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## **BNS-i intervjuu abiprofessorist populismieksperti Cas Muddega**

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Intervjuu toimus 10. oktoobril Tallinnas.

What is populism?

I consider populism to be an ideology. It's not just a way of talking or a style but actually a view of the world which sees society as fundamentally consisting of two groups – on the one hand you have the „pure“ people and on the other hand you have the „corrupt“ elite. They want politics to be based on the „general will“ of the people. And so, what is fundamental to populism is that you see the world in two homogenous groups and that the major distinction between those two groups is moral. It's not about a clash of interests, as in socialism. It's between „pure“ people and „corrupt“ elites.

It also means that populism by itself is very „thin“, it doesn't really say much about many of the major issues like what is the best economic system, the best political system. That's why most populist actors actually combine populism with something else. On the left it is mostly some form of socialism, on the right it is mostly some form of nationalism.

So, it's incorrect to think of populists as a monolithic entity, although people throw the label "populist" around very liberally?

Yes. When we say „the populists“, they have that one thing in common, that they think about the world in terms in morals and homogenous groups. But they can differ in all kinds of different ways – what their favorite economic system is, what their favorite political system is, how they define „the people“ and how they define „the elite“. So, it's also wrong to speak about a populist international as if all the populists work together.

For the sake of argument – you have a left-wing prime minister in Greece, Alexis Tsipras, you have a right-wing populist leader in Hungary, Viktor Orbán. They agree on very little, except that both have the idea that they really represent the „pure“ people and that their domestic and international elites are corrupt.

Why don't populists work together? Is it because it is a „thin“ ideology and they take different parts from other ideologies? Is it that or something else?

It's mostly because they are not just populists. They're also socialist in the case of Syriza or nationalist or conservative in the case of Orbán. Their prime loyalty is not so much to a populist group but to another group. The prime loyalty of Syriza is to this kind of communist-socialist network which is on the left on most issues, which is mostly opposite to what Viktor Orbán stands for and whose loyalties are more to the conservative side or nationalist side.

In that sense populists often don't self-identify as populist although they will at times support the struggle of someone else. You saw that many right-wing populists were siding with Tsipras in Greece in the austerity struggle. Not because they actually supported the economic position but they saw him as an example of someone standing up against a corrupt EU elite.

How should societies or parties respond to populism?

Not with anti-populism which is really what the classic response is. The classic response is: “They say that we are wrong and they are right, and we will say that they are wrong and we are right”.

You saw this strongest in Hillary Clinton’s campaign against Trump. As soon as Clinton knew that she was facing Trump she totally changed her campaign. It was no longer on issues, it was no longer a positive campaign but a negative campaign. It was about “Trump is very dangerous”, that “he’s a bad person”, that people who vote for Trump are “deplorables”. Which is to a certain extent a mirror image of the populist debate.

So, what happens is that society gets polarized even more. It’s now a struggle between good and evil from both sides. The problem with that is you can’t compromise with evil because evil is corrupting you.

They should respond by addressing the issues that populists address if these are relevant to a sizeable portion of the population but address them from their own ideological background. So, if 1.2 million refugees come in you have to talk about refugees, that is clear, but you don’t have to talk about them as a threat to society. If you’re a social democrat, refugees are not a threat to your society. These are the weakest and the most vulnerable that demand and require our support. At the same time, you have to talk about how to integrate them without putting all the cost of their integration on the shoulders of the weakest of your own society.

So, it is cliché but it is about good politics, it is by giving social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal responses to the questions that are raised both by populists but, more importantly, by their voters. No populist party is successful by addressing issues that no one cares about.

They are a symptom of a broader problem – there is a sizeable portion of the population in Europe that’s unhappy with the way the EU has been governed; there’s a sizeable portion that’s unhappy with the way multiculturalism is shaped; there’s a sizeable portion that’s unhappy with how austerity works. Those need to be addressed. It would have been better if they had been addressed before populists captured them. They have to be addressed but they don’t have to be addressed in a populist way.

What are the structural causes of populism?

There are at least five.

First of all, supporters of populist parties, and in societies more broadly, there is a sizeable portion who believe that various issues were or are not adequately addressed by mainstream parties. In Western Europe in the 1990s they were immigration, European integration, now terrorism. It can be other issues as well. This is true – in many countries immigration and European integration weren’t addressed in the 1990s.

However, it’s not so important whether it’s actually true, but whether people believe it’s true. If you look at the debate in the Netherlands there’s a sizeable portion of the Dutch people who believe that you can’t say anything negative about Islam. That was true in the 1990s but it’s not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because we have one of the most Islamophobic discourses in the Netherlands. That doesn’t matter because people believe that to be the truth and they will vote based on that.

Second, parties are all being perceived as all being the same, that it doesn’t really matter whether you vote for a conservative, Christian democratic, social democratic party – you get the same type of politics. Again, to a large extent that is true. Partly because the ideological differences have become much smaller as soon as social democracy embraced the market in the 1990s. Socio-economic policies became marginally different. All were pretty much pro-multicultural, pro-European integration, pro-NATO etc. And so there’s a truth to it.

However, there are still fundamental differences, particularly in recent times. Whether you have a party like the Green Left in the Netherlands or the conservative party of Mark Rutte [People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy] – those are reasonably different worlds. Syriza or New Democracy in Greece are fundamental choices, but not as fundamental as campaigns often make it out to be. Political parties still campaign as if they have full power but national governments don’t have full power any more. Much has been privatized –

the government no longer sets the rules for various industries -, others have been put to the supranational level. So, politicians overpromise. Not just in the classical sense of saying “we will give you more services with less taxes” but they also overpromise on what they actually can do.

Third, as I said on the panel, there is cognitive mobilization – people are better educated and they have more self-confidence politically. Which means that they will hold leaders accountable, they feel they can judge their performance. This wasn’t the case in the 1960s-70s. Then a worker just voted for what the trade union told them and they believed that the leader would understand what they did; Catholics voted for the Christian-democratic party. They didn’t feel qualified to judge. Now we do and that’s good, but it’s also difficult.

Fourth, the media structure has changed completely. In most of Western Europe all the radio and media was state-controlled and almost all of the major newspapers were either owned by political parties or trade unions or organizations like that. They had a strong gatekeeper function. New voices, populist voices were kept out because they threatened the system, not just a single party but all the major parties.

Now almost all the media is independent, privately owned and needs advertisement to survive. For advertisement you need to “chase eyeballs” as they say in the US, which means they need to get as many clickers as fast as possible because that’s what you sell your ads on. And so what you’re chasing now is what sells. And what sells are scandals, corruption, conflict. And populists offer that.

Fifth and finally, populists have become much more attractive actors. Many of the leaders of the populist parties are good speakers, very good at social media. Within this new media structure that’s particularly attractive you want to bring them in because they are exciting to watch.

As I argued, almost all of these are structural causes and they will continue. Consequently, populism will continue, not linearly going up but they are now a structural part of our politics.

Various of these factors can be addressed from liberal democratic points of view or can be exploited by non-populist actors. Macron in many ways profited from this new media structure which always wants something new and exciting. Macron was more exciting than Le Pen because there has been a Le Pen since 1972, there’s been a National Front since 1972. Le Pen was not really that fresh and exciting any more, Macron was. Macron was an actor that was attractive – a good speaker, very smart in how he works the media. Justin Trudeau in Canada – a similar type of thing.

It’s important to remember this is just a structure which favors particular actors of which populists are one but not necessarily the only.

Populism is usually talked about in negative terms. Does populism have any positive effects as well?

Yes, I think populism can have a positive effect by shaking up the system. Some systems are sclerotic. The EU for example was developing in a wrong way, in an archaic way. It was an elite project that had very little input from the people, that made decisions with almost no oversight. That had to be adjusted to the modern times.

Often populists will ask right questions, in the sense of saying: “They should be debated”. Immigration should be debated, multiculturalism in society should be debated.

I personally think they often give the wrong answers, in part because they assume the people all share the same interests and values and therefore think they can give just one answer that is perfect for everyone. Societies are way more complex than that.

I would like to turn to the elections that took place in 2017. The year started with a large expectation that populists might win but it didn’t happen. What are the main takeaways from this year, what is the current state of populists?

There are various points.

First and foremost, obviously the broader media and political narrative that we started the year with was exaggerated and was never based on polls. Populists were never going to take over power. They were going to present a fundamental challenge.

They did but they fell short of their previous scores, particularly compared to polls in 2016 and even largely with regards to the more recent polls. Now it's clear that the populist radical right peaked in 2016 and has since gone down a bit. It's also clear that overall populism and the populist radical right scored higher than it's ever scored on average. There are certain parties that are a little bit lower and others that are higher. But even Marine Le Pen who in the parliamentary elections was a little bit lower than last time, in the presidential elections, particularly in the second round was way higher than her father ever was. So in that sense populism underperformed compared to unrealistic expectation.

What we also see is that left-wing populism by and large doesn't win. So, when we talk about populism in 2017 we almost exclusively talk about the populist radical right. We have a left-wing populist party in the Netherlands – the Socialist Party – pretty stagnant. Die Linke in Germany – pretty stagnant. Only [Jean-Luc] Mélenchon in France did reasonably well but nowhere near the levels of Syriza and Podemos [in Spain].

The reason is that the elections were about immigration, terrorism, Islam, which are not so much populist issues but nativist issues. Which means that populist parties which don't have a strong nativist agenda only have part of the solution for many voters. They have the anger towards the establishment but not the perceived solution to nativist issues.

I think what we've also seen is that there's a lot of volatility. I think that is structural too. The Netherlands was relatively stable although we now have a four-party government – out of necessity rather than choice. We've had those before but those were out of choice. France saw the total implosion of the established parties and the emergence of a new one without a real political party. Germany saw its two-party system transform into probably a three party government. Those are structural changes and we're going into a period of medium to small size parties and high volatility, irrespective of whether that volatility includes major populists. It means parties go up and down, new parties come and old parties implode.

Are we entering an era of minority governments or governments with very slim majorities in parliament?

That touches on the issue of fragmentation and volatility. What makes populist parties stand out is that they tend to polarize. And so, given that in many countries they are the third biggest party and if they are excluded from coalition formation, it makes coalition forming incredibly hard because after excluding the third party you often need three or four different ones, of which the Netherlands is a good example.

But that is not the only model. Austria is going to have almost certainly a coalition between the mainstream right and the radical right populists. Denmark might have one between the social democrats and the populist radical right.

Certain countries are going to normalize populist parties pretty much out of opportunistic choice of wanting to remain in governments.

The inclusion is almost always an opportunistic choice. What we know from research is that when it becomes advantageous for a mainstream party to have a coalition with a populist party rather than a mainstream party – in the sense that it provides them with more power in government and it allows them to enforce more their policies – they will do it. And we saw that already in 2000 in Austria, when the Christian democrats chose the FPÖ [Freedom Party] over the SPÖ [Social Democratic Party].

What we often see is that before that happens the mainstream party moves more towards the populist party in terms of its program and it starts to normalize that party although they are not really populist or anti-system. I

think we'll see that in more countries.

It's just that established parties are very slowly starting to get to terms with a new reality. Many are still thinking that what has happened over the last couple of years is just because of the great recession or the refugee crisis and once that is smoothed out we will return to this period where three or four major liberal democratic parties dominate. I don't think that's happening.

Which forthcoming elections are the main battleground elections for populists this year or the next? What elections should we look out for?

Definitely Austria this Sunday because, first of all it will be both a victory and a loss for the populist radical right. The FPÖ is probably going to come in second or third. A year ago, they were far and away the biggest party. So, in that sense it's disappointing. On the other hand, they are probably going to be back in government with a mainstream rightwing party that has shifted significantly their way. This important because it might change the broader narrative about populism being on the rise.

The Czech Republic is interesting for the reason of where is Andrej Babiš going to go. He's almost certainly going to win. He is perceived as a populist and I'm not certain about that but he's a very different type of populist than Viktor Orbán or Jarosław Kaczyński. The question is how he's going to position the Czech Republic – as being staunchly with the EU on most issues or as being a kind of in-between the Orbán-Kaczyński camp and, for the sake of argument, the Western European camp, which would make more of a division. If Babiš distances himself from Orbán and Kaczyński, the kind of momentum that took on with the refugee crisis in 2015, of Orbán being a kind of voice for Central and Eastern Europe, is really going to have its last legs. [Prime minister] Robert Fico of Slovakia already distanced himself from that. That's regionally important.

The most important elections are next year in Italy. Italy is economically in a very problematic state and has been for decades. It's a massive economy in the eurozone. It has populists pretty much from all sides fighting the elections – you have the Lega Nord [Northern League], which is populist radical right; you have Berlusconi which is rightwing neoliberal populism; you have Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement which represents an idiosyncratic type of populism.

There's only one party that is perceived as “stable” and pro-EU which is the Democratic Party or the social democrats. If the social democrats can't create a government, Italy will be perceived as a liability. And that is not just politically important, it's economically very important. The eurozone can't bounce back if one of their major economies is perceived to be close to bankruptcy and in the hands of unpredictable and incompetent people. And so, I think it really is all about Italy.

There is an overall narrative that Europe is crawling out of the economic crisis – Macron and Merkel are probably going to push forward. You can do that with a bankrupt Greece, which is one percent of the eurozone economy. You can't do that with a bankrupt and unclear Italy. In that sense I think Italy is where it's at.

Would you like to add anything important that I forgot to ask?

From a Baltic perspective it's kind of interesting – they're kind of missing in this story. They don't fit the Central European narrative we have where rightwing populists are dominant. We now have this East-West divide in some simplistic narratives where the West has an embattled center that holds against some radical right populists, and in the East everyone is pretty much intolerant and votes for some kind of conservative nationalist populist parties.

And then you have the Baltic countries which in all three very different ways have relatively small or mild populist factors. EKRE here, which is fairly nasty but relatively small. The National Alliance in Latvia, which is reasonably mild populist and is in government but doesn't seem to push for anything that is particularly controversial. And then in Lithuania you have mostly Law and Order, which hangs a little bit on

the side.

I think it's important because it shows diversity. We're caught in narratives about Europe-does-this or Europe-goes-there but we're still 28 different countries, and each individual election is first and foremost a national election, not a European election.

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