

POPREBEL

**Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century
Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism**

Working Paper no. 5

**The conceptualisation and theorisation of the demand side
of populism, economic inequality and insecurity**

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POPREBEL Working Paper series

POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) is a large Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The aim of the project is to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences and propose policy solutions.

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The POPREBEL consortium comprises six universities – UCL (co-ordinating institution), University of Belgrade, Charles University, Corvinus University of Budapest, Jagiellonian University and University of Tartu – and Edgeryders, a social enterprise.



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1. Introduction

Fitting in the broad framework of POPREBEL, our analysis of populist voting draws on the ideational definition of populism. Populism does not necessarily imply short-sighted economic policymaking (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991) and is certainly more than a cult of charismatic leaders, a type of discourse and mass appeal (Barr 2009; Weyland 2001). Populism is rather a set of ideas that sees politics in Manichaeian terms as a struggle between the people, which is the embodiment of democratic virtue, and a corrupt establishment (Hawkins 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Within this essentialist view of politics, the world is separated into two camps with fundamentally moral distinctions: the good ‘people’ and the evil ‘elite’. The people are always praised as a virtuous, reified and homogeneous entity, whose general will should be the basis for all politics (Mudde, 2004). These people are oppressed by a powerful minority, illegitimately controlling the state for its benefit: the elites. Beyond any legitimate differences between the people and the elites, beyond the differences of opinion or interest, the only relevant political division for populism is the moral cleavage between the people and the elites.

Reflecting on the widely accepted ideational approach to populism, many papers on the demand side of populism define populist voters through certain attitudes and value-sets. A number of studies use public opinion surveys to assess the extent to which the populist or proto-populist set of ideas is widespread in society and thus understand the depth of populist attitudes in society (Schulz et al. 2018). Typically, these ideas and values resonate with some populist-sounding predispositions, such as the virtue of ordinary citizens, anti-elitism, anti-migration, xenophobia etc. Some recent studies have found that these attitudes (and the attitudes towards certain sets of values) are correlated with voting for populist parties, for instance in the Netherlands (Akkerman et al. 2017) and in other Western European countries (Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). On the other hand, Rooduijn (2018, p. 364) found that when investigating the voter bases of populist parties in Western Europe, they have nothing in common: Euroscepticism, political distrust, attitudes towards direct democracy, income and class do not unify them; and the evidence from Latin America (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020) seems to back this up.

Because the evidence from Western Europe and Latin America is quite mixed, it is an interesting and thought-provoking research question whether the characteristics of a Central and Eastern European “populist citizen” can be categorized, and what makes the citizens of the region vote for populist parties. When reviewing the scholarly literature, the Central and Eastern European picture is not (yet) as diverse as the Western European, primarily because the current literature uses mainly quantitative analysis or qualitative case studies on selected Central and Eastern European countries, see for instance (Benczes, 2016; Hanley and Vachudova, 2018; Ádám, 2019; Kotwas and Kubik, 2019; Stanley, 2019), and comparative analyses too, see for instance (Koev, 2015; Pirro and van Kessel, 2017; Santana, Zagórski and Rama, 2020). Furthermore, most of the literature is focusing on the supply side to describe the various countries’ governments, instead of focusing on the individual citizens’ demands.

Findings on the demand side of populism in CEE are very contested in terms of the values and attitudes associated with populist voters and in terms of the conceptual approach to economic insecurity. When attempting to focus on the demand side of the populist voter, Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020, p. 13) found that the Polish populist is dissatisfied with democracy, but supports the democratic process, even though they are not satisfied with how it works. In the case of Poland, Stanley (2019: 39) also found that voters themselves can be placed into two camps: “those accepting the liberal-orthodox politics of transition, and those rejecting this developmental model”, with cultural issues being the most important determinants and economic issues remaining unimportant. Hartevelde *et al.* (2015) argued that voting for the populist radical right in CEE can be explained at least partially by a gender gap, while Santana, Zagórski and Rama (2020) found that some form of Euroscepticism is the common denominator amongst radical right voters in CEE (which has been affirmed to an extent by Pirro and van Kessel (2017)), while nativism is less of a uniting factor (possibly stemming from a lower amount of immigrants in CEE), while economic deprivation is not significant. As opposed to Santana, Zagórski and Rama (2020), Koev (2015) argued that the presence of minority ethnic parties and opposition to them will serve the same role as anti-immigrant rhetoric in Western Europe and bring success to right-wing parties in CEE. What seems to be emerging from the literature is that populist demand is quite diverse within the CEE region, which may mean that the “populist voter” might be equally difficult to characterize, given the assumption that parties react to the demand of voters.

The goal of this Working Paper is to provide a selective review of the literature to test whether economic inequality and economic insecurity lead to a rise in populist demand (as had been the case in Western Europe). Because of the



employment effects of the coronavirus, the researchers will not only use the existing databases of the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer etc. to investigate voting patterns of the citizens of CEE (which have been conducted before covid-19), but are planning to contract surveys of their own (if the timeline of the project allows for it) to see how the global pandemic impacts on the fears of voters and whether it leads to an increase in populist support.

1.1. Transition mechanisms and background to the concepts

In line with the consensus in the literature (e.g. Hawkins et al. 2018), this Working Paper argues that populism is not a well-defined, stand-alone ideology that is usually considered as having a coherent and relatively comprehensive programmatic position. While the 'thick' or classical ideologies, such as conservatism, liberalism or socialism, typically articulate comprehensive political programmes, populism – as well as other discourses such as nationalism or pluralism – has limited programmatic scope and is therefore a 'thin-centred' ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Thus, we cannot interpret or understand populism without the broader ideological context within which it operates, as these classical ideologies (or right versus left-wing ideologies) actually mediate the effect of populist ideas, whilst also providing the political means through which populist attitudes can be activated. Once these populist attitudes are activated (due to for instance widespread economic discontent), their interaction with the conventional ideologies cannot be disentangled.

Furthermore, populist attitudes require a certain context and triggering factors that make them salient. It is a common theme in the field of political psychology (e.g. Mondak et al. 2010, Stenner 2012) that the effective presence of voters' attitudes or dispositions depends on external triggers, while it is also widely argued that the less consciously articulated certain ideas are, the more likely that they require activation to become salient. The populist literature is unanimous in believing that populist attitudes are a set of loosely articulated ideas; thus, it is reasonable to assume that they generally lie dormant and are typically activated by certain factors.

The context which is most likely to activate populist attitudes is domestic governance failure, attributable to internal elite behaviour and collusion (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). The failure of domestic governance justifies the rise of populism by undermining the democratic legitimacy of the political class and by engaging dissatisfied and disenfranchised citizens, helping close the representation gap (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Populism is interpreted as a corrective to democracy that responds to the community's problems. The establishment (*in t-1*) is held responsible for not fulfilling the general will of 'the people', and thus the anger becomes widespread across the population, which in turn triggers the activation of populist attitudes (Rico *et al.* 2017).

What are the components of such contexts in general and of such a domestic governance failure in particular? Can we predict the typical contexts activating populist attitudes? Whilst there are numerous components of such contexts, this Working Paper focuses on two of the most commonly cited factors: economic inequality and economic insecurity.

2. Economic inequality

Much of the debate over the rising levels of inequality is phrased in terms of income, or in terms of components of income, like wages and earnings. Nonetheless, in economics, a basic utility function of individuals typically refers to consumption and leisure, not to income. The distinction between income and consumption could make a meaningful difference in thinking about inequality, if the distribution of consumption at a given point in time is less wide than that of income or if its evolution over time is smoother than that of income (Attanasio *et al.* 2016). Another aspect of economic inequality is the distribution of wealth, which usually shows an even more unequal pattern than the distribution of either income or consumption. Distributions of factors of production – such as land or capital – are important determinants in terms of assessing the opportunities individuals have to be productive and to generate household income. It is indeed critical to divide total income into two categories of income flows: income from labour and income from capital.

Nonetheless, income or any other materialised measure does not tell us what an individual can really do and be, given his or her own characteristics. The same amount of income does not translate into an equal capacity to do the same set of activities. Acknowledging this underlying criticism against the utilitarian tradition, first in 1971, Rawls focused on the problem of choosing the correct equalisandum and proposed the notion of primary goods. Primary goods such



as basic liberties and rights, access to political and other offices, income and wealth should be distributed equally within the society. Although primary goods, as proposed by Rawls, are a broader group of necessities than income in itself, they still fail to account for what an individual is capable of doing. Amartya Sen (1980, 1985, 1992) argues that instead of focusing on commodities and on the distribution of these commodities across individuals, functionings, defined as observable 'doings and beings' of persons should lie at the heart of our understanding. Hence, in a society, functions such as literacy, nutrition and health status should be promoted and equalised. Sen goes one step further and claims that societies should advocate for the (positive) freedom a person may enjoy. Capabilities therefore should be seen as sets of attainable functionings, from which the individual is free to choose. Sen's view enriched our understanding of equality with concern about equity. In their papers, Dworkin (1981a, 1981b), Arneson (1989) and Cohen (1989) echo similar sentiments and claim that equity requires that factors influencing the individual's final achievement, for which he or she cannot be held responsible, should be equalised within the society.

Consequently, the equity (or fairness) of a given distribution of achievements (say utilities, or incomes) cannot be judged by observing only the degree of inequality present in that distribution. Distributive judgments require an extended informational basis, with a special focus on how the observed outcomes were derived from the choice sets available to individuals. The same inequality in a distribution of outcomes can sometimes be judged equitable and sometimes not, depending on whether they reflect differences in choice sets.

There are many ways of measuring 'economic insecurity' and inequality (conceptually embedded in the term of economic insecurity), ranging from simple measures to more comprehensive aggregate indexes. The beauty of many inequality measures lies in their simplicity and starts from the same basic input: distribution. For any income, a distribution shows the number of individuals in the society and their share of the total income. The most commonly used measures of income inequality is the Gini coefficient and its graphical representation, the Lorenz curve. Data from the size distribution are the basis of drawing the Lorenz curve. Income recipients are arrayed from lowest to highest income along the horizontal axis, whilst the curve itself shows the share of total income received by any cumulative percentage of recipients (Pekins et al. 2013). In a perfectly equal society, the curve touches the 45-degree line at both the lower-left corner (0 percent of recipients must receive 0 percent of income) and the upper-right corner (100 percent of recipients must receive 100 percent of income). If only one household received income, and all other households had none, the curve would trace the bottom and right-hand borders of the diagram (perfect inequality). In all actual cases, the Lorenz curve lies somewhere in between. Derived from the Lorenz curve, the Gini coefficient¹ measures how far the income distribution of a country deviates from the perfectly equal distribution. As an alternative to the Gini coefficient, a common measure of income inequality is the so-called Kuznets ratio. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the degree of inequality between high- and low-income groups in a country, this measure shows the ratio of the incomes received by the top 20% and bottom 40% of the population. In a similar vein, the Palma ratio as a specific form of the so-called Decile Dispersion Ratio is also commonly used. The Palma ratio focuses on the differences between those in the top and bottom income brackets. The ratio takes the share of the richest 10% of the population in gross national income (GNI) and divides it by the share of the poorest 40% of the population. This ratio is readily interpretable by expressing the income of the rich as a multiple of that of the poor. However, while it ignores information about incomes in the middle of the income distribution, it is still a popular measure presenting well the growing divide between the richest and the poorest in society.

3. Economic insecurity

The literature on economic insecurity is quite diverse: Anderson and Pontusson (2007, p. 212) argue that in many cases it is used as an umbrella term for the "different manifestations of material well-being", and its meaning can range from job-related concerns to personal-income-based issues. This is also apparent from the definitions below:

¹ Nonetheless, collapsing all the information contained in the frequency distributions into a single number inevitably results in some loss of information as no weights are attached to the lowest quintiles that might receive less income. Another criticism of the Gini coefficient is that it is more sensitive to changes in some parts of the distribution than in others. Despite these shortcomings, the Gini index, with its simplicity, including its graphical interpretation using Lorenz curves, remains the most widely used income inequality measure.



- Bossert and D'Ambrosio (2013, p. 1018) define economic insecurity as “the anxiety produced by the possible exposure to adverse economic events and by the anticipation of the difficulty to recover from them”.
- Jacobs (2007, p. 1) states that “economic insecurity is perhaps best understood as the intersection between “perceived” and “actual” downside risk.”
- Dominitz and Manski (1997, p. 264) state that “an individual's sense of economic insecurity may be thought to arise from his or her perceptions of the risk of economic misfortune”.
- Western *et al.* (2012, p. 341) conceptualise economic insecurity as “the risk of economic loss faced by workers and households as they encounter the unpredictable events of social life.”
- Osberg (1998, p. 17), cited in Osberg and Sharpe (2014, p. 53), directs attention to “the anxiety produced by a lack of economic safety – i.e. by an inability to obtain protection against subjectively significant potential economic losses”.

One common denominator among these definitions is the risks people face and the anxiety experienced as a consequence of these risks. Individuals will feel insecure if they believe that there is a major and “unavoidable downside economic risk” Osberg (2015, p. 7). In the remainder of this section, the Working Paper will differentiate between the literature which uses economic insecurity as an explanatory variable for explaining populism, and economic insecurity used as a response variable (an outcome to be explained).

Economic insecurity as an explanatory variable

When assessing the root causes of populism, Inglehart & Norris (2016) analysed two possible reasons for its emergence: the economic inequality and the cultural backlash arguments. According to the economic inequality thesis, “rising economic insecurity and social deprivation among the left-behinds has fuelled popular resentment of the political classes” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 2), which is exploited by populist leaders and parties. If the economic insecurity argument holds, this would mean, according to Inglehart and Norris (2016), that support for populism should be observed among those who have lost the most due to globalisation, technological changes and the structural changes of economies. The initial results are mixed in the sense that they do find a relationship between populist support and economic insecurity amongst the petty bourgeoisie (self-employed people, small businesses etc.) but not amongst the unskilled manual workers. In contrast to Inglehart & Norris (2016), Guiso *et al.* (2018) found that economic insecurity has been the most dominant reason for frustration-induced abstention from voting in elections, and the leading motive behind the demand for populist parties. They argue that systemic economic security, which the traditional incumbent parties have found hard to address, make their voters turn to alternative parties who promise redistributive changes. In a more recent article, Guiso, Herrera, Morelli, & Sonno (2019, p. 101) argue that an increase of economic insecurity drives up the populist vote through two mechanisms: anti-immigrant tendencies and distrust for traditional politics.

A slightly different theme is analysed by Algan *et al.* (2017), who focus on the impact of the global financial crisis on trust and on voting for anti-establishment parties. They find that crisis-driven economic insecurity (mainly via changes in the level of unemployment) during the financial crisis, and the inability of European institutions to deal with it, led to falling trust in national parliaments and European institutions, and to the emerging popularity of populist parties. Should this be the case, we should be able to witness a repeat of it, thanks to the large increase in unemployment because of covid-19. As unemployment has increased during the economic crisis of 2008, so has trust decreased with it in Europe in parallel (Foster and Frieden, 2017). Mayer, Rovny, Rovny, & Sauger (2015) show that focusing only on unemployment to determine a rise in economic insecurity may be wrong, as employed people can be differentiated between as insiders (occupying well-paid and stable jobs) as well as outsiders (facing increasing levels of social and economic risk). Probably one of the most comprehensive studies has been conducted by Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch (2016), who find that political polarisation in the 19th and 20th centuries increased after financial crises, and that far-right parties gained, in the five years following crises, an increase of 30% in the vote share relative to pre-crisis levels. Voters are systematically lured by the rhetoric of the far-right, which is often nationalistic or xenophobic, while the far-left profits less from financial unpredictability.



What seems to be a common theme in the literature mentioned previously is that adverse economic events will have an impact on the trust citizens have towards both their national governments, and in the European case, towards the institutions of the European Union. This can result in an increase in the vote-share of anti-establishment parties, both at the national and at the European level. It is also understandable that, as a result of adverse economic events, individuals have become economically more insecure: fears of job loss due to imports, the fear of immigration and automation coupled with the effects of the financial crisis manifesting in the decline of the middle class and the defaulting mortgages, have led to emotionally less secure voters, dissatisfied with existing parties and age-old solutions.

Economic insecurity as a response variable

A collection of articles in the early 21st century attempted to analyse the new, but already visible effects of globalisation on workers. These effects were captured by focusing on how the security of workers changed, due to the new causal mechanisms of deepening international economic integration. Scheve & Slaughter (2004) conceptualised economic insecurity as the perception of labour market status. They argued that a vast majority of people rely more on income from labour than from capital, and if the labour status of workers is threatened, because of increased global competition, workers will feel more insecure. They find that people are more insecure if they are more educated, in households with low income, unionised and working in a sector with high unemployment. Furthermore, workers, employed in sectors where FDI is present, report higher insecurity, which may be because multinational companies can more easily substitute workers and production among different locations. Burgoon and Dekker (2010), while also connecting economic insecurity to labour conditions, expose a different causal chain: they argue that the usage of flexible working hours increases economic insecurity amongst workers. Based on a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2001, carried out across 15 European countries, the authors argue that the prevalence of part-time employment and temporary employment causes feelings of job insecurity and income insecurity, as these types of jobs are heavily dependent on business cycles.

One of the most detailed conceptualisations of job insecurity is offered by Anderson and Pontusson (2007). Their paper conceptualises the components of affective job insecurity (the anxiety over the fear of losing one's job) into three parts: cognitive job insecurity, labour market insecurity and income insecurity. According to the authors, cognitive job insecurity is made up of three components: labour market conditions (e.g. how secure workers are in their current employment position), individual employability attributes (e.g. how valuable workers are for their employers), and institutionalised employment protection. Labour market insecurity refers to the likelihood the individual can find a job and depends on labour market conditions, individual employability attributes and labour market policies. Finally, income insecurity refers to the prospects of income replacement provided by the state, insurance or family. The authors find, based on individual-level survey data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) conducted in 1997, that more educated workers and workers in non-manual occupations feel more secure in their current job and are more optimistic about finding a new one if necessary.

The conceptual work of Western et al. (2012) also connects economic insecurity to domestic events, and argues that while economic inequality describes variation in the level of socioeconomic status, economic insecurity calls for a more dynamic approach. The authors specify four types of "adverse events", which should be analysed to find out whether economic insecurity is increasing as a result of them. The adverse events in question are: job loss and threat of unemployment, family instability and healthcare issues. These authors also stress that if a country possesses well-functioning institutions, the risks attributed to adverse events can be shifted or reduced, which in turn reduces economic insecurity experienced by citizens.

Measuring economic insecurity

The diversity of the literature is also visible when attempting to operationalise economic insecurity. However, due to page restrictions, the Working Paper focuses on the operationalisation used in populist studies. The authors who have used economic insecurity as a tool to explore the relationship between economic factors and populism have not settled on one common way of measurement. Algan *et al.* (2017, p. 319) measure insecurity as a change in the unemployment rate, Inglehart & Norris (2016, p. 45) use reported difficulty of living on current household incomes,



Dustmann *et al.* (2017) use per capita income and the unemployment rate as the economic indicators to test insecurity.

Using an interesting mixture of objective and subjective factors, Guiso *et al.* (2018, p. 15) capture economic insecurity by looking at three indicators from the European Social Survey: 1) whether the respondent has experienced unemployment in the last five years; 2) whether the respondent experiences income difficulties (similar to Inglehart & Norris, 2016) and 3) the exposure of the respondent to globalisation. In this way, the authors factor in objective elements such as unemployment and the impact of globalisation, and also the subjective experiences of the respondent. An additional control variable is used to measure whether respondents to the survey are fearing immigration and the resulting availability of cheap labour. The first econometric test, which will be run in the empirical analysis of D5.5 will use the operationalisation of Guiso *et al.* (2018) to see whether it provides significant results or not. Further fine-tuning of the measurement of economic insecurity will be explained in greater detail with D 5.5.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this Working Paper was to provide an overview of the conceptual elements of two of the main drivers of populism: economic insecurity and economic inequality. While economic inequality is a relatively straightforward term, economic insecurity remains a concept in search of precise definition. The Working Paper provides an overview of the noisy academic debate concerning the main conceptual elements of the term, as well as the evolution of thought about measurement and operationalisation. The overall goal was to explain how economic insecurity is linked to the demand side of populism on a theoretical basis, thereby providing useful inputs for the database in D5.2 and for the theoretical framework of D5.3.

The literature on inequality and economic insecurity as triggering factors of populism is now sizable. A number of different measurement and evaluation methods have been proposed and an even broader array of empirical applications have been undertaken. Economic insecurity as an umbrella term often encompasses some forms of (real or perceived) inequality. Economic insecurity implies “different manifestations of material well-being” (Anderson and Pontusson 2007, p. 212) that can range from job-related concerns and personal-income-based issues and to inequality. The remainder of WP5 loosely follows the definition of economic insecurity provided by Bossert & D’Ambrosio (2013, p. 1018): “the anxiety produced by the possible exposure to adverse economic events and by the anticipation of the difficulty to recover from them”. WP5 therefore sees inequality as a term conceptually embedded in economic insecurity and assumes that both objective and subjective reasons can be found as to why the demand for populism is growing. Economic insecurity is defined as the anxiety produced by the possible exposure to adverse economic events and by the anticipation of the difficulty to recover from them, an intersection between “perceived” and “actual” downside risk. An important element of this conceptualisation is that the sense of economic insecurity may be thought to arise from perceptions of the risk of economic misfortune. This perception is always relative. The task of the populist is to exacerbate this perception and attach certain highly appreciated value to these perceptions.

Until recently, scholars explained electoral support for populist forces by simply relying on measures such as support for restrictive immigration and asylum policies, the employment sector and exposure to economic globalisation or levels of trust in the traditional political institutions of liberal democracy. While these studies are helpful in that they identify why voters support particular populist parties with a well-defined policy package, our research as a whole and the subsequent Working Papers assume that there is an additional layer of ideas that politicians are expressing. Populist politicians do not merely reflect upon income inequality or economic insecurity but rather exaggerate these issues and create social cleavages and social tensions based on these phenomena. It is not necessarily the nature or the basis of these cleavages that matters; populists are rather striving to attach some superior values (e.g. job security) to these cleavages. Economic insecurity, as a base of the social cleavages and the values attached to its relative importance, justify and legitimate the power of populism. Thus, voters support politicians who choose policies in line with their preferences, which can loosely be interpreted as policies that are not in their best interest but that serve their belief system.

Based on the conceptual review of this Working Paper, the main hypothesis we test in the subsequent Working Papers are that irrespective to the source of fears and frustrations are (driven by economic insecurity and/or inequality), the task of the regime is to maintain this source, overemphasise its relevance and create a new one upon social request.



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