

# Populists and Language

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2017**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:906893>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-03-14**



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**Populists and language: an analysis of a populist's style of  
communication**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B. A. In English

Language and Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

Submission date: 6<sup>th</sup> of September, 2017

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## **Abstract**

Over the past few years, a resurgence of the populist agenda has made itself apparent in the western world. In light of the recent socio-economical precarity, some personages have propped themselves up as beacons of the current iteration of neo-populism. Intent on using their newfound popularity in what could best be described as a low-key power grab, these people offer a profound insight into what truly makes populism tick - language. This paper is going to try and dissect the very foundation of populism, how it relates to the rest of the relevancies of the world we live in, and will feature a particular focus on the language and mannerisms of any given populist. First discussed will be the exact definition of this movement, as well as the makings of the ongoing populist craze. After the basics are in place, some space will be given to historical populists by the likes of Adolf Hitler and, arguably, George Wallace. All of this combined will form the core framework that is necessary for further discussion and explanation of the problem at hand. Once that is specified, this dissertation will focus on the lead-up to contemporary populism. Parallels will be drawn between the historical and modern-day leaders, with added context wherever it might be necessary. All of the relevant matter will then be related to language, which includes but is not limited to verbal and visual communication, body language, the role of media, public speaking and the like. The final part of this paper will be dedicated to showcasing some of the ways in which populist demagoguery may well best be countered.

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## 1: Introduction

The definition of a populist, as it is explained by Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, populism), pertains to a person who is a member of a political party that claims to be representing the common people. That is - a believer in the rights, wisdom or virtues of the common people. This rather innocuous definition sits at odds with the perceived image of contemporary populism, the mention of which usually calls for the likes of Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and, naturally, Donald J. Trump. Should the matter be brought up in a more liberally-oriented company, thoughts of apparent xenophobia, isolationism, and aggressive nationalism are soon to follow, almost exclusively so. There are numerous reasons as to why this is the case – some valid while others not – but before delving into those, it should be defined precisely whether this apprehension and fearfulness of populism have any real substance to them.

It can be said that, up until a couple of years ago, the political left and right of the western world both agreed upon one thing, and that was their stance on populism as an inherent flaw of democracy. Richard Hofstadter, an American historian, once wrote it off as the 'paranoid style of politics' (Hofstadter, 4) and was particularly dismissive of its qualities. The thing to keep in mind in relation to this is that, at its core, populism is inherently neither right nor left-leaning, but is a perfectly centrist mode of political communication upon which populists then project their own affinities. Regardless, it is a fact that, historically, populism has, by far, most often been realised as a right-leaning policy imbued with nationalism. However, this has been set to change over the past decade-or-so, with the rising popularity of Podemos in Spain (Judis, 87) and Syriza in Greece (Judis, 83) – two left-wing populist parties whose rhetoric includes anti-capitalism, social justice, pacifism and anti-globalisation. Thus, it is clear that contemporary populism, indeed, must not be considered exclusive to the political right, and that in any related discussion, populism ought not to

be conflated with an opposition to immigration or the welfare state, a disdain for the European<sup>1</sup> Union or something of the type.

What warrants further discussion is that populism itself, even as an "empty" ideology, retains a fair number of issues without being appropriated by either a left or right-leaning populist.

*"Populism, I suggest, is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior." ( Müller, 16)*

The core tenet of any given iteration of populism is the perceived clash between two entities: the people and the elite. A populist will always, without fail, claim that they are representing the good, moral people of their country in an attempt to take back the power from the evil, immoral elites. The discrepancy will never not be present, even though the exact definitions and conditions pertaining to one's belonging to either of these groups vary depending on the needs of the populist in question. Aside from being anti-elitist, populists are also anti-pluralists, which is to say that a populist will claim that they and they alone represent "the people." (Müller, 17) In the words of Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself: "We are the people. Who are you?" This speaks volumes about the atmosphere that populists try and foster in the country they are active in, and will be analysed in detail later on. The main takeaway at the moment, though, should be the basic premise of populism, which is essentially a version of the age-old 'us vs. them' mentality.

Erdogan's quote was spoken in the context of declaring defiance against his then-numerous domestic critics at a party congress (Müller, 8). The most important implication of this utterance is that, even though his political opponents were Turks as well, Erdogan was intent on making it seem as if that isn't the case, at least at face value. This is a common populist tactic – an attempt to make

the opposition seen as the immoral elite, and not part of the people. In simpler terms, what any given populist wants is to make it seem as if they and they alone represent the essential will of the people. And not just a majority of the people, either, but the 100%, and this can only be pulled off by making their competitors to be the non-people; a foreign entity made up of immoral elites.

(Müller, 16)

The conviction of morality is key because, if a populist can make it seem like they and the people that they represent are the source of moral behaviour in their country, the remainder can easily be signed off as immoral and therefore *wrong*. With this in mind, populism is and always will be a form of exclusionary identity politics. (Müller, 20) Naturally, such a divisive approach to politics is also a dangerous one, because not only does a populist seek to dismantle the opposition in political discourse, but in daily life as well. Simply by designating their critics as 'enemies of the people', a populist can easily bring down the wrath of their followers upon them, all the while being protected by the indirect nature of their implication. Another important thing to mention here is that, whereas most other political candidates would be willing to drop their campaign rhetoric upon being elected, populists will only rarely agree to do so. In fact, the final result of one such election is often entirely irrelevant, because no matter what it is, a capable populist could keep their oration up all the same. Should the result be a loss for the populist, their followers will be riled up until the next campaign. On the other hand, if a populist wins, they can continue ruling as one, however counterintuitive that might seem. (Müller, 27) For substantive proof, look no further than the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

*"Populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and 'mass clientelism' (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favors for political support by citizens who become the populists' clients) and efforts systematically to suppress civil society." ( Müller, 8)*

Though these features are also a staple in many an authoritarian's handbook, none but the populist type can justify their conduct by claiming that they represent the people, which is one of the reasons why even with substantial proof of personal political corruption, they are able to avow their practices openly. (Müller, 28) In other words, if a populist is corrupt, their followers can wave it off by saying that their leader is doing that for their people – the authentic citizenry of that country.

## **2: Brief history of populism**

The history of populism is long, varied and layered, though its first prominent iteration could perhaps be traced back to Ancient Rome, where an unofficial splinter of the Roman senate known as the 'Populares' was known for its populist agenda. (Zoch, 147) Julius Caesar himself had often used the referenda to bypass the Senate, thus making a direct appeal to the people, which is one of the main draws of modern-day populism as well.

One of the substantially more relevant iterations of historical populism, however, is that which was fostered in Germany in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. With roots in romantic nationalism, the *völkisch* (often translated as ethno-racialist (Webb, 276)) movement represented a sort of a melting pot of various notions, beliefs and hopes drawn from a variety of older trains of thought, but the core idea of which was that of folkdom and national pride. The main proponent of the *völkisch* nationalism was Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), a philosopher who lived during the French occupation of Berlin, and who called for a "people's war" to retaliate against the occupying force. (Ryback, 129) Among other things, Fichte was a proud promoter of the idea of German exceptionalism and felt that the German people were in need of a thorough purge of all foreign ideology. (Ryback, 130) Though little came of Fichte's ideas at the time, the notion of *völkisch* populism was given a new lease on life in the aftermath of the first World War. Amidst open defeat



and a rise of national despair, the German people got enthralled by a more propagandistic outlook on the *Volk*, the definition of which became increasingly unclear as both the German left and the German right took the term under their wings. As the history shows, it is obvious which of the two sides was more successful in appropriating the idea. The jump from the comparatively mild *völkisch* ideology to outright nazism is well-documented by none other than Adolf Hitler himself, who wrote about the perceived equivalence between *völkisch* and his National-Socialist movement in *Mein Kampf*.

As could perhaps be expected, the rest of the European continent faced similar historical outings of populist policy from time to time. The French Revolution, for example, at its very core was an uprising of the people against the elites, albeit far more nuanced than could be described in this essay. A more contemporary example of overt populism was that of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, who ended up holding the seat of Prime Minister for close to ten years.

In the United States, things were a bit different. Whereas the source of European populism had historically often been found in the misplaced sense of aggressive nationalism and xenophobia, the American populism finds its roots in a somewhat different context; that of what might seem like camaraderie at face value.

*"In the height of the 1877 Depression, a group of white farmers gathered together on a farm in Texas and formed the first "Farmers Alliance." In a few years, it was across the state. By 1882, there were 120 suballiances in twelve counties. By 1886, 100,000 farmers had joined in two thousand suballiances. They began to offer alternatives to the old system: join the Alliance and form cooperatives; buy things together and get lower prices" (Zinn, 277)*

Due to numerous economic reasons, the state of American farming in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was such

that very few farmers could ever afford paying their debts to the banks, and were thus turning into mere tenants on their own former land – by the millions. According to sources, 4 and a half million farmers had been turned into farm laborers by 1900. (Zinn, 278) Due to post-war anxieties, there was little hope of turning to the government for leadership and union between the South and the North, and with the population rising (while the amount of money in circulation remained more-or-less the same), farmers had to pay their debts with money that they no longer had a way of earning. (Zinn, 278)

Thanks to considerable progress that was being made in alleviating the farmers' problems, the Farmers Alliance kept growing in popularity, and would eventually reform itself as the People's Party, with a more generalised goal of uniting Americans (Zinn; 283) regardless of the colour of their skin. Among its other goals, the People's Party wanted to "curb the vicious corporate monopoly" and act as a counter to the "transcendent white prejudice." (Zinn, 284) A stark contrast to most other iterations of populism. In spite of this call for unity, the fires of racism burned bright, and the pre-platform-switch Democratic party played on this card as much as it could, taking votes from the People's Party in large numbers. (Zinn, 284)

The complexities of racial tensions in the States made themselves apparent when the leadership of the People's Party had begun to show their true colours. Not only did the party leaders start dismissing black people's rights when it became obvious that they didn't need their votes any longer to stay afloat, but they also went to great lengths to actively prevent them (and particularly downtrodden whites) from voting altogether. (Zinn; 287) This made People's Party more interesting to the Democrats, and would eventually result in the fusing of two parties, with the Populists losing their identity almost completely. (Zinn; 289)

In the context of this information, it is definitely worth noting that, up until the last few decades, the Democrats and the Republicans were essentially running on switched platforms when it comes to the issues of civil rights and their approach to racial matters. This was being incurred over a long timespan, ever since the sixties, though the exact nuances far exceed the scope of this essay. The process itself goes by the name of 'southern strategy' and was realised as a ploy by the historically metropolitan Republican Party to boost their approval ratings in the South. (Boyd) What happened was that Richard Nixon and Senator Goldwater successfully realigned a large number of Southern white conservatives from the Democratic Party to the Republicans with a series of locally-appealing narratives that were specifically focused on pursuing latent racial tensions of the area. (Apple) As one would expect, this also helped in pushing the Republican Party further toward the right, and as a result, Democrats veered toward the left. (Apple) It could be argued that the long-term effects of southern strategy led to the current North American political climate.

### **3: Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever**

Before looking at contemporary populists and, in particular, the manner in which they communicate with the outside world, same should be done for a few people from the history books who could also be identified as such. In the United States of America, for example, the title of populist goes to George Corley Wallace Jr., who was a Presidential candidate for four consecutive elections from 1964 to 1976. While Wallace never did get the chance to test his resolve as a President, the speech he gave upon his inaugural address as the governor of Alabama in 1962 gave chills to many:

*"In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." (George Wallace Segregation Forever Speech)*

As can be assumed from the quote given above, Wallace was not very keen on racial integration. In fact, the "tyranny" he referred to in his speech was specifically targeting the government's attempts at mending the racial relations of the time, and behind him rallied a not-insignificant amount of people who felt the same way.

*"I want to tell these national parties this – they're going to find out there are a lot of rednecks come Nov. 5<sup>th</sup> in this country." (Elliot; quote by Wallace)*

As has been established at the very start of this text, populists generally have more-or-less the same modus operandi across the board. What they want to do is establish an easily understandable context with two key elements sitting adverse to one another: the elites and the. A populist also wants the people to recognise them as the tool through which freedom from the elites' shackles is attained – this does not need to be conveyed directly, as will be explained later on. In fact, it might be preferable in some situations if the conflict itself remains partially shrouded, though it was most certainly not the case with Wallace.

Wallace knew who his followers were. He knew exactly how to cater to those people, too, and he understood how to project the status of the "elites" upon the government that was attempting to change the people's preferred way of life. There is good reason for why Wallace, even though he never did get elected as President, drew tens of thousands of people to his crowds and won close to 10 million popular votes in the 1968 general election. (Rohler, 15) The man had swept across five states – Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and Arkansas and won 46 electoral votes. (Rohler, 16) There is no going around the fact that Wallace was wildly popular back in his day, even though not much came of it in the end.

While Wallace's thoughts and beliefs might seem like overt racism now that the benefit of hindsight is in place, the exact language that was used in the campaign makes for a significantly more reasonable, though not an altogether compelling case. Wallace was running on a platform which stated that the issue of racial differences was fairly similar to that of, say, political or religious beliefs. Namely, he claimed that people had the freedom to live in complete segregation should they choose to do so. (Elliot) This is yet another curious feature of the populist approach to politics: Wallace could easily claim that his was not a racist take on the problem at hand. Indeed, if critically disassembled, Wallace's argument rests less on its racist implication and far more on the freedom that is given to all Americans with the Amendments – so that they may live however they choose. Regardless, it goes without saying that Wallace *did* in fact gain popularity in racist circles, simply because his argument was consistent and compatible with their beliefs. The populist in question was thus shielded from any direct consequences of what his followers may or may not have acted upon.

#### **4: The corrupted swastika**

A much more direct occasion of populism rising to unprecedented levels could be found in the wake of the first World War, in Germany. While some general information on how the idea of *völkisch* came to be has already been given, there is no better exemplar of a populist to study than that of Adolf Hitler himself.

While the generally accepted image of Adolf Hitler in this day and age is that of a raging lunatic – a wild demagogue intent on changing the face of the world as we know it – his contemporaries insisted on this not being the case up until the very end of the War. (Rees) Indeed, during his political rise, Hitler had always been an impressive orator to say the least. Populist from

the get-go, what this man did had less to do with making the audience see things his way than it was about vocalizing the thoughts that had already been popular with the majority of the *Volk*. (Rees) Since it is so easy to demonize Hitler himself for all the questionable actions undertaken by the Nazis during the Second War, it is equally effortless to forget that the feeling of anti-Semitism was fairly popular at the time. Hitler, being as politically intelligent as he was, had little issue when it came to monopolising on those feelings among the German people and, eventually, make them take up arms for his cause. In other words, Hitler gave concrete form to the idea that had already been well-developed, as any clever populist with an agenda would. (Rees)

A truly powerful populist can only come in power when there is a significant amount of unrest in their country of origin. A large number of people needs to be in economic or social distress (preferably both). Additionally, those very same people need to have their trust in the government severely diminished, and should best be disenfranchised in the general sense. From these factors are, then, erected the oft-mentioned and much-maligned pillars of populism. This is always how way is made for a populist to take advantage of the situation at hand - for them to rise as the perceived saviours of their nation.

The onslaught of right-wing populist resurgence in this day and age has come in the wake of certain socio-economical instability. This is nothing new. The two discussed historical examples have both appeared after being fostered by immense nation-wide stresses that manifested themselves in those two populists. In the case of Wallace, it was a certain traditionalist group of white Americans who wished to maintain the racial status quo of the era indefinitely, and they felt threatened by the coming change. In the case of Hitler, it was the German people who felt ashamed and underrepresented after their loss in the first World War. The current political climate in which populism has found a safe haven is not all that different than the given examples, when it is all

boiled down to basics. In 2017, first-world countries are facing a considerable influx of Muslim refugees, which has caused significant unrest in the receiving countries. The native citizens of those countries feel understandably threatened by the immigrants' religious and social habits, and not to mention the possible element of terror that seems very nearly all-encompassing as of late. (source pending) Naturally, there is the economic crisis of 2007/2008 to consider as well, the consequences of which have only begun to be alleviated over the last few years. The stage was, then, ripe for a number of strongmen to rise and defend their respective nations from these unprecedented crises which had been raging through the nations of the first world.

## **5: The French revolutionary**

In Europe, the most popular and widely-acclaimed modern populist has certainly had to be Marine Le Pen, the president of the National Front – a far-right political party active in France. Though Le Pen lost the presidential race to Emmanuel Macron, the fact that she managed to leverage enough influence to get to that point speaks volumes about the current political climate in the Old Continent. While it could be argued whether one of the reasons for Le Pen's loss is the successful election into office of a certain other populist, her oration deserves a mention and a thorough analysis all the same, without much regard to the outcome of the election.

The primary weapon of any given populist is their language. The manner in which they speak, carry themselves and control the media – for a populist, people's perception of their personage is key. Marine Le Pen was well aware of this fact.

*"We do not want to live under the rule or threat of islamic fundamentalism. They are looking to impose on us gender discrimination in public places, full body veils or not, prayer rooms in the workplace, prayers in the streets, huge mosques, or the submission of women... ..no French, no Republican, no woman with*

*her freedom and dignity at heart can accept it." (Marine Le Pen launches presidential campaign with hardline speech; quote by Le Pen)*

What the current wave of neo-populism wants to establish is that the traditional venue of politics is essentially self-serving and incapable of doing what the people want it to do. (Jagers/Walgrave, 4) Representatives of this type of populism choose to focus primarily on issues such as immigration, crime, and nationalism, which resonates with their voter base. (Jagers/Walgrave, 4) By alluding to protecting their people from foreign influence (be it globalism, excessive immigration or whatever else), the populist allows them to seek shelter and comfort when it seems like there is none to be had. This is why the sense of being a "strongman" is so important for the populist to convey – they must be perceived as astute, powerful people because that will make them worth the voters' time and effort. Marine Le Pen completes this objective by repeatedly and loudly stating just how *strict* her take on the immigration crisis would be, should she get elected. (Marine Le Pen) Similar as to how Wallace knew how to cater to his audience of die-hard segregationists, Le Pen understood that her voter base wanted to see an acute and perceptive woman who would solve their perceived problems. Words themselves are a fair tool to convey this message, but a rabid speech alone does not a populist make.

Marine Le Pen is an active, articulate speaker who uses strategically-placed pauses combined with vivid gesturing to drive her point across. (Marine Le Pen). The speech from which the quote above has been taken showcases this especially well. Not only is each sentence filled to the brim with meaning – stated directly or otherwise - but Le Pen also opts to give people time to process what she has said after each message. (Marine Le Pen. The speech itself is fairly standard in its content – the conditions the speaker wishes to impose are driven entirely by common sense; difficult to disagree with. What gives the speech its obviously populist qualities is the adversity with which Le Pen chose to make the delivery. It is essential that the tone of her voice is rapid, strong

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and unwavering, and as long as this is the case, she will be seen as the resident strongman, ready to protect France from globalist and immigrant influence, the two great scares of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the end, virtually everything that Le Pen has said in any of her speeches should best be considered a sort of an appeal to the voters' emotions. She said that "the new world that is arriving is a world where the people regain power, where the oligarchies are put back in their place" (Campbell) which serves as an invocation of positive thoughts amongst her voter base – a regaining of power for the people, whose sole representative would then be Le Pen herself, of course. There would be little point in denying that Le Pen is a full-blooded populist, and the reality of French politics during the election of 2017 was such that the National Front had a good chance at winning the race. In fact, one could safely argue that there were only two main reasons that the populist party lost at that time; one of them being the existence of a charming and, more importantly, moderate opposition that materialised in the form of Emmanuel Macron and his Democratic Movement, and the other being the fact that a fair number of European and, by extension, French voters experienced a sense of distress and disgust upon seeing Donald Trump taking office in the US.

## **6: The Turkish demagogue**

Before discussing the monumental linguistic anomaly that is Donald J. Trump, some consideration should be given to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the contemporary Turkish populist. With ideological roots in Turkish conservatism, Erdogan has shown himself to be a nigh-unstoppable force of change when it comes to the politics of his country. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7) Describing Erdogan as a Turkish equivalent of Trump would not only be stupid and short-sighted, but it would also severely undersell the man's political intelligence and sheer calculation. To understand this man's

history is to understand his demagoguery, so a short synopsis of his career may well be in order.

Erdogan was elected Prime Minister in 2003, after a prolonged ban from politics that was caused by his imprisonment for inciting religious or racial hatred – by reciting a poem. (Turkey's charismatic pro-Islamic leader) However, upon taking a position of power, Erdogan was careful to maintain the center-right appeal that his party – the AKP – harbored in the years leading up to the takeover. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7) To be specific, the AKP promoted themselves as the single ray of hope for Turkish politics: they alone could lead Turkey to join the EU (which was one of their main goals at the time) and they alone could maintain an uncompromising image of progress. At the time, this was true. Not only had AKP been untarnished by the local economic crisis of 2001, but they were also free of any major corruption that had made itself manifest in the 90s (Cagaptay, Ch. 6). The adopted nomenclature was signifying this much alone, since the initials 'AKP' translate to 'white' in Turkish – a show of purity and cleanliness that everybody could understand. (Cagaptay, Ch. 6) AKP did much for the well-being of Turkish people as well, with investments in infrastructure and local business that rarely went unnoticed by the general public. Indeed, by the time Erdogan took office, the voting majority wanted the AKP to take the lead. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7)

This was the line that Erdogan had to straddle at the time. He articulated a convincing case for joining the EU and people followed, which led to unprecedented economic growth between 2002 and 2007. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7) Even though Erdogan abandoned this stance of careful moderation in speech and policy slowly over the next decade-or-so, what mattered to him at the time was political survival. Since he experienced the backlash of his mistakes on his own skin, Erdogan was afterwards very careful not to sound too antagonistic in public. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7) What all of this means in the context of spoken word is that Erdogan knows very well what, when and how to say something. This would serve him well after his speedy disillusionment with the EU,

and especially over the past few years, when he finally got to control virtually every relevant aspect of Turkish government. (Cagaptay, Ch. 7)

A particularly chilling example of Erdogan's realisation of power via language can be found in one of his most infamous political monologues – the one he held during the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009. “One minute,” said Erdogan in plain English just as the host of the debate, David Ignatius, was making an attempt at closing the panel. Speaking directly to the Israeli president Shimon Peres, Erdogan said that the man spoke in a loud voice, which he recognised to be a sign of guilt. “Be sure that my voice will not be raised as yours,” he continued. At the moment, Erdogan was calculatedly referencing the justification that was given for the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip. “I know how you hit and killed children on the beaches.” After the accusation, Erdogan finished by quoting the sixth of the Ten Commandments and storming out of the building. (Turkish PM Erdogan Slams Shimon Peres)

By speaking freely, and in an obviously derogatory tone to the Israeli president, Erdogan made apparent the fact that he did not act like diplomats do. Instead, he was blunt and direct and brutal – true to his populist persona. In this aspect, the speech was a deliberate show of strength, one that was fueled by anger. No less important is the fact that Erdogan referenced the Old Testament in particular. While the inclusion of religion in Turkish political discourse is no strange matter, Erdogan did not choose Quran as the source of his quote. Quite the contrary – the populist chose to go after the faith of the Israeli in an attempt to shame Peres for not conforming to his own ancestral religion. Impulsive or not – it was a power move all the same. Excesses of thinly-veiled aggression were nothing new to Erdogan at the time, who was recorded saying that *“This idea of showing the other cheek – we don't have that. I am not some kind of patient sheep.”* (Steinvorth)

Something could also be said about Erdogan's apparent change of heart when it comes to the European Union. As referenced earlier, it is no secret that the Turkish people – and Erdogan himself – have had their eyes on joining the fold for quite some time. It is interesting to see, then, how the Turkish leadership have changed their stance almost completely in this regard. Not only has Turkey reoriented itself away from European values – be it by re-introducing Islam to every aspect of what was previously almost entirely secular daily life or simply by seemingly giving up on joining the Union – but they have also chosen to prop Erdogan up as a sort of a saviour figure for hardline Muslim communities across the world.

This is where the crux of Erdogan's dominion lies. It could be (and has been) argued that, despite appearances, he never did have a liberal democracy in mind when it comes to Turkey. (Cagaptay, Ch. 12) In his book titled *The New Sultan*, Cagaptay argues that Erdogan's agenda was never built on the principles of Islam, but rather on those of Islamism, which is a social ideology whose endgame focuses on a rapid implementation of Sharia Law. (Cagaptay, Ch. 12) The possibility of Erdogan thinking ahead and slowly easing his country into sheer authoritarianism should definitely be entertained, because the populist in question certainly has shown himself to be capable of impressive political feats, not least of which was his widening of the AKP's general appeal almost twenty years ago. (Cagaptay, Ch. 12) Whereas most populist politicians would choose to explosively enter the scene once all of their pieces are set, it would seem that Erdogan is in for a long run, and is passively increasing his political overreach with each passing month.

## **7: The American populist**

One of these explosive, though short-lived populists from the States was Ron Paul, who stepped into the spotlight with his two contemporary attempts at getting into the White House.

Facing off against none other than Barack Obama – and twice at that – Ron Paul was somewhat unique in regard to his policies simply because he was a Libertarian at heart. His 'Plan to restore America' from 2012 made no attempts at hiding that fact, with all the slashing of government agencies that were described in the paper. (Ron Paul's Plan to Restore America) The reason Paul is relevant here, however, aren't his Libertarian leanings, but rather his approach to running for President.

One of the seemingly more popular opinions on the rise of Donald Trump is that he and his team managed to pull it off because he joined the race out of the left field. Just one look at Ron Paul's campaign, however, and one will easily notice all the main hallmarks of populist agenda represented in an American Presidential candidate *much* before Donald Trump ever sprung into relevance.

Ron Paul ran on the promise of slashing government expenditure to an extent that would have made Ayn Rand proud (Ron Paul's Plan to Restore America), but he also placed significant emphasis on him being the part of the 99%, and that his campaign was set to stick up for the little man in every way possible. He made an attempt at pitting the people against the elites, though it could easily be argued that he himself was – and always has been – one of the “elites” as well. (Weiss) Ron Paul did receive a fair percentage of votes whenever he ran, which means that there was a not-insignificant number of people ready to get a populist into the White House. A man who would be willing to leave government spending gutted and diminished, as well as removing some of the more sensible social checks and balances (Ron Paul's Plan to Restore America); Ron Paul was running a campaign that, had he been elected, would have been a dream come true for the 1% - if for nothing else, then for his attempt at getting rid of the income tax, but simply reading his “Plan” makes it obvious that Paul was never a true populist at all. He did, however, find it useful to run a populist-like campaign, and though he failed, he did set a very strong precedent for his successor to

take up.

When it comes to discussing contemporary populists – and perhaps specifically the language that they use in their day-to-day demagoguery – there's no better example than that of Donald Trump. Though coherency and objective vocal presentation may well not be some of Trump's strengths, it cannot be argued that the manner in which he speaks and addresses the listener does not have an odd sense of power backing it up. During the Presidential campaign of 2016, whereas nigh-all of Trump's political opponents knew that their words would be picked apart and analysed by thousands upon thousands of people and acted accordingly, Trump either willingly chose to ignore this situation or simply did not care enough to bother. As a life-time showman that is borderline obsessed with how other people perceive him, it should not be surprising to see that Trump is very good at selling feelings. In other words, by choosing specific words and phrases, he gives the listener an idea of how they should feel about the matter at hand, though whether this is intentional or not remains yet to be proven.

For a perfect display of Donald J. Trump's linguistic ability, here will be used a verbal quote of his that was laid out as an answer to the question of whether banning Muslims from coming to the States altogether was unamerican:

*“But look, we have people coming into our country that are looking to do tremendous harm. You look at the two – look at Paris. Look at what happened in Paris. I mean, these people, they did not come from Sweden, okay? Look at what happened in Paris. Look at what happened last week in California, with, you know, fourteen people dead. Other people going to die, they're so badly injured. We have a real problem. There is a tremendous hatred out there. And what I wanna do is find out what it – you know, you can't solve a problem until you find out what's the root cause. And I wanna find out, what is the problem, what is going on. And, it's tempo-. I've had so many people call me and say thank you. Now, if you remember,*

*when I did that a week ago it was like bedlam. All of a sudden – and you watch last night, and you see people talking. They said, “Well, Trump has a point. We have to get down to the problem.” The people that are friends of mine that called say, “Donald, you have done us a tremendous service.” Because we do have a problem.”* (Donald Trump Says Muslims Support His Plan)

It is important to have the full quote in mind when discussing Trump's speech patterns because certain facts might seem inexplicable or altogether false without a text sample nearby to check them immediately.

The first thing to notice should perhaps be the incredible simplicity of vocabulary that is put on display here. The full quote consists of 220 words, 172 of which are made up of a single syllable. Additionally, many words – which will be referred to as 'buzzwords' in this context – are repeatedly slotted into the sentences so as to drive the point home, even though it may not be clear what the point is. A study conducted by the Boston Globe (via the acclaimed Flesch-Kincaid readability test) has shown that Trump speaks at the level of a fourth-grader, which is to say that Trump talks about things that are *“emotional, simple and angry.”* (Viser) And, as the outcome of the Presidential race of 2016 has shown – this approach is devastatingly effective. Almost unbelievably so. But it is not all down to word choice, however. Earlier referenced was the “punchiness” of Trump's speech which appeals to many people for reasons that will be discussed later on, and this is made possible by the way he constructs sentences. A single look at the quote featured above should show make this readily apparent. Not only does Trump avoid using complex sentences, independent clauses or the like, but he also likes to address the listener directly via the use of second person. Additionally, many of the sentences are finished with aforementioned buzzwords, most of which conduce negativity, such as 'problem' or 'dead'. Simply by doing this, he makes the listener focus on those words, even if the cost of doing that is making the rest of the sentence in question a confused, jumbled mess. There is a point to this, of course, and that is making the audience remember these buzzwords specifically. Other linguistic anomalies include, but are not limited to the usage of word

'tremendous' and having unnamed friends who belong to whatever group of people is being discussed at the time. And, as it has been shown time and again – this sort of approach to politics just works.

However, as exemplified earlier in the text, when it boils down to pure rhetoric, Paul Ryan was not all that different from Trump, though saying that he was a tad bit more refined does go a long way in describing the comparison. One could argue, then, why is it that a seemingly more appealing, more capable candidate by the likes of Ryan failed whereas the bumbling and confused old man Trump succeeded at doing the same thing in the very next election cycle?

It would be easy to point fingers and blame the success of Donald Trump on unappealing opposition or simple immigration-related xenophobia, but an argument that should also be made is that many were simply tired of the political status quo. Barack Obama, for example, ran a very moderate, very centrist government which was fairly in line with what his predecessor had been getting at in the post 9/11 haze that turned the country upside down. (Stone/Kuznick, Ch. 14) After Bush, Obama felt like a breath of fresh air – a more coherent, reliable and liberal candidate that held infinite possibilities in his hand. Many were hopeful that Obama would end the ongoing wars and relinquish some of the governmental overreach that Bush had put in place beforehand, and that other countries would come to see the States in a different, more positive light. (Stone, Kuznick, Ch. 14) Though Obama did do well in certain critical areas and has seemingly revitalised the economy, not only has he not shut down the perpetually-running war machine, but he also went further than ever when it comes to instating mass-surveillance, which drove many Americans away from him – and rightfully so. (Stone/Kuznick, Ch. 14)

Due to this, it is not much of a stretch to imagine that large swathes of Americans were



simply tired of handsome, well-spoken politicians who would turn out to be nigh-perfect moderates operating on a tight-rope between two extremes only to maintain the current state of affairs. It goes without saying that wishing for change for the sake of change itself is faulty reasoning, but since populism is about identity politics and “feels before reals”, it is a worthy argument to consider in the wake of contemporary American government, the head honcho of which is now Donald J. Trump.

## **8: Drawing conclusions**

Taking into account everything that has been said about populists in this body of work, a reasonably sound theory of their linguistic modus operandi can now be drawn. Ranging all the way from Hitler to Le Pen, what every populist needs first and foremost is a media through which they can express themselves. In the past, these were the energetic, powerful speeches that led to the second Great War. Today, this is the unambiguously less glamorous, albeit significantly more efficient Twitter, where people can soak in their favourite persona's thoughts – condensed into a single sentence's worth of words. Contemporary neo-populism is as potent as it is, at least in part due to the immense power wielded by those who know how to employ all the features offered by social media.

Not only can in this day and age a tech-savvy populist target exactly those people who are prone to accept and further their agenda, but they can also do so when these potential voters are most vulnerable – in their homes, surfing the Internet. (aimClear's Psychographic Targeting)

Political online campaigns aside, it would be very short-sighted not to use the immense amount of meta-data that has been collected worldwide by mega-companies to go after those people who are statistically most-likely to join a populist's cause. Since history has shown many times over that a

powerful and capable populist has little need of overtly lying and deceiving his or her people, it is no leap of logic to imagine that a person capable of using stylistically and vocally perfect language (for its designated purpose) could sway thousands upon thousands of people by using all the modern media that is at their disposal. After all, is that not suspiciously close to what happened with not only the American elections, but also with their French equivalent?

When it comes to the core of every populist's linguistic arsenal, they have many tools at their disposal, the combination of which makes for an appealing show of force without using any literal force at all. Politics is a confusing, nuanced matter, and what the general public wants to hear aren't lengthy theses on how problems should best be tackled. Instead, direct and sometimes even brutal solutions are significantly more appealing to those who face the brunt of whatever localised or global hardship they may be facing at the given moment. Additionally, a smart populist will begin by claiming to represent the perceived underdogs of their country. Take the example of Donald Trump, again, under whose wing huddled those who wanted to oppose the highly-educated liberal elites. Whether their targeted representation wants what is best for the country matters very little – what a populist wants is unquestionable support without falter. Some of them are smart about such matters, like Erdogan, and build up their voter base for decades (Cagaptay, Ch. 13), whereas others will employ their bombastic and uncensored personality to garner sympathy, like Trump.

Language being the main tool of expression, a populist will use buzzwords and clear-cut terminology so as to appeal to the lowest common denominator between all of those who might someday comprise their voter base. Reading between the lines of a populist's speech, even if only of one as short as simple as the one example that was featured earlier on, shows that they will try and force their moralistic outlook on whatever problem might be at hand through language itself.

When talking about any given subject, a populist will use negatively-charged words and, if possible, even try to make the problem in question seem like more of an issue than it actually is. When inserting themselves into the context of the given subject, they will use positively-charged vocabulary instead, so as to try and foster a problem-solution relationship between themselves, the actual subject matter and the audience. For a populist, perception is everything – they want their people to see them as one of the crowd, a fill-in figure whose shoes anybody could find themselves in – and they have the solutions, be it a new immigration policy or the building of a wall. This is why Le Pen posed such a significant threat to Macron during the French elections of 2017. This is why, for many people, Donald Trump felt like the more realistic, down-to-earth candidate than, say, Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders. As soon as a populist steps into the spotlight, democracy is brought into question, but not by virtue of substantial, well-sourced proof that democracy does not work, but rather because of feelings and perceived slights by the Elite against the People. (Müller, 56)

## **9: No easy solution**

It should be clear by now that contemporary critique alone does little good when it comes to deterring populism. In fact, some have argued that populism is a “*permanent shadow of representative politics*” (Müller, 55) and that little can be done to stop it from making rounds every few decades or so. Be that as it may, it is clear that something *should* be done in an effort to prepare against one such onslaught.

While there do not seem to be any viable short-term solutions to the problems posed by the rule of, say, Erdogan, the key to preparing the people themselves to deal with populists lies in

education. Namely, it is critical thought that should be particularly emphasized when it comes to teaching children how to think in their formative years. The modern educational system still works on the basis of enduring repetition until facts are hammered into one's head, with little thought given as to how the child might operate in the future with this knowledge. The entirety of this argumentation can be boiled down to a single English proverb: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

Perhaps it is the case that what should be done is to prepare young minds to a reality where important, nuanced and protracted socio-economical issues are not black and white and cannot be solved by the simple-sounding promises of one charming man with a wicked smile. As has been reiterated many times in this text, populism is an approach to politics that plays on the feelings of the people who, in return, let their representative think in their stead. Even if this political phenomenon was entirely impossible to put an end to, allowing children to learn how to think critically at an early age, only for the schools to sensibly upgrade this knowledge over time, would also train them into thinking for themselves and collecting valid sources for their belief systems to be built upon. That way, when people that were equipped with the tools to think critically at an early age finally do come against a populist, they will be able to decide whether they want to support the person in question or not – but for no other reason than the combination of their own individual and personal agreement with the given agenda, backed by proper and thorough fact-seeking.

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