



# **FACES OF POPULISM**

**IN CENTRAL  
AND SOUTH-EASTERN  
EUROPE**

**EDITED BY  
HARIS DAJČ  
NATASZA STYCZYŃSKA**

**JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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Reviewer  
dr Ivana Vesić

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Marta Jaszczuk



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The research and ideas for the chapters were discussed at several academic conferences in recent years – annual ECPR, CES, UACES conferences; POPREBEL conferences in Belgrade; and smaller workshops organised within the consortium and by our partners and colleagues. We would like to thank the organiser and attendees for stimulating discussions and for their valuable remarks on earlier versions of the chapters. We hope that this volume will serve as an invitation to a wider debate about the phenomenon of populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Haris Dajč and Natasza Styczyńska  
Kraków

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HARIS DAJČ  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0446-3830>

NATASZA STYCZYŃSKA  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5056-8241>

## INTRODUCTION

The book *Faces of Populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe* is the result of research cooperation within the project Populist rebellion against modernity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism (POPREBEL) and the conference that was held in Belgrade in April 2022, within the scope of the project. POPREBEL is a Horizon 2020-funded research project that analyses the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe and is run by a consortium of six universities: University College London, Jagiellonian University, Charles University, University of Tartu, Corvinus University of Budapest, University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy and, think tank, Edgeryders.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought significant crises (economic and refugee crises and the COVID-19 pandemic) that generated fertile ground not only for populist rhetoric but also policies. With the recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, one could notice a new wave of populist slogans often merged with nationalist and conspiracy arguments. The war in Ukraine generated dissonance among populists in the region and brought further proof that populism is very context-dependent. As Russia is a close neighbour to

the region and fuels populist movements in Europe, especially in the former Yugoslavia, our book focus on different faces of populism that developed in Central and South-Eastern Europe during the recent period.

“A[t] last everyone understands that populism matters” is the opening statement of the handbook on populism published by Cambridge University Press (Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 1). On the other hand, there is much less agreement regarding the definition of the phenomena.

Populism is one of the most frequently-used terms in contemporary political debates and the media. This elusive and difficult-to-measure concept became also highly politicised. The number of populist governments in Europe has increased in recent years, and the victory of Donald Trump in the US falsified the theory that the rule of populists concerns only young democracies (Kyle and Gultchin 2018). Interestingly, in Central and South-Eastern Europe, populist actors are part of the political mainstream and parties in power (Poland, Hungary). Although the dichotomy between ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupted elite’ characterises all populist movements and actors, we wondered if there were particular features that connect these types of actors in the post-communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The volume collects chapters primarily based on empirical research undertaken within the POPREBEL research project framework, however, it also includes chapters by external researchers with whom we had the pleasure to cooperate during the time of the project.

In the first chapter of the book, Alexander Mesarovich addresses the conditions under which the confluence of populism and Euroscepticism impacted the accession processes in Croatia and Serbia. The author uses a social network analysis to identify the structure of relations within the parliaments of Croatia and Serbia during their accession processes, along with interviews with politicians from both countries. In the end, he demonstrates some potential challenges faced by those attempting to confront the ongoing populist phenomenon that are relevant in the case studies of these two countries.

Milan Vukomanović’s chapter on populism and religion in the Western Balkans focuses on Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina). He explores how nationalist religious discourse and the advancement of an ethnocentric political theology have also been utilised as a populist mechanism in the hands of the current political elite in those

case studies. A special focus is given to the Serbian Orthodox Church and its “protection of culture” and how it started to participate with local political elites in reshaping the classical modernisation concept by accommodating it to local, national and particular moulds.

The chapter of Paulina Lenik examines the attributes of voters favouring populist parties in Czechia and Poland, using European Social Survey data for 2012–2016. By illustrating the amorphous nature of populism using Czechia and Poland as case studies, she proved that populism has country-specific features, complementing the previous region-wide assumptions on the general attributes of populist voters. Her findings exemplify that populism varies across political contexts and has a slightly different nature from what had been established on the regional level.

The fourth chapter, written by Ognjen Radonjić, addresses the Russian conquest of Serbia’s oil and natural gas sector from 2008 to the present day, as well as the Russian war on Ukraine. The author explains how Russia uses energy as a soft power instrument of foreign policy. In Serbia, this Russian soft power strategy has materialised through the Energy Treaty signed in 2008. Radonjić explains how the neo-traditionalist narrative referred to Serbia’s historical, cultural and religious ties with Russia and the neo-feudalist narrative to the traditionally close friendship of the Russian and Serbian authorities, as well as private relations between certain Russian and Serbian politicians. This led to a highly probable event of total energy instability and complete dependence on Russia in Serbia.

Joanna Orzechowska-Wałaszewska and Agnieszka Sadecka, in the fifth chapter, focus on ‘othering’ Europe in Poland’s right-wing media post-2015. Their chapter examines specifically the strategies of othering of Europe and the EU used by national populists in Poland in the name of promoting (and defending) Polish national traditional values, which have been portrayed as endangered by the liberal, supranational values professed by the EU. The empirical part of the study is based on the analysis of magazine covers of two opinionated right-wing weeklies: *Gazeta Polska* and *Do Rzeczy* during 7 years (2015–2021). They traced that, in the post-2015 period, there has been a significantly different perspective on the EU compared to the enthusiastic tone adopted – sometimes by the very same journalists – at the time of Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004. The authors successfully explore and analyse the ways in which the national ‘self’ is contrasted with the European ‘other’.

Natasza Styczyńska and Jan Meijer, in their chapter on populist Euro-scepticism in Poland, analyse the state of play in the field of populist Euro-scepticism in Poland and the rest of Europe, and, based on existing research, they suggest the most useful approach to define and study populist Euro-scepticism observed in Poland. The authors suggest adopting an ideational approach to researching populism, which applies a specific focus on the ideas of populist parties and movements, as it considers these to be the key features of populism and the distinguishing feature of the parties and movements in question. When it comes to Euro-scepticism, they stress the importance of a detailed look at the correlation between populism and Euro-scepticism, which are often assumed to be ‘distinct but intersecting phenomena.’ The authors argue that differentiating between ‘Europe-level populism’ and ‘populist Euro-scepticism’ is essential because it allows for the untangling of populist and Euro-sceptic messages.

In the seventh chapter, Mladen Radulović and Haris Dajč examine the connection between nationalism and egalitarianism in populist narratives and value orientations in Serbia in the 21st century. Using a triangulation of different methods, the authors manage to detect how nationalism and egalitarianism, both as messages (from above) and as value orientations (from below), have shaped the modern political life of Serbia. They analyse nationalism and egalitarianism in the political messages of the two parties that won the most votes in parliamentary elections since 2000 and use data gathered during the past 20 years in the World Values Survey and European Values Study. The authors successfully explain the *longue durée* of nationalism and egalitarianism in Serbian society since the 19th century.

The final chapter, by Maja Vasiljević and Ljiljana Dobrović examine the encounter of nationalism – more precisely, right-wing populism – in the political life of Croatia in the 21st century. The authors re-examine and fulfil previous analyses of this topic with a historical insight into the political narratives that deal with nationalism. Special attention is given to the Homeland Movement and the initiative ‘On the Behalf of the Family.’ Vasiljević and Dobrović strongly explain the consequences of the rise of right-wing populism in Croatia, in weakening democratic institutions in Croatia.

In the postface, *New Russia’s Imperialism and Populist Deluge from the Current Perspective of Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine*, Nikola

Samardžić summarises how the emergence of populist politicians in 21st century – who were and still are allies of Russia – fuelled the deepest and most dangerous crisis in European relations since 1945. The author explains how dissatisfactions among developed European societies and in the geographical peripheries that were included in the process of EU enlargement helped the rise of populism, while also shining a light on the role of the Kremlin in that process.

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## AUTHORS' BIOS

**Haris Dajč** is an Associate Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. He has been working at the Faculty of Philosophy, Department of History since 2010. His teaching includes undergrad and graduate courses in Modern and Contemporary History, with the special focus on the History of the Mediterranean and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. He is the Chair of the Centre for the cooperation with the EU at the Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade. Haris Dajč is a scientist in charge for the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy for the POPREBEL Horizon 2020 project (2019–2022). In March 2018 he was appointed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia to be its representative and Chairman of the Supervisory Board for the Jewish Restitution Law. Dr Dajč was a research fellow at University of Padova in 2015, working in Archivio di Stato, Venice. Haris Dajč is Nahum Goldman alumni and also alumni of the Israeli Foreign Ministry diplomatic YLD program in 2015. He was visiting professor at the Institute of European Studies (Jagiellonian University) in 2019, 2021 and 2022.

**Ljiljana Dobrović** holds a PhD Degree in history (2007) from the University of Zagreb. She is a scientific adviser at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar in Zagreb. Her primary areas of research are the history of the Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries and the cultural history of World War I. She is the author of five books, editor of five more and of one exhibition catalogue, as well as 68 variously categorized academic articles, text and publications.

**Paulina Lenik** is a PhD candidate in Economics at School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, UCL. She holds a MSt in Diplomatic Studies from Blackfriars Hall, University

of Oxford (2018) and Postgraduate Diploma in Foreign Service, Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford (2017). In 2014 she graduated with honours with a Master's Degree in European Studies from the Centre for European Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. In 2012 she obtained her first-cycle degree in International Economic Relations, Kraków University of Economics. In 2017 she was awarded the Oxford University R.G. Feltham Prize for her thesis *Energy Politics in the Eastern Mediterranean: Case Studies*. Her current research interests include: illiberalism, democracy, economic determinants of populism, quantitative methods, survey data, attitudinal trends, electoral behaviour, Central and Eastern Europe. She is supervised by Julia Korosteleva and Elodie Douarin at UCL and by István Benczes at Corvinus.

**Jan D. Meijer** is a research assistant at the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. His research interest focuses on Central and Eastern European politics, in particular the study of populism, Euroscepticism and nationalism. He has graduated from UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, Jagiellonian University and Maastricht University.

**Alexander Mesarovich** is an Early Career Researcher based at the University of Edinburgh. He received an MA (Politics) from UCL and an MA (History) from the University of Belgrade, before completing his PhD (Politics) in 2022. His doctoral research examined the impact of informal political networks on the EU accession processes of former Yugoslav countries, for which he won First Place in the Management and Social Sciences category at the UK wide 2022 Doctoral Research Awards. Currently, his research focuses on comparative approaches to populism in the region, and populism's broader impact on politics and policymaking. He teaches on courses covering UK and EU politics and is employed as a research assistant on the H2020 project ENGAGE, examining EU external action. He is an avid conference attendee, and a periodic author of posts for sites such as the European Futures blog.

**Joanna Orzechowska-Wałaszewska** is an economist, sociologist, and Assistant Professor at the Institute for European Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her research interests lie at the intersection of economics and sociology. She has been mainly concerned with the influence of economic factors on the formation, development and the rebirth of national and nationalistic movements in Europe. Her current research focuses on Poland with two parallel arrays of analysis: one focusing on economic populism in Poland, the other on the consequences of Polish socio-economic transformation on ideological



portray of Polish nation, nationalism, national ideology and national interest. Recently she has been involved in three scientific projects: POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism, Horizon 2020, 2019–2021), EU3D (EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy, Horizon 2020, 2019–2022) and Reclaim (Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in Europe, Horizon Europe, 2022–2025).

**Ognjen Radonjić** is a Professor of Economics and former head of the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. He is a member of the *Institute for Sociological Research*, Belgrade, Serbia, the *World Economics Association*, Bristol, the UK and the editorial board of *Limes Plus*, Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities. He is also a full member and executive secretary of the *Scientific Association of Economists of Serbia* and the *Serbian Academy of Economic Sciences*. He is the author of the book *Financial Markets: Risk, Uncertainty and Conditional Stability* (in Serbian, 2009) and *The Eurozone Crisis: The Most Expensive Divorce in the World* (in Serbian, 2016) and the co-author with Predrag Lažetić, Ivana Živadinović and Isidora Jarić of *From student to (Un)Employed Professional: Findings from the First Graduate Survey in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro* (2014) and with Srdjan Kokotović of *The Second Decade of Transition in Emerging Europe: The Age of Capital Inflows, Macroeconomic Imbalances and Financial Fragility* (2012) and *Keynes, Minsky and Financial Crises in Emerging Markets* (2014). He also wrote a number of articles on macroeconomics and financial markets topics.

**Mladen Radulović** is a Research Associate at Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade. He got his BA, MA and PhD in Sociology at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy. His field of interest is sociology of education and his research focuses on the effect of cultural capital on achievement and educational aspirations. Mladen conducted several qualitative and quantitative researches on educational inequalities and impact that schools and teachers could have in reducing them. He is a researcher at the POPREBEL Horizon 2020 project (2019–2022) at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy. Also, he has experience in data management of large-scale studies of reading literacy (data manager for Serbia in PIRLS 2019).

**Agnieszka Sadecka** is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in the area of cultural studies. Her research revolves around 20th and 21st century Polish culture, literature and heritage, post-socialist cultures of Central and Eastern Europe, postcolonial/post-dependency studies, identity,

as well as socio-cultural dimensions of populism and nationalism. She has worked as a researcher in the Horizon2020 project: POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neofeudalism, 2019–2022), and is currently leading the Jagiellonian University team in the Horizon Europe project RECLAIM (Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Post-Factual Age).

**Nikola Samardžić** is history professor with the Faculty of Philosophy, University in Belgrade, Serbia. Specialized in early modern and contemporary history. Fulbright Scholar in 2003, Steinhardt School of Education, New York University. Main publications: *France and Turkey* (1992), *Charles V* (2001), *History of Spain* (2003), *The Second Twentieth Century* (2007), *Identity of Spain* (2014), *A Cultural History of Belgrade – XVIII Century* (with M. Roter Blagojević, 2014), *Limes. Historical Margin and Origins of South Eastern Europe's Peculiarities* (2017); *Second Cold War* (2022); also, *The Peace of Passarowitz, 1718* (editor, with Ch. Ingrao and J. Pešalj), *Purdue University Press* (2011). Editor in chief of the journal *Acta Historiae Medicinae*, and founder of the Scientific Society for the History of Health Culture. Fluent in English, French, Spanish and Italian.

**Natasza Styczyńska** is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Her academic interests include transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe, party politics, nationalism, populism and Euroscepticism in the CEE region and the Balkans. She has been participating in numerous research projects: H2020 POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism, 2019–2022), EU3D (EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy, 2019–2023), from 2022 she is leading JU team in REGROUP (Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic, 2022–2025) as well as educational ones (Jean Monnet Module, EurAsia Erasmus Plus Capacity Building Project, Visegrad Fund). She published several book chapters, articles, blog posts, and radio columns to popularise research outcomes and discuss politics in CEE region and the Balkans.

**Maja Vasiljević** holds a PhD in Sociology and MA in Sociology and Musicology. She works as a Research Assistant at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade (Serbia). Main publications: *Jevrejski muzičari u Beogradu: Od Balfurove deklaracije do Holokausta* [Jewish musicians in Belgrade: From Balfour Declaration to the Holocaust] (2021) and *Filmska muzika u SFRJ: Između politike i poetike* [Film Music in SFRY: Between Poetics and Politics] (2016), and many papers on different topics: film music, military music, racism, Cold War, gender, and minority politics in occupied Belgrade in WWII, social

movements and music and music in the Great War. She is a researcher at the POPREBEL Horizon 2020 project (2019–2022) at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy dealing with qualitative analysis of right-wing populist discourse.

**Milan Vukomanović** is a full Professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. At the same Faculty, he received his BA and MA degrees in philosophy. He earned his doctorate in 1993 at the University of Pittsburgh, USA, where he taught religious studies courses from 1989 until 1995. He was also a visiting professor of this University (program *Semester at Sea*) and a guest lecturer at NTNU, Norway and the University of Sarajevo. Vukomanović has taught courses at the Faculty of Philology and Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade. He is the co-founder of the Center for Religious Studies (Belgrade Open School) and a member of the Islam in South East Europe Forum. He was also a two-term president of the Sociological Association of Serbia and Montenegro and member of the Kotor Network, an international academic exchange in the field of Balkans based religious studies. The area of Prof. Vukomanović's academic interest ranges from sociology of religion to history of religions. He has published nine books (monographs) and over 300 journal articles, chapters in books and (co)edited works in Serbian and international publications (including Cambridge University Press, Palgrave-Macmillan, CEU Press and I.B. Tauris).



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Editors

Anna Kędroń

Józefa Kunicka-Synowiec

Proofreading

Katarzyna Borzęcka

Typesetting

Marta Jaszczuk

Jagiellonian University Press

Editorial Offices: ul. Michałowskiego 9/2, 31-126 Kraków

Phone: +48 12 663 23 80, +48 12 663 23 82

Populism is one of the most frequently used terms in contemporary political debates and the media. This elusive and difficult-to-measure phenomenon became also highly politicised both in Europe and around the world. The dichotomy between 'pure people' and 'the corrupted elite' characterises all populist movements and actors, and so this book focuses on particular features that connect populist actors in the post-communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The volume gathers chapters analysing the phenomenon of populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe from multidisciplinary perspectives. The aim is to map and understand the peculiarities of populism in the region seen from the perspective of political science, economy, history, and cultural studies.

The book is a result of cooperation between researchers working on a project entitled Populist Rebellion against Modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: Neo-Traditionalism and Neo-Feudalism (POPREBEL). The project is funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 scheme and aims to analyse the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. POPREBEL is run by a consortium of six European universities: University College London, Jagiellonian University, Charles University, University of Tartu, Corvinus University of Budapest, University of Belgrade, and the think tank Edgeryders.

Haris Dajč and Natasza Styczyńska



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