

## Populist Upheavals: What can we do?

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### Abstract

**Background:** The authors argue that in the last few years we have seen a recurrent pattern of social change. It consists in the strengthening of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, a demagogic and deceitful campaign in mass media, which has already led quite often to “populist upheavals”.

**Main body:** As examples of such already realized changes, the authors mention Brexit and its consequences, as well as the government of the victorious political faction in Poland. The authors are worried that such upheavals may soon occur in other countries. The authors attempt to characterize the repeated sequence of events leading to such transformations and determine what can be done in a situation of potentiated xenophobia and populist arguments. They emphasize what should be better understood and explained to citizens. They also discuss the implementation of appropriate changes in education and the promotion of cultural creations.

**Short conclusion:** The most important actions that are able to suppress the emerging populist movement, as it seems should aim to (a) immunize the entire population against the deceitful arguments and (b) suspend the spread of these false arguments in mass media. The essence of these actions should consist on better understanding of the processes and in the implementation of effective changes in education at all levels, as well as on targeted cultural activity. This is also a challenge for actions in the field of public health.

**Keywords:** *Populism; Xenophobia; Nationalist sentiments; Populist upheaval; Mass media; Populism counteraction; Brexit; Poland; Education*

### Background

Many of us wonder why in the last few years we have observed a recurrent pattern of social change. It consists in the strengthening of nationalist sentiments and a xenophobic attitude, followed by a demagogic and deceitful campaign in mass media, which has already led to kinds of “populist upheavals” [1-3]. One can enumerate at least two examples of such transformations, namely Brexit and its consequences, and the winning political faction government in Poland [4-8]. Such transformations are characterized by the feature that the members of a large social group take irrational, unfavourable decisions regarding their future.

We would stipulate, however, that in general we are never sure whether certain decisions, e.g. electoral decisions are irrational and disadvantageous. When we consider, though, the known sequences of events that have occurred in the past, e.g. during the last century, it is possible to distinguish such electoral decisions which led to adverse consequences. For example, it may be recalled how the taking of power was realized by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela [9,10]. The greatest political changes of the XXI century, it means the taking of power by the Nazi party in Germany and the formation of Stalin’s regime have similar features [11]. Therefore, in this article, we try to characterize such decisions of members of a certain community, which on the basis of similarity to past sequences of events is likely to bring negative consequences for a particular social group or even an entire nation.

Although our article is merely a commentary which expresses our particular point of view, we can nevertheless mention its methodological grounds. Namely, the authors of this text have been watching the course of changes that have occurred in Poland, while the readers, as we think know very well the course of the campaign which led to the referendum calling for Brexit [4,5].

### Main text

#### Repeating sequence of events

On the basis of those observations, one can propose a characteristic sequence of events and the following regularities:

- A charismatic person assembles around himself a group of followers who will soon form the elite of a new social and political movement [12].
- Close identification of the members of this group with the views of the leaders, so that observers have the impression that they are acting as a “religious sect” is characteristic [13].
- The leader along with his closest collaborators formulate a specific populist program of social change (political, electoral program) [14,15].
- The key element in this process is the gaining of influence in mass media, which allows a. the promotion of this populist program and b. discrediting the current authorities and social groups supporting the current establishment [16,17].
- Since the populist program, by definition lists promise that are difficult to fulfilling to the economic realities, or due to

insurmountable social limitations, inevitably a disappointment phase in the public mental state occurs [18].

- In order to maintain the possession of power, ensure the lasting interests of the new elite which realized the upheaval it must in this phase of development of events use intimidation and various coercive measures.
- If the upheaval led to changes in political factions, it usually happens that the new elite tries to change electoral law or creates another way of staying in power [19].
- Usually, the new elite, presenting a populist program, after the electoral upheaval slowly transforms itself into an authoritarian regime [8,19].

This in fact banal description of the course of events, however, highlights the key elements of the process, which is important for people who have the ambition to recognize the early beginnings of a populist transformation, or possibly would like to prevent the full realization of such an upheaval. Interesting questions arise: what is so attractive in the populist offer and how do the founders of such a new movement gain influence in mass-media? It seems that successful populist charismatic leaders accurately read the contemporary deficiency of a wide range of potential voters. They try to convince potential voters that they will assure "justice" and will raise the personal significance of everybody, or rather of a selected group of citizens. They promise to: "restore order, the rule of law, social discipline, national dignity". They guarantee to implement the control of international capital, and "regulate market activity". They clearly indicate the guilty parties and the enemies of the state.

### Why there is Susceptibility to Populist Arguments?

Substantial susceptibility to populist arguments also results from the growing inequalities and uncontrolled actions of owners of supranational capital which is poorly controlled by the national elites [15]. The dissemination of information and ideas incompatible with the conventional way of thinking is frightening to citizens. Such supranational structures like the European Union contribute to the processes of globalization. The EU promotes the freedom of movement, settlement of immigrants and the undertaking of jobs. It also promotes patterns of social behaviour which are in contradiction with conservative patterns of behaviour. The citizens of many countries have lost their sense of agency. They assume that the current ruling elite are also responsible for the growing inequality, the economic crisis and high unemployment. It is assumed that the administration of the EU and even present national governments are not able to solve the new growing problems, such as the influx of refugees, and in particular to end the war in Syria and other conflicts generating the influx of people from Africa. In contrast, the authors of populist programs suggest simple, understandable solutions.

Moreover, autocratic regimes realizing a populist program usually include attempts to directly manipulate the identity of citizens, which is necessary to explain the adverse long-term consequences of such a method of governance. These adverse consequences consist in general of deterioration of public finances as a result of the misappropriation of public funds. Usually the restriction of freedom and due rights of some social groups follow. The elite of the authoritarian regime try to deepen social divisions and exclude some social groups. It is necessary to indicate those responsible for the adverse consequences of the populist program. Thus, a sense of injustice is accompanied by identity disorders [20-23]. The question arises if it is possible to formulate the explanation what they are? Probably one can refer here to the simple

model of hierarchical identity e.g. {I, a man, a professional in the domain of..., member of a social group ..., a citizen of the nation and the state of..., an EU citizen, a citizen of the world}. Contemporarily, it frequently happens that people living in a country have the inclination to sever the link with the successively higher "layers" of identity. It occurs that the feeling of belonging to a broader group seems unnecessary and bothersome. For many people, identification with transnational communities (e.g. Europeans, citizens of the world) may be too difficult and incomprehensible. As a theoretical model, we can refer here to the analogy between impaired social consciousness and altered consciousness of people diagnosed with personality disorders [22].

In our opinion, it is useful to also take into account transformation of the Jungian "collective unconscious", even though this concept may be considered very controversial [24-26]. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in her discussion of the works of Klaus Theweleit states: "The masses are not innocent. They do not go astray, but sometimes they just want fascism" [27]. The age-old nationalist rivalries and intensification of competition between dominating cultures also have a subconscious character, already discussed by Samuel Huntington (1996).

In contemporary transformations of the "collective unconscious", the recent widespread need to replace the "quiet continuation of social existence" with "colorful", exciting social changes, which deliver entertainment ("desire of games") can also be discerned [28].

The causes of the discussed, widespread frustration also have roots in the consequences of globalization and widespread access to information, resulting from the development of the Internet and social media. It facilitates the dissemination of different, polarized, alternative opinions, which are often contradictory. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult to form a balanced opinion, possibly coinciding with the actual state of a particular fragment of reality. As some publicists note, social media enable people to live in "separate realities". Manipulating the sense of identity has become easier and more common. This also applies to the assessment of past events and remembering history. The consequences of the events which happened during 2014-2016 in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East also tend to the conclusion that the concept of so-called democracy there is too abstract and unconvincing.

The most interesting phenomenon involved in the mechanisms of populist upheavals is the ability or possibility to gain the influence of mass media. The already established totalitarian regimes, of course, completely control the mass media, subordinated to the elite which took power. It turns out, however, that gaining the favour of the media is possible, or even easy in democratically governed countries [16,17]. This is due to the caring of owners of "free, independent TV stations" for the so-called "audience" and the owners of newspapers to maintain high circulation.

Moreover, it should be noticed, that during the last electoral campaigns the impact of deliberate manipulation carried out by the new mass media became increasingly more important. It seems that the leaders of new populist groups involve or even organize the activity of hundreds or even thousands of so-called "trolls" who spread false information aiming to promote a particular political option. It becomes effective because a growing number of people support unusual, often conspiratorial ideological theories, living in separate cultural worlds. Mary Aiken discuss this phenomenon in her book "The Cyber Effect" [29].

Today, the citizens of democratic countries also crave variety and more excitement. They are hungry to observe the social and political “games” [28].

The hunger for such impressions can be explained by a psychological attitude marked by unreflective selfishness, sometimes cynicism and desire for revenge. Perhaps these patterns to secure this kind of games is illustrated well by the producers of series such as “House of Cards” and “Game of Thrones” [30].

## Conclusion

### What should be done?

The main direct causes of the popularity of populist programs in Western countries is due to the negative assessment of the consequences of immigration coming from Eastern European countries and the new wave of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. Counteraction at the source of the first of these processes would have to rely on abolition of the EU principle of free movement of people and return to an isolationist national policy. Brexit is an example of such an action.

Stopping the new wave of refugees from entering Europe from the Middle East and Africa would require ruthless procedures implemented on the southern maritime borders of the EU and perhaps military intervention in the Middle East. Even a compromise, limited actions in this area, are beyond the capabilities of individual EU countries. The lack of a convincing design of solutions to these problems by both the leaders of the EU and national governments tends to maintain the expected trend of nationalist and xenophobic attitudes. The persistence of such attitudes is detrimental to the state of public mental health. The polarity of views and acts of aggression against immigrants or even all foreigners cause anxiety, identity and even personality disorders [31-38]. This obstructs social and economic development [39].

It seems that the main activities which could modify the xenophobic attitude should consist in better understanding of the processes and in the implementation of effective changes in education at all levels.

It is worth noting that today there is a tool available that objectively presents the real situation regarding the most significant characteristics of countries, which are important for the well-being of their citizens. It is the annual report of the institution called the “World Justice Project” [40]. As is known, this annual report provides a summary of indicators and graphic illustration of the situation in 102 countries of the world on objective findings concerning:

- Compliance with the standards of democracy (Constraints on Governmental Powers)
- The level of corruption
- Transparency in governance (Open Government)
- The degree of respect for human rights (Fundamental Rights)
- Order and Security
- The effectiveness of legislation implementation (Regulatory Enforcement)
- Civil (social) justice
- Judiciary (criminal) justice

Therefore, every citizen or social science researcher can compare his own opinions with estimates made by a team of numerous observers living in particular countries. What is more, one can study the

numerical and graphical characteristics of other countries known from personal experiences as well to track changes over time. We propose looking at the graphs, for example, of Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Russia, Venezuela and Turkey, and to draw conclusions.

### What should be understood better and be done to raise public awareness?

If we would like to emphasize what the most difficult and most important objective of efforts to curtail the activities of a populist movement are, one should say that it will be necessary to (a) immunize the entire population against the deceitful arguments and (b) suspend the spread of these false arguments in mass media.

Each of the above-mentioned elements of the sequence of events leading up to populist upheaval requires in-depth research and better understanding.

A very charismatic person is always at the head of populist movements, therefore considerable attention should be paid to understanding who is perceived as a charismatic person. It has already been established that these are people who masterfully evoke emotions and direct them. The arguments of charismatic people are generally based on distorted facts. The decisions of followers are taken under the influence of induced emotions, usually designed to arouse indignation at the current state of affairs and to form the belief that positive change in their destiny is at hand. Within the psychological sciences, only fragmentary progress of the understanding of those processes has occurred, e.g. on the essence of so-called emotional intelligence. It would be necessary to have the explanations of such phenomena like the appearance of a so-called alternative right political wing.

What is also needed is an effective methodology warning against the consequences of giving out awards, privileges and promises of prosperity. Remembering the consequences of such populist programs which were implemented, e.g. in Greece and Venezuela is not sufficient. This is confirmed by the recent events occurring in Poland, where among others the early age of retirement was restored. It is necessary to seek for ways of warning, referring to emotions. Saving and moderation in claims are not currently reputable values. The proposed sometimes new lifestyles like “to be modest”, “to have few material things” is still very exotic. Since as a rule populist movements appeal to the fears associated with increased immigration in particular, it is necessary to understanding the reasons for these biases.

It is necessary to understand what the real possibilities are of the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians, what the content is of the most common and deepest ethnic and cultural prejudices [33-43]. We have to understand why the Christian message is not a guideline of conduct and even the recommendations of the sovereignty of the church are rejected [44].

The awareness of the overwhelming influence of parents on the formation of xenophobic attitudes is also very important [45,46] as well as the knowledge of the inverse relationship between the ability to be friendly and tolerant towards strangers [36,47,48].

It is necessary to comprehend the reason for the popularity of the alternative right political wing and its methods of influence through new mass media.

It should be made aware that neurophysiologists research shows that in each population there will be people with opposing liberal and conservative views because it is conditioned by regularities of the

development of brains [49-52]. Recognition of this fact should diminish the controversies between the two wings of the population, which often turns into a fight. Equal rights for men and women and even a 50% parity in different social bodies are beneficial. It enhances moderate, pacifistic attitudes. The freedom of manners is maintained, which is a component and determinant of civil liberties.

One should also stimulate research into the essence of collective consciousness [24-26] and the ability to cooperate, the so-called social capital [53-59].

Organization of changes in education and stimulation of cultural influences

One should distinguish between two different situations in which there are people who want to maintain an equilibrated state of the country and peaceful co-existence. Sometimes, the counteraction to nationalist and xenophobic attitudes is yet in line with the sentiments of the current authorities. However, in some countries, the governments are currently populist regimes. In the case of the possibilities of cooperation with the current ruling elite, one could try to implement appropriate educational programs at all levels of education [3,21,60,61].

One should remember that in fact, formalized programs for multicultural integration have existed for decades in Western countries [62]. Certainly, in these countries there are numerous recorded experiences with attempts to integrate immigrants from former colonies (e.g. India-the United Kingdom), (the Maghreb region-France) and separate experiences with Turks in Germany. To some extent, integration of these immigrants has taken place. The scope and reasons for failure of the so-called policy of multicultural coexistence should be analysed [63]. It is necessary to search for new theoretical foundations for the coexistence of different nationalities in the same area [64-68]. See also the Via Institute on Character [69].

Perhaps it is necessary to design a difficult plan to conduct scientific research on the foundations of the anthropological, philosophical, sociological and ecumenical coexistence of inhabitants of the planet in the age of globalization, which cannot be stopped.

One should start from organizing competitions for grants and projects formulating rules for increasing the tolerance of ethnic and cultural identity [70].

Universities should establish scientific institutions and faculties devoted to this subject. New, innovative, creative, targeted educational methods and new methods of influence on mass media are needed here [71,72].

The governments of countries with low birth rates should support the policies of immigration from countries which arouse the least social resistance [73-75]. An example would be the significant tolerance of Poles towards immigrants from the Ukraine [76].

It is necessary to stimulate cultural creativity that promotes inter-ethnic tolerance and coexistence [77]. One should find mechanisms to incline well-known, recognizable publicists to realize programs devoted to reviewing books and movies, who would like to advocate such cultural products [78,79]. Scientific publications in the field of mental health services should discuss and propose examples of such literary and cinematographic products.

Most of the above enumerated actions supporting the habits of rational thinking and balanced behaviours becomes however gradually, though quickly impossible after the occurrence of a populist upheaval.

It is important to realize which are directions of changes occurring in the activity of the mass media after the populist upheaval. We emphasized that the populist upheaval is possible and occur as a result of acquisition of control by activists of a populist movement over the part of the mass-media. The victory of a populist movement in Poland was preceded by creating a TV channel and a network of radio stations, tracks willingly by religious people. The populist activist managed also to be issuing some daily and weekly newspapers popularizing their ideology. After taking power, there is a progressive strengthening of this part of the mass-media and attempt to seize or eliminate media of opposing camp.

It causes a significant polarization and intensification of the ideological arguments.

The intensity of the disagreement becomes so significant that it causes an unpleasant social and cultural atmosphere. Signs of aggression and anxiety are intensified. In particular, it is easy to observe in the content distributed via the Internet.

As the argument of populist movement is aimed at those who feel the unsatisfied needs, for the sake of accuracy and impartiality one should admit that different deficiencies, shortages, scarcities, deficits, insufficiencies and exclusions are described probably more thoroughly and completely.

Several well-known publicists and writers have already formulated advices for citizens who find themselves in this situation [80,81]. Timothy Snyder recently published a text containing twenty such specific pieces of advice [80]. This text begins with the motto: "Believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle."

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