Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu, eds.


The analysis of populism has become more important than ever as radical (right-wing) populist parties are emerging not only in national parliaments, but also in the European Parliament. Just as in the case of any post-communist country in Eastern Europe, defining what, how, and who makes Romanian politics populist is a complex and eclectic assignment. At the end of the day, we are tempted to ask ourselves whether “to be or not to be a populist” (p. 119) is a question of choice or of determinism in certain countries and/or political systems.

The book *Populist parties and personalities in post-communist Romania* aims at bringing together the theoretical and empirical findings of researchers and experts from various fields, who have one aspect in common: all of them think that populism – be it of political, social, cultural, psychological, discursive, organizational, global, regional, or domestic character – is not only recurrent in the Eastern European dimension, but that it also inherently forms part of the day-to-day political life.

The book consists of seven chapters, focusing on populism from various angles and culminating in the particular case of Romanian populism and populists. There is a scarcely addressed need on the part of Eastern European politics that this book addresses very well, namely, the crystallization of the conceptual framework. This book argues that only when being clear about the theoretical path can we answer such questions as: what makes a public person populist? Who is revealed by populism? What has one to say in order to be pinpointed as populist? Are populists a well-identifiable group? This review focuses on whether the book and its contributors managed to find or give reasonable answers to these questions.

Within this edited volume there are diverging opinions and arguments about which Romanian parties, and to what extent, can be considered to be populist. However, there is a general agreement that radical-marginalized groups, such as the Great Romania Party or the New Generation Party, no longer hold a monopoly over populist techniques as discursive means. It must be emphasized that the most elaborated argument on this topic is found in Mihail Chiru’s chapter “Only the outstretched hand that tells a story gets... the vote: An analysis of the populist electoral rhetoric in Romania 2004–2008.” According to Chiru, populist techniques form an essential part of Romanian political life, being applied by both opposition and governing parties. Furthermore, Sergiu Gherghina, in the chapter “Organization of populist parties and their electoral
success in post-communist Romania,” is of the same opinion as Chiru: the reason why radical movements or parties are not actively present on the Romanian political stage is that they are marginalized by mainstream parties. This type of party organization paved the way for the takeover and internalization of the populist discourse by the establishment.

Nevertheless, George Jiglău argues that we should be less preoccupied about whether populism in view of Romanian politics and citizens is good or bad; rather, there is a need for drawing an imperative line between the normative deficiency and the actual implications of populism, and Jiglău consequently comes out in favor of the latter. Jiglău’s chapter “Do we know what we are talking about? A theoretical perspective over populism” is also an intellectual endeavor for advising and drawing the attention of politicians, analysts, and journalists towards the proper usage of the term and of its impacts on political life. Populism, for the moment, is another sophisticated word in the spar of political adversaries, who are all failing to recognize their responsibility as decision-makers and administrators of political life. This vulgarizes and ridicules the phenomenon.

The book also manages to encompass the categorization and assignment of genres to populism. While most of the chapters disregard this approach, Sorina Soare and Adriana Marinescu complete the missing piece. Soare argues in “Genres and species of Romanian populism. A roundabout to the land of Everlasting Youth and Never-ending Life” that the soil for the genres of Romanian populism is a combination of communist discourse on the one hand, and the extreme right from the interwar period on the other. Moreover, different types of populisms coexist on the Romanian political stage: national populist groupings with a paternalist style, anarchic populism, extreme populism *per combinatium*, nationalist conspiracy theory oriented populism, radical movements of the extreme right, and discursive populism. Based on Traian Băsescu’s practices, Soare shows how populism can be transformed from a marginal phenomenon into a central element of Romanian politics.

Nevertheless, another vision about the embedded character of populism is offered by Marinescu in the chapter “Through myth to reality: the populist discourse in Romania.” Seeing populism and its legitimacy through the lens of discourse, rather than assigning genres to populism, she introduces the dichotomy of populism from above, attributed to Traian Băsescu (Democratic-Liberal Party), and populism from below, imputable to George Becali (New Generation Party). The utilization of the mythology of the golden past and the continuous drawing on recurrent historical topics ingrained in the common consciousness enable such parties and leaders to give meaning to events and notions that are molding the path to their (private) purposes.