

## CULTURE AND POPULISM

**This is the edited version of the brief power-point-supported contribution of Péter Inkei in Prague, on the 8th of November in 2017, at the 16th Assembly of Experts of the Council of Europe / ERICarts: Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends in Europe.**

### **Liberal democracy era**

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations Organisation was an early milestone of this era. This idealist quasi-utopian value doctrine defined the new world order. The “higher” spiritual values were declared priority over “lower” needs and instincts. Its underlying principles are roughly the same as those of the Open Society.

This authoritative Declaration could be adopted owing to a number of conditions:

- 1) The lingering trauma of the Second World War.
- 2) Seventy years ago societies were traditional and hierarchical: the crowds of the population acknowledged and accepted the dominant ideals communicated from top down. Intellectuals were respected.
- 3) The world was unipolar. The western powers could push through their own principles across the globe.
- 4) Stalin did not care. He knew he would outwit the petty games of those useful idiots anyway.

The advent of liberal democracy brought about a flow of emancipation that has been expanding on a broad scale up to our days.

### **Enter populism**

70 years later, we live in fluid societies, among dispersed sources of information; the multiple channels of communication facilitate the spread of populism. A phenomenon that equates closely to populism with demagogy, as defined by Wikipedia: gaining popularity by exploiting prejudice and ignorance among the common people, whipping up the passions of the crowd and shutting down reasoned deliberation.

### **Rearguard**

The rearguard has a thin voice. E.g. „Toleranz ist Grundprinzip der offenen Gesellschaft” (Angela Merkel in Wittenberg, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October).

### **Populism and culture**

On the one hand, there is a parallel relationship between the two. The same conditions that favour populism in politics, favour populist trends in culture, too: national narcissism, xenophobia, conspiracy theories, esoterism, etc.

The relationship is also consequential. Biased cultural policies encourage and facilitate the creation of pieces of art that support populist ideas. With deeper consequence is the adversity of populist policies towards contest and dissent in culture.

## Evidence

One promising diagnostic tool – although still too sophisticated for outsiders to use – is the Council of Europe [Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy](#) (IFCD).

1) Variables behind most indicators in the IFCD democracy components are suitable as indicators of populism, especially the following: analytical capacity, political independence, political competitiveness, safeguards and checks and balances, constraints on government powers, Informational openness, free and neutral press, freedom of association, freedom of expression, judicial impartiality.

2) Indicators of a smaller number of IFCD cultural components can explore the degree of cultural populism on the one hand, and populist bias in policies on the other, especially the following: interest in foreign cultures, non-partisan involvement, intercultural education, cultural funding legislation, support and promotion of cultural diversity, public measures for equality.

It will be an uphill job to apply this instrument and detect the advances (or retreat?) of populism in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, including in the cultural domain – especially where populism has the upper hand.

The diagnostic tool evolved by the Budapest Observatory, the [Cultural Climate Barometer](#) has two items that can signal the level populism permeates the system: *Excessive political influence in cultural matters*, and *Favouritism and biases in the distribution of grants*. Maybe also *Vanity projects absorbing too much money*. Respondents in the Visegrad countries have selected these as problematic factors in particularly high numbers.

## Warning

As it was referred to above, not the entire cultural sector is a bulwark against reactionary populism. Similarly, populism is not 100% evil. Otherwise populists would not be popular. Some populists use some of their power to the benefit of society. (Is Pope Franciscus populist?)