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# HOW TO BEAT THE POPULISTS

IAF Seminar Paper

Liberalism vs Populism

International Academy for Leadership (IAF)

16 - 28 June 2019, Gummersbach

How to beat the Populists!

## Foreword

What makes populists attractive? Are they a projection screen for pent-up anger and frustration? Do people really believe the often obvious lies and false promises? Do they really share the hostile opinion towards minorities? And why don't they see that the harshest critics of the so-called elite are themselves part of privileged groups of society?

These same questions keep popping up after many elections and in many countries around the world. Within liberal political organisations these are followed by questions like: What exactly is populism and how can liberals win against it in political competition? And since populists seem to reach the hearts and minds of many voters so well: should we learn from them? Is there something like a liberal populism or populist liberalism as some occasionally suggest?

Liberals from around the world met at IAF in Gummersbach in June 2019 to examine these issues, to dissect populism into its individual components and to work themselves through the different forms and varieties of populism around the world to finally get to its core. With a better understanding of what we are dealing with, the group of course wanted to explore ways on how to tackle populists and beat them in political competition without detaching oneself from liberal values.

After 10 days of research, discussion and deliberation the participants of this intense seminar compiled their thoughts and findings into the following text that I think is worth sharing. Sven Gerst and Radu Magdin not only co-authored this paper together with the participants, they also kept the flow intense and high during the seminar with their exceptional facilitation!

So, if some of the above mentioned questions had come to your mind at some point after an election you will enjoy reading this brief IAF Seminar Paper and inspire your own thoughts.

Bettina Solinger

International Academy for Leadership (IAF)

## How We Will Beat the Populists!

- We have to recognize that populism is an ideology and not a communication strategy. And treat it like that!
- Liberals have to stop being lazy. We need a new vision. A new Utopia!
- Liberalism is deeply empathetic. Our vision of the Open Society™ is too powerful to reduce it to public policy and rational arguments!

## What is Populism?



*Translated as: "Right-wing Populism Eats Your Soul".  
Spotted in Berlin during the excursion.*

*"Populism is the most dangerous of narcotics, the most powerful of opiums, to numb and annihilate intelligence, culture, patience and intellectual efforts"*

- Michel Onfray

Populism is not a style of politics. Populism is an ideology. An ideology that connotes a democratic way of life built on popular support—essentially a positive force for the mobilization of the common people and for the development of a communitarian and nationalistic model of society through demonization of other groups, often minorities. More recent approaches consider populism as a political ideology employed by specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers gained through charismatic communication, normative statements and emotions.

Most populists are inherently very different from each other. However, [populism, universally, can be characterized on the basis of a set of basic features](#) that are cross-cutting across various populist regimes. They can be largely clubbed as under:

1. Populists are [MORALIZING](#); they tend to claim a high moral ground idealizing popular support and appeal to national, cultural and historical symbols.
2. Populists propagate [ANTI-PLURALISM](#); using demonization and polarization as techniques of mobilization and follow it up with an urgency to dismantle institutions (e.g. civil society, party systems etc).
3. Populists claim [PROXIMITY TO PEOPLE](#); through a self-imposing image of a 'common man' and leverage on 'silent majority'.
4. Populists are inherently [ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT](#); they are anti-elites and heavily rely on creating an illusion of democracy and governance of 'the people.'
5. Populists universally are very [LEADER FOCUSED](#); they create an image of a 'care-taker'—a savior complex that usually leads to the fact that the leader is outshining the party.
6. Populists adopt an ['US VERSUS THEM'](#) approach to politics; they project politics as an existential battle of friend versus enemy and leverage on that distinction.

## Can there be a liberal populism?

There is a short and clear answer: No, there cannot be a liberal populism. To set the context, liberal democracy is based on respect for individual human rights, the rule of law, and democratic procedures based on the exchange of interests in a multi-party party system and vivid civil society.

Populism is essentially democratic (although this might vary depending on how much populists have already dismantled democratic institutions), but at odds with liberal democracy. Populism is inherently grounded in the notion that nothing should constrain 'the will of the people' and

fundamentally rejects values of pluralism and tolerance and therefore 'minority rights' and the 'institutional guarantees' that must protect them. Populists often invoke popular sovereignty to undermine institutions that seek to protect those individual rights; something [inherently opposed to the liberal values](#).

Populism, therefore, tends to exploit the tensions that are core to liberal democracy, which is built on the fundamental premise of the values mentioned above and which are elaborated further in this document.

As liberals, we must acknowledge that there is much to learn from the populists in the in terms of their communication and strategy. Simplicity and clarity are key. In doing so, however, [we must be absolutely careful not to undermine our core values](#) - not only in substance but also in our attitude and conduct.

The following document delves into the foundations of liberalism and populism and how they are contrasting to each other, what kind of society both the ideologies envision and how it reflects in politics and ways of communication. It is interesting to observe in the course of this evaluation how fundamental opposing values as liberalism and populism define the playing field and determine what kind of society we build for ourselves.

## **Liberalism vs Populism: Values**

Politics is about values. And thus, every political analysis has to start with values. Values are basic and fundamental beliefs that guide and inform our attitudes or motivate our actions. They help us to determine what is important to us. Values are the motive behind *any* purposeful action. They are the ends to which we act and come in many forms. Likewise, two major political ideologies namely liberalism and populism have certain fundamental values that define their societal approach and identity. Interestingly, there exists a clash of values between the aforementioned political ideologies.

In the following table, we contrast the values of liberalism with those of populism. We observe that populist values act orthogonal to liberal values—which gives further support to our hypothesis that [populism is a backlash to the success of liberalism!](#)

*The Clash of Values: Liberalism vs Populism*

<b>LIBERAL VALUES</b>	<b>POPULIST VALUES</b>
<p>Liberty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Freedom of expression</li> <li>→ Freedom of choice</li> </ul>	<p>Power control &amp; submission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ State Control</li> <li>→ Authoritarianism</li> </ul>
<p>Individualism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Enable self-mastery</li> <li>→ Respect human rights</li> </ul>	<p>Nationalism &amp; Collectivism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Patriotism &amp; Sectarianism</li> <li>→ Xenophobia</li> </ul>
<p>Tolerance &amp; Pluralism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Recognition &amp; Identity</li> <li>→ Acceptance</li> </ul>	<p>Intolerance &amp; Homogeneity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Dogmatism</li> <li>→ Majoritarianism</li> </ul>
<p>Open Society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Transparency</li> <li>→ Free Markets</li> </ul>	<p>Closed Society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Conservative</li> <li>→ Protectionism</li> </ul>
<p>Rule of law</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Strong &amp; independent Institutions</li> <li>→ Equality before the law</li> </ul>	<p>Anti-establishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Corruption &amp; Nepotism</li> <li>→ Impunity</li> </ul>
<p>Skepticism about power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Limited government</li> </ul>	<p>Centralization of Power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ large government size</li> <li>→ heavy bureaucracy</li> </ul>
<p>Individual Responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Political Accountability</li> <li>→ Private Initiative</li> </ul>	<p>State Responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Redistribution</li> <li>→ Nanny State</li> </ul>
<p>Peace</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Dialogue &amp; Consensus</li> <li>→ Stability</li> </ul>	<p>Polarization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Hate speech</li> <li>→ Fake news</li> </ul>
<p>Spontaneous order</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Free market</li> <li>→ Private Property</li> </ul>	<p>State planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ State intervention</li> <li>→ State ownership</li> </ul>
<p>Enlightenment &amp; Progress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Competitiveness</li> <li>→ Entrepreneurship</li> <li>→ Creative destruction</li> </ul>	<p>Nostalgia &amp; Status Quo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Blame game</li> <li>→ Use of national symbols</li> </ul>



## Liberalism vs Populism: Visions

In order to beat populism, we have to create a liberal utopia, we need a value proposal for a successful society, which can be clearly communicated to the people. We strive for the future because it will be great. We envision a society, where the horizon of opportunities for everyone is constantly getting broader. We want a society where people's dreams are no longer confined by borders, prejudice or the power of the state. We believe that individual initiative, pluralism & respect for others, and the spontaneous order of markets and civil society are the most humane (and natural way) to govern social interaction.

Actually, we strive to change the overall agenda in society. Possessing considerable intellectual resources, economic and political ones, as well as sociological insights knowledge and global vision, liberals can (no, they HAVE to) attract intellectuals as allies in their fight against populism. Liberal change-making is rooted in ideas, more precisely in the ideas of liberty and individual self-determination. To spread our ideas, we need the intellectual class. In this joint venture, we will reach not only the academe and elites but media and all across the internet. Our arguments that have been refined over centuries combined with the support of intellectuals in their role as second-hand dealer will become our stronghold against populism.

The Vision of Populism is clear: Populists aims for a homogenous society. Populists want a society where all people are the same without any diversity of culture. On the other hand, liberals cherish diversity, individuality, and accepting difference. Our Vision is called the Open Society, where open self-discovery free from judgment and interference is at the heart of human flourishing. But liberals have not sufficiently articulated this idea of the Open Society. So, here is a starting point:

- The Open Society provides opportunities for individuals to choose their way of life, to realize their potential in accordance with their needs and wants.
- Main function of the state is to protect human rights and human dignity. The state should not interfere with the domain of civil society.
- Power should not be centralized. The Open Society stands for polycentric, local governance that encourages individual action on the ground.
- This means that regions and local council need more financial and political competences and much more independence.
- All conflicts need to be solved via continuous dialogue among all stakeholders by peaceful means. This ranges from private initiative to deliberate democracy on a local level.
- Any individual, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion should have equal access to education, professional growth opportunities, and inclusive participation.
- We know how to preserve our planet, therefore all technologies, transportation, housing should be environmentally friendly. Growth, innovation through, private initiative and progress are at the heart of the Open Society – and also the best way to deal with environmental and climate issues.
- Open markets without crony capitalism, subsidies and other government favors are the keys to more wealth without leaving anyone behind.

- The Open Society relies on an Open State with a [minimal amount of bureaucracy and the digitalization of all services](#) that make all governmental action transparent and accessible.
- [Open borders](#) provide the chance to get an education, to travel and to cooperate with others in science and culture—to get a life of one’s own choosing! Cooperation in these areas will give us unlimited possibilities.

We have to remember that freedom of choice also makes us responsible for these choices and the future we are shaping. [Aligning freedom and responsibility is the big project of the Open Society.](#)

## Liberalism vs Populism: Politics

### *Politics*

Populists claim that they are the true representatives of democracy. But they are not. [Populist represent a vision of a homogenous society without respect for individual rights and the rule of law.](#) This is not democracy as we understand it. Therefore, it is important for liberals to stress that liberal democracy is not the tyranny of the masses but only works with a proper division of powers. We defend a vision of society that protects individuals and minorities. Liberal democracy is a representative system based on [free and transparent elections](#), with pluralism in politics proposal—and therefore [political parties and a multi-party system](#). Moreover, we stand for a clear [separation of powers](#), with independent and strong institutions to guarantee the application of the constitution, the rule of law, and the equality of each one before justice. Also, the openness to dialogue with all sectors of society to have [an inclusive government](#). The [freedom of opinion and speech](#) guaranteed for considering the opposition a very important part of the democracy. As long as this debate does not call into question institutions, individual freedoms, minority rights. The government must guarantee the [freedom of association](#) for all citizens, provided it is for legal purposes. Populists undermine all of these elements of liberal democracy: they dismantle the separation of power by appointing judges of their own liking, they shrink civil spaces by not allowing certain protests based on ‘national interest’ and undermine the diversity in civil society and party systems by changing funding structures. [This shows the natural path of populism: Populism will transform liberal democracies into autocracies.](#)

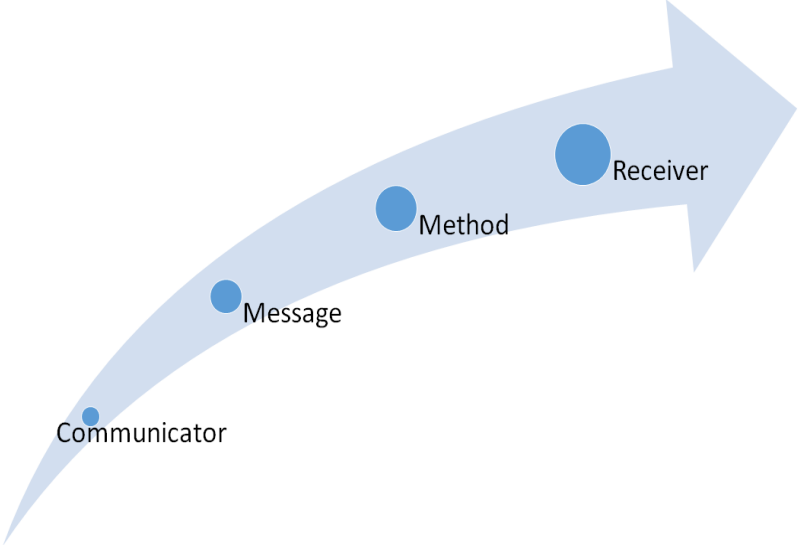
### *Policies, especially Social and Economic Policies*

While liberals consider the field of intervention of the state in a very limited sense— namely to safeguard fundamental freedom - [populists centralize power to act as caretakers and thus expand the realm of the state.](#) This undermines private initiative and individual responsibility and is therefore in direct conflict with liberal values. Yet, this centralization process allows populists to cater to their interest groups and fundamentally change the funding structure of civil society through the means of subsidies, redistribution or other political tools. In the long run, [this approach to politics will undermine the diversity of opinion and expression in society as politics is rendered into a competition for government favors—and thus a Zero-Sum-Game.](#)

# Liberalism vs Populism: Communication and Strategy

Let's start by: *What is Communication?*

Communication is the process by which the communicator shares a message to a receiver. Along this process, a strategy is needed so the message is rightly delivered to the receiver.



## Which Strategy to Follow?

For the message to have the intended outcome, a specific strategy should be followed. Thus, **there must be consistency between the communicators and their values**. This is the basis because the values define the content of the message. And hence, **liberal cannot simply adopt populist rhetoric**. They have to find their own way of communication - which does not mean that liberals cannot learn from populists in this regard. Moreover, it is crucial that a vision for society is articulated in political communication.

Communicator	Message	Method	Receiver
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Align what you think (ideas), with what you say (discourse), with how you act</li><li>• Build an <b>Identity</b>:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Define your <b>values</b>: Tell your story, NOT your CV. Build your Gravitas! Try a common man image! Show leadership!</li><li>• <b>Your Narrative</b>: Speak from your heart showing what you stand for: Emotions are important to connect with your audience. Be Authentic.</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Content of your message should <b>resonate</b> with your values</li><li>• Empathetic Message: Show the people you care! Use sound bites</li><li>• <b>Reframe</b> and control your narrative: In the face of hate speech, don't escalate the discourse. Don't let populists paint the picture for you!</li><li>• <b>Inspire</b>, call for action, call to change social norms</li><li>• Message provides an alternative, think big!</li><li>• Message should be <b>clear, simple, concise, brief</b>.</li><li>• Create <b>MAGIC</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Storytelling: Explain as if you talked to an old grandma or a 7 year old<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Body Language</b>: Eye contact, posture, power pose, movement of hands. Clear voice, different tonalities, projection and diction of voice, be theatrical, use humor, use emotions to color</li></ul></li><li>• Consistent message, message in volume, and over time</li><li>• Intensive use of media: Choose your channels!</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appreciate diversity of audience → target your message to everyone without a bias</li><li>• Choose your media channels according to the receiver to have a greater impact (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, News)</li><li>• Ultimate goal: Receiver relates to communicator through your message</li></ul>

## Authors



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Sven Gerst is a PhD Student in Political Philosophy at the Department of Political Economy at King's College London. His research mainly focuses on matters of global justice, democratic responsibility, and individual accountability. At King's College London, Sven also teaches courses on political and economic philosophy, environmental economics, meta-ethics, and contemporary issues in applied ethics. He holds a M.Sc. in Philosophy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), as well as a M.Sc. in Management from the University of Mannheim. Previously, he also studied at Harvard University, St. Petersburg State University and at National Taiwan University. Sven has already designed and facilitated a number of seminars for IAF.



**Radu Magdin**

Radu is a global analyst, consultant and trainer, passionate for power, strategy and communications. He focuses on helping individuals and organisations lead, compete and communicate. He worked as a honorary advisor to the Romanian Prime Minister (2014-2015) and advised the Moldovan PM (2016-2017) on a range of strategic issues, from political strategy and global communications to reforms implementation and external affairs. Radu, a frequent event speaker himself, has also helped Speakers of Parliament, MPs and MEPs to campaign successfully and deliver once in power. He works to make mainstream politics popular again and combat populism. He is keen to help empower girls and women around the world, and has worked on a variety of leadership and empowerment trainings together with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the European Women Academy.

**Together with the 21 participants of 20 different countries who took part in the seminar „Liberalism vs Populism“ of the International Academy for Leadership (IAF), 16 - 28 June 2019, in Gummersbach, Germany.**

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