Ana-Maria Hojbotă
Daniel Nica
Cristina Maria Bostan-Tofan

The many faces of authenticity in populist rhetoric

Ana-Maria Hojbotă
American-Romanian Coalition for Human and Equal Rights, Romania
Email: a_hojbota@yahoo.com

Daniel Nica
University of Bucharest, Romania
Email: daniel.nica@unibuc.ro

Cristina Maria Bostan-Tofan
"Gh. Zane" Institute of Economic and Social Researches, Romania
Email: cmbostan@gmail.com

Abstract: This study delves into authenticity's multifaceted role within populist discourse, revealing its intricate connection to some particular psychological motivations and political functions. Populism wields authenticity as a versatile tool, intertwining diverse meanings to serve various normative, persuasive, regulatory, and purportedly emancipatory functions. It juxtaposes authenticity against the perceived inauthenticity of elites, framing the former as a virtue and the latter as a vice. Distinct dimensions of authenticity emerge, including rejecting political correctness, validating instinctual feelings, and fostering genuine connections with the "people." Authenticity's portrayal of leaders is pivotal in populist discourse, focusing on consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy. This performative authenticity aligns with specific ideologies, normalizing extreme views, legitimizing illiberal leaders, marginalizing opponents, and redefining acceptable behaviors. Beyond immediate impact, authenticity becomes a numbing and emboldening device, eroding prosocial norms while valuing antisocial acts. This intricate interplay creates a syndrome of meanings, reinforcing one another and infusing allure. The narrative resonates deeply with supporters, cultivating partisan attachment and trust by evoking the strongest moral conviction and shared identity. Exploring authenticity in populist discourse unveils the complex interplay of psychological, philosophical, social, and political factors. This investigation underscores authenticity's nuanced role in shaping ideologies, reflecting and influencing societal perceptions, values, and behaviors.

Key words: populism, authenticity, ideology, social identity, political leadership.

Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, vol. 22, issue 66 (Winter 2023): 96-111.
ISSN: 1583-0039

1. Populism, the rhetoric of authenticity

What underlies the astounding spread of populism in contemporary times? The most common answer is that populist movements are thriving because they pledge to rejuvenate democratic governance by pitting a homogenous and virtuous people against a malevolent, self-serving elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Pappas 2014, Ştefănel 2016, Momoc 2018). Populists offer a compelling collective identity that is presented as morally superior, grounded in values, principles, and beliefs portrayed as innate and just. But what explains the effectiveness of this discourse of antagonism between the good populace and the corrupt elite? After all, history shows that common people have always been the victim, while the holders of power have always been prone – as Lord Acton noted – to corruption. Could there be another source for the success of this dualistic framework?

A pertinent explanation for the success of such a polarizing rhetoric depends on the contemporary individual's need for authenticity; and what populists offer is, in fact, a contrast between a group of people who, for some specific reasons, is authentic (pure, homogeneous, unadulterated), and the elites who are, for the same reasons, the opposite. In addition, the rhetoric of authenticity fulfills the promise of populism by foregrounding the grievances of the people while simultaneously addressing an identity void. This is achieved by promising membership in a distinctive, privileged, and unique group, tapping into the illocutionary power of multiple, interchangeable meanings. These meanings subtly capitalize on negative emotions such as disillusionment and disenfranchisement, mobilizing individuals with slogans infused with messages designed to incite anger and moral outrage. Implicitly, they assert a commitment to replace these emotions with pride and esteem through a collective identity that offers social support and validation of what are portrayed as sacred values—the "collective passions of enthusiasm and love" (Tietjen 2022, 3).

As we endeavor to elucidate the tenets, values, and attitudes surrounding diverse conceptions of authenticity for individuals, citizens, and politicians do not simply align with the liberal/conservative dichotomy; they tend to draw from both camps and exhibit flexibility, integrating previously considered incompatible elements. The fluid definitions of authenticity expand or adapt based on the effectiveness of elite cues—political leaders, influencers, and sometimes psychological experts or self-improvement gurus—and the dissemination of certain beliefs that garner widespread popular support, thereby becoming cues for normativity.

Our objective is to show how the rhetoric of authenticity transcends mere ornamentation and actively aids in negotiating norms and drawing

group identities, capable of deepening or reshaping allegiances. Initially, populist leaders employ stylistic and discursive tactics to construct an authenticity aura that primes acceptance of anti-democratic measures. Employing narrative strategies of "everyday bordering," akin to those employed in determining which members of society warrant the label of true or authentic, individuals become ensnared in the struggle to establish a stable core for their identity. This endeavor often culminates in anchoring the parameters of this identity in their opposites, namely – defined as what they perceive themselves not to be—such as fake, threatening, outsider, corrupt parasite, puppet, sinner, woke, snowflake, queer, traitor, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, or bigoted.

2. Authentic people. Common sense definitions of the "true people" and their use in populist politics

In the contemporary political discourse, authenticity is a widely used and abused narrative, employed to instill or erode trust in certain persons or groups, and to sell party platforms that rely on hampering the emancipation of socially ascending minority groups (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, etc.), and for politicians to lure voters by constructing and presenting oneself as one of the people, honest, relatable, and trustworthy.

To block the undesired ascension of minority groups or their mere access to basic rights, delineating *the pure or the true people* (who inhabit the "heartland", the "deep" or true America/Austria/Italy, etc.) helps draw and validate strict boundaries around who should be considered a lawful citizen and have all the prerogatives of an active member of the society. In other words, it packs an entire set of norms, rules, and procedures based on which someone is warranted as a part of the "true people", or isn't either because they are perceived as deviant, lesser, abnormal, have certain deficits, dysfunctions, lack or don't know how to capitalize certain qualities that would deem them worthy of fully participating in political decisions. Offering a reference group for downward social comparison, this discourse promises and often delivers positive social identities and helps secure long-lasting partisanship by consolidating the status quo or by selling a convincing story around those identities.

Various political parties, movements, leaders, and influencers attempt to mobilize and secure voters using populist rhetoric elements. Not all of their authors represent populists per se, but their platforms tend to be conflated with populism: from right-wing populism to the faux populisms of anti-elitist movements which constantly redefine the notions of class or the elites they oppose, and even anti-populist populism. However, we will analyze some of these different populist manifestations under the label of "populist rhetoric", as they share the same antagonism at their

core: an inherent opposition between *the people*, a more or less organic, homogenous, and extended collection of "special" and "true" individual humans, who usually share an essential set of superior qualities, on the one hand, and the elites (represented by various antagonists, ranging from the government or those holding the political power, to certain professional classes, the rich and powerful, corporations, media, teachers and – in some cases, even precarious blue-collar workers, assimilated to the concept of the elites under not always a very straightforward logic, etc.). These malevolent elites are conceived as working against the will and sovereignty of the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). The only way to regain power is to back candidates that can defy these elites, by speaking to the people and in the name of the people, to assert the collective will, in other words, to "tell it like it is". The style of delivering this message is important, with expressions of discontent, anger and outrage appealing directly to people's emotions, without elaborated, polished expositions. Not only the intensity of the expressed emotions reflects the degree of discontent and readiness to change the status quo, but it also tells an implicit story of liberation and psychological release from current oppressive structures, ideas and norms of behavior. This commitment to empowering the historically oppressed or disregarded is drawn in opposition to a cold, emotionless (or emotionally repressive), manipulative, self-interested, corrupt, and hypocritical political elite.

While scholars' views tend to diverge on whether populism should be seen as a consequence of a crisis (Laclau 2005) or a phenomenon that triggers crises (Moffitt 2016), we nevertheless agree that at its core is considering that society is "separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. Immediately deriving from this is the action-oriented conviction that there is some sort of order of things that demands to be restored. With the experience or imminence of the crisis at the core of this goal, which is aiming to reduce the existential threat, certain political projects focus on bringing the power back to the people, claiming to speak for them, insisting on defining the identity of the true people.

Pitching the two symbolic groups against one another (with the empty signifiers "people" and the "elite") needs a mechanism of legitimation or delegitimization. One of them is based, as we will try to argue in this section, on using the rhetoric of authenticity, which is employed to provide a flexible and reconfigurable ideological scaffolding for what Yuval-Davis coined as the phenomenon of "everyday bordering", involved in the "autochthonic politics of belonging": "All citizens are required to become untrained unpaid border guards, and more and more of us are becoming suspects of illegal or at least illegitimate border crossers." (Yuval-Davis 2019). We believe that authenticity's rhetoric's uses and abuses are appealing and persistent, without losing their allure, also because of the term's shifting and changing set of meanings and multitudes of referents,

which grants a special exclusionary and boundary-drawing power within this Manichean worldview: to delimitate, legitimize and delegitimize, to point to who belongs (who deserves being considered a part of the "We") and who is not (who displays the undesirable qualities of the "Other"), based on certain criteria of being worthy or unworthy, expendable or erasable, inferior.

In all areas of political life, "authenticity may be a virtue that politicians increasingly need to demonstrate, in part as a response to rising distrust in politics" (Valgarðsson, Clarke, Jennings, and Stoker 2021). Analyzing the potency of the concept in a comparative overview of populism in Italy, France, Netherlands, UK, Fieschi (2019) describes it as a way of thinking, relating and recognizing others, and validating knowledge and authorities. Seeing it as an ideology, but not as thin as described by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), whose work on populism as an antagonism between the authentic and nefarious others, she is endorsing, Fieschi believes that populism relies heavily on the semantics of authenticity, with the heavily infused connotations of naturalness, immediacy, and transparency.

As mentioned earlier, an identity's purity (authenticity) is constituted by the projected opposite of the elements that are excluded from it. Without a stable, substantive core, the concept is used as a metonymy, more like a blank placeholder or empty signifier that is temporarily filled in with what better reflects the current political grievance and serves the corresponding ideological goal. This covers a variety of more or less fixed traits, such as legitimacy, right of birth, legal status, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, moral virtue, integrity, autonomy, agency, honesty, social desirability, social deviance, conformism, non-conformism, charisma, repulsiveness, or merit. The kaleidoscopic quality of the folk uses of the concept of authenticity is not countered in any way by the largesse of definitions and the ongoing debates around the attributes of the construct in the academic fields concerned with its study (psychology, sociology, communication studies, philosophy), which is why we consider it opportune to bring this topic to the attention of the scholars in the field, from a different viewpoint than usually addressed.

3. Varieties of populism and flavors of authenticity in the East and West

Traditionally centering on an essentialist notion of the people, populist movements rely on an implicit definition of who and under what circumstances can be treated as part of "the people", the "Us" that opposes a real or symbolic Them. Authenticity is a convenient construct, a heuristic to help people orient their political perception and behavior: signaling the commitment to certain political goals and values, endorsing claims regarding membership to social categories (i.e. legitimation/in-

clusion vs. social exclusion), creating a sense of belongingness to a marked group through identification with a "true" leader (authenticity as identity source), mitigating reputational costs of norm violations, etc. Even if they propose a definition of what counts as authentic citizenry, these definitional criteria usually take the shape, and conviction of the movement's targeted audience. However, electorates and political goals change, and they are especially dynamic in times of crisis.

We will treat the concept of authenticity as a free-floating notion that can constrict or dilate under the pressure of political constraints, or - depending on the goals, the trending, dominant rhetoric in a certain space and time, and, of course, the creativity of political elites: a Rorschach test revealing the underlying political goals and enemies. The polysemy and controversies around the term make this variability even higher, compared to other concepts, central to the popular consciousness, that share the same fate. Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall (202) discuss at large this kind of "linguistic expansion", in which those who are in power employ a "logic of spin to detach concepts from their previous associations and shift them to new meanings" (Hall and Massey 2010, 11), leading to a difficulty in establishing what some buzzwords mean and for whom.

Certain crises or the increased diversification of society can bring certain constructs into the spotlight (see Lionel Trilling's discussion of the relationship between the rising preoccupation with sincerity and increased social and geographical mobility), and force opinion leaders to relax racial and social boundaries to appeal to as many minorities as possible, especially when they are either despondent or they don't have strong fully-formed political attachments. With some degree of risk and creativity, discourse elements of competing politics could be appropriated or symbolically adapted to fit into one's ideological tradition.

For the populist leaders, defining who is "Us" and who is them (a deceptive elite, secret cabals or "the deep state") is important because it delivers a symbolic "them". Having am enemy to rally against also guards the populist leaders against being perceived as "the elite", especially once in power. This accounts for the dynamic in the definition of the "true people". For instance, some authors observed a shift in Western Europe's populist radical right-wing parties towards welfare state-friendly positions; however, this relaxing of the views on distributive politics is not universal, but takes the form of "welfare chauvinism", where benefits directed only to the "deserving" and "hard-working" (namely native citizens), and not towards the "lazy free-riders" or "parasitic" (see Chueri 2022). A similar phenomenon seems to be reported in the US, where right-wing movements also tend to incorporate a series of elements previously alien from their programmatic agenda, often in a paradoxical or contradictory way. As HoSang and Lowndes explain in *Producers, parasites patriots: Race and the new right-wing politics of precarity*, there is a pressure to solidify existing hierarchies through recurrent stories of racial transposition that

sell a certain view of the "producer" (who generates capital and economic value, rather than draining the economy), defined in opposition to parasites (who drain and "game the system"). As the authors explained this phenomenon specific to the American context, "political and economic elites need novel forms of moral legitimation to justify the withdrawal of their commitments to the growing number of households newly vulnerable to an economy rooted in plunder and financial predation" (Hosang and Lowndes 2019). This refurbishing of the programmatic agendas that bring together strange bedfellows can be done with ease, the inconsistencies being covered through the co-option of popular cultural tropes, religious and spiritual models, ethical virtues, or even understandings of psychological functions and dysfunctions, as in the case of authenticity. This is illustrated also by Schmidt (2020) in her discussion of "radical center" that dissolves the continuum left-right or the "polyvalent populism" drawing together ideas from both extremes (Pirro 2018), such as left-libertarian ideas with cultural issues or anti-immigration stances.

Some uses of authenticity ask for stricter conceptual boundaries, especially when it comes to criteria related to class, nationality, ethnicity, coloniality, minority status, while others are more permeable, allowing more inclusiveness and improvisation. Various conflations and chronic confusion around the concept of authenticity and also the co-option of psychological theories (ranging from psycho-analytic, positive, humanistic accounts to the individualistic ideal of human functioning) further reinforce their use as a political legitimation tool, serving as ideological scaffolding of exclusionary ideologies. The malleable and flexible configuration of authenticity connotations is by itself generating a vicious cycle: as different political groups or moments claim ownership over certain definitions, or discard and replace old ones, the obsession with the concept is reinforced, especially for discourses where the dominant need is represented by reaching a essentialist, non-debatable core.

For the right-wing populist, authenticity is a concept in charge of gatekeeping the definitions of ethnicity, which allows someone access to the category of chosen people. That can be granted by birth, religious conviction, in its stricter meanings; other times, it can relax to include more merit-based definitions: for instance, someone can be accepted as a true member of a symbolic nation by adopting a language, religion (via conversion) and displaying all the markers of with the virtuous: hard-working, true believer/orthodox, holder of traditions.

The vast majority of studies on populist movements have been conducted in Western contexts, from Western Europe to North and South America, covering delineated instances of both right- and left-wing populists. In the US and Southern Europe, the left-wing populist tropes rely on the antagonism between a "progressive, tolerant, inclusive us" and a "reactionary, xenophobic them". The self-professed pluralism of left-wing populism becomes contestable at a close analysis of the discourses aimed

at delegitimizing political opponents, especially from the extreme right, but also from the conciliatory, "both-sideist" center.

Western and Northern countries like France, Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, see a rise in right-wing populist tropes usually contrasting the common, ordinary individual against elites using nativist, nationalist, and organicist metaphors. In Eastern Europe, the countries from the former Soviet bloc or satellite states experienced almost four decades of transition from socialism to capitalism that demanded the quick adjustment of the population to several shocks that came with laissez-faire marketization, the privatization of state enterprises, and dismantling of the welfare system. Alongside the rise of a new class of newly rich, the shock therapy of the market reforms had devastating effects such as mass unemployment, and a drop in life expectancy, especially in males, manifested in a suicide epidemic.

In his work on the dynamics of biopolitics in post-socialist Russia, Tomas Matza (2012, 2018) described the refashioning of the self as one of the central projects guiding the new post-socialist subjectivity, in the same time one of the bases for the new class definitions, explaining how the psy-disciplines, mainly psychotherapy and psycho-education are often orienting the neoliberal governmentality. After being mainly associated with instruments of repressive governments and secret police activity, psy-disciplines became not only instruments for achieving personal freedom and exploration of the new environment of democracy, but full-blown weapons in a competitive economic world. The individual self be–comes a product that requires constant investment, adjustment, and – when needed – reform, calling for shock therapies, which are often risky and traumatic, in a fashion that mirrors the economic doctrine of the transition.

We propose that the individualistic account of authenticity is the ongoing design and elaboration process of the entrepreneurial self, in the absence of which, motivational, and moral bankruptcy are regarded are highly likely, in addition to economic falling through and entrepreneurial defeat. The popularity and persistence of this type of culture or rein–vention through shock and rediscovery have been discussed in other contexts too, historically different than the ones we will refer to here. Carla Freeman (2014, 1) does a great job of talking about what Foucault (1988) called the "technologies of the self", by analyzing how they are represented in the neoliberal ethos in Barbados, where she describes entrepreneurialism *as* "not simply a mechanism of self-employment—a vehicle for income generation, an economic matter of business, that is, entrepreneurship in a narrow sense—but a subtler, generalized way of being and way of feeling in the world". To count as authentic, one has to perpetually "rebrand", by reinvention and renovation of the self, an undertaking requiring a combination of self-awareness, active risk-taking and commitment to one's own entrepreneurial identity. What is striking

about Freeman's account is that it reveals that this type of professional identity is also adopted as a way of life, spilling into the spiritual, interpersonal, and parental domains and roles.

When it comes to authenticity adopted via popular psychological discourse, with more or less contribution from the psy-ences to lend the expert credibility to the way it is sold, we have a different meaning than the one usually adopted by populism: which is sending to a more stable, essential trait that one is usually born with and unalienable (but has to be recognizable and visible, either by physical or behavioral cues, such as adopting customs, norms, beliefs that signal allegiance to that privileged identity). It is not difficult to see how this view is a reaction to the hyper-individualistic view of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self-described by Freeman (2014). While claiming that economic, and spiritual success can be achieved through hard work, and self-authorship, this view also charges the individuals with the blame for their own economic hardship, namely lack of education or vision, or even with a dispassionate apathy to their own work and life projects in general. Going back from this view of authenticity to the populist narratives, it is important to mention that according to some authors like Michael Sandel, "the populist backlash of recent years has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit, as it has been experienced by those who feel humiliated by meritocracy and by this entire political project." (Coman 2020). Also, a suspected reaction to this hyper-individualizing account of personal success, ownshifting is another contemporary movement that seems to be closely related to the discontent around the hustle culture.

At the center of the political spectrum, the managerial or technocratic populism mainly seeks to sell expertise and competency, trying to erode the divide between the elite and the people, appealing to the lower classes through directness, immediacy, and ordinariness, usually representing an entrepreneurial figure that wants to implement their business expertise into good, efficient governance. What the technocrats are antagonizing is the bad government or corrupt leaders they are seeking to replace, to represent the interest of the people on the left and right, between which they want to build bridges rather than capitalize on ethnic, national, and other identitarian cleavages. However, any of the elements can become salient if there is a crisis when demonizing an internal or external threat or other seems a good strategy.

The neoliberal account of the authenticity of ordinary people and their leaders are working in a more meritocratic frame. While the first is a fact granted by mere birth, a life-long pass to a certain status of belonging to a (symbolic) privileged group, the latter is equivalent to an ongoing "validation" process, a never-ending work in progress. For the centrist populist, authentic living is not the liberating, freedom-granting ideal of spontaneity, impulsiveness, and naturalness that we find in the understanding and branding of the right-wing populist, but a cerebral endeavor

that is future-oriented, that demands strategic thinking, restraint, and self-control. It also requires continuous resource investment for self-renovation and maintenance.

In this context, many post-socialist societies became divided in at least two factions: the pro-West/pro-European, oriented towards reforms (even if it implied costs in terms of austerity), and the Eurosceptics, that voiced the reserved toward the forced "westernization"/"europeanization" and expressed nostalgia for the communist past. The two factions often described themselves as the "true people" and characterized the opponent as the backward/Bolshevik/soviets, or the brainwashed/mentally ill/devoid of Western values (for a discussion of the particularities of these divides in Ukraine and how they contributed to the rise of populism, see Baysha 2020). More than in other contexts, the technocratic variety of populism shook hands with the more nativist, nationalist right-wing one: the pro-European, pro-democratization, meant clearly stated independence from Russia.

4. "Authentic leaders", populist politicians and online communication

An authentic leader is perceived as such, as long as it is displaying or performing a certain type of identity (through discursive and extra-linguistic performances), either characteristic to the people a certain strain of populism has in mind as the sole bearer of legitimacy. Luebke (2021) defines the construct of political authenticity as a multidimensional one, comprised of the following four dimensions: consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy. Based on the performed identity, a politician will appear as more or less authentic depending on the overlap between the evaluator's identity and the one they are evaluating. Conceptualizations of political authenticity rely on the perceiver's ideology, as conservative voters and media will construct it differently than liberal audiences and media (Luebke 2020).

As Enli put it (2015, 2017), performed authenticity impersonates the kind of persona a politician is delivering and the quality of its performance, then their quality of being "real", namely true to the inner self: self-aware, transparent, and honest. For other authors, performed authenticity is more about calibrated amateurism, in other words, regards the art of delivering a persona in "the raw aesthetic of an amateur", to present oneself as ordinary and relatable (Abidin 2017, 7). Enli coins a few strategies that political leaders use to convey authenticity: spontaneity, intimacy/immediacy, predictability/consistency, ordinariness and openness, and amateurism that stems from imperfection or ambivalence (Enli 2015, 2017). While honesty can be more or less straightforward (usually stemming from a degree of overlap between the public and "backstage"

image of politicians), the quality of "realness" that Enli (2018) talks about is one that allows for more variability of interpretations and meanings, based on the perceivers' values, attitudes, and ideological affiliations. Anti-elitism, ordinariness, and imperfections (being direct, outspoken and displaying a certain degree of the messiness of appearance or workspaces, using faulty grammar in written personal communication), are all details employed to minimize the impression of being staged.

It is possible that perceiving a leader as authentic can be based on a more visceral/automatic/non-rational evaluation, reflective of a concordance between the exhibited traits, values, and political preferences of a certain leader, and the perceiver's own traits. A more aggressive personality can prefer and consider as authentic a more assertive, vulgar, antagonistic, dominant figure, who is ready to perform the "flaunting of the low": use of coarse language, and impoliteness (Ostiguy 2017). By displaying bad manners, populists are representing themselves as being ordinary, common, and close to the people, or "perform ordinariness" (Moffitt 2016, 57). An illustrative example of the more extreme ways of this transgressive style of populism is a Beppe Grillo's "vaffanculismo", a term coined by the former comedian, leader of the anti-austerity Five Star Movement (M5S) party.

In the landscape of modern ideological discourse, the advent of new media has significantly altered the construct of authenticity. The role of new media, encompassing digital platforms, social networks, and online forums, extends beyond mere communication tools; they actively shape perceptions of authenticity. Unlike traditional media, which often adhered to editorial standards and journalistic ethics, new media platforms are decentralized and user-driven. This characteristic allows for a more organic, rough and sheer, even – as Grillo put it – "vaffanculistic", form of content creation, where authenticity is perceived not through institutional validation but through unrestricted expression of gut and through communal resonance and engagement (Castells, 2012). The immediacy and interactivity of these platforms enable users to share unfiltered and personal narratives, creating a sense of genuineness and relatability that traditional media often lacks.

Populist leaders prefer online social networks, because they allow a more direct (unmediated, therefore "authentic") communication. Additionally, online social networks are a prominent space for expressing moral outrage against all kinds of social and political issues (Mihailov, Voinea and Vică 2023). With their outrage against the elites and their direct engagement with the "common people", populist politicians find online social networks particularly advantageous (Ennli and Rosenberg 2018). Platforms like X (the former Twitter) and Facebook allow these leaders to bypass traditional media filters, directly reaching their audience with unmediated messages. This direct line of communication helps populist leaders maintain a narrative of being "one of the people", enhancing

their authenticity among followers. Additionally, the algorithmic nature of these platforms often leads to the creation of echo chambers, where users are predominantly exposed to viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2017). This environment amplifies the leaders' messages, further entrenching their ideological positions within their support base.

As such, the role of new media in constructing authenticity and the preference of populist leaders for online social networks represent a paradigm shift in ideological discourse. The unfiltered nature of these platforms creates a sense of immediacy and genuineness, while their algorithmic underpinnings facilitate targeted message amplification, significantly impacting the spread and reception of ideologies in the digital age.

•

As pointed out in this article, authenticity activates a constellation of different meanings, some of them situated in tension to one another, which may take either a primary or a secondary role, or work in tandem with each other to reach a wide range of normative, persuasive, social regulatory or emancipatory functions. Catherine Fieschi previously proposed the following set of functions: "It is useful (1) to brand all others as hypocrites; (2) as a blanket excuse to speak one's mind in ways that are as disruptive as possible, unbounded by received social and political norms; and (3) to make good on the populist claim that instinct and commonsense trump reason and strategy" (Fieschi 2019, 36). We will develop these functions, adding a few others.

Activating the concept and its counterpart (inauthenticity) can help *build (or erode) trust in* certain groups, leaders, institutions, formal or informal, such a symbolic elite or expert corpus; can *normalize (mainstream) extreme attitudes* by encouraging strength and extremity of convictions (an authentic member of the people can probe one's quality only by displaying signs of this belonging through strong adherence to the implicit or explicit beliefs of the "people"); *legitimize (or delegitimize) members and leaders* by pitting them against tests of ideological purity, consistency and predictability; *derogating or excluding opponents*, *outsiders or dissidents*; *normalizing previously unacceptable or antisocial behaviors* (by attaching the label of authenticity to behaviors, emotions and attitudes reflects an implicit reflection on their naturalness, normativity, sincerity, sense of obligation or even moral beauty); *mitigating reputational costs of antisocial or uncivil acts* (which are rebranded as markers of authenticity).

We will conclude the article with some final remarks on the explanations put forth by Fieschi, which we believe remain open for future explorations. We agree with the point Fieschi makes that "populism is the politics of the gut" and that it does not so much oppose reason to emotions, but rather to instincts. If we try to continue this reasoning, we can

identify ways in which it co-opts psychological justifications for this. Through a bottom-up implicit evaluation, attaching the feeling of being wrong or right to issues based on the degree to which they feel authentic or inauthentic to the individual leads to a moralization of a gut-feeling-based decisional process, which is the prerequisite of the capacity of populist discourses to challenge, promulgate or eradicating norms. Challenging the injunctive norms through appeals to authenticity refers to pushing boundaries, negotiating the limits and acceptability of conduct, in the name of a true self, which is perceived as inherently good, thus offering a moral license to think, feel and act liberally, even in depraved or reprehensible ways. Similarly, new norms are also symbolically promulgated, allowing for new definitions of what legitimate or desirable actions are, allowing what was previously regarded as antisocial conduct, by constructing them as natural, and normal, because they are emanating from the organic, spontaneous, and mundane will of the "people". Lastly, norms related to communal living are eradicated, by constructing civility, propriety, or solidarity as artificial, and hypocritical, as they are imposed by either bad actors, disguised in Samaritans, or by political elites.

We believe that all these meanings evoked above, coexisting in the semantic network of authenticity almost act together as a syndrome, being reciprocally connected readily compensating for each other when one dimension or another lacks intensity or representativeness and sometimes augmenting each other's potency. This gives the signifier an almost magical, religious appeal through which it manages to permeate extreme ideas and attitudes without generating much dissonance or resistance. Anti-social ideas can become normalized, spiritualized, and softened under their umbrella of authenticity. Reversely, norms or behaviors that call for control are pathologized and demonized as tools of control by the elites. What all these examples have in common is a firm commitment to principles, as Jones put it (2016, 492), regardless if they are right or wrong. Strength of moral conviction is what most politicians who want to display an authentic persona is what they ultimately want to instill in their followers, a strength that guarantees partisan attachment and trust in the leaders.

In sum, the rhetoric of authenticity works as a numbing device, by gradually making people less sensitive to the extent to which prosocial norms are eroded, and in a way, works as emboldening device, attaching a positive, moving, and energizing value to acts of antisociality, by reframing it as a virtue. Whether framed as an innate quality, a virtue or character strength or psychological trait built and constantly reshaped and updated in time, authenticity has gone through a complicated history of conceptual dilation and contraction, being weaponized in various ways, to best serve the politico-historical and socio-cultural context.

Acknowledgements: *This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministery of Education and Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020–0521, within PNCDI III.*

References:

Abidin, Crystal. 2017. "#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor". *Social Media + Society* 3(2): 1-15.

Ahmadian, Sara, Sara Azarshahi, Delroy L. Paulhus. 2017. "Explaining Donald Trump via communication style: Grandiosity, informality, and dynamism." *Personality and Individual Differences* 107: 49-53. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.018.

Bauer, Rob., Paul Smeets. 2015. "Social identification and investment decisions." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 117: 121-134.

Brody, Richard A. 1991. *Assessing the president: The media, elite opinion, and public support*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of outrage and hope – social movements in the Internet age*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Coman, Julian. 2020. "Michael Sandel: The populist backlash has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit." *The Guardian*, September 6. Accessed May, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/06/michael-sandel-the-populist-backlash-has-been-a-revolt-against-the-tyranny-of-merit.

Demertzis, Nikos. 2006. "Emotions and Populism." *Emotion, Politics and Society*, 103–122. doi:10.1057/9780230627895_7.

Enli, Gunn. 2015. *Mediated authenticity: How the media constructs reality*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Enli, Gunn. 2017. "Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election." *European Journal of Communication* 32: 50–61.

Enli, Gunn, Linda T. Rosenberg. 2018. "Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic." *Social Media + Society* 4(1): 1-11.

Fieschi, Catherine. 2019. *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism*. Columbia University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1988. "Technologies of the Self." In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, 16–49. *Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.*

Frank, Thomas. 2020. *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Hall, Stuart, Doreen Massey. 2010. "Interpreting the Crisis." *Soundings*, no. 44: 57–71.

HoSang, Daniel Martinez, Joseph E. Lowndes. 2019. *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jones, Ben. 2016. "Authenticity in Political Discourse." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19(2): 489–504. doi:10.1007/s10677-015-9649-6.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason. London: Verso.*

Luebke, Simon M. 2021. "Political authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26(3): 635–653. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220948013.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Matza, Tomas. 2012. "Good Individualism? Psychology, Ethics, and Neoliberalism in Postsocialist Russia." *American Ethnologist* 39(4): 805–19.

Matza, Tomas. 2018. *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Post-socialist Russia.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mihailov, Emilian, CristinaVoinea, Constantin Vică. 2023. „Is Online Moral Outrage Outrageous? Rethinking the Indignation Machine." *Science and Engineering Ethics* 29, 12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-023-00435-3

Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Momoc, Antonio. 2018. "Populism 2.0, digital democracy and the new 'enemies of the people." *Communication Today* 9(1): 58-77.

Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The populist zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America." *Government and Opposition* 48(2): 147–174.

Mueller, John E. 1973. *War, Presidents and Public Opinion.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Ostiguy Pierre. 2017. "A Socio-Cultural Approach." In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by Critobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy. 73–97. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pappas, Takis. S. 2014. "Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary." *Government and Opposition* 49(1): 1–23.

Pirro, Andrea. 2018. "The Polyvalent Populism of the 5 Star Movement." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 26(4): 443–58.

Saad, Gad. 2020. *The Parasitic Mind. How Infectious Ideas Are Killing Common Sense.* Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

Salmela, Mikko, Christian von Scheve. 2018. "Emotional dynamics of right-and left-wing political populism." *Humanity and Society* 42(4): 434-454.

Schmidt, Vivien A. 2020. Europe's Crisis of Legitimacy: Governing by Rules and Ruling by Numbers in the Eurozone. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ștefănel, Adriana. 2016. "Notes on Populism." *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie* 59(2): 129-138.

Tietjen, Ruth Rebecca. 2022. "The Affects of Populism." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1-19. doi:10.1017/apa.2021.56.

Trilling, Lionel. 1972. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Valgarðsson, Viktor Orri, Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, Gerri Stoker, G. 2021. "The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics?" *Political Studies* 69(4): 858–880. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720928257.

Yuval-Davis, Nora. 2019. "Autochthonic Populism, Everyday Bordering and the Construction of The Migrant." *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, Vol. 3: Migration, Gender and Religion, edited by Fitzl, G., Mackert, J., and Turner, B. S.: 69–77. London/New York: Routledge.