

The populist political logic and Alexey Navalny's political discourse

Ivan Nokhrin

De Cleen is definitely right when emphasizes that the categorization of parties, movements, and leaders as populist, which is carried out based on intuition (i.e. an implicit definition), complicates the development of the theory of populism by endlessly increasing the diversity of the case studies, among which there are much more differences than similarities (2019, p. 25). And this is not to mention the fact that the large majority of the cases under study are taken from the context of the Western democratic political regimes. But what if cases will be implicitly borrowed from Central Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Middle East? And what will happen with the coherence of the populism theory if researchers in different parts of the world will take into account only cases in the immediate geographic proximity to them?

In this regard, De Cleen's proposal to put the theory first and study populism as a political logic from the perspective of Ernesto Laclau's (1977, 2005a, 2005b; 2013 [1985]) approach seems very promising, especially because it has the potential for global application. Perhaps, the identification of new interesting cases of populism will be among the most interesting results of such an approach. Such cases, besides the fairly well-studied examples of European and American agenda, can advance the understanding of the phenomenon of populism. Here I would like to draw attention to the case of Russian politician and blogger Alexei Navalny, whose arrest, trial, and conviction were widely discussed in the world press in January and February 2021. It seems surprising enough, but during more than a decade of Navalny's activity, his figure rarely attracted attention in the context of populism studies (Glazunova, 2020; Lassila, 2016). Although, if to follow the De Cleen's and Laclauian approach, Navalny's political logic is purely populist. In this short paper, I am not going to discuss whether Navalny's political platform is right or wrong, but I am going to show that his populism is both quite typical and very closely related to the specifics of the development of Russian society in recent

decades.

'The people' and 'the elite' as nodal points. Navalny's political discourse is built on the construction of the 'people' through the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' along vertical down / up axis claiming to represent 'the people' as an underdog of illegitimate 'elite' (De Cleen, 2019, p. 30). In Navalny's interpretation, the Russian people are a victim of the corrupt politicians of the regime who are literally daily robbing the people through the appropriation of funds (i.e., the people's taxes) from the federal and regional budgets. It was Navalny who popularized the phrase "the party of crooks and thieves" addressing it to the ruling United Russia party (the phrase quickly gained popularity and became an Internet meme). Again, the words "crooks" and "thieves" in this context should be understood very literally meaning that members of the United Russia party had been stealing the people's money for many years. The illegality of the political 'elite' was argued by Navalny simultaneously by pointing out violations in the elections at various levels (from presidential to municipal) and, again, by emphasizing corruption of the regime. Moreover, the latter obtained even higher importance than the first because it allowed Navalny to call officials criminals, i.e. literally illegal persons.

The choice of accents was determined by the specifics of the values and meanings in Russian society. First of all, democracy and democratic institutions are still associated in Russia with the era of the "freewheeling 90s" (*likhie devyanostye*) – the time when the development of democratic political institutions was accompanied by a deep socio-economic crisis, poverty, rampant crime, and blatant social inequality. Moreover, there is a widespread opinion in Russia (although not unanimous) that it was precisely the democratic transition that caused the socio-economic crisis. Therefore, democracy as a symbol still has conflicting connotations and cannot play the role of a common denominator in the sense of Laclau (2005a, p. 82) for the demands of different social groups. At the same time, corruption and "stealing" are the symbols that people in Russia also associate with the most terrible crisis that they have personally experienced – the same "freewheeling 90s" and the recovering period of the early 2000s. But unlike "democracy", these symbols have an unambiguously negative meaning which explains their domination in Navalny's rhetoric.

The logic of equivalence. Laclau (2005a, 2005b) has argued that populism is governed by the logic of equivalence. It links together a number of demands and identities, without, however, totally eliminating their differences. Accordingly, the central theme of Navalny's discourse is corruption. This issue, chosen for numerous journalistic investigations, again, is symbolically associated with the 1990s – the era of "wild capitalism" in Russia when huge fortunes were made by the so-called "oligarchs" former bureaucrats of the Communist Party (*nomenklatura*) or people close to them who used their position in power for enrichment while

the living standards of the majority of the population fell sharply. Thus, the concept of corruption has a broader purpose than a common denominator. It is a symbol of the very social order for many unprivileged social groups who feel themselves a victim of the ontic social order (Laclau, 2005a, p. 90) established in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, Navalny's criticism of corruption in Russia today is much more than a criticism of economic crimes, it is a criticism of the social order in the broadest sense of the word. Navalny uses the logic of equivalence to appeal to all of those who are not satisfied with this order.

Constructing 'the people' versus the 'elite'. As De Cleen points, the category of people has to be opposed to 'the elite', or 'the establishment', but also to 'the caste' by symbolic manners of pointing out the 'high' position of 'elite' and its disconnection from the 'low'. It can include references to 'the elite' in its 'ivory tower', or to the well-off neighborhoods where they live, the kinds of houses they live in, and the kind of cafés and restaurants they visit (2019, p. 35). This logic has been Navalny's main ideological weapon in all of his journalist investigations over the past decade. The cases of corruption he chooses are of a mind-boggling scale. A vivid example is his latest video "Palace for Putin" which contains the fact that can shock the imagination of an 'ordinary' Russian. For instance, the video contains information about the price of toilet brushes (700 euros) in 'the palace' that exceeds the average monthly salary in Russia (about 550 euros). After the publication of the video, memes have appeared on the Internet in which the analogy was drawn between toilet brush and a royal scepter quite accurately coinciding with the intention of Navalny's film to show a giant gap between 'the elite' and 'the masses' like between the tsars and peasants in the Russian Empire. In other words, Navalny's videos do not deal with corruption as just a social ulcer or a crime but, again, use corruption as a symbol to create the impression of a gigantic gap between the everyday life of an 'ordinary' person who does not have enough monthly salary to buy a toilet brush from 'the palace' and the life of a thin 'elite' existing like in a parallel universe or an 'ivory tower' in the literal and figurative sense. Thus, the category of people is constructed as a community of all to whom such a flashy luxury seems outrageous – a very wide framework that can include groups with a variety of demands, not only economic but also moral and ideological.

Concluding this short analysis of Navalny's case, I would like to note that Navalny cannot be placed on the left or right in the political spectrum or clearly defined as a liberal or conservative in Western terms (he manages to combine libertarian and socialist ideas in his rhetoric), he is little worried about the problems of globalization whatever it the maintaining of Russian cultural identity, the limitation of migration, or the growth of supranational institutions and corporations. Navalny today has little inclination towards exclusive nationalism

(although, some years before nationalism and nativism was present in his rhetoric, however, it had never been among core ideas) and speaks even less about religion. Nevertheless, his political logic is purely populist, although it draws its strength from symbols and meanings specific only to Russia without left-right, globalist-nativist, and multiculturalist-nationalist dichotomies. The latter seems to raise the question of how important these oppositions are in general for understanding the phenomenon of populism.

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