

Populism as Meta Ideology

Kire Sharlamanov

Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 233 pages. ISBN: 9783031039348 (E-book)

The Populist Style: Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far Right

Théo Aiolfi

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. 2024, 243 pages. ISBN: 9781399537438 (E-book)

Mesut Can Akçay

Ph.D, Independent Researcher

E-Mail: mesutcanakcay@gmail.com

Orcid: 0000-0003-4375-8228

Populism has become one of the most dynamic concepts in the social sciences literature over the past two decades. Offering a significant analytical framework for explaining crises of representation and the transformation of contemporary forms of leadership within the discipline of Political Science, populism has been intensely debated at both the theoretical and empirical levels since 2010. During this period, populism has gained an interdisciplinary scope of research in interaction with sub-disciplines such as comparative politics and discourse analysis. In this context, besides studies focusing on the political strategies, rhetorical styles and behavioral repertoires of populist actors, the International Relations literature includes theoretical and empirical studies conducted on the global diffusion of populism (Ramos and Torres 2020; Kaltwasser and Sandoval 2024), its effects on foreign policy decision-making processes (Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann 2025) and challenging stances towards international institutions (Spandler and Söderbaum 2023). Today, populism continues to be the subject of multidisciplinary studies as a multidimensional concept. Themes such as the definition of populism, its ideological content and impact on democracy as well as its global rise have been addressed within the framework of varying theoretical approaches.

Central debates focus on whether populism possesses a certain ideological framework and whether it constitutes a threat to, or a corrective for, democratic systems. In this respect, populism is conceptualized through various approaches such as “a thin-centered ideology” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), “a political style” (Moffitt 2016), “a movement” (Wiles 1969;

Taggart 2000), “a political strategy” (Weyland 2001; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013) and “a discourse” (Laclau 2005). With their distinct methodological approaches and arguments, the works *Populism as Meta Ideology* and *The Populist Style: Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far Right* reviewed by this study, provide a fresh perspective to the ongoing efforts to understand populism. Sharlamanov’s *Populism as Meta Ideology* moves the concept beyond the traditional ideological classifications and redefines it as a “meta ideology”. According to Sharlamanov, rather than being an autonomous ideology, populism offers a meta-ideological structure that is formed within varying socio-political contexts by borrowing concepts and agendas from existing ideologies. For example, although political actors such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders draw upon narratives of anti-establishment and protecting the people’s interests, they articulate political agendas rooted in diverse ideological traditions like conservatism and socialism. On the other hand, Théo Aiolfi’s work called *The Populist Style: Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far Right* moves beyond approaches that address populism on the ideological basis and treats it as a performative style. Aiolfi claims that populism is shaped by the political performances enacted by right-wing populist leaders such as Trump and Marine Le Pen. These leaders transform the political arena into a stage, constructing a populist discourse through body language and rhetorical strategies. The exuberant rallies run by Trump during the US presidential campaigns in 2016 and Le Pen’s controlled provocations during the 2017 French presidential debates illustrate how populism functions as a performative form of staging. The analytical framework presented by Aiolfi enables the examination of populist actors through elements such as rhetoric style, visual presentation and emotional interaction.

Kire Sharlamanov’s *Populism as Meta Ideology* offers a novel approach by redefining populism as a “meta ideology” based on the recent resurgence of the concept. The book systematically explores the nature of populism, characteristic concepts, and principal approaches in the literature. In addition, it looks into the rise of populism within the context of modernization and globalization, discussing the effects of these processes on populist discourse and behaviors. The book examines the relationship between populism and democracy analytically, bringing an innovative perspective to the current conceptual and theoretical boundaries of populism.

The first three chapters focus on the characteristic structure of populism, principal approaches in the literature and key concepts, providing an analytical framework for the conditions that give rise to populism discussed in the following chapters. According to Sharlamanov, populism is a multidimensional and flexible political phenomenon dating back to the 19th century. However, it gained strength in the modern era through globalization, media, and social transformations. In this sense, populism can be evaluated as a phenomenon operating at a meta-political level. A phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to the left-right spectrum ideologically. In this context, no single definition can be established for populism, which manifests itself in varying forms depending on socio-political conditions. Sharlamanov builds the theoretical framework of populism around the concepts of the people, sovereignty,

the elite, the general will and demagoguery and analyzes how these notions determine political actors' positions and interactions. Within this framework, the people, located in the center of populism, are defined as a collective subject exercising direct or indirect influence on state governance through the "general will". A populist leader identifies with the ideals of the people and mobilizes large masses around their political narrative with an anti-elitist stance. In this process, "the other", such as immigrants and minorities, is excluded from society. The exclusive mechanisms of populists enable the establishment of a moral and political dialectic between the people and the elite, where the former are depicted as innocent and morally superior, the latter are accused of corruption. In this respect, populism generates democratic legitimacy through the promise of restoring popular sovereignty, and functions both as a political strategy and a form of social movement.

In the fourth chapter titled "Modernization", Sharlamanov elaborates on the emergence of populism in the contemporary era. In this chapter, elements such as social crises, deficiencies within political systems, and declining trust in traditional parties are examined together with the phenomena of modernization and globalization, providing an analysis of the emergence of populism. The author discusses how modernization affected the emergence and development of populism in different ways. He places particular emphasis on the effects of modernization on the "losers" among social groups in the shift from populism (19th century) to new populism (post-industrial era), thereby locating populism as a reactive defense mechanism against successive waves of modernization. According to Sharlamanov, while populism triggers social transformation, it emerges as a reaction to these changes and manifests itself in distinct forms in various socio-political contexts. He believes that populism is not a static phenomenon; but it rather embodies a dynamic "reactivity" shaped by contextual changes. In this regard, peasant uprisings originating in rural settings in the early modern era shed light onto the dynamic structure of populism. Populism responds to the social disruptions caused by modernization as an alternative mode of modernization that prioritizes the interests of the people.

The fifth chapter, titled "Globalization", which examines the complex dynamics of the populism-globalization relationship, advances the argument that the political, economic, and social outcomes of globalization have laid the ground for the rise of populism. For Sharlamanov, while advances in transportation and communication technologies have accelerated the flow of capital, goods, and information, they have also resulted in unfair outcomes in the global distribution of income. In this process, financial elites and multinational corporations have emerged as the primary beneficiaries of globalization, whereas individuals composing the unqualified labor force have become its losers. He argues that the losers of globalization have mobilized around populist leaders so that they could express themselves within the political arena. Populist actors, on the other hand, have framed globalization as a project of transnational elites and claimed to reestablish popular sovereignty.

In the sixth chapter titled "The Crisis of Political Parties", the author analyzes the effects of globalization on populism within the scope of the crises of political parties. According to Sharlamanov, while the shift from the mass parties of the 20th century to the leader-centered

democracies of the 21st century triggered a profound crisis in representation mechanisms, populism has become an attractive alternative in contemporary democracies. The blurring of ideological boundaries among mainstream parties, the increase in corruption and the erosion of national sovereignty caused by globalization have detached citizens from their collective identities, empowering individualism and considerably decreasing political participation. The author believes that the electoral success of populist actors such as Wilders in the Netherlands and Grillo in Italy was not a coincidence. He thinks that the problems caused by the crisis of political representation have driven citizens towards populist parties. In this context, the theocratic dominance of elites has been replaced by the direct-communication based public discourse of charismatic leaders.

Sharlamanov suggests that modern representative democracy fundamentally relies on communication between politicians and citizens and that the media serves as an independent instrument enabling this communication (p.175). The author elaborates on this idea in chapter seven, “Transformation of the Public Sphere”, providing a comprehensive examination of the relationship between the rise of populism and the evolving role of the media. Sharlamanov’s key argument is that the media has become an instrument that strengthens populism. Accordingly, populist leaders mobilize large masses by benefitting from the entertainment and sensation-oriented logic of the media. In this context, the commercialization of the traditional media has paved the way for the dissemination of populist discourse while leading to erosion in the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Digitalization and advances in social media have further contributed to the intensification of these dynamics. Populist actors have empowered mass mobilization through direct and emotional communication strategies on platforms such as X and Facebook. For instance, Donald Trump adopted a direct communication mode on his X account, thereby cultivating a close connection with his followers. Trump’s posts such as “Thank you, America!” have reinforced his image that identified him with “the people”.

The dimensions of the relationship between populism and democracy are addressed in the eighth chapter, titled “Populism and Liberal Democracy”. This chapter presents a discussion over the paradoxical nature of populism, derived from the tension between sovereignty and constitutionalism – the two core elements of democracy. Sharlamanov states that populism undertakes a democratizing role at the stage of opposition by including marginal groups into the political arena; however, when it comes to power, it tends to adopt an anti-democratic orientation threatening pluralistic structures through the conceptualization of a homogenous “people”. In this process, an “illiberal” form of democracy emerges as the anti-elitist stance of populism targets constitutional institutions. The claim to embody popular sovereignty in a single political actor absolutizes the will of the majority, thereby leading to majoritarian authoritarianism.

Théo Aiolfi’s work titled *The Populist Style* addresses far-right populism through the lens of “political style” and provides a comparative analysis centered on the examples of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen. Aiolfi argues that despite the sharply divergent political styles of the two leaders, they converge around a shared populist style. The author adopts Benjamin

Moffitt's framework of political style as the methodological basis, and re-conceptualizes populism as an aesthetic, rhetoric, and performative mode of politics accordingly. The primary focus of the book is on the speeches, rally performances and media appearances of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen during their 2016 and 2017 election campaigns. The work is based on Aiolfi's doctoral dissertation and consists of six main chapters and a concluding section. The chapters of the book are organized as follows: "Staging Populism", "Redefining the Populist Style", "Analysing Political Performances", "Performing Identity", "Performing Transgression", "Performing Crisis", and "Conclusion: Comparing the Performances of Le Pen and Trump".

The first three chapters focus on the theoretical and methodological framework of the research. In these sections, Aiolfi assesses various approaches in the populism literature with a critical perspective and clarifies his own conceptual position. In addition, the author elaborates on the rationale behind conceptualizing populism as a political style and provides a detailed explanation of the Comparative Thematic Analysis method, which forms the analytical basis of the study. Aiolfi's key argument is that politics is, in all its facets, a performance and populism is an interdisciplinary repertoire based on the concepts of performance and performativity. This repertoire draws on insights from diverse fields such as theatre, sociology and political science and encompasses strategies like leaders' emphasizing the antagonism between "the people" and "the elites" and dramatizing political crises. Accordingly, politicians, just like actors going on stage, work to persuade masses by performing the roles expected from them. For example, while Trump uses an abrasive style in his direct communication, Le Pen adopts a more derisive style. Drawing upon Moffitt's approach, Aiolfi suggests three main performative clusters to form the populist style: (1) "Performing Identity" (2) "Performing Transgression" and (3) "Performing Crisis".

The fourth chapter of the book focuses on the identity performances inherent in populism. In this chapter, identity is defined, in its broadest sense, as a social construct that distinguishes individuals or groups from others. The concept is used drawing upon the post-structuralist thought (particularly Derrida and Butler) and adopts an anti-essentialist approach that challenges the assumption of a pre-existing essence. Within this framework, Aiolfi comparatively examines how Trump and Le Pen use the concept of "the people" in their populist discourse and analyzes the performance of the concept through quantitative data, thematic tendencies and semantic associations. While Le Pen associates "the people" with a discourse of class, national solidarity and pronounced nationalism, Trump foregrounds the image of a 'forgotten people' through superlative expressions such as "Make America Great Again" and anti-establishment rhetoric. Le Pen's discourse carries a strong emphasis on national identity reinforced by French universalism and Islamophobic allusions whereas Trump's rhetoric is rather framed by a more individualistic and exclusionary tone. Moreover, while Le Pen establishes populism coherently around collective identity and nationalism, Trump performs a form of leadership shaped by pragmatism and a personalized TV style.

Aiolfi claims that the political styles of populist leaders deliberately violate established norms. In his view, deliberate violations collectively make up a whole called “transgressive performances”. In the fifth chapter, the author contends that transgressive performances such as coarse language, emotional rhetoric, visual ordinariness, and meta-political commentary form the core of the populist style. According to Aiolfi, “violation” is not a byproduct of populist politics but a key performative strategy that defines it. While this strategy creates an image of a sincere and independent leader, it carries the risk of being perceived as unserious and threatening. From a gender perspective, Le Pen has had a more limited area of violation due to her hegemonic masculinity expectations and presidential norms. Unlike Trump, Le Pen received harsh media condemnation in her attempts at humor.

The sixth chapter of the book concentrates on the concept of “the performance of crisis”, which Aiolfi conceptualizes as the third performative cluster of the populist style. The chapter looks into Trump and Le Pen’s political strategies and the core components of their populist discourse comparatively. The analysis addresses the dominant narratives in both leaders’ rhetoric under two categories. The first of these is the Crisis Narrative Rooted in Exclusionary Nationalism that involves the notions of economic crisis, security crisis, and the “heartland”. The second one is the Anti-Establishment Crisis Narrative encompassing crises of leadership, accountability, and vulnerability. According to Aiolfi, Trump and Le Pen frame economic, security, and identity-based crises with an exclusionary nationalism, thereby depicting immigrants, foreigners, and global actors as threats to national identity. Additionally, with a populist anti-establishment discourse, both leaders target political elites, the media, and global capital as corrupt actors undermining the interests of the people. Such a crisis narration, directed against “the others” and “the elites”, produces a sense of fear, anger, and urgency within society, while Trump and Le Pen situate themselves as the sole leaders capable of perceiving the existential threats facing the nation and saving the country. The main difference between the two leaders emerges in the quality of their ideological orientations and the discursive traditions through which they articulate crisis. Le Pen associates economic crises with hyper-liberalism, inequality, and austerity policies and grounds her proposed solutions in a nationalist framework. Trump, however, approaches economic crisis in a non-analytical manner using concrete notions such as “stolen jobs” and “closed factories”. Similarly, Le Pen presents the identity crisis dramatically and calls for a return to a lost national past using such expressions as “Give us back France!”, whereas Trump articulates the issue more vaguely with the slogan “Make America Great Again”.

In the conclusion where the performances of Le Pen and Trump are compared, Aiolfi shares his opinion regarding the key differences between the two populist actors. In his view, Le Pen aims to reach broader audiences by using left-wing themes superficially through her “gauchisme” (leftism) strategy, while softening her far-right image with the “dediabolisation” approach. On the other hand, Trump emphasizes nationalism to a lesser extent, adopting a more transactional approach and prioritizing discourses on economic interests. On a personal level, Trump stands out with his past identity of a successful and wealthy businessman, whereas

Le Pen embraces the persona of an ordinary French woman with a traditional political career, drawing on gender dynamics. Rhetorically, Trump employs a simple and concrete style, while Le Pen resorts to rich, abstract and metaphorical discourse.

Sharlamanov approaches populism as a flexible and dynamic construct of ideological content emerging in varying socio-political contexts. Accordingly, populism, shaped by core values such as the glorification of the people, anti-elitism, and direct democracy, can borrow some concepts and instruments from other ideologies, which makes it a meta-ideology for Sharlamanov. He draws attention to the differences between the ideologies of Trump and Sanders, and presents their shared status as anti-settlement populist candidates as an example of meta-ideology. In this definition, the flexible structure of populism allows it to emerge in alignment with both right- and left-wing movements and to develop various political agendas depending on social contexts. Aiolfi, on the other hand, defines populism as a political style drawing upon Moffitt's approach. His principal argument is that populism cannot be defined by a specific idea or ideological content. In Aiolfi's view, what matters is not 'what' populist actors such as Trump and Le Pen say, but 'the way' they say it. This approach necessitates accepting that populism inherently carries a performative and theatrical dimension. Aiolfi further develops Moffitt's definition and suggests a repertoire of performative practices that populist actors can use to communicate their ideological agendas. According to Aiolfi, populist style consists of three complementary components: (1) Expressing the antagonism between the people and the elite through a populist leader (2) violating established political rules to distinguish from other politicians, and (3) developing a narrative of crisis for a nation under threat. Aiolfi's comparative analysis demonstrates that the populist style of Trump and Le Pen are structured around shared performative logics that generate political appeal, while also showing that these logics are articulated in distinct ways across different political and cultural contexts.

The most striking distinction between the two books is that while Sharlamanov proposes a broad and abstract model, Aiolfi presents an in-depth theoretical analysis based on a narrow and concrete sample. In this respect, Sharlamanov's book introduces a novel conceptual approach to populism drawing on the existing theoretical framework. Sharlamanov, who defines populism as a meta-ideology and suggests an authentic framework, forms this framework based on a comprehensive review and critical analysis of the related literature. The methodology of the study relies on the examination and evaluation of existing theoretical approaches rather than using empirical data. In this respect, the book proposes a conceptual model and enables future meta-ideology research to be supported through empirical inquiry. In addition, the framework suggested by Sharlamanov allows for an in-depth examination of phenomena such as globalization and modernization and the discussion of abstract issues, including the relationship between populism and democracy. In contrast, Aiolfi's book has an empirical methodology. He treats Trump and Le Pen as units of analysis and conducts a comparative analysis, using qualitative data collection methods (textual analysis, leader discourse etc.) and providing an observable framework for the populist style. The argument concerning the populist style is substantiated with concrete data, including leader discourses,

electoral campaigns and media performances. Holistically, Sharlamanov's work provides an abstract and literature-based framework, while Aiolfi introduces a more concrete and empirical analytical perspective.

The populism-democracy nexus lies at the center of political debates today. Populists' promises to integrate diverse social segments of society into the political arena, and their invocation of democratic instruments, such as referendums and direct participation are considered constructive elements in the relationship between populism and democracy. However, most populists' tendency to exalt the will of the majority but disregard pluralistic structure and their antidemocratic attitudes such as ignoring democratic accountability mechanisms, raises the issue of the authoritarian erosion of democracy. Sharlamanov defines populism as a meta-ideology, which is embedded in liberal democratic systems and poses a threat to the pluralistic structure. He sees populism as a reaction to crises of legitimacy and representation in emerging democracies. Additionally, populism aims to create an alternative legitimacy against political elites by claiming to transmit the will of the people directly into politics. This carries the potential to undermine the core pillars of democracy (the rule of law, pluralism, minority rights etc.). For Sharlamanov, reliance of populist rhetoric on a homogenous conception of the people poses the risk of generating a political culture that glorifies majority rule. Populism's emphasis on direct democracy, referendums and people-centered participation causes the rejection of the compromise mechanisms and pluralistic nature of representative democracy. In this respect, Sharlamanov concludes that decision-making mechanisms are likely to lose their functionality in a society where democracy is reduced to the will of the majority. On the other hand, Aiolfi challenges the view that populism constitutes an absolute threat to democracy. For Aiolfi, approaching populism through preconceived associations with demagoguery or proto-authoritarianism impedes understanding the internal vulnerabilities of democratic systems. In this regard, populism is not solely a destructive political element, but it also holds the potential to expose crises of political representation and contribute to political renewal. Aiolfi thinks that populist discourses mobilize the dynamics of the democratic system by questioning political elites and criticizing the existing order. Moreover, Aiolfi states that populism, when combined with regressive and exclusionary content, can get instrumentalized and trigger "liberal tendencies". Populism can be seen as a political phenomenon capable of being employed in both democratic and anti-democratic forms.

The two works examined in this study exhibit distinct differences in terms of narration. *Populism as Meta Ideology* employs a highly theoretical language and conceptual framework. Questions such as "What is populism?" or "What are the key concepts related to populism?" are discussed through extensive theoretical and conceptual debates. However, such abstract conceptualizations may limit the readability of the text for general audiences who are not field experts. In contrast, instead of discussing populism solely on a conceptual level, *The Populist Style* analyzes it through dynamic and interdisciplinary concepts such as "performance", "performative repertoire", and "theatrical norms". This approach renders populist discourse and practices more concretely observable, making the text more interesting for a broader

audience. Aiolfi's detailed analyses of recent political cases gives the text a more current context, promoting the reader's engagement. In conclusion, Sharlamanov's in-depth and conceptually dense discussions reflect a more "elitist" academic style, whereas Aiolfi's self-centered narration presents a "style" that encourages the participation of the reader.

As a complex and multidimensional phenomenon of contemporary global politics, populism, has been largely debated in social sciences. The books by Sharlamanov (2022) and Aiolfi (2025) introduce different approaches to understanding populism. Despite their methodological and empirical differences, both works aimed to produce coherent findings to understand what populism is, how it emerged and how it has affected global politics and democracy. In this regard, *Populism as Meta Ideology* addresses populism in a holistic framework, presenting a conceptual debate through a clearly-structured content order. Sharlamanov looks into the reasons of the rise of populism in a contemporary context, conceptualizes the phenomenon as a meta-ideology, thereby introducing an innovative theoretical framework to the literature. However, the book's heavy reliance on conceptual discussions lead the author's conclusions and observations to remain at an abstract level. Likewise, the book does not move beyond the right-wing populism centered narration in the literature. Moreover, the absence of empirical findings causes the analysis to lack practical contexts. Despite all these limitations, *Populism as Meta Ideology* makes significant contributions to the literature with the innovative perspective to contemporary populism and compelling analysis of the populism-democracy relationship in the age of globalization. *The Populist Style*, on the other hand, approaches populism as a concrete "performance repertoire", introducing a novel perspective to the literature through its analyses of the political leadership of Trump and Le Pen over empirical data. Advancing Moffitt's methodological approach, Aiolfi examines populism around three performance clusters, presents an authentic approach by offering clear and decisive responses to the ongoing debate on the ambiguity of the phenomenon. The interdisciplinary nature of the book provides a multifaceted contribution by enabling it to reach a wide range of readers. Moreover, the book provides no assessment regarding left-wing populism and confines itself to the comparison of two politically similar figures: Trump and Le Pen. This emphasis on right-wing populism may be associated with the growing salience of authoritarian populist strategies, particularly their capacity to mobilize electoral support through effective crisis framing (Akgemci 2022; Güler 2025). This maintains the ambiguity concerning the approach of the populist style to left-wing populism. In addition, a performance-based approach fails to offer a comprehensive debate on the violation of the ideological foundations of populism and the current problems of the populism-democracy relationship across different socio-political contexts.

References

- Akgemci, E. 2022. Authoritarian Populism as a Response to Crisis: The Case of Brazil, *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 19, 74: 37-51.
- Destradi, S., D. Cadier and J. Plagemann. 2021. Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda (Intoduction). *Comparative European Politics* 19: 663-682.

- Güler, K. 2025. Fear of the Other as Electoral Strategies in Italy and Hungary. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 22, 86: 49-66.
- Kaltwasser, C. R., and C. Sandoval. 2024. Diffusion and Global Circulation of Populist Discourse. In *Research Handbook on Populism*, ed. Y. Stavrakakis and G. Katsambekis. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing: 540-550.
- Laclau, E. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London and New York, Verso.
- Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C. R. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Moffitt, B. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Ramos, J. M., and P. Torres. 2020. The Right Transmission: Understanding Global Diffusion of the Far-Right. *Populism* 3, 1: 87-120.
- Spandler, K., and F. Söderbaum. 2023. Populist (de)legitimation of International Organizations. *International Affairs* 99, 3:1023-1041.
- Taggart, P. 2000. *Concept in the Social Sciences Populism*. Buckingham-Philadelphia, Open University Press.
- Weyland, K. 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics* 34, 1: 1-22.
- Wiles, P. 1969. A Syndrome, not a Doctrine. In *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, ed. G. Ionescu and E. Gellner. Letchworth, The Garden City Press: 166-179.