Populism As a Political Force in Post Communist Russia and Ukraine

The "masses" as they appear in modern European History are not composed of individuals; they are composed of "anti-individuals" united in a revulsion from Individuality".

Michael Oakeshott[1]

If the political discourse of the19th century was dominated by the ideas of classical liberalism, grounded in English Utilitarian philosophy and the Scottish Enlightment based on the centrality of the individual as an independent agent perusing his natural rights within a minimalist state. The European politics of the 20th century were dominated by corporatist-populism appearing in a plethora of forms. The liberal idea, however, was sustainable only within the context of a strong state which can prevent the human quest for security from turning into political action.[2] While the United States and Britain with their powerful political institutions and a cultural ethos of libertarianism, indeed, managed to sustain a basically Laissez-faire liberal – individualist society. On the Continent, with its tradition of communiterinsm and notions of organic societies, individualist liberalism proved to be a short episode between 1880 and 1914[3], to be eclipsed by various from of populist corporatism ranging from Fascism to the notions of "social market" promulgated by the founding fathers of the European Union, who opted for market economies, while rejecting the liberal notion of market societies. Thus, across all of Continental Europe various forms of Populism came to dominate the political discourse. While the forms of Populism varied form country to country, however, regardless whether the populism is "peasantist" as it

is in the case of Romania or Bulgaria and other parts of Eastern and Central Europe, or based on petit bourgeoisie in the case of France, or the urban "*volkish"* variant associated with Germany, several basic features are a constant of the populist political structure. The following features are persistent in virtually all forms of populist discourse: Powerful anti-elitism, the notion that the average person in the embodiment of all virtue and wisdom, a belief that a society is an organic body with the state being responsible to tend to the well being of that body, powerful distrust of outsiders (both as persons and institutions). Because of the strong links to an "organic society" and streaks of xenophobia, European populist movements tend to be strongly linked to "romantic nationalism" stressing a "glorious past", as well as notions of "ethnic purity" and "blood and belonging".[4] It should be noted that, after World War I, across the entire European continent the legitimacy of the state was anchored in being able to meet the populist agenda. Regardless, of whether the model was a Gaullist system of economic "dirigisme", West German "social market", Kadar's "Goulash Communism", or Husaks's "grand compromise" all regimes on the continent of Europe appealed to populist instincts, ranging from Nationalism, to the protection of the "little people" to the defense of "native culture". Joseph Schumpeter's observation that populist regimes "…do not make rational choices; the losers will bloc it."[5] Clearly applied both to the Christian Democrat dominated European Economic Community as well as to Communist Central Europe.

The only two political blocs were populism failed to become the dominant form of political discourse, were the English speaking countries, where the British

elections of 1950 and US elections of 1952 marked a reversal of populist policies of Roosevelt and Atlee, and the USSR where an imperial ideology continued to displace the notions of “ethno-nationalism” or “organic society”.

Ethno nationalism a key element of European populism rarely was utilized in the service of populism. In sharp contrast with the communist experience of the former Soviet Union, which with the exception of specific periods such as “high Stalinism” and late Brezhnevism, sought legitimacy trough an internationalist ideology, and a deliberate system encouraging the political atomization of much of the populace. Therefore, whereas, the Central European communist regimes attempted to come to terms with their populations through overt populist policies, the policies of the USSR continued to rely on a imperial ideology, atomization and repression.

It was the ability of Europe’s governments to meet the populist agendas that largely accounted for the relative political stability that typified Europe between 1945 and 1989. It is in the context of the triumph of populism after World War I, that the collapse of communism must be seen. In all Soviet bloc, other than the USSR itself, the legitimacy of the communist regimes rested firmly on their ability to defend a populist agenda. What finally triggered the broad popular rejection of communist in Central Europe the growing inability of the communist regimes to continue fulfilling the populist social contract forged between the regimes and their respective populations during the 1950’s and the 1960’s. The post communist leadership, whether it was Walesa, Antall; Meciar, or Klaus[6], all embraced a strong populist rhetoric and, despite neo liberal

protestations pursued a economic policy laden with nationalist bombast and populist-corporatist baggage.

Thus whereas the collapse of communism in most of the Soviet bloc was a result of the failure of exhaustion of the communist-corporatist model of populism, and both he populace and leadership saw in that collapse a "second chance" to build a "national- corporatist" state, the situation in the Slavic core of the USSR was very different from the outset. Unlike the counties of Central Europe and the Baltics, nationalism was a far weaker component of the legitimacy of the state. The Russian empire, whether Tsarist or Soviet was an ideological, rather than a national construct. Within the Tsarist and Soviet empires Belorussian and Ukrainian nationalism where viciously persecuted, and Russian nationalism was episodically revived from above by Alexander III, late Stalin and late Brezhnev only when the empire's viability was under severe stress. This overt manipulation of Russian nationalism from above resulted in a cynical attitude among the urban population toward official nationalism (*Kazenyi natstionalism),* and profound atomization of the rural population.[7]

Leo Tolstoy reflecting on the a-national nature of the Russian people observed:

> "…in Russia, where patriotism, in the form of love and loyalty for faith, the Tsar, and the country is inculcated in the masses with extraordinary tension and with the use of all the tools at the command of the government…they [the Russian people] however, look upon all [government] powers, as powers of violence, if not with condemnation, then with absolute indifference. Their country, if by that we don't mean their village or township, they do not know at all or, if they do, they do not distinguish from any other countries."[8]

Thus, unlike the polities of the Baltics and Central Europe, the newly independent States of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, emerged with only an embryonic notion of

nationalism, and a very murky definition of the “other”, both vital ingredients of populist polities.

The difference in the political structures of the former USSR and the Central Europe reflected strongly in the dynamics of the collapse of communism in the two entities. Whereas, in Central Europe the collapse of communism was a result of popular turmoil and a fundamental rejection of communism by the countries’ intellectuals, leading to the emergence of a new top leadership not directly linked to the discredited *nomenklatura* . The collapse of communism in the Slavic core of the USSR was a product of the loss of elite cohesion, and its consequent regrouping on a more “local” base. Neither the collapse of Soviet Communism, nor the collapse of the USSR was a result of a popular rejection of the existing model or a rebirth of a clear eyed new intellectual paradigm built along nationalist-populist lines. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, a process which still did not come to full closure, was a result of a “war at the top” among various *nomenklatura* factions, with little direct public participation, or even comprehension of the dynamics of the process.

Thus, the dynamics of the collapse of communism in the USSR and the ensuing criminalization of the state machinery by various political clans in both Russia and Ukraine led to an ever deeper atomization of the population and the de facto to the atrophy of both states (Russia, and Ukraine) as coherent polities.

The cultural proclivity, which Nikolai Berdiav observed early in this century that ”Russian moral judgments are determined with reference to the person, not to the abstract principle of property, state, nor to the abstract good.”[9] , has been

intensified and deepened by the post communist experience to befall both Russia and Ukraine. As Boris Maizel aptly noted:

> In Russia there are many small islands of community life. But they are communities of family and close friends bound together only by blood ties and personal attachment, not by the principle of ideology. Unlike communities that are formed either around a specific civic ideal (religion, moral, social) or around clearly articulated economic interest. Russian comradeships are casually formed and are bereft of any common basis of mutual trust. Consequentially, Russian communities are unable to produce a civil society at large.[10]

Given the chronic weakness of the both Russian and Ukrainian societies, a condition which was reinforced by their unique process of the communist collapse and the ensuing experience, made the potential for a rise of a coherent populist polity in either country remote. As in pervious times, it seems to far more likely that populism in Russia and Ukraine will take a form of a local incoherent violent outburst (*Bunt)* rather than a coherent populist movement typical of the rest of continental Europe.

The amorphous situation in Russia and Ukraine created an enormous psychological vacuum makes these two countries inherently unstable and potentially subject to ever greater atrophy. In the case of Russia there is a growing tension between ever greater regionalism and atomization, and a renewed attempt to create a xenophobic nationalism from above.[11] In the case of Ukraine the situation is even more complex, given the fact that many Ukrainians opted for independence as a reaction to the collapse of the Soviet state and due to the perception that the union with Russia is directly responsible for the dire economic conditions of the country, the quest for a national state in the sense advocated by Herder found scant resonance among most

Ukrainians.[12] Given the catastrophic state of the Ukrainian economy (even when compared to Russia) the level of political atomization is even more profound. While the relative weak national identities in both Russia and Ukraine, the deep seated tradition of political atomization, and the specific dynamics the collapse of communism did contribute to the on going political backwardness of these countries, however it may well turn out to be an asset in the future where cultural and political post modernism are likely to become the dominant political and economic model.

While historians focused on the collapse of communism in 1989-1991, few noticed a no less important development to occur concurrently with the demise of communism which was the decline of the “Rhine [corporatist] Capitalism” and the ascent of “Atlantic [neo liberal] Capitalism” as the universal economic model.

It was the Rhineland capitalist model pioneered by Frederich List and adopted by Bismarck, and the rest of continental Europe, that enabled the continental polities to reconcile the economic modernization of capitalism with populist traditionalism. One of the basic principles of the Rhine capitalist model was that a state is an organic body, and thus labor, management and capital markets cooperate, assuming that all the components of a national economy will be able to sacrifice parts of their profits for the “common good”. Thus, the banks were willing to make less than optimal loans to national industries, consumers were willing to pay higher prices to support national industries and agriculture, and labor unions were willing to support wage restraints as a part of the process.

The Arab oil embargo of 1973-74, propelled the industrial world toward a new industrial revolution shifting away from physical manufacturing toward emphasis on development and export of intellectual property, primarily in the fields of data processing, bio-technology, telecommunications and services.

One of the most significant by-products of these new industrial revolution based on services and intellectual property, was that unlike manufactured goods these products do not easily led themselves to government control, nor to the Rhineland economic model, where political elites were able to channel capital into spheres of economic activity most beneficial to "common good". One of the most important economic developments to emerge from the "post industrial revolution" of the 1980's is that for the first time in the annals of history, the world is facing free trade in goods, free flow of capital, and increasingly free flow of "human capital". This new economic condition has rendered the corporatist economic model largely useless. The European state, historically the arbiter between populism and capitalism has mutated into a "virtual state" devoid of the ability to affect is economic and many social policies.[13] The free flow of goods, and capital, the concept of protecting national industries is either through tariffs, easy credit, or currency debasement is increasingly unfeasible, and with it the entire corporatist economic model which managed to reconcile capitalism and populism. Furthermore, given the importance of mobility of "human capital" in the economic age based on intellectual property and services, success of polities to compete effectively in attracting: "human capital" across national frontiers had become the hall mark of being able to compete effectively in the global market. It

is the nature the relative absence of parochial nationalism that enabled the City of London to become World's financial center, or the see California's "silicon valley" to become the global locomotive of new technologies. In other words, modern economic structure is inseparable from "Multi culturalism", "relativism" , "post modernism" and with it the negation of the Herderian notion of a national state. Increasingly post modern polities, of Western Europe and North America are characterized by what Mikhail Bakhtin called "polyphonic dialogue" within any given polity and "carnival of consciousness"[14], precluding any single national identity or grand narrative. This economic model, based on the notions of "post-modernism" is rapidly becoming the principle source populist mobilization in the ethno-national states of Europe. In all clearly defined ethno national states of Europe a serious populist backlash against the impending, and inevitable multi culturalism, as well as the triumph of Atlantic (neo-liberal) capitalism has taken place, highlighted by the inclusion of Jorg Haidar's populist political party in the Austrian government, along with a wave of growing anti foreign violence across the European continent. As the French philosopher Alain Tourine observed that contemporary post modernism is…"a struggle between rationality and authoritarian neo-communitarian politics of identity". [15]

To the new post communist states in Central Europe, molded in ethno-nationalism, and more than a century of corporatist nationalism, the transition to a post-modernism is bound to be a long painful and destabilizing process. Not only will these state will have to shed their entire notion of "the state" and "the nation" under the conditions of impoverishment and moral adversity. The new

democracies will be forced to accelerate the process of post-modernization under the relentless pressure from the European Union continues to demand political and social changes far faster than the polities in the region can sustain.[16] The governments of Central Europe are keenly aware that by adopting EU mandates they are usurping the democratic principle. However, at the same time the elites recognize, that failure to be admitted to the European Union will lead to a reversion of nationalism, unsustainable corporatism, and a reversion to a populist romanticism discourse to which Vladimir Tismaneanu referred to as “Fantasies of Salvation”.

The situation in Russia and Ukraine remains visibly different in a sense Russia and Ukraine having failed to develop a functioning modern society, and have already entered the era of post-modernism. Unlike the rest of Europe’s peoples the Russians and Ukraine are far better equipped to deal with the notion of a “virtual state”, given the fact that the Russian state under both Tsar or Communism resembled either a coercive colossus, immortalized in Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” or a “Potemkin village” depending on the specific time in history. Thus, the demise of the state as an active force in their daily lives does not demand the psychological adjustment required of most other peoples of Europe, accustomed to the variations of “Rhine capitalism”. Thus, the atomized condition of the peoples of Russia and Ukraine make them far more reliant on their local resources, as well as tolerant of foreign presencse which is often far more trusted than that of their own governments.

Similarly in absence of a clear national identity and an enduring lack of agreement on a the essence of a national grand narrative, both Russians and Ukrainians proved to be far more willing to adjust to multi-culturalism. This weak concept of Russian identity was witnessed by the muted reactions of the Russian population to the demise of the USSR, the passivity of the "Russian Diaspora" in the Baltics and Central Asia, as well as the absence of inter communal violence in either Ukraine or Russia. Russians' fairly tolerant attitude toward immigrant populations from China in the Far East, or the former republics of the USSR, stands in sharp contrast to the violence against Vietnamese emigrates or Roma in Central Europe.

The lack of a legitimate central state, induced both Russia and Ukraine to enter a political pattern predicted by Robert Nisbet, when he argued that the emergence of an impotent "virtual" state will result in the transfer of identity and of political discourse to a local level, where practical issues, rather than abstract issues such as "national identity" or "national mission" etc.[17] Indeed, increasingly Russia and Ukraine are governed by local political actors who focus on pragmatic issues with little or no reference to either the national capital or national issues.

While it is clear that Russia and Ukraine will have its share of racists, xenophobes, and anti-Semites the weight of history and current developments do not seem to indicate that politics of resentment will turn into a coherent populist national movement. Although it is possible and indeed likely, that at some time in the future a national leadership might once again attempt to impose a "national

identity" from above, the prospect of a successful creation of a state orchestrated nationalism remain relatively remote. Russia and Ukraine appear closer toward the creation of post -modern polities dominated by a "parade of consciousness" then toward populist Neo communitarianism.

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[1] Michael Oakeshott, "The Masses in Representative Democracy" in Kenneth Templeton, Jr. ed., *The Polarization of Society* Liberty Fund, (Indianapolis, 1997) p. 327
[2] See John Gray, *False dawn: The Delusion of Global Capitalism* The New Press (New York 1999).
[3] See Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* Princeton University Press (Princeton, 1975)
[4] See Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses On Populism" in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner eds. *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* Weidenfeld and Nicholson (London, 1969)
[5] Francis Fukuyamah, "On the Possibility of Writing a Universal History" in Arthur Mleltzer, Jerry Weinberger and M. Richard Zinman, eds *History and the Idea of Progress* Cornell University Press, (Ithaca & London, 1995
[6] Vaclv Klaus despite his claims to being the embodiment of "neo Thatcherism" perused the mot extreme form of populist "privatization" which cripples the Czech economy to this day.
[7] See Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland Russia, and Ukraine* Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1998).
[8] Leo Tolstoy, "Christianity and Patriotism" *Collected Works*, AMS Press vol XX. (New York, 1968) 421
[9] Quoted by Boris Maizel, "The Postmodern Identity of Russia and the West, *Critical Review* 13(1999) nos. 1-2 p.133
[10] Ibid p. 132
[11] see Ilya Prizel, "Nationalism in Post Communist Russia: From Resignation to Anger" in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, eds *Between Pat and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* Central European University Press (Budapest 2000).
[12] See mark von Hagen, "Does Ukraine Have a history?" *Slavic Review* 54:3Fall 1995
[13] See Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Virtual State" Wealth and Power in the Next Century* Basic Books (New York , 1999)4
[14] Maizel opt. cited. p 137
[15] See Gerard Delanty, *Modernity and Post modernity* Sage (London, 2000) x
[16] for example about 80% of Poland's adults favor the death penalty, yet it was abolished in deference to the EU preferences.
[17] See Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority"* Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1975).