CHALLENGING THE LIBERAL ESTABLISHMENT AND CONSOLIDATING THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME: COMPARING POPULISM(S) IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

CHALLENGING THE LIBERAL ESTABLISHMENT AND CONSOLIDATING THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME: COMPARING POPULISM(S) IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

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The concept of populism has become particularly salient in the academic debates of recent years. Yet, there are few cross-regional studies of the populist phenomena. Comparisons of populism across qualitatively different polities are even fewer. The main reason behind this gap can be attributed to the fact that there is as much dispute about defining populism as there is about studying it, both of which contribute to the theoretical dissonance of populism studies. In this thesis, I attempt to bridge the gap between the three recent approaches to the study of populism – the Ideational Approach (Cas Mudde), the Discursive Approach (Ernesto Laclau), and the Political-Strategic Approach (Kurt Weyland) – by suggesting a conceptual categorisation of *content*, *form*, and *function* respectively. I argue that this analytical distinction allows one to employ these three recent approaches to the study of populism in a complementary manner, by virtue of which, a cross-regional comparison of populism becomes more viable. I employ this categorisation to illuminate the similarities and differences between the 21st century populist experience in France (*Front National*), the Netherlands (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), and Russia (Vladimir Putin's presidencies). I arrive at the conclusion that while Marine Le Pen's and Geert Wilders' populism is peculiarly different from Putin's populism in terms of content, form, and function, the

remarkable similarity between these cases lies in their tendency to *de-politicise* and *de-institutionalise* the political participation of citizens. Moreover, their populism enables the far right ideology to traverse borders and to attain cross-regional solidarity.

Keywords: Populism, Vladimir Putin, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, De-Politicisation.

ÖZ

KURULU LİBERAL DÜZENİN SORGULANMASI VE OTORİTER REJİMİN GÜÇLENDİRİLMESİ: ÇAĞDAŞ BATI AVRUPA VE RUSYA'DA POPÜLİZM(LER) KARŞILAŞTIRMASI

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Popülizm kavramı son yıllardaki akademik tartışmalarda özellikle belirgin hale gelse de bölgeler arası popülizm incelemelerinin sayısının oldukça az olduğu gözlemlenebilir. Niteliksel olarak farklı yönetim biçimleri arasında popülizm karşılaştırmalarının sayısı ise daha da azdır. Bu boşluğun arkasındaki ana neden, popülizmi tanımlamakla ilgili olduğu kadar, onu incelemekle ilgili de ortada bir fikir birliğinin olmayışıdır. Her ikisi de popülizm çalışmalarının kuramsal uyumsuzluğuna katkıda bulunmaktadır. Bu tezde, popülizm incelemelerinde kullanılan üç yaygın yaklaşım – Düşünsel Yaklaşım (Cas Mudde), Söylemsel Yaklaşım (Ernesto Laclau) ve Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım (Kurt Weyland) – arasındaki uçurumun içerik, biçim ve işlev kategorileri öne sürülerek kapatılması amaçlanmıştır. Tezin ana savunularından biri bu kategorik ayrım ile sözü edilen üç yaklaşımın tamamlayıcı bir şekilde kullanılabileceği ve bu sayede popülizmin bölgeler arası bir karşılaştırmasının daha mümkün bir hale geleceğidir. Söz konusu kategorik ayrım, bu çalışmada, Fransa (Front National), Hollanda (Partij voor de Vrijheid) ve Rusya'daki (Vladimir Putin) 21. yüzyıl popülist deneyimleri arasındaki benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları aydınlatmak

için kullanılmıştır. Bu karşılaştırma, Marine Le Pen ve Geert Wilders'ın popülizminin içerik, biçim ve işlev açısından Putin'in popülizminden farklı olmasına rağmen her üçünün de vatandaşların siyasi katılımını siyasetten arındırma ve kurumsallaştırmadan uzaklaştırma eğiliminde olduğunu göstermektedir. Dahası, bu siyasi figürlerin popülizmi, aşırı sağ ideolojisinin ulusal sınırları aşmasını ve bölgeler arası bir dayanışma elde etmesini sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Popülizm, Vladimir Putin, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Depolitizasyon.

моим родителям, Тамаре и Леонарду,
с любовью и благодарностью

и коту Сойеру,
которого очень не хватает

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
FN	Front National
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During my master's studies, I have observed a tendency in political science literature to examine political phenomena through the binary categories of democracy/non-democracy which have limited explanatory power. As a way of going beyond such bifurcation, many scholars have come to view (de-)democratisation as a process (a view which allows to identify degrees of democracy, as opposed to its absence or presence). While such a view does have more explanatory power, the influence of the initial binary of democracy/non-democracy can still be seen in comparative studies: democracies are most often compared with other democracies and authoritarian regimes are compared with other authoritarian regimes. Assuming that the logic of the selection of cases is based on the similarity of qualities, I would argue that there are convincing reasons to compare democracies and non-democracies, at least because they are similar in terms of one particular element, which is *authority*. When one asserts that democracy differs from authoritarianism, one cannot be taken to mean that in authoritarianism there is *too much* 'authority' while in democracy there is an *absence* of it. Forms of government differ in the ways authority is structured and exercised: in 'democracies' authority is decentralised and plural, while in 'authoritarian' regimes authority is concentrated in a single leader (or a political centre represented by the leader). Hence, I have a conviction that a comparison of seemingly different political contexts – such as Western Europe and Russia – may yield fruitful results in terms of further illuminating the (re-)production of political authority. I chose populism as an axis of such a comparison because it is a relevant and contentious subject in political science literature. I hold the belief that right-wing populism is a type of a democratic *façade* for conservative ideology which diminishes the political authority of citizens. I am interested in shedding light on how political actors which represent *the right* in

qualitatively different political complexes (re-)produce their authority. Having set out the main problematique of this thesis, I will now turn to an elaboration of my methodological approach.

It would be apt for this work on populism to begin with a *cliché*, namely that the concept of populism is too ambiguous to be able to hold up as an adequate tool of political analysis (Panizza, 2005; Müller, 2016; Moffitt, 2020). Its ambiguity stems from a myriad of definitions in general and an absence of "ontological tools" to grapple with the political and ideological realities in particular (Laclau, 2005). Scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that the term populism should altogether be retired as a tool of analysis (Roxborough, 1984). Nevertheless, the articles and books employing the concept continue to mushroom in the academic environment. The term populism has even outgrown its academic greenhouse and has branched out to popular discourse. The term was used in 300 articles published in The Guardian in 1998, in 2015 the term was mentioned in 1,000 articles, and in 2016 the number has almost doubled (Rooduijn, 2018). Furthermore, "populism" was declared word of the year 2017 by the *Cambridge Dictionary*. Vernacular use of the term populism in the media has contributed to a random application of the term to various actors in a pejorative way (March, 2017: 277). As for the academia, the phenomenon of populism gained a reputation of being hostile to any attempts at theorisation (Musihin, 2013: 151). Notwithstanding these developments, the salience of the term in the contemporary political discourses is a testament to populism's semantic construction of the ideological reality. Moreover, populism can be interpreted as a political concept that "aids our understanding of the development of the logic of ideologies and political parties" (Musihin, 2013: 151).

Whether in pejorative or analytical usage, the term and concept of populism are operationalised to interpret the contemporary political realities in various regions of the world. As a result of this, a high number of definitions have arisen contradicting each other, parallel to several theoretical approaches that stand in tension with one another. The theoretical dissonance can perhaps be most clearly seen in the comparison of contemporary Western European and Russian experiences of populism. While the concept of populism is used to explain the political complexes of both regions, comparison of these two cases shows that the content, form, and function of populism differ to such an extent that one can speak of several populisms,

thereby undermining the singularity of the concept. Populism in Western Europe most often manifests itself through oppositional parties and it seeks to challenge the political establishment (Taggart, 1995). Populism in Russia is most clearly expressed in the politics of the establishment whose further entrenchment it seeks (Baranov, 2015). The differences can be hypothesised to be stemming from the divergent political and ideological realities of Western Europe and Russia – Western Europe is characterised by a democratic form of government with democratic institutions while Russia is characterised by an authoritarian form of government that imitates democratic institutions. Paul Taggart notes that "populism has an essentially chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment in which it occurs" (2000: 4), and Nadia Urbinati emphasises that "[populism's] language and content are imbued with the political culture of the society in which it arises" (2019b: 114). While the emergence of populism is often a result of crises in politics, populism's flexibility (Wejnert, 2014: 156) also makes it an effective political tool used by a wide spectrum of politicians in different political contexts. Studying populism in contemporary Western Europe and Russia by highlighting the similarities and differences between these cases can help us to clarify the concept of populism and to explain the salience of modern populist politics in the respective regions and beyond. The present study will attempt to do so by examining the populism of Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, and Vladimir Putin in a comparative framework. I will examine these cases through the categories of form, content, and function. These three categories correspond to the three dominant approaches in populism studies: the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategy Approach.

The present thesis seeks to achieve three aims. The first aim is to contribute to the closing of the gap in cross-regional populist studies by including Russia in the comparative analysis. The second aim is to contribute to the systematisation of analysis of contemporary Russian populism. The third aim is to contribute to the clarification of the concept of populism in global studies by testing the applicability of a mixed approach based on a categorisation of the recent approaches to the study of populism.

This work proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 will set forth the subject matter of this thesis. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the main theoretical threads of

populism and democracy and examine the recent dominant approaches to the study of populism, namely, the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategic Approach. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of populisms that can be registered in Western Europe (*Front National* and *Partij voor de Vrijheid*) and Russia (Putin's regime). Here, a juxtaposition of populism(s) in two political complexes – the liberal democracy and the authoritarian state – will be made *via* the categories of content, form, and function. I will conclude that last chapter with a comparative discussion of the content, form, and function of populism in Western Europe and Russia. In the concluding chapter, I will provide an overview of the thesis, briefly discuss the analytical distinction of content, form, and function of populism in light of the findings of this thesis, and suggest areas for further research.

1.1. Conceptual Categorisation: Content, Form and Function of Populism

The present study is of comparative nature, and it combines political theory with empirical cases. In adopting an empirical approach, it employs typologies of populism. Critical scholars of populism have observed that typologies are only useful in political analysis when they are formed around a conceptual core that binds them together (Panizza, 2005: 2). This insight is ever more significant given the methodological heterogeneity of the academic literature on populism. Hence, the present thesis adopts a symptomatic reading of populism that provides a conceptual core to make the empirical analysis consistent. The symptomatic reading views populism as a discourse that symbolically divides society into two groups, 'the people' and 'the other', and establishes an antagonistic tension between them. This tension will be assumed to be the vital force of populism. It is important to mention that there are several ways of dividing a society into two abovementioned groups. One way would be to ascribe fixed content and thus an essential meaning to the antagonistic groups. Together with a questionable explanatory power, such an approach would be fruitless in a comparative endeavour. Instead, the present work recognises that 'the people' is both a signifier and a signified, and the relationship between its form and content is contingent on the political context of a given region. This constitutes the conceptual core of the present work, the aim of which is to discover similarities and differences in the emergence of populist antagonism in

Western Europe and Russia and to trace its impact on governance in the respective regions.

The thesis at hand analyses populism in contemporary Western Europe and Russia by operationalising three categories: content, form, and function. This categorisation corresponds to the three recent and dominant approaches in the study of populism (De la Torre, 2019; Moffitt, 2020), namely the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategic Approach. The first category – content – encompasses the ideologies and ideological fragments manifest in populist phenomena. These contents will be analysed through the Ideational Approach that studies populism as a thin ideology by identifying "individual or collective political actors" and the "full ideologies with which populists associate themselves" (Stanley, 2008: 108). The Ideational Approach views the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' to be central to populism. Scholars favouring this approach tend to exclude the populism in Russia based on the argument that the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' is not present in Russian domestic politics. I argue that while this antagonism is not as apparent and straightforward as in the Western European case, it nevertheless exists.[1] The second category – form – considers populism as a political logic that "[i]nvariably involves the performative construction of a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands" (Ostiguy, Panizza, & Moffitt, 2021: 26). This logic will be examined through the Discursive Approach to the study of populism which is based on Laclau's theory. Laclau's framework considers populism as a movement from below. Because of this, populism in power (as is the case in Russia) is largely neglected by the Discursive Approach. Nevertheless, I argue that Laclau's formal analysis allows us to understand populism not *only* when it ascends 'from below', but also when it descends as 'from above', thus making it apt for the analysis of both the Western European case *and* the Russian case. The third category – function – focuses on the actions of populist leaders and considers their impact on democracy understood as procedural and institutional arrangements as per Robert H. Dahl. The ways of governing of populist leaders will be considered through the operationalisation of the Political-Strategic Approach that views

[1] In sections 3.1.2 and 3.2.2, I argue that this antagonism exists as a domestic extension of the antagonism between Russia as a 'state-civilisation' and the 'decadent' liberalism of the 'West'.

populism as a "political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power" (Weyland, 2001: 14).

By introducing this categorisation, I do not pretend that it is clear-cut and non-mutually exclusive. Instead, I set forth this categorisation as a theoretical sketch with the purpose of simplifying a complicated theoretical and methodological debate. Responding to the need to foster a dialogue between different methodologies in the study of populism (Mudde, 2017), rather than choosing one of the dominant approaches to compare populism in Western Europe and Russia, the present thesis will attempt to blend the abovementioned approaches. Furthermore, one can draw a logical continuation between the categories by first tracing the ideological substance of populism in a given context, then analysing how populists employ these ideological elements to create new identities, and finally considering how the strategies of acquiring or maintaining political power are shaped by the particular ideological elements and the logic of discourse employed.

One critical strength of blending the approaches mentioned above is that it allows one to arrive at a more holistic picture of a country's experience of populism. This can especially be evident in a comparative study of country cases. If one considers only the ideological content of populism in different countries then one can arrive at a misleading conlusion that the populisms under examination are very different. However, by also considering the function of populist politics, one can arrive at the conclusion that the populisms under examination are in fact very similar, even though they have different content. For example, the issue of migration is salient in the populism of Western Europe, while in Russia the issue of migration is underemphasised. By considering this issue only through the lens of the Ideational Approach, one can arrive at the conclusion that the populisms of Western Europe and Russia are different. However, if one considers this issue through the lens of the Political-Strategic Approach, one will see that populists in Western Europe employ the issue of migration as a way of attaining power, while in Russia the populism in power avoids mentioning the issue of migration as a way of further strengthening its power. Hence, the populisms of Western Europe and Russia are in fact very similar in their different treatment of the issue of migration, because they both approach it as a means of either acquiring or consolidating power. This brings us to another critical strength of blending the three approaches mentioned above: it allows one to

be more sensitive to the specific context of political units under examination. This is particularly significant in a comparative study of different political complexes. For example, the issue of migration in Western Europe emerges against the backdrop of nation-states that are more ethnically homogeneous with smaller populations (Germany: 83.24 million; France: 67.39 million). As for the issue of migration in Russia, it appears in a setting of a spatially large and ethnically heterogeneous federation with a relatively large population (144.1 million). Finally, another strength of blending the three approaches mentioned above is that it allows one to compare cases that have diverging political systems such as liberal democracies and hybrid regimes.

In terms of concept formation, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser emphasise that classical categorisation enhances conceptual clarity and facilitates the formation of cumulative knowledge, especially when it comes to comparative approaches to populism (2012). Classical categorisation entails the identification of a common denominator of emergence of a given phenomenon. In this light, several attributes of populism can be chosen as necessary and sufficient. Classical categorisation is opposed to radial categorisation that is derived from Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance. In line with Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's suggestion, classical categorisation will be operationalised throughout the present study. That is, this thesis relies on the assumption that the main defining quality of populism is the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other'.

Given the gravity of the question of the relationship between populism and democracy – and the tension between the people and popular sovereignty – in theoretical debates on populism, the present study will survey the dominant approaches to populism together with the concepts of democracy that they interact with. The lack of clarity in terms of normative commitment to the study of populism has previously been underlined by scholars of the subject (Abromeit, 2017). The present work aims to be as rigorous as possible to clarify the relationship between the approaches to the study of populism and their commitment to various understandings of democracy, while also illuminating the nature of the tension between populism and democracy.

1.2. Geographical Scope

Western Europe and Russia constitute the geographical regions under examination in this thesis. These areas were selected because academic literature registers the salience of populism in both of these regions while also acknowledging the lack of comparative analysis between them. Notwithstanding the salience of populism in multiple regions of the world, the academic literature is largely limited to the study of individual cases of populism (Wodak, Khosravinik, & Mral, 2013), with comparative studies being limited to the bounds of a single region (Bernhard, 2019). But even when it comes to the study of single cases, Tipaldou and Casula note that "Russia has so far been widely neglected compared to discussion of populist movements in Western Europe or Latin America" (2019: 353). Furthermore, Barr writes that "[t]he literature [on populism] would benefit from additional comparative analyses, particularly across regions and historic periods" (2019). Responding to these views, the present study aims to contribute to the filling of a gap in literature on populism by including Russia in the cross-regional comparative perspective on populism. While plenty theoretical and empirical case studies of populism have been conducted in the last two decades, little academic attention has been paid to a comparative cross-regional analysis of the phenomenon. Even less attention has been paid to comparative studies that include the former Soviet Union (March, 2017: 276). However, as Ostiguy asserts, "[t]o understand populism adequately, it is essential not to be cognitively restricted to Eurocentric or even Latin America–centric readings of the phenomena, but be global and truly cross-regional" (Ostiguy, Panizza, & Moffitt, 2021: 4). The same point is emphasised by Federico Finchelstein: "[p]opulism is a global and transnational phenomenon and yet many scholars emphasise the European and American dimensions (2017: xii).

Given the global dimension of the debate on populism, the apparent lack of comparative cross-regional analysis is surprising at first glance. The regional isolation of the studies of populism can be explained by the excess of definitions of populism and their frequent inconsistencies with each other. In other words, the lack of a consensus on the defining properties of populism prevents the production of comparative cross-regional studies. This impasse can be addressed *via* the categories of content, form, and function. In terms of content, the ideological components of populism differ significantly according to a given region's political, cultural, and

historical context. These dynamics shape the ideological content of a given region's populism(s). In terms of form, populism manifests itself differently depending on the relationship between state and society in each region. When the form of populism is considered through Laclau's discursive approach, it is possible to say that the construction of 'the people' – through the discursive production of emptiness – shows significant variation depending on the pre-existing discursive horizons of a given region. In terms of function, populism can be viewed as a means of either challenging the political establishment of a given context or legitimising its *status quo*.

1.3. Temporal Scope

The populism analysed in this study belongs to the contemporary period. Contemporary is understood as beginning with the 21st century and spanning the following two decades. For this reason, the developments forming the roots of populism in 19th century Russia and Europe and the consequential transformations that took place in the politically turbulent 20th century are beyond the scope of analysis.

The present thesis recognises that, as per Finchelstein's assertion, populism cannot be understood without appreciating its complex history, in particular its genetic connection to classical fascism (2017: 251). Nevertheless, to include a century of political developments relevant to populism is to go beyond the scope and focus of the study at hand. This work will attempt to do justice to the complicated history of populism by including the insights of scholars of populism in history where deemed necessary to the illumination of the subject at hand.

1.4. Research Design

The French *Front National* (FN) under Marine Le Pen and the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) under Geert Wilders in Western Europe and the Vladimir Putin regime in Russia constitute the cases of the present thesis. The right-wing populist parties FN and PVV were selected as representative cases of populism in Western Europe because they are considered to be classic cases of European populism in the academic literature on this subject (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 425). Furthermore, FN and PVV are known as close populist allies that have united into a

pan-European alliance with each other in 2013.[2] Putin's regime in Russia was selected as the case to be compared with FN and PVV. The reason for this is the apparent lack of understanding of the relations between Russia and the European far right, as recognised in academic literature (Shekhovtsov, 2018: xxviii). What is more, some scholars have characterised Russia and Europe's far right as "strange bedfellows" (Polyakova, 2014: 36). The link between them has been described as "fatal love" by others (Braghiroli and Makarychev, 2016: 6). In more substantial terms, it has been pointed out that there is consonance between the European right-wing populists and Russia's Putin in terms of their embrace of conservative values, national sovereignty, and anti-Americanism (Braghiroli and Makarychev, 2016: 6–14). Marine Le Pen, the leader of FN, made her admiration of Putin particularly apparent when she said that "[Putin] has managed to restore pride and contentment to a great nation that had been humiliated and persecuted for 70 years" (Le Pen, 2011, cited in Braghiroli and Makarychev, 2016: 9). Geert Wilders, the leader of PVV, has also expressed his approval of Putin in the following way:

> I think the strength … of Mr. Putin is that [he] believe[s] that the interests of [his] country go first. Mr. Putin goes for 'Russia First', for the interests of the Russian people. I wish that we had in Europe and in my country, the Netherlands, the leader who would say … 'Holland First' or 'Europe First'. And we don't have that. (*Russia Today*, 2017)

This ideological affinity between Le Pen, Wilders, and Putin constitutes the main logic of case election in this thesis.

Literature review will constitute the method in this study. Together with making references to articles in the digital media, I will review the academic literature on populism in Western Europe and Russia in English and in Russian. While conducting the review, I will attempt to go beyond the paradigm of democracy/non-democracy analysis that is prevalent in comparative political studies. As Tipaldou and Casula write, "The dominant paradigm for looking at politics in Russia has been nationalism or (non-)democracy, despite the central role that populism has been acknowledged to play in neo-authoritarian regimes" (Tipaldou & Casula, 2019: 353).

[2] For the *BBC* news article, please see: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24924372

The present thesis adopts the Most Different Systems Design because Western Europe and Russia have qualitatively different political systems. The aim of the comparative endeavour of thesis is, as Giovanni Sartori once wrote, to "discover deeper or fundamental similarities below the surface of secondary diversities" (1970: 1035). Hence, outlining the similarities and differences of populism in qualitatively different political units constitute the main objective of the present work. The present work also aims to make theoretical, empirical, and analytical contributions to the cross-regional comparative study of populism. Rather than making sense of regional political developments through the lens of populism or vice versa, an attempt will be made to shed light on the formative interaction between the content, form, and function in two divergent political complexes – Western Europe and Russia.

1.5. A Brief Overview of the Cross-Regional Studies of Populism

Contemporary studies of populism are mostly positioned within the framework of liberal democracy (Pappas, 2019). Regimes that are characterised by various degrees of authoritarianism are largely held outside of the comparative effort based on the claim that populism does not exist under authoritarian conditions due to a lack of democratic institutions and procedures. However, the populist traits exhibited by political actors in liberal democracies are in many ways and on many levels are similar to the traits that can be observed under authoritarian settings.

As has been mentioned above, the plethora of definitions of populism – arising by means of carrying out case studies of individual countries or regions – has hampered cross-regional analysis of populism. While significant attention has been dedicated to various regions of the world – in particular North and South America and Eastern and Western Europe – most of the literature on the subject examines the regions on a case-by-case basis with little cross-regional research being conducted as a result. Perhaps the most prominent cross-regional comparative analysis is a study conducted by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) that compares contemporary Europe and Latin America in order to clarify the confusion in regard to whether populism is *inclusionary* or *exclusionary*. They arrive at the conclusion that while both regions exhibit common characteristics, populism in Europe is *exclusive* while populism in Latin America is *inclusive* – in material, political and symbolic terms. This study is important in that it both clarifies theoretical problems in the studies of populism and opens the path to further research. One instance of such further research

has determined that colonialism is an important key to understanding the development of *inclusive* and *exclusive* forms of populism, thus further illuminating how different groups designated by the signifier 'people' are articulated (Filc, 2015). Here, the positive role that cross-regional comparative analysis plays in understanding populism better can be clearly seen.

While cross-regional studies of European and Latin American populism are few, they are still part of a dominant approach to studying populism. This approach is characterised by analysing mass electoral politics, with European populism being identified as a far-right challenge to liberal democracy (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018) and Latin American populism with left-wing actors (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Against this dominant approach, one of the other cross-regional studies of populism attempts to go beyond the juxtaposition of Western Europe and Latin America and to address the historically diverse manifestations of populism (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017). The novelty of this study resides in its inclusion of populism in mature democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian settings. By comparing the disparate cases, the study provides an insight into the degree to which global and regional processes inform the shape and outlook of populism. This work, much like the previously mentioned cross-regional study by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, opens the path for further research. While it addresses the question of how regional context shapes populism emerging in a given region, it does not tackle the question of how populism affects the regional context. Expanding on the cross-regional comparative frameworks of the abovementioned studies, it can be analytically fruitful to analyse the effects populism has on a political system and vice-versa in a comparative framework.

The political crises in Western Europe have given rise to populism that challenges the political establishment and focuses on issues such as immigration, taxes, crime, and nationalism (Taggart, 2000). The political crises in Russia enabled the formation of a populism that may be seen as a facade mechanism of recruitment and legitimation for the political establishment (Morini, 2013). Given this, it can be repeated that depending on the region under examination, populism differs in terms of content, form, and function. Notwithstanding these differences, one critical similarity between the populisms of Western Europe and Russia – and indeed the phenomenon of contemporary populism in general – is ideological opposition to

political liberalism with a corresponding attempt to establish a form of modern democratic politics in opposition to liberal democracy (Pappas, 2019).

CHAPTER 2

POPULISM IN THEORY

The purpose of this chapter is not to develop a new concept of populism, but rather to provide an overview of the conceptual debates relevant to the comparative endeavour of the present study. The concept of populism dates to 19th century Russian and American political developments; trails into the 20th century revolutions, wars, and post-war reconstructions; and culminates in the populist boom of the 21st century with the right-wing political forces enforcing themselves on the global politics. Given that the present work is of a cross-regional comparative nature, it is important to reiterate Dani Filc's argument that "populism emerges as the complex interaction between the structure of specific societies, the characteristics of the political system and the emergence of struggles on the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups" (2015: 278). The last point assumes that the category of 'the people' lacks ontological content and only emerges in competitive nature with its antagonistic opposite, the category of 'the elite' (Musihin, 2013). This argument concerning the indeterminacy of categories undergirds the discussion in this and the following chapters.

As has been previously mentioned, the definition of populism is varied and contentious. Scholars add or remove, emphasise, or downplay different elements within a particular framework that they build in order to accommodate their academic research. Yet, there is a core element that is agreed upon, even after decades of debate. In May 1967, a thematic conference consisting of prominent political scientists was held at the London School of Economics and Political Science dedicated to populism. In the concluding notes, Isaiah Berlin summarises that one of the main common elements of the concepts of populism is the notion of 'the people', in particular the people who have been left out (Berlin et al., 1968: 175). These people are 'the true people' that have been damaged by an elite, an enemy. Berlin further

adds that the content of the people depends on the region under examination, a point that is critical to the thesis at hand. After more than half a century of debate, the common point of various definitions of populism remains to be the antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the elite". There is also a growing concern in contemporary discussions that has to do with the need to identify actual populists and distinguish them from actors that criticise elites, but do not necessarily subscribe to universalising part of a population as "the people." This is indeed a prime task for a contemporary theory of populism in Europe, according to Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 98). Given the abovementioned centrality of 'the people' in debates on populism, it is necessary to consider the formation of 'the people' and the mechanisms underlying this process. The thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a reasonable point of departure due to references to the 'general will' in contemporary populist studies. Rousseau's thought is evoked particularly when it comes to issues such as the formation of 'the people', the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other', and the establishment of the link between a populist leader and 'the people'. Hence, I will first consider the relevant parts of Rousseau's work before continuing with the discussion of populism.

2.1. The General Will as the Kernel of Populism?

One of the most influential sources of the theory and practice of populism is Rousseau's thought, in particular his work titled '*The Social Contract'*. Rousseau's writings are so influential that those who advocate political elitism today must legitimate their position in terms of why it is in the public interest for the few to govern without the oversight and consent of the many (Tannenbaum, 2012: 205). Rousseau's thought gains even more significance and relevance to populism considering that one of populism's main characteristics is not the appeal to majoritarian rule but the demand for the authentic representation of 'the people's interest (Musihin, 2013: 164).

Rousseau, in his search for a more just society, favours the collective over the individual (Dunn, 2002). Admiring the ancient philosophers with their values and institutions, Rousseau believes that Machiavelli's advancement of the self-seeking individual, as much as the egoistic individuals of Hobbes and Locke, only leads to injustice. Rousseau goes towards a new form of community, one which is characterised by political and social democracy (Tannenbaum, 2012: 192). In this form of association, the common good would prevail over the private goals of

individuals, and the individuals would be bound to the collective in interdependence. While the sovereign authority in Hobbes' and Locke's thought rests on an unjust basis due to it being enforced, Rousseau's sovereign authority rests on mutual consent and thus attains legitimacy (Rousseau, 2002: 165). The sovereign authority belongs to the community that consists of individuals who gave up their rights by agreement. The government's *raison d'être*, then, is to execute the will of this community, or 'the people'. This finds a direct echo in contemporary politics as the main legitimising element of present populist parties and governments. Notions of popular sovereignty are at the centre of populist theologies (Finchelstein, 2017). But what exactly is the will of the community (or 'the people')? And what is the substance of this will?

2.1.1. Formation of Rousseau's General Will

The General Will, or *Volonté Générale*, is one of Rousseau's main contributions to political philosophy and the kernel of the theories of populism and their practical embodiments. This concept provides the answer to the problematic of individuals giving up their rights while remaining as free as before and to the issue of reconciliation between the welfare of individuals and collective welfare. Rousseau's answer consists in the following: when a person gives up her rights, she does so not to a body but to a sovereign authority that is seated in the community by which it was created (Rousseau, 2002: 163). Thus, the sovereign is a collective and organic public person which transcends the individuals that are part of it as it unites them in harmony. Rousseau's sovereign is created through the process of the general will that establishes the social contract, stands behind it, and determines the laws.

It can be claimed that the General Will constitutes the point of origin for a just society and its main condition of sustainability. It becomes clear that in order to illuminate the logic behind any political imagination which subscribes to the principle of government by the people one needs to examine the dynamics behind the process of formation of the general will and its various functions. As Susan Dunn describes:

> Hovering strangely above and beyond the wills of all, the General Will is ''always constant, unalterable, and pure,'' always mirroring perfectly the common good of all members of the community. The ultimate authority—and ultimate sovereignty—thus reside not really in the people, who may err in their estimation of the General Will, unable to transcend their private

> wills, but rather in the infallible General Will itself—the power of Reason, the enlightened collective moral conscience. (Dunn, 2002: 19)

The transcendental and unifying nature of the General Will has to be emphasised here as it raises questions as to how exactly this process can be enacted. What is being transcended in this process? If the process unites the individuals – and even further, as Rousseau proposes, if it makes a community rather than just a collective out of the individuals involved – then what is (are) the unifying element(s)? It appears that what is being transcended is the reason of individuals involved, or, perhaps more precisely, their capacity to arrive at a given truth. In this case, the truth is the form of association that would allow its members to abide by their own will while remaining as free as they were in the state of nature and at the same time to be in unity with other members (Rousseau, 2002: 163). Indeed, this is the problem to which Rousseau's Social Contract seeks a solution. The need for transcendence of reason becomes inevitable as Rousseau believes that reason leads to human enslavement (Tannenbaum, 2012: 187) and that along with language and speech it has damaged 'natural freedom' (2012: 190). Followed by reason, science is condemned as a basis of an immoral society by Rousseau, although with the acknowledgement that it is instrumental in improving the human condition (2012: 191). What is beyond reason? It should be feeling. Rousseau is convinced that feeling must be substituted for reason in order to understand and cure the ills of human affairs (2012: 187). Closely tied to feeling, compassion is believed by Rousseau to be what separates humans from animals (2012: 188). Rousseau's infamous words "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 2002: 156) allude to his understanding of the functions of reason and feeling in human affairs. Humans are free in the natural state because feeling is the driver of their actions. When reason emerges in the movement of civilisation – with the egoistic individualism of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke driving the change – humans come to be in chains. Incidentally, feeling and emotion are crucial elements of populism that is emphasised among other elements that make up its complexity (Gherghina & Soare, 2013: 7).

Having established the centrality of feeling to Rousseau's thought, I will now consider the crucial role it plays in the process of the formation of the General Will. The General Will is discovered through a process of spontaneous discussion and decision making carried out by citizens. A set of shared values emerge as a result of

this process. The emerging values are primitive and beyond reason but are arrived at by rational means and are reasonable to ordinary people (Tannenbaum, 2012: 195). In other words, reason dictates the form and procedure in order to allow feeling to determine the content of the social bond. It appears that it is through feeling that a community arrives at an agreed definition and standard of justice, common good, and public interest. What is also critical is that the General Will is always right; and given that the main function of the General Will is to establish the social contract, to stand behind it, and to determine the enacted laws, the importance of feeling as its basis becomes ever more significant. What becomes clear is that with Rousseau, feeling becomes elevated as a ground for legitimacy of authority, although not at the expense of reason, but rather on par with it. Furthermore, it can be said that reason provides the form of the debate, while feeling provides its content, and subsequently, the two facilitate the emergence of a free society and a legitimate authority. This point will be touched upon in the next chapter as it gains significance in the discussions of contemporary populism due to reason being effectively disabled in the contemporary framework, with feeling being the main operational element. Thus, Rousseau attempts to replace a political system rooted in early modern materialism with a system that builds on the idealism and organicism of the ancients. Doing so, he also replaces the abstract reason of the ancients with patriotic feeling, one that guides the masses to the collective unity of citizens. Tannenbaum points out that Rousseau joins populism with a vision of organic politics (2012: 205).

As has been established above, the General Will owes its formation to a rational discussion of feelings. But what generalises the will? The answer Rousseau provides is riddled with ambiguity and indeed leaves the debate open-ended for the next generations of political thinkers. Rousseau asserts that the answer deals not with the number of voices but rather with the common interest that unites them (Rousseau, 2002: 175). Phrased differently, it is not a question of quantity – as is the case with the Lockean majority – but rather of quality. Rousseau, here, differentiates between the general will and the will of all (2002: 172). While the general will has to do with the common interest, the will of all regards private interests and is a sum of particular wills. To Rousseau, particular wills and private interests raise questions in regard to rectitude and lead the path to corruption, deception and "evil". As for the general will that is based on the common choice, it always tends to the public good. Rousseau

asserts that the general will emerges when adequately informed citizens deliberate with each other without communicating among themselves so as to prevent the formation of factions. This deliberation appears to be the condition under which a "great number of slight differences" can emerge (Rousseau, 2002: 173). In turn, the general will results from these slight differences, the resolution of which is "always good". So, to answer the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, in order for the general will to be genuinely general, it must reflect the maximum number of differences, each represented by separate individual voices. But what happens when a particular will is represented by more than one voice/citizen, or, in other words, when the difference is minimised due to two or more citizens holding the same particular will? Here, Rousseau suggests that, it is possible to arrive at the general will by taking away from the overlapping wills the "minuses and pluses which cancel one another" (Rousseau, 2002: 172). This point raises questions in regard to how exactly these wills are to be cancelled out. Tannenbaum points out that Rousseau does not address the question of elimination of overlapping private wills, nor does he address the question of how the citizens are to know the difference between the wills (2012: 195). Tannenbaum further points out that Rousseau's thoughts on the matter imply that after the cancellation is carried out, a "majority of remaining votes, even if a minority of the original total, represents the current general will." Even more significant for the subject of populism is that in a case where all but one citizen has voted selfishly, the "majority" of one will have discovered the general will. Then, it is possible for the 'majority of one' – with the operationalisation of feeling – to determine the public good and hence to legislate towards a free society and even to legitimately "force" those who refuse to obey the general will to "be free" (Rousseau, 2002: 166).

2.1.2. Populism's Disfigurement of Rousseau's General Will

Rousseau provides a theoretical ground that makes it possible for citizens to remain free while obeying the law. The condition of this possibility is that citizens must vote with the common good in mind – or their private wills must be cancelled out – as a result of which the general will comes forth. This particular moment is in fact at the core of the relationship between people and popular sovereignty. This point is exemplified by Margaret Canovan:

> … [S]overeign people is an elusive entity, not to be equated simply with a majority vote at a particular time. Indeed, "the people" as an entity or group capable of exercising power is/are not readily available. Far from being a given, it/they has/have to be in some way constructed, mobilized or represented to be in a position either to wield power or be checked in doing so. The people as the population of individual citizens of a state do not in themselves add up to a collective agent. (Canovan, 2005: 88)

Rousseau's general will, together with the theoretical ambiguity of its formation, constitutes a conceptual building block for the scholars of populism. The concept of the general will is one of the main elements of many approaches to the study of populism, according to which, the link between populism and general will consists in populism's claim to represent and realise the will of the people. However, as Jan-Werner Müller points out, there is a significant difference between the populist representation of 'the people' and Rousseau's general will (2016: 29). For the latter, active participation by citizens is a necessary condition, as outlined in the paragraph above. As for the general will in the framework of populism, the populist leader indicates "the true will of the people", cleansed of elite machinations and propaganda (Musihin, 2013: 164). This will is a symbolic substance that is independent of citizens and their deliberation. In fact, populism without citizen participation is very much a possibility, if not a reality, because in the worldview of populism, the role of citizens is not to *debate* but to *ratify* what the populist leader has already identified as the genuine popular interest. Involvement in politics is viewed as corruption by populists, and the ideal state of affairs in the populist worldview consists of citizens living their lives while avoiding politics. This is what Taggart refers to as the "*unpolitics of populism*" as opposed to anti-politics or apoliticism (2018: 2). As Finchelstein notes, the populist leader *is* the will of the people and stands as a surrogate for the citizens in making all decisions (2017: xv). Given this critical insight into populism's disfigurement of Rousseau's general will, can one be vindicated for reformulating the infamous notion and suggesting that the modern populist leader forces their 'people' to be free? This problem leads one to consider the relationship between populism and democracy.

2.2. Problematisation of the Relationship between Populism and Democracy

There is a tendency in academic literature to view populism as harmful and inimical to democracy. As such, some scholars refer to populism as democratic illiberalism (Pappas, 2019: 2) and as a "symptom of democratic pathologies (Martinelli, 2016: 22). I view this position to be problematic because one can argue that populism is closely related to democracy, at least because both of these concepts refer to the same principle: both consider the people – *demos* or *populus* – to be the main source of political authority. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, viewing populism as incompatible with democracy means excluding non-democratic political units such as Russia from the comparative perspective.[3] In light of this, the purpose of this section is to emphasise the problematic relationship between populism and democracy and to show that populism is closely connected to the internal tension of democracy. Such a problematisation will allow us to go beyond the understanding of populism as something that is either exclusive to liberal democracy or inimical to democratic politics. As a result of this, the inclusion of authoritarian regimes in comparative populist studies can be rendered both possible and meaningful. Furthermore, this section highlights the tendency of populism to advocate for a *de-institutionalisation* of democracy on grounds of morality. This stems from the idea that bypassing political institutions and establishing a direct link between the leader and 'the people' is the true meaning of democracy. As will be seen in the third chapter, this is a common trait in both the populisms of Western Europe and Russia.

As has been established in the previous section on Rousseau's general will, central to populism is the question of 'the people' from whom the government derives its legitimacy. The previously mentioned tension between 'the people' and popular sovereignty – inherent in the conceptual core of populism – can be said to be derived

[3] The argument is that because populism is detrimental to democracy, it is something that a democratic regime needs to be purged of. Therefore, analysing populism in non-democratic and/or authoritarian regimes is considered to be meaningless because populism does not oppose non-democracy and *is* authoritarian itself. Against this perspective, I would argue that populism should not be limited to a strict consideration *vis-à-vis* the liberal-democratic institutions. Understanding ideas and logics of articulation of populism in authoritarian settings can be fruitful for illuminating populism in democratic settings. For even democracy and authoritarianism have a common element: the notion of authority. Be it the authority of a *demos* or a single leader claiming to represent the *demos*.

from an inherent tension of democracy. This tension can be analysed through Michael Oakeshott's distinction between 'the politics of faith' and 'the politics of scepticism'. The former views politics as a means of attaining perfection – religious or secular – in this world. The latter considers politics to be an instrument of keeping order and maintaining institutions. These two types of politics are in constant tension with each other and at the same time, they are inseparable in modern politics. Canovan asserts that democracy exists at the point of intersection between 'the politics of faith' and 'the politics of scepticism', or as Canovan labels them, "redemptive and pragmatic styles of politics" (1999: 9). 'Redemptive politics' is understood as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. 'Pragmatic politics' considers politics as resolving conflicts without violence. According to this framework, democracy promises salvation while ensuring peaceful resolution of conflicts. People are promised salvation when they take charge of their life but at the same time democracy is just a form of government. Democracy entails institutions but at the same time it harbours an *anti-institutional* impulse. The internal tension between these two faces of democracy is conducive of populist mobilisation. But what is the difference between populism and democracy?

Like populism that revolves around the formation of 'the people', democracy revolves around the question of the constitution of the 'demos' and the government that is derived from it. Referring to Claude Lefort, Canovan points out that "modern democracy has a hole at its centre, a stage on which we can imagine that special people appearing to make a new start" (2005: 90). Thus, democracy can be said to have an empty space as the locus of power. When a substantial image of 'the people' comes to occupy this locus, exclusion that is inimical to democracy emerges because of the homogenisation of 'the people' against 'the other' (Abts & Rummens, 2007). As Abts and Rummens point out, democracy is based on the idea of an open society based on diversity while populism revolves around an imagined collective identity that suppresses difference. Given its immediate identity between a leader and 'the people', populism opposes the idea of representation around which constitutional democracy revolves. Active citizenship that is central to democracy does not have a function when 'the people' directly express their will through a leader. Irrespective of geographical regions, the populist discourse criticises the division between the people and their leader (Gherghina & Soare, 2013: 7). This is accompanied by a

condemnation of constitutionalist interpretations that distance democracy from its etymological meaning as the power of the people. Thus, populism becomes a simplified form of democracy that is reflected in the populist disfigurement of Rousseau's *volonté générale* – mentioned in the previous section – with the popular acceptance of democracy as its core element. Having outlined the problematic relationship between democracy and populism, I will now turn to outlining the recent approaches to the study of populism.

2.3. Recent Approaches to the Study of Populism

A very large bulk of political science literature in recent decades is dedicated to the study of populism. Several dominant approaches have formed over the years: the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategic Approach. Each of these approaches has an underlying normative view on democracy. The Ideational Approach considers populism as inimical to liberal democracy, with the proponents of the approach identifying populism with illiberal politics. The Discursive Approach adopts a critical perspective on the nature of liberal democracy and views populism as conducive of radical forms of democracy. The Political-Strategic Approach views liberal democracy and its institutions as being under the threat of populist mobilisation, that we witness in recent times.

2.3.1. Populism as Content: Ideational Approach

The Ideational Approach to populism is one of the dominant approaches to studying the contemporary phenomenon of populism. The pioneer of this approach is Cas Mudde, who is also its major proponent. Mudde attempts to create a framework that would allow for an empirical study of populism and its consistent applicability in time and space. For this reason, Mudde adheres to Giovanni Sartori's approach of minimal definitions.

The Ideational Approach adopts the following approach to populism:

> [Populism is] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde, 2004: 543)

Mudde, with this definition, attempts to 'define the undefinable' while responding to what he believes to be the inadequacy of the two dominant interpretations of populism (Mudde, 2004: 542). The first interpretation views

populism as emotional and simplistic discourse. Its inadequacy stems from the complications that arise when it is operationalised in an empirical framework. The second interpretation considers populism as political opportunism and operationalises terms such as 'rational policies' and 'best options'. It is prone to relativism and for this reason it is limited as a theoretical tool.

There are three critical elements that can be found in Mudde's definition of populism and consequently in its utilisation by researchers adopting the Ideational Approach.

The first element is ideology. It has been firmly established in academic literature spanning more than a century that populism, with no regard to the space and time under subject, does not contain a coherent ideology (Aslanidis, 2015). Rather than constituting a coherent ideological whole, populism refers to a certain pattern of ideas that constitutes the populist ideology in a given context (Stanley, 2008: 100). In order to account for this characteristic of populism, proponents of the Ideational Approach borrow from Michael Freeden's morphological approach to ideology (1996). Freeden differentiates between 'thin' and 'thick', 'micro' and 'macro' ideologies and asserts that thin-centred ideology "severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by the deliberate removal and replacement of concepts" (Freeden, 1998: 750) thus allowing the populist subject to attach disparate ideas to an ideological core so as to effectively appeal to 'the people' under different political, cultural, social, and economic contexts and to offer them a set of solutions for socio-political issues. It is important to note that Freeden himself is against considering populism as a thin-centred ideology: "[a] thin-centred ideology implies that there is potentially more than the centre, but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive. It is emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred" (2016: 3).

The second element of the definition of populism adopted by the Ideational Approach is the existence of two antagonistic groups. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (2006) thought on 'imagined communities', it is important to note that this element has symbolic significance and does not necessarily have to represent the empirical reality. In other words, one can argue that people who do not fall into either of the two categories of 'pure people' and 'corrupt elite' (or 'the other) are simply not registered in the populist imagination. This point is important because it shows

that the content of the people can be formed according to the political conditions of a given period. The content of the 'corrupt elite' can also be moulded depending on the context. As such, the content can be of civilisational nature or based on an idea of a nation, or it can consist of identity politics or class struggles. Hence notions such as "social populism" (March, 2011) and "national populism" (Taguieff, 1995) can come to the fore. The antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite', or between 'us' and 'them', is constructed on the basis of morality and in Manichean terms (Mudde, 2017: 52). The main function of such a moral juxtaposition is that it categorically precludes any potential compromise with the 'evil elite' because otherwise the 'pure people' will become impure. This in turn means that the 'pure people' must remain in perpetual solidarity with the leader so as not to be corrupted. Furthermore, 'the people' are constructed as homogeneous. This point is reiterated by Müller who states that populism is characterised by a moralistic conception of politics that must distinguish between what is moral and what is immoral (2016: 18). Such morality is thus a key criterion by which a populist is distinguished from an anti-establishment actor, and homogeneity of 'the people' enables the populist to represent herself as leader of 'the people' and the realisation of their 'will'.

The third element of the minimal definition is the notion of general will that contributes further to the inseparability of people and leader. The notion of general will – loosely based on Rousseauian thought (Mudde, 2017: 53) – allows the articulation of the concepts of common sense and special interests. However, as has been argued in the previous section, populism disfigures Rousseau's general will. Therefore, it will be more correct to state that the Ideational Approach is based not on the general will, but on the will of the people (a term that Canovan uses). Nevertheless, within the framework built by the Ideational Approach, the populist leader is perceived to be acting in the interest of the people because the leader's policies stem from common sense. In turn, the populist leader's policies gain popular legitimacy. As a result, the leader becomes "the voice of the people" (*vox populi*) (Mudde, 2017: 53) and the safeguard of popular sovereignty. Policies that deviate from the common sense of the people are registered as representing special interests and are rendered corrupt and thus illegitimate. It is also worth noting that, according to the Ideational Approach, the notion of politics appears in a negative light in the populist imagination. While the leader's policies are framed as non-political (by

virtue of stemming from the common sense of 'the people'), policies that benefit specific groups are presented as political and thus illegitimate.

The definition of populism adopted by the proponents of the Ideational Approach is presented as a minimal definition that can accommodate the methodological requirements of a cross-regional analysis (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 149). In other words, this definition minimises conceptual confusion and it can be applied to a greater range of cases due to its few attributes. Furthermore, this approach allows for the analyses of cases of populism that vary in terms of spatial and temporal contexts. One prime example of such a cross-regional analysis is the study carried out by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser which compares populism in contemporary Latin America and Europe (2013). Mudde and Kaltwasser operationalise the Ideational Approach to compare four prototypical cases of populism – two cases in Latin American and two cases in Europe. The main concern of their study is to go beyond the regional isolation of studies of populism that result in inconsistent findings when compared with each other. As a result, Mudde and Kaltwasser arrive at two regional subtypes of populism – *inclusionary* populism of Latin American and *exclusionary* populism of Europe. The minimal definition adopted by Mudde and Kaltwasser considers both the supply- and the demand-side of the populist phenomenon. That is, while the populist leader is considered as an important protagonist of a given populist phenomenon, the leader is not exalted to the status of a prime determinant. The minimal definition assumes that the social groups, political entrepreneurs, and their emotional and rational motives give shape to the populist phenomenon under examination, thereby having greater explanatory power.

An important characteristic of the Ideational Approach is that 'the people' does not have a static ontic content. Its content is derived from the opposition to the antagonistic 'elite', or 'the other'. This ontological fluidity facilitates the construction of 'the people'. The content and quality of 'the people' as a political being is derived from the idea of popular sovereignty (Musihin, 2013: 163). However, the potential methodological advantage – that is, a wider spatial and temporal comparability of cases – of the Ideational Approach stemming from this characteristic is undermined by the main elements of this approach. There are three important points related to this matter: homogeneity of 'the people', morality, and thin-centredness.

Homogeneous 'people' are rare and moral framings are only one of the many ways of constructing an antagonism between the two groups (Katsambekis, 2020: 16). Furthermore, the thin-centred quality of populism within the Ideational Approach assumes the need to co-exist with a full-fledged ideology in a given context – otherwise, the definition of populism loses meaning. The presupposition hints at the existence of a fixed content, simultaneously undermining the Ideational Approach's claim that the ontic content of 'the people' is derived from the opposition to 'the elite'. Furthermore, such presuppositions preclude the complicated construction of 'the people' and its mechanisms from being accounted for, thus hindering – rather than enabling – the deepening of insight of comparative research on the populist phenomena. Moreover, as has been mentioned in the beginning of this section, the Ideational Approach builds on Sartori's methodological body of thought. In particular, it adopts Sartori's understanding of dichotomous concepts – the either/or concepts. As a result, the proponents of the Ideational Approach largely view populism in binary terms, i.e., something either is populist or is not populist. This inevitably leads to a lack of attempts at the understanding of the degrees of populism. The following section will demonstrate how the Discursive Approach delivers a convincing answer to these theoretical limits.

2.3.2. Populism as Form: Discursive Approach

The term discursive analysis can entail several different methodologies in social sciences. For example, approaches such as the critical discourse theory analyse the rhetoric and expressions of social actors. While such approaches which are based on content analysis *are* heavily influenced by Laclau's theory, the Discursive Approach used in the present thesis is different from them. In the Discursive Approach, the term discourse refers to "a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated" (Torfing, 1999: 85). In other words, here, the focus is on signifiers and their relation to each other which give rise to the production of meaning. It can be said that this approach did not enter the mainstream of populism research because of the abstract quality of Laclau's writing which is oftentimes referred to as philosophical prose (Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021: 21). As a result, proponents of the Discursive Approach simplify the terms and concepts in their employment of Laclau's theoretical framework. Rather than summarising these references, I would like to proceed by considering Laclau's latest

work '*The Populist Reason'* (which revolves around the concept of populism) and to explicate the elements that have come to constitute the Discursive Approach.

As has already been mentioned, the Discursive Approach in the study of populism finds its origin in Laclau's theorisation of populism. The question of the constitution of populist subjects within an antagonistic relation between 'the people' and 'the other' takes centre stage in his work. However, the said constitution focuses not on the contents of populism in general or 'the people' in particular, but on the articulation of political demands by populist actors. This is the point of departure from the Ideational Approach outlined above (De Cleen, Glynos, & Mondon, 2021: 157). The Ideational Approach views populist politics as driven by the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' and directed by the claim to represent the will of the people. In contrast to this, the Discursive Approach focuses on the discursive construction of the antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite'. This approach also examines how populist actors claim legitimate representation of 'the people'. Laclauian discourse theory shifts the emphasis from *content* to *form* of populism (Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021: 24). This approach is formal in nature, does not ascribe *a priori* determined normative content to populism, and focuses on how populist discourse forms our understanding of the social reality. As Laclau argues:

> The concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation—the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic—independently of the actual contents that are articulated. … Most of the attempts at defining populism have tried to locate what is specific to it in a particular ontic content and, as a result, they have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an "intuition" which cannot be translated into any conceptual content. (Laclau, 2005: 44)

'The people' emerge through the discursive production of emptiness. Laclau, together with Chantal Mouffe, define discourses as 'structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements' (1985). Based on this, populist political symbols carry significance in terms of creating the emptiness that brings about a performative act which creates the populist subject. One may notice that three elements undergird Laclau's theoretical approach to the study of populism.

The first element is discourse, by which Laclau understands 'any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role (2005: 68). These elements are constituted through the relational complex, and this process of constitution is characterised by a differential relation. In other words, elements emerge not by means of a positive definition but by a negative differentiation, i.e., something *is* in relation to the other's existence. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's breakthrough in the field of linguistics, Laclau asserts that there are only two types of relations between elements: combination and substitution. An element owes its 'centrality' to the play of differences, and no privilege of one element over another is possible (2005: 69). By element, one can understand a group of people within a population on its way to become 'the people' in a differential relation to another group – 'the other'.

The second element is empty signifiers and hegemony, and it sheds light on how the differential relations give shape to elements (2005: 69). The empty signifier[4] is Laclau's response to the questions of the determination of the whole – within which the differential identities are constituted – and the possibility of 'centring' effects constituting a precarious totalising horizon. Each element or particularity within the differential interaction makes a reference to a totality. The totality, by definition, is all encompassing. In order to be differential, reference has to be made to an external totality, but such a totality is impossible. So, instead, reference is made to an excluded outside, or an element that is expelled by the totality in constitution of itself. In other words, a society can reach a sense of cohesion by demonising a section of the population. Laclau sees this point as problematic because "*vis-à-vis* the excluded element, all other differences are equivalent to each other" (2005: 70). Given that equivalence subverts difference, identity is formed as a result of the tension between the equivalential[5] and differential[6] logics. This comes to mean that this tension is the core of the totality (2005: 71). It is not possible to overcome this tension, and at the

[4] An empty signifier can be understood as a symbol that is open for re-interpretations and ascriptions of new meanings. Here, 'emptiness' does not mean 'nothingness' or a lack of meaning, but rather, it means a lack of predetermined content.

[5] The logic of equivalence refers to "the linking together (articulation) of different social groups, identities and demands in one (hegemonic) political project so that the social-political space is simplified and represented as consisting of two opposed blocs" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017: 306).

[6] The logic of difference entails the "unlinking" of the logic of equivalence and prevention of the unification of political demands (for example, by integrating the political demands into the system).

same time, identity will not exist without attempting to overcome it. This tension finds reflection in contemporary populist politics: the recurring demonisation of small – both quantitively and qualitatively, in relation to the population – groups by a society whose sense of identity depends on this very act of exclusion. In other words, 'the people' stands as an incomplete totality, continually being refilled by a plurality of contents. Moreover, the impossible and incommensurable totality – 'the people' – is represented by a particular difference. Laclau calls this operation 'hegemony', and the hegemonic identity that results from this operation an 'empty signifier'.

The third element of Laclau's theoretical approach is rhetoric, and it provides an answer to the problem of naming something which is essentially unnameable, or articulating the impossible totality. Laclau, drawing on classical rhetoric, employs the term catachresis. Catachresis means a figural term that cannot be substituted by a literal term. An example of catachresis is the 'leg' of a chair. When an object which is both necessary and impossible needs to be named, an empty signifier is hegemonically operated, and this operation carries the quality of catachresis. Hence, the construction of 'the people' is essentially catachrestical (2005: 72). As a result of this catachrestical hegemonic operation, the part comes to represent the whole.

By operationalising the three elements outlined above, Laclau conceives of 'the people' as an empty form that is continually and contingently being filled by a plurality of 'content'. This form can never be completely filled because full form amounts to a static and unified subject. Thus, the form remains an empty signifier. 'The people' stands as an incomplete totality. Devoid of ideological expression, 'the people' is a continual result of ongoing relations between social agents. The social agents have isolated political demands that they direct at local authorities. If these demands are left unfulfilled, a so-called equivalential relation is established between the demands that causes a rift between the social agents and the institutional system. This rift leads to the emergence of an internal frontier that divides the society into two groups. The equivalential relation can grow bigger and become an equivalential chain, expanding further through symbolic unification and leading to a more articulated category of 'the people'. In other words, emergence of 'the people' begins with isolated and heterogeneous demands that later become a global demand through the formation of political frontiers and the construction of an antagonistic power

(Laclau, 2005: 110). However, Laclau asserts that the formation of 'the people' does not logically make a transition from one level to the next. The various stages of the process of the constitution of 'the people' are undergirded by a 'radical investment' – a 'naming' that can have a retroactive effect that creates a narrative and establishes the populist subject, an identity that lacks ontic content. This naming's – or radical investment's – function is to push the process from one stage to another by introducing something that is qualitatively new. This 'newness' is brought about through both signification and affect – whether it is love or hatred. In other words, symbols, and emotional attachments play a central role in formation of 'the people'. As Laclau points out, "there is no populism without affective investment in a partial object" (2005: 116). This point gains particular importance in light of populism's constitution of popular identities: the whole is not composed of parts, but rather, the part functions as a whole (Laclau, 2005: 111).

Laclau asserts that populism depends on three structural dimensions: the equivalential chain, the internal frontier, and the construction of a popular identity (2005: 77). The paragraphs above analyse each of these dimensions together with the interactions among them. Building on these arguments, Laclau conceives of populism as a political logic[7], as opposed to a type of movement. Political logic appears as a type of social logic, which is "a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are representable while others are excluded" (Laclau, 2005: 117). However, instead of rule-following inherent in the social logic, political logic has to do with the institution of the social consisting of social demands which lead to social change. Articulation of equivalence and difference, together with the equivalential moment, lead to the emergence of a political subject through the formation of an internal frontier and the establishment of 'the other'. Based on this assertion, a political movement emerging as a result of the operation of the political logic through these structural moments will be populist.

[7] A political logic can be understood as a set of formal discursive qualities or an articulatory pattern. This logic can be rooted in a variety of ideologies without regard to particular content. Thus, one can register populism in both left-wing and right-wing politics, or in liberal democratic political systems and authoritarian regimes.

The political demands outlined above are an expression of a systemic dislocation[8] (one can also use the word destabilisation), which is contingent on a multitude of factors. As such, no *a priori* unity can emerge as a result of the unification of demands. This means that a popular subject can only be a contingent subject and the demands this subject embraces and excludes will be "blurred and subject to permanent contestation" (Laclau, 2005: 118). Hence – unlike the common tendency of academic literature to ascribe a pejorative meaning to populism due to the vagueness of populist discourse – Laclau views moments of vagueness as an essential component of populism. As Malinova and Casula explain, "[i]t is this vagueness[9] that makes [a given populist actor's] discourse so inclusive and compatible with other positions, enabling it to conquer a hegemonic position" (2010: 174). When a particular demand goes through the process of acquiring centrality and becomes the name of something it exceeds and cannot control, it becomes popular. At this point, the 'name' is detached from the 'concept', or the signifier is detached from the signified. In fact, "[w]ithout this detachment, there would be no populism" (Laclau, 2005: 120). In other words, populism emerges when a particularity disassociates from its content and comes to represent the whole. This is enabled by the tension between the logics of difference and equivalence (Laclau, 2005: 120). When a particular demand is unfulfilled together with other demands, solidarity emerges among these demands, with one of the demands being elevated to become the signifier for the whole chain – the empty signifier. The unifying element of the chain cannot be the heterogeneous content of the demands. Rather, the unifying element is the fact of these demands not being fulfilled. Laclau refers to this process as the "inscription of differences within an equivalential chain" (2005: 121). The equivalential inscription that brings about 'the people' has two faces: a rupture with an existing order, and an ordering of a fragmented symbolic framework. Hence, at the root of the populist experience lies a double dynamic: the attempt to break with

[8] Laclau conceives of dislocation in the following way: "every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends upon an outside which both denies that identity and provides its conditions of possibility at the same time. [...] If on the one hand, [...] [the effects of dislocation] threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted" (Laclau 1990: 39).

[9] Malinova and Casula further clarify that "vagueness" can also be "interpreted as inclusiveness, as the ability to include different discursive elements and to articulate them as moments of a single discourse" (2010: 174). Indeed, as Taggart and Wejnert write, "the flexibility of populism makes it particularly apt for sustaining all kinds of policies" (2019: 352).

the *status quo* and the effort to constitute a new order. This dynamic is devoid of content. As for the demands constituting the chain of equivalence and one of the demands representing the whole chain – while they are based on particular content, this content has no operational significance because the processes outlined above are not determined by content. They are determined by political logic[10]. Thus, populism can appear in the context of any ideological or institutional framework.

It is clear from the discussion above that the empty signifier plays a key role in the construction of a popular identity. Laclau's discussion of the empty signifier is based on a sterile theoretical model of politics that does not take into account the agency of the other side of the dichotomous frontier – 'the other', 'the elite', or whatever constitutes the other group in a given context. However, in more realistic political settings, a rival hegemonic project would exert pressure on an equivalential chain that would result in a rearticulation of demands and the emergence of an alternative equivalential chain. To account for the particular demands whose meaning becomes indeterminate between the different equivalential articulations, Laclau employs the concept of the 'floating signifier'[11] (2005: 131). A floating signifier can be operationalised by either of the antagonistic camps, and it is most visible at times of crisis when the symbolic framework is fractured. On the other hand, when there is a stable frontier, the *empty* signifier is operationalised. Both empty and floating signifiers are involved in the hegemonic construction of 'the people'.

The distinction between empty and floating signifiers is key to shedding light on another crucial characteristic of populism in Laclau's reading. 'The people' do not emerge as a pure opposite of 'the other', instead, 'the people' emerge from unstable antagonistic frontiers[12]. A decisive factor in the establishment of these frontiers is the outsiders of the system – the heterogenous actors whose demands do not fit among the sets of either of the equivalential chains (hegemonic or anti-

[10] My brief explanation on what the political logic means is included in the footnotes on the previous page.

[11] I understand the floating signifier to be a symbol whose ideological content is fluid. Depending on the political crisis, this symbol can be made to signify different things, while also remaining the same in terms of the name of the symbol not changing. It is an *empty* signifier that *floats*.

[12] Unstable antagonistic frontiers can be understood as the constantly shifting political environment that produces new demands (oftentimes antagonistic to each other) of a variety of political actors.

hegemonic): "without heterogeneity there would not be antagonism either" (Laclau, 2005: 149). The antagonism is established contextually, and so is 'the people' whose construction is a political operation that involves an undecidability between the homogeneous and heterogeneous. Hence, "the political becomes synonymous with populism" (2005: 154). While this expression necessitates clarification as to what 'the political' means in Laclau's thought, such a debate is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important for the present work is that Laclau motivates us to think about populism beyond institutions and consider how a populist subject is constructed discursively based on contingent contexts. Laclau's assertion can also be taken to mean that one can analyse cases of populism where the mainstream literature registers a lack of conditions[13] for populism to exist.

To summarise, populism is a political logic in Laclau's theorisation. Populism consists of three interrelated elements: empty signifiers and hegemonic representation of equivalential chains; floating signifiers and fluid internal frontiers; constitutive heterogeneity and the impossibility of dialectical retrievals. But how are these elements employed in the discursive study of populism? And what are the methodological virtues and limits of this approach, especially when compared to the Ideational Approach outlined in the previous section?

Defining populism as a political logic allows the Discursive Approach to ask a set of questions that the Ideational Approach is not able to register. One of the major proponents of the Discursive Approach, Benjamin De Cleen, compiles these questions in the following way:

> What are the different ingredients of the populist politics in question? Which demands, identities are brought together in the populist chain of equivalence? Moreover, we need to ask exactly how the populist logic and these other ingredients are articulated. How are they brought together in a more or less coherent structure of meaning? How do they reinforce each other? Do these connections create tensions? (2019: 37)

These questions are able to be posed because the Discursive Approach assumes that 'the people' and 'the elite' are not objective categories and that they are constructed discursively depending on the context. As Howarth and Stavrakakis argue:

[13] Conditions such as liberal democracy and a constitutional framework.

> A political project will attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a certain way. [...] [D]iscourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality. (2000: 3, quoted in De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017: 307)

By virtue of its constructivist and practice-oriented nature, the Discursive Approach appears to be fit for a cross-regional study of populism. That is, articulation and disarticulation of political demands, operationalisation of empty and floating signifiers, and the hegemonic struggle can be registered in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. The main question that the Discursive Approach allows one to ask is not whether a given populist leader is a threat or a corrective to democracy, but rather, it is the question of how meaning is created in different political settings that revolve around the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other'. Because empty signifiers and chains of equivalence do not presuppose predetermined content, one can analyse both the populism of an authoritarian leader acting within the framework of limited democratic institutions and the populism of a political figure in a constitutional democracy with liberal values. However, as has already been mentioned in the beginning of this section, the Discursive Approach is oftentimes considered to be too abstract to hold up as an effective tool for empirical analysis (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012: 7). Perhaps this is most true when it comes to Laclau's assertion that populism is synonymous with the political. Such an assertion can be viewed to expand the definition of populism to a point that would make more precise analysis of populism very difficult. Moreover, this assertion appears to carry a political commitment to radical democracy, subsequently underemphasising the institutional dimension of politics. Nevertheless, these are not good enough reasons to discard the Discursive Approach from populist research. On the contrary, one can argue that given what has been outlined in this section, the Discursive Approach can shed light on the phenomenon of populism that manifests itself across regions which are rarely compared with each other due to the methodological limitations of other approaches to the study of populism.

2.3.3. Populism as Function: Political-Strategic Approach

The Ideational and Discursive Approaches possess the explanatory power to shed light on the formative dimension of 'the people' and its antagonism to 'the other', however, "it does not explain what makes populism's anti-establishment position different from what we find in the republican paradigm, in traditional oppositional politics, and in democratic partisanship", as Urbinati points out (2018b: 117). Hence, it is reasonable to turn to the Political-Strategic Approach.

In contrast to the Ideational and Discursive approaches, the Political-Strategic Approach to populist studies views populism as a political practice, one that searches for and uses power (Barr, 2019: 44), with the leader being the main actor (Moffitt, 2020). The proponents of this approach diverge in their methodological assumptions and research design. However, the common link between different positions of this approach consists of the focus on the means and ends of acquiring power through mobilisation understood as agency and action. Kurt Weyland, a proponent of the Political-Strategic Approach whose work undergirds a bulk of literature on the subject, provides the following definition of populism:

> [P]opulism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. This direct, quasi-personal relationship bypasses established intermediary organizations or deinstitutionalizes and subordinates them to the leader's personal will. (Weyland, 2001: 14)

Three elements take precedence in the Political-Strategic Approach: strategy, agency, and behaviour. These elements find their expression through the figure of a political leader. While the Ideational and the Discursive approaches outlined in the previous sections ascribe political agency to 'the people' – the demand-side – the Political Strategic Approach focuses on the leader – the supply-side – who claims to act on behalf of 'the people'. Thus, as opposed to conceiving of populism as a bottom-up mass movement, the Political Strategic Approach views populism as resting on a "top-down strategy through which a leader marshals plebiscitarian support for the goals that she determines on her own" (Weyland, 2017: 79). The strategy adopted by a personalistic leadership is directed at maximising its power and autonomy while dominating other actors such as elites and parties. Such leadership is sustained by mobilising 'the people' whose 'will' the leader claims to embody or

personify. Such personification of the 'will of the people' is further enabled by the diversity and heterogeneity of 'the people' (2017: 86). The connection between 'the people' and the leader is of personal nature, quasi-direct and unmediated by formal institutions. Bypassing regular intermediaries, this connection is strengthened and sustained through charisma understood as belief in the "supernatural" capacity of a leader. Given the intensity of emotions involved in such a relationship, ideological consistency is not necessary for a leader to garner mass support. In fact, no commitment to a systematic ideology is required from a leader, enabling them to govern based on their tactical considerations (2017: 87). The more autonomy a populist leader gains, the more they can engage in 'decisionism', that is, undertaking new initiatives on a whim. The aim of these initiatives is to entrench the power of a leader. A possible result of these initiatives is institutional change directed at entrenching a leader's authority over a long period of time.

Revolving around the centrality of the opportunistic leader and their agency, the Political-Strategic Approach considers populism as a mode of political practice, or populist mobilisation. The latter is defined as "any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorises ordinary people" (Jansen, 2011: 82). The term "political project" implies a set of actions that consolidate or overthrow political authority relations.[14] Such actions are a means of enactment of certain social, political, and economic agendas aimed at the pursuit and sustainment of power. The populist mobilisation can be engaged in by both incumbent and oppositionary political actors. The populist mobilisation consists of a combination of popular mobilisation and populist rhetoric (Jansen, 2011: 83). The former implies the mobilisation of the excluded into coordinated political activity. The latter entails the intentional usage of symbols and expression styles that postulates the unity and virtue of 'the people', appealing to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader (De la Torre, 2010: 4). It can also have the function of creating 'the people' through rhetorical invocation and positioning 'the people' in an antagonistic relationship against 'the other'.

[14] This means that populist mobilisation can be employed *both* by actors who challenge the established government *and* by an established government to consolidate its regime against political protest.

The Political-Strategic Approach thus considers populism in terms of a means of acquiring power. It focuses on the leader, their actions, and institutions. Populist actors, by establishing a direct connection to 'the people' in the ways outlined above, are able to legitimately alter state institutions in correspondence to their aims (Huber & Schimpf, 2015: 4). This point corresponds to the understanding of populism as function in this thesis. As a function, populism can challenge the political establishment and/or it can consolidate the political regime given in a social/historical context.

In terms of methodology, early applications of the Political-Strategic Approach employed populism as a radial family-resemblances type of a concept but in the later period began adopting a degreeist perspective (Moffitt, 2020). In this regard, Charles C. Ragin advocates for a fuzzy-set approach that allows for examining the gradations of populism together with its nuances and subtleties: "fuzzy sets introduce conceptual gradations and qualitative thresholds that can capture the shades and mixtures of "real world" politics" (Weyland, 2017: 93). This point is significant because it allows one to state whether an actor is more populist or less populist. What is even more significant for the thesis at hand, the Political-Strategic Approach "yields underlying similarities [between cases of populism] across a variety of contextual differences" (Weyland, 2017: 96).

Concluding remarks

The Ideational Approach posits that populism exists when there are two groups, 'the people' and 'the elite', standing in a moral opposition to each other. It also assumes that the leader and 'the people' have an organic connection. As a direct consequence of this organic connection, the only possible political participation for 'the people' is the election of the leader through whom the 'will of the people' is realised. This constitutes the 'general will' in the Ideational Approach. Even though I have shown in the previous section on Rousseau that this in fact amounts to a *disfigurement* of the general will, I will nevertheless refer to this element as the general will for reasons of convenience. Furthermore, the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' is substantiated by ideological fragments that are tied together (thus they come to form a 'thin-ideology' under a populist leader). Hence, when studying a case through the lens of the Ideational Approach, one needs to consider what the content of 'the people', 'the elite', 'the other' is, and how the 'general will'

is substantiated. However, the Ideational Approach considers populism as a feature of democracy rather than of politics. As a result of this, politics becomes rather oblique in this approach. The relationship between populism and politics takes centre stage in the Discursive Approach. When analysing a case through the Discursive Approach, one needs to consider the construction of empty signifiers that are operationalised in order to create or ascertain hegemony of a given political actor. This includes the discursive formation of 'the people' and 'the other'. Furthermore, one needs to consider the inscription of different demands in discursive formations that allow for normally irreconcilable actors to be unified. The Discursive Approach allow us to go beyond *a priori* notions of 'the people' and 'the other', thus enabling us to delve deeper into the construction of identities and antagonisms in different political contexts. Finally, after having analysed the content and the forms of populism through the Ideational and the Discursive approaches, the Political-Strategic Approach allows us to consider the function of different populisms. That is, it enables us to consider the ways that a particular case of populism transforms power relations. By considering populism as a political project, one can view a case of populism either as challenging the prevalent power relations or as consolidating them.

CHAPTER 3

COMPARING THE CONTENT, FORM, AND FUNCTION OF POPULISM(S) IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

Before proceeding to the employment of the three recent approaches to the study of populism (the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategic Approach), I will provide a brief background of the political context of Western Europe and Russia. The purpose of this introduction is not to give a comprehensive overview of the political landscape of each of the regions, but rather, it is for touching upon the political developments relevant to the comparison that I will carry out in this chapter.

In contemporary Western Europe, populism is mostly widespread in the far-right political parties (Taggart, 2004: 270). While the phenomenon of populism is not a new development, these parties have been receiving increased popular support in recent years. Moreover, they increasingly become part of the political mainstream, in contrast to being relegated to the periphery of politics during the last decades of the 20th century. One such party is the French *Front National*[15] *(*FN). Established in 1972, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen who remained its leader until 2011, FN was a marginal political force in its early years. However, it has come to represent a major force of French nationalism in the 1980s and managed to sustain this position throughout the later years. Marine Le Pen succeeded her father as the leader of FN in 2011, and began to soften the party's far-right image. As its popularity grew, FN became a major political force. FN's electoral success in the 2014 European Parliament election marks "the first time the anti-immigrant, anti-EU party had won a nationwide election in its four-decade history" (*Reuters*, 2014). In the 2017 French presidential elections, Le Pen managed to become one of the top candidates, losing

[15] "*Front National*" translates into "National Front".

in a runoff to Emmanuel Macron by a decisive margin (33.90% against Macron's 66.10%). And even though FN fared badly in latest 2021 French regional elections, its political weight remains to be significant, especially considering FN's increased moderation of its far-right discourse that enables it to attract more conservative voters. Another party that is considered to be a representative case of contemporary Western European populism is the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid*[16] (PVV). Largely viewed as the political and ideological successor of Pim Fortuyn's *Pim Fortuin List* party, PVV was established by Geert Wilders in 2006. Building on anti-Muslim and anti-EU rhetoric, PVV quickly became the third-largest party in the Dutch parliament after its electoral success in the 2010 Dutch general election. PVV's electoral popularity continued throughout the decade. In the 2012 Dutch general election, PVV came third. It also came third in the 2014 European Parliament election. Finally, in 2017, PVV became the second-largest party in the Dutch parliament. Even though PVV performed poorly in the 2019 Dutch provincial elections, it continues to be a considerable political force in Dutch and European politics. Having briefly outlined the political context of FN and PVV, I will now turn to a brief overview of the context of Putin's populism.

Contemporary Russian populism can be divided into four phases (Gudkov, 2017). The first phase began in the late 1980s with Boris Yel'tsin – the First Secretary of the Moscow City Committee of the Communist Party – challenging the prerogatives of the political apparatus dominated by the *nomenklatura* (the Soviet ruling class). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the first phase reached its culmination with the young reformers – led by Yel'tsin, who became the President of Russia by then – assuring the Russian population that the national prosperity is imminent once the remaining proponents of the Soviet government are completely defeated and the new economic reforms fully enacted. The second phase of contemporary Russian populism began in 1993 and lasted throughout the decade. It is characterised by the anti-reformist demagoguery of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – the leader of the mislabelled Liberal Democratic Party of Russia – that targeted the then-president Yel'tsin and his circle's politico-economic initiatives. Later, the rhetoric and style of Zhirinovsky began to be imitated by a number of small parties,

[16] "*Partij voor de Vrijheid*" translates into "Party for Freedom".

particularly the radical nationalist ones. The third phase of Russian populism began in 2000, the year that Vladimir Putin became the president of Russia. This phase is characterised by the rhetoric of '*sovereign democracy*', 'stability', and imperial 'conservative modernity'. Such slogans constituted the major legitimising elements of the Russian political regime in the following two decades. While Putin's populism *does* continue to be a strong force in the Russian politics, it can be said that the fourth phase of Russian populism emerged in opposition to Putin's official populism in early 2010s. Its primary representative is Aleksey Naval'niy who sought to mobilise heterogeneous segments of Russia's population by carrying out a massive anti-corruption campaign. Given the gravity of ideology in the theoretical framework of the present thesis, the focus will primarily be on the third phase of populism outlined above. Moreover, the first and the second phases of contemporary Russian populism are characterised by an inconsistent usage of populist techniques and incohesive references to ideological frameworks, and the fourth phase has emerged in response to Putin's populism. These points contribute to the reason of exclusion of the first, second and fourth phases of contemporary Russian populism from the focus of this thesis. Nevertheless, throughout the analysis of Putin's populism, references will be rarely made to the other phases of contemporary Russia populism, if they seem relevant to the populism under examination.

3.1. Divergence of Content in the Populism of Western Europe and Russia

In the previous chapter, I have shown that the Ideational Approach asserts that populism is a thin-centred ideology that is not able to set forth consistent and wide-scale programmes aimed at solving political questions. As Mudde puts it, "populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public" (2018: 1669). Hence, this section will revolve around discovering the interconnections between the conceptual core of populism – the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' – and the various ideological elements in Western Europe and Russia. I will first consider what 'the people' and 'the elite' consist of in the political horizons of FN and PVV, and examine the way both of these parties conceive of the relationship between 'the people' and the leader. Following this, I

will carry out the same analysis based on the case of Putin's regime. Finally, I will conclude this section by discussing my findings in a comparative manner.

3.1.1. Content of 'the People' and 'the Elite' and the Characteristics of the General Will in the Populism of FN and PVV

In this section, as per the Ideational Approach, I will consider what the content of 'the people' and 'the elite' is in the Western European and Russian cases. I will also analyse how FN, PVV, and Putin's regime conceive of the political participation of citizens and the ensuing relationship between the leader and 'the people'.

3.1.1.1. Content of 'the people' in the populism of FN and PVV

The political developments of the last several decades in Western Europe have been characterised by a turn to the right (Medushevskiy, 2017: 31). In Europe, the impact of the right turn is seen in the redefinition of 'the people', as opposed to a structural change of the European political system: "'government of the people, by the people, for the people' is not at stake, but the concept of 'the people' is" (Minkenberg, 2001: 21, cited in Mudde, 2012: 11). Mudde explains that 'the people' became re-defined in line with a pre-multicultural society that Europe used to be, that is, an ethnically homogeneous society (2012: 11) with an emphasis on ethno-national purity (Pelinka, 2013: 8). However, the exact content of 'the people' remained ambiguous. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser note, "[the right-wing populists] remain vague on who 'the Austrian people' or 'the French people' exactly are, and what defines them, yet everyone instinctively knows that, for example, Muslims are not part of '*wir*' or '*nous*' (us)" (2013: 166). This new European identity was largely built on anti-Muslim racism that emerged alongside the securitisation and stigmatisation of migrants in the neoliberal age and parallel to a resentment of multiculturalism and diversity (Kaya, 2018: 9-10). However, as many scholars point out, the emergence of this Islamophobia is not the result of the activity of right-wing populist parties, rather, it is a continuing trend that has exacerbated in the 1990s in Europe (Betz, 1994; Semyonov et al., 2006; Alonso & Claro da Fonseca, 2012 cited in Mudde 2012: 12). Therefore, one can see that on the demand-side – the electorate – there is a fertile ground for *exclusionary* politics that the supply-side – the right-wing populist parties – consistently provides. In other words, the right-wing populist

parties politicise the anti-immigrant sentiments that were present in the populations across Western Europe and they amplify them further.

The French *Front National* under Marine Le Pen and the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* under Geert Wilders both focused on the issue of migration against the backdrop of Islamophobia in Europe (Taggart, 2017: 323). As a result, Muslim migrants have come to form 'the other' that stands in Manichean[17] opposition to the ethnically, nationally, and religiously homogeneous 'people'. The leader of PVV, Wilders, believes that this 'other' will infiltrate the European society and eventually turn Europe into *Eurabia*, that is, "a mythological future continent that will replace modern Europe" (Kaya, 2018: 6). The following quote belonging to Wilders exemplifies his stance on Islam and, by extension, on the Muslim people in Europe:

> The reality is that Islam commands its followers to make all nations submit to Islamic Sharia law, wherever and whenever they have the power and the opportunity to do so. If necessary, through the use of violence and terror. The reality is that Sharia law is a mortal danger to our way of life, our Constitution, our laws, and our liberties. It is a matter of our existence and the survival of our free society ... We should not be so tolerant that we open the door to the horror of intolerance. (Wilders, 2015)

The content of this 'we' is, therefore, the opposite of those who 'submit to Islamic Sharia law'. Marine Le Pen expresses herself in a similar fashion:

> We are being submerged by a flood of immigrants that are sweeping all before them. There are prayers in the street, cafes that ban women and young women who get threatening looks if they wear a skirt. I will say when I become president that this is not the French way. (Le Pen, 2017, quoted in Cohen, 2017)

Le Pen further adds that "France isn't burkinis on the beach. France is Brigitte Bardot[18]. That's France" (Le Pen, 2017, cited in *CBS News*, 2017). However, it is not only the immigrants and the Muslims that constitute the 'other'. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser point out, the excluded groups range from illegal foreigners and legal non-citizens to citizens with a foreign background and ethnic minorities (2013:

[17] The opposition is Manichean because no *moral* compromise is possible with this 'other', for if compromise was to take place, the 'purity' of 'the people' would be tainted.

[18] Brigitte Bardot is a French celebrity who is also known for her racist remarks. For the BBC article on this subject, please see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7434193.stm

166). In the following section, I will consider how this 'other' is situated in the image of 'the elite' and its antagonistic relation to 'the people'.

3.1.1.2. Content of 'the Elite' in the populism of FN and PVV

In the previous section, I have shown that the 'other' constitutes a point of gravity in the right-wing populist argument, especially in its presentation of 'the people'. However, the right-wing populist argument only gains full force when the notion of the 'other' is combined with notion of 'the elite'. The right-wing populist parties in Western Europe view 'the people' as being in an antagonistic relationship to elites that are viewed as "tainted, unrepresentative, and often corrupt" (Taggart, 2017: 320). 'The elite' is conceived as the politicians and intellectuals who are responsible for Europeanisation, globalisation, mass migration, and the liberal democratic policies which welcome cultural diversity (Pelinka, 2013: 8). As a result, the right-wing populist parties reject central state structures, demand regional autonomy, and assert regional identities – with these demands being framed in ideological terms *via* the antagonism of 'the pure people' and 'the elite' (Taggart, 2017: 325). By focusing on the issues of regional identity and autonomy, populists express the frustration of 'the people' with the functioning of politics in general.[19] This frustration is articulated through the term of corruption. Populists in Western Europe understand corruption in two ways (Taggart, 2017: 330). First, there is the corruption of elites, that is, of the politicians and establishment figures. Second, there is the corruption of institutions, or political parties and state structures. Corruption, here, is understood as a process of deterioration. This deterioration takes place when, according to the right-wing populists, the politicians become detached from those they represent, thereby ceasing to realise the will of 'the people'. By extension, institutions – political parties and government, both at the local and the regional levels – are, too, viewed as corrupting as they have become unrepresentative of 'the people'. As a result, corruption of 'the elites' – which is a leitmotif of all Western

[19] This point exemplifies what I have illustrated in the second chapter of this study, namely that, as opposed to the Rousseauian general will which ascribes critical meaning to the political participation of citizens, the populist disfigurement of the general will negates political participation. Or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that political participation becomes reframed and highly limited in the right-wing populist worldview.

European right-wing populist parties (Taggart, 2017: 328) – is viewed as a contamination of the 'purity' of 'the people'.

This perception of the failure of the establishment to represent 'the people' finds its expression through opposition to the EU and its institutional architecture. Euroscepticism is known to be a major feature of most of the right-wing populist parties of Western Europe (Kaya, 2018; 10). Euroscepticism is, first of all, bolstered by the hostility to migrants and Muslims mentioned above. It is precisely here that 'the other' comes to be operationalised in the construction of the antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The populists blame the EU and its cultural integration policies for the presence of 'the other' and its negative consequences (which are, in fact, misconceived due to the simplification of complex economic processes).

For the presence of 'the other' and its negative consequences (which are in fact misconceived due to the simplification of complex economic processes by the populist parties) on the EU and its cultural integration policies that enable the presence of migrants in Europe. This is exemplified in the following words of PVV's Wilders:

> If we don't wake up, stop Schengen, become masters of our own house and be in charge of our frontiers we will cease to exist. I'm not exaggerating. If you look at the numbers, we're facing the existential problem today, worse than any economic problem we faced before. It's the existential problem of whether we will exist or not by the end of the century if we don't start defining our border controls and deciding for ourselves who we let in our house and who should leave it, like all normal people in Russia or elsewhere. We don't have that in Europe. We only know the policies of open borders and at the end of the day it won't be our house anymore. (Wilders, 2017, quoted in *Russia Today*, 2017)

The second source of Euroscepticism is the EU's economic and political integration policies targeting European states. The populist opposition to this integration is echoed in the politics of regionalism mentioned above that advocate the need to strengthen national identity and state autonomy, both in cultural and economic terms. The economic dimension of Euroscepticism came to be even more articulated with the crisis of the Euro in 2009 when EU-member states such as Germany financially bailed out other member-states that were in a difficult financial situation. As a result of this, Taggart points out, European solidarity came to be undermined (2017: 330). FN's Le Pen exemplifies this stance with the following

words: “Either you reform and you give us back our sovereignty and independence over the currency, or I will propose that France leaves the union” (Le Pen, 2017, quoted in Fisher, 2017). Finally, in regard to the issues of migration, Islamophobia, integration, regionalism, corruption, and Euroscepticism mentioned above, Taggart explains that right-wing populist parties do not cynically select which of these issues to emphasise in their politics, rather, the selection of issues depends on the changing political agenda (2017: 331).

In the paragraphs above I have shown that the content of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in FN and PVV’s politics depends on how they define the ‘other’. Both FN and PVV view the ‘other’ as a Muslim threat that is ‘worsened’ by migration. As such, FN and PVV conceive of ‘the people’ as white, native Christians adhering to national (whether French or Dutch) traditions. “The elite”, on the other hand, is conceived of as corrupt establishment: Politicians or bureaucrats that allow the ‘other’ to ‘infiltrate’ Europe and undermine national sovereignty. In order to understand how FN and PVV transfer this into political action, I will consider how FN and PVV view the nature of political participation and the relationship between the leader and ‘the people’.

3.1.1.3. Characteristics of the general will in FN and PVV’s populism

In this section I will try to clarify several points in regard to the formation of ‘the people’s will’ and its realisation in the politics of Western Europe as per the Ideational Approach. Right-wing populist parties of Western Europe are not against democracy *per se*, and they advocate for change within the rules of democratic constitutions (Pelinka, 2013: 12). However, they believe that representative democracy is corrupted by ‘the elite’ that deviates from the will of ‘the people’. According to them, they themselves “represent the true form of democracy … [and] defend it against the ‘political class’, against the ‘power cartel’ of the traditional mainstream parties” (Pelinka, 2013: 17). These leaders argue for a more direct democracy with plebiscitary measures in order to give power back to ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2013: 163). Hence, they constantly make calls for referendums. This point is exemplified in the following words of Wilders:

> It is time for a new start, relying on our own strength and sovereignty. … If I become prime minister, there will be a referendum in the Netherlands on leaving the European Union as well. Let the Dutch people decide. (*Reuters*, 2016)

However, this does not mean that right-wing populist parties look upon participatory politics with favour. Much like having a peculiar outlook on democracy, these leaders have a particular way of conceiving politics. Relevant to this is Urbinati's argument that "[populism] displaces equality for unity and thus resists social and political pluralism" (2014: 152). Far from espousing a pluralist conception of politics that liberal democrats subscribe to, right-wing populist leaders of Western Europe believe that they are the only legitimate candidates for positions of political authority. This assertion is derived from the idea that the populist leader is the true representative of 'the will of the people'. The leader knows this will through common sense and 'feeling'[20]. As Jean-Marie Le Pen put it in his 1995 presidential election speech: "I am nothing more than a French citizen like any of you … I know your fears, your problems, your worries, your distress, and your hopes because I have felt, and continue to feel them" (quoted in Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 165). The assertion of being the only legitimate political authority is further strengthened by the negative values ascribed to the institutions and institutional mediation of political processes.[21] One can arrive at the conclusion that the right-wing populist conception of politics is limited by the act of voting for the leader during election times and letting the leader realise the 'will of the people' during non-election times.[22] The following quote from a *CNBC* interview with Marine Le Pen demonstrates the issues raised above:

> I think that the elites have lived too long among themselves. We are in a world where globalisation, which is an ideology, has forgotten, and put aside the people, the people's interests, aspirations, and dreams. They have acted like carnivores, who use the world to enrich only themselves. … [T]he elites have realised that the people have stopped listening to them, that the people want to determine their futures and in a perfectly democratic framework, regain control of their destiny, and that panics them, because they are losing the power that they had given themselves. … [I]f the French people too wish to regain their independence, wish to regain control of their country, and wish to reinforce the elements of security, the

[20] The previous chapter's discussion of the notion of feeling in Rousseau's general will is highly relevant here, even though the populist worldview disfigures the meaning of Rousseau's general will.

[21] This is due to the corruptive nature of institutions and 'the elite', a point that is elaborated in the previous paragraphs.

[22] This corresponds to the populist disfigurement of Rousseau's general will, a point that I have emphasised in the previous chapter.

> borders, the rule of law, economic patriotism, then I will be elected president. (Le Pen, 2016)

3.1.1.4. Concluding remarks

In this section, I have considered the politics of Western European right-wing populists represented by FN and PVV by employing the Ideational Approach. I have shown that the content of 'the people' is based on ethno-nationalism and consists of the image of a white, native, Christian citizen who adheres to traditional values. This image is arrived at by setting forth a representation of 'the other' as a Muslim threat, with an emphasis on migrants. The right-wing populist leader emerges as a protector of 'the people' against the 'the elite' who allow 'the other' to threaten the purity of 'the people'. 'The elite' is conceived of as the corrupt politicians that wish to further integrate individual European nations into the EU, thereby threatening 'national sovereignty' of the countries involved (whether it is France or the Netherlands). The expression 'national sovereignty' is central to the politics of FN and PVV because the 'other' and the 'elite' are viewed to be threatening 'the sovereignty of the people'. In the following section, I will use the Ideational Approach to analyse the Russian case and to show what the content of 'the people' and 'the elite' is in comparison to the Western European case.

3.1.2. Content of 'the People' and 'the Elite' and the Characteristics of the General Will in the Populism of Putin's Regime

3.1.2.1. Content of 'the People' in Putin's regime

Much like in Europe, the political developments of the last several decades in Russia have been characterised by a right turn (Medushevskiy, 2017: 31). In stark contrast to the Soviet period and its vision of the citizen as a secular agent of historical progress, 'the people' in Russia came to be re-defined in line with the traditional values based on Christian orthodoxy. However, unlike the European case mentioned in the previous section, the ethno-national identity was underemphasised. In fact, Putin strongly opposed the ethno-nationalist call for *Rossiya dlya Russkih* (Russia for Russians) (Fish, 2017: 66). The reason for this is clear: Russia has a diverse and multi-ethnic population (as opposed to Europe, where different

ethnicities and religions remain marginal in numerical terms).[23] Instead of adopting an ethno-national understanding of 'the Russian people', Putin's presidency in the 2000s was "attempting to link national pride with the idea of a strong state, its leadership, state symbols, and even territory" (Laine, 2017: 225). Based on this, Putin differs from the Western European right-wing populists because he attempted to use nationalism to strengthen the state. However, 'Russianness' ('*Russkost*') was understood in ethnic and religious terms, and this created tension with the official state rhetoric of a 'multi-ethnic nation'. As Zakharov points out, while the state leadership considered all ethnicities to be equal, it viewed Russians to be the first among equals (2015: 123). Notwithstanding this tension (or perhaps by virtue of it?), the question of "who exactly *are* 'the Russian people'?"– in other words, what is the content of 'the people?' – was not clearly addressed during Putin's first decade of presidency.

This reluctance, on the part of Putin's regime, to give a clearer definition to 'the people' did *not* persist in Putin's second decade of presidency. After the global financial crisis of 2008, anti-government protests began to mount in Russia. Alongside the deteriorating economic situation in the country, the popular protests spoke out against corruption and electoral fraud. The popular protest found its most clear expression in the *Bolotnaya Square* demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 which constituted one of the largest protest gatherings in Russia since the 1990s. In response to this and other challenges in domestic politics, Putin's regime took a more active ideological stance. Conservative-traditional values began to be strongly articulated, marking the beginning of full-fledged populism in Russia (Robinson and Milne, 2017: 420). Putin began to speak of Russia as a civilisation with an underpinning set of conservative-traditional values around which 'the Russian people' united (Putin, 2013, quoted in Robinson and Milne, 2017: 420). In contrast to his first decade of presidency, Putin began to employ ethno-nationalism to stabilise his political support in response to the mounting pressure of the protest movements (Burrett, 2020: 195). The reason behind this employment of ethno-nationalism is the latent xenophobia which is prevalent in the Russian population. As Gudkov shows in detail, xenophobia

[23] It also should be mentioned that 'the people' were viewed as a multi-ethnic entity by the Soviet state throughout its existence. One can say that the contemporary Russian state inherited this trait from the Soviet period.

among the Russian population grew since the collapse of the Soviet Union (2014: 171–188). By conceiving of 'the people' as ethnic Russians, Putin aimed to bolster the public support for his administration. However, after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's rhetoric went back to a multi-ethnic conception of the Russian nation and remained that way. This multi-ethnic conception of 'the people' also include the traditional religions of Russia such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. Though not a religious figure, Putin "blesses" the traditional religions present in Russia (Fish, 2017: 63) and views Russia's Muslims as "full partners in the national community" (Fish, 2017: 66). This ethnonational inclusivity is an inheritance from the Soviet Union that was later combined with religious inclusivity as a result of Putin's governing policies. Hence, one can say that Putin oscillates between the purity of the Russians and multi-ethnic and multi-religious visions.

As I have shown in this section, 'the people' in Russia is an ethnically and religiously *inclusive* and heterogeneous concept that, with time, began to revolve around conservative-traditional values as Putin's administration responded to internal political crises. This stands in stark contrast to the Western European right-wing populists who espouse an ethnically and religiously homogeneous notion of 'the people' based on Islamophobia. However, apart from the adjectives I have so far attached, the content of 'the people' remains ambiguous in the Russian case. Considering its antagonist, 'the elite', might help to get a better, albeit a negative, definition of the content of 'the people'.

3.1.2.2. Content of 'the elite' in Putin's regime

I have shown in the previous section that the right-wing populists of Western Europe conceived of 'the elite' as corrupt establishment figures and politicians that have lost touch with 'the people'. The Russian case is somewhat similar but with important differences. In the first decade of Putin's presidency, 'the evil elite' consisted of oligarchs[24] that were presented as amassing financial gains at the expense of 'the people' (although in reality, these oligarchs opposed Putin's policies

[24] For an in-depth analysis of the tension between Putin and the Russian oligarchs, see Marshall Goldman's article, *Putin and the Oligarchs,* published in 2004 in the Foreign Affairs journal: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20034135

and were viewed by the regime as formidable political opponents). Furthermore, most Russians perceived the oligarchs to be in a parasitic relationship with the state.[25] Ahead of the 2004 elections, Putin sought to present himself as a political leader who stands for 'the people'. For this reason, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, one of the most influential oligarchs who was being increasingly involved in politics and opposing Putin's political projects, was arrested and imprisoned (the arrest itself was heavily televised and transformed into a public sensation). Burrett points out that this allowed Putin to "satisfy publics demands while also removing a potentially dangerous political opponent" (2020: 198). Throughout the first decade of Putin's presidency, many arrests of oligarchs took place, with many of these oligarchs ending up in exile. Together with a 'campaign against corrupt oligarchs', Putin's administration acted against corrupt government officials, with many arrests being publicly televised. Hence, much like the case of Western European populism, the central theme of Putin's populism is *korruptsiya* (corruption).

However, in the Western European case, corruption was understood as a deviation from the 'will of the people' and the pursuit of policies (such as cultural and regional integration) that damaged the 'national sovereignty'. In the Russian case, corruption is understood as a deviation from legality, and more specifically, it is understood as acquiring illegitimate wealth through illegitimate means. 'The people' stand as a victim of illegality – an illegality that has a material cost to the people and that prevents them from leading a life that is deserved by their labour. 'The elite', or the oligarchs, must be eradicated if 'the people' are to prosper. This antagonism creates a political demand for a strong leader whose role is to protect 'the people' by "liquidating the oligarchs as a class" (Putin, 1999, quoted in Burrett, 2020: 198). Here, it needs to be mentioned that several scholars have argued that it is difficult to speak of populism in Russia, because the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' is not present in Putin's domestic politics (Pain and Fedyunin, 2019: 39). In contrast to this, based on the above paragraphs, I would argue that this antagonism, while not as plainly apparent as in the European cases, nevertheless still

[25] This perception was rooted in the ways that these businessmen acquired their immense wealth, namely through the chaotic privatisation of state businesses and resources after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. This shaped the popular Russian opinion (that persists to this day) on the acquirement of wealth: corrupt doings, preferential treatment, and lawlessness.

exists, because the regime's reference to the oligarchs as trickters and plunderers of national wealth (especially before election times) is an allusion to the implicit 'purity' of 'the people' and the state's role of being the protector of 'the people' against such corruptive threats. Therefore, much like in the European case analysed in the previous section, in the Russian case the leader stands as the means of realisation of 'the will of the people' against the corrupt elites.

The content of 'the elite' underwent a shift in early 2010s as Putin's government was faced with large political protests and an increasingly organised opposition which attempted to employ the notion of corruption against Putin's regime. The oppositional figures included Boris Nemtsov (who was assassinated in front of the Kremlin walls in 2015) and Aleksey Naval'niy (who was poisoned in 2020 and imprisoned in 2021). The campaigns of these figures revolved around the term corruption, claiming that the regime under Putin exploits the state and natural resources for their personal gain and normalises this exploitation by instrumentalising public institutions. Putin's response to such populist challenge from the political opposition was to turn to a new comprehensive worldview based on conservative-tradionalist values. This worldview included the notion of Russia as a 'state-civilisation' that positions itself against an antagonistic 'other'. This 'other' was conceived of "the international liberal democracy and its political-military henchmen, Western governments [and NGOs]" (Fish, 2017: 64) that strived to undermine the '*gosudarstvennost'*' ('statehood') of Russia. In line with this, the 'evil elite' (that was previously identified as corrupt oligarchs and government officials) became an extension of the international 'other' that the Russian 'state-civilisation' opposes. As a result of this extension, Putin's regime now presented the 'evil elite' as a 'fifth column'[26] that consisted of 'foreign agents' working for the interests of the 'decadent' West. Any individual or NGO that either challenged or had the potential to challenge the regime headed by Putin was deemed part of 'the evil elite' that is an extension of the antagonistic 'other'. This even found expression in the Russian state

[26] This term refers to "a group of people who support the enemies of the country they live in and secretly help them" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). The term 'fifth column' is "conventionally credited to Emilio Mola Vidal, a Nationalist general during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). As four of his army columns moved on Madrid, the general referred to his militant supporters within the capital as his "fifth column," intent on undermining the loyalist government from within" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

law with the adoption of the controversial 'foreign agent' law[27] that requires NGOs and individuals who receive foreign funding to register as 'foreign agents' (Elder, 2013). While technically this does not preclude the NGOs and individuals from being active (they can still be active but under the label of 'foreign agent'), the law effectively disables these NGOs and individuals from conducting their work, because no one would risk being in contact with a 'foreign agent' (this is due to the Cold War era associations that are still vital in the Russian mass consciousness). In addition to oppositional[28] (or potentially oppositional) figures being framed as 'foreign agents' who are working against the interests of the 'state-civilisation' of Russia, undesirable individuals can also be presented as threatening the traditional values of the 'state-civilisation'. This also found its expression in Russian state law when a law against "homosexual propaganda"[29] was adopted in 2013. While this law can serve as an instrument of oppression, it also caters to the homophobic sentiments of the conservative segments of the Russian society, thereby strengthening the ties between Putin and these segments.

As I have shown in this section, Putin's regime first conceived of the 'elite' as corrupt oligarchs and government officials. In later years, beginning with the political crises of 2012, the notion of elite came to encompass the 'West' and its extension and influence in the domestic politics of Russia. This shift shows that there is an absence of a comprehensive ideology that drives the politics of Putin's regime. Instead, Putin navigates the political terrain in response to the political agenda and the various crises that are part of it. Hence, in order to better understand Putin's populism, it would be fruitful to consider the fragmented ideological elements that Putin's regime incorporated into its politics. In the following section I will attempt to do that.

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[27] The official title is "On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent".

[28] Because of the conservative-traditional reframing around the concept of 'state-civilisation' that was undertaken by the Putin regime in early 2010s, political opposition no longer signifies only domestic groups, but rather, it has a civilisational character (this opposition is based on a stand-off between the 'Russian civilisation' and the 'Western civilisation')

[29] For brief information on this, please see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/11/russia-law-banning-gay-propaganda

3.1.2.3. Ideological fragments of Putin's populism

The particular notions of 'the people' and 'the elite' mentioned above were not derived from one particular ideology. As per the Ideational Approach, several ideological fragments can be recognised in Putin's early populism. In the first decade of Putin's rule, the Russian leader did not offer a consistent and unified political programme to the people of Russia. Instead, he borrowed a variety of ideological elements used by various political figures in Russia (Zassoursky et al., 2002): the ideas of "empirial patriotism" and nationalism were borrowed from the then-Mayor of Moscow Yuriy Luzhkov and were used to advocate the interests of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet countries; the ideas of a strong state and the fight against corruption were borrowed from the ex-Prime Minister Evgeniy Primakov and were employed in the construction of a loyal system of government that was based on the authority of the *siloviki*[30]; the ideas of democracy and economic liberalism were borrowed from the ex-Mayor of Saint Petersburg Anatoliy Sobchak; and the stance against favoroutism and preferential treatment in the private business sphere was borrowed from Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, the leader of the liberal *Yabloko* party. These elements revolved around an ideological leitmotif summarised in Putin's famous expression "*pod'yom Rossii s kolen"* ("getting Russia off its knees")[31]. This distinctly Russian metaphor was borrowed from the ex-President Yel'tsin, who in a 1991 presidential speech spoke of getting Russia off its knees in the sense that Russia would be re-acquiring its statehood. This leitmotif was present in Putin's first presidency, signifying the bringing of law and order to Russia and recovering from the criminal chaos of the 1990s (Robinson and Milne, 2017: 415). "Getting Russia off its knees" became internationally known after Putin used it in his 2007 Munich speech (which was also addressed to the domestic audience advancing an 'us' against 'them' logic). Since then, this metaphor became a symbol of Russia's imperial revanchism aimed

[30] The term *silovik* (literally 'strongman' or 'person of force') refers to a representative of a law enforcement organ of Russia. These figures were often officers of security organs, intelligence agencies, and armed services of the state that were inherited by the Russian state from the Soviet Union.

[31] For more information on this metaphor, see Andrey Kolesnikov's article *The Russian Regime in 2015: All Tactics, No Strategy,* published in 2015: https://carnegiemoscow.org/2015/09/09/russian-regime-in-2015-all-tactics-no-strategy-pub-61238 Kolesnikov argues that the slogan "getting Russia off its knees" is used in order mobilise the Russian society while compensating for the lack of a consistent and long-term political vision.

at the West in economic, political, cultural and military terms. This point is similar to the Western European case because the right-wing populists also focus on a past glory to which their countries need to turn. Moreover, both the Western European and the Russian cases consider this glorious past as the one that, with its traditional values, stands against the deteriorating liberal norms. Yet, one should ask who is the agent that will carry out such a political programme? In the Western European case it was the leader, either Le Pen or Wilders, whom 'the people' needed to elect to realise the 'will of the people'. The following section will attempt to understand the connection between 'the people' and the leader as conceived by Putin's regime. In that section I will also try to shed light on the nature of political participation in the Russian case.

3.1.2.4. Characteristics of *the general will in Putin's regime*

As I have shown in the discussion of the Ideational Approach in the second chapter of the present study, the institutionally unmediated relationship between 'the people' and the leader who knows and realises their 'will' is central to populism. In this regard, Putin exemplifies a paternal leader who knows the 'will' of 'the Russian people' (however poorly defined it is, as has been shown above) and realises it in opposition to the various internal enemies (law infringing oligarchs, corrupt government officials, foreign agents, and styles of life that oppose traditional Orthodox values) and external enemies (the 'West' and its degrading liberal values). The connection between Putin and 'the people' is not established through the official political institutions and mechanisms such as the ones that can be seen in the liberal democracies of the West. It may be argued that this is a common feature with the Western European populists who, against the democratic principles of their systems, claim that the institutions are corrupt and therefore the leader must establish a direct link with 'the people'. What separates the Russian case from the Western European populists is that Putin attempts to solidify his authority as the leader of Russia by making an emphasis on the legitimacy of the political insitutions and the electoral system of the Russian state. However, these institutions and mechanisms are only legitimate *to the extent* that they facilitate the establishment of a link between 'the people' and the leader. Such a restrictive view on legitimacy precludes the possibility

of a political figure other than Putin[32] coming to power though legitimate means such as elections.[33] Thus, one can speak of a symbiotic relationship between the state institutions and the leader. This is exemplified by the popular belief that "Putin is Russia – without Putin there is no Russia". Going beyond a simple direct link between the leader and the state insitutions, this popular belief alludes to a unity between the leader, the state, and 'the people'. Gudkov points out that this "ideology of the monotonous totality of the population [and the state] comes from the late Soviet socialist period (2018: 87). This is a major point of divergence from the Western European political environment, where right-wing populist leaders must argue against a diverse variety of opinions, ideas, and values – a variety whose presence is in itself recognised as legitimate.

As I have shown in the paragraph above, Putin claims a direct link with 'the people', much like the right-wing populists of Western Europe. However, the nature of the relationship between the leader and 'the people' is peculiar to the Russian case. As Putin's years in power went by, his populism has evolved and came to include more slogans that facilitate his political authority. One such concept is '*sovereign democracy*' ('*suverennaya demokratiya*'). This concept was developed by a group of well-known intellectuals led by Vladislav Surkov[34], the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration between 1999 and 2011. Surkov presented this concept in his article titled 'Nationalisation of the future' ('*Natsionalizatsiya budushego')* in 2006.[35] Judging by the content of the proposed concept, it is a model of modernisation for the Russia of the future which is based on an 'illiberal' understanding of democracy. It is also supposed to be compatible with the idea of

[32] As Gleb Pavlovsky, a well-known 'political technologist' and a former political advisor to Putin, has said in an interview in 2000: "Putin simply cannot be opposed". For the interview in Russian, please see: https://www.ng.ru/politics/2000-12-09/3_belovejie.html

[33] Hence, one can argue that if someone other than Putin was to come to power legitimately, he or she would first need to be viewed upon as a leader of Russia and then be elected. This means that elections *on their own* do not function as a mechanism of the formation of a public consensus, but rather, it has the function of legitimating a leader who has already been chosen prior to the election. This brings to mind what Gramsci referred to as 'hegemony' (1971: 57).

[34] In the political circles of Russia, Surkov is known as one of the main ideologues of Putin's administration.

[35] For the article in Russian, please visit https://expert.ru/expert/2006/43/nacionalizaciya_buduschego/

Russia as a great power ('*velikaya derzhava*'). '*Sovereign democracy*' appears to fuse a collectivist model of democracy with a liberal model of democracy. While doing so, several points of tension arise, especially where it aims blending certain elements of the liberal models of democracy with collectivist ones and employing the term 'the Russian nation'.[36]

'*Sovereign democracy*' is identified with the "independent sovereign authority of the people". Given the allusion to a collectivist understanding of democracy present throughout the text, one can say that there is an assertion of the prime subjectivity of an organic and unified "Russian nation" (which remains undefined in the text) that transcends the mere sum of the Russian citizens.[37] This organic Russian nation has divergent meanings throughout the text: it is understood as subjects of the Russian state; as carriers of the Russian culture; and as ethnic Russians. The question of knowing the will of this Russian nation is also characterised by ambiguity. However, when it comes to the realisation of the 'will of the people', the text appears to be clear: it is to be realised by the Kremlin[38]. One can thus say that, it is also the Kremlin who 'knows' the 'will of the people'. Given the emphasis on the organic quality of the nation, the plebiscitary mechanisms appear to be of secondary importance. In other words, a plebiscite is organised not for the 'will of the people' to manifest itself, but to legitimate a decision taken by the leader on behalf of 'the people' whose 'will' the leader already knows (because the leader is the embodiment of 'the will of the people'). The political vision of '*sovereign democracy*' provides a path for Putin as a leader of 'the Russian people' who does not have to rely on electoral success to remain in power. As Surkov, the main architect of the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*', has said: "The text on sovereign democracy is *personified* because it interprets the course of President Putin" (Surkov, 2007, italics mine). This 'course' of Putin is 'special'. As Putin

[36] For an in-depth analysis of the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' in Russian, please see Andrey Kazantsev's article titled *Суверенная демократия: структура и социально-политические функции концепции* [*Sovereign democracy: The structure and social-political function of the concept*] published in 2007. This article, in original Russian, is accessible at https://www1.ku.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/5Kazancev.pdf

[37] This is clearly an allusion to Rousseau's general will.

[38] Kremlin means a "fortress inside a city". It is a metonymical reference to the government of Russia.

himself has stated: "The democratic road we have chosen is independent in nature, a road along which we move ahead, all the while taking into account our own specific internal circumstances" (Putin, 2005). Considering the unity of the Russian leader with the Russian people that I have emphasised in this paragraph, Putin's 'special' course is also the course of 'the people'. Indeed, a national opinion poll conducted by Levada Centre in 2007 (after the concept of '*sovereign democracy*' had already been articulated by Surkov) found that 74% of Russians are in favour of Russia following its 'own path of development'. According to the same poll, Putin's approval rating oscillated between 80% and 87% throughout the same year, which is the highest it has been until the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This empirical finding testifies to the organic tie that Putin's administration has symbolically established between 'the people', the leader, and the general will that I have examined here through the lens of the Ideational Approach.

Now that I have established a symbolic link between the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' and Putin's government, it seems pivotal to mention that while this conceptualisation alludes to Rousseau's general will, '*sovereign democracy*' is significantly different from Rousseau's general will when it comes to political participation. In fact, '*sovereign democracy*' corresponds to the *disfigurement* of Rousseau's general will, much like populism itself (as has been shown in the previous chapter). While Roussseau espouses the idea of active participation of the citizens in the formation of the general will, '*sovereign democracy*' (and populism in general) favours a passive view of political participation because it assumes that 'the will of the people' is already known by the leader prior to elections, a plebiscite, or any other instance of political participation. My argument is exemplified by Laruelle's assertion that "Putin's governing strategy is based on demobilising and *depoliticising* Russian citizens" (2013: 4, italics mine). Why would a leader politicise the citizens if he or she claims to already know their 'will' and be its embodiment? Genuine political participation is thus out of the question in the Russian case.[39] This is similar to the Western European case; however, the right-wing populists of Europe do not substantiate their leadership with

[39] This is substantiated by the opinion poll results published by the Levada Centre: in 1989, 14% of the survey population said that politics do not interest them; in 2016, the ratio is %38 (Gudkov, 2017: 99).

such comprehensive (albeit internally inconsistent) concepts, and they *must* rely on political participation in order to gain political legitimacy in the competitive political systems of Western Europe.

The conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' was not immediately picked up by Putin. In fact, initial scepticism of scholars as to the future popularity of the concept (Kazantsev, 2007: 16) was justified because this concept did not get officially endorsed by Putin. And although Putin *did* make references in his speeches to upholding state sovereignty as a new path for Russia's development, these references were situated within the framework of European values and norms (Robinson and Milne, 2017: 418). As Putin declared: "Russia is part of European civilisation, I cannot conceive of Russia falling out of Europe" (Putin 2000, cited in Tolz, 2004: 175). This shows that populism was not allowed to dominate the state's political agenda in the 2000s. However, this changed when Putin faced formidable political opposition in 2012. This was because the political opposition was employing populist themes such as speaking in the name of 'the people' and their 'will', and protecting them from the (legal and financial) corruption of the (morally) degrading state and politics under Putin's rule. This is summed up in the opposition's call for a "Russia without Putin"[40]. In response to this, Putin began to employ conservative-traditional values in his politics (Medushevskiy, 2017). As part of this ideological shift, political agency came to be defined in line with the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*'. Putin would emphasise that it is the role of the state to protect 'the people' and their values, and the state ensures its survival through this protection. Democracy, then, becomes understood in line with the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*'. As Robinson and Milne explain: "[t]his preservation of popular support for the state is a form of democracy; as it builds up popular support the state is also representing the people's organic social values and interests, enabling the people to live in a political community that is true to their deepest interests and beliefs" (2017: 420).

[40] For a coverage of the protests in Russian, please see: https://www.dw.com/ru/zaderzhanija-za-lozungi-putin-vor-i-rossija-bez-putina/av-56409983

3.1.2.5. Concluding remarks

By examining the Russian case through the lens of the Ideational Approach, I have shown that 'the people' is defined in an ethnically and religiously *inclusive* and heterogeneous way. Beginning in early 2010s, as a response to internal political crises, Putin began to emphasise conservative-traditional values. As a result, 'the people' was transformed so as to include conservative and traditional characteristics, while also being positioned in an antagonistic manner against 'the elite' which transcended the Russian borders. 'The elite', throughout the 2000s, consisted of Russian oligarchs who challenged the state and corrupt government officials, both of which tainted the 'purity' of 'the people'. Later in 2010s, 'the elite' came to be redefined as the 'West' and its domestic sympathisers who were labelled 'foreign agents' by Putin's regime. According to Putin's regime, in order to counter this 'elite', 'the people' must support the leader who will 'get Russia off its knees'. Hence, political participation in Putin's regime is limited to electing the leader, with whom 'the people' organically share a 'special path'.

In this section, I have shown the content of 'the people' and 'the elite' and the characteristics of the ways of grasping the general will in the Western European and Russian cases. Recall from the previous chapter that the Ideational Approach is prone to viewing 'the people' and 'the elite' as *homogeneous* entities which stand in *moral* opposition to each other. Furthermore, the Ideational Approach assumes that populism is a "thin-centred" ideology: populists, devoid of a consistent ideology of their own, attach their ideas to 'full' ideologies which are present in the political horizon. Therefore, it can be said that the Ideational Approach ascribes fixed content to 'the people', 'the elite', and the antagonism between these two categories. One can argue that this may lead to a limited grasp of populism in distinct regions. In order to arrive at a fuller picture, I will consider the interactive formation of 'the people' and 'the other' in Western Europe and Russia. Hence, I will focus on the practices of articulation and discursive construction carried out by FN, PVV, and Putin's regime. I will do so by employing the Discursive Approach based on Laclau's theory which I have outlined in the previous chapter.

3.2. Divergence of Form in the Populism of Western Europe and Russia

Narratives are used as instruments of political reasoning and persuasion.

Tipaldou & Casula, 2019: 355.

In the previous section, I have outlined the ideologies with which the populisms of Western Europe and Russia interact. I have also pointed out how this ideological content is included (or excluded) in the notions of 'the people', 'the elite', the antagonism between them, and the relationship between the leader and 'the people'. The following section will continue to build on these findings by considering precisely *how* the discursive construction of 'the people' and 'the other', and thus of populism, takes place. I will examine this discursive construction *via* the Discursive Approach which is rooted in Laclau's theory. Recall from the previous chapter that the Discursive Approach "investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality" (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000: 3, quoted in De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017: 307). The Discursive Approach examines the articulation of the populist logic while focusing on demarcating the demands and identities in the populist chain of equivalence.

3.2.1. Discursive Formation of 'the People' and 'the Other' in the Populism of FN and PVV

As I have shown in the previous section, FN and PVV's populism revolves around ethno-nationalism, pitting the native people of France and the Netherlands against the Muslim 'other'. In this section I will consider the cases of FN and PVV through the Discursive Approach by looking at the construction of 'the people' and 'the other' by the respective parties. I will first begin with an analysis of FN under Marine Le Pen and then proceed to an analysis of PVV under Geert Wilders.

3.2.1.1. Front National's discursive construction of 'the people', the 'other', and the empty signifier 'national sovereignty'

In the previous section, I have demonstrated that FN constructs 'the people' through an organic and exclusive connection to the nation. 'France for the French' used to be its long-standing motto, exemplifying its national identity. Together with this, FN would emphasise traditional values and present the nation as being under threat. Throughout its existence, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, FN was known for its extreme position on migrants. This changed when the party leadership

switched to Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, in 2011. Under her leadership, the so-called *dédiabolisation* (de-demonisation) period of the party began. The aim of *dédiabolisation* was to bring FN into the political mainstream by underemphasising the element of racism in FN's discourse. As a result, instead of targeting migrants on the basis of racism, FN's discourse began to articulate the incompatibility of Muslim cultures with the French values. Hence, FN came to view immigrants as an internal[41] threat to the nation of France. In recent years, Le Pen began to articulate it as an economic issue: "We have millions of unemployed and cannot afford any more immigration. Where are they supposed to live? It is not viable" (Le Pen, 2014, quoted in Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 432). On top of being an economic threat, the non-integrated migrants also pose a democratic threat, because it is supposed that these migrants do not adhere to the political culture and democratic procedures of the French political system.

Together with this xenophobia, an *external* threat is also registered in FN's discourse. This external threat is globalisation and cosmopolitanism, and it is seen as corrosive to the nation. The European Union is viewed as a "deeply harmful" and "anti-democratic monster" (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 431). Le Pen publicly expressed her wish to "destroy the EU" with the aim of regaining popular sovereignty (which is tantamount to national sovereignty in the case of FN): "The European Union is working to destroy the nation and we are here to defend our people" (quoted in Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 432). This aggressive stance against the EU integration is compatible with FN's position on anti-immigration: the EU is putting pressure on the French state to include more migrants in the French society. By framing it this way, FN establishes a correlation between EU's integration policies and migration: as the EU further integrates its member-states, migration increases, and with this increase in newcomers, the French state becomes responsible for their integration. FN frames its objection to such dependence on EU by references to the problems of democracy: non-integrated migrants pose a threat to democracy and global governance cannot be held accountable to 'the people' (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 433). In other words, the 'sovereignty' of the nation is at stake: "[w]e want to represent all the French people

[41] As opposed to an external or civilisational threat as articulated by FN's earlier years.

with ideas that are neither left nor right: patriotism, defence of the identity and sovereignty of the people" (Le Pen, 2014, quoted in Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 433).

From the paragraph above, one may claim that FN's political discourse was re-articulated in the shifting of political frontiers of France and the EU. During FN's earlier years (1980s and 1990s), 'the other' was articulated on racist basis. This limited the political possibilities of FN, because such articulation did not have political purchase. By conceiving non-integrated immigrants as 'the other' in terms of democratic and economic threats, FN under Marine Le Pen was able to appeal to a larger constituency. The EU (or the 'establishment', with its representatives in the French state) and supranational entities (such as a global system of banks) were added to the articulation of 'the other' parallel to migrants. 'The people' came to be articulated as the 'French nation', demarcated from this 'other' and under constant threat from this new more populated other. In order to stabilise the unity of 'the people', FN employed the empty signifier 'national sovereignty'. By conceiving 'the people' as 'the nation', FN ultimately reduced 'popular' to 'national'. While this *does* allow for the expansion of FN's constituency, it also potentially limits it: the narrower the definition of the 'nation', the narrower the scope of 'the people'. The empty signifier 'national sovereignty' served as a discursive formation into which a variety of differential demands (such as Euroscepticism, democratisation, anti-globalism, nativism, and conservatism) were inscribed, thereby uniting a disparate set of actors into an equivalential chain (that is, a set of normally unrelated actors united by their seemingly different demands through an empty signifier).

Having considered *Front National's* discursive construction of 'the people' and the 'other' through the empty signifier of 'national sovereignty', I will now turn to employing the Discursive Approach to the examination of our second case of Western Europe: The Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* under Geert Wilders.

3.2.1.2. Partij voor de Vrijheid's discursive construction of 'the people', the 'other', and the empty signifier 'national sovereignty'

As I have shown in the previous section, much like FN, PVV based the construction of 'the people' on Islamophobia. PVV's ideological predecessor in Dutch politics is Pim Fortuyn of the List Pim Fortuyn Party (LPF), who stated in 2002 that Islam is a 'backward' culture. However, Furtuyn never made calls for a total ousting of Muslim migrants, instead he rallied against their integration into the

Dutch society with an anti-establishment rhetoric, thereby articulating a sort of a 'civic' nationalism that could be blended with liberal values (Akkerman, 2005, quoted in Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 429). After Fortuyn's assassination in 2002, Geert Wilders' PVV filled the political vacuum of Fortuyn's party by re-articulating and radicalising its stance on the subjects of migrants, Islam, and the EU. Islam, in particular, became an overdetermining aspect in his discourse. Wilders constructs 'the people' in nativist antagonism to Muslims. 'The other' is articulated primarily in such an ethnic and religious vision. Wilders employs the signifier *Mohammed and Fatima* to articulate the immediate threat of 'the other'. According to Wilders, *Mohammed and Fatima* are a danger to *Henk and Igrid* (most common Dutch names), which is a signifier for 'the people' that need to be protected. Much like the French case, PVV's discourse also incorporates the EU (or the establishment) into the antagonistic tension between 'the people' and 'the other'. The EU is presented as a "monstrous super-state" whose anti-democratic bureaucratisation and 'elites' need to be opposed in order to protect the 'sovereignty' of the Netherlands (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 428). This is exemplified in PVV's 2012 political campaign: "*Their* Brussels, *our* Netherlands" (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 428). Thus, much like Le Pen, Wilders employs the empty signifier 'national sovereignty', which is considered in essential terms, because there is a call to return to a mythical nation:

> The peoples of the free world will only be able to fight back against Islam, if they can rally around a flag with which they can identify. This flag, symbolizing *pre-political* loyalty, can only be the flag of our nation. (Wilders, 2011, quoted in Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 431, italics mine).

Recall from the previous section that populism *de-politicises* 'the people'. This *de-politicisation* is echoed in Wilders' reference to "pre-political loyalty". Based on Wilders' quote mentioned above, 'the people' should be loyal to the nation, and by extension, they should be loyal to the nation's leader before engaging in politics or the act of voting. Hence, like in the French case, the discourse of PVV uses the term 'nation' as the signified of 'the people' and revolves around the empty signifier of 'national sovereignty', in which a variety of demands is inscribed. Another major similarity with the French case is that Islam stands as the constitutive 'other'. Recall Laclau's assertion from the previous chapter that identity is formed as a result of the tension between the equivalential and differential logics. One can even argue that the strength of an identity is proportional to the degree of this tension.

Hence, by emphasising the 'otherness' of Islam, Wilders attempts to solidify the identity of 'the people' of his political vision.

3.2.1.3. Concluding remarks

While being very similar in terms of the employment of discursive operations and signified notions, FN and PVV differ in their discursive articulation of 'the other'. Marine Le Pen de-emphasises (at least rhetorically) Islam as a civilisational threat. Under her leadership, FN focused on the democratic and economic threats posed by non-integrated migrants and the EU that 'enables' these threats with its multi-culturalism and integrational policies. PVV, on the other hand, considers Islam as an invading civilisational threat, articulating 'the people' in nativist terms and in antagonistic opposition to the Muslim 'other'. Both FN and PVV employ the empty signifier of 'national sovereignty', for the purpose of equating 'the people' to 'the nation'. Here, one can see the isolationist character of the nation as conceived by FN and PVV. The solution for both parties lies within "making the nation sovereign again" through the empowerment of charismatic figures such as Le Pen and Wilders. In the next section, I will consider the case of Putin's regime through the lens of the Discursive Approach.

3.2.2. Discursive Formation of 'the People' and 'the Other' in the Populism of Putin's Regime

> *[S]olidarity in an authoritarian regime can only be reached through the creation of a negative identity.*
>
> Lev Gudkov, 2018: 88.

In the previous section, I have used the Ideational Approach to outline the fragmented ideological elements with which the populism of Putin's regime interacts. 'The people' is defined in an *inclusive* way, both ethnically and religiously. Later, in the 2010s, 'the people' adopted conservative and traditional characteristics. 'The people' were first (in 2000s) positioned against 'the elite' which consisted of Russian oligarchs and corrupt government officials, and later (in 2010s), 'the elite' came to consist of the 'West' and its domestic extension – the 'foreign agents'. In this section I will consider the Russian case through the Discursive Approach by looking at the construction of 'the people' and 'the other' by Putin's regime.

3.2.2.1. Discursive construction and operationalisation of Putin as an empty signifier

As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, it has been declared 'Russia is Putin' and 'Putin is Russia'. Building on this argument, one can say that Putin is an empty signifier. As David Howarth explains: "[T]he figure of "president Putin" served the function of holding together a diverse set of social demands – demands for political stability, economic welfare, and an efficient state domestically and in international relations – that were put forward by a number of different social actors in various social sites" (2014: 33). To be clear, it is not Putin as a person who is an empty signifier, but rather, it is the name (or the image) *Putin* and what it stands for.[42] I have shown in the previous section that, Putin incorporates ideological fragments such as 'getting Russia off its knees' with an anti-corruption crusade in domestic politics and anti-Westernism in foreign relations. Apart from this, the name Putin stands for a set of policies, such as the largely fictional 'Putin's plan' in the 2007 political campaign of United Russia. The plan itself had ambiguous content. However, because it carried the name '*Putin*', the plan's elusive substance appeared understandable. One can argue that the reason behind this is that Putin is part of it: the plan included Putin and what he thinks, and the Russian people supposedly knew it instinctually. A poll conducted in 2007 reported that "the overwhelming majority of Russians could not describe Putin's plan. … Yet an equally large majority was nevertheless confident that Putin had one. Furthermore, … Russians want the country to be guided by that strategy, whatever it is" (Gaddy and Kuchins, 2008: 118 quoted in Casula, 2013: 7). One can view this remarkable public trust to be a testament to the successful operationalisation of '*Putin*' as an empty signifier. Moreover, the empty signifier '*Putin*' creates an antagonism between the supporters[43] of 'Putin's plan' and the 'bad institutional system' with its corrupt bureaucracy. In this antagonism, Putin stands on the side of 'the people' as its leader who embodies its

[42] This point can be better understood through Ernst Kantorowicz's distinction between the body natural' and the 'body politic' which was made in his seminal work titled '*The King's Two Bodies*' (1957). The medieval doctrine of 'the king's two bodies' holds that the king is actually both a physical body ('body natural') and a manifestation of state power ('body politic'). For an application (written in Russian) of this conceptualisation in the contemporary Russian political context, please see: https://carnegie.ru/2020/10/28/ru-pub-83077

[43] Supposedly, because Putin *is* Russia, Putin's supporters are 'the people' of Russia.

'will'. But the empty signifier 'Putin' does not just position the good 'people' against the 'bad institutional system'. Because 'Putin's plan' assumes that there are those who support it and those who do not, it pits the former against the latter. As a result of this, 'the other' becomes constituted through a negative operation. As opposed to a positive operation which loads content into a symbol, a negative operation defines something based on what it is not, thereby avoiding to provide an answer to the question of *what* or *who* someone or something *is* exactly. 'The other' is what 'the people' *are not* or what 'the people' (or Putin) stand *against*. In this equation, Putin is the leader of the nation ('the people') who knows the 'will of the people' and for whom 'the people' must vote in order for Putin to realise the 'will of the people' and to lead the battle against 'the other'. One can also understand from this equation that 'the people' are *de-politicised,* because political participation is limited to the practice of electing the leader.[44] By considering this *de-politicisation*, one can further illuminate the construction and operationalisation of the empty signifier '*Putin*'.

Towards the end of Putin's first decade of presidency, the official discourse came to present Putin's regime as a type of non-ideological form of government. Putin was presented as standing above the politics of the country, with political issues being presented to be guided by economic necessities (Casula, 2013: 7). Prozorov points out that this economic and technical framing "permeates the entire discourse of the Putin presidency, whereby even governmental mechanisms and the operation of the state are subjected to the logic of economic efficiency … it is this rationality of neoliberal governance that attracts liberal conservatives to … Putin" (Prozorov, 2005: 135, quoted in Casula, 2013: 8). Together with this, Putin's administration sought to politically neutralise the opposition by inscribing the political demands of their supporters into its programme. This is exemplified in the United Russia's[45] programme that included the demands of the liberals in terms of economic reform, demands of the left through the raising of the wages, and the demands of the nationals through the articulation of Russia as a "great power" (Casula, 2013: 8). However, United Russia did not (or could not) inscribe all of the demands of the opposition.

[44] Recall from the previous section (3.1.2.4) that Surkov's conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' sets forth a passive view of political participation as it is based on the assumption that 'the will of the people' is known by the leader prior to the elections.

[45] United Russia is a political party known to be a *de facto* party of Putin.

Such demands were put outside the political discourse and presented as the demands of the 'fifth column'[46] articulated through its 'foreign agents', thereby shifting these political actors to the field of 'the other' whose demands are illegitimate because they originate in the opposite camp ('the people' and the Russian state are presented as a unity, therefore opposing the state means opposing 'the people'). This hegemonic operation serves to further demarcate the difference between the inside and the outside, or between 'the people' and 'the other'. As for the *de-politicisation* of 'the people' mentioned above, it serves to keep the 'inside' together by reducing the friction between the plethora of different demands (Casula, 2013: 8). These discursive operations are made possible through the empty signifier '*Putin*': by virtue of its fluidity, it can incorporate demands, including seemingly irreconcilable ones; and through its symbolic embodiment of Russia (or 'the people'), it has the authoritative capacity to exclude, *via* a hegemonic operation, the demands that can potentially destabilise the regime. Considering the ability of the signifier of '*Putin'* to both include and exclude the newly emerging demands of a variety of political actors in the constantly shifting political frontiers[47], perhaps it would be more correct to use the term *floating*[48] signifier instead of *empty* signifier when analysing the politics of Putin.

In this section I have shown that '*Putin*' as a signifier is employed by Putin's regime in order to hold together a heterogeneous society with different political demands. While doing so, I have touched upon the construction of 'the people' through the employment of the signifier '*Putin*'. In the next section I will focus on the construction of 'the people' and 'the other' under Putin's regime.

[46] I have provided a brief explanation of this term in footnote number 26.

[47] By political frontiers I understand the wider domestic and international political environment that undergoes discursive transformations (a shift in cultural, social, economic, and political values used as points of anchorage in the justification of political decision-making) in response to various crises.

[48] Recall from chapter 2 that Laclau uses the term 'empty signifier' to refer to a symbol in a *static* political frontier. In order to refer to a symbol in a constantly *shifting* political frontier, Laclau uses the term 'floating signifier'.

3.2.2.2. Discursive construction of 'the people' and the 'other' in Putin's rule through the employment of the slogan of 'sovereign democracy'

In the section about the content of populism in Russia, I have discussed the central role played by the concept of '*sovereign democracy*' in framing the relationship between the Russian leader and 'the Russian people'. In order to illuminate the construction of 'the people' in contemporary Russia, it would be reasonable to continue with the discussion of '*sovereign democracy*'. This is inevitable because "the concept of 'sovereign democracy' forms the ideological horizon of contemporary Russia" (Morozov, 2014: 211). In the section above, I have shown that '*sovereign democracy*' sets out a special path for Russia and its people, suggesting a peculiar model of democracy which supposedly fits the 'uniqueness' of the Russian political context, pivoting the Russian state against the 'decadent' West. As I examined the role played by the concept of '*sovereign democracy*' in Putin's populism, given the methodological assumptions[49] of the Ideational Approach, I traced its salience to an ideological moment: the conversative-tradionalist turn in Russian politics of early 2010s. In this section, I will consider '*sovereign democracy*' as a discursive formation employed by Putin's regime to inscribe a wide range of political demands of a variety of actors and equate them in an equivalential chain. As a result of this operation, it is possible to see the emergence of 'the people' and 'the other'. As Hudson writes, "… [s]overeign democracy may be interpreted as a hegemonic project whose role as a discourse is to 'provide the empty signifier of the nation, which symbolises an absent fullness, with a precise substantive content that people can identify with'" (2014: 199).

As I have shown before, the question of the content of the Russian nation, or 'the people', is rather problematic. This is reflected in the *Russkiy* versus *Rossiyskiy* debate in Russian politics. Although both of these terms mean 'Russian', *Russkiy* signifies only the cultural and ethnic dimensions, while *Rossiyskiy* signifies the civic dimension of the Russian identity. Over the two decades spanning Putin's presidency, depending on the political agenda, Putin's administration emphasised

[49] The Ideational Approach views populism as a thin ideology which attaches itself to 'full' ideologies such as conservatism because populism does not have a consistent ideological framework of its own.

either one of these identities[50]. The civic identity signified by *Rossiyskiy* would largely prevail under Putin as he would emphasise the multi-ethnic character of Russia. This accommodates the ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population of Russia, thereby minimising intercommunal tension in domestic politics. *Rossiyskiy* also emphasises continuity with the policies of the Soviet Union of conceived of the 'the people' as a multi-ethnic entity. However, this inclusion of different identities is rather problematic in the Russian case. This can be seen in the concept of '*sovereign democracy*' and discourse of Putin and his administration in relation to this concept. As Surkov (one of the main ideologues of Putin and the figure behind the creation of the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*') writes:

> The nation is understood here as a supra-ethnic totality of all citizens of the country. As applied to Russia: "the nation … [is equivalent to] "the multinational people" in the text of the Constitution. i.e., the Russian nation ('the people') incorporates all the peoples (nationalities?) of Russia in the shared boundaries, state, culture, past and future. (Surkov, 2006: 27)

Such conceptualisation emphasises many nationalities belonging to one nation, or a "community with which the majority identifies" (Surkov, 2006). Drawing on Laclau's framework elaborated in the previous chapter on the Discursive Approach, it can be said that there is an attempt to inscribe many different political demands (the inclusion of religions such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism and a multitude of ethnicities in the definition of the 'the people), in the empty signifier of '*sovereign democracy*' and unite them into an equivalential chain. However, tension arises when Surkov conceives of ethnic Russians as "the leaders of the fate of the nation" and the "creators of the greatest projects" (Surkov, 2006). As Karpenko points out, "… ethnic Russians are the only nationality to possess a distinct profile, while others are merely listed on occasion as titular appendages, with sovereign rights attached only to "their territory" (Karpenko, 2007, quoted in Hudson, 2014: 205). It can be said that Putin attempts to alleviate this tension by strongly opposing the ethno-nationalist call for *Rossiya dlya Russkih* (Russia for Russians) (Fish, 2017: 66). By showing these groups as the 'other', the

[50] As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, one of the few instances when ethno-nationalism was emphasised by Putin was in 2012 as a way of consolidating political support in response to the political unrest in the country.

definitional frontier becomes split into two camps with Putin's conception of 'the people' gaining unity in a negative sense *vis-à-vis* the 'other' conception of the ethno-nationalists (Putin's 'the people' are what the ethno-nationalist definition of 'the people' *is* not).[51] But '*sovereign democracy*' does not only deal with the issue of hegemonizing[52] its definition of 'the people' against other definitions prevalent in the Russian political frontier. '*Sovereign democracy*' also inscribes the demands for democratic reforms that began to be articulated with the *perestroika* (a set of political liberalisation reforms undertaken in late 1980s in the Soviet Union) and the liberal reforms of the 1990s which called for a "return to the road of civilization".

Thus, '*sovereign democracy*' serves as an empty signifier that is capable of bringing together irreconcilable demands such as democratisation and authoritarianism. As Malinova and Casula argue, "sovereign democracy strives for legitimization of [Putin's] regime, internally (binding demands from different political currents) and externally (claiming democracy and hence parity with Western powers)" (2010: 178). Together with the articulation of '*sovereign democracy*', the irreconcilable demands find unity when the floating signifier '*Putin*' is employed so as to refer to Russia. This is what Laclau refers to as 'radical investment' or naming'. The famous slogan "Putin is Russia" is a case in point because it solidifies the unity (that is actually ambiguous and perpetually incomplete) which emerges in the shifting political frontiers of Russia. In order to better understand the success of Putin's regime in carrying out these hegemonic operations, I will consider the construction and function of the 'constitutive other'.

As I have shown in section 3.1.2, Putin's later references concerning the conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' pits the Russian 'state civilisation' against the politically and culturally 'decadent' West. Considering this issue in Laclau's terms, as Hudson argues:

> [T]he problematisation of the West enacted in the discourse of sovereign democracy in response to the destabilisation (or dislocation) of Russia's identity in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be seen as creating a constitutive outside

[51] As I have shown in the previous chapter, 'the people' is an incomplete formation in Laclau's understanding. Thus, 'the people' requires an 'other' to keep itself from falling apart.

[52] And, thus, establishing the stabilisation of Putin's regime against anti-hegemonic movements in Russian domestic politics.

> that simultaneously denies and provides the conditions of possibility for that identity. (Hudson, 2014: 203).

As I have outlined in the section on Laclau's theory, 'the people' is an 'incomplete totality'. Because it can never be full (as I have outlined in the previous paragraph), the construction of the 'other' is necessary for the demarcation of the frontier between 'us' and 'them' and the symbolic stabilisation of 'us' (in other words, uniting the population against the 'other'). As was shown in this section, such fullness is not possible simply by reference to positive national attributes, and thus, a negative differentiation is also needed (that is, unifying the 'inside' by articulating what the 'outside' is *not*). As Makarychev writes:

> Russia needs, first, to explain what Europe is, and then – secondly – to define and reposition herself *vis-à-vis* this reinvented image. Put it differently, Russia uses the alleged emptiness of Europe as a signifier for filling it with a variety of discourses and playing with them afterwards. (2005: 1).

The conceptualisation of '*sovereign democracy*' considers 'the other' to be the 'West' and its hegemony in political and cultural terms. The word '*sovereign*' in '*sovereign democracy*' is actually an allusion to this because what is implied is that the Western liberal democratic form of governance is *not* the only legitimate form of governance, and the Western cultural norms are not representative of the whole world. As Putin expressed himself in an interview with the *Financial Times*: "'the liberal idea' hegemonic in the second half of the 20th century has "outlived its purpose" (2019). He further added that "… liberals cannot simply dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over the recent decades" (Putin, quoted in *Financial Times*, 2019) The liberal 'West', with its emphasis on liberal democracy, human rights, and individualism, comes to constitute 'the other' against the 'obsoleteness'[53] of which the Russian identity is constituted.[54,55] Thus, the

[53] Both political *and* moral.

[54] I trace a part of the constitution of 'the people' in Russia to the external relations with the West because of the importance of international prestige in the Russian social consciousness. This manifests itself in the slogan 'getting Russia off its knees' that Putin came to power with. It is also rooted in the mentality that originated during the Cold War era and continued to exist to this day: the 'stand-off' between the Soviets and the Westerners.

[55] As Olga Oliker points out: "Russia's evolving self-definition also draws on a juxtaposition to the West. Appeals to 'conservative values' are explicitly presented as an alternative to Europe's liberalism, particularly when it comes to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, religious minorities, women and other historically disadvantaged groups. Russia

frontier between 'the people' and 'the other' becomes clearly demarcated, as a result of which, the '*incompleteness*'[56] of 'the people' become fixed. Furthermore, one can also see that, as a result of this antagonism, the demands of different segments[57] of the Russian population become inscribed into the signifiers of '*Putin*' and '*sovereign democracy*'. In fact, one can trace the inscription of demands even beyond Russia, as conservatives in the Western countries make positive references to Putin's stance against the 'decadent' West.[58]

3.2.2.3. Concluding remarks

In this section I have shown that under Putin's regime in Russia, the image of '*Putin*' is employed as an empty signifier, synonymous with 'Russia', to establish hegemony in domestic politics by holding together a plethora of irreconcilable political demands. With the addition of the empty signifier '*sovereign democracy*' that inscribes in itself the political demands for both democratisation and authoritarianism, 'the people' and 'the other' emerge as two antagonistic entities. 'The people' is articulated in an *inclusive* manner, with the 'nation' being understood on civic grounds as departing from ethnic or religious grounds. As for the 'the other', it emerges as an enemy of 'the people': first as oligarchs and corrupt governmental officials in 2000s, and later in 2010s as the 'decadent West'. Moreover, by articulating the 'other' as the 'West' which threatens the conservative and traditional values of Russia, Putin's regime is able to exclude domestic opposition by referring to it as 'foreign agents' who are part of the "threatening West".

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is presented as a bulwark against the threat to traditional families and societies posed by European liberalism, often as part of a civilisational stand-off with the West" (2017: 10).

[56] As per Laclau's argument in the previous chapter, 'the people' is an impossible totality because the identity of 'the people' emerges as a result of the tension between the equivalential and differential logics. In other words, 'us' needs an opposing 'them' in order for 'us' to exist. If 'us' becomes truly 'total' by integrating 'them' into itself, 'us' will cease to exist because 'us' will lose the point of reference in the formation of the identity of itself.

[57] Whether they are conservatives, anti-globalists, or anyone else who subscribes to ideas that appear to be opposed to the liberal 'West' and the imagined ideological framework.

[58] As Steven Fish writes: "Prominent American social conservative Pat Buchanan lauds Putin as a leader in the global charge against debauchery, the voice of "conservatives, traditionalists and nationalists of all continents and countries [who seek to] stand up against the cultural and ideological imperialism of what [Putin] sees as a decadent West" (2017: 64).

In the previous section I have shown *what* the content of 'the people' and 'the elite' is in the cases of FN, PVV, and Putin's regime. In this section I have shown *how* 'the people' and 'the other' are discursively constructed by FN, PVV, and Putin. In the next section I will consider the political function of the populism of FN, PVV and Putin. Recall from the previous chapter that the Political-Strategic Approach shares the assumptions of the Ideational Approach and the Discursive Approach in regard to a lack of consistent ideology in populism and the discursive construction of 'the people' and 'the other'. The Political-Strategic Approach contribute to the debate by emphasising the role of the leader, his or her drive to concentrate power by means of the *de-politicisation* of politics and the consequent establishment of a direct connection between the leader and 'the people'.

3.3. Divergence of Function in the Populism of Western Europe and Russia

Populism is a reaction to the exposed dysfunctions, or incapability of the state and political institutions.

Gudkov, 2018: 80

3.3.1. Populism of FN and PVV as Challenge to the Liberal Establishment

The political system of Western Europe is characterised by the rule of law, political pluralism, liberal values, and democratic procedures. As such, both FN and PVV must act within the framework of representative democracy. As I have shown earlier in this chapter, the Western European right-wing populists, more specifically FN and PVV, view the EU as an anti-democratic bureaucracy that infringes upon 'national sovereignty'. Together with this, 'transnational capital' is also seen as harming the 'sovereignty of the nation' because it is not transparent and not accountable to 'the people'. And while FN and FVV diverge in their view on why migration is an issue, they strongly oppose immigrants, and in particular Muslim immigrants, connecting this 'issue' to the 'sovereignty of the nation'. In order to implement their political vision, both FN and FVV, given the institutional framework of France and the Netherlands, must compete with other political parties by appealing to an electorate. In the previous sections of this chapter, I have shown that both FN and FVV's populism is characterised by *exclusion* in terms of content (ethno-nationalism and Euroscepticism) and form (articulating 'the people' by demarcating the 'other'). This *exclusive* populism is used by FN and FVV as an instrument of coming to power through electoral means.[59]

On the other hand, the political rise of FN and PVV is viewed by scholars of populist politics to be symptomatic of the crisis of the system of political representation (Makarenko, 2018: 35). FN and PVV, claiming to be the representatives of the unrepresented, demand more direct forms of political participation in order to restore the 'sovereignty of the people'. This corresponds to the tendency of populists to *de-institutionalise* politics. With the rise of populism in Western Europe, instances of plebiscitary democracy have become more frequent in the politics of this region. But this does not amount to a 'true' democracy. Urbinati

[59] As illustrated by Le Pen's quote in section 3.1.1.1 of this thesis.

argues that populism "deforms" representative democracy by enforcing a "regime of the majority": "[populism] does not tolerate opposition and tries to conceal it as much as it can, when it does not liquidate it altogether" (2019a: 98). This issue becomes even more critical when one considers that FN and PVV define 'the people' by excluding large segments of the population, and there can be no dialogue with the excluded because the existence of 'the people' in FN and PVV's worldview depends on *exclusion*. Moreover, as I have shown in the section about the content of populism, FN and PVV view the leader and 'the people' as organically connected to each other, with the leader being the embodiment of 'the will of the people'. Hence, in addition to *de-institutionalising* political participation, FN and PVV's populism *de-politicises* citizen participation because the only 'true' political decision for 'the people' is to elect the leader.

Taking into account the abovementioned aspirations of FN and PVV to instrumentalise social grievances, *de-institutionalise* political participation, and *de-politicise* citizens, one can say that FN and PVV's populism is a challenge to the political establishment in terms of political culture, economic policy, and integration policies. However, by virtue of the electoral system and political pluralism in Western Europe, FN and PVV's populism can be challenged efficiently. FN and PVV's populism is limited by electoral cycles because the institutionalised democracy of Western Europe allows an electorate to eliminate a political party from the political stage. In fact, some scholars point out the potentially positive effects of Western European populism by bringing to light the societal tensions that arise as a result of the representation gap and by providing a means for segments of a population to have an impact on political decision-making (Makarenko, 2018: 35).

3.3.2. Populism of Putin's Regime as Consolidation of the Authoritarian Regime

In contrast to the Western European case of FN and PVV, the Russian polity is characterised by competitive authoritarianism[60], imitation of democracy[61], and limited pluralism. Populism emerges in this political setting through the association made with the politics of the state and the leader. Moreover, given that Russia is a relatively traditional society with a non-democratic political system, populism does not aim to change the relations between state and society (Makarenko, 2018: 31). As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the content of 'the people' in Putin's populism is carefully constituted in such a way as to include the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of Russia. One can argue that, from a political-strategic perspective, this is done with the intention of stabilising intercommunal dynamics. The discursive articulation of the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other' is also done in a way that ensures the political stability of the regime: 'the people' are articulated against an 'other' which is external to Russia. That is, 'the other' is articulated as a foreign enemy based on 'decadent' liberalism. The internal enemy of Putin's regime is then articulated as an 'outer enemy within', or as I have shown earlier in this chapter, it is articulated as a 'foreign agent'. The overriding theme of Putin's populism is the "unity of the government and the people" (Makarenko, 2018: 31), with people being defined in a wide sense. Thus, one can say that the form of populism in Russia is of *inclusive* character, but its inclusivity is strategic as it serves to mobilise support for Putin, to stabilise Putin's rule, and to defend traditional authoritarianism.

Stabilisation of Putin's rule by the Russian version of populism can also be traced to the Russian state inheriting the Soviet political culture and the crises of the Eurasian geography. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian

[60] Levitsky and Way provide the following defining characteristics of competitive authoritarianism: "[In such regimes,] constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups compete in a meaningful way for executive power. Elections are held regularly and opposition parties are not legally barred from contesting them. Opposition activity is above ground: Opposition parties can open offices, recruit candidates, and organize campaigns, and politicians are rarely exiled or imprisoned. In short, democratic procedures are sufficiently meaningful for opposition groups to take them seriously as arenas through which to contest for power" (2010: 10).

[61] As Dmitri Furman summarises, it is "a combination of democratic constitutional forms with a reality of authoritarian rule" (2008: 39).

state aimed to reorganise the post-Soviet geography. Putin continued with this trajectory and directed his efforts at the centralisation of internal political institutions of Russia and also at the centralisation of politics of the 'near abroad'[62] (Medushevskiy, 2018: 53). Hence, as I have outlined earlier in this chapter, Putin's populism developed a discourse that suits its ambitions for political centralisation both inside Russia and in the post-Soviet geography.

As I have outlined in the previous sections, the organic relationship between 'the people' and the leader is of central role to Putin's populism. This organic relationship comes together with a *de-politicisation* of Putin's constituency. In addition to this, as scholars point out, the responsibility to the voters is blurred between the parties and the regime, allowing for discursive operations which direct political pressure away from Putin (Medushevskiy, 2018: 53). When it comes to elections and political change, Petrov points out that, " … in Russia everything is considerably more complicated and requires more time: citizens infected by populism cannot escape other than through a large-scale political crisis of the entire system" (2018: 100). Judging by our findings earlier in this chapter, Putin's populism is in fact a significant barrier that prevents such a political crisis. Hence, one can claim that Putin's populism serves to consolidate his regime.

Concluding Remarks

In this section, I have shown that FN and PVV's populism is a means of acquiring power through electoral means. The *de-institutionalisation* of politics and the *de-politicisation* of citizen participation are central to FN and PVV's populism. In the Western European political context, FN and PVV appear as a challenge to the liberal establishment. On the other hand, in Russia, Putin's populism functions as an instrument of consolidation of an authoritarian form of government which centralises and concentrates political power in the leader. Furthermore, Putin's populism adopts the practices of the *de-institutionalisation* of politics and the *de-politicisation* of citizen participation which enable the long-term political sustainability of Putin's regime.

[62] The post-Soviet states.

3.4. Comparative Discussion of Populism in Western Europe and Russia

In this chapter I have examined the populism of FN, PVV, and Putin's regime through the Ideational Approach, Discursive Approach, and Political-Strategic Approach. In this last section I will discuss my findings in a comparative perspective by referring to three categories that correspond to the three abovementioned approaches: content of populism, form of populism, and function of populism.

In terms of content, the populism of FN and PVV appear to be *exclusionary* because 'the people' are presented in ethno-nationalist terms. 'The people' is used so as to refer to the native French or Dutch population. Moreover, 'the people' appear as Christians who adhere to traditional values. This image is created in opposition to a Muslim threat, with an emphasis on migrants. This is a point of divergence with the populism of Putin's regime because here 'the people' mostly appear as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious entity. Hence, Putin's populism can be described as *inclusive*.

In terms of form, the populism of FN and PVV can also be described as *exclusionary* because 'the people' are articulated against 'the other' of the domestic politics. The French and Dutch natives are viewed to be in opposition to the Muslim 'threat' and the EU, both of which are viewed as encroaching on 'national sovereignty'. The empty signifier 'national sovereignty' is a point of similarity with Putin's populism. However, the populism of Putin's regime articulates 'the people' in opposition to an 'other' which is an external threat from abroad. Hence, one can say that the form of Putin's populism is *inclusive* because the 'the people' can include anyone in the Russian population as long as they are not an 'extension' of the foreign 'other' (although the monopoly of naming the enemy resides with Putin himself).

In terms of function, the populism of FN and PVV *challenges* the establishment of France, the Netherlands, and the EU. Such populism is focused on acquiring power through charismatic leaders who instrumentalise the *exclusionary* content of 'the people' and the *exclusionary* discourse of populism. One can raise the question of 'what will happen to this populism if either FN or PVV become the party in power?' One answer would be that their policies will exclude large numbers of the population, which will destabilise their government. Furthermore, conceiving of 'the people' in an *exclusionary* way prevents the populism of FN and PVV from reaching

the realm of international politics. They can only establish small alliances among other right-wing populist actors in a small range of countries (such as the alliance established in 2010 between FN and PVV and other Eurosceptic parties of Europe). In contrast to this, the populism of Putin *consolidates* the Russian authoritarian regime. The *inclusive* content and articulation of 'the people' in Putin's populism limits inter-communal tension and allows for the stabilisation of domestic politics. Furthermore, by conceiving of the 'other' as the 'West' and its 'decadent liberalism', Putin's populism seems to stabilise itself internationally by creating a linkage with other actors (conservatives and traditionalists in particular) in different countries who are not content with liberal democracy.

Having come to the end of this study, I would like to recollect its beginning. Recall that Rousseau conceives the general will as emerging through the political participation of citizens, by virtue of which the general will comes to reflect the public good. As a result, the citizens remain free while obeying the law. In this thesis, I have shown that populism disfigures the general will and negates political participation. In the populist vision, 'the people' and the leader exist in an organic relationship which is established through symbols. Moreover, populists demand pre-political loyalty which prevents the citizens from participating in politics (unless the citizens are doing so only to elect the populist leader). Such a political vision prevents 'the people' from being free because 'the will of the people' reflects only a particular good (as opposed to a common good), symbolised in the leader. Furthermore, 'the people' cannot engage in the deliberation of a plurality of opinions because the populist vision is single (although its content is determined contextually). Those who deviate from this vision risk being included in the category of 'the other'. In this thesis I have shown that even though there is a divergence of content, form, and function in the populism of FN, PVV, and Putin, their populist politics nevertheless converge on the subject of depriving the citizens of genuine political agency. In light of the populist tendency to *de-institutionalise* politics and to demand pre-political loyalty, it would seem that the most viable way of challenging populism is the reforming of institutions. Taking stock of Rousseau's thought and of right-wing populist practice, it would be reasonable to state that it is only under the conditions of pluralism, deliberation, and democracy that the common good may emerge and 'the people' can be free.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt at a cross-regional examination of populism. While there is a plethora of single case studies of populism in academic literature, few cross-regional analyses of populism exist. Most of these analyses focus on the comparison between Europe and Latin America. In this thesis, I attempt to fill the gap in literature by including Russia in the comparative analysis of populism. In my comparison of the contemporary Western European and Russian populism, I dedicate more attention to the latter for three main reasons: the disproportional lack of academic attention to contemporary Russian populism; the richness of material available for study; and the pivotal role played by populism in Vladimir Putin's politics. Putin's populism is selected as the representative case of contemporary Russian populism, because it employs the antagonistic distinction between 'the people' and 'the other' which is considered to be the minimal definition of populism. Furthermore, Putin's populism is the norm-setter in Russian politics because other political actors in Russia found their political practice in response to the political discourse of Putin's regime. Putin's populism is compared to two populist actors in Western Europe: the leader of the French *Front National*, Marine Le Pen, and the leader of the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, Geert Wilders. These two cases are selected as the representatives of Western European populism because they are recognised by the academic literature to be the prototypical cases of populism in Western Europe. Moreover, the populism of Le Pen, Wilders, and Putin are compared with each other because of their ideological affinity: conservative and traditional values shape their discourse, allowing for potential collaboration as is shown by the public speeches of Le Pen, Wilders, and Putin in which they proclaim support for each other.

One of the main reasons behind the absence of Russia in comparative studies of populism is the theoretical dissonance that appeared as a result of the definitional inflation of the concept of populism. Furthermore, there are also ambiguities in literature on populism that stem from the notion of the general will. Scholars of populism argue that one of the main components of populism is the formation of a general will as conceptualised by Jean-Jacque Rousseau. The present thesis shows that while populism does revolve around the construction of 'the people' and their 'will', populism *disfigures* Rousseau's notion of the general will. Rousseau conceives of the general will as arising through the political participation of the citizenry in public matters. In contrast to this, populism projects a vision of political participation in which 'the people', having pre-political loyalty, participate in politics only by electing the populist leader. Moreover, populism views participation in political decision-making as corrupt action. Hence, populist leaders attempt to *de-institutionalise* politics and subsequently establish a direct link between the people and the leader who is presented to be the embodiment of the 'will of the people'. Further contributing to the ambiguities in populist research is the tension between populism and democracy. Many scholars view populism as something that is external and inimical to democracy. However, this subject appears to be more complicated. Democracy has an internal tension at its core: democracy entails institutions, but at the same time it harbours an *anti-institutional* impulse. This internal tension is conducive of populist mobilisation.

The ambiguities surrounding the concept of populism have given rise to a variety of methodologies which attempt to grasp the populist phenomena. This methodological heterogeneity has prompted many scholars to voice the need to foster a dialogue between different methodologies in the study of populism. In response to this, the present thesis attempts to blend the three recent approaches to populism (the Ideational Approach, the Discursive Approach, and the Political-Strategic Approach) by suggesting a conceptual categorisation of content, form, and function. I argue that this analytical distinction enables the employment of the three recent approaches to populism in a complementary way to each other, thereby providing a more holistic view of the populist phenomena.

The first category in my analytical distinction – content – encompasses the ideological fragments manifest in populism. I employ the Ideational Approach to

determine the content of populism in FN, PVV, and Putin's regime. A major proponent of this approach is Cas Mudde who conceives populism as an ideology which creates an antagonistic relationship between '*the pure people*' versus '*the corrupt elite*' and which argues that politics is an expression of the general will of 'the people'. It can be said that the Ideational Approach is the most employed framework in the cross-regional analysis of populism due to its empirical applicability to a wide spatial spectrum of populism cases. However, the Ideational Approach sets forth three presuppositions that undermine its empirical advantage. This approach assumes that: 'the people' is homogeneous (which, in reality is very rare); the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other' is based on a moral framing (which is actually only one of the ways of constructing this antagonism); populism must co-exist with 'full' ideologies (which hints at the existence of fixed content in populism). One may argue that these assumptions preclude the construction of 'the people' from being accounted for. For this reason, I turn to the Discursive Approach which I employ to investigate the form of populism (the second category in my analytical distinction).

The Discursive Approach finds its origin in Ernesto Laclau's work. This approach proposes a formal concept of populism as it does not ascribe *a priori* determined normative content to populism, and it focuses on how populist discourse forms our understanding of the social reality. Hence, the Discursive Approach shifts the emphasis from the content to the form of populism. Laclau conceives populism as a political logic which can be understood as a set of formal discursive qualities or an articulatory pattern. This logic can be rooted in a variety of ideologies without regard to particular content. The Discursive Approach illuminates this political logic by employing the following three elements: discourse (a relational complex that creates meaning), empty signifiers (symbols which are constantly re-interpreted) and hegemony, and rhetoric (the act of naming something which is both necessary and impossible to name). When taken together, these elements account for the construction of 'the people' through the discursive production of emptiness. Here, emptiness means the lack of predetermined content. As a result, 'the people' and 'the other' are constructed based on the interplay of political demands in a given polity. 'The people' emerge when the different demands which are articulated by different social groups are linked together by means of an empty signifier. Laclau refers to this

operation as the 'chain of equivalence'. 'The people', as a political subject, emerges by means of a negative differentiation *vis-à-vis* 'the other'. In other words, 'the people' is what 'the other' is not. Moreover, the construction of both 'the people' and 'the other' is highly contingent due to the constantly changing politico-social environment with newly emerging political demands. Laclau's theoretical toolbox enables the Discursive Approach to account for the contextual complexity of populism. However, Laclau considers populism to be synonymous with the political. As a result, populism as an object of analysis becomes too ambiguous. Furthermore, the Discursive Approach overlooks the institutional dimension of populism, that is, it does not account for the populist tendency for the *de-institutionalisation* of politics. In order to consider the dimension of institutions and power and to determine the function of populism (the second category in my analytical distinction), I turn to the Political-Strategic Approach.

The Political-Strategic Approach shares the view of the Ideational Approach that central to populism is the organic connection between 'the people' and the leader, and that ideological consistency is not necessary for populism. The Political-Strategic Approach also acknowledges the central assumption of the Discursive Approach, namely that, 'the people' is a heterogeneous entity whose unity is established *via* symbols in antagonistic tension with 'the other'. However, in contrast to the Ideational Approach and the Discursive Approach, the Political-Strategic Approach views populism as a political practice, a means of acquiring power. Taking into account that formal rules, procedures, and institutions limit the autonomy of political leaders, the proponents of the Political-Strategic Approach emphasise the tendency of these leaders to *de-institutionalise* politics, establish an unmediated relationship with their supporters, and subordinate institutions to their personal will. Hence, the Political-Strategic Approach focuses on the notion of political power and the effects that the populist practice has on political institutions. This allows one to determine the function of populism while considering the content and form of populism in different political contexts. One function of populism can be to challenge the political establishment from the outside. Another function of populism might be to consolidate the political regime from the inside.

I employ the three approaches outlined above to examine the populism of FN, PVV, and Putin's regime. In terms of the content of populism (the Ideational

Approach), FN and PVV ascribe an *exclusive* ethno-nationalist quality to 'the people' which comes to consists of white, Christian natives of France and the Netherlands. 'The people' are positioned against 'the elite' which is viewed as corrupt establishment politicians acting according to the EU's integrationist vision. 'The elite' is believed to enable the presence of 'the other' which is seen to consist of an 'imminent Muslim threat' embodied by migrants. Yet, no substantial explanation is provided as to why 'the elite' is 'evil'. This 'evilness' appears to be contingent and ultimately derived from the nature of the 'imminent threat' (as narrativised by right-wing populists) which faces 'national sovereignty'. Furthermore, the leader is viewed as the true representative of 'the will of the people' who demands pre-political loyalty from 'the people'. In contrast to this, Putin's populism espouses an ethnically and religiously *inclusive* vision of 'the people'. Putin adheres to conservative-traditional values which undergird his definitions of 'the people', 'the elite', and 'the other'. 'The elite', in Putin's early years of government, consists of Russian oligarchs who challenge the state. In the later period of Putin's rule, 'the elite' came to consist of the domestic sympathisers of the "West" – or 'foreign agents' – who undermine the unity of the Russian 'state-civilisation'. Here, 'the other' is conceived as the "decadent liberal West". Much like the Western European cases, Putin's populism limits political participation to the election of the leader, with whom 'the people' organically share a 'special path'. In contrast to FN and PVV, Putin's populism is more resourceful is terms of the ideological grounding of its *de-politicisation* of 'the people'. Putin's populism employs the notion of '*sovereign democracy*' which presents a vision of a 'special path of Russia' in which the leader and 'the people' are organically connected to each other.

In terms of the form of populism (the Discursive Approach), FN and PVV employ similar symbols and discursive operations. They both articulate 'the other' as an imminent Muslim threat which is enabled by the EU policies of multi-culturalism and integration. In FN and PVV's populism, 'the people' stand in a differential relationship to 'the other' and are articulated in nativist terms. Both FN and PVV employ the empty signifier of 'national sovereignty', equating 'the nation' with 'the people'. FN and PVV present their main political aim as "making the nation sovereign again" which entails a nativist and Eurosceptic political vision. In contrast to this, Putin's populism mainly articulates 'the people' in an *inclusive* manner so as

to stabilise the ethnic nations in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity. In order to hold together the heterogeneous 'people' of Russia, Putin's populism employs the image of Putin as an empty signifier. The irreconcilable political demands of 'the people' are inscribed in the empty signifier '*Putin*' which is also articulated as a synonym of Russia. Another discursive construction which is used to unify irreconcilable political demands (such as demands for both democratisation and increased authoritarianism) is the notion of '*sovereign democracy*' outlined earlier in this section. Putin's populism articulate 'the other' as the 'decadent' yet powerful "West". The image of this 'other' is projected to the Russian domestic politics where 'the other' is articulated as the extension of the "West". The empty signifier 'foreign agents' and, more rarely, 'fifth column' are used to refer to this 'other'.

In terms of function of populism, as I have already mentioned, the Political-Strategic Approach shares the assumptions of the Ideational Approach and the Discursive Approach. Hence, by building on the examination of populism outlined above, the Political-Strategic Approach shows that FN and PVV's populism is an instrument of coming to power through electoral means. FN and PVV attempt to *de-institutionalise* politics and *de-politicise* citizen participation. By doing so, FN and PVV challenge the liberal establishment. In contrast to this, Putin's populism can be said to function as a means of consolidating Putin's authoritarian form of government by centralising and concentrating the political power in the leader. Further contributing to this consolidation of Putin's rule is *de-institutionalisation* of politics and *de-politicisation* of citizen participation.

Overall, one may conclude that, the right-wing populism in Western Europe and Russia is different in terms of content, form, and function. Yet, it is similar in terms of the *de-institutionalisation* of politics and the *de-politicisation* of citizen participation. Given the complexity of institutional politics and the rule of law in the European Union, FN and PVV arise as an alternative to the mainstream politics of parliamentary democracy. The political sustainability of FN and PVV is questionable because their claim for political authority is based on a marginal position. One may argue that, if they do come to the position of party in power, the vitality of populist parties such as FN and PVV will be lost because 'the other' will have to be re-defined in relation to a transcendent enemy which threatens the 'national sovereignty'. On the other hand, may this actually open the path towards a scenario such as the one

observed under Putin's regime? In contrast to FN and PVV's relatively marginal position in European politics, Putin's populism appears as the political mainstream in Russian politics. Unlike the right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, the right-wing populism in Russia cannot simply be 'voted out' at the next electoral cycle as the institutional structure in Russia is based around the political leader (who is presented as standing above and beyond politics). Moreover, Putin's populism creates an illusion of inclusivity which extends across borders and finds sympathisers among conservatives in the West, including FN and PVV. Hence, one may argue that populism enables the political right of all stripes to achieve intra- and cross-regional solidarity. This presents a dangerous prospect, for at stake is the genuine citizenship of people everywhere.

The analytical distinction of content, form, and function of populism appears to yield fruitful results when comparing populism in two divergent political complexes: the liberal democracy and the authoritarian regime. The virtue of this distinction resides in its ability to blend three recent approaches to populism which are viewed to be incompatible with each other due to methodological differences. As a result, the concept of populism becomes better clarified: it essentially revolves around the constructive antagonism between 'the people' and 'the other'. Another virtue of this analytical distinction is that qualitatively different polities can be compared with each other with considerable consistency. Furthermore, the study of less researched cases can be further systematised by way of contrast with the more researched cases (as we have seen in the comparison of PVV, FN, and Putin's regime which reveals deeper similarities below the surface of diversities). Taking these points into account, further research can focus on comparing populism in regions (especially those which are overlooked in populism studies) which are usually studied as single cases. Moreover, the focus in this thesis was on right populism. It would be interesting to see the results of a comparison of left populisms. Perhaps, even more interesting would be to see the results of a comparison of left and right populisms.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Bu tezde, niteliksel olarak farklı yönetim biçimlerinde vuku bulan popülizm(ler) karşılaştırılmaktadır. Akademik literatürde popülizme ilişkin çok sayıda tekil vaka çalışması bulunurken, bölgeler arası çalışmaların sayısı oldukça azdır. Bu çalışmaların çoğu, Avrupa ve Latin Amerika arasındaki karşılaştırmaya odaklanmaktadır. Bu tezde, popülizmin karşılaştırmalı analizine Rusya'nın dahil edilerek literatürdeki boşluğun doldurulması amaçlanmaktadır. Mevcut tezde incelenen popülizm çağdaş döneme aittir. Çağdaş, 21. yüzyılın başından sonraki yirmi yıl olarak anlaşılır. Bu nedenle, 19. yüzyıl Rusya'sında ve Avrupa'da popülizmin köklerini oluşturan gelişmeler ve buna bağlı olarak 20. yüzyılda meydana gelen dönüşümler tez kapsamının dışındadır. Bu çerçevede çağdaş Batı Avrupa ve Rus popülizmi karşılaştırılırken, üç ana nedenden dolayı Rusya'ya daha fazla dikkat çekilmektedir: çağdaş Rus popülizmine olan akademik ilgi eksikliği; mevcut materyalin zenginliği; ve popülizmin Vladimir Putin'in siyasetinde oynadığı önemli rol. Bu tezde Putin'in popülizmi, çağdaş Rus popülizminin temsili örneği olarak seçilmiştir. Bunun arkasındaki ana neden, popülizmin "minimal tanımı" olarak kabul edilen "halk" ve "öteki" arasındaki antagonistik ayrımın Putin'in siyasetinde gözlemlenebiliyor olmasıdır. Ayrıca, Putin'in popülizminin Rus siyasetinde norm belirleyici olduğunu söylemek de mümkündür. Zira, Rusya'daki diğer siyasi aktörler, kendi siyasetlerini Putin rejiminin siyasi söylemine yanıt olarak şekillendirmektedir. Bu tezde Putin'in popülizmi Batı Avrupa'daki iki popülist aktörle karşılaştırılmaktadır: Marine Le Pen (Fransa) ve Geert Wilders (Hollanda). Bu iki figür, akademik literatürde Batı Avrupa'daki popülizmin prototip vakaları olarak kabul edilmektedir ve bu nedenden ötürü Batı Avrupa popülizminin temsilcileri olarak seçilmiştir. Bununla birlikte, Le Pen, Wilders ve Putin'in popülizminin birbirine ideolojik olarak yakın olduğu söylenebilir. Muhafazakâr ve geleneksel

değerler etrafında şekillenen siyasi söylemleri, Le Pen, Wilders ve Putin'in potansiyel iş birliğini mümkün kılmaktadır.

Rusya'nın karşılaştırmalı popülizm çalışmalarına dahil olmamasının ana nedenlerinden biri, popülizm kavramının tanımsal enflasyonunun bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan teorik uyumsuzluktur. Ayrıca popülizm literatüründe genel irade kavramından kaynaklanan muğlaklıklar da mevcuttur. Popülizmi araştıran pek çok sosyal bilimci, Jean-Jacques Rousseau tarafından kavramsallaştırılan genel irade nosyonunu popülizmin ana bileşenlerinden biri olarak kabul eder. Bu tez, temelinde "halk" ve "irade" nosyonları yatsa da popülizmin Rousseau'nun genel irade kavramını "bozduğunu" göstermektedir. Rousseau, genel iradenin yurttaşların kamusal meselelere siyasi katılımı yoluyla ortaya çıktığını savunmaktadır. Bunun aksine popülizm, siyaset öncesi bağlılığı olan "halk"ın sadece popülist lideri seçerek siyasete katıldığı bir siyasi katılım vizyonu yansıtır. Ayrıca popülizm, siyasi karar alma süreçlerine katılımı yozlaşmış bir eylem olarak görür. Bu nedenle, popülist liderler siyaseti kurumsuzlaştırmaya ve ardından halk ile "halk iradesinin" vücut bulmuş hali olarak sunulan lider arasında doğrudan bir bağlantı kurmaya çalışırlar. Böyle bir siyasi vizyon, "halkın" özgür olmasını engeller, çünkü "halkın iradesi" liderde sembolize edilen (ortak bir iyinin aksine) yalnızca belirli bir iyiyi yansıtır. Ayrıca popülist vizyon tek olduğu için (içeriği bağlamsal olarak belirlense de) "halk" çoğul görüşün müzakeresine dahil olamaz. Bu vizyondan sapanlar, "öteki" kategorisine girme riskiyle karşı karşıyadır.

Popülist araştırmalardaki belirsizliklere daha fazla katkıda bulunan husus, popülizm ve demokrasi arasındaki gerilimdir. Pek çok akademisyen, popülizmi demokrasiye aykırı ve dışsal bir şey olarak görür. Bu bakış açısına göre popülizm, demokrasiye zarar verdiği için, tasfiye edilmesi gereken bir şeydir. Bu nedenle popülizmi demokratik olmayan ve/veya otoriter rejimlerde analiz etmenin anlamsız olduğu düşünülmektedir. Bu bakış açısına karşı bu tez, popülizmin liberal-demokratik kurumlara karşı katı bir değerlendirmeyle sınırlandırılmaması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Otoriter ortamlarda tezahür eden popülizmin mantığı ve pratiğini anlamak, demokratik ortamlarda popülizmi aydınlatmak için verimli olabilir.

Popülizm kavramının temelinde, bir hükümetin meşruiyetini aldığı "halk" sorunu yer almaktadır. Popülizmin kavramsal özünde içkin olan "halk" ile halk

egemenliği arasındaki gerilimin demokrasinin içsel geriliminden kaynaklandığı söylenebilir. Bu gerilim, Michael Oakeshott'ın "inanç siyaseti" (politics of faith) ile "şüphecilik siyaseti" (politics of scepticism) arasındaki ayrımı üzerinden analiz edilebilir. İlki, siyaseti bu dünyada dini veya seküler mükemmelliğe ulaşmanın bir aracı olarak görür. İkincisi ise siyaseti düzeni sağlamanın ve kurumları sürdürmenin bir aracı olarak görür. Bu iki siyaset türü birbiriyle sürekli bir gerilim içinde olsa da modern siyasette ayrılmaz bir bütündür. Margaret Canovan, demokrasinin "inanç siyaseti" ile "şüphecilik siyaseti" – veya Canovan'ın ifadesiyle "kurtarıcı ve pragmatik siyaset tarzları" (redemptive and pragmatic styles of politics) – arasındaki kesişme noktasında var olduğunu iddia eder.

"Kurtarıcı siyaset", halkın halk tarafından ve halk için yönetimi olarak anlaşılır. "Pragmatik siyaset", siyaseti çatışmaları şiddet olmadan çözmenin bir aracı olarak görür. Bu çerçeveye göre demokrasi, çatışmaların barışçıl çözümünü sağlarken bir yandan da kurtuluş vaat etmektedir. Demokraside insanlara hayatlarının sorumluluğunu aldıklarında kurtuluş vaat edilir fakat aynı zamanda demokrasi teknik bir yönetim biçimidir. Demokrasi kurumları içerir ancak aynı zamanda içinde kurumsallık karşıtı bir dürtü de barındırır. Demokrasinin bu iki yüzü arasındaki iç gerilim, popülist mobilizasyonu mümkün kılar.

Popülizm kavramını çevreleyen belirsizlikler, popülist olguları kavramaya çalışan çeşitli metodolojilere yol açmıştır. Bu metodolojik heterojenlik, birçok akademisyeni popülizm araştırmalarında farklı metodolojiler arasında bir diyalog geliştirme ihtiyacını dile getirmeye sevk etmiştir. Buna cevaben, mevcut tez, içerik, biçim ve işlevin kavramsal bir sınıflandırmasını önererek popülizme yönelik üç yaygın yaklaşımı (Düşünsel Yaklaşım, Söylemsel Yaklaşım ve Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım) harmanlamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu tezin ana savunularından biri bu kategorik ayrım ile sözü edilen üç yaklaşımın tamamlayıcı bir şekilde kullanılabileceği ve bu sayede popülizmin bölgeler arası bir karşılaştırmasının daha mümkün bir hale geleceğidir.

Tezin öne sürdüğü ilk kategori – içerik – popülizmde tezahür eden ideolojik parçaları kapsar. Bu doğrultuda Fransa'daki Front National (FN), Hollanda'daki Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) ve Putin rejimindeki popülizmin içeriğini incelemek için Düşünsel Yaklaşım olarak adlandırılan yöntem kullanılmaktadır. Bu yaklaşımın önemli bir savunucusu olan Cas Mudde, popülizmi "saf halk" ile "yozlaşmış

seçkinler" arasında uzlaşmaz bir ilişki yaratan ve siyasetin "halkın" genel iradesinin bir ifadesi olduğunu savunan bir ideoloji olarak görmektedir. Düşünsel Yaklaşımın geniş bir popülizm vakaları yelpazesine ampirik olarak uygulanabilirliği nedeniyle popülizmin bölgeler arası analizinde en çok kullanılan çerçeve olduğu söylenebilir. Ancak bununla birlikte, Düşünsel Yaklaşım, ampirik avantajını zayıflatan üç varsayım ortaya koymaktadır: "halk" homojendir (ki bu gerçekte çok nadirdir); "halk" ve "öteki" arasındaki antagonizma etiksel bir çerçeveye dayanır (aslında bu antagonizmayı inşa etmenin yollarından yalnızca biridir); popülizm, "tam" ideolojilerle bir arada var olmalıdır (böylece Düşünsel Yaklaşım popülizmde sabit içeriğin varlığını ima etmektedir). Bu varsayımların "halk" inşasının hesaba katılmasını engellediği iddia edilebilir. Bu nedenle, popülizmin biçimini (bu tezin analitik ayrımındaki ikinci kategori) incelemek için Söylemsel Yaklaşıma bakılmalıdır.

Söylemsel Yaklaşım, kökenini Ernesto Laclau'nun çalışmalarında bulmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, popülizme önceden belirlenmiş normatif içerik atfetmediği için formel bir popülizm kavramı önerir ve popülist söylemin toplumsal gerçekliğe ilişkin anlayışımızı nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanır. Bu nedenle Söylemsel Yaklaşım, vurguyu popülizmin içeriğinden popülizmin biçimine kaydırır. Laclau, popülizmi, bir dizi biçimsel ve söylemsel nitelik ya da artikülatif bir kalıp olarak anlaşılabilecek bir politik mantık olarak kavrar. Bu mantık, belirli bir içeriğe bakılmaksızın çeşitli ideolojilerde köklenebilir. Söylemsel Yaklaşım bu politik mantığı üç unsuru kullanarak aydınlatır: söylem (anlam yaratan ilişkisel bir kompleks), boş gösterenler (sürekli yeniden yorumlanan semboller), hegemonya ve retorik (her ikisi de adlandırılması hem gerekli hem de imkânsız olan bir şeyi adlandırma eylemidir). Birlikte ele alındığında, bu unsurlar söylemsel boşluk üretimi yoluyla "halk"ın inşasını açıklar. Burada boşluk, önceden belirlenmiş içeriğin olmaması anlamına gelir. Sonuç olarak, "halk" ve "öteki", belirli bir yönetim biçimindeki siyasi taleplerin karşılıklı etkileşimi temelinde inşa edilir. "Halk", farklı toplumsal gruplar tarafından dile getirilen çeşitli siyasi talepler boş gösteren aracılığıyla birbirine bağlandığında ortaya çıkar. Laclau, bu işleme "eşdeğerlik zinciri" adını verir. Politik bir özne olarak "halk", "öteki" karşısında negatif bir farklılaşma yoluyla ortaya çıkar. Başka bir deyişle, "halk", "öteki"nin olmadığı şeydir. Ayrıca, sürekli değişen politik-sosyal ortam ve ortaya çıkan yeni politik

talepler nedeniyle hem "halk"ın hem de "öteki"nin inşası son derece olumsaldır. Laclau'nun kuramsal önerileri, Söylemsel Yaklaşımın popülizmin bağlamsal karmaşıklığını açıklamasını sağlar. Ancak Laclau, popülizmi politik olanla eşanlamlı olarak görür. Bunun sonucunda, bir analiz nesnesi olarak popülizm muğlak bir hal alır. Dahası, Söylemsel Yaklaşım popülizmin kurumsal boyutunu gözden kaçırır. Başka bir deyişle, siyasetin kurumsuzlaştırılmasına yönelik popülist eğilimi hesaba katmaz. Bu nedenle, popülizmde kurum ve iktidar boyutunu ele almak ve popülizmin işlevini (bu tezin analitik ayrımındaki üçüncü kategori) incelemek için Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşıma bakılmalıdır.

Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım, popülizmin merkezinde "halk" ile lider arasında organik bir bağın olduğu ve popülizm için ideolojik tutarlılığın gerekli olmadığı şeklindeki Düşünsel Yaklaşımın görüşünü paylaşır. Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım aynı zamanda Söylemsel Yaklaşımın temel varsayımını da kabul eder: "halk", "öteki" ile antagonistik gerilim içinde semboller aracılığıyla kurulan heterojen bir varlıktır. Ancak, Düşünsel Yaklaşım ve Söylemsel Yaklaşımın aksine, Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım popülizmi politik bir pratik ve bir güç elde etme aracı olarak görür. Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşımın savunucuları, formel kuralların, prosedürlerin ve kurumların siyasi liderlerin özerkliğini sınırladığını dikkate alarak, bu liderlerin siyaseti kurumsuzlaştırma, destekçileriyle aracısız bir ilişki kurma ve kurumları onlara tabi kılma eğilimlerini vurgular. Bu nedenle, Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım, siyasal iktidar kavramına ve popülist pratiğin siyasal kurumlar üzerindeki etkilerine odaklanır. Bu yaklaşım, popülizmin içeriğini ve biçimini farklı siyasi bağlamlarda ele alırken popülizmin işlevini belirlemeyi mümkün kılar. Böylece popülizmin işlevlerinden biri, kurulu düzenin dışarıdan sorgulanması olabilir. Popülizmin bir başka işlevi de kurulu düzenin içeriden güçlendirilmesi olabilir.

Bu tezde, FN, PVV ve Putin rejiminin popülizminin incelenmesi için yukarıda özetlenen üç yaklaşım kullanılmaktadır. Popülizmin içeriği (Düşünsel Yaklaşım) açısından, FN ve PVV, Fransa ve Hollanda'nın beyaz Hıristiyan yerlilerinden oluşan "halk"a özel bir etno-milliyetçi nitelik atfeder. "Halk", burada, Avrupa Birliği'nin entegrasyoncu vizyonuna göre hareket eden "elitlere" ("yozlaşmış politikacılar") karşı konumlanır. "Elit"in, "öteki"nin ("Müslüman tehdidi" olarak görülen göçmenler) varlığını mümkün kıldığına inanılır. Ancak FN ve PVV, "elitlerin" neden "kötü" olduğuna dair substantif bir açıklama yapmaz. Sağ

popülistlerin söylemine göre, bu “kötülük” olumsaldır ve nihayetinde “ulusal egemenlik”le karşı karşıya olan "yakın tehdidin" doğasından kaynaklanıyor gibi görünmektedir. Ayrıca “halk”tan siyaset öncesi sadakat talep eden lider, “halk iradesinin” gerçek temsilcisi olarak görülmektedir. FN ve PVV, liberal demokratların benimsediği çoğulcu bir siyaset anlayışından uzak dururlar ve siyasi otorite pozisyonları için tek meşru adayın kendileri olduğuna inanırlar. Bu iddia, bir popülist liderin “halk iradesinin” gerçek temsilcisi olduğu fikrinden türetilmiştir. Buna göre bir lider, bu iradeyi sağduyu ve “duygu” yoluyla idrak eder. Böylece denebilir ki sağ popülist siyaset anlayışı, seçim zamanlarında lidere oy verme ve seçim dışı zamanlarında liderin “halkın iradesini” gerçekleştirmesine izin verme eylemiyle sınırlıdır.

Rusya örneğine gelecek olursak, Putin'in popülizmi etnik ve dini açıdan kapsayıcı bir “halk” vizyonunu benimser. Putin, “halk”, “elit” ve “öteki” kavramlarının temelini oluşturan muhafazakâr ve geleneksel değerlere bağlı kalır. Putin’in hükümeti ilk yıllarında “elitleri” devlete meydan okuyan Rus oligarkları olarak görür. Putin yönetiminin geç döneminde ise, “elitler” Rus “devlet-uygarlığının” birliğini baltalayan “Batı”nın iç sempatizanları ve "yabancı ajanlar" olarak görülür. Buradaki “öteki”, “yozlaşmış liberal Batı” olarak tasavvur edilmektedir. Batı Avrupa örneklerinde olduğu gibi, Putin’in popülizmi de siyasi katılımı, “halkın” organik olarak “özel bir yol” paylaştığı lidere destek vermesiyle sınırlandırmaktadır. FN ve PVV’nin aksine, Putin’in popülizminin, “halkı” siyasetten arındırmanın ideolojik temeli açısından daha etkili olduğu söylenebilir. Putin’in popülizmi, liderin ve “halkın” organik olarak birbirine bağlı olduğu bir “Rusya’nın özel yolu” vizyonu sunan “egemen demokrasi” kavramını kullanır.

Popülizmin biçimi (Söylemsel Yaklaşım) açısından, FN ve PVV benzer semboller ve söylemsel işlemler kullanır. Her ikisi de AB'nin çok kültürlülük ve entegrasyon politikalarının “Müslüman tehdidine” yol açtığını dile getirir. FN ve PVV'nin popülizminde, “halk” ve “öteki” farklılaşımsal bir ilişki içindedir ve nativist terimlerle ifade edilir. FN’nin söylemi, Müslüman kültürlerin Fransız değerleriyle uyumsuzluğunu dile getirir. Bu nedenle FN göçmenleri Fransa ulusu için bir iç tehdit olarak görür. Fransız toplumuna entegre edilmemiş göçmenler hem ekonomi hem de demokrasi için bir tehdit olarak görünür. Bu yabancı düşmanlığı ile birlikte FN’nin söyleminde bir dış tehdit de bulunmaktadır: küreselleşme ve kozmopolitanizm.

Avrupa Birliği "son derece zararlı" ve "anti-demokratik bir canavar" olarak görünür. AB entegrasyonuna karşı bu saldırgan tutum, FN'nin göçmenlik karşıtı tutumuyla uyumludur. FN'e göre AB, Fransız toplumuna daha fazla göçmeni dahil etmesi için Fransız devletine bir baskı uygulamaktadır. FN, bunu bu şekilde çerçeveleyerek AB'nin entegrasyon politikaları ile göç arasında bir ilişki kurar: AB, üye devletlerini daha fazla entegre ettikçe göç artar ve yeni gelenlerdeki bu artışla Fransız devleti onların entegrasyonundan sorumlu olur. PVV'nin popülizmine gelecek olursak, burada İslam işgalci bir medeniyet tehdidi olarak görünür. "Halk" ise nativist terimlerle ve Müslüman "öteki"ne karşı düşmanca bir zıtlıkla ifade edilir. PVV, Müslümanlara karşı nativist bir düşmanlık içinde "halkı" inşa eder. PVV'nin "öteki"si, böyle bir etnik ve dini vizyonla artiküle edilir. Fransa örneğinde olduğu gibi, PVV'nin söylemi de AB'yi (ya da kurulu düzeni) "halk" ile "öteki" arasındaki uzlaşmaz gerilime dahil eder. AB, Hollanda'nın "egemenliğini" korumak için anti-demokratik bürokratikleşmeye ve "elitlere" karşı çıkılması gereken "canavar devlet" olarak sunulur. Hem FN hem de PVV, "ulusu" "halk" ile eşitleyerek "ulusal egemenliği" boş göstereninini kullanır. FN ve PVV, ana siyasi amaçlarını, nativist ve Avrupa şüpheciliğine bağlı bir siyasi vizyon gerektiren "ulusu yeniden egemen kılmak" olarak sunar.

Bunun aksine, Putin'in popülizmi, etnik ulusları çok etnikli ve çok dinli bir yönetim biçiminde istikrara kavuşturmak için esas olarak "halkı" kapsayıcı bir şekilde ifade eder. Putin'in popülizmi, Rusya'nın heterojen "halkını" bir arada tutmak için Putin imajını bir boş gösteren olarak kullanır. "Halk"ın uzlaşmaz siyasi talepleri, Rusya'nın eş anlamlısı olarak da dile getirilen boş gösteren "Putin"e entegre edilir. Bu husus, "Putin Rusya'dır, Rusya Putin'dir" sloganında kendini belli etmektedir. Boş gösteren "Putin", "Putin'in planının" destekçileri ile yozlaşmış bürokrasisiyle "kötü kurumsal sistem" arasında bir antagonizma yaratır. Bu antagonizmada Putin, "halk"ın "iradesini" somutlaştıran bir lider olarak onun yanında yer almaktadır. Ancak boş gösteren "Putin" sadece "iyi insanları" "kötü kurumsal sistem"e karşı konumlandırmaz. "Putin'in planı", onu destekleyenlerin ve desteklemeyenlerin olduğunu varsaydığı için, birincisini ikincisiyle karşı karşıya getirir. Bunun sonucunda da negatif bir işlemle "öteki" kurulur. İçeriği bir sembole yükleyen pozitif bir işlemin aksine negatif bir işlem, bir şeyi ne olmadığına göre tanımlar; böylece birinin veya bir şeyin tam olarak ne veya kim olduğu sorusuna

cevap vermekten kaçınır. "Öteki", "halk"ın olmadığı veya "halk"ın (veya Putin'in) karşı durduğu şeydir. Bu denklemde Putin, "halkın iradesini" bilen ve "öteki"ne karşı savaşı yöneten, "halkın iradesini" gerçekleştirmesi için "halk"ın oy vermesi gereken ulusun ("halkın") lideridir. Bu denklemden "halk"ın siyasetten arındırıldığı tespiti yapılabilir, çünkü siyasi katılım lideri seçme pratiğiyle sınırlı olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Uzlaştırılamaz siyasi talepleri (hem demokratikleşme hem de artan otoriterlik talepleri gibi) birleştirmek için kullanılan bir başka söylemsel yapı "egemen demokrasi" kavramıdır. Bu kavram, çağdaş Rusya'nın ideolojik ufkunu oluşturur. "Egemen demokrasi" kavramı, Rusya ve Rus halkı için yalnızca özel bir yol çizmez, Rus devletini "çökmekte olan" Batı'ya karşı döndürür ve sözde Rus siyasi bağlamının "benzersizliğine" uyan "özel" bir demokrasi modeli önerir. Bu kavram aracılığıyla Putin'in popülizmi, "öteki"nin konumuna "çökmekte olan" ancak yine de güçlü "Batı"yı yerleştirir. Bu "öteki" imajı, "öteki"nin "Batı"nın uzantısı olarak eklemlendiği Rus iç siyasetine yansıtılır. "Yabancı ajanlar" ve "beşinci sütun" boş gösterenleri bu "öteki"ne gönderme yapmak için kullanılır.

Popülizmin işlevi açısından Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım, daha önce de belirtildiği gibi, Düşünsel Yaklaşım ve Söylemsel Yaklaşımın varsayımlarını paylaşmaktadır. Dolayısıyla Politik-Stratejik Yaklaşım, yukarıda ana hatları çizilen popülizm incelemesini temel alarak, FN ve PVV'nin popülizminin seçim yoluyla iktidara gelmenin bir aracı olduğunu göstermektedir. FN ve PVV siyaseti kurumsallıktan çıkarmaya ve yurttaş katılımını siyasetten arındırmaya çalışmaktadır. Bunu yaparak FN ve PVV kurulu liberal düzeni sorgulamaktadır. Bunun aksine Putin'in popülizmi, siyasi gücü liderde merkezileştirerek ve yoğunlaştırarak Putin'in otoriter rejimini güçlendirmektedir. Siyasetin kurumsuzlaştırılması ve yurttaş katılımının siyasetten arındırılması Putin yönetiminin bu konsolidasyonuna daha fazla katkıda bulunmaktadır.

İçerik açısından, FN ve PVV popülizmi dışlayıcı olarak tanımlanabilir zira "halk", FN ve PVV tarafından etno-milliyetçi terimlerle sunulur. "Halk" terimi, yerli Fransız veya Hollanda nüfusuna atıfta bulunmak için kullanılır. "Halk"ın burada geleneksel değerlere bağlı Hıristiyanlardan oluşan bir bütünlük olarak tasavvur edildiği vurgulanmalıdır. Bu imaj, göçmenlere vurgu yapılarak "Müslüman tehdidine" karşı oluşturulmuştur. Putin rejiminin popülizmi bu noktada bir farklılık göstermektedir zira Putin'in popülizminde "halk", çoğunlukla çok etnikli ve çok dinli

bir varlık olarak sunulmaktadır. Dolayısıyla Putin'in popülizmi kapsayıcı olarak tanımlanabilir. Fakat bu kapsayıcılık bir yanılsama olarak da görülebilir çünkü "halk"ın içindeki iktidar politikasına karşı çıkan bireyler "yozlaşmış Batı"nın "yabancı ajanları" olarak sunulur. Başka bir ifadeyle, kapsayacılık iddialarına rağmen "halk"a kimlerin dahil olmadığı tespit etme tekeli Putin'in iktidarında olduğu görünmektedir.

Biçim açısından, FN ve PVV popülizmi dışlayıcı olarak tanımlanabilir çünkü FN ve PVV "halk"ı iç siyasetin "öteki"ne karşı artiküle eder. Fransız ve Hollandalı yerliler, "Müslüman tehdidine" ve AB'ye karşıt olarak konumlandığı görülmektedir. FN ve PVV'nin kullandığı boş gösteren "ulusal egemenlik", Putin'in popülizmiyle bir benzerlik noktasıdır. Bununla birlikte Putin rejiminin popülizmi, kaynağı yurtdışında olan bir "öteki" ile karşıt olarak "halk"ı ifade eder. Buna rağmen, Putin'in popülizminin biçiminin kapsayıcı olduğu söylenebilir, çünkü "halk", yabancı "öteki"nin bir "uzantısı" olmadığı sürece (düşmanı adlandırma tekeli Putin'in iktidarında olsa da) Rus nüfusundaki herkesi içerebilir.

İşlev açısından FN ve PVV popülizminin Fransa, Hollanda ve AB'nin kurulu düzenini sorguladığı tespiti yapılabilir. Bu tür bir popülizm, "halk"ın dışlayıcı içeriğini ve popülizmin dışlayıcı söylemini araçsallaştıran karizmatik liderler aracılığıyla güç elde etmeye odaklanmaktadır. Putin'in popülizmi ise Rusya'daki otoriter rejimini güçlendirdiği gözlemlenebilir. Putin'in popülizminde "halk"ın kapsayıcı içeriği ve artikülasyonu, ülke içinde topluluklar arası gerilimi yatıştırmaya çalışır ve iç politikanın istikrara kavuşmasını sağlamaya çabalar. Bununla birlikte Putin'in popülizmi, "öteki"yi "Batı" ve onun "çökmüş liberalizmi" olarak tasavvur ederek ve farklı ülkelerdeki siyasi aktörlerle (özellikle muhafazakârlar ve gelenekçiler) bir bağlantı kurarak kendisini uluslararası alanda meşrulaştırmaya çalışır.

Bu tez, Batı Avrupa ve Rusya'daki sağ popülizmin içerik, biçim ve işlev açısından farklı olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Ancak öte yandan siyasetin kurumsuzlaştırılması ve yurttaş katılımının siyasetten arındırılması açısından bir benzerliğe işaret etmektedir. Avrupa Birliği'nin siyasetin kurumsallığı ve hukukun üstünlüğü gibi ilkeleri göz önüne alındığında, FN ve PVV, parlamenter demokrasinin ana akım siyasetine bir alternatif olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Böylece FN ve PVV siyasetlerini marjinal aktörler olarak sürdürmektedir. Bu iki parti siyasi otorite

iddialarını marjinal bir pozisyona dayandırdıkları için uzun vadeli siyasi sürdürülebilirlikleri sorgulanır hale gelmektedir. İktidar parti konumuna gelme senaryosunda, "öteki", "ulusal egemenliği" tehdit eden aşkın bir düşmana göre yeniden tanımlanmak zorunda kalacağından FN ve PVV gibi popülist partilerin siyasi canlılığının kaybolacağı iddia edilebilir. FN ve PVV'nin Avrupa siyasetindeki nispeten marjinal konumunun aksine, Putin'in popülizmi Rus siyasetinde ana akımı oluşturmaktadır. Batı Avrupa'daki sağ popülist partilerin aksine, Rusya'daki sağ popülizmin seçimlerle gitmesi ihtimali çok düşüktür, zira Rus siyasi kurumları siyaseti aşan ve ötesinde duran iktidar lideri etrafında şekillenmektedir. Dahası, Putin'in popülizmi, sınırları aşan ve Batı'daki FN ve PVV dahil olmak üzere muhafazakârlar arasında sempatizanlar bulan bir kapsayıcılık yanılsaması yaratmaktadır. Bu nedenle, popülizmin sağ siyasi partilerin bölge içi ve bölgeler arası dayanışmasını mümkün kıldığı iddia edilebilir.

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