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The Role of Conservatism in Development of Right-Wing Populism in Western Democracies: the UK Case

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The purpose of this article is to reveal the role of conservatism as the factor of development and as the limited factor for right-wing populism (RWP) in Western countries. The relationships and mutual influence of United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), as the initiator of EU membership referendum and electorally successful RWP, and Conservative Party are one of the main cases that are relevant to contemporary Western politics.

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the phenomenon of United Kingdom Independence Party not only as a manifestation of a fundamentally new phenomenon - right-wing populism [Greven, 2016], but also as the British version of “hard Euroscepticism” [Vasilopoulou, 2016] and as a modern variation of right-wing radicalism [Ford, Goodwin, 2014]. However, with all these variety of approaches to understanding this phenomenon, it is important to take into account not only foreign (the Eurozone crisis and migration pressure) and socio-economic factors of its growth, but also the role of mainstream, in particular conservative political forces in the process of formation and development of UKIP.

We adopt Cas Mudde’s definition of populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology ‘that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 543). Populism in its right variation is intertwined with the ideas of nativism. When we adopt ideational approach to define RWP, we can trace mutual influence and even the ideological convergence of conservatism and right-

wing populism, especially in Britain, where there is a long-standing and stable Eurosceptic tradition among the elites.

From this point of view, it is important that the traditionalist conservatism, especially after its Thatcherite modification, caused the weakness of the extreme right wing of British politics, including the one created in 1993 by UKIP. Dominance of the conservatives on the right flank occurred due to a combination of populist style and anti-European discourse (for example, Margaret Thatcher's famous Bruges speech in 1988 and the speech of "Foreign land" by William Hague in 2001).

For the period 1997-2005, we can observe not just the continuation and strengthening of the anti-European rhetoric of conservative leaders, but also its apparent interweaving with populism. In the speech "Foreign land", W. Hague spoke of the "forgotten majority" of the British people, who cannot influence their fate due to European bureaucracy.

In this context, when anti-European rhetoric was monopolized by conservatives, UKIP remained marginalized. UKIP essentially was formed as a single-issue party, whose main goal was to get the country out of the EU. UKIP's Euroscepticism, then, has not evolved: it arrived, as it were, fully formed. The very first line of its very first manifesto made plain that it was 'committed to withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European Union and replacing membership by a free-trade agreement'. Hardly surprising, given its view that: 'Europe' ... is not working. It is bureaucratic, not democratic. The overwhelming majority of the people of this country boycott its elections The European Union represents government by decree, and the bureaucratic waste over which it presides feeds immeasurable graft and corruption. Its symbol is the gravy train. It constitutes institutionalized fraud. None of its policies – agriculture, fisheries, foreign or economic – actually works. The result is that the British people are forced to pay billions of pounds each year to bureaucrats whose only job appears to be to think up new schemes to bankrupt them" [Bale, 2018].

Afterward party eventually adapted the Thatcher's Conservative Party of the 1980-s adding new topics such as anti-immigrant agenda, populist style and rhetoric.

At that time the transformation processes in the Tory party after three defeats in the elections in a row fit the liberal-conservative trend, which consisted in borrowing elements of the social liberalism by the conservative parties to "modernize" their organizations. The party shifted to the center of the political spectrum in the struggle for a middle class voter and softened positions on issues of European integration and immigration, which are of particular importance for the basic Tory electorate. The reverse side of this trend was that, due to the strengthening of the liberal wing of conservatism, the right flank of the political spectrum remained free.

In the context of external (the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis) and internal factors (Cameron's modernization of conservatism and adaptation by UKIP's leader Nigel Farage populist style) UKIP proposed a simple solution to the all European problems - the country's exit from the EU. In 2009, the party became the second in the elections to the European Parliament.

The success of UKIP, of course, reflected in the political strategy of the conservatives. In a nutshell, there are several strategies for countering mainstream parties. In the most general sense, this is either ignoring right-wing populists, or their involvement. There are more detailed classifications, for example, William Downs, which include ignoring, political and institutional constraints, co-optation and collaboration [Downs, 2001].

The conservatives from ignoring switched to a mixed strategy, which included both political isolation, for example, a tacit agreement on the "sanitary cardon" of the main parties around right-wing populists, as well as institutional isolation, which was expressed in the tactical cooperation of the leading parties again elections to the House of Commons. However, the main element of the strategy was the co-optation of elements of the political course, first of all, the demand to hold a referendum on Britain's withdrawal from the EU. Conservatism

tried to return to its "field", this is especially noticeable from the end of 2011, but the monopoly on Euroscepticism and populism has already been lost.

It is important that the conservatives did not use a strategy of collaboration, that is, the formation of a coalition or a joint vote on bills. This opportunity was consistently rejected by the party leadership, since the right-wing populist party wanted to destroy the conservative, as D. Cameron said. However, researcher Sarah Le Lange says that it's strategically advantageous to share places with right-wing populists.

The chosen and adjusted strategy in essence achieved the goal and led to the fact that UKIP ceased to be the third force of British politics. However, the cost of this strategy turned out to be very high - Brexit as a state of foreign policy and domestic political uncertainty and an increase in the polarization of the conservative camp along the line of "soft-hard" Euroscepticism. In addition, there are no guarantees that there will not be a new wave of support for UKIP against the background of negotiations that are proceeding with creak and the release date of the country in the context of Theresa May's project of Brexit. UKIP has possibility to start a new wave for the deceived expectations of ordinary British people.

The British case shows that conservatism, especially in its Thatcherite variation, acted as an ideological and programmatic resource for UKIP. Conservatism is a kind of a role model in regard to the combination of anti-Europeanism and populism [Bale, 2018]. Conservatism and right-wing populism often use the same concepts ("nation", "sovereignty", "tradition", "order", etc.), but the correlation of these concepts, their "proportion" and place in the structure of ideology and political program definitely vary. Right-wing populism being largely "parasitic" in the ideological field of conservatism adopts the right elements from its program and gives them hyperbolic attention.

We can add that the thesis of the "populist infection" of the political system, which means that the populist impulse always goes from the extreme flanks to the center, is not always true. This "infection" may have a reverse vector. The British

example shows that conservatism, especially in its tactical variation, acted as an ideological and programmatic resource for UKIP, as a kind of the role model for the combination of anti-Europeanism and populism.

The growth of right-wing populists makes conservatism act as a restraint of RWP. According to William Downs there are few strategies that mainstream parties undertake. That includes strategies of ignoring, political and institutional isolation, co-optation and collaboration [Downs, 2001]. Conservatism used various strategies to neutralize right-wing populists: since 2006 they have been ignored. However, it is difficult to ignore right-wing populists when they use elements of your program. Therefore, the conservatives switched to a mixed strategy, which included both political isolation, for example, a tacit agreement on the “sanitary cordon” of the main parties around right-wing populists, and institutional isolation, which was expressed in tactical cooperation of the leading parties again on the issue of preserving the majoritarian electoral system elections to the House of Commons. However, the main part of the conservative strategy was the co-optation of elements of the political course, first of all, the claim to hold a referendum on Britain’s withdrawal from the EU.

The British case demonstrates that conservatism in Western democracies can play a dualistic role. On the one hand, conservatism can act as an ideological resource of right-wing populism, ensuring its ideological equipment; while on the other hand, it can undertake effective strategies, such as co-opting a number of elements of a political course to reduce the electoral positions of right-wing populists, but leads to unpredictable results, which Brexit has most clearly demonstrated.

In spite of the fact that UKIP was formed as an independent and influential political player, the boundaries of its political capabilities are largely determined by the state of affairs in the conservative camp. If liberal or centrist tendencies dominate in the Conservative Party, the right flank of British politics is released, which gives the right-wing populists room for maneuver. If the traditionalist line

dominates in the conservative camp, on the contrary, it narrows the field on which right-wing populists can score their points.

Accordingly, the peculiarities and tendencies of development of conservatism in its national variations along with foreign, socio-economic, institutional factors can also act as a factor of growth / deterrence of right-wing populism in Western democracies.

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