sciendo

Research Article

© 2023 Kelmend Nezha and Oriona Muçollari
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Populism as a challenge for Albania's fragile democracy

PhD (C.) Kelmend Nezha
University of Tirana (Albania)

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Oriona Muçollari
University of Tirana (Albania)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/ejels-2023-0002

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of populism and its impact on the democratic processes in Albania. The spread of populism represents one of the most acute challenges to Albanian democracy. To understand the dynamics of populist strategies and behavior, it is crucial to analyze the relationship between populism and the media, and to discuss the phenomenon of "media populism". More than two decades after the transition from communism, democracy in Albania remains fragile. Freedom House labels Albania 'transitional or hybrid regime' and international organizations have expressed concern about the progress of Albania. Populism, characterized by its appeal to the emotions and grievances of the people, has gained prominence in recent years, posing significant challenges to the stability and development of democratic institutions in Albania. Through an examination of the historical and socio-political context of Albania, this paper analyzes the rise of populism, its consequences for democracy, and proposes potential strategies to mitigate its negative effects. Drawing upon scholarly research and case studies, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of populism's influence on Albania's democracy and suggest actionable recommendations for safeguarding democratic values and institutions.

Keywords: democracy, populism, media, election, anti-establishment.

1 Historical and Socio-Political Context of Albania

Albania's historical and socio-political context plays a crucial role in understanding the challenges it faces in maintaining a stable and robust democracy. This chapter provides a brief overview of Albania's historical background, focusing on the country's democratic transition and the socio-political challenges and vulnerabilities it has encountered.

1.1 *Historical Background of Albania*

Albania, located in Southeast Europe, has a complex historical legacy shaped by various influences, including Ottoman and communist rule. The country gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, but its development as a democratic nation was hampered by political instability, territorial disputes, and authoritarian regimes.

1.2 *Brief Overview of Albania's Democratic Transition*

Albania's transition from communist rule to democracy began in 1990 following the fall of the Stalinist regime led by Enver Hoxha. The transition period was marked by political and economic reforms, including the establishment of multi-party elections, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the adoption of a new constitution.

However, Albania's democratic transition faced numerous challenges. The legacy of communist rule, characterized by a centralized and repressive regime, created significant hurdles in building democratic institutions and a functioning civil society. The lack of democratic traditions, political experience, and weak rule of law further complicated the transition process.

1.3 *Socio-Political Challenges*

Albania's socio-political landscape is characterized by a range of challenges that have affected the consolidation and functioning of its democracy. These challenges include corruption, clientelism, and a weak judiciary.

Corruption has been a persistent issue in Albanian society, undermining democratic institutions and eroding public trust. It has permeated various sectors, including politics, public administration, and the judiciary (Dellepiane-Avellaneda & Dominguez-Redondo, 2017). The presence of corruption has hindered the effective implementation of democratic reforms and impeded progress in areas such as the rule of law and accountable governance.

Clientelism, characterized by the exchange of political favors and patronage networks, has also been a challenge to Albania's democracy. This system has perpetuated a culture of political nepotism and undermined meritocracy, as political power and access to resources are often distributed based on personal connections rather than on qualifications and competence (Beha & Koçiu, 2019).

The weakness of the judiciary in Albania is another significant challenge. The judiciary has been plagued by inefficiency, lack of independence, and allegations of political interference (Demjaha & Avdyli, 2018). This has undermined the rule of law, impeded the protection of human rights, and eroded public confidence in the justice system.

1.4 *Vulnerabilities*

Albania's democracy is vulnerable to external influences and geopolitical dynamics. The country's geographical location in the Balkans, a region historically characterized by ethnic tensions and conflicts, poses challenges to its democratic stability. Ethnic divisions and the potential for external interference can exacerbate social and political

tensions, undermining the consolidation of democratic institutions (Bieber, 2020). Moreover, economic factors such as high unemployment rates, poverty, and income inequality contribute to social discontent and frustration among the population. These socio-economic vulnerabilities can create fertile ground for the emergence of populist movements and anti-establishment sentiments (Raposo, 2019).

2. Understanding Populism

Populism is a complex and multifaceted political phenomenon that has gained significant attention in recent years. This chapter aims to provide an understanding of populism, its definition, characteristics, strategies, rhetoric, and the factors contributing to its rise in Albania.

2.1 *Definition and Characteristics of Populism*

Populism is a political ideology that emphasizes the division between the "people" and the "elite" or "establishment." It presents itself as a champion of the ordinary citizens, claiming to represent their interests and address their grievances against the ruling elites (Mudde, 2004).

One of the key characteristics of populism is its anti-establishment stance. Populist movements often portray established political parties and institutions as corrupt, self-serving, and disconnected from the concerns of the people. This rhetoric aims to create a sense of solidarity among the people and to foster a perception of a united "us" against a corrupt and detached "them."

Furthermore, populism tends to simplify complex political issues by offering straightforward and often emotionally appealing solutions. Populist leaders often employ simplistic narratives, scapegoating certain groups or institutions as the source of societal problems, thereby providing a clear target for the frustrations of the people.

2.2 *Populist Strategies and Rhetoric*

Populist leaders in Albania, as in other countries, employ various strategies and rhetoric to mobilize support and connect with their followers. These strategies often include direct appeals to the emotions and values of the people, as well as the use of charismatic leadership.

One common populist strategy is the creation of a charismatic leader figure who embodies the aspirations and grievances of the people (Mudde, 2007). This charismatic leader is seen as a strong and decisive figure who can bring about radical change and restore the voice of the people.

Populist rhetoric relies heavily on the use of simple and emotionally charged language. Populist leaders in Albania may employ nationalist rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of national identity and sovereignty. They may also employ anti-immigrant or anti-globalization sentiments, tapping into fears and anxieties related to cultural or economic changes.

2.3 *Factors Contributing to the Rise of Populism in Albania*

The rise of populism in Albania can be attributed to a combination of domestic and international factors. One factor is the legacy of communism and the subsequent disillusionment with the political establishment (Canovan, 2002). The transition from communism to democracy in Albania was marked by economic hardships, political instability, and corruption, which created a fertile ground for the emergence of populist movements.

Socio-economic factors, such as high unemployment rates, income inequality, and perceptions of corruption, have also contributed to the rise of populism in Albania. These socio-economic grievances provide fertile ground for populist leaders to mobilize support and offer promises of economic and social transformation.

The influence of international trends and global events cannot be overlooked. The rise of populism in other countries, such as the election of populist leaders in neighboring countries or the Brexit referendum, can have a spill-over effect on Albania. These international events can shape public perceptions and fuel anti-establishment sentiments.

Furthermore, the role of the media and social media cannot be underestimated in the rise of populism. Populist leaders often utilize social media platforms to communicate directly with their followers, bypassing traditional media channels and amplifying their populist messages (Tsfati, 2018). The spread of disinformation and fake news through social media can also contribute to the rise of populism by shaping public opinion.

3. Populism's Impact on Democracy in Albania

3.1 *Erosion of Democratic Institutions*

Populism in Albania has had a significant impact on democratic institutions, leading to their erosion and undermining the principles of liberal democracy. Populist leaders often employ rhetoric that attacks the legitimacy of established institutions, including the judiciary, the parliament, and the electoral system (Mudde, 2019). This erosion of democratic institutions weakens the checks and balances that are crucial for a functioning democracy.

The rise of populism in Albania has led to the concentration of power in the hands of populist leaders, who often seek to bypass or undermine established democratic processes. This concentration of power undermines the separation of powers and can lead to the erosion of democratic norms and practices (Urbinati, 2020).

3.2 *Polarization and Divisions within Society*

Populist movements in Albania have often fueled polarization and divisions within society. Populist leaders tend to frame political debates as a struggle between the "people" and the "elite," creating an "us versus them" mentality (Canovan, 1999). This polarization can lead to increased social tensions and hinder constructive dialogue and cooperation among different segments of society.

Polarization and divisions within society can also weaken democratic institutions by

eroding trust and undermining the legitimacy of political processes. When societal divisions deepen, it becomes increasingly difficult to find common ground and build consensus, which are essential for a well-functioning democracy.

3.3 *Threats to Rule of Law and Human Rights*

Populism in Albania poses threats to the rule of law and human rights. Populist leaders often adopt policies and actions that challenge the independence of the judiciary and undermine the rule of law (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). This can lead to a lack of accountability, as populist leaders may seek to consolidate their power and disregard legal and constitutional constraints.

Furthermore, the focus on "the people" and the exclusion of certain groups can lead to discriminatory practices and the violation of human rights. Populist rhetoric that targets minority groups or marginalized communities can exacerbate social divisions and undermine the principles of equality and inclusivity that are fundamental to democracy.

3.4 *Weakening of Political Accountability*

Populism in Albania has also weakened political accountability. Populist leaders often portray themselves as the sole representatives of the people's will, dismissing alternative viewpoints and disregarding the importance of checks and balances (Brubaker, 2019). This can lead to a lack of transparency, as accountability mechanisms are weakened or ignored.

Additionally, populist leaders may engage in policies and actions that prioritize short-term gains and electoral popularity over long-term sustainable development and responsible governance (Pappas, 2016). This disregard for accountability can have detrimental effects on the quality of governance and undermine public trust in democratic institutions.

3.5 *Media Manipulation and Disinformation*

Populist movements in Albania have exploited the media to manipulate public opinion and spread disinformation. Populist leaders often target independent media outlets and journalists who criticize or question their actions (Mény & Surel, 2002). This can lead to self-censorship, as journalists fear reprisals or loss of access to information.

Furthermore, the spread of disinformation and fake news has become a significant challenge in the era of populism. Populist leaders and their supporters often disseminate false information through social media platforms, exploiting the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills among the population (Mudde, 2007). This manipulation of the media landscape undermines the democratic process by distorting public discourse and hindering the ability of citizens to make informed decisions.

4. Mitigating Populism's Challenges

Populism poses significant challenges to democratic systems around the world, including Albania. This chapter explores strategies and measures that can be taken to mitigate the negative impacts of populism on democracy. Specifically, it focuses on strengthening democratic institutions, promoting civic education and critical thinking, enhancing transparency and accountability, fostering inclusive political discourse, and strengthening media literacy and fact-checking.

4.1 *Strengthening Democratic Institutions*

Strengthening democratic institutions is crucial for safeguarding democracy against the threats posed by populism. This can be achieved by promoting the independence and effectiveness of key institutions such as the judiciary, electoral commissions, and anti-corruption bodies. Ensuring that these institutions are free from political interference and operate with integrity is essential for maintaining the rule of law and protecting democratic principles.

Additionally, enhancing the capacity and resources of democratic institutions can help them better fulfill their functions and respond to populist challenges. This includes investing in training programs for civil servants, improving administrative procedures, and adopting technologies that enhance transparency and efficiency.

4.2 *Promoting Civic Education and Critical Thinking*

Promoting civic education and critical thinking is vital in countering the simplistic narratives and divisive rhetoric employed by populists. By providing citizens with a solid understanding of democratic principles, human rights, and political processes, civic education can empower individuals to engage critically with political messages and make informed choices.

Integrating civic education into school curricula and developing educational programs for adults can help foster a culture of active citizenship and democratic participation. Emphasizing critical thinking skills, media literacy, and the ability to evaluate political claims can enable individuals to discern between genuine democratic actors and populist demagogues (Hameleers et al., 2020).

4.3 *Enhancing Transparency and Accountability*

Transparency and accountability are essential for building trust in democratic institutions and countering populist narratives of corruption and elitism. Governments should promote transparency by ensuring that information related to public finances, policy decisions, and political processes is readily accessible to the public.

Furthermore, establishing mechanisms for public oversight and accountability, such as robust anti-corruption bodies and whistleblower protection laws, can help prevent the erosion of democratic values. Strengthening the legal framework for political financing and implementing regulations that limit the influence of money in politics can also mitigate the potential for populist manipulation (Della Porta & Pavan, 2018).

4.4 *Fostering Inclusive Political Discourse*

Promoting inclusive political discourse is crucial for mitigating the polarization and divisions caused by populism. Political leaders and parties should strive to create an environment that encourages dialogue, cooperation, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives (Hameleers et al., 2020).

Inclusive political discourse requires respecting the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their political beliefs or social backgrounds. Encouraging the participation of marginalized groups, promoting intercultural dialogue, and fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens can help counter the exclusionary tendencies often associated with populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015).

4.5 *Strengthening Media Literacy and Fact-Checking*

Media literacy and fact-checking initiatives play a critical role in addressing the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which are often utilized by populist movements (Tsfati, 2018). Investing in media literacy programs that educate citizens on how to critically evaluate information, identify biased reporting, and differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources can help build a resilient and informed society (Guess et al., 2020).

Supporting independent media outlets and fact-checking organizations is equally important. Providing them with resources and legal protections can enable them to fulfill their role as watchdogs and gatekeepers of information, helping to counter the manipulation and distortion of facts by populist actors (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

5. **Comparative Insights: International Experiences**

5.1 *Lessons from Other Countries Facing Populism*

Populism is not unique to Albania, and several other countries have faced similar challenges to their democracies. By examining the experiences of these countries, Albania can gain valuable insights into strategies and policies that have been successful in countering populist movements.

One such country is Hungary, where Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been accused of eroding democratic institutions and suppressing opposition voices through his use of populist rhetoric and policies. However, civil society organizations in Hungary have been successful in fighting back against these actions, through initiatives such as mass protests, social media campaigns, and legal challenges.

Another example is Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro has been criticized for his divisive rhetoric and disregard for democratic norms. Despite this, civil society organizations and opposition parties have been able to successfully mobilize public opinion against Bolsonaro, through social media campaigns, peaceful protests, and targeted messaging.

5.2 *Strategies and Policies Implemented Successfully*

One strategy that has been successful in countering populism is promoting civic education and media literacy. In Finland, for example, the government has invested

heavily in promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills among its citizens, in order to combat the spread of fake news and disinformation.
Another successful strategy is building strong, independent institutions that can serve as checks and balances on populist leaders. In Germany, for example, the judiciary and civil society organizations have been successful in pushing back against far-right populist movements through legal challenges and public education campaigns.

5.3 *Applicability to the Albanian Context*

Many of the strategies and policies that have been successful in countering populism in other countries could be applicable to the Albanian context. For example, investing in media literacy and promoting critical thinking skills among citizens could help to combat the spread of disinformation and fake news in the country.
Additionally, building strong, independent institutions such as the judiciary and civil society organizations could serve as important checks and balances on populist leaders in Albania. Furthermore, empowering civil society organizations and opposition parties could help to mobilize public opinion against populist movements and hold them accountable for their actions.
However, it is important to note that each country has its own unique context and challenges, and strategies that have been successful in one country may not necessarily be effective in another. Therefore, any strategies and policies implemented in Albania should be tailored to the specific context of the country, and take into account the political, social, and economic factors that contribute to the rise of populism in the country.

6. **Recommendations for Albania's Democracy**

Albania faces significant challenges in strengthening its democratic institutions and safeguarding democracy from the threats posed by populism. This chapter presents recommendations to address these challenges and promote a healthier democratic environment. Specifically, it focuses on promoting political dialogue and consensus, investing in education and awareness programs, and reforming the political party systems.

6.1 *Promoting Political Dialogue and Consensus*

Promoting political dialogue and consensus-building is crucial for fostering a constructive and inclusive political environment. Political leaders should prioritize open and transparent discussions that seek to find common ground and address the concerns of all citizens (Merkel, 2019). This can be achieved through the establishment of platforms for dialogue, such as national conferences or committees, that bring together representatives from different political parties, civil society, and marginalized groups.
Furthermore, engaging citizens in participatory decision-making processes can enhance democratic legitimacy and reduce the potential for populist backlash.

Initiatives such as citizen assemblies or deliberative forums provide opportunities for citizens to actively contribute to policy discussions and shape the political agenda.

6.2 *Investing in Education and Awareness Programs*

Investing in education and awareness programs is essential for building a well-informed and politically engaged citizenry. By providing quality education that promotes critical thinking, democratic values, and civic participation, Albania can empower its citizens to actively participate in the democratic process.

Curriculum reforms should include civic education components that teach students about democratic principles, human rights, and the importance of democratic institutions. Additionally, awareness programs targeted at adults can enhance political literacy and promote active citizenship (Galston, 2018).

Media literacy initiatives should also be prioritized to enable citizens to critically evaluate information and recognize media manipulation. These programs can provide individuals with the skills to navigate the digital landscape and identify reliable sources of information (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

6.3 *Reforming Political Party Systems*

Reforming the political party systems is crucial for strengthening democracy and countering the influence of populism. Measures should be taken to enhance the transparency, accountability, and internal democracy of political parties. This can include stricter regulations on party financing, promoting gender and minority representation within parties, and ensuring the selection of candidates is based on merit and integrity.

Moreover, fostering greater interparty cooperation and encouraging the formation of cross-party alliances can mitigate polarization and promote a more inclusive political landscape (Bardi et al., 2020). By facilitating collaboration and compromise, political parties can effectively address the diverse needs and aspirations of the population.

It is also essential to promote the engagement of young people in politics by creating platforms for their participation and encouraging their involvement in political party structures. This can be achieved through mentorship programs, internships, and the establishment of youth wings within political parties.

Reforming electoral systems to ensure proportional representation and reduce the barriers to entry for new political actors can also foster a more pluralistic and competitive political environment.

References

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). Populists in power. Routledge.

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). Twenty-first-century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy. Palgrave Macmillan.

Andrew M. Guess, Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler (2020). Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 US election. Nature Human Behaviour, 4(5), 472-480.

Bardi, L., Bartolini, S., & Trechsel, A. H. (2020). Changing party systems: Stable democracy, contested modernisation. Oxford University Press.

Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2018). Going, going... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. European Journal of Political Research, 57(3), 539-560.
Book by Julian Sefton-Green and Sonia Livingstone (2016). The class: Living and learning in the digital age. NYU Press.
Brubaker, R. (2019). Populism and nationalism. Nations and Nationalism, 25(3), 896-909.
Canovan, Margaret (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. Political Studies, 47(1), 2-16. Book chapter The SAGE Handbook of Political Science
Canovan, Margaret (2002). Taking politics to the people: Populism as the ideology of democracy. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.), Democracies and the populist challenge (pp. 25-44). Palgrave Macmillan.
Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.). (2017). Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy? Cambridge University Press.
Christos Lyrintzis (2005) The Changing Party System: Stable Democracy, Contested 'Modernisation', West European Politics, 28:2, 242-259, DOI: 10.1080/01402380500058845
Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (Editor), Paul A. Taggart (Editor), Paulina Ochoa Espejo (Editor), Pierre Ostiguy (Editor) (2019). The Oxford handbook of populism. Oxford University Press.
Donnatella Della Porta, Alberto Vannucci (1999). Corrupt exchanges: Actors, resources, and mechanisms of political corruption. Routledge
John Keane (2009). The Life and Death of Democracy. Simon and Schuster.
Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) The ideational approach to populism: Concept, theory, and analysis (pp. 1-22). Routledge.
Mudde, C. (2017). Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press.
Mudde, C. (2019). The populist radical right: A pathological normalcy. West European Politics, 42(3), 601-620.
Mudde, Cas. (2004). The populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition, 39(4), 542-563.
Nadia Urbinati (2019). Representation and Populism. Journal of Political Ideologies, 24(1), 1-18.
Nadia Urbinati (2020). Populism and democracy. Journal of Democracy, 31(1), 5-19.
Richard Fletcher, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, (2017). Are news audiences increasingly fragmented? A cross-national comparative analysis of cross-platform news audience fragmentation and duplication. Journal of Communication, 67(4), 476–498. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12315
Takis S. Pappas (2016). Populist radical right parties in Europe: ideology, impact, and electoral performance. Routledge.
William A. Galston (2018). Anti-pluralism: The populist threat to liberal democracy. Yale University Press.
Wolfgang Merkel (2019). Democracy and crisis: Challenges in turbulent times. Springer.
Yariv Tsfati (2018). The social media basis of political populism. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 23(4), 423-443.
Yves MENY, Yves SUREL (2002). Democracies and the populist challenge. Palgrave Macmillan.