

### **The End of the Liberal Order? Central, East, and Southeast European Populism in Comparative Perspective**

**Veranstalter:** Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich / University of Regensburg; University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
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Populism in Central, East, and Southeast Europe was the main focus of the 4th Annual Conference of the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies (LMU Munich and University of Regensburg). In their welcoming address, both speakers of the Graduate School, ULF BRUNNBAUER (Regensburg) und MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL (München) noted that scholars needed to address the worrying political developments that are increasingly challenging the newly established liberal order in Central, East, and Southeast Europe, as well as beyond. The region is important for analyzing not only the recent populist upsurge, but the historic origins of populism itself. It is also a cause of concern for scholars, as illiberal forces increasingly put pressure on members of academia. This is best illustrated by the recent attacks of the Hungarian and Russian governments against internationally renowned universities in Budapest and Saint Petersburg, respectively.

The opening keynote lecture was given by JOHN B. JUDIS (Washington, D.C.), a philosopher and journalist, whose 2016 publication „The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics“ tries to explain the electoral win of Donald Trump and his populist campaign. He emphasized that central to any kind of populism, past and present, is a belief that the elite's projects and the people's will are in direct confrontation with one another. Hence, populist leaders tend to claim they speak in the „name of the people“. Socioeconomic factors

like job and income insecurity, nostalgia for past greatness and the feeling of being disadvantaged compared with third groups such as immigrants, are the necessary ingredients for populism to flourish.

The first panel on Friday, chaired by BJÖRN HANSEN (Regensburg), elucidated the complex relationships of „Populisms and Language“. In his keynote, MICHAŁ KRZYŻANOWSKI (Örebro/Liverpool), Professor of Communication and Media Studies, discussed shifts in right-wing populism as a part of a political strategy. Taking Poland and its ruling PiS party as an example, he demonstrated the recent intensification of the anti-refugee discourse and the rapid normalization of this form into an accepted norm. The absence of Muslim foreigners has led to the conflation of (historic) xenophobic discourses, with anti-Semitic jargon now recycled to defame the „new“ strangers.

Linguist DANIEL WEISS (Zurich) tested the salience of linguistic definitions of populism by assembling a set of diagnostic features of populist language. Aiming first and foremost at conveying a sense of „being close to the people“, populists tend to employ techniques like the expression of personal involvement, as well as vulgar, provocative and shocking formulations, personal attacks and ridicule, as well as a suggestive and illogical style of reasoning. Through numerous examples of utterances by politicians, Weiss convincingly demonstrated that most linguistic studies fall short of more complex realities in which various actors slip in and out of „populist“ rhetoric.

Art historian TANJA ZIMMERMANN (Leipzig) examined the political implications of three large-scale urban planning projects: The exhibition area of the Soviet industrial achievements in Moscow's city centre, the new district of Andrićgrad in Višegrad in the Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the Serbian „promo-train“ in Kosovka Mitrovica. These new structures invoke a nationalistic repertoire of images and associations, aiming to advance a coherent and relatable national narrative both at home and abroad.

Literary scholar PETER ZUSI (London) used literary works from 20th century authors

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to reflect on the spellbinding power of subordination that many populist leaders have mastered. Victor Dyk's „Rat Catcher“ can be seen as a charismatic authority, which blights the entire community with his hypnotizing flute. Hermann Broch's protagonist in „The Spell“ was an enigmatic stranger who nevertheless asserts a great and detrimental influence over the village he approaches. The way dark charisma is embellished in this work showed that even unreliable and self-destructive forces can be extremely seductive.

Anthropologist ERIC GORDY (London) opened the panel on „Typologies of Populism“ and described how the rise of grassroots movements in the former Yugoslavia has meant a shift away from traditional illiberal parties, who are increasingly viewed as corrupt and self-serving. Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed an increasing sense of solidarity between opposition groups that now crosses the ethnic divide. Positive developments are also seen in Serbia, where liberal opposition candidates, who lost to Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, outperformed their ethnic chauvinist counterparts during the 2017 presidential elections.

PhD candidate in International Studies MARTIN MEJSTRÍK (Prague) noted how „populism“ has become a catch-all term, which is consistently invoked by academics and journalists. Extreme left-wing and extreme right-wing parties may use populist rhetoric but unlike populists in the true sense of the word, they do not operate within the democratic system but ultimately seek to overthrow it. He also described so-called „entrepreneurial populism“, which has now arisen in the Czech Republic with the ANO party and its leader, billionaire businessman Andrej Babiš.

Political scientist ALLAN SIKK (London) discussed the limits in identifying populism. He argued that due to the limits of the „family resemblance model“, there is a need to cultivate a broader and more methodological approach in defining populism. One could see the increasing usage of populist rhetoric by more liberal opposition parties, such as in Hungary, suggesting experimentation with new political and electoral strategies. Arguably, populism could therefore be seen more as a political tactic rather than a coherent ideology.

Professor of Southeast European Studies FLORIAN BIEBER (Graz) examined the role of external actors in providing international legitimacy to populist-oriented governments in the Western Balkans. Due to the bleak prospects of a „populist international“, populist governments on Europe's periphery require external legitimacy provided by EU member states, while at the same time seeking the validation of countries further eastward, such as Russia.

The day was concluded by a public round table with journalists and publicists chaired by historian MARIE-JANINE CALIC (Munich). GREGOR MAYER (Budapest) explained how Viktor Orbán constructed quite an effective and sustainable regime, which at present is largely indestructible. ANDREAS ERNST (Belgrade / SZurich) remarked that the concentration of power in Serbia in President Aleksandar Vučić was seen internationally as a guarantee of stability for the whole region and is therefore unlikely to be challenged. BORIS SCHUMATSKY (Berlin) recounted how Vladimir Putin managed to establish a convincing narrative of Western intrigue against Russian national interests, which granted him unrestricted popular support. Today the Russian state was more repressive than ever. All discussants reported severe restrictions on the free press as government-controlled manipulation has largely taken over.

Professor of Slavonic and East European Studies JAN KUBIK (London) and PhD candidate MARTA KOTWAS (London), gave the opening keynote on the third and final day of the conference, examining the differing degrees of populism and increasing polarization over the usage of national symbols. The presenters differentiated „thin populism“ from „thick populism“, with the former focusing primarily on anti-corruption and protecting the nation from internal or external threats, and the latter tending towards nativism, authoritarian nationalism and even religious extremism.

Historian EGBERT KLAUTKE (London) began the panel on the history of populism, by focusing on the political career of Karl Lueger, the proto-populist mayor of Vienna in the early 20th century. Originally a liberal-

minded politician, Lueger's evolution would culminate in his adoption of an explicitly anti-Semitic political platform. Despite achievements such as the modernization of the city's infrastructure, Lueger is today widely perceived as a political opportunist, who altered his political leanings in order to attain power.

Historian ELIZABETH WHITE (Bristol) gave a historical overview of the „Narodnichestvo“; the revolutionary populist ideology that emerged in late tsarist Russia. The movement opposed both capitalism and industrialization, advocating instead a socialist and agrarian economy based on the peasant commune. Having failed to spark an anti-tsarist revolution, the Narodnichestvo's ideals were later adopted by the Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) in the early twentieth century, until they were displaced by the Bolsheviks in October 1917.

Historian BALASZ TRENCSENYI (Budapest) focused on the history of the agrarian populist tradition in Central-East Europe. Trencsenyi notes that populism should not be viewed as an ideology in and of itself, but a „matrix“ of various political traditions. For instance, the ideals of Croatian agrarian populist Stjepan Radić included radical left-wing nationalism, anti-clericalism, anti-capitalism, opposition to urban modernity and anti-Semitism. While certain features of agrarian populism were absorbed by national communists after 1945, the social base of this movement was largely eliminated by the socialist-era urbanization process.

The conference closed with a panel on „Populist Subjectivities“ chaired by ČARNA BRKOVIĆ (Regensburg), introducing several small-scale and in-depth approaches to individual populist mentalities. Anthropologist GER DUIJZINGS (Regensburg) consulted psychoanalytical theorists to explore why particular people become attracted to the simplified and xenophobic solutions of populists: Jacques Lacan claimed that the self is incoherent and necessitates techniques of self-fashioning in order to hide undesired aspects and highlight others. Melanie Klein introduced the term of *splitting*, a dynamic by which unacceptable aspects of the self are projected onto external objects and can subsequently be fought.

Sociologist MARGIT FEISCHMIDT (Budapest) presented ethnographic case studies of Hungarian communities in which xenophobic (anti-Ziganist and refugee-hostile) narratives became integral tools of self-fashioning. She argued that support for the far right concentrates among people on the periphery suffering not only from a shortage of economic means and perspectives, but also self-confidence.

Anthropologist and sociologist DON KALB (Budapest / Utrecht) highlighted the economic crisis and adjunct crisis of liberalism in which populism gained momentum. He demonstrated how the populist discourse disguises problems of class as problems of culture. In this sense, the arrival of refugees on Hungarian soil was „electoral gold“ for Orbán, who established a discourse of threat that culminated in material jealousy of refugees.

Anthropologist CATHERINE THORLEIFSON (Oslo) presented her research on supporters and rank-and-file members of Britain's UKIP and Hungary's Jobbik. She identified surroundings of existential insecurity and the critical importance of the refugee „crisis“ as connecting points. The loss of personal pride associated with the perceived decline of their homeland proved to be equally formative. The discussion revealed that threatened male identities also stimulate populist responses: a majority of voters and representatives of parties with populist strategies are men.

The conference provided an essential forum for discussing the recent political upheavals and shed light on the implications of the seemingly nebulous term „populism. While the participants offered rigorous and insightful analyses of the roots and inner logic of populism in particular settings, they wisely refrained from predictions or general solutions. It is clear that academia is well advised to continue sharpening and specifying its theoretical and methodological tools when analyzing populism. Although the conference was focused on the rise of populism in East and Southeast Europe, the diverse range of attendees from various fields and disciplines allowed for political developments in the region to be placed within a wider global context.

#### Conference Overview:

##### Keynote

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Chair: Ger Duijzings (Regensburg)  
John B. Judis (Washington, D.C.): The Populist  
Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed  
American and European Politics

*The Language of Populism*

Chair: Björn Hansen (Regensburg)

*Keynote*

Michał Krzyzanowski (Örebro / Liverpool):  
Populism in/and Politicisation and Mediat-  
isation of Immigration: The Case of the 'Refugee  
Crisis'

Daniel Weiss (Zurich): How (not) to Recognise  
Populist Discourse? A Glance at East Euro-  
pean Varieties

Tanja Zimmermann (Leipzig): „Alternative“  
Histories in Fake Environments

Peter Zusi (London): The Literature of Dark  
Charisma: Hermann Broch and Viktor Dyk

*Typologies of Populism*

Chair: Melanie Arndt (Regensburg)

Eric Gordy (London): „Don't mourn, Balkan-  
ise:“ What the Post-Democratic West Can  
Learn from the Balkans

Martin Mejsťřík (Prague): Current Populism  
in Central East Europe. Threat to Liberal De-  
mocracy?

Alan Sikk (London): Populist Parties and  
Other Creatures: Towards a Typology of 'Pop-  
ulism' in Central and Eastern Europe

Florian Bieber (Graz): Populism at the Euro-  
pean Periphery: Negotiating Popular and Ex-  
ternal Legitimacy

*Public Roundtable*(in german): Das Ende der  
liberalen Ordnung? Zentral-, Ost- und Süd-  
osteuropäischer Populismus im Vergleich\_

Andreas Ernst (Belgrad / Zürich) / Boris  
Schumatsky (Berlin) / Gregor Mayer (Buda-  
pest)

Moderation: Marie-Janine Calic (München)

*Historical Trajectories*

Chair: Martin Schulze Wessel (Munich)

*Keynote*

Jan Kubik (London): Beyond Populist Poli-  
tics: Communities of Despair, Rudderless Li-  
ves, and Cultures of Redemption

Egbert Klautke (London): Antisemitism, Cha-  
risma, Infrastructure: Karl Lueger and the In-

vention of Populism in Vienna 1900

Elizabeth White (Bristol): 'Narodnichestvo'  
and 'neo-narodnichestvo': Revolutionary Po-  
pulism in Russian, Soviet and Eastern Euro-  
pean History

Balázs Trencsényi (Budapest): Comparing Po-  
pulist Discourses in East Central Europe in  
the Twentieth Century - Continuities, Con-  
texts, and Typologies

*Populist subjectivities*

Chair: Čarna Brković (Regensburg)

Ger Duijzings (Regensburg): Smears and  
Insults: Performative Acts of Denigrating  
Others

Margit Feischmidt (Budapest): Policing of  
Borders, Production of Boundaries: Structu-  
ral, Political and Cultural Conditions of Anti-  
Migrant Mobilization in Rural Hungary

Don Kalb (Budapest/Utrecht): From Populist  
Reason to the Rationality of Populists

Cathrine Thorleifsson (Oslo): In Pursuit of Pu-  
rity: Understanding the Appeal of UKIP's Po-  
pulism in Precarious England

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