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Populism and Elitism in Today's Russia, or When Populism Can Be Good for Democracy

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Abstract. In light of the recent political tendencies in multiple regions across the globe, including Europe and Northern America, populism has become one of the most prominent objects of research among political scientists. But in Russia populism studies still remain unsystematic, and many scholars tend to define populism as “rhetoric”, while paying little attention to its role in the political process. Based on an analysis of four central approaches to populism existing in the contemporary literature (populism as a set of ideas or ideology, as logic or discourse, as a political style and a strategy of mobilization), we argue that one should combine an ideational approach with an approach considering populism as a strategy of political mobilization in order to grasp the populist phenomenon in the Russian context.

By focusing on the main political actors in today's Russia, who are often described as populists (Vladimir Putin, the so-called “systemic” opposition, and Alexei Navalny), we seek to clarify the relationship between two forms of modern demagoguery, i.e. populism, based on the flattering of “the people”, and elitism which disdains “the people” in one or another way. Thus, we demonstrate that the major problem in Russia is elitism, not populism: Although President Putin broadly uses populist rhetoric and political style, the ideological core of his regime is definitely elitist and, more precisely, “paternalist”. On the other hand, many Russian liberals often resort to another form of elitism expressing hubris and a feeling of superiority. Then, the parties of Russian “systemic” opposition, i.e. the Communist party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR and Just Russia, demonstrate what we call “imitation populism” based on a mix of imperial nostalgia, Russian ethnic nationalism and an idea of social justice, but are mostly incapable to translate populist rhetoric into real populist mobilization, even when they benefit from the current rise of protest activities (as shown by the 2018 Russian gubernatorial elections). As for Alexei Navalny, he can be described as a populist leader *par excellence*, whereas his pro-democracy populism – primarily social (“the good people” versus “the corrupt

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elite”) but also moderately national (“us” versus “them”) – represents an effective tool of mass protest mobilization.

More broadly, we argue that populism is not an essentially negative phenomenon and can have positive impacts on the political process both in liberal democracies and non-democracies. Instead of regarding populism as a dangerous threat to democracy, it is more fruitful to consider it as a “simplified” vision of democracy. As such, populism can contribute to spread basic democratic principles among the population under authoritarian and post-authoritarian conditions, when political pluralism is significantly restrained, ideological attitudes are poorly differentiated, and civil society is weak. Nevertheless, in Russia pro-democracy populism such as Navalny’s one would most likely need to compete with pro-authoritarian populisms, and the outcome of this rivalry seems to be highly uncertain.

How to define populism?

In light of the recent political tendencies in multiple regions across the globe, including Europe and Northern America, populism has become one of the most prominent objects of research among political scientists. Some of them have proclaimed the beginning of an “age of populism” [Krastev 2007], while others speak about the “populist Zeitgeist” [Mudde 2004]. Among “populists” the experts consider both “left-wing” (like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain) and “right-wing” (like the French National Front, renamed National Rally, and the Freedom Party of Austria) parties, as well as hard-to-classify movements such as the Italian Five Stars Movement. Many have seen the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States as prominent “victories” of Western populism. A whole range of political regimes or governments, that are considered to be authoritarian, are also often described as “populist”, e.g. “illiberal democracy” in Hungary and Poland, “competitive authoritarianism” in Latin America [Levitsky, Loxton 2013], Modi’s government in India, Erdogan’s presidential regime in Turkey, Duterte’s presidency in the Philippines, and post-Soviet autocracies, including Putin’s regime in Russia.

Yet, an extreme variety of “populist” cases raises complex methodological questions. How may we describe such disparate political phenomena and modes of action using the very same concept? Another important question concerns temporal and geographical limits of populism as a term. For instance, to what extent the *narodnichestvo* of 1870s Russia and Chavismo of early 21st century Venezuela can be considered as equally “populist”? Moreover, many competing approaches to populism exist, and each of them has its own definitions and criteria to distinguish what is “populism” and what it is not.

In Russia populism studies have emerged only recently, and still remain unsystematic [March 2017]. At the same time, those approaches that have been developed by Russian scholars seem to be contentious in several respects. First, some tend to define populism as “rhetoric”, while paying little attention to its role in the political process [Berelowitch 2018; Kynev 2018; Petrov 2018]. Second, analysts do not seem to put sustained attention to a variety of forms of the populist phenomenon in the Russian political context [Makarenko 2018; Medushevskiy 2018]. Third, populism is often considered as a factor that does not favor democracy or simply hinders democratization under authoritarian regimes [Medushevskiy 2018; Petrov 2018]. This paper suggests an alternative approach to populism in Russia, based on political theory, cross-national comparisons, and empirical evidence.

Populism is a deeply contested term. Apart from the academic literature, it is broadly used in the political and media discourse, most of time to stigmatize the opponent [Taguieff 1995]². This can lead for doubts about practical usefulness of “populism” as a category of analysis [Brubaker 2017: 358; Moffitt, Tormey 2014: 382; Mudde 2017: 27]. Other scholars do not hesitate to use the concept without even defining it [see, for example, Kymlicka 2016]. In any case, in political science or any other discipline “we

² The “negative” view of populism leads to a paradoxical situation when politicians who are frequently described as “populists” do not identify themselves as such. In most cases, they prefer other political identities like “patriots”, “(true) democrats” and so on.

simply do not have anything like a theory of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense” [Müller 2016: 2].

In the contemporary literature, there exist at least four central approaches to define populism and its main features. The first and most popular among them is an ideational or ideological approach considering populism as a set of ideas or thin-centered ideology. Cas Mudde defines it as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” [Mudde 2004: 543]. Some scholars, while expressing opposition to the use of the concept “ideology” in regard to populism, propose alternative definitions in the framework of the ideational approach. Thus, populism can be equally identified as a particular worldview [Hawkins 2009] or “moralistic imagination of politics” [Müller 2016].

The second central approach defines populism as logic or discourse and has been particularly developed by the political theorist Ernesto Laclau [Laclau 1977; 2015a; 2005b]. In Laclau’s view, populism should be considered as a logic of the political which consists in constituting a popular subjectivity, i.e. “the people”, that involves the division of “the social into two camps: power and the underdog” [Laclau 2005b: 38]. In other words, populism is logic of demarcation between “the inside” and “the outside”, “us” and “them”. This leads to the definition of populism as “an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between ‘the people’ (as the ‘underdogs’) and its ‘other’” [Panizza 2005: 3]³.

³ There also exist applied discursive approaches to populism, based on the use of content analysis. While these approaches allow us to quantify the populist discourse, they do not “provide a workable theoretical framework” to define populism as such [Moffitt, Tormey 2014: 285].

According to the third central approach, populism is a political style. Those scholars who adhere to this approach focus on the performative elements of (populist) politics and, therefore, distance themselves from other approaches, including the discursive one [Taguieff 1995; Moffitt, Tormey 2014]. However, Brubaker argues that one should rather speak about a general “discursive and stylistic turn” in the study of populism [Brubaker 2017]. Thus, he proposes to consider populism as “a discursive and stylistic repertoire”. In any case, the primary focus of this approach is to distinguish the main characteristics of the populist style. Moffitt and Tormey cite three key elements of this style: appeal to “the people”; the perception of the political reality through the lens of such concepts as “crisis”, “breakdown”, and “threat”; and the so-called “bad manners”, e.g. use of slang, swearing or political incorrectness [Moffitt, Tormey 2014]. In his turn, Brubaker considers as a core element of populism “the claim to speak and to act in the name of ‘the people’”, combined with some additional elements like protectionism, majoritarianism or anti-institutionalism [Brubaker 2017].

Finally, the fourth main approach considers the populist phenomenon as a political strategy of mass mobilization. This approach mainly builds on empirical evidence from Latin America. Thus, one of its prominent theorists, Kurt Weyland, defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” [Weyland 2001: 14]. Similarly, Jansen considers as populist any “sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people” [Jansen 2011: 82].

It is obvious that each of these central approaches to populism has both important advantages, but also considerable shortcomings. Since we lack the space to develop a

detailed comparative analysis, we need to limit ourselves to a brief outline of the major difficulties raised by the application of these approaches. Notwithstanding its broad and successful use in the comparative cross-regional studies thanks to its “minimal” definition of populism [Mudde 2017], the ideational approach does not devote substantial attention to a mobilization dimension of the populist phenomenon. The approach considering populism as logic or discourse remains too abstract, since ultimately populism becomes synonymous with politics [Moffitt, Tormey 2014: 384; Arditi 2010]. Though, Laclau recognizes it himself while he puts that “no political movement will be entirely exempt from populism” [Laclau 2005b: 47]. In spite of its flexibility in the description of political actors’ behavior, the stylistic approach to populism has a relatively poor explanatory power. According to this approach, almost every political actor, both in democratic countries and autocracies, can be described as populist *to a certain extent*. Moreover, defining populism as a political style ignores or seriously underestimates its ideational and structural components, e.g. its relation to democracy. Finally, the main shortcoming of the approach considering populism as a mobilization strategy stems from the fact that it does not respond on its own to the following questions: Does populism exist beyond the periods of social mobilization? Can populism develop without being expressed by charismatic leaders seeking to organize the masses?

While choosing an approach, one should take into consideration the characteristics of political culture of a given context. Thus, in liberal democracies it will be in most cases no difficulty to identify populist actors by analyzing their public behavior and political rhetoric. But the heuristic value of the same stylistic and discursive approaches will drastically decrease in the application to the contexts characterized by a low degree of political concurrence and poorly developed (or “imitated”) political institutions. Under such conditions, populism understood as a form of behavioral and rhetorical

demagoguery may become a commonplace. This is what can be observed in many post-Soviet countries, including Russia [Kynev 2018]. The ideational approach seems to be indispensable here, as it helps distinguish more consistent populists from those who occasionally employ demotic rhetoric [March 2017].

But the ideational approach alone would not be sufficient. In societies with a poorly embedded participatory culture, rather personalized political landscapes, weak party institutionalization system and poorly differentiated ideological attitudes (all of this is characteristic of the modern Russia), the approach defining populism as a strategy of political mobilization becomes all the more important. It highlights the role of leaders looking to affect the public opinion in order to expend their political capital and mobilize the followers. Yet, it is important to note that the populist mobilization can serve both to contest the existing political order (populism as a power of protest) and to gain power in order to implement a political program (populism as a mode of government). Therefore, the mobilization approach helps make a clear distinction between essentially discursive forms of populism (“populism as rhetoric”) and those generating mass protest activities and using them for political ends (“populism as action”).

To summarize, we suggest that one should combine an ideational approach with an approach considering populism as a strategy of political mobilization in order to grasp the populist phenomenon in the Russian context. Let us now focus on the main political actors in today’s Russia who are often described as populists. Are Vladimir Putin and his political regime populists?

Fake populism and real elitism in 21st century Russia

In the liberal press, president Putin is frequently compared to foreign (and especially Western) political leaders widely described as populist challengers, e.g. Marine Le Pen,

Viktor Orban, and Donald Trump [Lassila 2018: 177]. Such comparisons can be also found in the academic literature. For example, Berelowitch compares the rhetoric and public behavior of Vladimir Putin, Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy and comes to the conclusion that all three are populists [Berelowitch 2018]. Moving from the personal characteristics of the Russian leader to the political regime of which he is president, Fish describes “a form of autocracy that is *conservative, populist, and personalistic*” [Fish 2017: 61]. In this, he considers among the distinctive elements of the Putinism’s populist arsenal its “reckless social spending” and “stern rejection of revolution, homosexuality, and feminism” [Ibid. 2017: 62, 65]. In his turn, Casula points out that in Putin’s Russia we observe a sort of “*populism from above*, a populism that is not oppositional but systemic” [Casula 2013: 10]. Kynev and Petrov speak about the “power populism” in Russia promoted by the Russian authorities [Kynev 2018; Petrov 2018], this general concept being divided into “threat populism, promise populism and demonstrative actions populism” [Kynev 2018].

Such descriptions of Vladimir Putin and his political regime stem from loose definitions of populism, in most cases identified with any form of modern demagoguery. If we focus not so much on the distinctive features of political actors’ rhetoric and public behavior as on the structural factors that determine (at least to a certain extent) their logic of action, we will get quite a different picture. To clarify, let us briefly compare the case of V. Putin with that of D. Trump.

There is little doubt that during his 2016 presidential campaign Donald Trump used populism understood both as an thin-centered ideology based on the opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and strategy of political mobilization in the context of a highly competitive political race. Acting as an anti-elites candidate, he was widely perceived as such not only by Democrats but also the Republican establishment. Once elected president of the United States, Trump remains an anti-

establishment actor challenging different parts of the American political system, including the Congress, courts, and the press.

By contrast, Vladimir Putin has been in office since 2000, and in 2018 he was sworn for another six-year term. Like his colleagues in Belarus, Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan, the Russian leader does not need populism to stay in power over the decades. All branches of state power in Russia are dependent on the president and his administration, while a large part of the Russian society remains passive and indifferent to democratic ideals. Unlike Trump who has criticized the American political elite in the name of the dissatisfied and protesting people, Putin, as an unchallenged leader, embodies the Russian establishment (or the co-called Russian “system”) and defends it from different kinds of protest activities (one of the last examples is a very controversial and unpopular pension reform backed by Putin). Perhaps, Putin’s regime can be understood as populist in only one respect: On the international stage, the Russian authorities pursue a strategy that consists in organizing a sort of “rebellion” against the global establishment or “hegemon”, i.e. the USA [Baunov 2017]. In this sense, one could point out the Kremlin’s “geopolitical populism”, strangely combined to anti-populism in Russian domestic politics.

The political regime in today’s Russia is that of “imitation democracy” [Furman 2010]. There are formally independent courts and freely elected institutions, e.g. parliament, but all of them are mere window dressing. Similarly, an imitation democracy needs *an imitation populism* in order to legitimize itself domestically. This is why president Putin demonstrates some visible signs of populism, understood as a discursive repertoire or political style [Gurganus 2017; Petrov 2018]. First, the Russian leader appeals to “the people” during annual television shows called “direct lines”. Second, he makes political promises directly to “the people” in disregard of the local and regional authorities. Third, Putin systematically uses the demotic rhetoric and is hostile to political

correctness. Finally, he actively participates in the making of an external enemy (i.e. the West) and its “agents” inside Russia (“foreign agents” and “national traitors”, i.e. NGOs critical of the Russian regime, liberals, and civil activists). Putin also leads the All-Russia People’s Front, that he founded in 2011 in order to counter the erosion in public support for the party of power United Russia: In the presidential election of 2018, he finally decided to run as an independent. Yet, what this imitation populism lacks is the main characteristic of a real populism, i.e. the anti-elite mass mobilization. By contrast, the Kremlin prevents any attempt of the opposition to engage in large-scale mobilization by means of fear and repression [Gel’man 2015], and seeks to canalize the anti-system sentiments into the hatred toward the external enemies.

To a larger extent, an imitation populism is inherent to the so-called “systemic” opposition parties in Russia, like the Communist Party (CPRF) headed by Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s misnamed Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), which have been represented in the State Duma since 1993. Both parties claim to express the genuine will of the people: While the LDPR underscore the national and social characteristics of their “demotic” identity (e.g. with slogans like “We are for the poor, we are for the Russians!”), the CPRF defines itself as a “party of patriots” and “party of the working people”. Both hardly criticize the elite, but not the real one, i.e. the *siloviki* and oligarchs who are close to Putin. Rather, they stand against the imagined elite – that of liberals, who actually form a discredited minority in the Russian politics and have no representatives in the parliament. Even if the LDPR, CPRF and Just Russia party of the Russian “systemic” opposition articulate a potentially radical critique of the Russian government and its policies, they are however unable, at least under normal circumstances, to translate rhetoric into protest action [Lassila 2018: 183; March 2012].

Nevertheless, Russian imitation populism is rather a phenomenon of the authoritarian consolidation period. In the 1990s, when real political concurrence was still possible in

Russia, both LDPR and CPRF acted as real, not imitational, force of populist protest (against the Yeltsin administration), able to mobilize their supporters by appealing to widespread social discontent, mass stereotypes and phobias. But even today, as 2018 Russian gubernatorial elections have shown, the nominal opposition can immediately engage into competition for power, provided that the support for the current authorities tends to decrease due to unpopular measures (like the controversial pension system reform). Yet, these parties are for now an integral part of the Russian electoral authoritarianism and would hardly survive in the long term without considerable changes, including changing leaders and ideology.

Rather than populism, it is another term that seems to be of more use to define the political regime in 21st century Russia. This is the concept of *elitism*. Like populism, elitism translates a Manichean vision of politics, based on the distinction of the political sphere into two homogeneous groups – “the people” and “the elite”. But in contrast to populism, “elitism considers the elite to be pure and virtuous, and the people to be impure and corrupt” [Mudde 2017: 34]. In other words, populism is based on the flattering of “the people” (which is seen to be unable to take wrong political decisions), while elitism disdains “the people” in one or another way as an inconsistent political actor which can exercise only a very limited (if any) influence on the political process⁴. It is elitism, not populism, which remains the dominant form of imagination of politics in Russia, while being shared by both the Russian leadership and liberal intelligentsia.

The Russian leaders’ elitism (among that of the rulers of other post-Soviet autocracies) rests on a vision of “the people” as a collective subject unable to govern itself due to some natural or historical factors. This is an authoritarian and paternalist vision, for

⁴ It is important to note that elitism as a form of political imagination does not necessarily reject the democratic government as such in favor of the authoritarian rule. It also may take the form of “unpolitical democracy” [Urbinati 2014]. In other words, elitism may provide an ideological justification for authoritarianism in one context and, in another context (mostly in consolidated democracies), it may be an argument for restraining the role of the popular will expression within the decision-making process.

which “the people” is not more than loyal subjects to be governed in a similar way as children are protected by their parents. The authoritarian leader believes knowing what the people really needs, and does not encourage civic participation. As argued by Vladislav Surkov who was the key Kremlin’s ideologist in the 2000s, Russians would be historically a “deep people”, which is passive and invisible but tied in a mystical way to the Supreme Ruler [Surkov 2019]. While blocking any non-sanctioned and oppositional mobilization, the Russian political regime seeks to foster the *virtual* mobilization based on anti-Western sentiments and demonstrative loyalty [Pain, Gudkov 2014]. Authoritarian paternalism is also perceptible in the formal and informal titles of several post-Soviets rulers (“turkmenbashi” in Turkmenistan, “elbasy” in Kazakhstan, “bac’ka” in Belarus, and “national leader” in Russia).

On the other hand, the Russian liberal intelligentsia resorts to another form of elitism. This liberal elitism, expressing hubris and a feeling of superiority, seems to reproduce the famous thesis by J. Ortega y Gasset, saying that “[the] masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general”. In the current Russian context this radical idea was expressed by leading liberal journalist J. Latynina, claiming that most of Russians would be mentally unable to political participation [Latynina 2014]. Another indicator of liberal paternalism in contemporary Russia is the widespread tendency to give insulting nicknames to compatriots, disdained as “slaves”, “rednecks” (*bydlo*), “sovki” (persons supporting Soviet values) or “vatniki” (term designing persons who are dumb and blindly love their Motherland). The persistence of the discourse about “the nation of slaves” is surely not unrelated to the psychological complexes inherent to the most educated classes of the Russian post-Soviet society, and reflects their will to assert their proper moral status [Petranovskaya 2016]. It is still important to underline that “mingled sworn and apprehension” [Lasch 1995: 28] with which the new elites view the masses is rather a

common phenomenon in modern societies. The recent populist outbreak in Europe and North America has obviously contributed to revive it [Pain, Fediunin 2018: 86-88].

Thus, not only Putin's regime but also the Russian opposition – both “systemic” and liberal – cannot be described as consistently populist. But then who may be defined as such?

Alexei Navalny as a populist leader

In the Russian political discourse the term “populism” is negatively connoted, and many are afraid of it. In the recent years, it is Alexei Navalny who was mostly accused of being populist, both by the Kremlin and liberal opposition. Vladimir Putin has compared Navalny (without naming him publically) to Mikheil Saakashvili, former president of Georgia and then Ukrainian opposition leader, when pointing out the dangers of color revolutions in the post-Soviet space. For many Russian liberals Navalny is also a target of frequent criticism. Some criticize his populism defined as a strategy of manipulation based on promises that he could not keep [Movchan 2017]. Others stress Navalny's tendency to “authoritarianism” (*vozhdism*). In the Russian social and opposition media the following question is systematically discussed: would not this popular leader become a more authoritarian ruler than Putin? For example, in 2013 Stanislav Belkovsky, a prominent political analyst, has coined the slogan “Putin is better than Navalny” [Belkovsky 2013].

Independently of these politically-oriented interpretations, there are indeed legitimate reasons to consider Navalny as a populist leader. First, his discourse is based on the classical populist distinction between “the good people” and “the corrupt elite” (both in material and moral terms). In his rhetoric, the Russian ruling class, which he systematically describes as “crooks and thieves”, is identified with the electoral fraud and systemic corruption, and “the people” is seen as the underdog. At the same time,

Navalny considers himself as a part of “the people” [Magun 2014: 176], and formulates in its name such major principles as national dignity and the rule of law [Lassila 2016].

Second, Navalny, unlike many liberal politicians in Russia, constantly seeks to enlarge his audience and supporters beyond ideological and social cleavages [Laruelle 2014]. In several years he became one of the most popular opposition leaders in Russia: in 2017, more than a half of the respondents (55%) indicated that they knew who Navalny was [Obshchestvennoe mnenie... 2018: 114]. Started as a LiveJournal blogger, he has progressively created his own media empire (website navalny.com, YouTube channel, etc.), reaching millions of people. Navalny’s rhetorical simplicity allows him to appeal to different social groups by “revealing the *injustice* of the current social order established under Putin” [Gudkov 2018: 87].

Third, Navalny seeks to transform the popular support for the agenda he creates into a strategy of protest political mobilization. Openly declaring that his main objective is to gain power, he mobilizes his supporters through online activities, personal communication with ordinary people, and organization of public events.

All these characteristics are those of social populism, built on the vertical opposition between “the people” and “the elite”. However, populism may also have another – national – dimension (the horizontal opposition between “us” and “them”) [Taguieff 1995; Brubaker 2017]. In this regard, some scholars [Laruelle 2014; Moen-Larsen 2014] highlight the presence of the nationalist content (mainly in form of xenophobia against migrants from the North Caucasus and Central Asia) in Navalny’s discourse and even consider Navalny to be part of the national-democratic movement. However, we do not fully agree with this vision.

First, the share of national-populist content in Navalny’s rhetoric is rather marginal and actually tends to decrease [Pain 2014], while that of social populism dominates,

reaching a peak during 2018 presidential campaign. Second, those Navalny's statements that are generally labeled as "nationalist" do not refer to the principle of collective responsibility which is typical for the ethnonationalists. When speaking about migrants or leaders of North Caucasian republics, he does not promote the idea of ethnic or cultural superiority of Russians or Slaves. Rather, his statements focus on the main theme of his discourse, i.e. tackling corruption, including in its territorial aspects. Third, we have to take into consideration the evolution of Navalny's views on nationalism. If in 2007 he came up, as a co-founder of the movement called *Narod* ("People"), with a project aimed at defending the *rususkij* (ethnocultural) identity [Laruelle 2014: 281], in 2015, in a discussion with Polish liberal intellectual Adam Michnik, he described his views in terms of "civic nationalism" [Michnik, Navalny 2015]. During his visit in Kazan in 2017, he spoke about the need for supraethnic consolidation of the Russian society, i.e. the project of "political nation" [Navalny 2017]. His strategy in regard to Russian nationalism has also changed. Despite his earlier calls for cooperation with "normal leaders of the nationalist movement" [Navalny 2011], Navalny has not participated in the annual "Russian marches" since 2012. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Navalny, in contrast to most Russian nationalists, expressed his opposition to the war in eastern Ukraine and the project of *Novorossiia*. The subsequent wave of repressions against the Russian nationalist movement made any close cooperation between Navalny and nationalists too dangerous.

To summarize, we conclude that Alexei Navalny may be described as a populist leader *par excellence*. Indeed, he is a charismatic leader of an anti-elite movement, who acts in the name of the people and constantly seeks to increase the number of his supports and engage them into protest political activities. Navalny's populism, which is primarily social but also moderately national, represents an effective tool of mass mobilization in order to gain power. But how could we evaluate it with respect to the democratization

perspective? Does it contribute to the spread of democratic norms in Russia or, on the contrary, distance it further from democracy?

Populism as a “simplified” democracy

In the contemporary literature, the populist phenomenon in its regard to democracy is perceived ambiguously. Some scholars insist that populism is anti-democratic because it is genuinely opposed to the principle of political pluralism, which is fundamental to modern democracy [Müller 2016]. By contrast, others emphasize the very democratic nature of populism, and consider it, following Christopher Lasch’s formula, as the “authentic voice of democracy” [Furedi 2016]. However, most scholars support a rather moderate view according to which populism would be essentially democratic (if we understand democracy as the realization of the principle of popular sovereignty and that of majority rule), but at odds with *liberal* democracy [Krastev 2007; Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017].

It is meaningful to affirm that the relationship between populism and democracy varies in different political contexts. The Russian case shows that without a minimal level of political pluralism stable and consistent populist movements can hardly exist. For this reason, in the post-Soviet space populism understood as mobilization “is more prevalent in the more pluralist states (e.g. Ukraine, Georgia, and to a lesser extent Moldova and Armenia), to periods before full regime consolidation (e.g. Russia and Belarus in the 1990s), and to periods of temporary regime breakdown (the Colored Revolutions of the mid-2000s)” [March 2017: 222; see also Ryabov 2018].

More broadly, the impact of populism on democracy may be rather positive and clearly negative. In different environments it can contribute to the democratization process and lead to the erosion of democratic institutions [Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 86-96]. In non-democracies, populism can play a positive role in the promotion of an “electoral”

or “minimal” democracy, based on the principles of popular sovereignty and majoritarianism. At the same time, the gain of power by the populist forces in countries with liberal democratic regimes can foster its partial erosion (but is rather unlikely to provoke a democratic breakdown). In any case, the appearance of populist movements in liberal democracies as an influential political factor is not an essentially negative phenomenon. It can produce some positive effects, e.g. revealing “legitimate concerns” sometimes hidden behind bigotry and xenophobic attitudes [Sandel 2018], giving voice to those who do not feel represented by the political elite, or improving the responsiveness of the political system [Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 83-84].

In those political environments where political pluralism is significantly restrained, ideological attitudes are poorly differentiated, and political elites do not respect democratic rules, populism often favors the very first steps toward democracy. Thus, the breakdown of communist regime and transition to a democratic government in Poland in the late 1980s is directly linked to the name of Lech Walesa, the iconic leader of mass anti-regime demonstrations. Unlike some other leading members of Solidarity, Walesa has demonstrated many populist features of populism not only as the leader of protest (“the people” against the communist “elite”), but also as elected president of Poland (1990-1995) [Wysocka 2009]. The same can be said for the case of Boris Yeltsin in Russia in the early 1990s, Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in the 2000s, and Nikol Pashinyan in Armenia since 2018. It is interesting to note that all these actors, who were (or still are) positively perceived in Western countries, are only rarely viewed as populists (given the above mentioned negative connotation of this term) but rather as “leaders of the democratic movement”.

Contrary to what populists usually claim, populism is not the incarnation of democracy as such. Rather it is expression of a specific, “simplified” vision of democracy. According to Rosanvallon, populism can be considered as a threefold simplification of the latter

[Rosanvallon 2011]. First, there is a political simplification which consists in constructing “the people” as a real political subject defined by its genuine opposition to “the elite”. The second populist simplification is institutional and procedural: Populists tend to mistrust intermediate and non-elected bodies, such as courts, and give preference to direct democracy mechanisms (e.g. referendum). Finally, populism preaches a simplified conception of the social link based on constructing a negative social identity based on stigmatization (or rejection) of immigrants, minorities or the corrupt elites.

On the other hand, simplifications do not have only negative effects: They can also enable the actors to find solutions to some complex problems that would not be solved otherwise. Thus, populism as a simplified vision of democracy may contribute to spread basic democratic principles among the population under authoritarian and post-authoritarian conditions, when the democratic culture has been lost or oppressed. More precisely, the values of democracy (including that of civic dignity) are often learned by the masses in a context of high emotional states and charismatic leadership. In Poland Walesa appealed to the recovery of national independence combined with an idea of non-violent national solidarity (“The Polish don’t shoot each other”). In his turn, Yeltsin proclaimed the idea of Russia’s return among “the civilized peoples”, which contributed to a mass support of the government’s reforms. In Georgia Saakashvili, who headed the Rose Revolution in 2003, had advanced two major claims: First, anti-corruption reforms and, second, the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia (in Adjara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia). The second claim has not been completely realized, but it generally contributed to national consolidation of the Georgian population. And in Armenia the program of the “popular” prime minister Pashinyan combined projects of anti-corruption and liberal reforms and the ideas affecting the national dignity of Armenians – international recognition of the Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) republic and

mass repatriation of compatriots to Armenia. Both ideas seem to be utopian (at least to a large extent) but have a strong appeal for the members of Armenian society.

The promises made by populists are often not realistic or simply false. This is a congenital defect of many (if not all) populist movements. Another is the importance of a charismatic leader. Thus, some of them, when gaining power, transform into autocratic or even dictatorial regimes (such examples are not rare in Latin America). However, populism as a “simplified” vision of democracy may prove to be the proverbial last straw for the countries not having a long democratic tradition, in which the state institutions were displaced by an extensive network of “paternal politics” [Hale 2016]. Finally, even the charismatic element of many populist movements is not an unequivocal impediment to democratization [Shimov 2017].

To summarize, it would be reasonable to assume that the key role in future democratic changes in Russia will belong not to marginal opposition actors but rather to populists in the strict sense of the term. In other words, to those leaders who will challenge the political establishment on behalf of the people’s will when producing and spreading an attractive image of the future. Nevertheless, pro-democracy populism such as Navalny’s one would probably need to compete with pro-authoritarian populisms in Russia, and the outcome of this rivalry seems to be highly uncertain. In any case, Russian politics is likely to (re)enter in the global age of populism.

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