

Is populism a problem?

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I want to thank the World Forum for Democracy and the Council of Europe, an indispensable promoter of universal human rights, for having invited me to speak to you on this important question: is populism a problem?

The answer is no, if referring to the usual meaning when speaking of a populist politician: the ability to connect closely with voters and to adopt a popular style.

The answer is yes, however, if we are referring to the meaning that the organizers of this forum and the accompanying videos by Pierre Rosanvallon give to the word populism, in the wake of the work by Cas Mudde and other authors.¹ In my words, a populist is someone who, in the name of the people, wants to concentrate power for himself or herself while weakening or politicizing the institutions impeding this concentration of power: parliament, political parties, regional or local authorities, the neutrality of the public service, the independence of the courts, the freedom of the press, academic freedom, the independence of unions, employer groups and other civil organizations.

In the end, a populist leader is still elected but in conditions that make it virtually impossible for him to be defeated, given the degree to which the checks and balances of liberal democracy have been weakened in his favour.

The populist justifies this concentration of power in the name of the defence of the people portrayed as being under threat. He gives this threat the traits of an elite, cut off from the people and responsible for spoiling representative institutions. This elite is denounced as being corrupt, selfish, arrogant, greedy, cosmopolitan, in league with foreigners, pathetically incompetent, or all of the above at once. Populism is anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic.

From this common core, populism can go off in various directions depending on the ideological orientations to which it has attached itself. Among the most common, there are:

- On the extreme right: defence or nostalgia for a once homogeneous nation, that may expand to xenophobia and racism;
- On the extreme left: radical socialism and anti-capitalism;
- Economic nationalism extending to systematic protectionism and rejection of all free trade;
- Rejection of multilateralism in the name of closed-door nationalism;

¹ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovari Kaltwasser, “*Populism: A Very Short Introduction*”, Oxford University Press, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/populism-dead-european-victories-centrists>; M.S. “What is populism?”, *The Economist*, December 19, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18>; Uri Friedman, “What is a Populist? And is Donald Trump one?”, *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/>; Kenneth Roth, “*The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values*”, Human Rights Watch, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism>; Cas Mudde, Frédéric Mérand and Bessma Momani, *Three Conversations about the Rise of Populism in the West*, Global Affairs Canada and Centre de recherches et d’études internationales, Université de Montréal, September 20, 2017, http://cerium.umontreal.ca/fileadmin/Documents/FAS/CERIUM/Images/2-Recherche/7-Publications/2017-09-19_Three_Conversations_About_Populism_-_External_Distribution.pdf.

- The promotion of an approach to fight crime and terrorism focused solely on repressive means, posing a threat to civil liberties;
- Climate scepticism and the defence of the interests of a fossil fuel based economy;
- On a less ideological but more opportunistic level, social and fiscal lavishness that throws budgetary caution out the window.

Populism can take on so many forms that we could question whether or not using this pejorative term could ostracize and lump into the same category everything that deviates from the established consensus of the centre-right and centre-left. Are we not muddying the waters by using a label that has been affixed to both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, as much as to Podemos and La France Insoumise as to the Front National, the Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom and the Alternative für Deutschland, and to governments as different as the ones that currently exist in Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Venezuela or the Philippines? Are we not conceding too much to these political figures when qualifying them as populists, which could be interpreted as "popular" or "close to the people"?

If we stick with the common core of populism – the weakening of liberal institutions – the antidote is, of course, defending or strengthening these institutions. We must also ensure that these institutions become more effective, transparent and diligent, since populists feed on the sluggish and opaque nature of the system and sell a dream of a strong man whose determination will overcome such difficulties and make everything simpler.

In Canada, as markers of institutional reform, the Prime Minister Trudeau, together with the Minister of Democratic Institutions, Karina Gould, have chosen as priorities the de-politicization of senator appointments, the transparency of federal institutions, the defence of the electoral process against cyber threats, the review of the rules surrounding the financing of political parties, the increased autonomy of the federal elections commissioner, the repeal of rules that needlessly interfere with exercising one's right to vote and the strengthening of rules that punish electoral fraud.

But the response to populism cannot just be an institutional one. It needs to also be political and occupy a stage in the media, including social media. There is no reason to think that social media networks are only favourable to populist politicians. If there is a political figure who knows how to use these social networks, it is the current Prime Minister of Canada, a resolute supporter of liberal democracy. The Government of Canada has taken on various initiatives such as the launch of a recent digital inclusion laboratory that provides analytical support for the promotion of inclusive values. The government is also playing an active role internationally, notably as part of the Freedom Online Coalition and the Internet Governance Forum.

Fundamentally, we need to respond to the insecurities, both cultural and economic, that make people more receptive to populist muses.

At the cultural level, faced with migration waves fueling identity fears, we must provide more effective aid to countries ravaged by war and misery. On this front, Canada has recently

adopted a feminist international assistance policy, as it has been shown that promoting women and girls is a powerful lever for development and democratization.

We need to find better practices for integrating immigrants and in this area, Canada, a country of immigration, is quite willing to share its experience, while recognizing that its situation differs from the one in Europe. You will have undoubtedly noted that Prime Minister Trudeau has made it a political priority, both at home and abroad, to focus on the inclusion of all communities, including the Muslim communities that are too often unjustly associated with violent Islamism, when in fact they are the main victims of it.

Economically, we need to find a path to growth that is inclusive and benefits everyone, not just the wealthiest 1 percent or the .01 percent. This is why the Government of Canada has, among other social measures, increased taxes on the richest and cut taxes for the middle class, in addition to significantly increasing assistance to families, granting them almost the equivalent of a guaranteed minimum income, which has reduced childhood poverty by more than one third.

We also need to learn how to negotiate new kinds of free trade agreements, ones that are progressive, ones like the agreement that the European Union and Canada have just concluded, which includes protections for the environment, labour rights, food safety and that guarantees the rights of parliaments to legislate and governments to regulate for the common good. We need to convince people that they do not have to choose between trade and social progress - these two objectives must be pursued together.

How can we make people feel they are truly included when the financing of political parties depends on major billionaire donors and clandestine foreign sources, and when one needs to be well-off to engage in politics? We need to take a serious look at political party and electoral financing; make it more grassroots and transparent, otherwise we will not be successful in curtailing the flow of populism.

How do we deal with countries whose leaders engage in actions to weaken liberal democratic institutions? Prime Minister Trudeau's approach is in line with the one expressed by President Macron before the Council of Europe: criticize, oppose, but without shutting the door; maintain a difficult but necessary dialogue. And I would add that we should not only criticize bad practices, but we must also acknowledge and support governments that are making the right choices on the democratic front. For example, Georgia, which despite facing very difficult conditions, has undeniably improved its democratic and corruption-fighting practices, as recognised by various international assessments.

Canada has been able to resist the populist wave so far. But we are well aware that even a democracy such as ours, which has never experienced a coup d'état, a civil war or foreign occupation, and which has had a long and fruitful experience with immigration, is not immune to populism. Without preaching to anyone, we want to offer our full cooperation so that together we can make our societies more inclusive, less vulnerable to populist drifts and better equipped to build justice, harmony, security and universal human rights on solid liberal democracies.