

Populism as global phenomenon in today's politics

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Expert Conference "Populism within Europe and beyond its borders" (Research- and Multinational Dialogue Project)

Populism is a complex phenomenon with practical relevance, which not only in Europe has become firmly established. This clear evaluation was the result of an expert conference organized by the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Brussels, which took place on 15 and 16 December 2012.

The concept of the conference was developed by Andrea Ostheimer, Programme Director of the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue and Dr. Florian Hartleb, expert on populism. High ranking experts discussed the regions Europe, USA and Latin America, Asia and Sub Sahara Africa. The goal was to reach beyond a Eurocentric view in a comparative analysis. The first scientific conference of 1967 in the London School of Economics was the declared model for the conference. It had followed exactly the same global approach, which however has hardly been pursued since then. Populism is associated with processes of modernization. Escalating financial crisis, which recently have been or still are being encountered in all world regions, can become the breeding ground for populism and provide a so called populist momentum. Against this background the conference was the prelude for a strategic and thorough examination of the topic, which will be continued in the form of a publication and a fur-

ther conference with political stakeholders in the end of 2013.

What is populism?

The beginning of the conference was characterized by the attempt to define the concept of populism. Populism is a concept which is difficult to frame, as everybody, be it politicians or the interested public, believe they know what it entails. Until today there is no valid definition as populisms are characterized by continuities and change. Already in 1983 Hans-Jürgen Puhle, Prof. Emeritus of the University Frankfurt (Main) had published an article on the question "What is populism?" which is still pertinent. In Latin America, populism has regime quality and a longstanding tradition, for instance by peronism. There have been repeated waves of populism in processes of modernization, also in participatory movements such as the anti-globalization movement. Populist politics have currently also found entrance in the context of technological progress. Populism is often being used as curse word in the day-to-day political business. And in effect it is a polemic style of political communication with the declared intention to embody the "will of the people". Because of this, it is equally important to reveal, what populism does not include. Populism is not simply equal to clientelism, charismatic leadership or neo fascism. As a "thin ideology" populism stands for the an-

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tagonism between the supposedly corrupt elites and the people.

Populism in the context of the financial and economic crisis: populist tendencies in Europe

The next panel dealt with Europe and case studies on the Netherlands and Denmark, Greece and Slovakia. Populism has not only since the last financial crises become a constant topic in European Politics. Especially right wing populist parties have found their way into the political system since the mid-80s. In the Netherlands particularly Geert Wilders with a radical anti-Islamism enriched with conspiracy theories has become a cause for discussion. With the most recent parliamentary election in September 2012 however he lost popularity. In Denmark, where "welfare state chauvinism" features as one of its characteristics, populism is an old tradition. The capability of such parties to conduct an electoral campaign is one of their main characteristics. In Greece which is shaken by political and financial crises a range of right and left wing populisms can be observed as well as in Slovakia, where snap elections were held in the frame of the Eurocrisis. The discussion showed that especially in Greece populisms has a strong link with clientelism.

Populism in the Americas: re-birth of a political tradition

The following panels widened the scope beyond Europe's borders and considered the clientelistic traits as by-product of populism. Recently, in the "Americas" the debate has focused on the fundamentalist populism of the Tea Party movement. Therefore, two speakers dedicated their contributions to this subject from a US-American respectively a European-German perspective. It became clear that populism follows a distinct tradition. Eventually the People's Party at the end of the 19th century is believed to be the prototype of the historical populism. Also single politicians have been and con-

tinued to be labelled as populist. This goes also for Argentina, where Peronism is associated with populism. It was emphasized that Peronism is celebrating its 70s anniversary in 2013. Specifically the economic performance record has been criticized repeatedly. Concerning Lula, there is a special relationship between the caudillo and the masses as well as illiberal tendencies, which are being discussed for Europe as well. In the discussion the social inequalities as breeding ground for populism were specifically accentuated.

Modernisation crisis and the rise of populist leaders/clans in Asia

With the turn of the millennium – with a view to some significant empirical cases – the term populism entered the Asian hemisphere. Specially in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, Indonesia and Japan, populism was became applied from a point of view of terminology and provided the base for comparative research, which so far only exists rudimentarily. Questions on redistribution play a special role in populism, as do nationalisms. Processes of modernization have equally left their traces as the Asian financial crisis. In Thailand the Thaksin-family is a specifically distinct case which is suitable for comparison. Whereas the previous Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra lives as fugitive in exile, his sister, who is upholding the cult, rules in the meantime. The Thaksin Populism is classical and comes very close to the historical prototypes of populism, it is anti-elitist, directed against the centre (here Bangkok) and anti-intellectual. In the Philippines on the other hand there is not this kind of apparent populism such as in Thailand, but cycles of participation crisis. In the case of Indonesia the elites themselves are corrupted. With the recent election populism in Japan is on the forefront, leadership of a strong hand and a policy of identity bring to mind the current right wing populism in Europe. The discussion brought up the new

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relevance of populism in Asia but it necessitates a wide definition of the concept of populism as otherwise a comparison with populist movements in Asia become difficult. Also, economical aspects as triggering factors for the appearance of populism should be included. In Asia the existence of a certain degree of democracy is a necessary precondition in order for populism to be able to develop. Subsequently the question for the contribution of South East Asia to the topic was posed. So far there is only one clear case – Thailand, unless the definition of populism is widened up.

Power in Sub-Sahara Africa: between populism and patronage

As the last and often overlooked region Sub Sahara Africa was on the agenda. Considering the non-existence of the middle class, populism has its specifics. In Ethiopia, for instance, it deals mainly with the question of land reforms. In South Africa the myth of liberation is predominant. Therefore, populism also has a positive connotation. Occasionally liberalism and socialism exert some influence. In Ethiopia on the other hand, because of the autocratic structure of the government there is a „top down“ populism, which could be maybe compared to the competitive authoritarianism in Latin America. Considering the case of Zimbabwe populist strategies, such as in connection with the question of land reform, prosper here in paternalistic structures, which are coined by colonialism. The David-against-Goliath-Argument of the populism there also invites an international comparison. This holds also true for the exclusive understanding of politics and the cult of sacrifice – populisms as the voice of the disenfranchised.

In the final discussion the question was discussed whether all relevant regions were covered. Especially the Arab Region could present a thematic addition. Finally Dr. Hartleb tried to summarize the results of the intensive conference and to establish

cross-references between the Panels, the presentations and the debates. The antagonistic nature of populism is striking: us against them, bottom-up and top-down populism, the significance of the contrast between centre and periphery and in general a policy of symbols and myths. Having abandoned the Eurocentric perspective is an enriching experience, with political-strategic added value. The special correlation between a charismatic leader and the masses becomes apparent, as well as the question of redistribution and processes of modernization which are of special importance. Populists can also transform in the course of time. On a final note, the conference revealed that in each world region there are cases which are worth discussing and empirically useful.

Florian Hartleb