comparison elements	SUA	France	Russia
1. Type of Initiator and Propagation Vector	Mass movement, bottom-up	Leader, top-down	Intellectuals as leaders, top-down
2. Role of Intellectual Elite	Limited	Relatively neutral	Significant
3. Role of the Leader	Balanced, due to heterogeneous nature	Primordial	Debatable
4. Source of Legitimacy	Tradition and objective economic reality	Popular adherence to the leader	Cultural and ideological instrumentalization of tradition
5. Doctrinal Field	Mixed - Instrumentalization of conservative Puritanism with economic liberalism	Mixed - Non-ideological autocracy using various methods (land distribution, limitations on liberties, etc.)	Mixed - Use of conservative tradition for developmentalist purposes
6. Discursive Type and Specific Cleavage	Integrative and representative in the farmer vs. industrialist antithesis	Autocratic	Reformist, progressive in the peasant vs. monarchy antithesis
7. Relation to the Form of Governance	Positive, constitutionalist	Intention for modifications	Frustrated-critical
8. Political Manifestation	Political party	Dictatorship	Cultural-intellectual movement
9. Addressability or Referential "Electoral" Basin	Local, predominantly affected farmers	General, but based on veterans and landowners	"The people" as the subject of the intellectual experiment
10. Attitude towards Property	Positive, as a stake and source of legitimacy	Positive, instrumentalized to gain followers	Positive, but in a traditional, rural, patriarchal sense
11. Level of Mysticism	High, targeting Protestant values	High, aiming at the personification of glory	High, focusing on the "golden age" of the rural space
12. Aversion to Foreigners	High, based on economic considerations	Relative, due to external political reasons	Relative, based on tradition

In light of these aspects, following the advanced methodology, the research achieved the following objectives:

1. Proposed a valid, synthetic, and comparative analysis model for the manifestations of the 19th and early 20th centuries, derived from researching their specific characteristics. Additionally, in the final chapter, it illustrated the integration of Legionarism into the fascist current.
2. Placed the local context within the European or international context, highlighting specific nuances and underlining the defining characteristics of cultural or aesthetic currents accompanying or triggering the political movements of ideas for each analyzed period: the Pasoptist movement, the Cuza regime, the Junimist movement, intellectual socialism, agrarian populism, and fascism.
3. Traced the connection between epochs, constructively resembling a syllogism, whose stages unfolded chronologically: from 1829 to 1878, there was a nationalist project dedicated to state-building, followed by isolationist and illiberal nationalism from 1878 to 1916. Finally, the mystical-religious fascism completed the ethno-centric nationalism in the interwar period. Thus, starting from a generous, national idea dedicated to the *state-building* process, we arrive at the necessary stage of its evolution, namely *nation-building*, culminating in the most irrational expression of nationalism. In contemporary terms, we can speak, in a liberal sense, without accessing moral evaluations, of a nationalism that can be considered *good* in the first epoch and bad in the last, based on its stakes and effects.
4. Identified the continuous intertwining of the two fundamental crises throughout the analyzed period, in order of importance: the land crisis and the identity crisis.
5. Revealed the quasi-constant presence of conservative moral-affective motifs, alongside the progressive proposition of socio-economic development. This morphological dichotomy is, fundamentally, a result of the developmentalist obsession, which fails to achieve structural completion, primarily due to the social composition dominated by traditional rurality, which the political elite does not intend to fundamentally transform.

Furthermore, despite the evident quantitative need for historical and descriptive material to support the analysis, the emphasis was placed on the ideological dimension, continuously tracking and capturing the evolutionary course of the national idea, both in line with external models and in response to local reactions to the proposed formats. As a result, throughout the process of exploring the nearly one hundred years subject to debate, the sources of this nationalism have been constantly updated. In this sense, a recapitulation of its conceptual evolution can be useful.

The entire collection of contents of the nation idea was constructed in the second part of European modernity, especially after the moment of 1789. The French territory, inherently progressive and revolutionary, saw in it not only a means to weaken the monarchy internally but also a way to destabilize multi-ethnic empires externally. Based on the foundations proposed by romantic historiography, the philosophical construct of national identity, and especially its conjugation in the social and moral concept of belonging, manifested differently in the Romanian context from the moment of 1848, on the two sides of the Carpathians. While the situation of civic and political inferiority of Romanians in Transylvania, based on ethnic criteria, drove them to a fight for liberation, in the old principalities, the stakes were rather related to land issues, opposing those deprived of land to the landholding boyars, without the antithesis containing any ethnic element. As I have shown, the nationalism of this period is not focused on a genealogical congruence, but on the need for freedom and independence, claimed by an elite that addresses itself but projects the benefits of political unity and autonomy into the sphere of the people's needs. Especially after adopting Hegel's construct of *Volksgeist*, educated minds returning from studies, united in the Pasoptist movement, declined the discursive arsenal legitimized by the people, inspired by the romantic ideals: the oppressed peasant masses, affected by the land imbalance, manifest in a legitimate endeavor to improve their living standards, drawing inspiration from the mystical stories provided by the rulers of the ancient *golden age*. As demonstrated, the need for the *nation* construct underwent transformations, including its political instrumentalization, but its ideological essence was also useful as an alternative for feelings of identity belonging to an empire or a religion. This formula, essentially one of secularizing perceptions, transforms into one focused on ethnicity when the level of cohesion needs to be increased to serve a young state. The pragmatic nationalism asserted by the Junimists is refined dogmatically, particularly through Sămănătorism. The latter provides utopian solutions such as isolationism, anti-Semitism, and ethnic obsession in

the doctrinal toolkit of Legionarism, which does not adopt the democratic socialism or the populist ideas.

Indeed, a specific feature of the Romanian model of populism can be identified in three completely contradictory and antithetical dimensions, whose relevance and continuity of manifestation throughout Romania's history up to the present day further validate the contribution of this study. These dimensions have been previously mentioned and explained, but when extracted and brought together, they can contribute to understanding a unique profile of the phenomenon manifested in Romania.

The first element is related to the *nation-building* stage, the second pertains to the *agrarian model of poporanism and sămănătorism*, with origins dating back to Teodor Diamant's utopian socialism, while the last one focuses on the *obsession with development*. Each component of this trinomial can be considered a result of the need for integration into the new Western civilization space, a need that has been constantly confronted with the syndrome or complex of *lagging behind*. This gap, visible until today, has animated both the discourse of the elite and the public consciousness.

The morphological contradictions between these three elements are rooted in their essence: on one hand, *nation-building* demands a sense of belonging and cohesion within a state, which is difficult to achieve with the proletariat, as it is a universal social class ideologically, without a specific country. On the other hand, without a proletariat, industrialization and, consequently, development become challenging. Additionally, when the overwhelming majority of the population is represented by the peasantry, it cannot be converted into the proletariat. Here is the inherent and persistent impasse that the political elite has not managed to solve until now: the model of urban evolution is mechanical, while that of the rural is organic. Despite meeting the sociological criteria of development, such as literacy, urbanization, and industrialization, which occurred in the mid-20th century, regional asymmetries between the countryside and the city remain as pronounced as they were 100 years ago. This confirms the continuity of the manifestation of these three contradictory and unsustainable models in the sensitive undercurrents of the social body.

As announced from the very introduction, the main focus of the research was on the current of national ideas, which evolved and crystallized in various forms, parallel to external models or local sources of influence. This clarification is important to distinguish the intentional political

element in the historical journey of the analyzed 100 years, whose continuity is evident even in the present. While the romantic pasoptists generously projected national unionism in a sense and endeavor devoid of personal or partisan objectives, the end of the 19th century began to shift the focus, typical of any young state, towards the interior/exterior antithesis. The cultural and journalistic phenomena of the early 20th century, represented by poporanism and sămănătorism, proposed a new perspective on ethnic relations and the socio-economic model to be followed. Only with the Legion of the Archangel Michael do we witness the instrumentalization of fascist ideologies in a populism that covers all dimensions of the concept: discourse style, political movement, party formulation, and form of governance. The exacerbation of the national idea with ethnocentric, antidemocratic, and antisemitic stakes places the movement on the trajectory of European interwar politics, without invalidating or compromising the legitimate goals previously promoted primarily as themes of public debate.

Last but not least, perhaps the most relevant aspect of the work lies in a certain specificity that it attempts to capture: although populism takes on many facets or forms of expression, which are fluid, superficial, and extremely versatile, making it almost impossible to place or define within a context of ideological homogeneity, its core remains a constant with powerful ramifications in the psycho-emotional sphere. It exploits various types of popular frustrations by pitting the virtues of the many against a dangerous elite, often intellectual, as well as reacting to modernity and its crises. Upon closer observation, both types of revolt stem more from the realm of emotions, benefiting from limited critical analysis, often attributed to a lack of education and civic or political culture.