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Author(s) / Autor(i): **Natasza Styczyńska – Jan Meijer – Michał Płaza – Magdalena Wilczyńska**

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**POPREBEL: “POPULIST REBELLION AGAINST MODERNITY
IN 21ST CENTURY EASTERN EUROPE: NEO-
TRADITIONALISM AND NEO-FEUDALISM” – RESEARCH
REFLECTIONS FROM JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY IN
KRAKOW.**

**Natasza Styczyńska – Jan Meijer – Michał Płaza –
Magdalena Wilczyńska***

“Populist Rebellion Against Modernity in 21st Century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism” (POPREBEL) is a large Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe (grant agreement no 822682). The aim of POPREBEL is to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences, and propose policy solutions. The project is run by a consortium of seven partners: UCL (co-ordinating institution), Jagiellonian University, Charles University, Tartu University, Corvinus University of Budapest, Belgrade University and Edgeryders.

The project aims at taking stock of the recent rise of populism – in its various forms – in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the Western

* Dr. Natasza Styczyńska is an assistant professor at the Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Reymonta 4, 33-332 Kraków, Poland, e-mail: natasza.styczyńska@uj.edu.pl.

Mgr. Jan Meijer is a research assistant in POPREBEL project, Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Reymonta 4, 33-332 Kraków, Poland, e-mail: jan.meijer@uj.edu.pl.

Mgr. Michał Płaza is a research assistant in POPREBEL project, Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Reymonta 4, 33-332 Kraków, Poland, e-mail: m.plaza@uj.edu.pl.

Mgr. Magdalena Wilczyńska is a research assistant in POPREBEL project, Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Reymonta 4, Kraków, Poland, e-mail: magdalena1.wilczyńska@uj.edu.pl.

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Balkans. Its trajectory is not just interesting in and of itself: it is also the harbinger of a possible future for the whole continent. It is urgent for Western Europeans to look into the CEE mirror, just as it is urgent for the CEE region to understand itself. We describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences, and propose policy solutions. Our focus is on the CEE region, but we will engage in comparisons with populisms in other parts of the world, particularly Western Europe. According to **Brubaker** (2017), the present wave of populist mobilizations in Europe is more politically consequential than any of the previous waves and it has already produced an 'extraordinary' reconfiguration of the political map of Europe. Populist parties have become significant political players in several countries, including Italy, Holland, Austria, France, UK, and Germany, and their number has almost doubled since 2000 (from 33 to 63) (Eiermann et al. 2018). Brexit vote in the UK might have gone the other way had it not been for the campaigning by the populist UKIP.

Currently, right-wing populist parties govern in two countries of the region – Hungary and Poland – and in several others, populists have emerged as serious contenders for political power. 'Populists are the strongest in Eastern Europe,' concludes a recent comprehensive report (Eiermann et al. 2018). We focus on studying the rise of populism in this part of Europe in order to draw lessons that will be applicable also to other countries. No doubt Eastern Europe has some specific features, but since the phenomenon is so intensely pronounced in that part of the continent, we believe it is easier to diagnose the causes of its emergence, reconstruct its basic features, and formulate policy recommendations that may be helpful also in other contexts. Therefore, the main research areas of POPREBEL are culture, politics, economy and online ethnography.

Jagiellonian University actively participates in two Work Packages of the project: WP3 on culture and WP4 on Politics. In the next part, we will shortly summarise our research activities in the project so far.

Work Package 3 of the POPREBEL project analyses the recent rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe from the cultural point of view. The team of researchers from the Jagiellonian University studies the links between populism and the region's cultural background, looking at the mechanisms used in the public discourse in order to present Europe and the European Union as foreign, alien to the national communities in CEE, and the methods used to

draw a line between 'Us and Them' within the Polish society. The process of 'Othering Europe' is investigated with a view to three case studies: of a failure in the considered countries to educate about Europe and the EU, of how the image of Europe, of Poland and of Poles is being redefined by the national cultural institutions in the context of rising Euroscepticism and how the leading figures of the Polish politics describe the EU and Poland's place in the Community. One of the tasks focuses on reflection on the imaginary and narrative of Europe and Europeanness presented by institutions of culture. In times of populism, this question opens a debate not only on the way how Europe and European identity is presented vis a vis national and local identities. It reveals the processes of production and translation of populist contents into the world of various cultural activities. Populistic authorities focus on heritage and culture narration in a specific way as the narration of national community and unity is fundamental for their social vision and political strategy. We can observe rapid changes of discourses, followed by changes of leaders and directors or financial situation, as well as the launching of new institutions, programmes, restoration of chosen ones and changes in communication strategies. Institutions of culture - from national museums to local "dom kultúry" gives the opportunity to observe the dynamics of top-down and bottom-up processes in constructing the image of Europe as well as in modalities of adaptation to authorities demands and public trends and wishes. The Polish 'Us and Them' narratives are examined by two case studies: one emphasises the role of imagining and re-imagining the country's past, of constructing a new interpretation of the national heritage and the national unity by United Right's/Law and Justice's government, and using the Self/Other binary in the identity construction; the second case study deals with representations of the symbolic enemy in Polish right-wing media discourses after 2015, the images often drawing on the old stereotypes, but presenting them in a new context, marking a new, hard-line between 'Us and Them' within the Polish society.

Work Package 4 of the POPREBEL projects focuses on politics. The main aim of this task is to examine these relatively advanced forms of populist politics in Central and South-Eastern Europe, considering both the emergence and supply of populist ideas, narratives and political identities; the importance and impact of more dominant populist parties; and the variegated and changeable forms of populism the region exhibits. The Jagiellonian team investigates the phenomenon of populist Euroscepticism through the case of Poland. Although populism and Euroscepticism often go together in politics, they are not the

same concept – instead, they are considered to be ‘distinct but intersecting phenomena’. This project studies to what extent and how Polish political parties combine populist and Eurosceptic sentiments in their political discourse. For this, a wide range of materials is examined, including parliamentary debates, party programmes and political speeches for the years 2015-2020. While most parties claim to support European integration in principle, many employ some form of populist discourse with regards to the European Union. European institutions or certain member states are regularly represented as alienated, ‘elitist’ and dominating over member states such as Poland. Such populist discursive constructions are in turn used to legitimize opposition to deeper European integration or support drastic reform of the European Union. A thorough analysis of populist Euroscepticism in Poland is important to better understand how support and opposition to various aspects of European integration is (re-) produced in Polish politics.¹

¹ More on the project, as well as POPREBEL Working Papers, videos and blogs can be found on the project’s webpage: <https://populism-europe.com/poprebel/>