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# Populism without history: Central and Eastern Europe and the case for a historical turn in populism research

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This article examines the dominant modes of conceptualising populism and critically engages with the ahistorical tendencies that have come to characterise much of the recent research in this field. Despite the robust historical reasoning and conceptual tools developed within comparative politics, populism research has largely avoided engaging with them. The article proposes an alternative analytical framework. In order to situate conditions, institutions, actors, and events within a single framework and across time, it advances the concept of populist configurations. These encompass populist actors, strategies, discourses, and styles, but also incorporate structural factors and transformations, such as degrees of sovereignty and socio-economic orders, as well as elite cohesion and responses, and critical junctures: significant events that alter power relations and shape the trajectories of (populist) politics. The article explores Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), a region with contested geographical and historical boundaries that nonetheless shares a distinctive set of structural features. Its belated development and chronic exposure to external aggression and domination, a consequence of the relatively small size of its historical polities, set the conditions for the region's uneven and conflictual transition to modern politics. The region also endured two world wars and a turbulent succession of competing political regimes, such as constitutional monarchies, military and royal dictatorships, socialist and communist republics, and parliamentary democracies, a trajectory that sets it apart in global historical comparisons and poses significant challenges to any account of its long-term political dynamics. In this long-term dynamic, it can be argued that populisms are rooted in early-modern contention and not electoral politics, and this contention was defined by the sovereignty—social reform uneasy ambivalence. Drawing on the Romanian case, the article develops a typology, a timeline, and an illustrative case of populist configuration—antisemitism, both to demonstrate the advantages of this research strategy and to call for a systematic historical turn in the study of populism.

### KEYWORDS

Central and Eastern Europe, comparative historical analysis, history, populism, antisemitism

# 1 Introduction: from populisms in history to populism without history

Populism research has become, in the last decade, a mature sub-field in comparative politics whose development was probably hard to anticipate in the early 2000s, when researchers were announcing its comeback driven by the necessity to grasp a new political moment (see Taggart, 1995, 2000; Mudde, 2004; also Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). Twenty years later, its theoretical core has consolidated around a few main perspectives and its empirical coverage has become resolutely global. However, as the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* assert, despite ‘the huge proliferation in the scholarship (...) the study of populism still bears the hallmarks of its disparate and atomized origins (...) and there has been a marked reluctance to systematically and comprehensively make use of work on populism from other regions or other historical periods’ (Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 12). This divergence can be explained by the specific modes and consequences of conceptualising populism. Defined variously as a set of core ideas, a discourse, a political strategy and (personalised) organisation able to merge with other major ideologies, or a ‘thin’ or ‘narrow’ ideology, populism can appear as both ubiquitous and elusive, and lends itself easily to conceptual overstretching (see Taguieff, 1997). In its ‘ideational’ approach, the most common in recent comparative politics research, populism is ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Mudde contends that this definition meets the basic criteria for a sound conceptual construction: distinguishability, categorizability, travelability, and versatility (Mudde, 2017). An alternative view is put forward by Weyland, who centres populism on personalistic and plebiscitarian leadership and its top-down mobilisation of large numbers of mostly unorganised followers (Weyland, 1999, 2001, p. 14). In this approach, populism is a tool used by political leaders to access power, who adjust their ideas and positions as long as these remain politically effective. Pierre Ostiguy proposes a socio-cultural approach in which populism is relational, and the relationship between the people and the leader unfolds as a process of identity creation in relation to a ‘nefarious’ Other (Ostiguy, 2017). A further perspective enlarging the scope of populism comes from Ernesto Laclau, who sees it as a way of building a political representational relation based on antagonism between the people and the elite, the identity of the former being fluid and vague, an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 1977, 2005).

The centrality of analytical debates in populism research seems justified but narrows down the paths taken. Rather than focusing on populist actors and their correlative discourses, strategies, repertoires, intensities, performances, and impact, the article engages with what can be termed an ahistorical inclination. The current expansion of populism research, under the remit of comparative politics, tends to operate within a short and recent temporal frame. By doing so, a diverse and rich set of earlier contributions are overlooked, inhibiting interdisciplinarity and the cumulative build-up of knowledge. Revealingly, the mention of the seminal comparative account on populism, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969), is cursory at best. The omission is structural and runs deeper. The collective of political scientists, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and economic historians who gathered at the LSE examined the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. They

engaged with all the major processes of political modernity such as democratisation and authoritarianism, wars and revolutions, the development and disruptions brought by industrial capitalism, the arrival of popular classes into politics, from a range of disciplinary perspectives and with an attentive eye to real historical cases and events. The collective volume also proposed substantive attempts to define populism; for example, Wiles’s proposal to see populism as a syndrome built on the premise that ‘virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions’ (Wiles, 1969, p. 166). Later scholars sharing a similar historical breadth advanced populism research further. Germani compared, in 1978, Italian fascism with Argentine Peronism, relating populism to the contested but fertile modernisation theories (Germani, 1978). Canovan took up the challenge of clarifying the meaning of the concept in her classic *Populism*, recognising the appeal to the people and anti-elitism as core features which nonetheless fall short of providing a fundamental unity for populism (Canovan, 1981, p. 294). Instead, she identifies real existing historical types that individually, as clusters, or as a general category can be classified as populist: farmer populism, peasant populism, intellectual populism, populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politicians’ populism. Notably, all these types can be combined in various ways, but they can also be detached from one another (Canovan, 1981, p. 293). Canovan’s work sits between the tradition of the 1969 *Populism* and future comparative politics research. She takes a step forward toward a typological definition on the basis of fine-grained historical cases. Later populism researchers would dismiss the structural diversity she proposed and struggle to arrive at a single operational definition, abandoning historical cases and historical thinking along the way.

The route taken by populism research is intriguing, given that comparative politics as a field and its related partner historical sociology has built a robust historical understanding and method. Works such as *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Moore, 1966), Lipset and Rokkan’s research on political cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), and Tilly’s long-term perspective on state-building, democratisation and contention (Tilly, 1992, 2004, 2008) are just a few references for the development of comparative historical social science. These works, and many others, explore major political processes and outcomes over time. Comparative historical social science has its own dilemmas and limitations, but it has identified convincing ways to think about long-term causality and variation, and also about the specific temporal aspects of power and political institutions (see Skocpol, 1984; Skocpol and Pierson, 2002; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Pierson, 2004; Collier and Munck, 2022; Kreuzer, 2023; Goetz, 2024). According to Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), works in this perspective are concerned with causal analysis, place an emphasis on processes over time, and use systematic and contextualised comparison. Marcus Kreuzer asserts that Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) sees history as a plurality and identifies four notions of historical time—cyclical, bounded, serial, and eventful—each varying in the way it conceptualises historical dates, explores distinct patterns, and stipulates different causal mechanisms (Kreuzer, 2023, pp. 41–49). Building on the ideas of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who outlined both a causal and temporal relation in their study of parties, cleavages, and critical junctures followed by legacies, Collier (Collier, 2022, pp. 33–53) adds two further elements—antecedent conditions and aftermath—to deepen the historical analysis. In the same volume, Munck (Munck, 2022, pp.

109–139) warns that historical causation may run into two problems: one of infinite regress—pushing the analysis back to ever earlier events and thus failing to find an adequate starting point—and one of distal non-recurring causes—the difficulty of linking a change in the distant past to a much later outcome. Today, few populism researchers would contest that, regardless of the various definitions and approaches, populism is intrinsically connected to democracy, representative government, and mass politics (see [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, 2013](#)). It remains open to debate whether historical populism could constitute one of the substantive issues, or ‘big questions’, that usually concern CHA; but at a minimum, one can accept that without a serious engagement with populism in history, we understand less about political modernity.

Not all research has assumed ahistorical positions. Guy Hermet, in his 2001 study *Les populismes dans le monde. Une histoire sociologique XIXe–XXe siècle*, starts from the observation that, after a period of absence, populism returned to the politics of Europe. Echoing the distinction made by Benjamin Constant between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns, Hermet asserts that there is a ‘populism of the ancients’ and a ‘populism of the moderns’. The first is a protest of dispossessed masses against privileged strata held responsible for their misery; the second represents the sense of dissatisfaction, humiliation, and even threat felt by not especially poor social categories regarding what they perceive as undeserved concessions by governments to the most destitute. This trajectory marks the historical arc of populism from the left to the right. Sergiu Mișcoiu employs a similar dichotomy—between classical or historical populism and current forms termed *neopopulism*—to highlight differences in the kinds of identity they form, how they conceive of the past and the future, and what their governing practices and political effects are ([Mișcoiu, 2013](#)). A different avenue for infusing theories of populism with history is proposed by [Finchelstein \(2017\)](#) in *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Finchelstein asserts that post-Second World War modern populism was born out of fascism, and that fascism departed in many ways from democratic pre-modern agrarian forms of populism and other movements that can be considered pre—or proto—populist ([Finchelstein, 2017](#), xiii). In his historical reading, populism is fascism defeated and reconfigured for democratic regimes. For Finchelstein, populism has a substantive meaning that includes the persistence of illiberal attributes, distinctive variants in left and right, and a range of historical possibilities, while being rooted in three global moments: the two world wars and the Cold War ([Finchelstein, 2017](#), p. 2). Finchelstein’s aim is to contribute to a global political history of populism, not to articulate a global explanatory model. According to Tuğal such a model—historically, temporally, and geographically sensitive—is needed, but “a theoretical, global account of the long durée of populism is yet to be written” ([Tuğal, 2021](#), p. 342, see also [Dunin-Wąsowicz et al., 2025](#)). Recent contributions from populism researchers seem to support the suggestion. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis include in their *Research Handbook on Populism* a section called ‘*Diachronies*’ to engage with the genealogy of populist movements, leaders and parties in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries (see also [Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2024](#); [Götz and Palonen, 2024](#), p. 4, in the same volume). Within the section, [Tarragoni \(2024\)](#), also concerned with the presentist bent that this article identifies, articulates the concept of *populist sensibilities*, which predate modernity and run through history since the beginning of democratic and republican political formations. Earlier, the same author proposed a ‘genetic’ approach to populism by combining

historical sociology and conceptual history, and arriving at a new definition of populism that distinguishes it from demagoguery, fascism and nativism ([Tarragoni, 2021](#)).

Drawing on CHA-inspired reasoning and using CEE and Romania as illustrative cases, the article proposes a typology, a timeline, and a specific populist configuration—antisemitism. In order to situate conditions, actors, institutions, and events within a single framework and across time, this article employs the analytical tool of populist configurations. A populist configuration refers to populist actors, but also incorporates structural factors and transformations, such as degrees of sovereignty or a prevalent socio-economic order, elite cohesion and responses, and critical junctures: the significant events that altered power relations and shaped the possibilities and trajectories of populisms. The concept of populist configuration employed here draws on the logic of configurational comparative methods, treating each instance of populism as a case-specific combination of conditions and features rather than a deviation from or approximation to a single ideal type (see [Rihoux and Ragin, 2009](#)). Central and Eastern Europe is well situated to provide a testing ground for such an approach—a region with disputed geographical and historical boundaries, but one that nonetheless shares a distinctive set of conditions and characteristics. Ivan Berend argued that CEE had a 500-year delay in establishing permanent states, in the adoption of Christianity, and in the creation of feudal institutions. It was exposed until late to incursions and occupations, and remained predominantly rural and agricultural until the twentieth century, while the West became modern, commercial, capitalist, centralised, and industrialised considerably earlier ([Berend, 2005](#), p. 402). This belated development and chronic exposure to external aggression and control, a consequence of the relatively small size of the historical polities in the region, established the underlying conditions for the transition to modern politics. The region also participated in two world wars and experienced an often violent succession of conflicting political regimes—constitutional monarchies, military and royal dictatorships, socialist and communist republics, and parliamentary democracies, outlining a trajectory that sets it apart in global historical comparisons and poses significant challenges to any account of its long-term dynamics.

## 2 Central and Eastern European populism research at 60

In *Populism* (1969), the region is covered in a separate chapter written by the Romanian-born British political scientist Ghiță Ionescu, also co-editor of the volume. The book covers North America and Russia, as well as Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Ionescu puts forward a framework sensitive to historical transformation and attentive to the inherent diversity of populist parties and movements. His analysis of CEE populism stops at the aftermath of the Second World War, when agrarian-peasantist and other democratic parties were destroyed by the imposition of communist regimes. In Ionescu’s view, Eastern European populism is a succession of distinct types, each sharing common elements with others while remaining different in nature. Populism as a distinct ideology is of Russian origin and was transferred to the region via émigrés and quasi-revolutionary contagion in the second half of the nineteenth century. This type of populism was built through a revolutionary intellectual movement acting in an agrarian, backward, and despotically ruled society. Peasantism

and agrarianism are already distinct ideological formations and belong to the first part of the twentieth century, during which peasants became a political and electoral class preoccupied with parliamentary representation and sweeping social and economic reforms. After the First World War, such parties reached peak influence, including through international alliance-building, only to be curbed by the Great Depression and by royal and military authoritarianism, which hollowed out the weak parliamentary regimes and the parties associated with them (Ionescu, 1969, pp. 98–99). Fascist and communist movements were existentially interested in mobilising the peasant class away from parliamentary reformism and peasantist and agrarian representation, connecting it instead to their revolutionary projects. In their respective worldviews, peasants were either ideally subordinated allies (communism) or the cultural core of the nation (fascism); yet, as Ionescu remarks, both movements reclaimed the lost legacy of nineteenth-century original populism, which was more revolutionary than reformist (Ionescu, 1969, p. 119). Thus, Eastern European populisms did not possess, in their initial history, a unique ideology, supporting class, strategy, political agent, or outcome. Opposing ideologies and movements competed in defining the people and made undeniable claims to power in a rapidly transforming society.

The issue of CEE populisms is addressed subsequently by one of the main researchers in the field, Cas Mudde, as part of the broader renewal of populism research. Taking post-communist politics as his vantage point, Mudde enquires into the potential of populism to shape the transition to democracy. He accepts the two categories of populism proposed earlier by Canovan (1981)—agrarian and political—and adds a third type, economic: ‘which tries to achieve a “Third Way” between capitalism and socialism, and whose core proposals were formulated in Latin America between the 1920s and the 1960s’ (Mudde, 2012, pp. 215–217). Each type has its own tradition in Eastern Europe, but Mudde contends that the communist period had a major transformative effect, rendering previous types almost irrelevant. The prospects of post-communist agrarian populism are limited by rapid industrialisation and the transformation of peasants into industrial and rural workers (for the recent farmer protest see Bujdei-Tebeică, 2024). Political populism is also considered marginal—shaped not by the pre-communist right-wing nationalist regimes but by the Leninist legacy, which has made post-communist societies particularly prone to political populism (Mudde, 2012, p. 224). Economic populism in the region is part of the broader attack on the neoliberal consensus coming from both the centre and the periphery (Mudde, 2012, p. 223). In hindsight, the analysis appears contradicted by the way CEE politics has evolved since the date of writing, with more and more actors adopting radical stances that echo the interwar repertoire (see Țăranu and Crăciun, 2014). For Mudde, Eastern European populism is a twentieth-century phenomenon, and not even in its entirety: while agrarian and political populism have a tradition in the region, economic populism is of recent vintage, with its origins in the process of twentieth-century Latin American rapid modernisation and industrialisation, and CEE is simply synchronising with it. From an alternative perspective, however, Eastern European and Latin American debates on industrialisation and economic development emerged earlier, were remarkably similar, and even influenced each other (Love, 1996). If Mudde was arguably selective, more recent accounts avoid the past altogether. In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Ben Stanley engages exclusively with post-communist populism and notes that Central and Eastern Europe has made prevalent a centrist populism (Stanley, 2017, p. 204). He engages with neither

Ionescu’s nor Mudde’s arguments, an omission partially remedied by Luke March in the chapter on populism in the former Soviet Union countries, who refers to Mudde’s remarks on the partial resurfacing of agrarian populism (March, 2017, p. 279).

Alternative accounts are, however, beginning to emerge. Inspired by Ernesto Laclau’s perspective on populism, Krakovsky (2025) puts forward in his book *Populism in Central and Eastern Europe*—a translation of the French edition of 2019—a case for seeing populism, or the constant need to define ‘the people’, in the context of the failed attempts of states and elites to face and manage modernisation crises (Krakovsky, 2025, pp. 1–5). Populism is more than an ideology and a mobilisation tool; it is a repeated cyclical script in which a strong central state, prone to recourse to authoritarianism, recomposes political communities from numerically majority but system-marginalised groups—peasants, and later workers. This process has an inherently contentious and exclusionary character. Elites, or parts of them, resist the enfranchisement of popular classes, and as political communities tend to be essentialised, other categories and minorities are excluded. Each historical period generates a similar context and pressure, and the post-communist moment cannot escape this dynamic. Economic and social transformations create marginalisation, which in turn creates a populist ‘route’ back to a promised prosperity and dignity (Krakovsky, 2025, pp. 165–167). Krakovsky, a historian by training, is not primarily concerned with long-term causality and variation, but offers a convincing response to the challenge of integrating the *longue durée* persistence of populism with the succession of contrasting social, political, and economic orders. A comparable proposal is advanced by Robert Adam in *Two Centuries of Romanian Populism* (Adam, 2018), which surveys the history of populist ideas, movements, and leaders and locates the origin of Romanian populism in the Romanian branch of the 1821 Greek Revolution, led by the revolutionary figure of Tudor Vladimirescu.

The CEE past features centrally in recent work carried out within two large-scale research projects—FATIGUE and POPREBEL—coordinated by Jan Kubik and Richard Mole, whose main findings are presented in *The Anatomy of Right-Wing Populism* (Kubik and Mole, 2025). These projects aimed to conceptualise the causes, functioning, and effects of right-wing populism in the region, with a focus on Poland and Hungary, the two countries with institutionalised and long-standing populist actors in power. They identify neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism as twin concepts, the first ordering culture and the second the economy, to describe the nature of current right-wing populism. Neo-traditionalism is defined as a series of rejections: of communism, of post-communist politics, and of liberal and progressive twenty-first-century modernity (Benczes et al., 2022, p. 8). Neo-feudalism represents a distinct pattern of capitalism in which security is provided through personal dependencies, and in which the provision of security constitutes a legitimisation strategy of hierarchically organised political and business actors (Benczes et al., 2022, pp. 9–10). Yet, there are distinct nuances in understanding both the past and its relation to the present. In an analytical paper, the research team argues that ‘the return of “tradition” and “feudalism” is not a process of mechanical replication of past phenomena but a heavily politicised reconstruction of certain past ideas and practices’ (Benczes et al., 2022, p. 14). In a later interview, Jan Kubik goes further, asserting that ‘many people say populists are stronger in East-Central Europe because of communism (.). It is actual feudalism, in a sense, and the structural composition of these societies, which started forming long before communism’ (Kubik, 2025). It makes a significant analytical

difference whether the present is a reconstruction or a continuation of the past. This line of reasoning has relevant precedents, for example, Jowitt's (1992) analysis of failed modernisation during communism, or Chiro's placement of the region within the constitutive condition of semi-periphery in the global capitalist system (Chiro, 1976). More recently, Cristian Pîrvulescu asserted that the communist regime, in principle antithetical to interwar fascism, nonetheless resorted to a conversion to national-populism with roots in Christian-populist legionarism (Pîrvulescu, 2017; also Shafir, 2008; for patterns of populist far-right voting in Romania's historical regions see Crăciun and Tăranu, 2023).

These examples illustrate different ways of engaging with CEE foundational modern politics and its populisms, ranging from treating the past as irrelevant to treating it as constitutive. And even though mainstream populism research on the region remains largely ahistorical, a number of contributions now question this consensus and point to the possibility, if not the necessity, of a systematic historical turn.

### 3 Populist configurations in history

A comprehensive and detailed exploration of all CEE populisms is too broad and complex for the purposes of this article. Instead, the article focuses on key aspects of populism that could inform such an effort, building a comparative framework that can be refined and confronted with specific national cases. First, it is necessary to explore the origins of populisms, which are usually unclearly specified as *classical*, *historical*, *proto-populist*, *pre-populist*, or *foundational*, and to meet the challenge of infinite regress. It is then crucial to engage with the nineteenth century, before the emergence of the Russian, American, and French populist movements conventionally associated with the arrival of populism in history. This vantage point allows for the construction of a historically informed typology of populisms and the specification of the conditions and events that influenced their later development. Wars, revolutions, and large-scale rebellions are treated as critical junctures, interacting over time with other relevant factors such as imperial control and international influences, state unification and centralisation, the constitutionalisation of power and the expansion of electoral constituencies, and changes in economic structures and the region's position in the global capitalist economy, all of which accelerated the destruction of existing orders and the generation of new ones. In this perspective, populisms are not rooted in electoral politics, but in contention. The Romanian case is used to illustrate this approach. Second, in order to illustrate the idea of a historically defined populist configuration, the article identifies (Romanian) antisemitism as an essential and rather specific form of populism. Routinely conflated with extreme and genocidal nationalism and racism, it is worth recalling its earliest contours and its multiple connections to the formation of modern political regimes.

#### 3.1 A typology of (CEE) populisms

It may seem obvious, but the fact that populisms concern power deserves restatement. Elites have it; popular classes do not. Some elites are local or national; others are distant and imperial. Some national elites hold too much power; others not enough. The collective 'We' may be peasants, poor townspeople, or both. Central and Eastern European populisms are comparable to populisms elsewhere but are

distinct in their historical trajectory. American foundational populism is too distant a relative: pro-capitalist, inclusionary, anti-elite, anti-centralist, and bottom-up, primarily a social and political movement. Russian populism is more similar but also very different: anti-Western, anti-capitalist, exclusionary, anti-monarchic, and top-down, primarily a spiritual and intellectual movement. One distinctive feature of CEE populisms is the centrality of independence and sovereignty, opposed to imperial control and influence from nearby powers, notably the Habsburg, Tsarist, and Ottoman Empires. CEE populisms were not metropolitan phenomena within empires, colonial or otherwise, mobilised by counter-forces whose ethnic identity was similar to that of imperial elites, such as White Christian American populism, Russian populism proper, or French plebiscitary Boulangerism (see Hermet, 2013, also Mişcoiu, 2012). CEE populisms were configured as independentist, anti-imperial, and anti-despotic, having republican and liberal overtones, while simultaneously being oriented toward privileging ethno-majorities in relation to minorities, threatening empires and territorially ambitious neighbours. A second duality results from the region's position within an agrarian and backward socio-economic order, extensively discussed in relation to capitalism and the transition to the global commercialisation of agriculture, which led in some countries to a new form of peasant capitalist servitude (see Chiro, 1976; also Blum, 1978). Populisms in the region were predominantly, though not exclusively, pro-peasant and anti-capitalist. The difference lies in the emphasis placed on these orientations relative to the national imperative. As Djordjevic and Fischer-Galați (1981) point out, the Balkans have two revolutionary traditions that overlap but are also in tension with one another, the national and the socio-economic (see Brock, 1977 for the Polish case). The former became prevalent and sometimes inhibited the development of the latter. An illustrative case of early nineteenth-century populist configuration was brought to light by the Galician Revolt of 1846 (see Brock, 1977; Clark, 2023). A national uprising of Polish nobles against Austrian imperial authorities turned into an anti-noble peasant violent revolt, aligned to the imperial administration. Some nobles held emancipatory and reformist social views, but the ingrained peasant distrust was more powerful than the national ideals and the prospects of reform. For most of them, the feudal order was the main problem, not the independence of the state, and in this feudal order it was the nobles sharing their ethnicity and religion who were the oppressors, not the imperial administration.

These are not the only distinctions. Populist configurations can rely on a single class, a cross-class alliance, or a class coalition, depending on context, and may shift from one category to another over time. They can be urban, rural, or mixed in their social base. Some configurations accept representative pluralism, the principle that a class or category should be represented by a single party, while others pursue monolithic and exclusive representation, as Aleksandar Stamboliyski did in Bulgaria. The definition of who belongs to the political community is central. Populist configurations can be activated from below by popular formations or from above by segments of the elite. Some are revolutionary and anti-systemic; others are reformist and parliamentary in orientation. They can oppose a type of regime—anti-monarchic, a type of state—anti-centralist, or an economic order—anti-capitalist.

The typology presented in Table 1 operates with a conceptual continuum rather than dichotomy, in order to emphasise the gradualism and fluidity of real historical configurations. How transitions between types occur in time, or what kind of specific combinations become

TABLE 1 Typology of populist configurations.

| Dimension                | Typological populisms                                                   |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Constituency             | Single class/category ↔ cross-class ↔ class alliance                    |
| Social base              | Rural ↔ Mixed ↔ Urban                                                   |
| Representation           | Pluralistic ↔ Monolithic                                                |
| Political community      | Inclusionary ↔ Exclusionary                                             |
| Strategy                 | Revolutionary ↔ Insurgent ↔ Reformist                                   |
| Position on institutions | Regime/anti-monarchic ↔ State/anti-centralist ↔ Economy/Anti-capitalist |

prevalent in specific cases, could be specified for each country. As indicated in the case of Romanian historical populism presented below, different strands become prevalent depending on the period and the broader political dynamic—‘national’ and ‘social’ populisms coexisted and each becoming dominant in a specific context and turning more or less ‘revolutionary’ or ‘reformist,’ while after the First World War, different variants populisms were competing with one another.

### 3.2 Populist timelines

The typology above remains too descriptive to clarify the trajectories of populist configurations. The transition from a synchronic classification to a diachronic explanation requires placing in relation a set of variables related to *structural conditions and transformations*, *elite types and responses*, and the *critical junctures* that triggered lasting effects. Structural conditions and transformation include the varying degrees to which the state is autonomous in making its own decisions, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are marked by the emergence of national states and the gradual removal of imperial and colonial control. In the cases in which this process is belated and limited, it tends to structure modern politics and populist configurations. Parallel to sovereignty, the constitutionalisation of power creates the institutional environment for political action, and the sites and catalysts for popular contestation (see Tilly, 2006, 2008 for his capacity-democracy space shaping of contention). The formation and empowerment of legislative assemblies structures elite relations and provides an avenue for electoral and political mobilisation. The formation of modern parties connects executives, legislatures, and electorates. The introduction of census voting and, subsequently, universal male suffrage transforms the political game altogether. Each phase also determines the features and the potential of populist mobilisations, and work cumulatively. A certain trajectory can lead to revolutionary rather than reformist populism.

Structural conditions are not only political but also economic. Urbanisation, the formation of national markets, trade relations, choices regarding productive sectors, and the distribution of labour across places and sectors all shape the transition to modern politics. In his *Politics in the Semi-Periphery*, Mouzelis (1986) compared the route to post-oligarchic politics in Latin America and the Balkans and outlined different trajectories resulting from distinct commercialisation, industrialisation and urbanisation patterns, and identified urban and rural populism as forces to defeat oligarchic parliamentarism. In his influential book, Moore (1966) shows that the commercialisation of agriculture sets in motion a series of elite (re)alignments which lead

to distinct political regimes, democratic or authoritarian and dictatorial. Taking Barrington Moore’s work as its starting point, Stokes argues that the peasantry did not play a significant role in determining regime type in the Czech lands, in contrast to Bulgaria, where the well-organised peasant class decisively won power after the First World War and came closest to establishing a modern European ‘peasant state,’ the nearest approximation of a social revolution in the region (Stokes, 1989). The belated urbanisation and industrialisation in the region, as well as the persistence of quasi-feudal peasant servitude, shape the trajectory of the transition to parliamentary politics and its populist dimensions. Peasant populism is thus not only a type but a constitutive element of modernity. A CHA-inspired approach can explain why it turns revolutionary or reformist, inclusionary or exclusionary, open to class alliances or not, and the extent to which it becomes politically institutionalised.

Any conceptualisation of populism is bound to remain incomplete without a corresponding conceptualisation of elites and elite responses. This is not merely to produce a simple equivalent, but to acknowledge that elites are constitutive of the historical responses set to counterbalance or eliminate them. The history of the region abounds with defensive moves by elites, from partial agrarian and electoral reforms to nationalist mobilisation and armed repression when everything else fails. Whether elites are unified or fragmented, and whether they repress, marginalise, concede, or incorporate, can explain the intensity and the time-horizon of populisms (see Tilly for state responses to contention 2006, 2008). Popular gains are not certain, and old (and new) elites can pursue regressive policies. Equally important is to situate populist leadership within the specific political, economic and cultural context. Which groups and classes support counter-elites, and what their origins are, is key to understanding populist mobilisations. It is relevant whether the populist leaders are part of the gentry, the landed classes, the church, the military, intellectual circles, or various productive classes.

With regard to the critical junctures that determine the trajectories of populisms, organised violence is fundamental. Large-scale rebellions, revolutions, and (civil) wars meet the definition of a critical juncture proposed by Collier and Munck (2022, p. 423): major episodes of innovation that generate an enduring legacy, rapid discontinuous change at the macro level, and a distal cause that generates a historical legacy. Episodes of intense and organised violence are not the only ones to produce legacies, but they exert a powerful influence on the shaping of modern political systems. Low-intensity violence, such as lawlessness or brigandage, matters more as a marker of an existing but failing order than as a generator of a new one. Yet, as Hobsbawm (1969) suggested in his work on social bandits, such phenomena have the power to shape popular imagination and cultivate a rebellious ethos that can acquire broader political relevance. The significance of revolutionary events is that they always challenge an internal set of power relations, which makes them directly threatening to elites and to the social and political fabric of the state. A revolution is a populist event *par excellence*, a moment of brave and virtuous popular ‘unity’ set against illegitimate and corrupt ‘elites,’ whose outcome is always open and can lead to both emancipation and exclusion. A second type of organised violence, war, sets the country and the nation against a foreign enemy. Violence on this larger scale tends to have a unifying effect on states, with elites and people on the same side of the barricade, and in some cases generates a populist military genealogy, part of the bureaucratic expansion of the state, as in the case of France (General Boulanger) or Romania (Colonel Cuza and General

Averescu). But wars also have significant internal effects: losing wars can trigger social revolutions, as Skocpol (1979) has argued, or they can transform the expectations and capacities of the popular classes who fought in them, leading to rebellions and major reforms (Crăciun, 2026).

Other connections are equally relevant. In the first half of the nineteenth century, before countries obtained full sovereignty, the prevalent events were independence-driven rebellions that mixed national and social agendas such as the Serbian (1804–1817), Greek (1821–1829), Polish (1830–1831), Bulgarian (1835), and Romanian (1821) uprisings (see Malešević, 2012). The CEE contentious century broadly follows a similar pattern, though the timing is different in most cases. The exception is the revolutionary events of 1848. These were pan-European, connected in ideas and action, armed and organised, and ultimately failed due to Habsburg, Tsarist, and Ottoman imperial intervention, yet in hindsight they were remarkably consequential. They were revolutions announcing the future in a number of significant ways: urban, egalitarian, republican, liberal, social, and industrial. The intellectual and political roots of both Marxism and populist agrarianism are associated with this moment. Alexander Herzen, one of the key influences on Russian populism, was during his exile a remarkable observer and supporter of the 1848 revolutions. Duncan Kelly asserts that the history of modern populism and the history of modern popular sovereignty are coterminous, and describes how populist thinking in the United States was directly influenced by the European revolutions of 1848 (Kelly, 2017, p. 514). But these revolutions were also fraught with tensions and contradictions: peasants and their agendas were subordinated and marginalised by bourgeois elites and by landed elites in cases where they too were part of the revolutionary wave, notably in partitioned Poland (for Polish agrarian populism, see Brock, 1977). Within the same imperial realms various ethnic groups were set against one another, as Croats and Magyars were, and Magyar landed elites excluded non-Magyar groups such as Slovaks, Romanians, and Serbs (see Clark, 2023).

With regard to wars, the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) are particularly relevant for the southern part of CEE, playing an important role not only for independence claims but also in transforming social relations within these societies (see Crăciun, 2026). The First World War stands as the major event that shaped the region in fundamental ways. It was a total war, bringing large-scale human and infrastructural destruction, fought by predominantly peasant armies but with industrial organisation and technology. Its end also brought the end of the old agrarian order, even though landed elites fiercely resisted agrarian and land reforms and the consequent loss of status and political power (see Beneš, 2025; and for the Romanian case, Mitrany, 1930). Most states in the region underwent significant changes to their territorial borders, losing or absorbing populations of similar or different ethnicities. The war and the associated reforms, economic and political, brought the peasant class into politics, as all accounts of populism in the region acknowledge. It also enabled a different strand of populist politics to become relevant: one that took a radical route toward right-wing extremism and fascism. Not least, it also brought the proletariat into politics, even though the still predominantly rural and agrarian character of these societies, and the fear of communist Russia, prevented it from becoming a relevant force. One might be tempted to identify a long-term trend toward the pacification of internal relations, but the historical record indicates otherwise. For example, peasant contention was intense before the First World War and, in its aftermath, also took

revolutionary forms, as Beneš argues in *The Last Peasant War*, (2025). These tensions partially resurfaced later in resistance to socialist collectivisation.

### 3.3 Romanian populist configurations

To illustrate the connection between structural conditions and transformations, elite types and responses, and critical junctures, Table 2 presents a timeline that suggests their interdependence and a corresponding structuring effect on populist configurations. It condenses and simplifies more than a century. Many consequential events, if not critical junctures in themselves, have been left out: for example, the trade war between the Romanian Kingdom and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1886–1891), the founding act of Romanian economic protectionism and state-led industrialisation that would become integral to both national liberalism and nationalism. The two large-scale peasant rebellions (1888 and 1907) were not singled out as critical junctures because, despite their disruptive effects and their role in shaping a popular revolutionary imagination, they did not alter elite alliances, power relations, or major policies. They became consequential in the context of the First World War, when the state faced existential danger and the old political and economic order was shattered. Although the transition to communism and its profound transformation of society, as well as the subsequent passage to democratic liberalism, need to be integrated into this timeline, doing so would have exceeded the scope of the present effort and remains a task for future work. For the earlier period, and in the history of populist configurations, the Revolution of 1848 stands out as a key event in all its dimensions: external and domestic, national and social, elite and counter-elite formation, agrarian and urban, and popular mobilisation (see Roman, 1999). The revolution was defeated but accelerated territorial unification, created a new post-revolutionary elite that gained executive power and enacted major reforms—emancipation of the serfs, land reform, the creation of a modern national army, and census suffrage, all in 1864 (see Jianu, 2011 for the social composition of revolutionary elites). These reforms were far-reaching, interdependent, and significantly restructured both social structures and power relations.

This timeline allows for the identification of distinct populist configurations determined by external factors and pressures, by the distance between popular classes and elites, by the cohesion or fragmentation of elites, and by the objective and subjective condition of popular classes. As long as the political imperative remained independence, ‘national’ populism operated as a top-down mobilisation of both elites and popular classes against imperial centres, a mobilisation that inhibited the ‘social’ populism of peasants and their elite allies. The Revolution of 1848 allowed elite allies of the peasantry to enact major reforms, turning peasant-based populism toward reformism and aligning it with the national struggle. This was followed by a regressive dynamic, as predominantly landed elites assumed responsibility for the autonomous rule of the state and became the principal beneficiaries of the large-estate grain-producing and exporting economy. To the extent that they blocked the social reforms desperately needed by a large and increasingly impoverished peasantry, ‘social’ populism became more rebellious, if not revolutionary. All of this occurred before the formation of peasant parties.

The First World War significantly altered populist configurations and produced three distinct ones. Peasant-based populism, benefiting from electoral and land reform, became so moderate and committed

TABLE 2 A timeline of populist configurations—Romania.

| Period                                                                                                           | Structural changes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Populist configuration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1821–1848<br>Pre-Revolutionary/<br>Constitutional                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The uprising of 1821 led by Tudor Vladimirescu—national and social agendas and the end of Phanariots and return to local rulers</li> <li>- First constitutionalisation under Russian Protectorate (1831–1832)</li> <li>- Grain exporting economy post Treaty of Adrianople (1829)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>National—revolutionary</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Primary claim: From foreign to national rule, complementary claims: European inspired modernisation/Social reform.</li> <li>- Elite: Territorially and socially divided—old boyars vs. young revolutionary descendants and parts of the bureaucratic elite/Wallachian elites distinct from Moldovan</li> <li>- People: Dominant and unorganised peasantry, nascent bureaucratic elites and bourgeoisie.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Critical juncture</b>                                                                                         | <b>The Revolution of 1848</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1848–1878<br>Post-Revolutionary/<br>Reformist                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unification of Țara Românească (Wallachia) and Moldova (1859) through the double election of a single ruler for both (Alexandru Ioan Cuza)</li> <li>- The emancipation of the serfs/ land reform—1864 (facilitated by an anti-boyar coup d'état by Cuza)</li> <li>- The establishment of the census suffrage (1864)</li> <li>- The removal of Cuza by an elite agreement followed by an elite-driven anti-unification Moldovan Revolt (1866)</li> <li>- Carol I becomes the ruler (1866)</li> <li>- Law on Agricultural Agreements (<i>Legea Învieielilor Agricole</i>) -1872 coerces peasants to work landowner lands</li> </ul>       | <i>National—consolidating and social—reformist</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflicting claims: National consolidation through peasant exploitation vs. social reformism</li> <li>- Elites: Moderately divided territorially, socially deeply divided—boyars vs. post-revolutionary political elite</li> <li>- People: Unorganised peasantry but increasingly impoverished by the limitations of the land reform and the Agreements. Poor urban strata and nascent bureaucratic bourgeoisie.</li> <li>- The 1848 Revolution was elite-led but supported by the peasantry</li> <li>- Formation of parties (working as elite political clubs)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Critical juncture</b>                                                                                         | <b>The War of Independence (1877–1878)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1878–1914/18<br>Bureaucratic/Agrarian/<br>Electoral                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full independence</li> <li>- First large scale mobilisation and army conscription (peasantry)</li> <li>- Post-war territorial losses (Southern Bessarabia) and acquisitions (Dobrudja), 1878</li> <li>- Carol I crowned as King (1881)</li> <li>- Large estate grain exporting economy</li> <li>- 1888—Peasant rebellion led by former combatants due to the failure of the land reform of 1864</li> <li>- The Peasant Rebellion of 1907-</li> <li>- Large-scale peasant rebellion repressed by the army but no political and economic changes until WWI</li> </ul>                                                                     | <i>Social revolutionary</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Primary claim: sweeping land reform</li> <li>- Elite: Mildly divided and blocked into an anti-peasant alliance/Boyars: rich and powerful, state and bourgeois elites dependent on grain exports and taxation.</li> <li>- People: Peasants—Emerging organisation but no political representation, strong bureaucratic bourgeoisie and landowners, emerging urban middle class.</li> <li>- Formation of two elite parties: Conservative and Liberal (1880–1885), socialist and workers parties (1893/1910), xenophobic and antisemitic party (Nationalist Democratic Party-1910)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Critical juncture</b>                                                                                         | <b>World War I</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1918–1944<br>Territorially expanded,<br>Parliamentary and then<br>Authoritarian,<br>Dual Agrarian—<br>Industrial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- During the war the country is invaded and the state risks total occupation</li> <li>- King Ferdinand promises land and electoral reform (universal suffrage) to peasants in 1917</li> <li>- The country integrates large territories and populations post-Versailles</li> <li>- First postwar elections: 1919, 16 parties represented, defeat of Liberals, the National party from Transylvania win the most mandates</li> <li>- Dual economy—The Great Depression hits hard the still nascent industry and the agricultural economy</li> <li>- Royal dictatorship/fascist coup/military dictatorship before and during WWII</li> </ul> | <i>Social reformist and nationalist-insurgent</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Competing claims: peasant-based economy and society vs. a strong state purifying the nation. Also Romanian vs. foreign capital claims (Liberals)</li> <li>- Elites: Deeply divided between democratic pluralistic, authoritarian protectionist liberals, royal authoritarians, and fascists</li> <li>- People: mobilised but divided peasantry between peasantists and fascists, divided urban classes, urban proletariat weak.</li> <li>- Postwar formation of the People's League, led by General Averescu (1918), two Peasant parties (one in the Old Kingdom one in Bessarabia), and various radical conservative (LANC), fascist (Legionaries), and authoritarian parties (National Renaissance Front).</li> </ul> |

to parliamentary action that it can hardly be called populist if populism is defined as anti-pluralist or anti-democratic (see Müller, 2016; for an overview of peasant politics, see Radu and Schmitt, 2017; and Brett, 2012). As Mitrany argued, these movements, had they joined

forces with the socialists in their urban strongholds, would have been the only ones capable of resisting authoritarianism (Mitrany, 1952). Out of the First World War also emerged the first political organisation bearing 'people' in its name: the People's League, later Party,

founded by General Alexandru Averescu. His party was initially popular with the peasantry, who saw him as a saviour and guarantor of reform, but it also attracted the most diverse range of political ideologies turning it into a quintessential, eclectic, short-lived, and personalised populist construct (see [Hermet, 2001](#); and [Murgescu and Sora, 2019](#) for an overview of the 1919 elections). A third strand was the radical conservative nationalism out of which various fascist parties evolved. Their populist configuration was national-insurgent, aimed at firmly establishing the supremacy of Orthodox Romanians in relation to the minorities of the new state, targeting once again menacing ‘foreign powers’ while seeking to mobilise both peasants and urban dwellers. Their meaning of ‘national’ differed significantly from the one forged in the nineteenth century, as a bottom up reaction against empires and the most powerful of the landed elites (see [Roger, 2003](#), pp. 249–50). It was not emancipatory, but extreme, mystical, and violent. Conservative nationalist and antisemitic parties such as LANC (*Liga Apărării Național-Creștine*—the League for National-Christian Defence) formulated this ideological line, but it was the Legionary Movement that became the main force, combining electoral mobilisation through excursions into the countryside, a populism in practice, as [Mann \(2004\)](#), p. 268) terms it, with paramilitary provocations, and building a mass movement of ‘peasantist fascism’ ([Mann, 2004](#), p. 274). It is worth noting that this movement shares more features with Russian *Narodnichestvo* than with earlier Romanian peasantism, which was more inclusionary and less mystical than its Russian counterpart. A further sub-variant emerged later: a party established to uphold the royal dictatorship of Carol II, the National Renaissance Front, which was fascistic in a different register: statist, authoritarian, and corporatist.

The Romanian case is also revealing when one considers a populist configuration that has rarely been treated as such. Conceptualised as an integral but secondary ideological characteristic of historical fascisms, antisemitism deserves closer examination.

### 3.4 A populist configuration: antisemitism

Antisemitism was identified in early populism research but was not acknowledged as a specific type. Canovan treats it as a specificity of German, Russian, Polish, and Romanian populisms, divided between peasant and reactionary populisms ([Canovan, 1981](#), p. 105, 128). Ionescu sees it as constitutive of fascist neo-populism, especially in the Romanian context ([Ionescu, 1969](#), pp. 116–117). Antisemitism can be considered an ‘essential’ form of populism in Romania and, with notable variations, across the region as a whole; its characteristics become more analytically apparent when conceptualised as a populist configuration. It is directly relevant to a typological approach but also has a distinct trajectory in time, one that materialised in the most tragic and destructive way the effects of persistent, institutionalised, and violent separation between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. Antisemitism can also serve as a testcase for how inclusionary or exclusionary other populisms might turn. Some of the populisms in the region turned antisemitic, clustered in a nationalistic and conservative group, but there are nuances, not all peasant or socialist populisms were antisemitic.

CEE antisemitism identified Jews as a multilayered elite with global and European as well as national and local representatives, ignoring the diversity and various stratifications of the group. It targeted the real or perceived Jewish preponderance in the capitalist economy: money-lending, commerce, artisanship and production, rural estate management, and tavern- and shop-keeping. It was both

rural and urban in character, and became a mobilising project for counter-elites in both environments. All the defining features of anti-semitism are to be found before the transition to mass politics, only to have them exacerbated by the formation of mass parties and electorates. The Romanian case can be revealing for its long term trajectory. The Romanian principalities, Wallachia and Moldova, had a historical Jewish presence before the nineteenth century and in its first half, Jewish migration was encouraged by local rulers in order to develop the commerce and the cities. A large number of Jews coming from Habsburg lands settled in Moldova, and to a lesser extent, to Wallachia, fleeing from persecution and pogroms but also from modernising drives of the imperial authorities. This migration generated a specific spatial order, the Jewish population forming in Moldova trade-orientated small towns called *fairs* and in Wallachia creating Jewish neighbourhoods within the larger cities such as Bucharest, Ploiești, Brăila, Craiova or Focșani. These specific territorial formations, the *shtetls*, were at the same time enjoying a degree of autonomy in community organisation and they were deeply connected to the economic activities of the surrounding areas, urban or rural, and were characteristic of the whole CEE, not only in the Romanian principalities ([Rotman, 2013](#)). Yet, the Romanian trajectory stands out within the CEE context. According to Pfützner, antisemitism is correlated with the revolutionary contention of 1848 and, contrary to the European revolutionary progressive positions that advocated the emancipation and full rights for Jews, the Romanian ‘48 revolutionary generation turned antisemitic in an effort to connect to the popular masses ([Pfützner, 2024](#), pp. 379–409). The moment the influence of grand boyars faded, the patrons of the Jewish merchants and estate managers dependent on the grain exporting economy, the new middle classes—low-level boyars, merchants, intellectuals, bureaucrats—saw the Jews as competitors. Their depiction as agents of imperial powers set to sabotage the independence of the country only reinforced the exclusionary dynamic. In other cases, such as Hungary, even though the elites were oligarchic and more conservative than their Romanian counterparts, the result was a gradual process of reform leading to more equality and integration.

The same pattern of exclusion continued during the later process of urbanisation and industrialisation, while the country became independent and constitutionalised its political power. Both urbanisation and industrialisation were depicted by a large part of the national political and economic (new) elites as processes dominated by Jews, and the only way to arrive at true independence would be their replacement and even exile, even though the exile of Jews was increasingly rare in Europe after 1870. Rural antisemitism was primarily directed against local Jews engaged in various commercial activities, but mainly mobilised by national and urban elites (see [Marin, 2018](#)). During the transition to mass politics, antisemitism became a widely shared set of values and attitudes that permeated the new national political culture among both elites and the broader population. Cârstocea identifies the political leader A. C. Cuza (1857–1947), considered “the patriarch of Romanian antisemitism” to be the pivotal figure linking state-driven institutional antisemitism of nineteenth-century Romania to its grassroots version, a populist one, that would prefigure the future interwar Romanian fascism ([Cârstocea, 2025](#)). Antisemitism can be identified to varying degrees in peasant, conservative, and nationalist parties, but also, as in the Romanian case, in the National Liberal Party, which sought to ‘nationalise’ the economy. Less so in the case of Romanian Socialists, even though their commitment to antisemitism was not complete ([Mândru, 2015](#)). In the interwar period, a new peak of militant antisemitism was reached: the agitation of the

countryside was carried out by a nationalist educated stratum composed of journalists, lawyers, teachers, and priests, whose direct adversaries were the Jewish intellectuals and students who populated higher education, the press, and cultural life (Sdrobiş, 2015). In the same period, educated, mobile, and well-connected Jews were also suspected of transmitting ideas and values considered dangerous to the new national states, notably communism from neighbouring Russia. At least in the Romanian case, antisemitism was not the exclusive preserve of proto-fascists and fascists, but a constitutive dimension of the modern state's policy, the pattern of political, economic and legal exclusion predating the late interwar period by several decades (Oldson, 1991).

Two further elements contribute to this configuration: the role of international actors and the resort to violence. The settlement of Jewish populations in various parts of CEE had an imperial origin, and Jews were welcomed and protected as part of various modernisation, urbanisation, and commercialisation drives. The transition to nation-states was inherently inimical to minorities, and to Jews in particular. The European great powers attempted to constrain the anti-minority policies of the new states, for example, pressuring Romania to grant Jews citizenship, a process that in practice was difficult and rather exceptional even before the Constitution of 1923, only for Jews to be stripped of citizenship *en masse* from 1940 onward. The second element is the systematic political violence against Jews, especially in the form of pogroms, and long before the onset of the Nazi genocidal programme (see Nemes and Unowsky, 2014). Pogroms were episodes of sustained violence against Jews in which the state was either passive or actively complicit through its local officialdom or institutions, carried out by vigilante groups, paramilitary forces, or state bureaucracies (see Klier and Lambroza, 1992).

All these specific elements together delineate an antisemitic populist configuration that predates fascism. This configuration generated various trajectories, of which fascism was the most radical and murderous but by no means the only one. It is worth examining the transformation of antisemitism after the defeat of fascism in the Second World War. The victorious and dominant Communist Party of Romania, despite its presumptive 'Jewishness' and internationalism, quickly sidelined its Jewish leaders and subsequently turned its remaining Jewish citizens into a commodity, permitting their emigration only on condition that the state of Israel paid for their release.

## 4 Conclusion: towards a historical turn in the study of populism

While acknowledging the cumulative and complementary approaches that have allowed populism research to reach maturity and relevance, there is considerable room for expanding its scope. Almost 60 years have passed since the publication of the seminal collective volume *Populism*, and while it continues to be cited, it is worth remembering that its cases and comparisons engage with populism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The present article can be read as an invitation to reconsider that collective work, together with Canovan's later account from 1981, as pivots enabling the long-term theorisation and understanding of populism. Comparative Historical Analysis can provide a useful framework for engaging with the past. The article does not offer definitive answers; it rather underlines the need for such historical engagement and maps a possible strategy for

pursuing it. The strategy brings together structural conditions and transformations, elite types and responses, and critical junctures in the explanation of the types and configurations of populism, as well as their intensity and persistence over time.

As a historical phenomenon or, as I argue, a configuration, populism correlates with the historical process of democratisation and with the articulation of political, electoral, economic, social, and cultural demands, in relation to both imperial and national institutions, mediated by more or less institutionalised groups and organisations. The exploration of the Romanian case allows us to identify distinct populist configurations. As in many other CEE cases, as long as the political imperative remained independence, 'national' populism operated as a top-down mobilisation of both elites and popular classes against imperial centres, a mobilisation that inhibited the 'social' populism favoured by popular classes. To the extent the predominantly landed elites assumed responsibility for the autonomous rule of the state and, as principal beneficiaries of the large-estate grain-producing and exporting economy, blocked the social reforms claimed by the peasantry, 'social' populism became more rebellious, if not revolutionary. This nineteenth-century contentious dynamic occurred before the formation of peasant parties, and other mass movements—placing the roots of populism in contention rather than in electoral politics. The transition to mass politics, which can be traced back to the aftermath of WWI, brought to light different strands of populisms that were existentially at odds with each other.

In some of its variants, populism has challenged democratisation in several significant ways: by defining the people narrowly and exclusively, by denying representation to various groups and classes, by centring on providential leaders who undermined pluralism and the separation of powers, and by infusing political competition with a sense of moral hierarchy. But in others it provided an emancipatory route guiding the entry of popular masses into modern politics against despotic leaders and oligarchies. The approach put forward in the article brings us closer to understanding the trajectories of historical populism by specifying the variables that determine its contours and variants. As the discussion of antisemitism in this article has shown, some radical and exclusionary populist ideas possess a remarkable capacity to reproduce over time, long after the social conditions that enabled their emergence have disappeared. This in itself may be sufficient reason to look back and inquire into the origins and trajectories of populisms, and into the puzzle of their enduring relevance for the present.

## Author contributions

CC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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