

## Populist Dichotomy in Homogenous Societies: Internal and External Others in South Korean Politics

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze populism in the scope of South Korean politics. It addresses the contexts in which political actors adopt dichotomous populist discourses and the implications of populist mentality on the social fabric of country. Populism can be defined in three different dimensions as an exclusionary, divisive and marginalizing ideology, discourse politics and a mobilization strategy. It is typically built on others that take on various forms. In this framework, the recent reflections of populism in the case of South Korea are discussed through the dichotomies and constructed perceptions of the other. It seeks to shed light on how political actors in South Korea which is assumed to have a homogenous social structure, point out the internal and external others that constitute the essence of populist politics. While populism's understanding of the other is relatively uniform in different contexts, in South Korea the reflections of populism are differentiated and concretely understood through a range of internal and external others. South Korea, which is considered as one of the successful democracies in East Asia, is also affected by populist wave. The reflections of populism in South Korea are not severe and can generally be expressed as soft populism. Moreover, it is predominantly effective on discourse politics and is not observed in the form of concrete policies.

**Keywords:** Populism, South Korea, Internal Others, External Others

### 1. Introduction

In different eras different phenomena, ideologies, movements and conceptions bring dynamism to politics. Populism has predominantly fulfilled this function and we have witnessed the rise of populism on a global scale in the last two decades. In an environment where democracy is reduced to the dimension of political elections, it becomes inevitable that populist discourses and strategies are the way to gain political power smoothly. The increasing prominence of populism in the discipline of political science in recent years has led to the need for a coherent conceptual framework. A review of the relevant literature reveals that populism has no a clear definition, it is an ambiguous and controversial concept and is characterized in various forms based on diverse perspectives.

Mouffe (2005) claims that the rise of populist actors in the recent decades is not a coincidence. She attributes the reason not to the historical background of countries or the backward socio-economic situation of the citizens but to the fact that mainstream parties, politicians or actors are no longer qualified and competent. Therefore, populist actors transform everything in the social sphere into a discourse in order to attract restless masses in social and socio-economic distress who do not trust the existing political system and actors and to gain political power by claiming that they are the real representatives of "the people". These strategies have often been successful and populism has gained a dominant political stance across the world. Although the populist style of politics widely associated with the pre-election activities and discourses of political actors, populism should not be perceived as a short-term political campaign or a discourse politics that fizzles out after coming to power. It is because populist actors continue to maintain their stance after coming to power (Müller, 2016).

The populist style of politics generally refers to three dimensions: ideology, discourse and mass mobilization. These three dimensions are in many cases intertwined and the distinction among them is

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often blurred. The ideological expression of populism may at some point turn into a discourse or mobilize the masses through both the discourse and the ideological framework adopted. Therefore, no precise distinction can be made.

In terms of ideology, populism is generally categorized into left and right-wing populism, however in some cases there is a hybrid populism that draw on both left and right ideology. In this respect, what matters is not the actual ideological cleavages in society, but how ideological discourses and narratives are used functionally in the relevant context. Mudde (2015) contends that populism as an ideology perceives society as consisting of two homogeneous subgroups -pure people and corrupt elites- and that politics can be seen “the expression of the general will of the people”. It is observed that populism expresses an exclusionary attitude rather than an inclusive one.

Populist mentality sees society as a homogenous structure (Moffitt, 2017, p. 112) and therefore tends to exclude certain groups of people with marked differences. Who populism excludes reveals in parallel with the ideology and populism generally gains a more precise connotation with the ideology espoused. Depending on the ideological perspective of the populist way of politics various groups, nations, minorities, countries are portrayed as other and marginalized.

In right-wing populism, debates mainly focused on internal others. However, the context also influences which kind of others become the subject of populist discourse. Populism is characterized by nativism on the right and correlation with socialism on the left (Mudde, 2015). Left-wing populism tends to define the population on the basis of economic classes, while right-wing populism points out cultural and nationalist grounds. Right-wing populists refer to the indigenous population defined on ethnic, cultural and religious grounds and draw on cultural, economic and political anxieties, often referring to the phenomenon of migration. Nevertheless, there is not always a linear correlation between the influence of right-wing populists and the number of immigrants in the country. It is more related to the existence of social perceptions and how widespread they are (Collot, 2017). As the literature on populism is generally constructed on the European experience, the arguments are also mainly shaped by the relevant context. Accordingly, it is seen that European countries are predominantly analyzed through right-wing populism. While left-wing populism in Latin America is perceived as socially inclusive by bringing different ethnic identities together on a common ground, right-wing populism in Europe is known to adopt an exclusionary attitude by targeting immigrants and minorities (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p. 4).

Populism can also be problematized in the scope of the mobilization strategy. Levitsky and Roberts (2011) assert that populism is from top to down mobilization of masses by political actors who are inherently anti-establishment. In this perspective populism is seen as a strategy. Lastly, the concept is considered as a discourse. The use of populism both as a mobilization strategy and as a discourse is a way to achieve political success by fueling existing tensions in the social base. These three dimensions are linked both to each other and to ideology.

Although populists do not concretely and sharply undermine constitutional institutions and political system, they mainly engage in discourse politics and construct a polarizing language by focusing on social and political others as enemies of the society and the country. Through context and ideological stance, they identify and target various internal and external others and these others are made the objects of political discourses that enable populist actors to attain political advantage. In South Korean context, both internal and external others are used to gain political power, but South Korea emerges as a special case. In this country, populism does not have sharp boundaries as in the European context. Since society is characterized as homogenous, it is assumed that the country does not have significant minorities – despite the fact that country’s social fabric has recently begun to change - therefore it is not similar to countries in Europe or America where heterogenous society and the presence of national,

linguistic, ethnic differences or minorities have a great impact on the populist politics. However, populist politics in the South Korean context also highlights others with different features. Japan, North Korea and China are labelled as external others in political discourses while communism, the establishment, the opposition, women and chaebols are pointed out internal others. This illustrates that South Korea is an interesting case in the study of populism.

This study analyzes the reflections of populism in South Korea through the concept of the other, which is frequently used in populist ideology, discourse and strategy. It goes beyond the European, American and Latin American contexts that are the main focus of populism studies, and examines an unusual but significant case. The reflections of populism on internal and external others in South Korea are examined using a descriptive analysis method.

## **2. Populism as an Ideology, Discourse and Mobilization Tool**

It is often claimed that we are currently living in an age of populism, an age dominated by what Mudde (2004) calls the “populist Zeitgeist”. Populist actors have emerged all over the world; though countries, political systems and cultures differ, the same components of the populist mindset are applied in almost every context (Naím, 2017). Rose (2019) argues that each decade has its own characteristics of political leaders such as democrats in the 1920s, dictators in the 1930s and 1940s, nationalists often labelled as anti-colonialists in the 1950s and 1960s, gerontocrats in the 1970s. This cycle recommences in 1980s. Following the democratization movements and new democracies in the 1980s and 1990s, dictators have been on the rise again. Although Rose’s argument is striking and sharply worded and dictators are not literally dominant worldwide, it must be recognized that he has a point about the cycle and the argument is also relevant to the populist surge.

Zakaria (2003) argues that the current wave of populism is reminiscent of what happened in Germany in the 1930s. As the crises of the 1920s and 1930s shook the public confidence in the establishment in Germany, Hitler’s charisma and statements that he would restore Germany to its former strength led to his rise to power. Therefore, Hitler and his followers defeated liberalism in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. As of the 1950s, populism started to slow down in the face of liberalism. Just as fascist actors on the right and communist actors on the left used democracy as a functional tool to eliminate liberalism in Europe in the 1930s, populists today follow the same strategy.

The growing tendency towards populist politics has evolved in parallel with the conceptual framework of democracy adopted in recent years. Populism has an intertwined relationship with democracy. The narrowing of the meaning of democracy by equating it with electoral democracy, which is constantly emphasized in debates under the heading “crisis of democracy”, increases the demand for populist politics and facilitates the way to easily attract the masses, gain political support and come to power. Finchelstein (2017) argues that populism is seen as an authoritarian form of democracy and it is expressed as an authoritarian response to the crisis of representation in democracy. It is not a pathology that emerges in democracies, as Urbinati (2019) asserts, but a political form that flourishes especially in unequal democracies where income gaps increase and democratic representation loses its legitimacy. It is more appealing to the people who feel disregarded by technocratic elites.

Populism is also addressed in relation to liberalism in various contexts. Whereas liberalism adopts the perspective that society is composed of different groups, the populist mentality claims that society is divided between real people and political elites; whereas liberalism ultimately aims consensus, populism pursues a contentious policy; whereas liberalism emphasizes constitutional pluralism, populism favors majoritarianism (Pappas, 2016, p. 20). Populism can become a form of democratic extremism and construct an illiberal democracy while capitalizing on the tensions inherent in liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Zakaria (1997) equates the concept of illiberal democracy with populism. This is because although illiberal democracies have free and competitive political elections,

the actors who come to power as a result of these elections use political power personally and violate the rule of law. It is due to the fact that populism is also used as a method in the construction of illiberal democracy.

Although populism is a prevalent political concept, it lacks a comprehensive theoretical perspective and there are intensive efforts to define the concept in the relevant literature. Cox (2018, p. 12) sustains that "...populism is very much an expression in the West of a sense of powerlessness: the powerlessness of ordinary citizens when faced with massive changes going on all around them; but the powerlessness too of western leaders and politicians who really do not seem to have an answer to the many challenges facing the West right now". It is a multifaceted concept and generally considered as an ideology, a discourse and a strategy of mass mobilization. The detailed studies reveal that these three dimensions are constantly intertwined. For example, when considered as an ideology, it is seen that the ideological position of the concept determines the discourse, political strategy and target groups. Mudde characterizes populism as "a thin-centered ideology". According to such an ideology, society consists of two homogeneous sub-groups (real people and corrupt elites) and politics can be seen as "the expression of the general will of the people". At this point, it is understood that populist ideology is anti-establishment. Naím (2017) on the other hand argues that populism is not an ideology, but "a strategy to obtain and retain power" and that it is not a new phenomenon, but has been around for decades. As a result of technological changes, mass migration, socio-economic concerns, social outrage, economic crises it has reappeared and started to dominate the political arena and is perceived as an alternative way of politics.

Populism is opposed to pluralist politics and political elites, conceives society as a homogenous group and is exclusionary (Moffitt, 2017, p. 112). This enables populism to adopt a unique and distinctive discourse. Populist discourse has a dichotomous character, it is based on real or imagined enemies or others. Others generally consist of the establishment, political elites, political opposition, immigrants, social groups defined ideologically, ethnically, linguistically or religiously. The concept constructs social stereotypes by channeling socio-economic concerns and anxieties through images of the others. In doing so, it exacerbates and fuels the problematic issues, exploits the perceptions and leads the polarization of society.

In populist politics, the leader typology has an important role and it is generally accepted that the leader has a charismatic characteristic. Populist leaders or actors seek to communicate directly with the real people, not through intermediaries. They also take a bold stance in their discourses and public speeches. This leads Arditì (2005) to portray populism with the metaphor of "drunken guests" coming to dinner. According to him, no matter how unpleasant the behavior of this drunken guest may be, it is this guest who is able to express the important issues at that dinner table. The fact that discourse politics is effective and prominent also makes the populist approach crucial in terms of political mobilization. Considering these three dimensions, it is evident that populist understanding is based on dichotomous concepts and it can be better analyzed through these dichotomies.

### **2.1. Ideology: Left versus right**

Populism corresponds to various things, but it takes a qualitatively distinct form through the ideology it embraces. The ideological character of populism emerges in parallel with the socio-political context and dynamics in which actors are mobilized (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). Taggart (2000) likens populism to a "chameleon" that rapidly and easily adapts to the context. In this respect, populism easily integrates into social, political and cultural dynamics and constructs its ideological perspective, discourse and strategy according to the environment it is in. Accordingly, it becomes a means of gaining votes by appealing to the public in political elections.

In general, the concept is ideologically labelled as right or left-wing. It is characterized by an attachment to nativism and nationalism on the right and to socialism on the left (Mudde, 2015). Right-wing populists refer to the native population defined on ethnic, cultural and religious grounds and often capitalize on cultural, economic and political concerns by pointing to the phenomenon of migration. In societies without established multicultural traditions, the simplest way to gain support in political elections is to emphasize religious and racial affiliations (Zakaria, 2003) and right-wing populists frequently use it. Left-wing populism, on the other hand, is less exclusionary than the right and is often fueled by inequalities caused by neoliberalism (Gaonkar, n.d.). The main distinction between left and right is who or what is excluded and marginalized depending on ideology and the context (Mudde, 2015). Both right and left-wing populists consistently claim that they are the only true voice of the people (Mueller, 2019).

As of 2015, the right-wing populism has gained increasing representation in the political arena due to the deteriorating economy and the resulting rise in unemployment, the migrant crisis and the social tensions affecting European countries. Across Europe, right-wing populist parties capitalize on the social anxieties of restless masses by emphasizing distrust in the pluralism of liberal democracy, political elites and institutions (Diamond, 2017). It is also known that left-wing populism has been influential in Europe in recent years, especially in countries such as Spain and Greece. In general, left-wing populism is considered as an attempt to bring social democracy back into the political arena by focusing on socio-economic concerns in the related conjuncture.

In recent years, while right-wing populism has maintained its dominant position in politics, left-wing populism appears to have lost momentum. Mueller (2019) even draws attention to the debate on the decline of left-wing populism by referring to the argument that “pink tide of the left populism coming to an end”. Regardless of whether it is currently in vogue or not, it can be stated that right-wing or left-wing populism is somehow effective by drawing on various dynamics. The ideological framework adopted in this regard provides an important background. It can also be perceived that some elements of right and left-wing populism are intertwined and blurred and hybrid versions have also emerged. In addition to its ideological character, populism constructs a unique discourse and offers a distinctive approach to politics and society.

## **2.2. Discourse: Us versus them politics “we” the people versus “they” the people**

Populism is a form of expression strategically used by political actors from all camps (Kazin, 1995). It constitutes a discourse and vision based on dichotomies, offering a “Manichean perspective” of “friends and foes” or “pure people and corrupt elites” (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). It challenges politics in favor of a pluralistic society, political elites and the status quo and promotes polarization by portraying the population as a homogenous group. The basic assumption that populists are the true and legitimate representatives of the people fuels polarization and marginalization in the political sphere. As Müller (2016) puts it “populists claim that they can speak in the name of people”. In this context, a dichotomy is observed between populist actors and the opposition. The opposition is often regarded as corrupt political elites and the establishment. As populists claim to be the supposed saviors and the real representatives of the people, this dichotomy can also be drawn between the elites and the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Although populism is claimed to be anti-elite, it is also observed that some populist actors are part of the elites as in the case of Trump’s presidency.

Another dichotomy is evident in the social conjuncture. As Laclau (2005, p. 87) notes, the populist conception of society is characterized by the dichotomy of “the enemy and the underdog”. For Laclau, populist discourse is based on the distinction between “us and them”. The distinction between us and them/other has a symbolic character and it is filled in depending on the social fabric of the society. Both sides gain meaning through each other and therefore the meaning and the nature of the lines are relational and based on established perceptions and stereotypes. The populist mentality tends to exclude certain groups of people with marked differences in order for society to have a homogenous



composition and structure, (Moffitt, 2017, p. 112). Especially in heterogeneous and multicultural societies, the distinctions made through dichotomies have serious repercussions.

Right-wing populism prevalently and constantly resorts to the distinction between us and them. It constructs an antagonistic and anti-pluralistic society of real people and others. It highlights certain collective ties such as ethnicity, culture and language and identifies the real people on the basis of these collective dynamics and dichotomies. It thereby engages in a discourse that marginalizes those who are different and channels social concerns towards these others. It assumes that the real people are homogeneous in themselves. According to Mudde (2004, p. 546) this is an “imaginary community” because in reality there is no such uniform conception of society.

Benhabib (2019) points out that unless migrants and refugees are incorporated into the boundaries of democracy, the demos are confined by the nationalist and exclusionary discourse. Since populism has no such concerns and functionally focuses on the social other, politics is consistently exclusionary, anti-pluralistic and agonistic. It is noted that the activism of populist political parties and actors varies depending on the political system and international context (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 93). Thus, in addition to being deeply influenced by separatist, nativist and nationalist populist discourses in domestic politics and generating internal others, the political environment also constructs external others and foes. The assumed forms of external others have emerged out of ideological, historical and social concerns.

### **2.3. Mobilization strategy**

Populism as a mobilization strategy encompasses both ideological perspective and discourse. As mentioned earlier, the three dimensions -strategy, ideology and discourse- are interconnected and have direct or indirect effects on each other. The plot structure that populism mostly adopts is as follows: populist actors first identify the most important cultural, socio-economic and political issues that plague the majority of the electorate and then, as the real representatives of the real people, undertake the mission to articulate these problems. It refers to real people whose boundaries are drawn by populists using selective discourses and marginalizing certain groups of people. The groups to be marginalized are conditioned by internal and external dynamics. It is highly important that populism predominantly engages in discourse politics through others. In this way, it makes real people publicly visible, mobilizes them and creates the perception that the real people actively participate in politics. The issues frequently raised by charismatic actors arouse the reaction of the silent masses, who are disappointed and frustrated by the established political order and politicians, and encourage them to reflect their reaction at the ballot box. Populism thus becomes a political mobilization strategy through which leaders or political actors seek to gain the direct support and political power (Weyland, 2001, p. 14).

As Urbinati (1998) points out, populism as a strategy has an impact on the rebalancing of political power among social groups in a society. In this context, populist mobilization as a political strategy is used by populist actors for different motives. By mobilizing real people who are alienated from politics and discontent with the existing order, it enables the supposed re-politicization of the people on the one hand, and enables populist actors to dominate the political sphere and ultimately to seize political power on the other hand.

### **3. Populist Actions, Attitudes, Discourses and Marginalized Others in South Korean Context**

Although the studies on populism have mainly centered on the left-wing in the Latin America and the right-wing in Europe, there are also significant case studies from different regions. In this regard, South Korea has emerged as a noteworthy case study of populism. Populism as a mobilization strategy and the repercussions of the dichotomy of ideology-driven discourse are frequently discussed in this context. In South Korea, dichotomies can basically be divided into two categories: internal and external.

Following the proclamation of the Republic, the country embarked on the construction of a pro-Western and ideologically anti-communist political system. Communism as the ideological other has been so deeply entrenched in the political sphere since the country's founding. Although relatively eroded at present, actors in the political sphere constantly stigmatize each other as communists in order to marginalize opponents. An anti-Japanese sentiment has also existed since the country's establishment due to the negative experiences of the colonial period and especially the issue of comfort women and the visibility of this sentiment has fluctuated periodically depending on domestic and foreign policy dynamics and the governments in power.

In addition to Japan, North Korea represents another external other in parallel with the historical background. In particular, the current nuclear disarmament issue and the North Korea's aggressive actions threatening regional and national security have been constantly on the political agenda and used by political actors in political campaigns (East Asia Forum, 2022). While the main external others of South Korean politics are Japan and North Korea, China is also occasionally referred in the context of national and international dynamics. Negative perceptions of external others do not lead to an active and aggressive foreign policy. Although China, Japan and North Korea are periodically brought to the political forefront of the political arena, this is often transformed into a short-term discourse without going beyond its symbolic meaning. The public and civil society in South Korea have a long-standing tendency to mobilize rapidly against authoritarian practices. It is also a convenient context for the functional use of various issues that are problematized at the social level in order to galvanize public opinion for political gains, which is one of the main strategies of populism. Therefore, politicians in South Korea, as in other countries, frequently resort to this method. Its impact, however, varies according to time and context. For instance, after the "hanbok issue" at the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, anti-China sentiment suddenly surged. At the ceremony, a woman dressed in a traditional Korean outfit called hanbok carried the Chinese national flag as one of the representatives of the China's fifty-six ethnic groups. The hanbok's representation of the Korean minority in China caused outrage among Koreans. The conservatives also used Sinophobia to boost support for their party. This strategy fueled racism and discrimination within the party (Shin, 2022; Park, 2022).

The identification of external others also varies according to the ruling government and its political stance (conservative or progressive). Conservative parties and governments generally favor relations with the US to ensure regional security and contain the North Korean nuclear threat (Chan & Choi, 2021). The progressives, on the other hand, remain deeply distrustful of Japan. For example, Moon Jae-in and his party adopted a liberal and nationalist stance while in government, maintained relatively stable and positive relations with China and North Korea, and consistently used anti-Japan discourse labelling Japan as "traitors in our minds" (Shin, 2022). A more recent example is the condemnation of the wastewater problem of the Fukushima nuclear reactor. The leader of the Democratic Party of Korea even stated that this issue could be called "Second Pacific War". The People Power Party on the other hand, is more irresolute and prefers not to take a sharp stance (The Economist, 2023b).

In South Korea, political divisions (right and left) do not emerge sharply on the basis of economic, social and cultural dynamics as in the West. The two main political parties, one left-wing and one right-wing, adopt almost identical economic and social policies. They differ in their attitudes towards certain characteristic domestic and foreign policy issues. For example, South Korean left has a strong desire for a unified Korea and has done its best to establish diplomatic relations with the North, especially during Moon's presidency. The People Power Party, on the other hand, has a more negative attitude towards North Korea and considers that unification is only possible after the collapse of the totalitarian regime in North Korea (The Economist, 2023b). The Democratic Party, representing left-wing populism, focuses on economic inequality and social justice. It argues for the expansion of the public sector, increased welfare initiatives and strict regulation of chaebols in order to mobilize the support of the working class

and disadvantaged groups. In comparison, right-wing populism promoted by the People Power Party, has a more nationalist and conservative stance (Lee, 2024).

As for internal others and dichotomies, until the second democratic transition in 1987, the prevalent division in the political sphere was between authoritarianism and democracy. Shin (2022), citing Kim Ho-ki, notes that political elections since 1987 have also been a struggle between pro-democracy and authoritarian political forces. However, following the 2022 presidential elections, it started to turn into a struggle between the old and new elites. Progressives are seen characterizing conservatives (People Power Party) and others as the “old evil”. As Shin (2022) points out, the nature of the presidential system and the electoral system (winner-take-all) transform presidential elections into a zero-sum game, hence the political arena is referred to as highly polarized. South Korean politics is also marked by vicious partisanship. This is particularly evident in Yoon Suk-yeol’s statements characterizing his opponents as advocates of totalitarianism and in the Democratic Party of Korea leader’s labeling of Yoon’s presidency as a dictatorial regime. It is notable that aggressive attitudes are often verbalized and otherwise ineffective (The Economist, 2023b).

Taking the issue of political elites in detail, the first dichotomy is drawn between the real people and the elites, while a second distinction is drawn within the elites themselves: old versus new elites. It was also reflected in Moon government’s policy against “deep-rooted evils” implying the ancient regime. Those in the Moon government were perceived as part of the pro-democracy movement. Despite being democracy, their attitudes and policies towards the opposition were based on polarizing and dichotomous discourses. The legal proceedings were initiated against opposition groups, characterized as deep-rooted evils entrenched in Korean society and politics, and various investigations and dismissals were carried out as unilateral actions of the executive branch (Shin, 2020).

In the case of South Korea, in addition to political elites, economic elites also come to the fore. One of the issues that has caused public outrage is the relationship between political and economic elites, also known as chaebols. The inter-elite relations have always been criticized by the electorate for fostering corruption. It led to the large-scale candlelight protests (2016-2017) in which people expressed their socio-economic and political frustrations and concerns about wealth inequality, unemployment and basic income. Although the nature of the relationship between chaebols and the political actors has caused massive unrest throughout society, no tangible attempt has been made to reform the existing problematic structures. It is well known that corruption stemming from the relationship between political elites and chaebols has become an electoral concern and political actors constantly raise the issue to appeal to voters frustrated by declining living standards. However, the left-wing populist politician’s promises to tackle the problem do not go beyond the rhetorical politics (East Asia Forum, 2022). In all presidential election campaigns except the last one, candidates promised to reform the chaebol issue. Yet previous promises appear to have gone unfulfilled (Kim, 2022).

The economy-based demands, discourses and policies provide a conducive environment for populism in South Korea (Diamond & Kim 2000). In their electoral campaigns, progressives generally emphasize left-wing populist discourses focusing on the economy, highlighting wealth inequality, low living standards and socio-economic problems that have become acute problems for society. In particular, in the face of rising food prices in recent years, the opposition has commented that “the president will be brought down by a spring onion”. Food inflation is also one of the main reasons why President Yoon's party lost the 2024 parliamentary elections (Lee & Jeon, 2024; Mackenzie, 2024). Conservatives, on the other hand, seek success not only through economic discourses but also by fueling gender antagonism and anti-feminist discourses, arguing that policies of gender equality have led to “reverse discrimination against men” in South Korea (Yang, 2022). Thus, by channeling existing social resentment and frustration into the gender context, another dichotomy emerges and the 2022 presidential election campaigns also clearly demonstrate it. It is known that Yoon Suk-yeol constructed his populist



discourses mainly on the basis of anti-feminism during the campaign. The main component of his “us versus them” strategy was consisted of “men versus women”. Yoon adopted a unique strategy during election campaign. In order to garner electoral support, he used the us-them dichotomy that divides society along gender lines to appeal to young male voters and announced that he would abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Burton, 2022). Yoon and his party sought political support from misogynists by highlighting anti-feminism and generally claiming that feminism caused low birth rates in the country because it reshaped the traditional male-female relations (Park, 2021). In a country where housing prices and rents are rising and high unemployment is chronic, the supposition that gender equality is the reason of the economic problems marks to a new argument in populist discourses (East Asia Forum, 2022).

Another dichotomy that is evident for populism and has diverse repercussions in the Korean context is constructed through minorities. Populism has rarely taken an anti-immigrant stance throughout Asia. Populist discourses in Asia have mostly targeted local political elites, local ethnic groups as in Bangladesh and India, or external threats as in Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan (Eurasia Review, 2019). In the case of South Korea, the role of minorities has been almost non-existent, while various others are constructed through dichotomies. In terms of ethnicity, almost 99% of the Korean population is assumed to be Korean and South Korea considers itself as an ethnically homogenous society (World Population Review, 2023; Hur, 2021). However, especially since the 2000s, low fertility rates - according to the recent government statistics, the total fertility rate decreased from 0.78 in 2022 to 0.72 in 2023 (KOSIS, 2023) - international marriages and foreign brides have transformed the social fabric of the country and the concept of “multicultural society” has been integrated into the political arena (Palmer & Park, 2018). Yet, the country still has a rather homogeneous social structure in comparison to heterogeneous and multicultural European societies where the impact of right-wing populism is sharply felt. As observed in the European context, in South Korea it is not yet feasible to construct an antagonistic discourse on the basis of a heterogeneous social structure and to select groups such as minorities and immigrants as the objects of political discourses.

As Hur (2021) notes, the ethnocentric narrative in South Korea is based on the belief that all Koreans share the same ancestry called “danil minjok”. This perception functions to support citizens’ sense of civic duty and has a positive impact on democracy in the country. It gives South Korean democracy a nationalist and organic character. As a manifestation of this mentality, South Koreans have stood up for their democracy in times of crisis. Despite its positive contribution to national and social unity, the presumed homogeneous character of South Korean society has begun to erode in recent years. The sharp decline in the country’s fertility rate has resulted in the importation of foreign labor, marriage migrants and multicultural families. In this context, demography and social fabric of South Korea have undergone a transformation. In spite of the change in demographic structure, ethnic cleavages are not a major issue in South Korean context.

The South Korean context is home to multifaceted dichotomies. Through the concept of other, various social groups are marginalized by fervent populist actors using derogatory discourses and policies. Which internal or external others are targeted depends on which ideological position (conservative or progressive) is taken based on national and international dynamics. The constant transformation of political parties and their lack of institutionalization polarizes the political arena. Political parties are therefore overshadowed by their leaders and become intermediary institutions designed to garner support for the party leader. Thus, politics becomes actor-based rather than party-centered and mediated.

The actor-oriented politics of discourse, known as a key feature of populism, has become effective in the South Korean political system. Confrontational party politics, fueling irreconcilable camps and dichotomous politics, focuses on defeating each other rather than reaching a compromise or solving

social and socio-economic problems (The Economist, 2023a). As Cho et al. (2019) point out, this leads to South Korea being characterizing as a contentious democracy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study examines the dichotomies of populist politics in the context of South Korea. As a mobilization strategy, ideology and discourse, the populist mode of politics has always strategically and selectively drawn on various dichotomies that emerge from a parochial perspective. The findings reveal that the populist discourse and strategy based on dichotomies are also visible in South Korean context. Compared to Europe, where the dichotomous politics of populism is dominated by anti-immigrant or anti-establishment politics, or Latin America, where left-based and anti-elite populism prevails, the South Korean case is rather different.

In South Korea, both left and right populist discourses and strategies are functionally used. It appears as a hybrid case in populism studies. The country also differs in terms of the dichotomies underlined in political discourses, marginalized social groups and countries. While countries such as North Korea, Japan and China are referred to as external other in political discourses, communism, opposition parties, elites and women are used as internal other. Progressives and conservatives dominate the political arena and use dichotomies that resonate with the social base and address various issues to appeal to voters. They divide the social and political arena along Manichean lines and exploit social, political and economic concerns to attain political success.

As political actors directly interact with and address the public during election campaigns, the use of dichotomies and the articulation of national and international problems are considered to have an impact on public perception. Which dichotomy is used depends on ideological formation of the government (conservative or progressive) and the national and international dynamics. Among these dichotomies, the gender-based populism points to a rather unique context in the populism studies. The right-wing populism, which polarizes society on the basis of distinctions such as ethnicity, language and religion, is reflected differently in South Korean society. In the recent presidential election campaigns, the gender context is emphasized and the populist dichotomy revolves around men and women. Gender-based discourses of political actors are used to fuel social polarization and ensure political success. Taken together, the current political environment has been witnessing increasing polarization around the world, leading to the erosion of democratic norms and values. South Korea, considered one of Asia's successful democracies, is also affected by this populist wave. The reflections of populism in South Korea are not severe and can be broadly characterized as soft populism. It is a tool used to exploit public sentiments for electoral leverage. Moreover, it is predominantly effective on discourse politics and is not observed in the form of concrete policies.

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