War(time) populism: Discursive strategies in violent conflict

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While the study of populism has primarily focused on processes of social homogenization, polarization, and anti-establishment/elite/institutional discourses in representative politics and political liberalism, its potential link to violent conflict remains understudied. This essay wants to reflect on the concept's possibilities and limitations for critical scholarship on violent conflict both in terms of vertical scalability (local, national, and international level) and horizontal comparability (cross-cultural, -national, and -regional). The concepts' often asserted "elusiveness" or "thinness" might also be its strength. By providing common academic terminology, while allowing for vernacular disparity, the notion of populism may be ideally situated to bridge not only the persisting Global North/South distinction still prevalent in (critical) conflict studies but also the spectrum of disciplines it builds on. To exemplify potential possibilities, the essay will take charge with three recent cases: Solidarity statements written by universities during the escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine in 2021, the public performances of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the Russia-Ukraine War, and the politics of memory by Bangladesh's ruling Awami League (AL) party.

Introduction

Populism has scarcely been studied in relation to (political) violence in the academic literature. That is both surprising and remarkable given that populism and violent conflict share the same essential characteristics: social homogenization, polarization, Othering, and antagonization. However, many prominent movements labeled populist have undoubtedly engaged in violent conflict or incorporated the memory of violent pasts as part of their populist ideology, discourse, strategy, or style.

Only a few examples in the literature have systematically linked populist movements (narratives) to violence. Penal populism (Pratt 2007) has perhaps been the most prominent type of populism in this context, particularly since Rodrigo Duterte's violent war on drugs (Curato 2017) gained much attention after his rise to power in 2016. Somewhat related, an ethnographic article by Tim Allen (2015) identified violent moral panics in northern Uganda, emanating from superstitious beliefs in witchcraft and vampires, as a form of moral populism. Yilmaz and Erturk (2021) have drawn the perhaps most explicit connection between populism and violence by framing Erdoğan's martyrdom narrative ("martyr nation") following the failed coup in 2016 as a form of necro-political populism to consolidate and stabilize AKP's authoritarianism.

As much as violence appears strangely absent from populism studies, the notion of populism does not figure prominently in the field of (critical) conflict studies either. This essay makes the case that populism can be a valuable framework to think about as well as through various aspects of violent conflict and that its perceived weakness, namely the concept's "slipperiness" (Mazzarella 2019), can also be conceived as its biggest strength. Its elusiveness allows for multidisciplinary and vernacular applicability to phenomena across socio-political and cultural contexts, effectively blurring the boundaries between the Global South/North. As Mazzarella (2019) rightly points out, a distinction that, in the first place, has always been more ideological than empirical.

Adding to the myriad of attempts to come up with a sophisticated or novel definition of populism or listing all the existing definitions or phenomena that this term has been stretched to accommodate seems less expedient and would go far beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, in the following section, I map the evolution of the study of populism, its most essential characteristics, and how it may relate to the study of violent conflicts. I will then offer three cases of how to use populism as an analytical lens in contexts of violent conflict. These accounts are not conceived as complete representations but as thought-provoking impulses. The first focuses on solidarity statements written during the 2020 violent escalation in the long-standing Israel-Palestine conflict as a discursive form of transnational

populism. The second case compares Vladimir Putin's and Volodymyr Zelenskyy's political style during the Russia-Ukraine War, acknowledging the workings and appeal of a "wartime populism". The third case applies the concept of populism as a thin-centered ideology to the memory of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War by the ruling Awami League (AL) party to legitimize and consolidate its authoritarian regime.

A genealogy of populism studies

The evolution of the systematic study of populism can be subdivided into four waves of scholarship. The earliest originated in a conference attended by a multidisciplinary cohort of primarily European scholars in 1967 at the London School of Economics, with the conference proceedings published in an edited volume (Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Those early scholars addressed the rise of a "global populism" primarily in what they considered "pre-modern states" located in Africa, Asia, and then communist Eastern Europe (Pappas 2016), including a myriad of disparate phenomena.

The second (1970s-1980s) and third wave (1980s-1990s) concentrated specifically on political developments in Latin America. The former group (e.g., Di Tella 1965; Germani 1978) sought to understand the socio-economic determinants of mass political movements and the structural conditions under which lower classes entered the political community through populist movements in the post-war decades and import substitution industrialization. The latter scholars (e.g., Roberts 1995; Weyland 1999) described a new "breed" of populist politicians who could implement neoliberal policies while simultaneously maintaining remarkably high levels of popular support: neo-populism. However, both waves remained primarily confined to Latin America's specific spatio-temporal context and socio-economic realities.

In the fourth wave (1990s-today), the study of populism has been growing exponentially. This renewed interest in populism was primarily based on the idea that a powerful populist "zeitgeist" has been challenging Western democracies (e.g., Mudde 2004). Therefore, populism has been increasingly studied in its relationship to representative politics (e.g., Canovan 1999; Taggart 2002), radical democracy (Laclau 2005), and political liberalism (e.g., Pappas 2019).

At least since Trump's 2016 election victory, Brexit, Erdogan's countercoup, and Orban's hold on power has ultimately turned populism into a buzzword in public discourse. Accordingly, in academia, "populism" became the Cambridge Dictionary's "word of the year"

in 2017, Brill launched the international peer-reviewed journal *Populism* in 2018, and in 2021 the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS) was founded in Brussels.

This academic turn to mostly far-right populism in the Global North West has also been critiqued for being primarily associated with an orientalist notion assuming that a previously "normal" or "liberal democratic" Global North West has suddenly become "abnormal" or "illiberal" (e.g., Masood and Nisar 2020)—or similar to the Global South East (cf. Pappas 2019).

Despite this fetishization of an idealized liberal democracy and predominance of North Western far-right politics in contemporary populism studies, a few prominent cases in the postcolony, which could perhaps indicate the beginning of the fifth wave of populism studies, such as the authoritarian "penal populism" spearheaded by Duterte in the Philippines (Curato 2016, 2017), Modi's "Hindu-nationalist populism" in India (Chatterji, Angana, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019), and liberation movements in South Africa such as the left-wing pan-Africanist Economic Freedom Fighters led by Julius Malema (Nyenhuis 2020; Melber 2018) have received adequate coverage in academic and public debate. Of course, one can also find scattered past cases of less prominent political movements or leaders in the Global South East that have been analyzed through the lens of populism. Some examples are Museveni in Uganda (Carbone 2005), Mumbai's Shiv Sena party in India (Heuzé 2000), or forms of 'electoral populism' in sub-Saharan Africa (Boone 2009; Kagwanja 2009).

Although there is no agreement over a common definition of populism among scholars, there is a minimal overlap in its described characteristics, which is relevant to my overall argument and cases in this essay. Populism then appears in the guise of either a (thin-centered) ideology (Mudde 2004), discourse (Hawkins 2009; Laclau 2005), or style (Moffitt 2016) that pits a whatsoever constructed notion of "the pure people" against an equally vaguely constructed "corrupted elite". Other key elements are the notion of a volonté générale (will of the people), social homogenization, polarization/antagonization, and charismatic leadership.

Since this minimal definition does hardly allow for an *a priori* normative application of the concept, at least not without contextual considerations, the simple labeling of a movement, party, or leader as populist is hardly expedient. Instead, we should focus our gaze on the processes of social homogenization and the various ways by which "the people", "the corrupt elites", and effectively antagonistic relationships are constructed in contexts of violent conflict.

Evidently, anthropologists have long covered such populist phenomena, particularly its micro-mechanisms, without explicitly referring to the concept itself or appropriating

its language (Mazzarella 2019). There are, of course, many good reasons for embracing the performative value of vernacular concepts, particularly for advancing our quest to decolonize the academy. At the same time, the concept of populism establishes a common language not only across disciplines and regions. Its simplicity has the potential to make our research more intelligible and comparable for conflict and development practitioners while preserving vernacular variations that interact with vernacular forms of democracy. Much like anthropological theorizing and methodology have impacted critical conflict studies, we should similarly consider using these tools to understand the relationship between populism and violent conflict.

Transnational populism: Solidarity discourse in times of escalating violence

The first case in this trilogy ensued in my personal sphere when the Israel-Palestine conflict arrived at yet another violent episode in May 2021. As so often, violence erupted over the planned eviction and displacement of Palestinian families from their homes. Demonstrations turned violent and Israel's police force reacted by brutely raiding the al-Aqsa Mosque. Hamas and other militant groups reacted by firing as much as 4360 rockets from the Gaza strip ("only" 60-70 hit population centers in Israel) (Mohammed et al. 2021), provoking a devastating campaign of Israeli air-, land- and sea strikes (around 1500) against Gaza. As usual, casualties were unequally distributed. While at least 256 Palestinians were killed and 1900 injured, Israel counted at least 13 casualties and 200 injured.

At the height of the escalating violence, some of my colleagues moved quickly to formulate a "statement in solidarity with the Palestinian people", condemning "the violent Israeli attacks on the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and within Israel". Published on May 18th, the statement was one of many issued by university faculties/ departments and civil society organizations (e.g., Fridays for Future) worldwide, reaching 1300 signatories by May 24th. A major point of contention with this statement and others was its conspicuously populist framing.

Due to the lack of space, it is not possible to recite or analyze the full statement here. However, let me highlight some of the most representative populist passages in the statement. First, the statement declared its solidarity with a homogenized "Palestinian people" in their struggle against the all-powerful/elite "settler-colonial regime [...] Israel". Second, the statement also points to a historic struggle of "the Palestinian people who have opposed, since 1948, [...] ethnic cleansing, land annexations, population transfers, and

apartheid." Third, the statement denounces "the misleading coverage in the Belgian media that consistently portrays the enduring violence in Israel/Palestine as 'clashes' between two equal parties, which are difficult to understand, as a mere 'conflict' between Hamas and Israel." Instead, the statement reduces the complexity to the "true nature of the Israeli/ Palestinian question", an antagonistic and Manichean relationship between "occupier versus oppressed, […] colonizer versus colonized."

To be clear, I am neither qualified nor do I intend to evaluate the validity of these claims or cast a normative judgment. I simply point toward the statement's populist elements and caution about its affectual potential. While for Mouffe and Laclau, the statement is probably a prime example of a legitimate populist discursive strategy to overcome the power inequalities in an unjust system (toward "radical democracy"), others might interpret it as a dangerous polarization and "outside" intervention, "fueling" rather than "solving" the conflict. This contention essentially carries the key question: What role does, should, or can these populist discourses in the transnational public sphere play in contexts of violent conflict? Is it an apposite or harmful strategy? Clearly, the answer is context specific and beyond the scope of this essay. However, and although it would be prudent not to equate these periodic transnational populist statements with more systematized global movements such as #occupy, it is the impact on and relation to violent conflict that should interest us both as scholars and activists, which has become even more prevalent since Russia invaded Ukraine.[1]

War(time) populism: Zelenskyy's political style

Charismatic leadership has been a central element in the analysis of populist phenomena, which inspired some scholars (e.g., Knight 1998; Moffitt 2016) to think about populism as a political style instead of discourse or ideology. Knight (1998, 223), for example, sees populism as a loose style "characteristically involving a proclaimed rapport with 'the people', a 'them-and-us' mentality, and (often, though not necessarily) a period of crisis and mobilization." Jagers and Walgrave (2007) have specified populism as "a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people." Moffit and Tormey (2014, 387, emphasis by the authors) have moved "beyond the purely communicative and rhetorical elements […], and emphasize the performative and relational elements of political style", defined as *"the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations."*

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[1] See also Benjamin Moffitt (2017) on the possibilities and limitations of a transnational populism.

Anthropologists have long applied political performativity as a conceptual lens to study how authority is (re)produced and political violence negotiated in more 'localized' political settings. Tomas Blom Hansen's (2004) work on the Hindu-Nationalist Shiv Sena party in Mumbai is one of the most notable examples here, which confirms that anthropologists have been studying populist phenomena for many years without explicitly labeling them as such. Osterlow's (2022) music video analysis of Bobi Wines' populist political style in Uganda is one of the notable attempts that draws on both sets of literature, demonstrating possible synergies that can emerge from crossing disciplinary boundaries. How can a stylistic perspective on populism be applied to the study of violent conflict then?

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's wartime performativity—especially when contrasted with Vladimir Putin's political style—may serve as an insightful contemporary case, illustrating the power vested in populist performances in contexts of violent conflict. Even before the war, Zelenskyy carried some of the typical populist characteristics as described in the literature: As a comedian/TV actor, he was a political outsider candidate when he ran a successful presidential campaign in 2019 at the age of 42; employees of his own production company Kvartal95 founded his eponymous party platform only shortly before in 2018; he campaigned on an anti-establishment (anti-oligarch) and anti-corruption ticket. In many ways, Zelenskyy personified the spirit of the Euromaidan uprising, which essentially demanded to part with the political vestiges of Soviet times, realize Ukraine's sovereignty as a nation, and follow other Eastern European countries in moving toward and eventually joining the European Union.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Zelensky took (once again) advantage of his experience as a TV actor and media professional by masterfully applying (social) media to adapt his performances to what I would call wartime populism. Much could be said, of course, about Zelenskyy's speeches, but his entire political style underwent a spectacular shift. Before the war, he fashioned a technocratic stateman-like appearance reminiscent of other young 'Western' charismatic leaders such as Macron or Trudeau. This changed from day one of the invasion. On social media, he reached out from bunker-like places, dark halls or stairways in what appeared to be the presidential offices under siege, or he presented himself in a handheld selfie video outside in central Kyiv with the words "I am here, we are not surrendering […] We are fighting." He would close every address to the people with the battle cry *"Slava Ukraini"* ("Glory to Ukraine"), which first became popular during Ukraine's independence war (1917-1921) and again during the 2014 Maidan uprising after the Soviet and later Russian authorities would discredit and even prohibit the slogan's use for decades. In 2018, it was introduced as the Ukrainian Armed Forces' official salute.

With the beginning of Russia's war of aggression, every Ukrainian became by their identity's mere existence a warrior in defense of the nation's sovereignty. Zelenskyy adapted his performances accordingly and resorted to military symbolism (e.g., wearing green military outfits, etc.) to both reconstruct and relate to "the Ukrainian people" in these times of war. The most iconic populist performance, however, was him turning down an offer from the US of evacuation from Kyiv with the words "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride'" according to a tweet by the British embassy.

Compared to Zelenkyy, however, Putin's performances (e.g., the long table, being isolated) remind more of a technocratic, autocratic, even monarchic political style that almost appears anti-populist. Contrasting the affectual potential of these two styles may be a valuable exercise to distinguish the populist political style from mere nationalist symbolism and appreciate its mobilizing power in times of violent conflict.

Memorial populism of the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh

The last vignette is somewhat related to Yilmaz's and Erturk's (2021) notion of necro-political populism. It deals with the ideologization of a populist memory of war and sacrifice to constitute and stabilize Bangladesh's authoritarian regime under the Awami League (AL) party. This case is based on a forthcoming book chapter I am co-authoring with my colleague Bert Suykens, where we look at the many ways in which the AL government reinterprets and essentially "empties out" the memory of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War and especially the liberation movements leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to build an ideology that legitimizes its autocratic reign.

The AL party was indeed the party of independence. Since the country's return to democracy in 1991, the over two-decade-long struggle for independence has become a crucial populist trope, re-emerging as the AL's central ideological reference. In countless interviews, party activists and leaders would reduce their party's ideology to the liberation war, and Sheikh Mujib, in the form of his unfinished memoirs (published in English in 2014) and prison diaries (to be published in English in 2022)—two books based on Sheikh Mujibur's diaries that came to light in 2004 and 2009 respectively. They reproduce a populist memory where the struggle for popular sovereignty coalesces with Mujib's personal struggle and sacrifice and the idea of a nation, defining in a Manichean manner "the Bengali people" and their colonial antagonist, the Pakistan elite, its elite Bengali supporters and by extension today's main opposition parties—or even those who simply criticize this often oversimplified historical narrative.

This (partial) memory of Mujib as a humble but heroic and charismatic leader is also spread via pop culture intended to speak to a younger generation. One example is a famous graphic novel called "Mujib" or a 2018 released independent movie titled "Hasina: A Daughter's Tale" that directly connects Sheikh Mujib's sacrifice and Prime Minister Hasina's inherited claim as the legitimate sovereign. A Bangladesh-India co-produced Bengali-language biographical film titled "Mujib: The Making of a Nation" is scheduled for release in September 2022. The film's trailer has already stirred some controversy over its historical accuracy.

One can find plenty of empirical evidence (e.g., school books, speeches, ceremonies, sculptures, museums) of this kind of populist memorial reproduction in Bangladesh (e.g., Ruud 2020; Karim 2020; Mookherjee 2011; Chowdhury 2020). What makes it populist in our (Kuttig and Suykens, forthcoming) conceptualization is its thin-centered ideological focus (which can be combined with ideologies such as nationalism, etc.) on a single past event and/or person. Crucially, this event or person acts as an "empty signifier" that constructs both "the people" and an antagonist to rally against. These memorial re-articulations and re-appreciation provide the central focal point of this kind of populist ideology, which is in some way reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's (1980) notion of the Balinese "theatre state" in its performative attempt to preserve its authority. Historical imaginaries are, of course, commonly used in all kinds of populist movements/politics. What distinguishes memorial populism as a specific subtype is the emptying out of one specific past event/rupture, which becomes the central trope for social homogenization and polarization.

Conclusion

This essay wants to draw attention to the complex ways how populist discourses, styles, or ideologies relate to violent conflict from a non-normative and non-oriental perspective. The three diverse cases illustrate how to distinguish populist characteristics from other related phenomena such as nationalism or authoritarianism and showcase its mobilizing power. Lastly, this essay invites us to incorporate the notion of (vernacular) populism in critical conflict studies to understand violent conflict better and use comparable conceptual terminology across diverse cases.

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