

# The Role of Mainstream Political Parties and Political Elites in the Rise of Contemporary Populism in Central and Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Period (1989-2022). Case Studies: Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland.

## Summary

Populism presents itself as one of the most debated and intensely addressed concepts in political science. It has not been content to occupy only a marginal and reserved place in the academic area but has managed to invade our social universe and collective consciousness. To emphasize the importance of understanding populism as a global phenomenon, recent specialized literature speaks of the populist *Zeitgeist*, the new populist wave, or the resurgence of populism. For this reason, contemporary populism requires comprehensive investigation and analysis to determine the factors that contributed to its emergence, to observe whether it is in some measure beneficial for a democratic regime, or if it is merely a pathology of democratic regimes that must be treated and removed as quickly as possible before causing harmful and irreversible reactions.

With the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and/or the exacerbation of various crises in this region, populism began to rise rapidly within these societies. Various external or internal causes have been identified and claimed to explain the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. Whether the seed of populism germinates in the presence of flawed public policies, corruption, inequality, immigration, or other reasons, one thing is certain: the level of trust in the main political institutions of these states is declining. Thus, we can assume that contemporary populism may be a natural political reaction to the failure of mainstream parties and elites in these societies to meet the needs of their citizens.

As the region of Central and Eastern Europe is vast, the analysis will be focused on the following states: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. These three states share both a common political past within the Iron Curtain and numerous social, political, economic, and cultural similarities. Moreover, these three states, along with Hungary, form the Visegrád Group (V4), a regional cooperation organization that focuses on several areas of common interest. Apart from belonging to the V4, the similarities between the three states are visible and pronounced because, first of all, they belong to and have always belonged to the same

civilization, sharing numerous cultural and intellectual values as well as common religious roots, especially in the case of Slovakia and Poland, which have predominantly Catholic populations. Furthermore, regarding the relationship and similarities between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, we must not omit that they shared the same state until 1993, and this singular aspect alone can indicate a profound closeness between the two on multiple levels, including historical, cultural, and political aspects.

The paper aimed to verify whether and to what extent the rise of contemporary populism in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, can be associated with the extremely low levels of trust that citizens have in mainstream parties and elites. Being an analysis that targets contemporary populism and its relationship with contemporary democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, it focused both on presenting the theoretical perspectives of contemporary populism and on presenting typical cases of populism in the targeted states. Subsequently, we were able to determine the main causes for which populism is gaining ground in these societies using a behavioral analysis approach. By studying the three states' i. the behavior of mainstream parties, elites, and populist parties; ii. the citizens' positions towards political institutions and especially towards mainstream political parties; iii. the impact and effects produced by the post-communist governments of mainstream parties, we attempted to observe explanatory regularities and generalities that will lead us to understand the success of contemporary populism in the Central and Eastern European region.

The central argument of the thesis targets the ability of contemporary populism to exploit the behavior of mainstream parties and political elites to infiltrate the political systems of Central and Eastern Europe. Due to the fact that mainstream political parties have become catch-all parties, lost their ideological substance, and more recently deviated towards the political right, with few exceptions, smaller ideological party formations, represented either by factions split from the mainstream parties or by newly emerged parties on the political scene, not having the potential for negotiation or blackmail in the context of forming coalitions, have managed to survive in the political landscape dominated by mainstream parties only by adopting populist positions, characteristics, and styles.

This research focused on five research objectives, one primary and fundamental, and four secondary. Thus, the main objective proposes:

1. studying the behaviors of mainstream parties, elites, and populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe in the post-communist period. The four secondary objectives are:

2. studying the impact that the behavior of mainstream parties and elites had on political trust and the quality of democracy in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland.
3. identifying changes within the political systems and party systems in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland in the post-communist period.
4. studying the evolution and adaptation of contemporary populism within the post-communist democratic regimes of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland.
5. studying the effects produced by populist governments on democratic political institutions in Central and Eastern Europe.

The thesis is structured into four chapters as follows. In Chapter 1, mainstream political parties are the central subject of discussion, but before anything else, I considered it essential to clearly define the concept of a political party. After defining mainstream parties, the next step was to observe the behavior of mainstream parties in the main democracies of Western Europe in the post-war period to determine if there was a tendency for them to transform into catch-all political parties, thus facilitating the penetration of populist formations into Western political environments. The second part of the chapter focuses on the region of Central and Eastern Europe, examining whether the new democracies that emerged after the fall of communism adopted and imitated the characteristics of Western political systems. Additionally, I aimed to capture whether the mainstream political parties in this region adopted similar behavior to their Western counterparts and whether the rise of contemporary populism occurred in Central and Eastern Europe in a manner similar to Western Europe. Chapter 2 focuses on elites and, specifically, political elites. The chapter begins with a theoretical approach to elites, reviewing the main elite theories, both classical (proposed by Pareto, Mosca, Michels, or Weber) and modern (Burnham, Mills, Bottomore, Dahl), as well as contemporary ones (proposed by Field and Higley or Burton and Higley). The complementary relationship between political elites and political regimes is highlighted in the next section of the chapter, where the role and functions that political elites fulfill within a political system are emphasized. Additionally, the possible influence that political elites exert on the organization and political direction followed by a political regime is also highlighted. In the last part of the chapter, the behavior of political elites in the specific situation of regime change in Central and Eastern Europe is analyzed, focusing on the shaping role that (political) elites exert in creating and consolidating the new institutional architecture while facing excessive diversity and fragmentation. Chapter 3 will focus on the relationship between distrust in political institutions and the rise of contemporary populism and will be divided into two main sections. The first section will be dedicated to the theoretical aspects of the concepts

in question, with defining social or political trust, social capital, and populism being priorities. In the case of populism, the central concepts it operates with, how it interacts and relates to liberal democracy, and its symbiotic relationship with movement parties will be closely examined. An additional space is dedicated in this section to highlighting the similarities and differences between populist parties and traditional/mainstream parties, as well as the directions populist parties follow: protest and authoritarian. The second part of the chapter focuses specifically on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, capturing both the reasons why political trust in this area is at extremely low levels and the ways in which parties adopting populist rhetoric exploit this post-communist socio-political reality to maximize their electoral scores. The fourth and final chapter represents the actual empirical analysis in the form of three case studies conducted on three representative states in the Central and Eastern European region: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. For each state included in the discussion, the focus was on the behavior of political elites on one hand, and the behavior of mainstream political parties on the other. The purpose of the analysis was to verify whether and to what extent mainstream political parties and political elites in similar national contexts – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland – have led and influenced the rise of populism. Due to the time span extending throughout the post-communist period, with reference points in the years 1989-2022, an exhaustive analysis of mainstream parties and political elites was possible. This highlighted the behaviors of these entities at key and crisis moments such as the early post-communist years marked by institutional chaos and economic and political difficulties characterizing the transition from socialist to capitalist society, accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, the global financial crisis of 2007-2009, the immigration crisis beginning in 2015, and the most recent pandemic crisis.

By synthesizing the data and information obtained and organizing them into distinct time intervals, we can state the following:

### **The 1990s**

In the 1990s, in the Czech Republic, populist discourse manifested through opposition to post-communist political elites and the promotion of moderate nationalism, except for Miroslav Sládek's SPR-RSČ party, which was noted for adopting strong xenophobic, anti-elite, and racist accents, particularly against the Roma minority. Otherwise, the political landscape of the 1990s in the Czech Republic was marked by the two mainstream parties, ODS and ČSSD, which managed to attract electoral support with promises of economic and

political reforms. However, these parties were criticized for corruption and their inability to achieve certain major proposed objectives. In Slovakia, populism was characterized by the rise of Vladimir Mečiar and his party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). HZDS embraced a nationalist agenda and incorporated significant authoritarian tendencies into the Slovak political landscape, being criticized both by internal and external observers for corruption and intentions to undermine democracy. In Poland in the 1990s, although there were notable populist voices on the political scene, populist manifestations were not as pronounced and dominant as in Slovakia, with populist parties primarily adopting issues related to conservative and nationalist values, without reaching the level of radicalism manifested by HZDS. Also in this period, but especially towards the end of the 1990s, even though the PiS party was not yet established, the influence exerted by the Kaczyński brothers was already felt in Polish politics. Their nationalist and conservative ideas and concepts attracted a significant segment of the population that felt marginalized or dissatisfied with the behavior of post-communist political elites.

### **The 2000s-2015s**

The period of the 2000s and the first half of the 2010s in the Czech Republic saw increased political fragmentation and a decline in trust in mainstream parties. Taking advantage of citizens' distrust directed at fundamental political institutions, parties such as KSČM, VV, ANO 2011, or Úsvit managed to attract electoral support by promoting populist messages, focusing especially on anti-establishment rhetoric, anti-corruption themes, and anti-elite attitudes. In Slovakia, HZDS lost popularity in the early 2000s, but populism persisted through the emergence of new parties such as Smer-SD. Led by the charismatic Robert Fico, this party managed to become hegemonic on the Slovak political scene at the beginning of the 21st century, its success being consolidated by promises of social and economic reforms, alongside substantial populist rhetoric that managed to mobilize citizens dissatisfied with the socio-political reality inherited from previous governments. In Poland, starting in 2005, the populist profile of the PiS party took shape, gaining popularity by promoting conservative nationalism and exploiting fears related to immigration and globalization. Its momentum, however, was slowed from 2007 to 2015 by two PO governments, which sought to counteract the populist agenda of PiS by promoting European values, a market economy, and a commitment to the rule of law and democratic institutions. PO governments tried to maintain a balance in public policies and avoid escalating conflict with PiS, but significant tensions

existed between the two political camps, from which PiS managed to achieve successes and important concessions.

## **2015-Present**

In the post-2015 period, the same dissatisfaction with political elites and mainstream parties persists in the Czech Republic, along with increased political fragmentation and, implicitly, the party system. Populist formations have seen a significant increase in electoral support, exemplified by the performance of the ANO 2011, SPD, and Pirate Party in the 2017 parliamentary elections. ANO 2011, in particular, ranked first in the elections and participated in forming the government. In Slovakia, similar to the situation in the Czech Republic, citizens' distrust in fundamental political institutions continues to be a defining feature of the socio-political reality, and populism does not hesitate to make its mark in this favorable conjuncture for its development. Apart from the soft populist style predominantly used by Smer-SD and the newly emerged OĽaNO, starting with the 2016 parliamentary elections, populist parties embracing the hard populism typology, such as ĽSNS and SR, will enter the Slovak parliament. For the Polish state, 2015 marks a turning point in its political trajectory, occurring against the backdrop of PiS's categorical success in the parliamentary elections. This electoral victory of populism marked the beginning of extensive changes in Poland's political and institutional structure. First, the emphasis on a nationalist and conservative agenda, shared by the top structures of the Catholic Church, prevailed, but the party was also responsible for implementing controversial reforms, mainly in the judiciary and media sectors. These measures triggered opposition both from internal political structures and from European institutions, which vehemently contested the changes implemented.

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Returning to mainstream political parties and elites, it can be affirmed that they bear responsibility for the rise of contemporary populism both in the specific national contexts of the three analyzed states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, as well as in the general context of the Central and Eastern European region, for the following reasons. First, after the collapse of communist regimes, the transition process to democracy and a market economy that began in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland was often accompanied by political and economic instability. Moreover, failures in implementing fundamental reforms weakened

citizens' trust in democratic institutions, mainstream political parties, and political elites, starting from the mid-1990s, paving the way for the rise of populism. Second, mainstream political formations in these states often faced significant difficulties in addressing social and economic issues, especially at the beginning of the transition, during the Great Recession, as well as during the migration crisis and the pandemic crisis. Thus, these precedents created fertile ground for the rise of contemporary populism, which managed to attract popular support by presenting simplified promises and immediate solutions to current and pressing problems faced by Central and Eastern European democracies in those crisis contexts. Third, especially in Slovakia and Poland, mainstream political parties and elites sometimes irresponsibly used nationalist and sometimes xenophobic rhetoric to consolidate their power and mobilize their supporter base. Consequently, as a direct and indirect effect, they contributed to increasing social tensions and polarizing the electorate, creating a favorable climate for the rise of populist parties with nationalist agendas. Finally, the striking corruption among elite structures constantly fueled feelings of frustration and disappointment among the electorate, easily opening the way for populist formations that promise to fight corruption and bring structural changes to the political system. In all three analyzed examples, we observe, sooner or later, the emergence of such populist formations that build their political programs and speeches around the anti-corruption theme.