



*Irine Kiyanka*

Lviv Regional Institute of Public Administration  
of the National Academy of Public Administration  
under the President of Ukraine  
ORCID: 0000-0002-3100-7796

## **Aspect of Populism: Irrational, Rational Technological Measures**

### **Przejawy populizmu: postawy irracjonalne, racjonalno-technokratyczne**

#### **Abstract**

The article focuses on the notion of populism analyzed from the point of view of political science and history due to the absence of a universally accepted and often unambiguous interpretation. The thesis concentrates on the complexity of the definition and manifestations of populism. It also offers reflections on populism as perceived by some scholars who have researched this sphere. An integral part of the scientific debate, which has been going on for several decades, presents the standpoint that the category of “populism” as a tool of political analysis, should be abandoned. However, considerable achievements of populism researchers provide a solid foundation for its active penetration by experts in political science.

Populism is mostly vivid at lower social and political class levels characteristic of underdeveloped political and legal culture as well as democracy. The inability of people to distinguish realistic proposals from demagoguery combined with their low political culture, is actively used by populist leaders to mobilize the masses for political support.

The article underlines the author's analysis of populism viewed through the prism of irrational, rational, and technological dimension.

**Key words:** *populism, political science, ideology, political leader, charisma, political system, political regime, political movement, political party, transformational processes, post-communism.*

### Abstrakt

W tekście autorka skupia się na pojęciu populizmu czyniąc to z perspektywy politologii, historii, zdając sobie przy tym sprawę z braku jednoznacznej i powszechnie akceptowalnej definicji poruszanego zagadnienia. Hipoteza o złożoności definicji i ogromnej różnorodności przejawów populizmu u większości autorów zajmujących się populizmem zawsze staje na początku ich refleksji o zjawisku. Nieodłączną częścią debaty naukowej, która toczy się już od kilku dziesięcioleci, jest twierdzenie, że pojęcie „populizmu” jako narzędzie analizy politycznej należy całkowicie porzucić. Tym niemniej, znaczące osiągnięcia badaczy populizmu przyczyniły się do tego, że opracowania dookoła poruszanego pojęcia stanowią źródło do którego dość często sięgają nauki polityczne.

Populizm występuje najczęściej w grupach społecznych/politycznych o niskiej kulturze politycznej i prawnej charakteryzujących się dość słabo rozwiniętą demokracją. Niezdolność mas do rozróżnienia realistycznych propozycji od demagogii, stanowi wszystkie te cechy niskiej kultury politycznej, które są aktywnie wykorzystywane przez przywódców politycznych celem mobilizacji poparcia.

Autorka postrzega populizm przez pryzmat jego przejawów – irracjonalizmu, racjonalizmu i technokracji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *populizm, nauki polityczne, ideologia, przywódca polityczny, charisma, system polityczny, reżim polityczny, ruch polityczny, partia polityczna, procesy transformacyjne, postkomunizm.*

### Introduction

Numerous and varied vocabulary definitions of populism interpret it as a type of policy, a particular political phenomenon, as a movement, as a term, denoting several distinct concepts, etc. Today, it is possible to distinguish several more or less clearly defined approaches to the interpretation of the category of populism, within which various aspects of this phenomenon are related to its definition.

According to one definition, populism is understood as a foremost specific discursive style, a kind of political argumentation (rhetoric) based on a dichotomous juxtaposition of either socio-political “good” or “evil”.

According to some researchers, populism is proposed to be considered as a kind of ideology, namely, an ideology with a “blurred”, fuzzy center capable of encompassing elements of different, even opposite, ideological systems, in the traditional classification.

### **The importance of the problem of populism**

The emergence of populism, at the paradigmatic level, involves the analysis of methodological reflection, through which the concept of populism is studied. The analysis of the research methodology provides the basis for the future development of this field of research, and also, to some extent, stimulates the creation of a professional community that practices scientific discourse on the inculcation of populism.

The emergence of the term “populism” is related to a particular story in the history of the United States, especially – the activities of the Populist (People’s) Party in the 1890s, which at one time played a significant role in the political development of this country. In the post-war period, the term “populism” was used to refer to another, very different socio-political phenomena – individual dictatorships in Latin America, post-colonial regimes in some countries in Asia and Africa, and later – many European political parties. Therefore, there is no single, universally accepted formulation, which should refer to this term and its definitions. (Kiyanka, 2015, p. 67)

### **Measures of populism**

We, herewith, present a peculiar approach to the interpretation of populism through the “irrational”, “rational” and “technological” dimensions.

The irrational slice in the context of ideology should be noted as irrational. Populism lacks core values, so it can be added to different ideological positions: it can be revolutionary, conservative, libertarian, and nationalist. Populism emerges as a specific characteristic feature of different movements and political ideologies. P. Taggart noticed that populism works against elites and institutions. Hence, the nature of this is different, and so is the nature of populism.

Another characteristic feature of populism, according to P. Taggart, is that populist movements usually flourish in times of crisis. The researcher has lin-

ked this to the defining feature of populism – the short-lived existence of populist movements that “lose face” when they become part of the opposing structures. The ordinary high personalization of populism, which makes it so “spectacular”, determines that it, by the witty definition of the researcher, has a “shelf life” that coincides with a similar property of a leader. (Taggart, 2000)

In trying to outline the state of affairs with the use of the category of “populism” in Ukrainian political science, it is necessary to state that there are no studies in the national political science literature that would be specifically focused on the problem of its exact description and definition. However, in the context of solving other research problems, domestic scholars have provided a number of definitions of populism. When there is no precise definition, the author’s interpretation is also ambiguous.

The Ukrainian political scientist – A. Romanyuk offered his own list of “indicators” of populism pertaining to a particular party or movement, to which he assigns:

- 1) lack of specificity, versatility of a program that does not appeal to a particular social group;
- 2) opposition of the authorities and the people;
- 3) the leadership type of the party, together with the weakness of internal party democracy;
- 4) the planting of a dichotomy in the assessment of political life, a contrasting contrast between “one’s” (right, good) and “another” embodying evil;
- 5) appeal to universal characteristics: solidarity, brotherhood, justice, in isolation from the real features of the situation of certain social groups;
- 6) hyperbolized social orientation of election promises and actions;
- 7) lack of formalized ideology.

The scientist also identified anti-intellectualism inherent in populists. Thus, A. Romanyuk views populism as a set of characteristics of political movements or parties that are not directly related to their ideological orientation. In his opinion, populism is inherent in almost all Ukrainian political parties in larger or smaller “doses”. (Romanyuk, 2013, p. 41)

Another researcher – T. Rad found two approaches to the interpretation of populism. The first is to interpret it as political rhetoric, and the second – as a style of politics, but he did not make his own choice, noting that populism is “synthetic” and “combines elements of theories, and doctrines.” Besides, the researcher identified nine features of populism “as a political phenomenon”:

- 1) anti-intellectualism: populism idealizes the masses and confronts them with the elite;

- 2) formal democracy, where populism is not really democratic;
- 3) appeal to an idealized image of a “better past”;
- 4) own and other interpretation of the past and future;
- 5) populists offer a third – not capitalist and not socialist – path of social development;
- 6) hostility to foreign capital;
- 7) absolutization of people’s values, culture and customs, while at the same time confrontation with conservative elements;
- 8) the irrationality that T. Rad sees in the appeal to the feelings and emotions of the masses;
- 9) populism favors movements over political parties. (Rad, 2010, p. 287)

In my opinion, the list of the above features of populism combines different views, and its interpretation undertaken at different levels – cultural, socio-economic, and also in terms of political technologies, makes it impossible to distinguish the key features in this list. Let us note T. Rad’s remark, regarding the confrontation of populism with conservatism. Conservatism is usually associated with traditionalist elites, so it appeals to the traditional culture of higher (pertaining to the past) layers of society. However, it is not associated with the majority of the people. (Rad, 2010, p. 25)

Therefore, what is true now is, as a matter of fact, the true majority principle. So, it is true as something contractual and binding, but by no means unambiguous. As a consequence, the whole apparatus of political argumentation of populism is a fact of “inflation of words.” Words lose their value, primary meaning, unambiguity. Irresponsible inflating of the semantic field reduced the specific weight of the word, relying only on a symbolic function present in the process of a communicative act. All this causes that populism is often identified with demagoguery.

In terms of morality, populism is a completely negative phenomenon. Its immorality lies in manipulating and distorting people’s confidence; populism, by the act of misleading, destroys citizens’ trust in politics and politicians, devaluing the best ideas and values.

### **Rational aspect of populism**

The rational dimension of populism contains a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of populism in works by Mudde who emphasizes the ambivalence of populism’s relationship with democracy. A potentially positive effect of populism is its ability to represent and mobilize politically marginalized groups, to create “cross-class” coalitions, and to emphasize de-

mocratic accountability. However, excessive populism, especially populism in power, can have a profound negative impact on society. (Mudde, 2015)

Important for outlining the modern understanding of populism in political science, is the scholarly analysis of its interaction with the democratic system. The questions are formulated as follows: is populism merely a threat, or a force that can, in principle, be able to correct, and even improve, the democratic order? Researchers have found ambiguity – ambivalence in the influence of populist forces on the functioning of modern democracies.

However, (and this is agreed by the majority of researchers) the populist understanding of democracy as an embodiment of the majority's ruling will entail some contradiction with the interpretation of democracy as a system that combines the majority principle with the mechanism of restraints and counterbalances, as well as with the guarantees of fundamental rights and freeness.

Populism can therefore be both a threat and an adjustment of democracy. According to C. Mudde and S. Kaltwasser, the total effect of populism depends on whether or not a democratic system is consolidated, and whether populists are in power or in the opposition. In consolidated democracies, populists in the opposition have little positive influence on democracy, and generally, have little influence on democracy. Instead, in unstable democracies, populists in the opposition can be a corrective to democracy and have a strong negative influence on power. (Mudde, 2015)

According to J. Kateb, populism is inevitable in democracy, especially mass capitalist democracy. The existence of populism is even desirable, of course, provided that it remains only as one of the ingredients of the mixture. (Kateb, 2018) When populism becomes too influential, we think that it is worth mentioning the metaphorical formulation of B. Arditti, quoted by N. Gidron and B. Bonikowski, who compare populism with a drunken guest at a feast, who begins to raise irrelevant questions that actually reveal important hidden problems. (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p. 248)

## **Technological dimension**

The technological dimension of populism conceptualizes it as a political strategy. Under this approach, populism can be seen as a political choice, a political organization, and as a form of political mobilization. Thus, the key notion for defining populism is power (or the struggle for it), which relies on mass support to bypass the complex system of representative institutions. (Kiyanka, 2016, p. 46)

The today's influential approach to the analysis of the phenomenon of populism is to interpret it as primarily a discursive style. The point is that populism is not an ideology but a characteristic feature of political broadcasting, a way of political expression used by politicians of different, even opposing views, supporters of different ideological systems. This approach is supported by, for example, the American researcher – M. Kazin. (Kazin, 1998, p. 407) With this question in mind, populism or the populist category acquires a certain quantitative dimension. In other words, it can be interpreted as a certain quantitative level of the use of special means of political expression. That is, when the dichotomous discourse of socio-political “good” and “evil” reaches certain signals for attracting attention, one can speak of its populist character. Within this concept of populism, the task of the researchers of this phenomenon is not to determine, for example, whether a particular party is populist, but to measure the level of populism inherent in it, which at least, in small doses, is inherent in all political actors.

To sum up, we note the following: nowadays, in the Ukrainian specialized literature, populism is defined as a form of political rhetoric, style of politics, a certain type of political consciousness, or political technology (within the latter definition – as a technique of consciousness manipulation, a form of mobilization and manipulative practice, etc.). Not all researchers emphasize the ambiguity and variability of populism. Some of them refrain from defining it, and try to identify a number of characteristic features of populism. (Romanyuk, 2012, p. 32)

There is a visible consensus on some of these definitions present in the political science environment. It is a “diagnostic” form showing the contrast between the “people” and the “elite”, and associated with the dichotomy of “one’s” and “another’s”. The views of the researchers also coincide with the statement of the prominent leadership character of populism – populist politics. In general, Ukrainian political science did not formulate the notion of “populism” in the universally accepted definition, leaving some scholars with a choice.

Despite the fact that the term “populism” is used often enough, a direct discussion on its essence has not yet occurred. The lack of unambiguous understanding of the widespread term “populism” in Ukrainian political science reflects the state of affairs with theoretical understanding in modern political science. The populism category has been used by scholars for decades to analyze the very different socio-political phenomena in different parts of the world. One may mention the existence of several alternative definitions of populism in the specialized literature. It is about its understanding of the di-

scursive style where the attention is paid to a specific ideology (“center-wide” ideologies) or a political strategy (in other words – political technology).

Researchers unanimously acknowledge the ambivalence of populism’s relationship with democracy. A populist movement or a party can be a factor contributing to the expansion of political participation, involvement in the decision-making process of certain social groups that have previously been ignored, and thus a tool for correcting and improving democracy. At the same time, they very often contain some potential for the “tyranny of the majority” embodied in the character of a certain leader, a threat to the constitutional system and minority rights. The populist appeal to the “people” is almost always overtly simplistic and hostile to social realities. (Panizza, 2005)

It is worth acknowledging the content of the arguments in favor of the refusal to use the category of “populism” in the analytical apparatus of modern political science as one that is interpreted very differently, and as one having a common definition of very different phenomena. However, the scientific community today is characteristic of the disagreement of opinion. Comparing the reasoning and argumentation of different researchers, in our study, we choose as an initial understanding of populism – first: the influence of dichotomous discursive style, and second: the influence of manipulative technology. Despite a solid argument for interpreting populism as an ideology, we do not agree with this point of view.

We also accept as characteristic (but not decisive) features of populism, its leadership character and tendency to oppose the majority and constitutional components of the democratic system. Finally, another common feature of populism is its eclecticism, i.e. the blending of approaches, positions of ideological and political systems that usually oppose each other. We believe that our proposed study should allow us to adjust or supplement the initial provisions formulated here, in particular, by relying on Ukrainian material, which, in the context of the chosen topic, is undoubtedly very rich.

## **The Ukrainian experience of populism**

The scientific interest in the chosen issue is due to the agenda of Ukrainian politics and a set of modern challenges faced by the State. It is evident that the political system of Ukraine undergoes a significant transformation: on the one hand – under the influence of European integration, on the other – under the pressure of internal crisis phenomena and foreign policy pressures in the form of a hybrid war. Populism, in conditions of political, economic, and ethnopolitical instability, is gaining influence, turning into widespread



political technology aimed at ensuring the achievement of short-term political goals.

In the Ukrainian popular political lexicon of the years of independence, the term “populism” belongs, apparently, to those most often used lexical units. At the same time, the overuse of the term is assigned either to government officials or political opponents. In domestic political controversy, the reproach to populism almost always means the assertion that it is a proposal of seemingly attractive but impossible to implement or even harmful options for solving certain problems, often socio-economic. (Kuzio, 2009, p. 77)

However, addressing the issue of populism as a category of political analysis makes it possible to conclude that it is a much more complex and multidimensional concept. In the scientific community, consensus on the understanding of populism has not developed today, and researchers’ approaches are marked by different accents, embodying different views on the meaning of the term “populism”. It appears both as a political technology and a specific characteristic of political activity, and a socio-political phenomenon, even ideology.

Researchers have found a populist component in the activity of virtually all Ukrainian parties – a link between populism and the crisis of the representative function of the domestic party system. At the same time, there are considerable differences in the views of political scientists. A comprehensive, analytical study of populism in Ukrainian historiography has not yet been conducted.

Thus, it can be stated that the concept of populism is a multifaceted political construct that performs an integrative-cognitive function of structuring and constructing a complex and contradictory political reality with elements of social, discursive, and praxeological eclecticism. A characteristic feature of the actualization of populism is the extreme parameter of the functioning of the state-political organism of the society, and the value projections of its existence. The socio-political crisis in the society, which generates the conceptual platform of populism, reflects the objective need for the democratization of the foundations of the social order and life.

## **Conclusions**

The notion of populism has been established in political science and history studies in the absence of a universally accepted and unambiguous interpretation of the term. The thesis on the complexity of the definition and a huge variety of manifestations of populism marks the beginning of reflection on populism which, however, was researched by many experts in

the field of political science. An integral part of the scientific debate, which has been going on for several decades, is the idea that the category of “populism” as a tool of political analysis should be abandoned altogether. However, the considerable achievements of populism researchers provide today a solid foundation for its active use by political scientists.

There is a clear need to reduce the level of populism in the Ukrainian socio-political life, and to weaken its influence on the process of struggle for power and the adoption of managerial decisions. This could be facilitated by a series of measures. That is, the saturation of the information space with objective analytical materials that would demonstrate the possible consequences of attempts to implement populist proposals – their harmful or unrealistic applications. A public space could be a media platform potentially capable of counteracting populism.

The Ukrainian election race, especially the presidential one, is characterized by another populist trait – an attempt to provide political rivalry as a struggle for good and evil. This was due to the deep cultural and mental differences between different Ukrainian regions. It is possible to reveal the presence of populist traits in most of the significant Ukrainian political forces. It appears that for some politicians, party ideology often becomes a scene for attracting and attaining the interests of certain business groups.

## Bibliography

- Gidron, N., Bonikowski, B. (2013). “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda”. In: *Weatherhead Working Paper Series*, no. 13-0004.
- Kateb, J. (2018). *Against populism. Six abstracts on populism and its dangers*. <http://gefter.ru.archive/9370>, 15.01.2020.
- Kazin, M. (1998). *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kazin M.(1995). *The Populist Persuasion*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Keren, M. (1995). *Professionals against Populism: The Peres Government and Democracy*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Kiyanka, I. (2015). “Populism as a Political Category”. In: *Scientific journal of the Oles Honchar Dnipropetrovsk National University*. Dnipro.
- Kiyanka, I. (2016). “The Phenomenon of Populism in Ukrainian and Foreign Special Literature (Historiographical Excursion)”. In: *Humanities and Social Sciences IV*. Budapesht. [http://seanewdim.com/uploads/3/4/5/1/34511564/hum\\_iv\\_12\\_76.pdf](http://seanewdim.com/uploads/3/4/5/1/34511564/hum_iv_12_76.pdf), 19.02.2020

- Kuzio, T. (2009). *Populism in Ukraine in Comparative European Context*.  
[http://www.taraskuzio.com/conferences1\\_files/Populism\\_Ukraine\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.taraskuzio.com/conferences1_files/Populism_Ukraine_Paper.pdf), 13.01.2020.
- Mudde, C. (2015). *The Populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition*.  
[http://works.depress.com/cas\\_mudde/6](http://works.depress.com/cas_mudde/6), 20.02.2020.
- Rad', T. (2010). "Methodological foundations for the study of populism as a socio-political phenomenon". In: *Methodology of Political Science*. Lviv.
- Rad', T. (2010). "Populism as a product of political communication". In: *Visnyk of Lviv National University*. Series: Philosophical Sciences. vis. 15.
- Romanyuk, A. (2013). Factors of formation and functioning of populism in Ukraine. In: Z. Białobłocki, A. Romanyuk (eds.). *Rozwój polityczny państw Europy Środkowej*. Lwów, Kutno: Wyższa Szkoła Gospodarki Krajowej w Kutnie, Uniwersytet Narodowy im. Iwana Franki we Lwowie.
- Romanyuk, A. (2012). "Populism and the Development of the Party System in Ukraine". In: *Party System of Modern Ukraine: Evolution, Trends and Prospects: Materials International*.
- Panizza, F. (2005). *Introduction. Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London; New York: Verso.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

*Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. hab. Irina Kiyanka – Researcher at The Lviv Regional Institute of Public Administration of the National Academy of Public Administration under the President of Ukraine.*

*E-mail: kiyanka@i.ua*