

Beyond “Democracy vs. Populism”: Urbinati’s Theory of Populism from a Central European Perspective¹

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Abstract:

This article criticizes the tendency to subsume under “populism”, in an undifferentiated manner, both national-conservative movements with authoritarian tendencies and post-ideological movements promising to replace the incompetence and corruption of established parties with technocratic efficiency and/or civic virtue. It calls for an internally differentiated conception of populism that does not reduce it to an anti-democratic phenomenon. In this context, Nadia Urbinati’s position is ambiguous. As she depicts the political upheavals of the last decade through the prism of “democracy vs. populism”, her position amounts to a clear example of the framework this article rejects. By emphasizing anti-establishmentarian and anti-partisan features of populism, however, she opens the door, albeit inadvertently, to a conception of populism that could include actors that aim to transcend established modes of party organization and classical partisan ideologies of the 19th century, without necessarily subverting democracy and the globalist or pro-European orientation of their countries.

Keywords: The “democracy vs. populism” framework; national-conservative populism; technocratic populism; civic populism; Nadia Urbinati’s conception of populism; the Visegrad Four

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46854/fc.2024.1s85>

This article examines the widespread tendency to associate the rise of populism in Central Europe in the last 10 or 15 years with nationalist and conservative movements, while overlooking those that have used populist strategies to challenge the established political parties without undermining the principles of democracy. I argue that the concept of populism can subsume these other challengers under ideal subtypes of “technocratic” and “civic” populism, which are different from the national-conservative subtype and

1 This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

which have been already theorized in the North American and Western European context by Marco Deseriis, Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, and Christopher J. Bickerton under the label of “technopopulism”.² I largely adhere to their analyses, although I take issue with the two latter authors for attributing an inherent anti-democratic bias even to technopopulism. Rather than seeing this bias as a necessary feature of populism, I suggest it should be considered as a contingent possibility that must be assessed empirically on a case-by-case basis.

In *the first part* of this article, I outline a modified – internally differentiated – concept of populism in the context of the political turmoil in Central Europe in the 2010s. In *the second part*, I dispute Urbinati’s assertion that every form of populism is by definition authoritarian and exclusionary. As I show in *the third part*, her definition of populism as anti-establishmentarianism nevertheless allows for the internal differentiation and, thus, also de-stigmatization, of populism. In *the fourth part*, I maintain that a personalized populist leadership that draws on technocratic and civic tropes is no more of a danger to democracy than oligarchies that inevitably form in traditional political parties.

1. “Populism” in the Central European Context

To gain an understanding of the political upheavals of the last decade in the four countries of the Visegrad Group, we must distinguish between different types populism, which may have different relationships to liberal democracy, and thereby loosen its a priori stigmatization as a threat to democracy. In Hungary and Poland, national-conservative populism has been the most successful, while in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, technocratic and civic types of populism (often appearing as two aspects of a single movement or party) have predominated. Whereas the former type of populism has jeopardized the constitutional order, the latter has usually (albeit not always) respected its boundaries. To miss its distinctive nature amounts to missing the primary agents of the re-structuration of the political landscape in the Czech lands and Slovakia over the last 15 years. Such an omission – and more generally, the fusion of all kinds of populism into one internally undifferentiated category – has a crippling effect on the analysis, which loses the capac-

2 Deseriis, M., Technopopulism: The Emergence of a Discursive Formation. From Section Global Justice to Occupy and Podemos: Mapping Three Stages of Contemporary Activism. *Triple C, Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 15, 2017, No. 2, pp. 441–458; Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2021.

ity to explain (or at least, to understand) different outcomes in the four different countries. In Hungary (since 2010) and Poland (since 2015), the arrival of the populists to power has undermined democracy, while in Slovakia (in 2019–2020), it saved it by removing the corrupt political establishment from power. In the Czech Republic, the first stint of the main populist party ANO within the coalition government (2013–2017) arguably strengthened democracy, while the second stint (2017–2021) reversed the balance and indeed began to threaten it.

We can gain a clear conceptual understanding of the various and changing consequences of the emergence of populism in power in the Visegrad countries only if we break populism down into three ideal subtypes that differ in how they define the elite, the people, and the aim of the struggle between them. National-conservative populism criticizes the ruling elite for being globalist and liberal, and claims to represent a culturally or ethnically homogeneous nation and its conservative and religiously rooted values, often drawing on the country’s far-right traditions. Even secularist leaders such as Miloš Zeman and Viktor Orbán, who had no traditionalist or religious proclivities in the first half of their political lives (the former as a social democrat, the latter as a neoliberal), started to stylize themselves as protectors of Christianity and conservative values against an LGBT+ political correctness and “gender ideology” once they became national-conservative populists. Their cases seem to reflect a more general pattern: national and conservative aspects almost always empirically combine into one movement or party in Central Europe. We can contrast this with Western Europe. The French National Rally under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, for example, shows that neo-nationalism can function independently of conservatism, which allowed Eric Zemmour to construct a national-conservative alternative to Le Pen’s neo-nationalism in the presidential elections of 2022. As this article focuses mainly on the Central European situation, the undifferentiated category of national-conservative populism is sufficient.

The rise of national-conservative populism in Central Europe was accompanied by the rise of technocratic and civic populisms. Movements or parties that fall under those subtypes (usually but not always empirically mixed) are characterized by attacks against the ruling elite as incompetent, corrupt, and/or imprisoned in outdated ideological concepts. They speak on behalf of the society outside the alienated political class that rules over it. A purely technocratic populism conceives of the people as “ordinary people” who want the state to be governed by competent and efficient managers so that they can devote their lives to their own concerns. The analogy between the efficient administration of the state and the firm, as well as the high number of successful businessmen among the populists playing this card, has

led some analysts to label this kind of populism “business” or “managerial” populism.³

Civic populism presents a different image of the people, conceptualizing it as a public of engaged citizens who care about their common good. In contrast with technocratic populism, which emphasizes scientific or economic standards of decision-making and therefore defends the rational government led by the experts, civic populism emphasizes moral standards and defends the participation of citizens (and NGOs and civic initiatives) in the political decision-making process (e.g., referenda or consultations with citizens assemblies chosen by lottery). Despite the two types of populism having completely different images of the people, they very often combine into a single political movement. The reason is simple: to the extent that civic populism rejects the ideological frames of party politics of the 19th and 20th centuries, it has no other option than to combine appeals to the technoscientific standards with those to common sense. As a result, the two ideal types are frequently found empirically mixed.

All three forms of populism appeal to modern majoritarian democracy when they promise to overthrow a long-establishing ruling minority to restore the rule of the majority’s representatives. These revolutions, however, are distinguished by three different – and potentially conflicting – visions of the majority. The national-conservative interpretation of the majority invokes a homogeneous “heartland”⁴ (which could be defined by a particular way of life, nation, region, civilization, race, or combination thereof), whereas the other two appeal to “ordinary people” and civic public, respectively. National-conservative and technocratic images of the “people” correspond to the images of “nation” and “ordinary people”, as singled out by Margaret Canovan’s analyses of populism.⁵ The image of the people as active citizenry corresponds with the idea of civil society promoted by Central European dissidents such as György Konrád, Aleksander Smolar, and Václav Havel in the 1980s.⁶ Milan Znoj labelled Václav Havel’s position, as he enacted it politically

3 For convincing applications of this category to Babiš and his ANO party see Kopeček, L., “I Am Paying, so I Decide”: Czech ANO as an Extreme Form of a Business-firm Party. *East European Politics and Societies*, 30, 2016, No. 4, pp. 725–749; Císař, O. – Kubát, M., Populismus in Tschechien: Ein ostmitteleuropäischer Regionalvergleich. *Osteuropa*, 71, 2021, No. 4–6, pp. 115–130.

4 Taggart, P., Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics. In: Mény, Y. – Surel, Y. (eds.), *Democracies and the populist challenge*. Basingstoke, Palgrave 2002, pp. 62–81; Taggart, P., *Populism*. Buckingham, Open University Press 2000.

5 Canovan, M., “People”, Politicians and Populism. *Government and Opposition*, 19, 1984, No. 3, pp. 312–327; Canovan, M., Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies*, 47, 1999, No. 1, pp. 2–16.

6 Konrád, G., *Antipolitics*. New York, Henry Holt and Co. 1987; Smolar, A., Towards “Self-limiting Revolution”. In: Roberts, A. – Ash, T. G., *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of*

in the first half of the 1990s, as “moral populism”. However, the term “civic”, used by other authors such as Michal Kopeček, is more suitable for the context and purpose of this article.⁷

The established parties or alliances that oversaw the accession of the Visegrad countries to the EU in 2004 and/or maintained the status quo, thereafter, began to disintegrate under the pressure of national conservatives on the one hand and civic and technocratic populists on the other in the 2010s. The former challenge had a distinct ideological basis, stemming from the split of national conservatism from the post-communist liberal-conservative consensus that it had belonged to until the 2000s and – in some countries even – the early 2010s.⁸ The latter challenge was post-ideological: it did not target the *content* (or direction) of the post-communist transformation but rather its *form* and the allegedly bankrupt and incompetent political elites who carried it out and then got entrenched in power.

Observers of Central Europe who fused the two kinds of challenge into one and talked about an attack of “populism” against “democracy” took for its empirical paradigms the Hungarian Fidesz and Polish PiS. The blurring of the distinction between those established right-wing parties and anti-establishmentarian and “ideologically thin” political forces – which, in theory, should have been the primary candidates for the “populist” label, according to Cass Mudde⁹ – has evacuated the latter from the visual field. They have either been assimilated into the image of national-conservative populists (Babiš has been made into a Czech Orbán or Kaczyński), or their populist features have been made invisible (e.g., presidents Kiska and Čaputová in Slovakia or the Pirates, STAN, and Million Moments for Democracy in the Czech Republic). After merging the two kinds of populism into one and conceiving such an internally undifferentiated populism as inherently authoritarian and anti-pluralistic, one has to suppose that whenever populism comes to power, democracy necessarily starts collapsing or at least is in grave danger. Thus, for instance, the proponents of such a view of populism claim

Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 127–143; Havel, V., O smyslu Charty 77. In: Havel, V., *Do různých stran. Eseje a články z let 1983–1989*. Praha, Lidové noviny 1990.

7 Znoj, M., Václav Havel, His Idea of Civil Society, and the Czech Political Tradition. In: Kopeček, M. – Wciślik, P. (eds.), *Thinking Through Tradition: Liberal democracy, Authoritarian Past, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe*. Budapest, CEU Press 2015, pp. 109–138.

Kopeček, M., From Narrating Dissidence to Post-Dissident Narratives of Democracy: Anti-totalitarianism, Politics of Memory and Culture Wars in East-Central Europe. In: Barša, P. – Hesová, Z. – Slačálek, O. (eds.), *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*. Prague, Charles University 2021, pp. 28–83 and p. 76.

8 For this aspect of the populist revolt in the Central Europe of the 2010s see Barša, P. – Hesová, Z. – Slačálek, O., *Central European Culture Wars*.

9 Mudde, C., The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39, 2004, No. 4, pp. 541–563.

that Babiš's participation in the Czech government (2013–2017) and his premiership (2017–2021) had to have undermined democracy in the Czech Republic.¹⁰ As Radek Buben, Karel Kouba, and Ondřej Čísař have convincingly shown, those claims have no empirical basis.¹¹ Such errors could have been avoided through the conceptual uncoupling of populism and national conservatism, which would have allowed for the differentiation of two types of actors in Central Europe in the 2010s: authoritarian national conservatives who *can* be but *need not* be populist and technocratic and civic populists who *can* be but *need not* be authoritarian.¹²

2. Urbinati's Concept of Populism

The upshot of the preceding section is that without an internally differentiated concept of populism, no meaningful analysis of the political turmoil in Central Europe in the 2010s can be done. In terms of such a framework, Urbinati's conception of populism occupies an ambiguous position;¹³ it conceives of populism as a homogeneous and internally undifferentiated phenomenon, attributing the same features found in its nationalist and conservative varieties to its technocratic and civic varieties. This aligns her with the “democracy vs. populism” framework. However, by specifying populism as a challenge to *political* elites – rather than elites in general – and their *party oligarchies*, Urbinati, opens the door, albeit inadvertently, for a more inclusive and less Manichean concept of populism. An anti-establishmentarian revolt need not be linked to the defense of a particular national identity against globalization, as most movements of the 2010s usually identified as “populist” were.

10 Mounk, Y., The Czech Trump: Populists May Soon Rule Central Europe from the Baltic Sea to the Aegean. *Slate* 11. 10. 2017. Available online at [www: https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/10/andrej-babis-the-czech-republic-has-a-trump-of-its-own.html](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/10/andrej-babis-the-czech-republic-has-a-trump-of-its-own.html) [cit. 29. 5. 2023]; Vachudová, M. A., Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe. *East European Politics*, 36, 2020, No. 3, pp. 318–340.

11 Buben, R. – Kouba, K., How Czech Democracy Defies the Illiberal Trend. *Current History*, 122, 2023, No. 842, pp. 108–114; Čísař, O., *Civil Society Organizations under the Conditions of Managerial Populism: Much Ado about Nothing?*, not yet published.

12 An outline of this framework is presented in Barša, P. – Hesová, Z. – Slačálek, O., *Central European Culture Wars*, pp. 7–16, 325–334, as well as in a less academic form in Barša, P., *To Do Away with Populism*. Vienna, IWM. Available online: [To Do Away with “Populism” – The New Republic of Letters](https://www.iwm.at/publications/to-do-away-with-populism) [republic-of-letters.eu; cit. 29. 5. 2023]. For a more general context of this perspective see also Barša, P., Three Responses to the Rise of National Conservatism in the Central and Eastern Europe of the 2010s and the Legacy of 1989. In: Masłowski, N. – Torbicka, K. (eds.), *Contested Legacies of 1989: Geopolitics, Memories, and Societies in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin, Peter Lang 2022, pp. 167–186.

13 Urbinati, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019.

Such a revolt could also include movements that had a positive or neutral attitude towards globalization (or Europeanization): instead of an image of restored national sovereignty, they could conjure up an image of competent managers and virtuous citizens who should replace corrupt and incompetent politicians.

If Urbinati does not follow through on this possibility to enlarge and internally differentiate “populism”, it is due to her a priori stigmatization of it as one of the three major disfigurements of democracy.¹⁴ The other two are plebiscitarianism and unpolitical democracy: the former revolves around an active leader whose decisions are acclaimed (or rejected) by a passive and homogeneous public; the latter involves a tendency to replace the work of opinion (*doxa*) with knowledge (*episteme*), which can manifest itself both in technocracy and in “counter-democratic” civic activism, which, according to the tripartite scheme of Pierre Rosanvallon, “surveils”, “impedes”, and “judges” political power.¹⁵ Although Urbinati points out that three disfigurements emerged in the earlier phases of the development of modern democracy, she focuses on their manifestations in the present times, which are characterized by the rise of what Bernard Manin calls “audience democracy”: the last stage of the development of modern democracy – after the democracy of notables and party democracy.¹⁶

Urbinati specifies the relationship between populism and the other two disfigurements as follows. Populism, she states, meets plebiscitarianism in its stressing of an immediate and direct connection between a leader and the masses. Conceptually speaking, however, the two disfigurements differ. The current plebiscitarianism involves an everyday plebiscite (measured by continuous opinion polling and “likes” or “dislikes” registered on social media) in which a passive and undifferentiated audience either acclaims or rejects the leader, who communicates with it continuously through, for example, the TV screen or Twitter. A populist leader, on the other hand, cannot dispense with a more or less permanent mobilization of at least one part of his base. Despite this difference, plebiscitarianism and populism can empiri-

14 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014.

15 Rosanvallon, P., *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2008. For the analysis of the place “counter-democracy” occupies in Rosanvallon’s general conception of the crisis of democracy see Barša, P., Democracy without the Demos: Rosanvallon’s Decentering of Democratic Theory. In: Biba, J. – Znoj, M. (eds.), *A Crisis of Democracy and Representation*. *Filosofický časopis – Philosophical Journal (Special Issue)*, 2017, No. 1, pp. 41–50.

16 Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997.

cally merge. Populist leaders, for example, are very good at practicing everyday plebiscite via media and at transforming elections into acclamations of their power.

The relationship between populism and unpolitical democracy is delimited differently by Urbinati. The former is primarily characterized by a direct or “embodied” representation of the will of a particular people in a leader, whereas the latter tends to replace the collective decision-making process by the supposedly impartial expertise of technocrats or by the supposedly no less impartial surveillance, impediment, and judgments of civic activists. In this view, populism and unpolitical democracy are antithetical: The former emphasizes the collective *will*, the latter the scientific, legal, or moral *knowledge*. One politicizes the public sphere by encouraging the direct engagement of the people, while the other depoliticizes it by submitting it to the cognitive or moral criteria that are represented and defended by experts or *civic* activists (as opposed to *political* activists who advocate for their respective parties and ideological projects). Whereas the relationship between populism to plebiscitarianism is based on resemblance and empirical overlap, its relationship to technocracy and civic “counter-democracy” is based on difference and opposition. These two opposing forces come together only through an adversary reaction, when the excess of the one provokes the rise of the other.

In their 2015 article, Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Christopher J. Bickerton¹⁷ noted that, although Urbinati underlines the differences between populism and unpolitical democracy, at a deeper level they can be seen as similar. Both challenge the political process, which is centred around parliaments and parties: both blame its intermediation and proceduralism for suspending immediacy and directness – be it that of the collective will, as expressed in a word or deed of the leader, or that of the judgment (scientific or moral) of a technocrat or civic activist. Jan-Werner Müller’s conception of populism, to which Urbinati also refers, points to a related aspect of an agreement between populism and technocracy: both seek to replace an undecided contest of alternatives with a single, correct answer to a given problem. However, in the former case, it is provided by an expert’s know-how, whereas in the latter by the unanimous will of the people.¹⁸ According to Müller, this explains why one often paves the way for the other.

Urbinati agrees that rather than combining empirically, the similarity between populism and technocracy smooths their alternating. If both authors

17 Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., Populism and Technocracy: Opposites or complements? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20, 2017, No. 2, pp. 186–206 [online 2015, pp. 1–21].

18 Müller, J.-W., *Was ist Populismus?* Berlin, Suhrkamp 2016.

omit the possibility that the two could intersect in their aim of depoliticization, it is because they both tend to assign depoliticization to technocracy (and to Rosanvallonian “counter-democracy” in the case of Urbinati), whereas they see populism as a noxious attempt at re-politicization. This opinion is shared by two of the most prominent defenders of populism in contemporary Western political philosophy: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹⁹ The opposite normative assessment of populism by the two former and two latter authors can be understood in light of their underlying analytical consensus regarding its primary function: what Müller and Urbinati deem to be a misguided form of re-politicization, Laclau and Mouffe consider to be the only way thereof.

I contend that a more comprehensive understanding of populism can be gained if we distance ourselves from the underlying consensus between the two sides of the dispute by allowing the possibility that populism can be an agent of de-politicization. The unanimous collective will, for instance, can merge with a fixed identity that excludes not only undesired “others” but the very political debate and democratic process in which the common will should have been elaborated. Once de-politicization is taken into account, one can push Müller’s and Urbinati’s acknowledgment of the similarity between populism and technocracy one step further: one may not only prepare the road for the other, but they can actually converge. Accetti and Bickerton highlighted this possibility in an article from 2018 and a book from 2021, in which they actualized the possibility opened up by their article from 2015, which was referred to positively by Urbinati.²⁰ In their view the similar features of technocracy and populism allow them to combine as too “parallel symptoms of a broader ‘crisis’ of democratic legitimacy. They therefore seem more likely to stand or fall *together* as characteristic features of European politics in the future.”²¹

We can complement their diagnosis with the abovementioned “identitarian” potentiality of populism. The rise of populism is understandable by its capacity to combine not only with technocracy but also with identity politics. No matter what “European politics” looks like “in the future”, the salience of technocratism – at present, anyway – goes hand in hand with that of nationalism. Populism can easily combine with both.

19 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso 2005; Mouffe, Ch., *For a Left Populism*. London, Verso 2018.

20 Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., “Techno-populism” as a new party family: The case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 10, 2018, No. 2, pp. 132–150; Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., *Technopopulism*.

21 Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., “Techno-populism” as a new party family.

3. Post-Ideological Anti-Establishmentarianism

Despite Urbinati's characterization of populism as a misguided attempt at re-politicization, she inadvertently points to a potentially de-politicizing aspect of populism by emphasizing its "anti-establishmentarianism". This specification of the elite as a political and administrative class linked to state institutions and their functioning gives more specificity to the notion that populism pits the "people" against the "elite". Nationalists mobilizing against globalization or Europeanization (as its regional variant) can thus easily portray that elite as uprooted cosmopolitans who want to replace homegrown national traditions with artificial transnational norms. The anti-establishmentarian posture, however, can be adopted not only by the politics of national identity but also by technocratic and civic forms of Rosanvallonian "counter-democracy". Moreover, anti-establishmentarianism can broaden the cultural and social pool on which the revolts of the "people" against the "elite" can draw. They need not appeal only to the plebeian segments of society but also to its educated middle-class segments. Members not only of economic elites but also of cultural and professional elites can become the supporters and spokespersons of such movements when they get the feeling that politicians have become a parasitic class whose incompetence and corruption suffocate their professional activities and society at large.

Despite Urbinati's intention, "anti-establishmentarianism" opens the door to an internally differentiated concept of populism that would make space for its technocratic and civic form(s), thereby also uncoupling it from a priori stigmatization as an anti-democratic phenomenon. However, she neutralizes this possibility with another feature that she attributes to populism: "factionalism". She characterizes it as a particularism – a posture of *pars pro parte* that goes against the principle *pars pro toto* on which democratic representation is based. The rhetoric of technopopulist movements, however, tends to be inclusive and universalistic. They are not factionalist or particularistic, at least no more so than other political movements.

This would exclude them from Urbinati's definition of populism, since she supposes a necessary link between anti-establishmentarianism and factionalism. More precisely, she depicts the latter as an implication of the former: populists represent the people *minus* the elite. Hence, they represent a part of the whole, not the whole through its part. To my mind, this generalization holds true for a populism based upon a culture war between the people rooted in their ethnonational identity and a cosmopolitan elite that supposedly tries to impose upon them global norms. Once the elite is defined primarily by identity, culture, or way of life, its members become the enemies of the people, which is defined by another identity, culture, or way of life. Such

a populism amounts, indeed, to an exclusionary movement that promotes one part of the society against the other and drops any pretence of universality in its definition of the common good.

I contend that there are populist movements that are not based primarily on identity politics and do not involve culture wars. Their definition of “the people” is more or less “civic” and, at least in principle, inclusive, and their definition of the elite is narrowly “political”, i.e., in Urbinati’s term, “anti-establishmentarian”: the privileged few have illegitimately usurped political power that should belong to the representatives of the people. To get rid of this parasitic elite does not deprive its members of their equal rights as citizens but merely of their privileges, which set them apart from and above other citizens. The archetype of such a project was provided by Pierre-Emmanuel Sieyès’s equivalence between the third estate and the French nation, in which the aristocratic estate was to be cancelled because it did not add anything to the wealth of the society but, on the contrary, subtracted one part of it for its own use. Its members, however, were to be transformed not into a group of pariahs, but rather into equal members of the nation. With the help of Urbinati’s dichotomy, we can say that this inclusive kind of populism is on the side of a posture of *pars pro toto* rather than that of *pars pro parte*. When the political establishment is corrupt and incompetent – lacking any expertise for its tasks, harming society rather than contributing to its development, and relying on outdated ideological concepts – then civic populism can combine easily with a technocratic one.

Both aspects are encompassed in two distinct yet overlapping theoretical frameworks for populism that have been elaborated by Marco Deseriis, and Invernizzi-Accetti and Bickerton. The former author conceives of it as a Foucauldian “discursive formation”, the latter two as a new “party family”.²² Both perspectives point to the Italian M5S and Spanish Podemos as the two most salient European examples of this kind of populism.

Deseriis identifies a distinct activist strand of technolibertarianism that is articulated with a populist critique of the political intermediaries, whereas Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti introduce a more general concept of populism that focuses on the public discourse of M5S and Podemos in the 2010s. While Deseriis perceives the core of this phenomenon as being associated with the new modes of social communication and organization associated with the internet and social media, Bickerton and Accetti subsume it under a larger umbrella of a new party family. Members of this party family replace a confrontation of *ideological* projects rooted in *values* with *pragmatic*

22 Deseriis, M., Technopopulism; Bickerton, Ch. J. – Invernizzi-Accetti, C., “Techno-populism” as a new party family.

solutions to the pre-given *problems*, i.e., solutions based on the knowledge of *facts* and *practical* experience of dealing with them.

The two authors argued that M5S, Podemos, and similar parties filled the void with policies that were no longer based on traditional ideologies, but instead pretended to solve current issues, one by one, in a piecemeal, business-like manner. They won over the public not by mobilizing passions but rather by having a supposedly fact-based approach to the questions of the public interest. Rather than deploying grand narratives, they focused on the technical reasons why public institutions did not work as they were supposed to. Their source of legitimation was not a particular ideology associated with a certain political tradition and social class, but rather scientific or technical knowledge, which was, however, presented as being in line with the common sense of ordinary people.

In the two countries of former Czechoslovakia over the last decade, various combinations of those arguments about professional competence, common sense, and digital democracy could be found in civic and technocratic populist parties or movements, such as VV (Public Affairs), ANO (Association of Unsatisfied Citizens), Pirates, and Million Moments for Democracy in the Czech Republic, and SaS (Freedom and Solidarity), OLANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), and Za ľudí (For the People) in Slovakia.

Urbinati extensively comments on both Podemos and M5S in her book on populism. If not for the names, however, one could easily get the impression that she is talking about completely different political movements than Deseriis, Invernizzi-Accetti, and Bickerton are talking about. One reason she emphasizes completely different aspects of the two movements is obvious. If she had focused on the elements pointed out by those three authors, it would have undermined her tripartite scheme of democracy's disfigurements. It would cast doubt on her construction of populism as a full-fledged alternative to unpolitical democracy. She associates the latter with a universalistic stance taken by the actors and movements who claim to be able to judge particular political projects from an impartial distance by applying either techno-scientific or moral criteria. This split of unpolitical democracy into an epistemocratic and civic wing corresponds to the differentiation of two aspects of movements such as M5S, Podemos, and Pirates in the Czech lands and For the People in Slovakia – their valuation of expertise on the one hand and of morally motivated civic activism on the other.

4. Me-the-People vs. Party Oligarchy

The elusiveness of Urbinati’s take on M5S and Podemos have yet another and more general explanation, which I have already touched upon in the third part: she partakes of a widespread tendency to depict the populist upsurge of the last decade as a reaction against a technocratic depoliticization of government linked to the shift in decision-making in many important areas (e.g., economics) to the bodies of non-elected experts that operate at both national and supranational level. Populism is seen as a misguided and harmful attempt at re-politicization which pits the supposed will of the people, embodied and personalized by the leader, against the well-considered judgments of the knowledgeable elite; it tries to replace meritocratic oligarchy, which appeals to the competence and education of the few by the “peoplecracy” – the rule of the many who act on strong convictions concerning values and identity rather than on competence and education.²³ According to this characterization, a homogenized majority embodied by the leader opposes constitutionally ensured pluralism and the rights of individuals and minorities. This view tends to equate the populism of the 2010s as a whole with the national-conservative populist movements of that decade, which, indeed, had an undeniable anti-intellectualist and authoritarian bias.

Even parties such as Podemos and M5S, which obviously did not belong to that version, were associated with it by the mainstream media and academic observers, such as Urbinati. In her eyes, the main link between the two parties and national-populist movements was authoritarianism, which stemmed from the “me-the people” posturing of the leaders – their exclusive claim to represent the people against the alienated “casta” was supposed to be proof that they would necessarily slip into the dismantlement of constitutional democracy once they would gain power. That is because they, too, replaced the democratic *pars pro toto* principle with its *pars pro parte* alternative.

In the third part, I have made a case against this automatic disqualification of an “anti-casta” posture as an anti-pluralistic attitude by likening it to the Abbé Sieyès “anti-aristocracy” stance. The wisdom of hindsight allows us to add to this conceptual point an empirical falsification of Urbinati’s claims from her book published in 2019. M5S was able to switch from an alliance with the Lega to an alliance with the Democratic Party, and Podemos entered the alliance with the Socialist Party in 2019. Against Urbinati’s assumption, the two parties have proven their readiness to accept both coexistence

²³ Diamanti, I. – Lazar, M., *Peoplecratie. La métamorphose de nos démocraties*. Paris, Gallimard 2019.

with more traditional parties within one government and the pluralistic constitutional framework. This fact does not exclude the possibility that, at some point, they might turn anti-pluralistic and authoritarian (in its alliance with the Lega, M5S tested this possibility). However, it prevents us from assigning them this tendency *a priori* as an ineluctable consequence of their populism, which is precisely what Urbinati does in her book.

This is not to deny their authoritarian potential nor the association thereof with a “me-the-people” kind of strongly personalized (or “embodied”) representation, which is entailed in their attack on the oligarchical representation practiced by traditional political parties. No doubt, this is a problematic feature of the “leaderist” (as opposed to “leaderless”)²⁴ variant of technopopulism. As Urbinati herself acknowledges, however, partisan democracy has its own problematic feature, namely the “iron law” of the emergence of party oligarchies. Her defence of partisan democracy takes for granted that the latter evil amounts to a lesser danger to democracy than the former one. But such a supposition is far from obvious. What appears more reasonable is to take the struggle and oscillation between the charismatic and personalized form of leadership and its oligarchical and institutionalized (Max Weber would say “routinized”) form as a perennial internal feature of democracy, whereby it remains alive: by pushing the pendulum into opposite directions, the two evils balance and check each other, thus ensuring the continuation of the democratic game.

Even if we reject Urbinati’s merger of technopopulists with national-populists, we have to concede that the former share with the latter the false promise of unmediated or direct representation, which would replace indirect representation mediated by party oligarchies. This promise has, indeed, a potential for authoritarianism and anti-pluralism and can lead to efforts to dismantle constitutional procedures, once its carriers get to power. It can, but it need not. Urbinati’s theoretical rejection of the latter possibility has been falsified by recent developments of Italian and Spanish politics, which have provided still more proof (if any more was needed) that the matter is empirical, not theoretical: the question cannot be tackled *a priori*, but only *a posteriori*.

This claim has been born out also by the Czech and Slovak experience with technopopulist parties in power.²⁵ Andrej Babiš’s transition from a junior partner in the government of Social-Democratic prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka from 2013–2017 saw an increase in his authoritarian tendencies in

24 For this distinction see Deseriis, M., Technopopulism.

25 For the argument that Babiš’s participation in power did not lead to a “democratic backsliding” or an “illiberal turn” see Buben, R. – Kouba, K., How Czech Democracy Defies the Illiberal Trend.

the second stint of the government, when he became senior partner of the Social-Democrats and prime minister (2017–2021). This was as much the consequence of his populist “me-the-people” posture as of his efforts to defend himself against charges of having conflicts of interest and corruption. The growing danger of authoritarianism was also a consequence of his opportunistic alliance with Czech president Zeman, who, in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, became a full-fledged national-conservative populist. The crisis had a similar effect on Babiš, although the nationalistic xenophobia of his party was not any greater than that of the Civic Democratic Party, which was an established post-communist political force (and was thus not seen as a threat to democracy by mainstream academics and the media). Despite an increase in Babiš’s authoritarian tendencies in the final years of his premiership, the Czech constitutional system survived undamaged.

Setting aside the short-lived appearance of the Public Affairs (VV) party in the Czech Parliament from 2010–2013, two other technopopulist parties gained representation in the 2010s: STAN (Mayors and Independents) in 2010 and Pirates in 2017. The latter has been the least xenophobic and eurosceptical and the most culturally pluralist pole of the five-party coalition government led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which replaced that of Babiš in January 2022. Due to the technolibertarian legacy, the authoritarian potential of the Czech Pirates is no more significant than with any other mainstream party in the Czech parliament. Its leader, Ivan Bartoš, with his dreadlock hairstyle, can hardly pretend to directly “embody” the Czech majority. STAN, which also participates in the government, lacks a strong “me-the-people” leader too.

The government of Slovakia, which was formed in March 2020, consisted of four more or less populist parties. It could be blamed for many mistakes and erratic moves, but not for an attempt to overthrow the constitutional regime and establish an authoritarian rule. Igor Matovič, who served as its prime minister in the first year before transferring to the finance ministry in spring 2021, was an almost pure type of a “me-the-people” leader. He caused many problems but arguably no more than any other problematic politician of this kind from a more traditional party.

Conclusion

This article has criticized a tendency to associate the rise of populism in the last decade with authoritarian and xenophobic leaders and movements and to elude those that have challenged the established political elites from the centrist position without necessarily holding a bias against democracy, globalism, or European integration. I have shown that those other challeng-

ers usually contain a combination of the features of two ideal subtypes of populism, which we can call “technocratic” and “civic”. Without taking into account those subtypes, we cannot understand the turmoil caused by the rise of populism in the Visegrad countries in the 2010s. The political status quo established in them in the 1990s and 2000s was attacked by national-conservative populism on the one hand, and by technocratic and civic populism (usually mixed into one movement whose nature depended on the relative weight of the two elements) on the other. If the first kind of populism marked its greatest successes in Hungary and Poland, the latter two were politically successful in the Czech and Slovak Republics.

I have shown that Nadia Urbinati’s conception of populism occupies an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the proposed revision of the conceptual framework. For one thing, she expresses the criticized view by perceiving the turmoil of the last decade through the prism of “democracy vs. populism” and categorizing all populists as enemies of the democratic order. At the same time, she indirectly opens up the door to the alternative perspective by emphasizing anti-establishmentarian and anti-partisan bias of populism. If we add an anti-ideological bias, a space has been cleared for a kind of populism that wants to transcend party oligarchies and classical ideologies but does not attack liberal democracy.

I have followed Deseriis, Invernizzi-Acceti, and Bickerton in acknowledging the emergence of distinctly technocratic populism, to which, regarding the context of the Czech and Slovak Republics, I added civic populism, whose leading paragon was Václav Havel, the founding father of the post-communist Czechoslovakia from which they both emerged in 1993. I have followed Urbinati, Invernizzi-Accetti, and Bickerton in acknowledging the dangers that follow from the populist promise of a non-mediated or embodied representation of the people in and by the leader. I have rejected, however, their Manichean tendency to overestimate the threat to democracy posed by this direct (or embodied) representation and to underestimate the threat thereto posed by the mediated representation provided by traditional political parties. I have instead argued that the evils of party oligarchies that haunt the latter kind of representation can be as dangerous to democracy as a “me-the-people” posture of populist leaders and that these two evils can be seen as checking and neutralizing each other. More generally, I have reversed the usual view of populism as a movement of re-politicization, and I have instead begun to regard it as the opposite. This has allowed me to conceive of the two main incarnations of the populism of the 2010s (i.e., national conservatism and civic technopopulism) as related to two broad de-politicization trends of the past fifty years: identity politics on the one hand and Rosanvallonian “counter-democracy” (or Urbinati’s “unpolitical democracy”) on the other.