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Populism and fascism in Europe: case of Romania

Populizm i faszyzm w Europie: przykład Rumunii

Abstract

The article focuses on the essence of populism and fascism in the context of the political regime in Romania. It analyses the real threat of fascism in the inter-war period in Romania as well as a negative impact on the socio-economic sphere in the Romanian society. The article also points to the fact that the fascist party in Romania was short-lived. The dictatorship of Ion Antonescu and his followers, in fact, implemented some points of their program (eg, anti-Semitic activities), adopting more nationalistic and conservative ideology, but it did not accept the fascist “revolutionary” ideas and totalitarian structures.

Populism is a good option for election campaigns. After all, people always like a simple and understandable way without undue burden. Human logic and speculation aid such a way. Nevertheless, populism is a nourishment for authoritarian leaders.

Key words: *populism, fascism, the political regime, the political system, political programs, political slogans, democracy.*

Abstrakt

Artykuł skupia się na istocie populizmu i faszyzmu w kontekście ustroju politycznego w Rumunii. Analizowane jest realne zagrożenie faszyzmem w Rumunii w okresie międzywojennym, a także jego negatywny wpływ na dziedzinę społeczno-gospodarczą. Zaznacza się, że okres przebywania partii faszystowskiej u władzy był krótkotrwały. W okresie dyktatura Iona Antonesku faktycznie realizowano niektóre elementy programu (np. aktywność antysemicka) odwołując się przy tym do ogólnych zasad nacjonalizmu i konserwatyzmu nie akceptując przy tym nadmiaru idei rewolucjonizmu a także struktury totalitarnej.

Populizm jest dobrym rozwiązaniem dla kampanii wyborczych. Obywatele są bardziej skłonni do przyjmowania prostych i zrozumiałych rozwiązań. Pomocną jest tu logika ludzka i spekulacje. Populizm kreuje także autorytarnych przywódców.

Słowa kluczowe: *populizm, faszyzm, reżim polityczny, system polityczny, programy polityczne, slogany polityczne, demokracja.*

Introduction

In the interwar period, Romania was among the states where the fascist ideology and fascist movement gained an impressive impact. In 1920-1930, this state significantly expanded its territory after WW1. It had a retrogressive agrarian economy with a poor level of industry and agriculture that provided poor quality products. Peasants constituted the 4/5 component of the population. Even after the agrarian reform in 1921, about 60% of every single rural land was owned by the aristocracy called "boyary". Meanwhile, most peasants suffered from the deficiency of soil. More than 90% of strategically important Romanian oil industry was controlled by foreign investments. Between WW1 and WW2, Romania was a multi-ethnic nation. The country was inhabited by representatives of Hungarian and German minorities (mainly in Transylvania), Ukrainians (Northern Bukovyna and Bessarabia), Russians and, apart from them there were the representatives of the "titular nation", shaped quite recently. The Romanian government generally attempted to carry on minority assimilation policy. Around 5% of the populace was Jewish.

Historically, the Jews enjoyed the dominant position in trade and industry in Romania. This was a typical feature of predominantly agricultural countries in Eastern Europe. The Jews were about half of the student population at Romanian Universities. By and large, the interwar strong anti-Semitic mood and endeavours to accuse the Jewish minority of being involved in va-

rious national issues were intrinsic to the Romanian society and political community. (Averin, Solokhin, 1998, p. 15)

The aim of the research is to illustrate the idea of populism constructed not by ideological appeals to “people” with the requirement to build a unified coalition; also, the idea is to show reactionary populism which calls for fundamental changes that often find support instead of resistance due to the misunderstanding of its foundation. Besides, the common feature of populism is to play the leading role or domination over people, offering the slogan: “Power to the people – all the people!”

Materials and Methods

In the article, we use such methods as a comparative analysis, structure and behaviour.

The fascist ideological doctrine became the catalyzer of the appearance of a radical-nationalist, anti-communist, and also the anti-Semitic party “Legion of the Archangel Michael” in Romania, in 1927. Later, it was known under the name of its militarized branch, also called the “Iron Guard”. Led by Corneliu Codreanu “legionnaires” began a sort of vigorous propaganda among the Romanian peasants and students. They attacked and murdered political opponents, government representatives and others. The militant anti-Semitic ideology of the ‘Iron Guard’ was combined with theoretical constructions of religious and mystical nature, the concept of ‘spiritual revival’ of the Romanian nation, ‘Orthodox revolution’, and anti-capitalist militant rhetoric. The Nazi doctrine of “Legion” and cult of self-sacrifice – in combination with praising violence and destruction seized many contemporary Romanian intellectuals, including those who later got the European popularity – Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran (after the war, he was known as the French writer E. M. Soran). The latter, living in France, partly concealing, partly rethinking his fascist past in Romania, wrote about himself and his associates from the pre-war period, in the following way: ‘Desperate gang from the heart of the Balkans ...’. (Arendt, 2005)

The “Iron Guard” immediately procured popularity and influenced the old political foundation. With a final goal to contain pressure from the “Iron Guard”, King Carol II step by step fortified his power, creating a foundation for an authoritarian regime in Romania. In 1938, the disintegration of every single political party began. K. Kodryanu and a group of his party members were imprisoned. The leader of the “Iron Guard” was at last sentenced to 10 years in prison. In November 1938, he was killed while attempting to escape from prison.

In June 1940, acting in concurrence with Hitler, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina from Romania. Following the decision of the Second Viennese Arbitration on August 30th of that year, Romania was obliged to give back a part of Transylvania to Hungary. These events resulted in the abdication of King Carol II of Romania and the foundation of the dictatorship of General I. Antonescu. The new leader of the nation was attempting to cooperate with the “Iron Guard”, by appointing its leader, Choir Simi, deputy head of the government. In Romania, there was a number of Jewish massacres and murders of political detainees kept in jails. But later, the fascist radicalism of the “Legion” prompted a conflict with I. Antonescu and the upshot was the slaughter by the armed forces of “legionnaires” in January 1941. C. Simi himself managed to escape abroad. (Viperman, 2008)

Thus, the fascist party in Romania did not obtain real power for a substantial period of time. In fact, the dictatorship of I. Antonescu realized some elements of their program, like anti-Semitic activities. Mostly, the program followed the nationalistic and conservative ideology, but it did not accept the extremes of the fascist ‘revolutionary character’ and ideas of the totalitarian regime.

After total crushing and military defeat in 1945, totalitarianism as a genuine political power vanished from the historical scene. Despite the existence of minor political neo-Nazi organizations in post-war Europe, the fascist ideology was ousted beyond political legitimization and real struggle for power. This situation, of course, does not reduce the need to study such a phenomenon and take opportunities for various interpretations. (Galkin, 1992, p. 34)

Although the idea of totalitarianism caused a methodological disapproval, it is still a common method for interpretation of fascism. According to A. Galkin, elucidation of fascism, national socialism and ‘communism’ as a type of totalitarianism are based essentially on the acknowledgment and recognition of political regimes by a state community, and their mechanisms of power. Bearing in mind fundamental differences between value systems, A. Galkin also pointed to a clear political doctrine of complex totalitarianism. (Galkin, 1995)

In the post-war decades and partly in the interwar period, various distinctive methodologies referring to the core and reasons for success of fascism had appeared. According to one of them, fascism appeared as the expression of interests of certain social groups. This approach, being in fact a working theory, showed that social groups were characterized in different ways. Fascism favoured interests of the most aggressive fractions of monopoly capitalism and, consequently it was a special form of anti-proletarian reaction. The orthodox Marxist hypothesis, formulated by *Comintern* (the international organization of Communist parties, 1919-1943, formed by Lenin to promote revolution in

countries other than the USSR) in 1936, consists in understanding fascism as an ideology expressing interests of the most aggressive fraction of monopolist capitalism and, being a specific form of anti-proletarian reaction.

Results

Another understanding of fascism consists in considering it as an anti-capitalist revolt by little bourgeoisie which was ruined as a result of the economic crisis of the time. In context of social conditions of ideological extremism, fascism appeared as an extremism of the middle class, which was opposed to left radicalism that relied on proletariat. This assessment was expressed by the American political researcher – S. Lipset. Besides the Marxist doctrine, the class interpretation of fascism was connected with the bourgeoisie of the countries where the Nazis won, and where historical peculiarities of development were vivid.

Another bunch of 'working theories' refers to the elucidation of fascism as something unusual, as a poor social awareness, a sort of 'moral malady of Europe'. The Italian philosopher B. Croce viewed totalitarianism as a 'reactionary episode', a contemporary deviation of the spread of the world's "consciousness of freedom", a kind of reaction to the theory of the Enlightenment values. In his opinion, no social class was particularly interested in fascism, no one needed it or bolstered it.

R. Griffin defines fascism as 'palingenetic ultranationalism'. The term "palingenesis" till this day was used in biology and geology. In his interpretation, it means 'revival, renewal, resurrection'. What is meant here is the main aim of fascism, the "revival" of society on the basis of certain values, which were forgotten or banned by it. R. Griffin proves that fascism was a movement and an ideology with revolutionary features. In his analysis, the term "revolution" (here "revolution" is the Weber's "ideal type", meaning a category, detached from unique variety of specific historic events) is a leap in the development of the society, 'which. has radical innovative consequences for the large interconnections of social and psychological realities'. R. Griffin rejected the old Marxist interpretation of fascist revolution (and not only that) as only (according to the term of the British communist activist R. Palm Datt) a "masquerade", simulation of revolution, which has to hide the aim for reactionary or retrograde purposes. In fact, fascists wanted to achieve a radical renewal of society, and the creation of a 'new human being' within their nation, while their 'obsession over the past' was driven by their desire to 'find and revive eternal features of the race'.

Fascism, therefore, was not anti-modernistic, but tried to create an alternative reality’.

Thus, fascism, according to R. Griffin, is a ‘revolutionary form of ultranationalism’. Apart from that, it is ‘characterized by populism, which includes mobilization of masses into sheer (not only fake or manipulated) support from the below for a number of actions, which begin as a self-proclaimed elite from the above in order to rescue someone from someone-else, who is seen as a threat’. (Griffin, 2005)

The third approach is that a few specialists preclude the likelihood of characterizing an arrangement of various phenomena of the 1920s-1940s under the umbrella term ‘fascism’. From this point of view, fascism is simply an Italian phenomenon, while the Germans had only National Socialism. “Falangists” in Spain and other political “formations” of the time are, in reality, distinguished by their inclination and ought to be considered independently. The main characteristics that they shared, were the hostility towards socialism and the Soviet Union as well as their “opportune coincidence of interests” in the outside. (Griffin, 2005, p. 16)

The understanding of fascism within the concept of totalitarianism was increased after the war. The term itself, that is “totalitarianism”, appeared as early as 1929. It was used in publications, and later – accepted by researchers. The foundations of this idea were laid by the works of the German analyst H. Arendt, and the American researchers K. Fridrikh and Z. Brzezinski who used such terms as “totalitarian dictatorship and autocracy”. They defined six features of ‘totalitarian administration’, namely:

1. the existence in the country only of one mass party led by a charismatic leader;
2. official ideology that is recognized by all;
3. state monopoly on media;
4. monopoly on all means of mass-media;
5. terrorist police control;
6. the centralized system of control and economic management.

In terms of totalitarianism, fascism in Italy, and National Socialism in Germany, and the Soviet and Soviet related “communist political systems face a variety of essentially one totalitarian-social order.” (*Kabeshv*, p. 14)

Discussion

Certain political extremes were firmly censured and rejected by Western societies in the post-war period. This doctrine permitted and similarly

censured the Soviet and fascist regimes, believing them to be as different manifestations of one and the same evil. The Russian researcher – I. Mazurov, offering his own particular rundown of indications of totalitarianism that adjusts and supplements the presented notion of 'totalitarian idea,' which, in the end, shapes the center of the ideological doctrine. He believed that there are distinctions in the system of values which are identified as three known types of totalitarianism: the political right or fascist, which depends on national or racial criteria, the political left or communist, which was based on the rule of class and religion (for example, Islamic administration in Iran). (Mazurov, 1993)

The fascist vision of “national revival consists of two myths. One of them consists in the conception of a nation as an organism, embodying a hero from an epic story, who endures moments of fame and disgrace, power and weakness”. 'Fascist nationalism is a legendary, fictional world, in which requests from History, Destiny and Providence are the embodiments of the nation having more power over the individual, where compassion for all human beings, irrespective of race and values to society, is seen as a sign of a spiritual decay that must be defeated. It is this rationale that for the Nazis words 'remorseless' and 'obsessive' turned out to be positive meanings. Another essential rightist legend is the fantasy of revival (palingenesis), inside of which the devastation is a prelude to rebirth. (Milza, 1995)

We consider, as proper, to admit that 'political technology' of a myth (in an exceptionally wide understanding of the term) was present, specifically, in the Italian fascism. It is believed that the formation of B. Mussolini's worldview was altogether impacted by the political thoughts of the French author Georges Sorel (1847-1922), who considered legends to be an intense factor in political activity. According to Z. Sorel, adequacy of the legend lies essentially in its capacity to mobilize and give energy to the masses. Specifically, the historic legends “might be the ideal reconstruction of the past, used by high elite for masses mobilization, to set people up for the courageous selflessness – the most powerful fantasies – dogmatic, simple, compelling”.

The merging of radical fascism and syndicalism, anti-parliamentarism and anti-rationalism, with an aim to object against the bourgeois society and morale – all this, without a doubt, creates a specific ideological 'alloy' for fascism. (Огаркова, p. 11)

In addition to this, fascism was not only a form of international ideology/movement, but it also supplied and proposed a new program of socio-economic transformations, based on the principles of state regulation and economy planning, the restriction of competition and interaction of employ-

ers and employees. In this dimension, the interwar fascism started not only as a revolution of values, but also as a large-scale attempt of social engineering, which was based on the organisational abilities of a modern state and up-to-date technology. Meanwhile, fascist states had a practice of militarization the economy. In fascist Germany, this practice developed to a grand scale. (Stogova, 2011)

During the time of crisis, a feeling of impatience prevails. “This is the origin of specific tendency to simplified explanations concerning the source of events, to very clear guidelines about moving forward, to the simple, pretty understandable ways of solving problems that arose. It can be said that if the crisis development reached a certain level, then the social awareness acts as if it wanted to be fooled and thus, it happily opens up to every well-skilled opportunist”. (Gillette, 2002, p. 23)

Let us turn back to the central theme of our work and try to determine what is the correlation between fascism and populism. We believe that there is a number of moments where fascist movements/ideology have similar, to a certain extent, features with populism, even the modern one. In the meantime, there are important distinctions, too.

Another common feature between fascism and populism is, from our point of view, the earlier mentioned dichotomy of ‘one of us/outsider’, ‘enemy/hero of the nation’, which during its time got an extreme, ‘exterminating’ form especially in relation to ‘outsiders’. (Stanley, 2008, p. 12).

Populism is the same as fascism when it comes to the appeal to mass awareness, intentional rhetoric oversimplification of complex economic and social issues. But this feature of populism is the characteristic of most politicians and though, without a doubt, it is present in fascism, although it is not the core of it.

In addition to this, populism and modernness as well, differ from fascism. The main distinction is the acknowledgement of democracy. (Umland, 2003) Although populist parties and movements criticise a political establishment, they (at least, in modern Europe and USA), generally, do not throw away the rules and values of democracy, predetermined by it within the context of a political conflict, even if they set their own accents about the power of people. Populists do not suggest terror as means of achieving their aim as they, more or less, stick to the traditional “views”, established in a society, especially with reference to the possible solutions undertaken on the political “market”. Instead of this, fascism appeared and gained momentum in a situation, when a political struggle in Europe got features of conflict and destruction, in which the communist revolution, (that one which for the first

time in history resulted in the creation of the USSR), threatened to destroy upper classes in Europe.

Conclusions

All in all, the quality turns into quantity and we believe that the political proposal “to limit illegal immigration”, despite the assumption of critics in its pretty xenophobic motivation, is very much different from the well-known attempt of National Socialists to “finally solve the Jewish question” with the help of concentration camps and mass executions. Thus, it can be stated that populist features, present in fascism, can be found in the rhetoric and methodology of theoretical explanations concerning political actions. But, as it has been mentioned earlier, populism is present in most movements, although on a different scale and to a different extent.

Therefore, the ‘totalitarian state’ created by fascists had to become a universal power that solves social conflicts, enables the “revival” of some mythological features of the Italian nation. In reality, the combination of populism and fascism, despite the “totalitarian” dreams of the fascist party, was based on the authority of the Church, army and, the very institution of still preserved monarchy.

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