
POPULISM – RHETORICAL MECHANISM OF THE ROMANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The article approaches the subject of populism in the distinctive form we find in today's society. Populism – as history has taught us – has lost its profound ideological component and can now be found in the shape of a marketing or public relations instrument: the populist discourse. Since the Peronist doctrine, other historical movements and significant populist contexts, populism has taken a chameleonic character and can now be understood as a result of the failure of representative democracy, as a way political leaders use in order to create legitimacy by appealing to rhetoric. One Romanian leader who uses populism as a political communication style is Traian Basescu, and by this article we are going to investigate how the said charismatic leader uses a rhetoric pattern that displays populist features.

Key-words: *populism, political leader, political rhetoric, representative democracy, charisma*

Motto: „There is a phantom haunting the world – populism”

(Ionescu & Gellner *apud*
Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2010)

Introduction

Populism is a concept we often hear about when referring to the Romanian practice of politics, yet very few are able to give a clear definition of the term, even out of those who use it. The most frequent use of this concept entails its adjectival form and references a particularly negative label, especially used in order to render the political opponents unfit, either them or their statements or actions. Moreover, one paradox of political practice consists in populist leaders often being those who blame their opponents for being populists.

The *populism* phenomenon, as we see it today, has been emptied of its ideological content and appears most likely in the spoken politics, in discourses. Also, this modern form of populism is not a domestic production, but rather a trend we can observe worldwide. The political populist impulse manifested within speech is determined by certain aspects which are specific to today's society of globalization and information. Therefore, the charismatic dimension of political leadership, the rising of *telepolitics* and the tendency to promote *cyberpolitics*, participatory debates, the political rhetoric devoid of its ideological component, the referendum trend, the marketing of the political actor and the call for the authentic simplicity of the “collective soul” are meant to facilitate embracing the populism logic within political life (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010).

Moreover, specialized literature is rich in exceptional papers focused on populist tradition and comprising ample historical movements and remarkable figures such as Juan Perón, Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel, yet the more recent scientific contributions approach a more customized dimension of populism, with a focus on populist leaders, populist rhetoric figures devoid of the old-fashioned ideological depth. The rhetorical populism of our

postmodern society is, above all, an expression of the natural professionalization process of political communication and, also, an expression of the development of public relations in politics.

This paper aims to enrich the specialized literature with extra information regarding the new face of populism, its presence and form of manifestation on the Romanian political setting at the present time. More accurately, the object of our research paper consists in the populist rhetoric within the discourse of power. Also, the practical relevance of this paper stems from the present-day topic and the up-to-dateness of the period in question.

Literature review

Political Discourse

In order to design the analytical frame of our research paper, it is imperative that we establish the main concepts to be approached in building the theoretical frame. As the form of the populism that we find specific to the postmodern society is the *discursive* one, it is mandatory that we bring to the reader's attention the concept of *political discourse*. The generally accepted depiction of political discourse is the political speech. As such, an interesting view which underlines the idea of legitimacy is the one defining the political speech "*as a tool for power; it explains itself through it, it speaks out and keeps itself alive, it (re)creates its own legitimating story, its own cosmogony and, therefore, its own direction of evolution*" (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). Another definition we find relevant to our topic presents the political speech in terms of

„the political language in one of its actual manifestations, taking the shape of allocutions, reports, calls, press conferences etc., especially meant for propaganda and bearing special effects in political mobilization, in expanding the political support, in leading potential followers toward a certain direction” (Magureanu 1997).

Thus, the conceptual universe consists of the key concepts *political discourse* and *populism*, all the other terms we make use of throughout the research paper revolving around these two fundamental notions.

Populism – general framework

Populism assumes the role of an entity which makes itself more and more conspicuous in the European – and even global – political landscape. It has become an expression for the failure of the representative democracy and has grown from the illusions of those individuals who cannot any longer find answers that match their power of comprehension to the uneasiness they develop, in the context of a postmodern world in which *image* has become a fundamental mark, a reference point. As such, one view of populism presents it as an "*overly enthusiastic ideology, which identifies the blind spots of a society and takes full advantage of them*" ("Cine e cel mai nepopulist din tara", 2011). This new type of populism represents "*society's cue to a crisis that does not cease to unsettle us*" (Betea & Dorna 2008), a juncture that requires room for the manifestation of populism within the great public space.

Without getting deep into the maze of history, it is worth noticing that the phenomenon represented by populism comes with a long tradition, yet defining this concept is still a problematic issue, as the specialized literature does not offer us a clear, unanimously

accepted definition. Margaret Canovan is a highly appreciated author because of her contribution to the theorizing of populism, describing it in terms of “*an appeal to «the people» against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society. This structural feature in turn dictates populism’s characteristic legitimating framework, political style and mood*” (Canovan 1999). However, specialists’ interests in this phenomenon have generated so many approaches that the depth of the phenomenon “*somehow goes beyond our comprehension power*” (Hermet 2007) due to its chameleonic nature. One converging point among the different senses of the concept is its derivation, as it comes from the Latin word “populus”, indicating the term “people”. The sense of the word comes from the significance it bore in Ancient times, as the starting point is the idea that popular representation is marked by citizens’ uneasiness regarding the direct relationship between a political designated actor and the popular masses. This “uneasiness” pointed the failure of the direct relationship “*into an easy manipulation that could backfire right against the principles of representative democracy*” (Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2010). Plus, one of the most significant populist markers is the “*rhetorical discursive logic*” (Betea & Dorna 2008), meant to prey thoroughly on mass symbolic, by means of warmth and persuasion. The triumph of the populist discourse stems from three sociological reference points, which are the citizen’s need for social integration, the pressures of social development or modernization and, finally, the nationalistic residues. Moreover, the target audience of the populist leader consists of those society layers that are most affected by crisis – regardless of the nature of the crisis we are referring to. Therefore, these layers represent the citizens who are disappointed in politics, the core of those indecisive and those who suffer from tradition nostalgia.

Regarding the *appeal to the people*, a central duality takes shape, as a fundamental element of the political populism. Hence, the political discourse represents an event for the political actor to claim to “*represent and speak for a group or against another one*” (Stanyer 2010), directing – at the same time – the unuttered feelings of the said group against the opponents. Moreover, the central duality shows up within the populist rhetoric in the form of a two-term construction – “*us*” and “*them*”. The first category includes individuals who belong, who share certain values or beliefs, implying the existence of a shared identity, “*a direct reciprocity of identity between me and us, in spite of the established gaps among any groups*” (Pickering *apud* Stanyer 2010). On the other side there is “*them*”, a category generically called *Alterity* or *The Other*, an identity structure that varies according to context, which comprises those who do not share the values of the first category. The populist leader resorts to this strategy in two separate manners: either in order to nominate a new power figure while trying to un-legitimize the power in office, or to promote a governmental alternative, in legitimizing a certain segment of the political spectrum.

Over time, populism has been defined in terms of an ideology, doctrine, mentality, system of ideas or political style, but also as rhetoric, demagoguery or discourse, yet the most practical configuration of the phenomenon consists in the movements recorded in history (Lee Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2008). Nowadays, populism is perceived in terms of democracy collapse or a pathology specific to representative democracies. Taggart defines this elusive feature by “*its capacity to use the representation mechanisms as a political take-off in order to turn the people right against it, during a second phase*” (*apud* Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). In addition, Guy Hermet deems the current political populism as a syndrome for a democracy

found in crisis, while advocating that populism “*finds fertile ground wherever the weeds of democratic ambition offer themselves to those who disrupt politics, when the latter element goes through a delicate time or has not had time to stick stably*” (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010).

In another train of thoughts, the same Taggart frames six main elements in rendering the specifics of the populism. The first one is the *hostility to representative democracy*, although not democracy as an idea, but especially as the operating mechanism of the current political life. Then, we talk about the *identification of the populist characters with an idealized view of the community they serve*; the concept that finds its relevancy here is that of *the heartland community*, which points to a structure or a construction viewed in retrospect. Another specific element is *the lack of actual fundamental values*, which “*speaks for the inherent incompleteness and great flexibility*” (Taggart 2003) of populism. Thereby, we can talk about left-wing populism or right-wing populism, reactionary or progressive populism, authoritarian or libertarian populism. Also, a specific feature is its onset as a *reaction towards a profound crisis*, as it develops on favorable ground, determined by instability and social disorder. On the other hand, we talk about the *auto-limiting character of populism*, limitation that reflects on content and rhetoric; this feature is generated by the mobilizing capacity of populism and the lack of management capacity. Finally, we invoke the *extreme chameleonic face of populism*, as the phenomenon tends to borrow the shape of the frame in which it develops. Taggart speaks about this last aspect as an argument towards studying populism by analyzing individual cases, as “*determining the «canons» of populism implies a steady research process*” (Taggart 2003).

However, the present-day reality shows that populism does no longer manifest as a political ideology, but especially under the form of a discursive strategy. To that effect, we invoke as arguments the views of the specialists, who think that “*populism is not an ideology, but a simplistic speech that drains political and social communication of any and all complexity*” (Camus & Jamin *apud* Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). More up-to-date is the perception of populism in terms of a “*strongly antagonistic form of rhetoric, which simplifies problems to the extreme and offers «painless», yet incredibly vague and easy remedies*” (Skolkay *apud* Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). The success of the present-day populism is provided by a strong ingredient – the “*ultra media exposure*” (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010) – that speeds up the transgression of institutional mediation and the breakage of the vicious circle of the political system.

The discursive populism is, to the political actor, a source of legitimacy, as it develops in the mainstream of socio-political life and promotes a *catch-all* type of speech. Thus, the populist rhetoric is an essential power tool; the legitimacy stems from discursiveness, and “*the performative force is the effectiveness criterion of gaining power*” (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). For that purpose, the five main markers of the populist discourse are essential to our paper. Firstly, in the light of the type of relation the transmitter claims to have with the people, the populist actor sets himself to “*embody the authentic people*” (Hermet 2007). In terms of tone, the populist rhetoric involves an emotional, proximal content. On the side of the nature of the diagnosis of societal flaws the political actor offers, the latter presents reality in a denunciatory manner. As far as the dimension of the political offer presented in the speech goes, the populist character nominates a “*simple anti-political curative remedy*”

(Hermet 2007). And finally, on what concerns his own stand on democracy, the politician asserts the importance of enforcing a profound reform, as the speech on modernizing the state is already very fashionable among the leaders in office.

Usually, the populist phenomenon at the level of leaders on the present-day political scene entails a triad which incorporates populism, discourse and charisma. The attitude of the charismatic populist leader is that of an older brother, upholder of direct contact and open dialogue. Communication takes places horizontally and “*the first-person reference gives the impression of proximity*” (Betea & Dorna 2008). Also, the simplicity of the relation between power holder and citizen has a liberating and emotion-creating effect, and it has no room for indifference. The populist leader has the communication skills of a powerful speaker, and the element that gives the speech its populist color is the “*style of voicing the request of the power figure in office with the mass disproof and with using a transversal ideology which reaches all the layers of the society*” (Betea & Dorna 2008).

In addition, the same Alexandre Dorna (2008), who suggests the inherent triad of the political scene in the postmodern era, offers a set of clues regarding the most frequent techniques used in the construction of the populist discourse. Thereby, the first element inherent to the populist discourse lies in a plain wording, accessible to all the citizens, as the technical terms are almost lacking. Then, the discourse needs a plain sense logic, in which the political actor brings empirical arguments. Moreover, the nonverbal communication confirms the verbal utterance, adding on the discourse. The speech has a team spirit and comprises a vision of a future. An essential aspect consists of praising the people and the national identity, which is a reference point not to be overlooked. Another fundamental element is the *anti-establishment* stand, displayed through criticizing the power in office. The populist leader must always assume responsibility by highlighting the *self* within the discourse. Equally, he should not overlook using the antinomy “them-us”, two-term construction specific to populism. The most popular references within the populist discourse are the nation, the people, the elite, the traditional values, the statehood, democracy and other general concepts bearing a strong resonance in the collective psyche. An interesting aspect lies in using the third person when the actor talks about himself, and the speech style is an apparently genuine one, as opposed to the wooden language that is such a common practice in politics. The semantics used in building the discourse bears a significant emotional weight, and the word sequence is meant to convey to the audience an engaging, dynamic rhythm. Also, the populist discourse makes use – almost redundantly – of both rhetorical figures and figures of speech, while incessantly hinting at membership and deep attachment to the country. Ultimately, the political performance entails staging and direction regarding the political stakes; one final relevant feature of discursive populism is the summoning of the great myths of origins and of the folksy images. Through all these aspect, the discourse fulfills its *informative* and raising *awareness* functions – by presenting the socio-political reality –, its *therapeutic* function – by appealing to myths – and its *mobilization* function – by appealing to action, which takes shape in exercising the right to vote. Lastly, all these aspects approach to legitimizing the political actor and his power.

We put an end to this section by framing the attribute of a “*self made man*” (Betea & Dorna 2008) to the leader who turns to profit – by discursive means – the populist rhetoric, as a character that has created his own legend and whose rating stems from facing the situation

of a test, which some eluded or failed to accomplish. Also, we have to reiterate the fact that populism represents the *consequence* of social unbalance and not the cause of it, as the presence of populism is a course of actions taken when the alternatives lose their vitality.

Populism in Romania

One view on populism asserts that the transition towards democracy represented a shock for the Eastern-European countries, playing the role of a catalyst in the emergence and strengthening of populist elements. Thereby, Vladimir Tismaneanu defines the populism specific to these countries as

“an expression of the persecution and resentment, an ideology of rescue and restoration, which one would suppose that offers an instant cure and turns the individuals and the groups out, those who – fairly or unfairly – see themselves as underdogs of the democratic conversion and of the liberal-procedural democracy.” (apud Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010)

The most long-lasting populist formula within the post-Revolutionary political spectrum is the *discursive populism*, trademark of the paternalistic, charismatic leader, Traian Basescu. From the moment this new species of populism started to shape on the Romanian political scene, we cannot talk about a populist ideology, but we are going into the universe of discursive strategies. Demagogy is a common element in the manifestation of politics, yet *“demagogy also fuels populism”* (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010). The populist species we are talking about in this case is still present in an embryonic state; however, Basescu’s political style aligns to *“a manner of making politics that is similar to certain patterns of «neopopulism»”* (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010), which find their legitimacy in the endless fight against corruption, despite the skeletons hiding in the closets of their promoters. In this manner, the populist formula that forms around the figure of the leader Traian Basescu incorporates in its gallery of practices critics to Communism, togetherness with those in need, readiness in making decisions and a direct utterance style, connections with a set of intellectuals, and also closeness to “the collective soul”, as a trick in order to build up his authority.

In addition, the *anti-establishment* nature of populism is a feature not set aside by the Romanian phenomenon. The populist leaders who present this characteristic *“dismiss any status pertaining to this one”* (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010), claiming they are voicing the wishes of the people who are united against the *block of power*. This block of power does not necessarily refer to the political power in office, but can include a wide range of actors, like politicians, businessmen or powerful media people, in the case of President Băseșcu a relevant example are the moguls, of whom he claims they disparage the state and pose real threats towards the citizens’ right to information. In this manner, the discursive populism oscillates *“between systemic and anti-systemic, mobilizing a potential destabilizer in the name of the people”* (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2010).

Research design

Whereas the populist rhetoric in the Romanian political arena is still to be found in an embryonic stage, the research that focuses on this phenomenon follows the same trend. Studies have been developed in order to demonstrate which of the three presidents who have been at the wheel of Romania after 1990 holds the most populist features or studies about the populist imaginary regarding the myths that are so appealing to the Romanian collective psyche; however, new contributions have to be brought to the literature, in order to reveal the new populist trends within the life of politics.

The *theme* of this paper consists in populism as a discursive mechanism of the current Romanian state leader, Traian Basescu's rhetoric; the actual issue under the scope is the presence of elements from the populist rhetoric within the last discourse given as President of Romania. Considering that the specialized literature gives solid arguments to speak for the populist character of Basescu's discourse, our research endeavor is meant to bring extra information regarding the discursive populist species in our political arena.

The *working hypotheses* to be validated or not empirically are the following:

- The political discourse of the Romanian state leader gathers the requirements of populist rhetoric;
- The discursive populism on the Romanian political scene is a political marketing instrument rather than an ideology *per se*.

The *research method* we use in order to confirm or dismiss the working hypotheses is **document analysis**, which we use in order to describe and examine the content of the communication in a comprehensible manner – yet leaning towards objectivity, rather than subjectivity. Within document analysis, we will analyze the populist elements in the speech delivered on December 20th, 2014, by the Romanian state leader Traian Basescu.

Analysis and interpretation

The object of our research endeavor is President Traian Basescu's discourse¹ that marked the ending of two presidential terms. The discourse was delivered during a press conference held in the Union Hall, the greatest room in Cotroceni Palace, on December 20th, 2014, the day before Klaus Iohannis' inauguration. Also, the discourse took the shape of a balance sheet – yet the former president sustained the opposite –, by which he meant to legitimize and explain all major decisions taken in office. The discourse itself lasted for an hour and was structured on three different subjects, flagged as vital by the speaker: *national security*, *Romania in the European Union* and *the rule of law*.

An element we should not overlook is the fact that, within this analysis, we only have in mind the textual construction of the speech, thus we set aside the rhetorical performance of the Romanian leader. We are only focused on identifying the marks of populist rhetoric and establishing the discursive mechanisms by which Traian Basescu enforces the discursive populism species, not on the power of performance carried by the paternalistic, charismatic leader.

¹ Former President Traian Basescu's discourse, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2KbQ_eJxks on May 15th, 2015

From the very start, the President displays a populist attitude by expressing hostility towards one of the fundamental democracy outlets, which is the media: *“I wish Romanians got some points of view from the President who has just ended his term and the real picture of Romania, not the one they see on the television”*. Furthermore, he is suggesting the potentially critical media to *“read official statements of the Romanian state, E.U. and NATO, and only after that issue a statement for the Romanian people to know the truth”*. By this means, he announces himself as the holder of the truth, which is a classic mark of populism.

Moreover, presenting the security situation in Romania, Basescu appeals to the *savior character’s myth* and implies that his efforts in this direction during his two presidential terms have led to a secure state, *“due to the way its [n.a. Romania’s] institutions function. [...] Thus, from a security standpoint, Romania is more secure than ever before. And in this regard, my message towards Romanians is that we are safe”*. What is more, the appeal to the people is another feature of the president’s rhetorical populism.

One of Basescu’s characteristic discursive leitmotifs, over the ten years he spent in office, is *state modernization*, which he continues to turn to profit within the present speech: *“Romania must invest more in modernizing armed forces equipment”, “[...] our duty is to go on. We must not stop”, “the health system must be reformed”, “in order to modernize the political class, we need the party financing reform, the reform for public finance. I am not talking about reforming NAFA [n.a. National Agency for Fiscal Administration], but rather the tax system”*.

Moreover, the speaker tries to define himself outside the populist phenomenon, which is a common feature of populist leaders: *“I don’t mean to get into areas which generate confusion and look like populism, yet these are the realities [...]”*. If in the beginning Basescu claims not to present numbers, but a real image of the country, he then gives numbers in order to present the economic achievements under his two presidential terms.

In order to enforce his position as a justice fighter against *media moguls*, the performer once again sets an implicit distinction between *us* and *them*; the first category represents those who are act in the name of justice – himself included, as one who has been *“humiliated day by day, dusk to dawn”* –, and the latter is made of media owners who have dodged the law. Basescu then emphasizes his *“great satisfaction”* of the progress made by the justice system despite *“suffering because of it and my position, when they used to claim that I have a hand over the justice system, that in Cotroceni arbitrary judiciary decisions are being made”*.

On the same train of thoughts, one of the most noticeable marks of populism in the present discourse is Basescu setting himself down as the promoter of *“Romania’s real chance, independent – yet carried out well – justice”*. This is the simple curative remedy he proposes for the country’s progress and he blatantly states that *“the supreme satisfaction of my term”* is that, following the results of the presidential elections in 2014, both parties forming the previous opposition have taken over his ideas, delivering a discourse about the rule of law and independent state of justice: *“[n.a. laughing] this is my satisfaction after 10 years in office: hearing the old social-democrats talk about the rule*

of law". One mention has to be made, in this context: the president had undergone two unsuccessful impeachment endeavors started by the opposition, both determined by the rule of law discourse which he was promoting.

One other aspect worth mentioning is that the President does not see Romania's progress in the judicial area as a result of legislative change, but rather presents it in populist terms, as a reaction toward a profound crisis; a reaction of "*people, prosecutors and judges*" to the legitimacy crisis the political actors – especially members of the Parliament – were undergoing. He states that the law enforcers "*felt like politicians are no longer untouchable*". Moreover, the speaker does not skip this opportunity to underline his own contribution to the status quo: "*I knew that if I kept silent, I would have been looking at an absence of evolution*".

To conclude with, this specific discourse, delivered on the occasion of handing the presidential term over to the winner of the 2014 presidential elections, is not one of the classic populist speeches of Traian Basescu, yet it presents several features of populist rhetoric. Overall, the speaker presents an idealized view of the community he had served for a decade, a *heartland community* whose progress in the area of national security and justice he steadily takes upon himself: "*at the beginning of my first term, Romania had become a member of NATO, now it has become a NATO country which presents credibility within the alliance*". While invoking "*the sake of democracy*", Basescu also shows hostility towards one of the core institutions of representative democracy, by rendering the Romanian media as an entity bound by media owners: "*the media must recover its independence. As an opponent, I might build a subject out of this!*". By this statement, the President also implies an anti-establishment position of power.

Conclusions

The analysis and interpretation of Basescu's final speech as President of Romania give relevance to the working hypotheses of the present paper. By the construction of the discourse, the Romanian state leader gathers the requirements of populist rhetoric. What is more, the discursive populism displayed on the Romanian political scene seems to be a political marketing instrument rather than an ideology, as it is devoid of the substance given by the populist historical movement.

As for populist features of the discourse, the President does not use this specific context to define himself as an exponent of the Romanian citizens, as the discourse is not meant to strengthen his position of power, but to reinforce an already established such position. However, the optimum context of building the polarization between *us* and *them* in this speech is found in the statements made against media owners in Romania and how justice eventually took its natural course. Creating this *savior* identity by implying that he had a great contribution in every progress recorded during this past decade in several areas, the speech is voided of its ideological content, positioning itself as a pure expression of populist discursive strategy.

This specific discourse is a part of the ample gallery of state modernization speeches delivered by the former president, this particular subject being the core of its political communication efforts. The anti-establishment and critics displayed in this speech consist in emphasizing the factors and actors who delay or stay in the way of progress, of state

modernization. Thus, the state modernization myth is a leitmotif of Basescu's discourse, as promised in both electoral campaigns. Regardless of the context of the speech delivery, Basescu does not miss any opportunity to underline the importance of the reform process of the Romanian state.

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