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RISING POPULISM AND ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS

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Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

It is with great joy that I greet the participants of the Forum. I have the best memories of my visits to your wonderful country. I feel honored by the invitation to address your meeting. In this talk I am going to discuss an important phenomenon the organizers of the Forum asked me to focus my remarks on: populism.

General attributes

First let me overview the general attributes of populism.

What does “populism” mean? There is no consensus among social scientists concerning the meaning of the term; there are various interpretations. In my talk I will suggest an interpretation widely accepted by many scholars. For example, you find a similar definition in *Wikipedia*, although at certain important points I will depart from that standard interpretation.

Populism is a phenomenon which appears firstly in the *ideological sphere* of life. It can be recognized in the speeches and writings of certain active politicians and in political programs of certain parties. Furthermore, we observe populist elements in the speeches and writings of opinion-leaders, journalists, media personalities, so-called “public intellectuals”, in the printed and the internet press, in blogs and Facebook notes.

Populist rhetoric is applied by politicians and political movements and parties *before* getting in power and also *after* they became the rulers of a country.

What is the political content of populist rhetoric? It contrasts “people” on the one hand and “elites” on the other. *You*, the people, are at the bottom, *they*, the elite are on the top. They, the elite, have lost contact with you, the people. The populist addresses the people, the ordinary simple masses of the street and tells them: look, *I am* your man, the true defender of your interest. They do not know what is hurting you – but I do know. They (pointing again to the elites) are corrupt, they are stealing your money, they deceive you. I am the one who is going to make order.

Just as a footnote: it is grotesque to hear populist slogans from a billionaire like Trump, who claims to be the representative of the blue-collar worker endangered by globalization. Or from full time professional politicians who never had a productive job before entering the political arena.

A populist expresses his disdain and contempt against so-called “experts”. These eggheads (as they are called in American parlance) just pretend that they are aware of the troubles of the people. They spend their life far away from ordinary people, in libraries or on university campuses. They are debating hair-splitting irrelevant issues with each other, while you are suffering. Only we, utters the populist, are ready and able to talk to you about your real problems.

Populism is usually closely associated with *nationalism*. These two ideological phenomena can be separated at the abstract level, but are closely correlated, one being a frequent concomitant of the other. That is exactly the point where my understanding of these

two currents differs from the standard characterization. In recent world history populist and nationalist rhetoric and policy are closely linked, and in a few cases almost inseparable. The nationalist slogans claim: “Our nation is Number 1.” -- “We are the best one, the greatest one, the superior one.” The feeling of supremacy is an important element of populist nationalism: all the others are inferior. Most of the populist-nationalists are at least hidden racists, and quite a few reveal their racist beliefs openly. They instigate hate against minorities, people belonging to another race, having a different religion or a different skin color. Hate appeals to the worst emotions in man’s soul.

We can find common elements in the *style* of populists. What matters is not only what a populist would say, but also *how* he says it. He does not build his talk on people’s *rational thinking*, on logic and on argumentation. He tries to affect the *emotions* of the audience or readership. Instead of a calm discourse with opposing views, he creates enemies and mobilize followers to join him in a battle, or rather in a series of battles, until it leads to a victory over the hated enemy. He creates some kind of mass hysteria.

On the peak of the populist-nationalist movement we see the paramount leader. He is a charismatic personality. A personal cult of the leader is quite a common attribute of populist movements.

The twin ideologies, populism and nationalism, can appear under various colors of the political spectrum. However strange it sounds, there are populists-nationalists not only on the right side of the political arena but also on the left side.

Many politicians who were populist and nationalist while in opposition remained faithful to this ideology even after becoming the rulers of a country. Populism and nationalism are addictive; one cannot give up this dangerous drug easily. An autocrat or a dictator, although his power is safe, would like to be popular, what is more, to be admired and loved by his people. Therefore they execute populist and nationalist *policies*. There are significant differences between such policies according to the situation of the country. It might include an irresponsible increase of wages not coupled with the parallel increase of productivity. Likewise, an irresponsible increase of governmental spending on welfare expenditures financed by foreign credit may be introduced. Whatever the diversity of populist policies, they have a relevant common feature: they sacrifice the *future* for the *present*. The present generation is grateful to the good-hearted government, they love the Number 1 leader – and later generations have to pay the bill.

Historical and contemporary examples

Beside the common attributes appearing in every populist-nationalist movement and regime, and reviewed in the earlier part of my talk, I turn now to history and to the observation of the contemporary experience, and present you a couple of examples. At closer look it turns out that although the *common attributes* appear in all of them, there are also remarkable *special features* which usually characterize only one or a small group of countries, and even this country or small group of countries only in a certain period of calendar time. History produced populism-nationalism with *German characteristics* occurring before and during the Second World War. Similarly, we can talk about populism-nationalism with *Argentine characteristics* in the post-war period, or about populism-nationalism with *Hungarian characteristics* following year 2010.

It seems to be a good starting point to begin with *Adolf Hitler’s* Nazi Germany. We find here almost all the common characteristics overviewed in the first part of the talk. The German word “Volk” (meaning people) is used in Hitler’s writings, and more generally, in Nazi propaganda time and again. Hitler speaks about his own movement as the only true representative of the people’s will. He is the advocate of the interests of the workers. He

chose the name National Socialist Workers' Party, "Nazi" being the abbreviated form of the word *National*. The names "national" and "socialist workers" point to the combination of nationalism and populism.

Hitler had many enthusiastic admirers among workers, poor people, but in hidden ways he got also financial support from powerful and rich industrialists, who were certainly part of the elite. The tragic German case shows that the populist ideology is full of inner contradictions and inconsistencies, a mixture of truth, half-truth and blatant lies.

It is a remarkable historical fact that the Nazi movement emerged when Germany's economy was in great trouble: accelerating inflation, depression, and mass unemployment. People were angry – and this anger was exploited by populist demagoguery. Hitler was a master of inflammatory speech; at the end of a meeting the crowd felt they would do anything commanded by the leader. He stirred up the hate against the Jews and the nationalist pride of the Germans. Every other race was inferior, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Croatians, also everyone who was not White Caucasian but Asian or African.

In Italy *Benito Mussolini* and his fascist movement appeared a few years before Hitler. The many similarities include the continuation of the populist and nationalist ideology after they became the dictators of their countries. Both did not simply maintain but intensified the nationalist feelings. At the beginning countries were conquered without resistance, but later they stirred up the flames of World War II.

Let me say loudly: populism combined with nationalism is not a minor local issue. It is terribly dangerous, and might eventually lead to war. Young generations do not understand what a war means. I belong to the old generations, which went through the last war. Therefore for me populism and nationalism are not just two of the ideologies but bring back the unforgettable memories of the horrors of a war.

Now let us turn our attention to the post-war era, and start with a look at China's recent history. In contrast to Hitler and Mussolini, who were on the extreme right side of the political spectrum, the place of *Mao Zedong* is unquestionably on the Left. This short talk of mine cannot offer a careful balanced analysis of the life-long performance of Mao. Since the theme of my talk is populism, I will say a few words about the period Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966 at his initiative and ended in 1976, when Mao died. This movement is in some sense unique. Just the sheer number of the Red Guards, the main activists of the *Cultural Revolution*, is fantastic, probably several millions of students and other young people. Mao was the chairman of the ruling party, he had a huge and robust organization under his thumb. Nevertheless, instead of using the service of the party apparatus, he addressed the young people and called for their action against the "bureaucracy". That is exactly the scheme described in the first part of my talk: the populist demagogue appeals to the "people" against the "elite". He set a hate campaign in motion, directed mainly against intellectuals and party functionaries. In this giant country not only the number of Red Guards, but also the number of victims are in the order of magnitude of millions. And the number of those who were not killed, "only" (and I put the word "only" in quotation marks) humiliated, deported from their usual place of living, and many subjected to cruel torture, is running in the order of magnitude of dozens of millions.

Populist rhetoric is a dangerous instrument. If the crowd or mob is set to motion, it is not easy to stop it. The Cultural Revolution ended when the mastermind of the movement died, and his successors declared energetically: enough is enough.

The post-war history of Argentina offers another characteristic example. *Juan Peron* is classified by most experts as a typical populist politician. His words and his actions show quite visibly that he was on the left side of the political spectrum, although he never belonged to the extreme left. Peron was elected President in 1946, and served in this position three times (with a long interruption) until his death in 1974. During his first term his wife Eva was

the vice-president. Both of them, especially Eva, had legions of admirers. There is even a very successful musical, *Evita*, about her life.

Blue-collar workers and the trade unions were Peron's social basis. During his tenure several measures helped the low-income strata of society. At the same time Peron expressed emphatically his disgust of universities, professors and students. There was a wide-spread characteristically populist slogan of the Peronists: "Shoes? Yes! Books? No!" Peron was harsh or even cruel to politicians who had the courage and protested against his policies. As the economic situation deteriorated, his rule became more and more autocratic and repressive. He removed liberal minded persons from the government apparatus, made great efforts to penetrate into the judiciary, and liquidated a large part of the free press and media.

Let me turn now to contemporary Western Europe. A well-known populist figure is *Jean-Marie Le Pen*, a French politician who started an extreme right party called the National Front. His hate-speeches instigated the crowd against the Arabs and the Jews. He blamed the European Union and the immigrants for the economic troubles of France. Le Pen presented himself as an outsider to the highly educated upper circles of the political elite, advocating the interests of ordinary people, which is a typical populist attitude. Gradually, his party got weaker, and finally he was pushed out of the leadership of the National Front movement by his own daughter, *Marine Le Pen*. Trying to sound less extreme than her father, she was one of the leading candidates in the last French presidential election, but finally lost.

Beside France, I could mention many more examples from the Western world, the populist rhetoric of the new American president Donald Trump, the waves of populism in Britain, Greece, Hungary and Poland. But my time for this talk does not allow the continuation. I hope that the few examples flash some light on the phenomenon of populism. In each case the individual character of the leader and cultural tradition shapes the style, and also the specific policies of populism. Nevertheless, we can recognize the relevant common features.

Concluding remarks

Having finished the exposition on the theme "populism", permit me to use this distinguished forum for making three general remarks only loosely connected to the problems of populism.

First remark. Economic progress is important, but not enough to assure a better life for the whole society. The high speed of growth cannot be granted forever, acceleration is usually followed by deceleration and other economic troubles, like inflation and unemployment. That is exactly the time for the emergence of populism and nationalism combined with harder hands of government administration. If the country must struggle with growing difficulties, politicians to draw the attention away from internal troubles to external issues; beside nationalist slogans also signs of expansionist policy appear. We must remember: the dangers of populism and nationalism are threatening everywhere.

Second remark. It was a great error to expect that the economic reform comes first, and if that made a significant progress, political reform will automatically follow. It is a fallacy to believe that the marketization of the economy would lead to the democratization of the political order. There is no such simple causation! Special efforts are needed for progress in the political order. What is required is the building of institutions able to defend the citizen from incompetent and corrupt bureaucrats, harmful laws, and despotic politicians.

Third remark. We, members of the intelligentsia, have no reason to feel ashamed, as it is suggested by populist rhetoric. On the contrary, we must continue to do our job: discuss and design carefully the further plans for more economic and political reforms and in a modest tone, but we must fight for the execution of these plans with determination.