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Populism from a double perspective

Book Review: Soini, Timo. *Populism*. Helsinki: Pole-Kuntatieto. 2020. 124 pages. ISBN: 9789523490444.

Jarosław Suchoples

It is not so often that a politician, whose ambition is to become a leader of the nation, admits openly and proudly, 'I am a populist!.' But this is the case of Timo Soini, one of founders of the right-wing populist True Finns Party (in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset) and the former foreign minister of Finland in the cabinet of the prime minister Juha Sipilä (2015–2019).

In his compact book (*Populismi* published in Finnish 2019 and *Populism* in English 2020) Mr. Soini presents populism from a double perspective: a perspective of a theoretician and a political practitioner. Firstly, he briefly summarizes what, according to his own views and experience, is populism. He refers in this context to several analysis and opinions, not necessarily concerning populism directly, written or simply expressed by such scholars like Margaret Canovan, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, Rudolf Heberle, George Hall, Voitto Helander, Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin, Jan-Werner Müller, Emilia Palonen, Joseph A. Schumpeter, Peter Wiles as well as his own (in 1988, Soini finished his master thesis, written at the University of Helsinki under the supervision of Professor Tuomo Martikainen; it was dedicated to the question of populism in Finland, perceived through the process of the changing role of the Finnish Rural Party [in Finnish: Suomen Maaseudun Puolue, SMP]).

Then, Soini explains the phenomenon of the Finnish populism in the light of his own experience and 'the four D's' ideas taken from *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, the seminal work by Eatwell and Goodwin. This included the *distrust* of the elitist nature of liberal democracy; the *destruction* of whole professional groups and certain historically established ways of liberal politicians, money and supranational organizations, i.e. globalization, the relative *deprivation* being a result of the sense of increasing inequalities in the western world; the *dealignment* understood as a process whereby a large portion of the electorate abandons its hitherto political party affiliation. Soini also discusses the meaning of such terms like demagogues and redeemers explaining the significance of the strong and charismatic populist leader who knows how to attract supporters and how to present the public opinion with own ideas;



and the place of people in the thinking of populists; government and the sovereignty of the nation.

The theoretical background Soini supplements with a short presented history of populist political movements in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Only then, he speaks about his own political activities, from the late 1970s, when he joined the Suomen Maaseudun Puolue (SMP) as a secondary school student. At that time, Soini, still had no awareness of populism, but was somehow seduced by questions of the SMP's leaders, above all Veikko Vennamo and Urpo Leppänen. Only later, he made a deliberated decision to become a populist politician, which became a start point for his brilliant political career, ending with his crowning appointment as the Finland's foreign minister. This success story is described in four subsequent chapters of the book, which also help readers to understand technicalities of the political cuisine as applied by the populist politician, who wish to gain popularity and, as a result, win hearts and minds of voters.

Populists, populism and its essence across the world

In some further part of his book, Soini dedicated much space to the presentation his views on his personal experience with populist leaders from three countries, who (in some sense) became iconic for all European and probably not only European populists: Nigel Farage from Great Britain, Jarosław Kaczyński from Poland and President of the United States Donald Trump. Nevertheless, Soini does not limit himself to these three countries and discuss *Populism across the world and its continents* as he titled a respective chapter. Here, he refers to several examples from Asia and Latin America as well as shares his views on the current situation and the future of populism in Africa.

In the next chapter of his book, Timo Soini analysis several questions, which, as seen from his own perspective, seem to be important for populism perceived as a broader social and political phenomenon. He asks about the limits of the populism and, in this context, discusses the situation of deputies representing populist parties from various countries in the European Parliament. The author used this background for further considerations about relations and contradictions between populism and right-wing populism, which he differentiated from each other making remarks on populist movement developed in France, Germany, Italy and Spain as well as the national loyalty of European populists. According to Soini, they try to defend the national tradition, its heritage and, in a broader sense, Judeo-Christian values forming a cornerstone of the European (western) culture.

In final pages of the book, Soini shares his views on the role played by today's media and journalists in the political life and never-ending process of communicating of voters by politicians about their views and ideas. He underlines, here, the significance of the social media as a vehicle especially suitable for aims of the populist propaganda. In other words, Soini explains how important for the dissemination of the populist message among the public (often simplified merely to slogans) are channels offered by new technologies. At the very end, author served readers a few remarks about the future of populism. It seems that the very first of them – 'populism is alive and well. It will not disappear, only change shape' – is a quintessence of views and all considerations presented by Soini.

Rather one-sided, but possibly valuable personal account

The book of Soini is not a scholarly study *per se*. Although he refers, as already mentioned, footnotes and a list of the relevant literature are omitted. Instead, the book is rather an opinion of the author about populism and is mainly stemming from his personal experience and aspirations as a politician, as well as one of the founders and leaders of the Finnish populist movement. Probably, the most interesting parts of the book are the chapters, where Soini describes his own political career. These can be read as a kind of a handbook for populism. These instructions were written by a populist politician, who tells the readers his personal account about how it all happened, how the populist political movement in Finland was able to emerge, gain wider social support and, later on, begin to play a significant role in the Finnish political life. However, the story presented by Soini is rather one sided. Although certain scholars are occasionally mentioned, their views or research is not explicated much and reflecting the matter in wider scale remains somewhat limited. Instead, the book is more of a “success story of populism” in Finland told from its very beginning to the moment of its biggest electoral successes. It all ended without much consideration given on why, after so many victories (if we agree that an electoral victory is an increase of the number of deputies far from the winning of the majority in the parliament) the True Finns Party broke up in 2017 or why Timo Soini, its leader was practically expelled from his own political organization.

The chapters containing more theoretical remarks regarding the author are important and attract special attention. At least some of these remarks help to understand why populism became so attractive worldwide. In this context, it is difficult to disregard many opinions expressed by Soini. He explains where to the strength of the populism has originated from. For example, readers are told that populism is about emotions supported by belief in a set of traditional values (p. 17, 25). Moreover, populism, through touching many socially sensitive questions, which nobody else had, according to Soini, wanted to discuss, successfully challenges the agenda and positions of old parties (p. 29). Soini also states that populism, with its hostility towards big capital and establishment, as well as populism’s idealizing of ordinary people, in other words those who appreciate traditional values (family, religion, etc.), closes the gap between the metropolitan elite and the rest of the country (a view of Nigel Farage shared by Soini; pp. 14-15, 23, 44, 70). Soini is, or has been, one of the most prominent populist politicians in Europe. Therefore, his views on the European Union makes interesting and informative reading. Unfortunately, these notions have been scattered throughout the text.

Chapters revealing Soini’s personal relations and / or his attitude towards populist leaders from other countries are less convincing. It seems that when writing, for example, his warm words about Nigel Farage, Soini totally forgot the destructive role played by this British populist politician, his obvious lies and manipulations broadly discussed in the media, which helped Farage to reach a goal of his life, i.e. the Brexit. Nevertheless, if Farage was obsessed by the idea of the Brexit, as Soini explicitly mentions (p. 74), it should be also asked whether politicians guided by personal obsessions should be presented as “reasonable fathers of their nations”, or as persons leading them, objectively, towards the better future.

This relates also to Soini's remarks about Jarosław Kaczyński and his Law and Justice party. From Soini's book, it is possible to learn only that Kaczyński is an ideological, well-educated leader, who "oozed anti-communist and Catholic ideology" during the ninety-minute-long meeting he had with Soini in Warsaw at the end of 2018. For Soini, the case of Poland is yet another interesting success story of populism. Only this time its Polish version, deeply immersed in the national history and tradition. Especially interesting for Soini is a fact that Polish populists won the majority as a result of parliamentary elections in 2019 when being already prominent in Poland. Nevertheless, Soini forgets that methods used by the Law and Justice to secure this election victory could not be described as fully legitimate nor compatible with democratic standards. They were also contradictory to Soini's own opinion that 'elections must be fair and transparent' (p. 121). Soini also appears not to acknowledge that the program of the Law and Justice is a collection of attractive slogans and the realization of its electoral promises (extensive "investing" resources and money in mainly poor pensioners and families with children), highly praised by the former Finnish foreign minister, is ruining the finances of the state. He also does not analyze what motives really lay behind putting forward all these socially justified transfers of the national wealth and populist ideas connected with its redistribution.

It is characteristic that Soini (p. 109) mentions Viktor Orbán only once. The leader of Hungarian populism, and his party, Fidesz, was named a prominent defender of the Judeo-Christian values in the European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament. Soini tries to indirectly defend Orbán and Fidesz by putting forward a question concerning the fact that Fidesz, "has not been ejected from the EPP, despite begin the object of harsh criticism for undermining the rule of law?" Not answering this question, he creates an impression that there is no reason why Fidesz should be expelled from the EPP.

In addition, the book has some mistakes with details. For instance, in the p. 92, the author made one obvious factual mistake when he was writing about populism in India and the Gandhi family. Indira Gandhi, a daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, and her sons were not related to Mahatma Gandhi as is suggested by Soini, but this detail does not muddle the content of the chapter.

In his book, Timo Soini presents himself as an idealistically disposed, but at the same time pragmatic practitioner of populism, who is deeply rooted in principles of Christianity (Soini belongs to a tiny Catholic minority in a predominantly Lutheran country), and who fully recognizes democratic rules in politics. His activities in Finland as a party leader and a member of the government allow believing that this image is not necessarily that objective account. Nevertheless, it remains a questionable issue whether populist leaders in other countries should be perceived in the same way taking into consideration the number of controversies surrounding them (Farage or Kaczyński, to use examples from the Soini's book). Open, unanswered question also remains, whether populism can be treated to some extent, at least as a consistent socio-political doctrine or only as 'protest movements without any overall concept of society' (p. 31).

However, both for scholars and for general audience *Populism* will increasingly gain the value of a first-hand source about its author, his ideas and views and times when it

was written. And, of course, to some extent also about Finland in the first two decades of the 21st century. Therefore, Timo Soini's opinions can be accepted or rejected, but cannot be neglected or disregarded and probably the best summary of this is what he wrote in the introduction of *Populism*: 'In this book, I treat populism understandingly, without moral prejudices. I do not claim to be objective, as I always discuss my own actions'.

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