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# POPULISM IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE – SOCIOTHEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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***Abstract***

*The term 'populism' is used to describe specific forms and techniques employed in contemporary political rhetoric and action. The term has experienced a significant increase in usage over the past few decades, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in other regions such as Brazil and the United States. Given the extensive use of the term, this paper initially examines the various interpretations of populism. In the second part of the paper, an attempt will be made to elucidate the specific historical, social and cultural circumstances and heritages of the region of Central and Eastern Europe. It is hoped that this will facilitate a deeper understanding of why the concept of populism, as defined by Ernesto Laclau, is a useful lens through which to view and interpret populism in this particular region. Finally, some sociotheological aspects of the phenomenon of populism will be investigated.*

***Keywords:*** *East Central Europe, Populism, Sociotheological Considerations*

## INTRODUCTION

In the public sphere, there are terms that completely prevent a lively discussion, a meaningful exchange of ideas, as they force the participants into a dichotomous position. These terms or topics can no longer be discussed according to content or truth criteria. They only serve to form camps and classify people into one camp or the other. Jules Monnerot called these terms magical formulas (*formules magiques*), or vampire terms, they suck the blood of opinions out of the public, leaving brain-dead soldiers who are only capable of echoing predetermined slogans. They can change the crowd into lions or sheep.

Among the many vampire terms used by the contemporary public, the term holocaust stood out.[1] When the term entered the public domain, it soon divided people into two camps: Holocaust defenders and Holocaust deniers. In the second half of the last decade, the most successful vampire term was migration, about which meaningful analysis in public forums soon became impossible. Nowadays, the leading vampire term is the corona pandemic, which is capable of dividing the whole world into two camps, with even the most scientifically sound statements sounding more like emotional battle cries.

With regard to politics, the term populism is also one of the vampire terms. Although this term has been widely and extensively analyzed and clarified by many excellent scientific works, it has remained alive as a dirty word in public discussions. Everything that is represented outside of one's own opinion bubble is labeled as populist. Content and arguments count for little or nothing; using the term as an insult simply discredits the opponent. The Polish moral theologian formulates his question from a similar

[1] V. ö. Stone, Dan, The uses and abuses of 'secular religion': Jules Monnerot's path from communism to fascism, in: History of European Ideas 37 (2011), 466-474.

perspective: why talk about populism if the term means nothing? In response, he points to the political function of populism:

*"Taking the "populists" as your opponent is very convenient, by the way: you don't have to argue with them, it's not even worth listening to their arguments or considering whether they might be aware of something that escapes the attention of others. After all, they can't be right on principle."*[2]

So the question urgently needs to be answered: how is it possible and meaningful to meditate on populism from the perspective of theology, if at all? I think that a corresponding theological reflection on populism should correspond to two maxims. One is the analytical understanding of the term and its functions, the other is practice-oriented support for our contemporaries who want to shape their lives in a reflective way based on their faith.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Populism Variations

Before 2015, the societies and political parties in Central and Eastern Europe tended to be described as populist. We can perhaps talk about a populism divide between West and East. A particular susceptibility to populism was signaled in East-Central Europe. Western observers were concerned, especially with regard to this region, whether the long-awaited democratization, which gained positive momentum after the system change in 1989/1991, would not be halted or even completely prevented by populist currents. The general political classification of East and West was: democracy with disruption in the West, populism with democratic minorities in the East. After the so-called "migration crisis", populism was interpreted as a global and general trend in public life. Along the lines of populism, it is no longer possible to define a clear difference between Eastern and Western Europe. As populism expert Cas Mudde stated in a newspaper article (2018): "There are at least as many differences within these regions as there are between them".[3] Nevertheless, behind the intensified and globally widespread populist tendencies - so my thesis - are different processes and tendencies. Although the basic elements of populist politics are essentially common throughout the world, the backgrounds and functions are different in the eastern and western parts of Europe.[4] In the eastern half of Europe, people were socialized under communist ideology and circumstances. However, the region of East-Central Europe is different from Western Europe not only because of the experience of communist totalitarianism, but also because of its geopolitical and geocultural position in the span between the great hegemonies of East and West. If we want to correctly understand the regional colors of populism in East Central Europe, we need to go back to this fundamental in-between status of the region, which decisively shaped the region's perceptions and reactions not only in the 20th century, but certainly throughout the second millennium. Before focusing on the regional dimensions, some concepts of populism should be presented.

The political lexicon briefly defines populism as "politics that presents itself as close to the people, uses the emotions, prejudices and fears of the population for its own purposes and offers supposedly simple and clear solutions to political problems."[5] This brief definition can be supplemented with a characteristic that has been emphasized by Frank Decker and Florian Elliker, among others, with the common-sense argument. The 'minimal consensus' for the definition of populism is what Decker calls a stylistic device and

[2] Gocko, Jerzy, Reaktionen der Kirchen auf Populismus. Ein Blick aus der Perspektive der Kirche in Polen.“ *Roczniki Teologiczne* 64 (2017), 63-77. 66
[3] In The Guardian 16. 09. 2018.
[4] See the focus issue of the Renovabis magazine: Ost-West Europäische Perspektiven 2 (2017).
[5] Art. Populism in Schubert, Klaus / Klein, Martina, Das Politiklexikon. Terms, Facts, Contexts, Bonn 5th ed. 2011.

means of agitation.[6] Decker supplements his list of populism characteristics with other important elements, such as the recourse to common-sense arguments, the preference for radical solutions, the juxtaposition of the common people and the elevated elite (contempt for the intellectuals), conspiracy theories and thinking in terms of enemy images, provocation and breaking taboos, the use of biologistic and violent metaphors as well as emotionalization and fear-mongering. By resorting to common-sense arguments, norms and moral concepts that have proven themselves in the private sphere are transferred to the public sphere; what is right on a small scale cannot be wrong on a large scale.

According to this view, populism can be understood not only as a type of politics, but rather as a yardstick, an analytical tool that can be used to analyze different political systems, but even more so different political actors. Looking at populism, working with the term populism, is a far cry from what is common in heated media discussions and what Monnerot rightly called the vampire term. As a Hungarian with permanent residence in Hungary, I experience the clear difference between the two views with particular severity. If I read the renowned newspapers from Germany or Austria, Hungary and especially the Prime Minister is described as populist. Instead of being able to read analyses of politics in Hungary, the term populism is used as a judgment on the entire government policy. In the Hungarian press, the same general judgments are not answered analytically, but with an outcry of national self-defense. As a result, neither newspaper readers in the German-speaking world nor those in Hungary can engage with the multiple dimensions of politics because the term has been stripped of its analytical value.

The same logic can prevent an analytical discussion about the role and positions of the major churches. If the Hungarian bishops are evaluated primarily or exclusively on the basis of how they relate to Viktor Orbán's populist policies, then they are quickly and uncritically labeled as followers. An analytical approach to the Church of Hungary - the same example could also be used for Poland - is prevented by the use of the term populism, because the term is not understood in an ideal-typical way (value-free according to Max Weber), but critically.

A somewhat simpler, more pointed and perhaps more useful definition of populism emphasizes three basic elements. First and foremost, populists are anti-establishment. They are out to overthrow a corrupt, isolated, privileged elite. Secondly, they are anti-pluralists. They perceive the world in "we-they" terms and believe that they alone represent the opinion of the people. And thirdly, populists show authoritarian tendencies. They promise to simplify the exercise of power and make it more efficient.[7] Elite criticism, an us-them dichotomy and authoritarianism are the main characteristics of populism and can be used for analytical purposes. This simple definition goes back to Margaret Canovan's approach, according to which populism is an appeal to "the people" that is directed against both the established power structures and the prevailing ideas and values of society. Criticism of the elite is also at the center of this approach, but not only with regard to the power-political elite, but also with regard to the value structure of the respective society.[8]

Based on this latter approach, the question arises as to the position of the major churches in East Central Europe during the communist period and after the fall of communism. From a structural point of view, the Christian churches were fundamentally in an elite-critical position during the communist dictatorship, as they could never regard communist power as an ultimate authority and hegemony. According to the Christian view, God is the absolute sovereign. Before we analyze the concrete decisions and actions of the churches, this structural opposition is a basis that should not be forgotten, nor should it be overestimated. In addition to structural elite criticism, there was also more or less concrete elite criticism.

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[6] Cf. Decker, Frank, Der neue Rechtspopulismus, Opladen[2] 2004. and also Decker, Frank, Populismus. Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches korrektiv?, Wiesbaden 2006.

[7] See Guth, James L. / Nelsen, Brent F., „Party choice in Europe: Social cleavages and the rise of populist parties.“ *Party Politics* 27, Nr. 3 (2021): 453–64.

[8] Cf. Canovan, Margaret, Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy, in: Political Studies 47 (1999), 2-16.

One only has to think of the electoral tradition in the Polish church, the Easter and Christmas celebrations in the Orthodox countries. These solemn occasions clearly demonstrate that there is not only a materialistic-atheistic view in society, that the churches and Christians are lively, despite persecutions and disadvantages. Furthermore, Christian dissidents, individuals and groups who have openly and clearly spoken out against the existing power and have suffered severe disadvantages for doing so have often been martyred in some countries. I refer here to the martyrs of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine and Romania, as representative of many others to the Polish priest-martyr Jerzy Popiełuszko, to the many in Czechoslovakia or Hungary who suffered difficult prison sentences. A structural and concrete criticism of the elite was an indispensable part of the Christian Church's existence during the communist era. By emphasizing this critical position, I by no means want to deny or even relativize the factual collaborations in all countries of the region. However, if populism is understood as elite criticism of this period, then references to collaboration must not relativize or even cover up references to this tradition of criticism.

It is also necessary to note the oppositional attitude of Christians and churches in the communist era, which could have been the actual motivation for this criticism. The studies that have examined the relationship between nationalism and religion after the fall of communism indicate a question that is difficult to answer: whether the strength and weakness of religiosity in the various countries of East Central Europe can be explained by the strength and weakness of nationalism.[9] This question could not be studied directly during the communist period, but we can reasonably assume that religiosity and the resulting elite-critical attitudes in many countries are closely linked to nationalist attitudes. The source of regime criticism was not only a religious conviction, or rather a desire to preserve and maintain religious customs and routines even in the face of atheistic opposition, but also a desire to protect the national heritage and sovereignty.

If we continue Canovan's approach for our analysis, then the question should be asked whether the churches also wanted to overthrow the regime during the communist era. Whether they were willing and or able to draw political consequences from their elite-critical attitudes. In most countries, there were no direct initiatives of this kind. Apart from the movements at the end of the 1980s, especially in Poland, where the Catholic Church supported the Solidarność movement, and apart from the East German Monday prayers and demonstrations in 1989, and finally the soon escalated resistance of the Calvinist pastor László Tőkés in Timisoara (Romania) in 1989, one cannot speak of any organized power-political initiatives in East Central Europe. However, all of the movements mentioned above represented and embodied the general structural criticism of the regime and acted as true and genuine representatives of the people, the nation or the ethnic minority.

Although populism as a central concept and political strategy has only been addressed in the specialist literature for about thirty years and a volcanic eruption of attention started mainly with the campaign and administration of Donald Trump, the core elements of populism, as elite criticism, speaking on behalf of the people and emotional dichotomization of cultural and political reality, can also be observed in modernity, in the development of nation states, throughout the twentieth century.[10] It is therefore legitimate to examine and reflect on the positions and attitudes of the churches and Christians in East Central Europe with regard to populism, also with regard to the period of communism.

The structural situation and the initiatives of the churches changed abruptly with the fall of communism in 1989/1991. The new regimes were no longer hostile to religion and the churches; on the contrary, in many of the region's new democracies they entered into an open or latent political coalition

[9] On the problem, see Tomka, Miklós, Expanding religion. Religious revival in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Berlin, New York 2011. 182-189; Tomka, Miklós / Szilárdi, Réka, Religion and Nation, in: Focus on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe: A Regional View, edited by András Máté-Tóth and Gergely Rosta (2016), 75-110.
[10] Cf. Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira / Taggart, Paul A. / Espejo, Paulina Ochoa / Ostiguy, Pierre, The Oxford Handbook of Populism 2017. Chapter 1. and La Torre, Carlos de, The Routledge handbook of global populism, London 2018. 1-27.

with the mainstream churches. What was an alloy of religious and national motives during the communist period came into full force after the fall of communism when the large majority churches fully supported the efforts of the new rulers to (re)establish the sovereign nation state. When the new governments during the campaign and in their first term of office saw themselves as true representatives of national interests and as determined fighters for the independence of the liberated states, the large churches also shared these goals and were strong allies of the governments in their populist policies and rhetoric. Although, according to Canovan, elite criticism is the key feature of the populist attitude, which includes a position outside the power holders, later literature emphasizes that there is one populism from above and another from below. Precisely because in East Central Europe the political interests and the interests of the Great Church with regard to the restoration and re-establishment of a sovereign and autonomous state were in harmony, a more precise analysis of the religious dimensions of populism in East Central Europe should focus on this dimension of national establishment. The groundbreaking theoretical approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe will be used as a theoretical framework for interpretation.

**Re-Creation of the Nation**

The book *On Populist* Reason *(La Razón Populista)* represents Laclau's most ambitious attempt to outline a general and abstract theory of populism.[11] He hopes to break the theoretical deadlock on the subject, which has often led to an impasse of conceptual ambiguity and political ambiguity about the political and conceptual status of the term populism, and to give the concept the central place it deserves within political theory. The latter involves a normative defense of populist reason as a paradigmatic expression of the grammar of politics. Laclau not only wants to liberate the concept of populism from its marginal theoretical state, he also strives to place the concept at the center of contemporary political theory.[12]

For Laclau, politics is par excellence *"the construction of a 'people'"*.[13] In his analysis, society is not a stable entity and hegemony in society is constantly acquired and secured through a communicative process. The various interest groups demonstrate their profiles and their visions by means of topics that serve as *empty signifiers*. The dynamic discourse creates cohesive interests, the individuals, groups and associations form a collective around the demonstrated identity. In this way, society is constantly being formed anew, through such processes communality occurs, *populus*, the people, takes place.[14]

The significant main issues in East Central Europe after the fall of communism included, as already mentioned, the (re)establishment of the nation state, securing the new post-Soviet diplomatic networks and the transition to a multi-party system and market economy. As a result of the permanent discussion surrounding this topic, the public was determined "from above" using all possible rhetorical means. All the major parties presented themselves as the true representatives of the people, the nation and national interests. Although the more right-wing parties used a more nationalist vocabulary, while the more left-wing parties used a liberalist one, all of them can be described as populists according to Laclau's approach. Chantal Mouffe, Laclau's former co-author, emphasizes in her latest book that the left should openly use populist methods in politics, because this is the only way to make politics right in itself.[15] She argues that one-sided

[11] Laclau, Ernesto, On populist reason, London 2005
[12] Cf. Peruzzotti's critical analysis of Laclau's approach in: La Torre, Carlos de, The Routledge handbook of global populism, London 2018. 33ff.
[13] Laclau 2005, 153.
[14] Cf. Máté-Tóth, András, Religion als leerer Signifikant in Ostmitteleuropa., in: Martin M Lintner (ed.), God in Question, Brixen (Bressano) 2014, 211-225; Máté-Tóth, András, Freiheit und Populismus. Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa, Wiesbaden 2019. 163-191; Máté-Tóth, András / Nagy Gábor, Dániel / Szilárdi, Réka, Populism and religion in Central and Eastern Europe, in: Belvedere Meridionale 32 (2020), 19-30.
[15] Mouffe, Chantal, For a left-wing populism, Berlin 2018.

populism destroys politics; only the agonistic[16] competition between right-wing and left-wing populism can secure what Laclau called the meaning of politics. She believes that "left-wing populism - understood as a discursive strategy aimed at establishing a political front line between "the people" and "the oligarchy" - is, in the current situation, precisely the kind of politics needed to restore and deepen democracy."[17]

What Canovan calls elite criticism is articulated by Mouffe as the creation of a political front line between the people and the oligarchy. However, what Canovan and Mouffe describe primarily from the perspective of the political opposition appears in East-Central Europe as the politics of the oligarchies, a populism primarily of some governments and only exceptionally a populism of movements that attempt to break the power of the oligarchies. In this respect, the approach of Arato and Cohen must be criticized[18] , at least based on the East-Central European experience. In the chapter on religion in the Handbook of Global Populism, the authors assume that both populist movements and religious movements belong to civil society. They argue that while populist movements and religious associations emerge and thrive in civil society, the logic of populism and politicized religion runs counter to the underlying principles of civil society and ultimately democracy itself. However, it is characteristic of East Central Europe that the strongest populist tendencies are not to be observed in civil society but at government level, and the religious forces of civil society tend to focus on welfare and mental hygiene and stay away from political activities altogether. There are exceptions as positive examples of civil society activities of religious associations or institutions, such as in Poland (and elsewhere) *Radio Maryja*, Christian renewal movements or online priests with many thousands of followers. Compared to the established mainstream churches, however, these initiatives can at best be categorized as an influential minority.[19]

Populism understood according to Laclau and Mouffe as the politics par excellence in the interest of re-establishing the nation, the people, has shown a clear change, a change of function in East Central Europe a few years after the fall of communism. While the first wave after freedom was about the whole of society, about getting away from Soviet rule and turning towards Europe as a continent of freedom, democracy and market economy, in the later phases of freedom populism became more about stabilizing one's own electorate, one's own political camps.[20] The international theme of populism also proved to be capable of stimulating collective emotions in East-Central Europe and of functioning as a simplified division of complex social and cultural reality into an us/them dichotomy. The main themes of this populism are Euroscepticism, genderophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, illiberalism, etc. All these themes are mixed with victimization, with an allusion to the wounded collective identity.[21]

The more populism has become the hallmark of right-wing parties in the region, which in some countries have not only entered parliament but also government for some time, the more the question of political repositioning arises for Christians and mainline churches. If they supported the most important national goals in the first phase of freedom, how can they continue to support the same goals, even though they see more and more clearly that the political function of the same rhetoric has become quite different. If they supported national sovereignty right after the fall of communism, now, by supporting the government, they are rather promoting a division of the nation and the expansion of a post-communist

[16] On the technical term agonism, which is central to Mouffe's work, see. Mouffe, Chantal, Agonistics. Die Welt politisch denken, Berlin 12014.
[17] Mouffe, Chantal, Für einen linken Populismus, Berlin 2018. 16.
[18] In La Torre, Carlos de, The Routledge handbook of global populism, London 2018. 98ff
[19] Máté-Tóth, András / Szilágyi Tamás, Faith Based Organizations in Hungary, in: Miguel Glatzer / Paul Christopher Manuel (eds.), Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare: Associational Life and Religion in Contemporary Eastern Europe 2020, 177-196.
[20] On the problems of the phases after the fall of communism, see Máté-Tóth András, Gärende Gesellschaft, in: Gregor Buß / Markus Luber (eds.), Neue Räume öffnen, Regensburg 2013, 164-184.
[21] On the concept of wounded collective identity, see. Máté-Tóth, András, Freiheit und Populismus. Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa, Wiesbaden 2019.

national oligarchy. It is increasingly recognized that the former political concepts such as nation, autonomy and freedom have been stripped of their original content and serve only as emotional battle cries.

This shift in emphasis is an international phenomenon. In the last decade, populism in the sense of elite criticism has been characterized by a strongly affective rhetoric. Although in earlier eras populist visions were also emotionally colored, today affectivity seems to be at the heart of populism as politics.[22] This dimensional shift is referred to by the fashionable term *post-truth* or post-factual politics, where the so-called facts count much less than the emotions with great motivational power. Without wanting to even sketchily reflect on the relevant specialist literature, it seems to me that affective populism dominates the public landscape in East Central Europe.

**Theological approaches and Public Theology**

On the one hand, populism is constructive politics in the re-establishment of the people, the nation, the state; on the other hand, populism is the destructive politics of xenophobia and the re-establishment of oligarchy. In theological reflections and in the outline of the Church's public presence, this distinction between constructive and destructive populism is crucial and demands a differentiated attitude from theology and the Church. The theological question regarding constructive populism is: how can theology offer intellectual support and orientation in the permanent re-establishment of societies, on the one hand in the forums of public discourse as *public theology*, or (new) political theology, and on the other hand for the constant repositioning immanent to the church as practical theology? With regard to destructive populism, the question arises as to how theology and the church can conceive and represent their prophetic critique, based on normative doctrine, of the instrumentalization of the poor and deprived, of national feelings, of victims and of Christianity.

A basic condition for theology and the church in the appropriate treatment of the topic of populism is above all a profound and self-critical reflection on the public dimensions of theology and, it may sound surprising at first, of the church as well. Although the period of direct and indirect censorship of the communist era was more than thirty years ago, the long shadows of this political epoch are still there today. It is not surprising, since the broadest layer of theologians and church officials were socially and ecclesiastically socialized during the period of almost total control. This period gave rise to a simplistic view of politics and the position of the church in society. The main efforts at that time were to maintain the unity of the church without conflict, as all internal tensions and divisions were exploited against the church by the anti-church rulers; to preserve the continuity and stability of church doctrine, structures and customs; and to keep church practice under communist radar control in order to prevent possible attacks. Today, however, in a pluralistic society and on the market of diversity of opinion and confession, theology and the church need a different basic attitude, the practice of which, however, essentially depends on how the long epoch and its aftermath are critically dealt with. I am by no means suggesting that nothing has been done in this respect in the last thirty years since the fall of communism, but it would be difficult to doubt that this task has not yet been fully resolved, especially at the theological level and among the ministers. Understanding plurality, practicing communication under pluralistic conditions, cultivating a dialogical attitude with intellectual openness and a flexible willingness to experiment, and generally learning to understand and speak the language of the times - these are structural and intellectual prerequisites of the time. Theology and the church in East Central Europe have been in a state of transition for 30 years, which is also made more difficult by the fact that there are no clear guidelines for post-communist thinking and life. The church wanders in time and has to draw its map along the way.

The comprehensive project in East Central Europe was the re-construction of the state, the people, freedom and independence. The region's major churches are now part of society as a matter of course, they

[22] A literature review on the connections between populism and emotion in Yilmaz, Ihsan, A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions, in: Religions 12 (2021).

are no longer marginalized and no longer have to fight for their mere right to exist. In many countries in the region, church leaders are part of the establishment. Today they face the challenge of dealing constructively with freedom. After the fall of communism they were challenged to participate in the refoundation of society, today they have a different challenge to enrich the existing structures with their own message. To use Leonardo Boff's ecclesiogenesis[23] , the Church is in the process of becoming a people, of "advancing from *plebs* to *populus*".[24] In Boff's sense of the word, this means effectively participating in the project of securing a voice for the people, finding a place for the church in plural society, participating constructively in the permanent discourse, without segregation and without privileges. At the time of the fall of communism, the state and the new freely elected governments were the primary dialog partners for the churches; today, the churches must find their own sovereign voice in the dialog with plural society. To quote a recent statement by Pope Francis: "I like to use the term popularism ... it is a question of finding the means to guarantee all people a life worthy of being called human, a life capable of cultivating virtue and forging new bonds."[25]

**Structural Conditions of Theology**

In the churches of Eastern Central Europe, church structures are increasingly needed for the learning process, especially the promotion of professional theology. In order to interpret the signs of the times theologically, theology needs appropriate structural conditions. The majority of theological training institutions in the region can only be called universities to a very limited extent. The chairs are often occupied by a single professor, in the vast majority of cases who (!) must also have pastoral responsibilities in addition to his theological work. No assistants, no support staff, no research budget, etc. characterize the working conditions of theologians in the region. This bleak picture may seem frightening and alienating, but there are really very few positive examples. Moreover, the bishops expect from the theologians of their church primarily or perhaps exclusively the theological preparation of candidates for the priesthood, and only in very rare cases professional theological work, with committed participation in human and social science discussions. These structural conditions are decisive weaknesses in a careful analysis of the zeitgeist and in the development of genuinely theological answers to the questions of the time, especially with regard to current trends.

It is therefore not surprising that pastoral decision-makers cannot rely on sources of theological analyses, reflections and specialists and find themselves in the trap of common political rhetoric that uses Christian and theological keywords far removed from the original understanding. The main task of theology and the Church in East-Central Europe, and probably also beyond our region, is to regain the right of determination and activity in relation to Christianity and Christian values. A confrontation between populist and genuinely Christian value concepts and interests is necessary. If the destructive populists combine the guiding concepts such as people, nation and Christianity with xenophobic fear, then theology and church teaching must emphasize the all-encompassing perspective of the Christ event, creation, redemption and the main virtues of love, forgiveness and solidarity. If destructive populism combines the vision of national sovereignty with the expansion of the network of oligarchies, then theology and the Church must stand up for justice and subsidiarity. Finally, if populist rhetoric alludes to the (ontological) insecurity[26] of the

[23] Boff, Leonardo, Und die Kirche ist Volk geworden. Ekklesiogenesis, Düsseldorf 1987. The Polish theologian also speaks about a permanent ekklesiogenesis. Cf. Dziewulski, Grzegorz, Permanentna eklezjogeneza w perspektywie słowa Bożego, in: Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne 28 (2019), 83-98.

[24] Cf. Rudolf von Sinner, Populism, Volk und Politik als Herausforderungen für eine Öffentliche Theologie, in: Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik 65 (2021), 8-20. 17

[25] Video address to the participants of the conference "A politics Rooted In the People, a reflection on Let Us Dream" London 16. 04. 2021. For an analysis of the Pope's view on populism, see McCormick, William, The Populist Pope? Politics, Religion, and Pope Francis, in: Politics and Religion 14 (2021), 159-181.

[26] Cf. Rudolf von Sinner, Populism, Volk und Politik als Herausforderungen für eine Öffentliche Theologie, in: Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik 65 (2021), 8-20. 9ff.

population in order to secure its own power interests by emotional means, then a Christian spirituality of fraternity presented in modern language and a strengthened practice of community life will be able to alleviate the fears in society.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I first tried to present populism as an analytical concept in relation to ecclesial tendencies in East Central Europe. In a second step, I focused on the situation of the churches and theology before and after the fall of communism in order to clarify the conditions in the midst of which the church is seeking its way today. Finally, I tried to name some positions that appear to be particularly important for theology and the church in East Central Europe. I am convinced that a differentiated confrontation with the multifaceted phenomenon of populism can bring the major churches in East Central Europe to a deepened autopoietic identity and help them to make a more constructive and independent contribution to the common good and to Christian life in the post-communist societies of East Central Europe. Time is pressing, the decision lies with the Christians and churches of the region.

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