Marijana Grbeša, Berto Šalaj (2018)

Good, Bad or Evil? – Populism in Croatia.

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Marta Takahashi

Associate Professor Marijana Grbeša, Ph.D. and Associate Professor Berto Šalaj, Ph.D., both professors at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, combined their knowledge from their many years of work related to political science, research methodology, media and education, and together prepared a fantastic analysis of populism in the form of an easy-to-understand text.

The book "Dobar, loš ili zao? – Populizam u Hrvatskoj" (translation of title: Good, Bad or Evil? – Populism in Croatia), with its Introduction, eight chapters and Conclusion, answers three research questions: 1. Conceptual level – What is populism?; 2. Methodological level – How can we research populism?; 3. Empirical level – Is populism present in Croatia and, if yes, in what form?.

The authors note that, in their reflections, they begin within the framework of what is known in literature on populism as supply-side, and it is related to the analysis of the presence and intensity of populism among politicians, political parties and political groups in some political community. An increasing number of researchers in the past few years has begun to deal with the other side, i.e. the demand-side of populism, which deals with the question of prevalence and distribution of populist attitudes and values among citizens. Nevertheless, this book is primarily focused on the supply-side, i.e. the analysis of populism among politicians.

The book begins with the "History of Populism" chapter, which briefly explains the origin of the term "populism", which derives from the period of the Late Roman Republic. The term *populares* denoted one of the political fractions in the Senate. In question was a group of senators who, although they themselves were of aristocratic origin, in all of their political speeches and activities, promoted the idea of rule in the interest of the people. The term populism, with today's meaning, began to be used in Europe in the 1990s.

The second chapter, "Contemporary Understanding of Populism", describes the difference between a few levels of use of the term populism – media-analytical, political and scientific-research. Political analysts use this term to denote the ideology, discourse and activities of certain, most often new, political parties and politicians in various parts of the world. In the media and political discourse, populists are considered political actors that are demagogic, tending to give unrealistic and false promises in order to gain the political support of citizens. At the centre of the scientific thematisation of populism are the questions of what populism actually is, what kind of phenomenon is it, and from which research perspective can it best be grasped. Those are also the questions that the second and third chapters of the book are concerned with.

The "Inclusive Approach to Populism" is the third chapter, and it associates two approaches to populism – populism as a "weak" political ideology and populism as a political-communication style. Described is the difference between populism and nationalism. The authors consider it important to understand the difference between these two phenomena because it has been shown that, in the political and media, as well as sometimes in the scientific-research discourse, these phenomena are uncritically identified or insufficiently clearly and precisely differentiated. Also explained is the concept of technocracy, which is also important for understanding contemporary political processes.

The next chapter, "Types of Populism" covers the most important populist actors in the United States of America, Latin America and Europe. The authors provide a tabular overview of populist actors in Europe, and describe in detail a few cases that clearly illustrate the dominant types of populism.

In chapter five, "Causes of the Strengthening of Populism", analysed are the reasons for the strengthening of populism and political actors in contemporary societies. The analysis is, thereby, focused on sketching a theoretical model that would encompass all of the most important determinants that affect the political strength of a populist actor. The question of the cause of the strengthening of populism must encompass at least two levels. The first is related to contextual factors, and the second, latent factors. The most important contextual factors are: 1. Socio-economic; 2. Socio-cultural; 3. Political system and 4. Media, while highlighted as latent factors are: 1. Liberalism versus democracy; 2. Democratic ideal versus democratic practice; and 3 media.

When considering the determinants for the strengthening of populism, the authors decided to pay particular attention to the media and their role in this process in the sixth chapter, "Populism and media". In addition to the role of the media in strengthening the populist actors, the authors also deal with the populist discourse of the media themselves, which they call "populist journalism". After a detailed explanation of populism within the context of media, the question arises of how Croatia fits into all of this. At the end of this chapter, the authors conclude that research on populism and the media is not available and that the representation of populist discourse in Croatian media can only be hinted at on the basis of a general impression or, possibly, research on general trends in Croatian journalism, which are dominated by tabloid style reporting and which are mostly very cynical towards the political elite and institutions, as well as measures that they recommend.

This topic is also continued in the seventh chapter, "Populism in Croatia". Is populism present in Croatia is the central research question of this book. The authors, first of all, on the basis of their own inclusive approach to populism, present operational populism, research design and matrix, on the basis of which, using the content analysis method, they conducted research on populism in Croatia. The research consists of three studies conducted from 2009 to the present, which, besides attempting to determine the presence of populism in Croatia, sought to learn something about its nature.

The eighth chapter, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: Threat or Corrective?", analyses the relationship of populism towards liberal democracy, i.e. there is discussion whether populism is good, bad or evil. By examining populism, an insight can be gained on the nature of challenges faced by contemporary liberal democracy. Thereby, populism may have two faces. One is negative, threatening, which is noticed and emphasised by the majority of political theoreticians, mainstream politicians and media, where populism is a threat to the stability of the contemporary liberal-democratic order. The second face of populism is emphasised far less often, that populism, by highlighting some ideas that are part of the populist ideology, can contribute to overcoming the crises of contemporary liberal democracies and renewing the democratic idea. In the final section of the chapter, the authors explain their position on the question of the relationship between populism and democracy, which cannot be theoretically determined *a priori*, but rather, necessary is an empirical analysis of ideas and activities of individual populist actors.

Summarised in the Conclusion are all of the most important conceptual, methodological and empirical findings of this book, pointing to the possible directions of future research on populism in Croatia. Populism in contemporary societies, in which, for the most part, non-democratic forms of rule have been rejected, can be examined as a set of ideas that allow existing paradigms of rule and power relationships to be brought into question. The authors conclude that it would seem that the strength of contemporary populism lies in the fact that, in the name of "pure" democracy, the imperfections and inadequacies of current liberal democracies are politicised and criticised.

Apart from providing an excellent analysis of populism, this book is also a reminder that scientific research can provide solutions as well as challenges, especially when researchers cooperate and exchange their knowledge.