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Who's 'populist' in Ukrainian politics

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The new derogatory term in politics is 'populist'. The word has replaced the derogatory term of the 1980s, which was 'fascist.' Use of these derogatory terms has little attachment to real life politics and is mainly a means used by those with few concrete arguments to attack their opponents.

When used by American commentators the term 'populist' has particular significance because of the absence of a left-wing component in American politics. The US is the only Western democracy which does not have a centre-left political party. This partly explains why American commentators were the most prolific in using the term 'populist' against Yulia Tymoshenko's government in 2005.

Canada to the north of the US has a strong left-wing tradition making its multi-party democracy more akin to Europe than to its southern laissez faire neighbor. Canada and European democracies are described as social market economies that denote a welfare state, free health care and education. Quebec's separatist parties moved the province to the left during the 1960s 'Quiet Revolution.' Ukrainian-Canadians have traditions of both anti-Communist Trotskyists and pro-Soviet Communists.

The term 'populist' has been applied to a heterogeneous group of political groups ranging from the anti-globalization left and greens to the nationalist right. They include those opposed to immigration, those who see globalization as 'Americanization,' believe government taxes are too high, complain about government interference in the private lives of citizens and in business. The pro-Kuchma center and first Yanukovych government mobilized anti-American rhetoric in the 2004 elections to undermine Yushchenko.

Politicians advocating a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism are sometimes labeled as 'populists.' Outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair is associated with 'third wave.' Pro-Kuchma centrist parties campaigned the most for a Ukrainian third way that could be perhaps described as a 'chumatskiy shlyakh' (the Milky Way).

'Populist' parties or movements require charismatic leaders. These are in short supply in Ukraine. The most charismatic Ukrainian politician is Yulia Tymoshenko, whose speeches played a major role in mobilizing the Orange Revolution. The Socialists, Communists, Our

Ukraine and Party of Regions lack charismatic leaders. Yanukovych admitted that, “I have said more than once that I have not learned to speak as eloquently as some. I was raised in an atmosphere that valued work over talk, and I was shy about seeking a lot of words. This was my failing.” This does not mean that they would not wish to be led by charismatic leaders. In elections Ukrainian parties and blocs invariably add the name of their leaders to the party or bloc name in the hope of adding votes. Only the Social Democratic united party’s popularity dropped after its leaders name, Viktor Medvedchuk, was added.

‘Populism’ is often associated with times of crisis and during times of change. The sense of crisis injects a sense of urgency into politics with business no longer being ‘as usual.’ ‘Populists’ are often labeled as seeking a moral purification of society. Politics is therefore defined in terms of a struggle of good against evil where compromise is difficult to imagine. In the 2004 elections both sides depicted the elections as a fundamental choice between good and evil.

How do these different and widely varied definitions of ‘populism’ apply to Ukrainian politics. Many of their characteristics could be applied to the entire political spectrum, especially during elections. They tend to claim to protect the outsider in politics whom the establishment parties have neglected or the people against a corrupt elite. All Ukrainian parties claim to represent the ‘narod’ or people: This is why so many of them have ‘narodniy’ in their names. The Dnipropetrovsk clan’s party was Trudova Ukraina (Labor Ukraine), while the Medvedchuk clan failed to convince the Socialist International that they were social democrats. On the eve of the 2004 election campaign, Prime Minister Yanukovych said, “The authorities should be effective and act first of all in the interests of people.” On the eve of the second round of the 2004 elections, Yanukovych claimed that – unlike Yushchenko – he was a ‘new man’ in Kyiv: “I was wondering when they would start caring about the people and the country. I came to Kyiv with one goal in mind – to figure everything out and try to restore justice.”

In each of Ukraine’s last three presidential elections, both leading candidates’ election rhetoric has resounded with warnings of the dire consequences if the other were to win. In 1994 and 1999, Kravchuk and Kuchma warned of the threat to Ukraine’s independence if Kuchma and Petro Symonenko came to power. In 1994 and 2004, Kuchma and Yanukovych warned Ukrainians against permitting ‘nationalists’ and an ‘American satrap’ from coming to power. The authorities revived Soviet era denunciations of western Ukrainian nationalism and traditional anti-Americanism in the 2002 and 2004 elections. In 2004, Yushchenko warned of the threat to Ukraine’s democratic prospects if Yanukovych was allowed to come to power. In 1999, Kuchma warned against voting for a Communist, copying Borys Yeltsin’s tactic three years earlier.

Populist election rhetoric is common to all political parties in Ukraine, but especially those in the ideologically amorphous center. In 1994 and 2004, Kuchma and Yanukovych campaigned on the populist slogan of upgrading Russian to a second state language (which is impossible to undertake without 300 votes to change the Constitution). After Kuchma and Yanukovych were elected to office, they have quietly forgotten the issue. Six days after becoming prime minister again, Yanukovych said that, “the language problem has been artificially created by politicians.” Populism is even worse in foreign policy rhetoric.

Yanukovych has moved from supporting membership (the first Yanukovych government), to hostility to anything to do with NATO (when in opposition) to support for cooperation (during the second Yanukovych government). The Yanukovych government's populist anti-Americanism in the 2004 elections flatly contradicted the fact his government had sent Ukrainian troops to Iraq a year earlier.

Election populism is common to all political forces in Ukraine. In October 2004 the Yanukovych government raised wages and pensions to attract voters, particularly the Communists who voted for him in rounds two and three. Fuel prices were cut, state pensions increased and coal miners given back pay. Yushchenko lobbied for an election date before the summer recess because he feared that the Yanukovych government would again resort to social populism ahead of the Sept. 30 elections. In the 2002 and 2004 elections Yushchenko focused heavily on the socio-economic gains of his government in re-paying wage and pension arrears. Yushchenko also vetoed the 2007 budget, complaining that the provisions for pensions was too low. In the 2002 elections the number two on Our Ukraine's list was Oleksandr Stoyan, head of the Federation of Trade Unions (FTUU). Stoyan was elected in the 2006 elections in the Party of Regions. In the 2004 elections, Yanukovych signed a 'Social Contract' with the FTUU. Yushchenko is currently touring Ukraine with his new 'Social Initiative' in what looks suspiciously like the start of the 2009 election campaign.

Anti-elite rhetoric is also common across the political spectrum. President Kuchma and his allies became the brunt of accusations during the Kuchmagate crisis. Anti-oligarch sentiment ran throughout the 2004 elections and Orange Revolution. Since 1994 the National Academy of Sciences annual surveys have asked Ukrainians which group they believed had most influence in Ukrainian society. The largest response was always 'organized crime and the mafia'.

And, what of economic protectionism? The main economic nationalists are to be found in the political center among former pro-Kuchma parties. Donetsk, home to the Party of Regions, is the most protectionist region in Ukraine. Foreign investors, Western or Russian, have been discouraged. Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, perennially described as a 'nationalistic' region, has more Russian investment than Donetsk. Then opposition leader Yanukovych condemned the sale of the re-privatized Kryvorizhstal to a foreign owner. Yanukovych would have preferred that it stay in Ukrainian hands. The Yulia Tymoshenko government organized the re-privatization and Ukraine's most transparent tender for a new buyer and, although out of office, she supported its sale to a foreign buyer. The Party of Regions economic protectionism lies at the heart of why they voted with the left against WTO legislation when they were in opposition. As with NATO, they changed their stance on the WTO only after returning to government. The Party of Regions record of voting against WTO legislation in 2005-2006 outshines that of other parties in parliament.

Grain export quotas were introduced in 2006 and 2007 by the Yanukovych government over fears of higher bread prices. Respected economist Volodymyr Lanovyy describes the Yanukovych government's policies as having returned the country to 'Kuchmaeconomics' by giving subsidies to sectors controlled by oligarchs, focusing on exports at the expense of the domestic market and working less effectively for structural change than the two preceding Orange governments.

Traditionally those labeled as ‘populists’ are seen as being against the organization of political parties. Tymosenko’s Fatherland Party has the second largest number of party branches in Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc is generally considered as one of Ukraine’s best organized political forces.

‘Populists’ are accused of lacking core values and hence can be found on the left and right of the spectrum. They can be against immigration, as in France, or support regional identities, as in Belgium and Italy, or criticize the welfare state and high taxes, as in Denmark. In the Netherlands they defended multiculturalism against what they perceived to be intolerant Islamic immigrants.

Ukraine’s parties do not campaign on anti-immigration, anti-tax or anti-welfare state stances. Some parties do though campaign, as in Belgium and Italy, as regional political forces. The Party of Regions campaigns for ‘strong regions’ and promotes candidates from Donetsk into government positions.

The Party of Regions is also the most ideologically amorphous of Ukraine’s parliamentary parties. The extreme left Communists, center-left Socialists and Tymoshenko bloc and center-right Our Ukraine each have an ideological niche. Surveys of Party of Regions voters show the party to be more akin to an eastern Ukrainian anti-Orange popular front uniting pan-Slavists, ex-communists, state paternalist trade unionists, oligarchs, former Soviet functionaries and red directors.

Fatherland has maintained a center-left profile since it was founded in 1999. In the 1999 elections this niche was represented by Yevhen Marchuk and Oleksandr Moroz. After Marchuk was co-opted as Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council his supporters moved to Tymoshenko. The Ukraine without Kuchma and Arise Ukraine protests were led by the center-left Tymoshenko bloc and Socialists. National democrats, who went on to create Our Ukraine, backed Kuchma during the Ukraine without Kuchma protests and moved back and forth between supporting Arise Ukraine or undertaking negotiations, or joining a parliamentary coalition with the authorities.

Yulia Tymoshenko and her eponymous bloc have not supported policies that are routinely ascribed to ‘populists’ in Western Europe. Tymoshenko is in favor of EU membership, has not raised the issue of immigration and supports foreign investment. The Tymoshenko government’s backing for re-privatization came out of the 2004 elections and Orange revolution rhetoric when it was used as much by Yushchenko as by her. If re-privatization is a sign of ‘populism’ then this label should be attached to center-left parties throughout the EU. The Party of Regions is in a parliamentary coalition with the Communists and Socialists who are against EU membership, are suspicious of the US oppose foreign investment and land privatization.

‘Populism’ is the new dirty word in Ukrainian politics. But, its use says more about the user than the party that is accused of its allegedly being ‘populist’. If we take policies routinely ascribed to ‘populism’, then the Party of Regions would win hands down.

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