

DAN DIACONESCU: THE POLITICS OF BREAD AND CIRCUSES

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Abstract

Founder and owner of two television stations, Dan Diaconescu found the opportunity to rise the electoral support for his anti-system party through media channels in the circumstances of a tumultuous political year and a bitterly personal power struggle between President Traian Băsescu and Prime Minister Victor Ponta. He described the victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections as a start of the battle against the post-communist Romanian political class that impoverished the country. Through this battle lead by him and other members of his party, his „army of angels”¹, Dan Diaconescu says he can liberate the Romanian people and install „people’s dictatorship” that will punish all the political class for the injustices suffered by them. In a context of highly visible and influential populist discourse, this paper considers the self-representation of Dan Diaconescu and his People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu during parliamentary election campaign in 2012. First of all, a multi-methodological approach was adopted to examine the key elements of national populist discourse: antagonistic struggle between politicians and citizens, popular sovereignty, corruption of the political class and popular mobilization for political change. After that, I will examine how this Romanian form of populism represents the rival version of western representative democracy, the populist democracy specific to Latin America based on direct representation embodied by a leader or a party capable to symbolize the power of the people. Within this frame, I will try to analyse to what degree Dan Diaconescu’s populism enrolls in the logic of Latin American populism instead of a cultural or ethnic populism dominant in Europe.

Key words: national populism, anti-system parties, populist discourse, People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu

Introduction

This paper’s main purpose is to analyze to what degree Romanian populism, particularly Dan Diaconescu’s, enrolls in the logic of Latin American populism due to the absence of democratic culture, the precarious socio-economic conditions, political instability and corruption inside the country. Understanding the emergence of PP-DD under these conditions, it will become clearer how this party succeeded in obtaining 14,64% of the votes for the Senate and 13,99% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies² and, thus, becoming the third most represented party in the country.

In the first part of the article, I will try to explain the difficulty of establishing a definition of populism and highlight the common characteristics of these movements that mark them as populist. The second part is intended for assessing a distinction between European and Latin American populism starting from the concept of democratic representation. We will see that the absence of democratic culture and the long history of governmental populism are common features for Romania and most of the Latin American states and are at the basis of new populist movements. In the last part, I will examine the populist logic of action and Dan Diaconescu’s discourse of and his People’s Party’s during parliamentary election campaign in 2012 to show how similar this party is with most of the populist parties in Latin America.

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¹ People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu website, accessed February 20, 2012, <http://www.partidul.poporului.ro/>.

² Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Romania. Parliamentary elections. 9 december 2012* (Warsaw, 2013), http://194.88.148.169/b4/cc/12/e5/default_851532130567.pdf?c=25b6316fcc0da26c81c9bc1477148343.

What is populism?

Despite the widespread use of the notion of populism, all analysts admit it is very difficult, even impossible to establish a definition encompassing all features that populist manifestations share. That's why most of the literature on populism is characterized by reluctance in assigning this concept a precise meaning. Most often, as Ernesto Laclau stated³, conceptual apprehension is replaced by appeals to intuition or by descriptive enumerations of several different features whose relevance is based rather on their level of proliferation.

Laclau considers the impasse that political theory reached in analyzing populism is due to the limitation of the ontological tools available to political analysis. Thus, the impossibility of conceptual apprehension is based on, according to Laclau⁴, limited methods used by political science to approach the problem of how social agents integrate all political experiences faced over time.

I have chosen to discuss only Laclau's theory of populism because he tries to overcome the deficiency of which I have spoken above starting from the construction of popular identities as a set of strategies that make possible the manifestation of the people as a collective actor. In his analysis, populism is described in positive terms and the rationality inherent to its political logic is not excluded as it happens in most of the literature where populism is seen as vague and irrational. Moreover, I can say this theory positions Laclau on the side of those who rehabilitate the democratic nature of populism by claiming that democratic identities and populist mode of identification are based on the same logic. His theory induces us to see populism as a mode of identification rooted in the big gap between political institutions and people and highlights the limitations of an entirely institutional approach of democracy⁵.

According to Laclau⁶, by populism we should not understand a movement with a specific social base or ideological orientation, but a type of political logic. While social logic involves following rules, political logic is related to the institutions of society. When a process of social change occurs and it gives birth to a global political subject that brings together a plurality of social demands, political space divides. Thereby, identities are created by establishment of a political border between fulfilled democratic demands as status quo on the one side and unfulfilled democratic demands on the other. These demands not fulfilled by those in power because they are reluctant or incapable are often institutionalized in a political movement. In these conditions of emergence, whatever the social or ideological content of the political movement under discussion, we are dealing with a form of populism⁷.

Laclau's conceptual characterization of populism has two other aspects, one concerning naming and the other one concerning affect. I will discuss only the first one of them due to its relevance for the paper⁸. Because the term "people" expresses the ensemble of social agents as such, without suggesting there exists a given unity of the group, the heterogeneity of the demands is only transformed by the popular identity into a unity⁹. This unity is false since the real existence of a unity is impossible as long as the unfulfilled demands are an expression of the structural system, not of the real demands of individuals. According to Laclau¹⁰, this situation involves two consequences. First of all, the moment of unity of popular subjects only exists at the nominal level, not at the conceptual one. Second of all, the limits between the demands that are going to be incorporated into the system

³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Francisco Panizza, "Review of *On Populist Reason*" by Ernesto Laclau, *The Political Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2007), http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/POQU/R_0032_3179_232_1007192.asp.

⁶ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸ The second one treats populism as a Lacanian object of politics and due to its psychoanalytic contents it is not necessarily relevant for this paper.

⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

and the ones that are going to be excluded are blurred and always subject of contesting. Thus, the language of a populist discourse is always imprecise and changeable because it attempts to operate with a social reality that is heterogeneous and changeable, not because it implies an inappropriate understanding of the wide world¹¹.

By understanding populism as a political logic, Laclau succeeds in explaining his flexible nature as it can be used as a logic for movements with distinct ideological contents from far-right to radical left. Moreover, he highlights another two major features of populism¹²: his radical democratic substance and the common roots shared with democracy in construction of popular identities. But, on the other side, it has two major problems¹³. First of all, Laclau fails to analyze undemocratic side of populism. Although he does not affirm that populism is necessarily democratic, his arguments that democracy depends on the construction of a democratic people and that democracy is not always liberal do not take into account this side of populism. Second of all, he tends to understand populism as a natural form of radical politics or even as a natural form of politics. Laclau claims in an earlier text that 'if populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads in which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative'¹⁴. The problem here is that not all politics in radical and not all radical politics is populist and furthermore, status quo and its radical alternatives are all political constructions¹⁵. Even if Laclau uses a definition too restrictive for politics to explain populism, I think this theory represents an important contribution to the literature on populism because it incorporates three important features frequently neglected, especially the one concerning the flexible nature of populism.

Besides these features of populism defined by Laclau, I will present a list of relevant elements frequently encountered in populist movements, especially at the discourse level. Because of the wide variety of populist movements, I would like to mention from the beginning that this list will not be complete and it can be extended by the reader. More than that, due to the flexible nature of populism, we can find populist movements where a part of these elements are missing. I have chosen to add this list alongside with the short presentation of Laclau's theory of populism in order to create a multiple picture of a populist movement no matter what social base or ideological orientation it has.

- antagonistic struggle between politicians and citizens (populist movements are defined by fighting against power structure and political elites whose interests are in conflict with interests of the "people"; the political elite is described as corrupt and degenerate)

- popular sovereignty - "power to the people" (populist movements claims that represent popular sovereignty¹⁶ because people should be the source of all political power as long as "the will of the people is supreme over every other standard"¹⁷; this is why a lot of them militates for direct democracy so that decisions will be made by referendum or popular initiative¹⁸)

- three perspectives of how they relate to people (their appeal is to people within the nation, the common people – plebe, and to the ethnic people)

¹¹ Ibid., *On Populist Reason*, 118.

¹² Panizza, "Review of On Populist Reason".

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 47.

¹⁵ Panizza, "Review of On Populist Reason".

¹⁶ Margaret Canovan, "Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy", *Political Studies* 47, no. 1(1999), 4.

¹⁷ Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981), 4, quoted in Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 5.

¹⁸ Margaret Canovan, "Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy", 2.

- a different perception of democracy (populists perceive democracy rather as an affective relation of mutual identification between people and government than an institutional practice and a culture of political responsibility¹⁹)
- popular mobilization for political change (an essential feature of populist movements is the political mobilization of the people directed by the leader for the promise of political system change and barrier between political elites and people abolished²⁰)
- apolitical temporality (populists promise to eliminate the time barrier between personal or collective desires and their fulfillment, time barrier that defines complexity of political action²¹)
- anti-elitism (the fight that populist movements are taking is not only against power structure and political elites, it is against all dominant ideas and values in the society presumably imposed by elites²²)
- charismatic leadership (an important feature of populist movements is the figure of a providential leader²³ that represents the will of the people; populists create a personal relation between leader and people not only by personalizing him but also rejecting institutional structures, including bureaucratization²⁴)

What do Romanian and Latin American populism have in common?

As we could see, because every form of populism is rooted in the socio-political reality where it appears, we cannot use a list of key elements of populist movements to analyze different forms of populism from different parts of the world. This type of approach is more likely to be misleading. Following Laclau's theory on populism, I have decided to start my analysis with the concept of democratic representation and the general conceptions about it. Hanna Pitkin²⁵ mentions in one of her works the occurrence of two conceptions about democratic representation which may serve as a central element in development of populist movements. The first conception, dominant in the world, is based on the delegation of power through elections to a limited number of individuals that should act according to people's interests. This is typical for modern representative democracy and develops a social distance between the representatives and the represented. Opposed to this version is the second one, based on direct representation embodied by a leader or a party capable to symbolize the power of the people. This is typical to populist democracy and its origins are exclusively Latin American.

These two conceptions about democratic representations and their versions of democracy can be useful to make distinctions between European and Latin American populist movements. In Central and Eastern Europe, populism has multiple forms but the great part of them can be certainly associated with the first conception I have talked about. That's why for the most part it is reduced to ethnic and cultural populism. Guy Hermet²⁶ even talks about two contradictory forms of popular identification that we can find in the literature about Eastern European populism. According to the first of them, people's identity is defined by a number of aspects concerning language, religion and even physical appearance. Assuming that people are carriers of a set of genes propagated from a generation to another, it appeals to a past related to the golden age of ethnic genesis. Contrary, the second form of popular identification is a product of common history that leads to the development

¹⁹ Guy Hermet, *Sociologia populismului* (Bucharest: Artemis, 2007), 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²¹ Ibid., 39.

²² Margaret Canovan, "Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy", 2.

²³ Guy Hermet, *Sociologia populismului*, 37.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1967).

²⁶ Guy Hermet, *Sociologia populismului*, 212.

of a collective memory. This memory gives birth to a feeling of political membership of a collectivity that most of the time is intermingled with the national state.

Although the second form of popular identification is the only one accepted, and present in our days, we can find traces of the first one in the program and discourse of some European populist movements. This could explain partially why these movements often have reactions related to linguistic particularism and religious intolerance. More than that, analyzing the increasing importance of national state in their activity and discourse, we can see a composite that incorporates elements from both forms of popular identification. That's why East European populist movements appeal to an aggressive nationalism that refers more to primordial people than to the body of citizens of the national state in its actual acceptance²⁷.

Latin American populism, on the other side, represents the rival version of western representative democracy, populist democracy. It is based on the political participation through the agency of a leader or an entire party that represents the power of the people. This way, populist movements respond to the popular demand of real citizenship, people being convinced that they do not know more than some disappointing judicial or electoral features of it²⁸.

In Europe, we can talk about three stages of manifestation of democratic citizenship²⁹, stages that have gradually contributed to the construction of democratic culture. First of them is legal and refers to the recognition of equality before the law, the second one is political and it is connected to universal suffrage and the third one is rather social than political and is assigned to the development of welfare state. Contrary, in Latin America we can talk about the absence of a democratic culture as a process where three aspects³⁰, partially opposed to the ones that contribute to the construction of democratic culture in Europe, had a great significance. Firstly, for a long period of time a generalized non-citizenship was imposed by dictatorships and oligarchic regimes. Secondly, there was a false liberal citizenship reduced to a ballot that most of the time was falsified. Last but not least, populist citizenship appeared and not succeeded to change anything, managing only to increase the legitimacy of the ruling rich minority.

In Romania, although the democratization process had started earlier than most of the Latin American states, the absence of a democratic culture is obvious. This absence is foremost a consequence of failure in the history of a stable and enlightened governance. Even if we are tempted to blame the communist regime for the lack of democratic experience, even before the World War II Romania didn't have solid democratic basis. Although, the four decades of communist dictatorship under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu destroyed every trace of democratic culture for Romanian people. Generalized non-citizenship and false elections were just a few of the arrangements to maintain power over the people and to block democratization attempts. After the violent overthrow of the communist regime in 1989, Romanians had to build democratic structures without a social and political base and this was a tougher challenge for Romania than for almost any of their post-Communist neighbors. More than that, after more than twenty years Romania is heavily criticized for the culture of lawlessness, corruption and winner-take-all politics. Taking all these features in consideration, we can see that at least two of the three aspects that contribute to the absence of democratic culture in Latin America are playing the same role in Romania.

Romania and the majority of Latin American states do not share only the absence of democratic culture, but also the long history of governmental populism. Unlike most of the European countries, in Romania, governmental forms of populism were always in front of its non-governmental and subversive forms. The first manifestation of Romanian populism coincided with

²⁷ Ibid., 211.

²⁸ Ibid., 205.

²⁹ Ibid., 204.

³⁰ Ibid., 204-205.

the formation of this country as a political structure³¹. Over time, it took different forms from what we can call boulangism under Marshal Alexandru Averescu to the national populism professed exclusively by the state, under Nicolae Ceaușescu³². The domination of these forms of populism created the environment for the development of what we can call populist citizenship in Latin America. That's why I could say that we can look at the appearance of populist citizenship as an element that contributes at the absence of democratic culture not only in Latin America, but also in Romania.

People's Party – Dan Diaconescu

One of the actors that stand out from the others, through his populist logic of action and discourse, in the parliamentary elections from 2012 is Dan Diaconescu, the leader of People's Party-Dan Diaconescu. Founder and owner of two television stations, Dan Diaconescu found the opportunity to raise the electoral support for his party starting even before the election campaign through media channels. This type of populism, called frequently media populism is specific to Latin America but now it has spread all over the world. Its central element is the television that helps neo-populists to communicate with the masses as radio did for traditional populists, but it is definitely more effective in communicating their charismatic qualities³³.

Therefore, a month before the legal start of election campaign, Dan Diaconescu arrived at Romania's economy ministry with seven bags containing three million euros to pay the overdue wages of the workers from a chemical plant called Oltchim. The money didn't eventually get to the workers but the electoral support for his party was considerably increased and, since then, he started to call himself "Romania's next president" on the nearly daily appearances on one of his television stations, OTV³⁴.

Dan Diaconescu found the opportunity to increase the electoral support for his party in the circumstances of a tumultuous political year and a personal power struggle between President Traian Băsescu and Prime Minister Victor Ponta. Although the coalition lead by Prime Minister Victor Ponta was always favorite to win the elections and won them in a convincing manner³⁵, his credibility was damaged after an accusation of plagiarism in his PhD thesis and the failed attempt to impeach President Traian Băsescu in the summer of 2012. The president, also, was not having a high credibility and, more than that, he was deeply unpopular due to his backing of austerity measures and his abuse of power. According to the turnout of the July 2012 referendum, 87,52% of the people who voted agreed to impeach President Traian Băsescu³⁶.

These are only few of the problems that contribute to the political and economical instability of Romania. Thenceforth, I will present more of them. Regarding the relation with the EU, although Romania joined it six years ago, now it is brought into question if the country is apt to be part of the block. It is considered a second-tier member and it is excluded from the passport-free Schengen zone³⁷. Furthermore, Romania is the second-poorest and one of the most corrupt EU states³⁸ and its

³¹ Ibid., 219.

³² Ibid., 220-222.

³³ Taylor C. Boas, *Television and Neopopulism in Latin America: Media Effects in Brazil and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), <http://lasa-4.univ.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/vol40no2/Boas.pdf>.

³⁴ Sam Cage and Luiza Ilie, "Populism takes spotlight in Romania power struggle", *Reuters*, November 22, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/22/us-romania-politics-idUSBRE8AL0IN20121122>.

³⁵ USL won the elections with 60,03% of the votes for the Senate and 58,63% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Romania. Parliamentary elections. 9 december 2011*)

³⁶ Romania, Biroul Electoral Central, *Comunicat privind rezultatele referendumului național din data de 29 iulie 2012 pentru demiterea Președintelui României*, 2012, <http://www.becreferendum2012.ro/DOCUMENTE%20BEC/Rezultate/Rezultate%20finale.pdf>.

³⁷ Sam Cage and Luiza Ilie, "Populism takes spotlight in Romania power struggle".

³⁸ Ibid.

justice is constantly subject to monitoring. In the last seven years, 23 politicians have been sent to trial for corruption³⁹. Although there exists a small number of very rich people, millions of people are living from subsistence farming or minimum wages⁴⁰. More than 30 percent of residences have no running water and almost five percent do not have mains electricity⁴¹.

Taking all these aspects into consideration and, also, the absence of a democratic culture and the long history of governmental populism that I have talked about earlier, we can understand the emergence of People's Party – Dan Diaconescu, the logic behind the actions of Dan Diaconescu and his party and the success registered in the elections. More important than that, we can see why Dan Diaconescu's populism enrolls in the logic of Latin American national populism instead of a cultural or ethnic populism dominant in Europe. The political instability, the precarious socio-economical conditions and corruption are features of a larger framework that constitutes the basis of populist movements in poor countries and Latin America is the main scene for this type of populism.

Under the conditions of a political crisis caused by the widespread discontent with the two major parties and their leaders, seen as arrogant and corrupt, PP-DD appeared as an anti-system party capable to assemble the people who are dissatisfied with the actual political establishment. Behind the wheel of a white Rolls Royce in his shiny purple jacket, Dan Diaconescu promises to save the Romanian people from the poverty caused by the political class whose actions are exclusively dictated by their personal interests. "Once in power we will make things right. We will have bread, glass and brick factories like in the old days,"⁴² Diaconescu told to the voters from Târgu Jiu, the city where he was running for parliament. As we could see, another essential feature of populist movements appears. Dan Diaconescu talks about the political mobilization of the people directed by him for the promise of political system change starting with "the revolution of the vote" ("If we all leave the house on election day, we will succeed. Only this way we could make a country like abroad, as young people say ... I propose you to make a revolution of the vote, this year in November..."⁴³).

Unlike most of the populist parties in Europe, PP-DD denies a part of the features of what we call democratic power. He speaks about installing the "people's dictatorship" to punish the political class for impoverishing the country. In the name of the people, he plans to seize illegal assets acquired by doing business with the state and to create an institution called People's Court for people to be able to decide how politicians should be punished for their injustices⁴⁴. The anti-elitism is a basic element for his party so that their proposals are based on the idea that power elites and bureaucracy are inefficient and corrupt (Romania does not necessarily need skilled people, but needs people that won't steal anymore"⁴⁵).

Therefore, people's problems can only be solved by simple persons like him and "his army of angels"⁴⁶. That's why, as most of the populist leaders from poor countries, he is admired by simple people because of his image as a man of a modest background who made good and didn't forget where he came from. Although he drives a luxury car, he has never fixed his teeth and doesn't talk too much about his personal life⁴⁷. What makes me also believe that Dan Diaconescu's populism is closer to Latin American populism than to the populist forms dominant in Europe are the party's

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Institutul Național de Statistică, Recensământ 2011, *Tabl1. Locuințe convenționale după dotarea cu instalații și dependențe la recensământul din 2011- Rezultate preliminare. România, macroregiuni, regiuni de dezvoltare și județe pe categorii de localități*, <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/TS11.pdf>.

⁴² Sam Cage and Luiza Ilie, "Populism takes spotlight in Romania power struggle."

⁴³ People's Party – Dan Diaconescu website, accessed February 20, 2012, <http://www.partidul.poporului.ro/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

inapplicable simple proposals regarding common problems of the people and his charismatic leadership. PP-DD is proposing to pay entrepreneurs 20,000 euros for starting a new business, to raise salaries and pensions, cut sales tax to 10 percent, build 200.000 apartments for poor people and people to stop paying installments for twelve months. Although it is impossible that this measures to become real, proposing them has a great impact on public because they, hypothetically, solve the simplest problems people confront with in everyday life.

Conclusions

As we have seen, there are two rival democratic representations that can help us make a distinction between European and Latin American populism. The first conception, dominant in Europe, is based on the delegation of power through elections to a limited number of individuals. Opposed to this version is the second one, typical for Latin America, based on direct representation embodied by a leader or a party capable to symbolize the power of the people. One of the basic conditions of the emergence of the second version and of Latin American populist movements is the absence of a democratic culture, absence that we can also see in Romania, foremost as a consequence of failure in the history of stable and enlightened governance.

But the absence of a democratic culture is not the only element that contributes to the emergence of the national populism specific to Latin America. People's Party – Dan Diaconescu arisen due to other favorable circumstances, like political instability, precarious socio-economic conditions, corruption and winner-takes-all politics. It is an anti-system party designed to assemble the people who are dissatisfied with the actual political establishment. As most of the populist movements from Latin America, it has a charismatic leader and propose simple but unapplicable solutions for the simplest problems people confront with in everyday life. Although it is impossible this measures to become reality, by proposing them, Dan Diaconescu managed to increase the electoral support for the party, because, in a poor country, these are the problems that really matter for people and they want simple solutions for them, solutions that they can understand.

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