

## Chapter 9: In the Political Mainstream: Populism in Albania

*Klaudia Koxha and Reinhard Heinisch*

### *1. Introduction*

In many ways, Albania represents a departure from the textbook case of populism in a transitional society described in the introduction to this book. There are two main reasons for this difference: First, ethnic conflict has been a less important issue in Albania than in other Central and Eastern European countries; and second, the country's party system has experienced less fragmentation by achieving a degree of stability during the political transition from Communism. Parties outside the politically dominant groups have not managed to penetrate the established party system. When it comes to challenging the political status quo, it appears to make little difference whether parties are in government or in opposition. In short, populism in Albania has taken on a different pattern despite some similarities with specific characteristics associated with the region and post-transition societies in general.

Since it is difficult to delineate parties in Albania according to any specific ideological characteristics of populism, it is more useful to consider it a form of strategic discourse used by parties, regardless of their position within the party system. Populism in Albania is thus a form of common political discourse connected with the establishment parties to which several factors have contributed. We argue that specifically the absence of successful political outsiders able to challenge the dominant parties as well as the lack of significant ideological and programmatic differences among the major parties have made populism the most common mobilization strategy in political competition.

In the first section of this chapter, we briefly review the historical and political context following the fall of the socialist regime in Albania. In the second part, we expand our theory and argument, by taking stock of the literature to highlight the similarities and differences of populism in Albania with that in other countries and regions, especially in Eastern Europe. We then conduct a media analysis, focused on the populist rhetoric of the two main political leaders in the context of the 2019 local elections.

Finally, we examine signs of authoritarian leadership and consider the role of the European Union (EU) in the political conflict over the local elections in order demonstrate how EU officials function as a source of legitimacy in party discourse.

## 2. *Historical and political context*

In order to contextualize the Albanian case against the larger backdrop of transition societies, we first outline the historical and political setting after the fall of the socialist regime. In this part, we also briefly explain political competition and the party systems, as well as the context in which the three main political parties were founded. In the first pluralist elections in 1991, the Party of Labor of Albania (PPSh) changed its name to the Socialist Party (PS). The latter acknowledged certain aspects of its predecessor's legacy, such as the anti-fascist national war, but gradually moved away from radical leftist ideology. After all, since the country opened up to the market economy and introduced comprehensive capitalist production methods, economic modernization became an important issue that was no longer suitable for political disputes. The PS's main challenger in the first pluralist elections and in subsequent elections was the Democratic Party (PD), which has been characterized by a strong anti-communist sentiment since its founding. This ultimately shaped its identity and solidified the party's position in the center-right of the political spectrum. As is common in post-socialist regimes, the parties mobilized around the new cleavage of how best to accommodate the losers of economic modernization. However, as already Mudde (2000) noted, Eastern Europeans socialized under communism had become accustomed to the idea of a protective welfare state. This also applied to Albania during the early years of transition to a market economy.

While economic modernization has become a central concern of Albanian politics, few parties, on the other hand, have embraced the nationalist banner, as has been the case with most parties in the region. In Albania, the nationalist cause was taken up by the marginal Justice, Integration, and Unity Party (PDIU) and the short-lived Red-Black Alliance. While the former even managed to enter parliament, the latter was a wholly unsuccessful attempt by a right-wing populist party to penetrate the political system. The emergence of new parties is largely due to the breakaway of major party factions or the transformation of interest groups and civil society

organizations into genuine political parties. Only a few new parties have emerged without reference or ideological links to one of the major parties (Këlliçi and Bino 2013).

The post-communist PS was less prone to fragmentation than the PD. However, none of the new parties succeeded in significantly influencing the electoral support of the PD. This could be attributed to the lack of a pluralist political culture in Albania, as well as to the changes in the electoral system that took place from 1992 to 2005. These introduced a new formula for allocating seats and 5% electoral threshold for entering the legislature, thereby making it more difficult for smaller parties to win seats in parliament (Zaloshnja and Zlaticanin 2011).

Although the PS was less likely to fragment than the PD, it was significantly affected by the secession of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI). The latter asserted that the mechanisms of internal democracy within the PS were not functioning properly (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). In comparison to the PS, the more liberal and centrist LSI entered into a coalition with the PD in 2009. As it turned out, changing the electoral system in favor of proportional representation with constituencies of relative weight disadvantaged the smaller parties but strengthened the position of LSI, without which the PD would not have gained a majority (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the PS was also unable to win a majority without forming a coalition with the LSI. All of this suggests that one possible factor contributing to LSI's rather unexpected success might have been serious allegations of clientelism and favoritism (Këlliçi and Bino 2013).

In sum, the party system in Albania has remained relatively stable since the first pluralist elections in 1991, which is rather unusual compared to other countries in the region (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). It was not until the 2009 parliamentary elections that a third party, the Socialist Movement for Integration, managed to break the two-party system of the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, thereby creating opportunities for post-election coalitions and for smaller parties to win seats in parliament (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). However, although several smaller parties flourished and won seats in parliament, they were mostly tied to broader coalitions of one of the two traditional parties and were never able to seriously challenge the established party system (Këlliçi and Bino 2013).

### 3. Theory and argument

Political competition in Albania has thus been largely dominated by the PS and the PD. The third party to break into the duopoly can neither be considered an outsider nor a challenger. Rather, the LSI had been a coalition partner in the government of both parties and had established itself within the political mainstream. A combination of factors accounts for the fact that these established parties turned to populism as a discourse strategy. First, there is the absence of a successful political outsider that would otherwise have functioned as a real political challenger to the establishment. Second, there is the lack of a distinctive ideological profile of the established parties, blurring the differences between them. The combination of these conditions explains, we argue, why discursive populism became the most commonly utilized mobilization strategy in party political competition.

We must first acknowledge that conceptualizing populism is complex regardless of the specific approach chosen (Mudde 2000; Barr 2009; Hawkins 2009; Casullo and Freidenberg 2017; Aslanidis 2015). Here, we refer to the introduction to this book, in which different approaches are presented. In our analysis here, we conceive of populism as a discursive strategy, as understood by Aslanidis (2015). Thus, political actors are assumed to make populist claims that emphasize the discursive opposition between elites and the people (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017). Capturing these claims requires a discursive analysis of political subjects based on their speeches and texts, such as party manifestos. The frequency of occurrence of these claims allows us to make corresponding measurements of their positionality and scope.

Specifically, populism becomes the meta narrative of a discursive framework, which presents politics as an antagonistic relationship between corrupt elites and betrayed common people. Political operators use this binary mode by purporting to rid the political system of corrupt elites by replacing them with true representatives of the common people by means of the political mobilization. In this respect, populism performs the function of a political frame, as it identifies a problem and calls for change by proposing a radical remedy (Aslanidis 2015). Discourse analysis is therefore helpful for uncovering more subtle populist positions and making meaningful distinctions between political parties that otherwise defy easy categorization (Aslanidis 2015).

Other scholars such as Casullo and Freidenberg (2017) consider populism a strategy, which any political actor can adopt at some point in time. The main characteristic of such a strategy is the direct communication between the populist leader and their followers and the decisive role of the leader in determining the party's goals and strategy. This usually consists of clientelist relations and paternalism and emphasizes the role of the populist leader rather than that of formal rules and procedures. It is the leader who defines the enemy and their transgression as well as 'the people' who both exists not as objectively given entities but rather as figments in the leader's rhetoric (cf. Laclau 2005a; Laclau 2005b). The leader also manages to define a set of standards by which 'the people' recognize both the elites' betrayal and the populists' legitimacy. Laclau (2005a) called these creations that only live in the populist discourse empty signifiers as they stand for something that does not exist as such. Differently put, populists are masterful at scoring political points using symbolic rather than substantive political arguments and criteria.

When comparing Albania to other post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, we find several similarities, but also significant differences. Mudde (2000) for instance argues that in countries with a communist legacy, political populism has manifested itself more strongly than both economic and agrarian populism. The latter was a limited phenomenon in isolated parts of pre-communist Europe. Due to industrialization and the gradual disappearance of the peasantry, agrarian populism did not resurface in those transition societies even where it had once existed. Thus, while agrarian populism has had no influence in modern Albania, the situation is different with economic populism.

This form of populism played an important role in Latin America in the 1970s, representing a multiclass political movement. It sought to define itself as a Third Way between capitalism and socialism. There are several features of the communist legacy which enabled economic populism to gain a foothold, especially in the early years of democratization. Socialized under communism, Eastern Europeans became accustomed to the idea of a protective welfare state (Mudde 2000). Thus, various political actors have openly challenged different economic dogmas and called for a middle ground, when the introduction of market capitalism resulted in increasing social polarization. In the less developed parts of Eastern Europe, such as the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, this situation resembled some of the heyday of Latin American populism, when "groups disadvantaged and alienated by modern urban, oligopolistic capitalism and foreign intrusion

turned to the state to restore protection and cohesion to older communities” (Mudde 2000: 43-44). However, because governments were highly dependent on the funds and financial support by Western countries, they had to pursue strict economic and fiscal policies that left little room for economic populism (Mudde 2000).

Similar to the literature on the idea of a protective welfare state in post-socialist countries, the PPSH, which later became the PS, was the party that tried to appeal to those who lost out in the transition to a market economy. It did so by advocating a form of capitalism in conjunction with a strong welfare state and certain controls over the economy. However, in the early years of the PS government, it proved very difficult to support the unemployed and pensioners while also creating other social services. In addition, governments had to comply with the conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nonetheless, gradually the established parties moved more to the center right and pursued neoliberal policies.

In addition to economic populism, there is political populism. The reason why it gained such strength throughout post-communist Europe has to do with the political elites that emerged from the transition. Typically, populists rail against what they consider the political class’s monopoly on power, arguing that the revolution was stolen by former communists and opportunists (Mudde 2000). In turn, several communist (successor) parties have used the stolen revolution argument against the new elite (Mudde 2000). In Albania, the PD has constantly accused PS leaders of being communists and opportunists, although the PS has distanced itself from its Communist legacy and considers itself part of the democratic European left.

Normally, political populism requires an outsider party or a group that transformed itself to appear like a political outsider in order to challenge the political establishment as corrupt and engaged in insider politics. Thus, the success of new parties usually depends on their status as ‘challengers’ or ‘outsiders’ as this underscores their credibility (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). However, no major political outsiders have entered the party system in Albania. Despite attempts to create parties outside the establishment, such as the Red-Black Alliance and later We, Tirana or LIBRA, which opposed all established parties, none of these attempts were able to penetrate the system and serve as the corrective force for democracy that they claimed to be.

The most notable breakthrough was the LSI, which emerged from a split within the PS. Contrary to what the literature suggests, the LSI's success depends on being part of a successful coalition, regardless of its composition. This strongly suggests that patronage was a factor in the party's success (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). It should be noted that the party has experienced a decline in voter support in recent years and is trying to reinvent itself in the political competition, which is once again oriented toward the socialist and democratic pole.

To be sure, the literature shows, successful populists are not always political outsiders. For instance, well-known Mexican populist leaders, such as Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, cannot be accurately described as 'political outsiders' (Bruhn 2012). Similar to Obrador in Mexico, Edi Rama, leader of the PS, entered politics as a self-styled intellectual and ultimately became the country's Prime Minister after his successful stint as a popular mayor of Tirana, which increased his popularity within the PS.

Finally, the insider-nature of Albanian politics is also underscored by the fact that regardless of their government and opposition roles, the three established parties were also able to cooperate strategically. One such example is the agreement that the PD reached with the PS before the 2017 parliamentary elections, which led to a change in the electoral system and the electoral threshold, putting smaller parties at a disadvantage. Such a move demonstrates that the main parties are able to maintain strategic relations across the political divide if needed, suggesting that regardless of the radical discourse there may always be room for strategic cooperation between populists in power and the opposition.

Turning to other factors that normally drive up radical populism in the Balkans such as nationalism and religion, we have to conclude that nationalism and religion played no major role in Albanian politics after the fall of communism. As already mentioned, parties based on nationalist themes, such as the PDIU, have been marginalized. Other attempts to advance a nationalist agenda, such as the Red-Black Alliance, were unsuccessful and soon disappeared from the political scene.

Nationalist elements were, nonetheless, present in the discourse of the PD, especially in the first decade after the fall of the dictatorship. Since the Albanian party system was long a two-party system, the PD constantly attacked the PS as unpatriotic, using a nationalist trope and accusing the PS leadership of collaborating with Greece and Serbia against Albanian interests (Qori 2015). An example of how nationalist sentiments have been

used to justify actions against political rivals is the media communication of the Democratic Party— the PD press. After the arrest of former PS leader Fatos Nano during the PD governance, one of the headlines in the PD press was “Italian mafia, Milosevic in Belgrade and Papandreou in Athens are alarmed and collaborate to protect Fatos Nano” (Rilindja Demokratike 1993; Qori 2015: 134).

Moreover, in the difficult year of 1997, then-President Sali Berisha accused the PS of being a destabilizing factor seeking to sabotage Albania’s transition to a market economy. This implied serving the national interests of long-time ‘enemies’ of Albania, such as Serbia and Greece (Qori 2015). Nonetheless, 1997 also marked the end of significant ideological shifts between the two major parties, the PS and the PD (Qori 2015).

In the first years after the fall of the socialist regime, the PS largely retained its ideological identity. It saw itself as representing those social groups that were considered the losers of the economic transition. Thus, the PS took a critical stance toward neoliberal policies. However, the PS soon moved away from representing workers as its main constituency. In the first years of the PD’s rule, the concept of ‘the people’ took on a less class-based but more ambiguous notion in the PS’s discourse through the usage of populist terms such as ‘the honest Albanians’ (Gazeta Zëri i Popullit 1994; Qori 2015). When the PS came to power in 1997, it nonetheless fully supported neoliberal policies and to some extent drew inspiration from the political direction of the so-called Third Way in Western politics, especially in the United Kingdom with New Labour and the United States with Bill Clinton’s New Democrats. Therefore, we can assume that from this point on, the ideological differences between the two major parties became less important, whereas abstract concepts such as ‘the people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ gained in importance. As far as religion is concerned, the PS began reaffirming its position on Christianity, considering it part of European civilization, whereas the PD has been more cautious in this regard. Despite its Catholic constituency in the north, the PD has had to take into account its Muslim constituency and central Albania’s former large landowners. Overall, Albania has not experienced any major religious conflicts and is considered a country of religious tolerance, where different faiths have coexisted peacefully (Young 1999; Melady 2013; Jera 2015; Tokrri 2019).

One factor that favors populism is the ease with which a political system provides opportunities. Presidential systems, because they focus on one person as the sole head of state and government, seem to have an



advantage over systems in which parties play a greater role and prime ministers are not also heads of state. Populism has been particularly favored in presidential and semi-presidential systems. Frequently cited examples of such populist presidents include Lech Walesa in Poland, Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine, and Boris Yeltsin in Russia (Mudde 2000).

However, the Albanian case shows that even parliamentary systems are not immune from this phenomenon. Even in a parliamentary system like the Albanian, there is ample room for personalized politics. This can be attributed to the country's political culture, which identifies parties with their respective leaders and emphasizes the role of the latter rather than any ideological or programmatic differences between the former. Since the general distinction between left-wing and right-wing ideologies is not particularly clear with respect to Albanian political parties, concepts such as class, people, and integration can be understood as empty signifiers whose content depends not only on the specifics of the political and cultural context (Laclau 2005a; Laclau 2005b), but also on party strategy.

In Albanian politics, the most important signifier is 'Europe.' As a concept, it evolved from the political discourse that took place after the fall of the socialist regime and came to represent the people's authentic hopes, especially concerning freedom and democracy, and their aspirations for taking Albania into European countries (Qori 2015). Looking at the political discourse of the PD, we find that Europeanization has been a central theme, especially during the first years after the fall of the old regime. Naturally, the Albanian people were generally seen as European and belonging to European civilization, which is underscored by the fact that Albania survived both the Italian and German occupation as well as an anti-European dictatorship (Qori 2015).

With the exception of the 2009 election campaign, in which the PD emerged as the most authentic representative of this idea of connecting Europeanization with a neoliberal economic restructuring, the party's election program in the following years emphasized this theme less and less (Qori 2015). However, in his rhetoric, then PD leader Sali Berisha referred to Albania's admission to NATO in 2008 as the return of the Albanian people to the European family and continued to view European integration as a miracle of freedom (Qori 2015). Thus, the PD's discourse on Europe begins with the identification of the Albanian people with the peoples of Europe, first in terms of adherence to the values of democracy and freedom as the highest goods, and then by referring to Albania's historical kinship with European civilization (Qori 2015).

In contrast to the PD, an analysis of the PS's electoral programs from 1991 to 1994 shows that the references to Europe were made to call attention to the social democratic model that the party wanted to implement in Albania (Qori 2015). The PS made no references to a cultural affinity with Europe, and the theme of European integration is highlighted only from 1996 onwards in terms of institutional integration. Albania's integration into the EU in the 2009 parliamentary elections refers not only to institutional integration but also to a broader, metaphorical concept of belonging to the European family, with Albania's integration into the EU seen as a 'homecoming' (Qori 2015).

However, the PS's discourse on Europe reached its peak during the 2011 parliamentary elections, during which Albania's European affiliation was strongly emphasized. This discourse remains relevant today and is associated with the party's concept of the 'New National Renaissance' (Qori 2015). Both the former and current leaders of the PS, Fatos Nano and Edi Rama, made references to the EU, especially when in opposition, attacking the government of Sali Berisha as authoritarian and corrupt, incompatible with 'European values.' Poverty and the lack of social solidarity in particular were perceived by Edi Rama as a deviation from the European model of civilization and government (Qori 2015).

Qori concludes that the idea of Europe as a civilizational advantage, belonging, and goal can be found in most of the political programs and electoral platforms of Albania's main political parties. It should also be noted that this idea is more salient in PD programs and platforms, at least until 2009, after which it has the same scope and intensity in both program discourses (Qori 2015). Overall, Albania's affiliation with a more economically and technologically advanced bloc of countries, embodied by the idea of Europe, and the integration of Albania into European and Western institutions (especially the EU) are an integral part of Albanian political discourse (Qori 2015).

In general, the Albanian case thus differs from others in that populism does not seem to arise from nationalism and Euroscepticism, as all attempts by outsiders to this end have failed. During the initial years after the fall of the socialist regime, the PD presented itself as a new political force against the establishment, constantly attacking the leadership of the PS and labeling the Socialists, an established elite that was trying to redefine itself and expand its interests within the new regime, as former communists. At the time, the PD also assumed itself to be the party representing all

Albanians, not necessarily only those on the political right. Therefore, it made sense to appeal to all people who had suffered under the old regime.

As political populism elsewhere, Albania's self-styled 'outsiders' really came from inside. Edi Rama, much like Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, became popular as an 'outsider' within one of the established parties by adopting the image of an unconventional politician who could change the course of one of the two major established parties, namely the PS.

Although the rise of populism can be attributed to these factors during the early years of transition, we need to probe deeper if we want to explain why populism is still present among the now established parties. After the 1997 elections, the two main political parties did not exhibit any significant ideological differences and proceeded much the same way in their policies. Political outsiders still failed to challenge the two-party system; rather, a third pole managed to establish itself, serving as a coalition partner in government for one of the two major parties. The absence of successful outside challengers to the political establishment, the ambiguous ideological and programmatic positions of the main political parties, and the lack of key differences among them have made populism the most common mobilization strategy in political competition.

To illustrate this situation, we focus on the 2019 local elections to measure populism as a discursive element and explore how the discourse on the EU and European integration unfolds on the part of the two major parties, the PS and the PD. As we have shown, the country's relationship with the EU represents a salient issue of great symbolic value. Some would call it an empty signifier in the Albanian political discourse in that it represents something that it is not or that exists only in this discourse but not outside. Next, we will also look more closely at the role of the EU in domestic conflicts and in the face of authoritarian leadership.

#### 4. Analysis

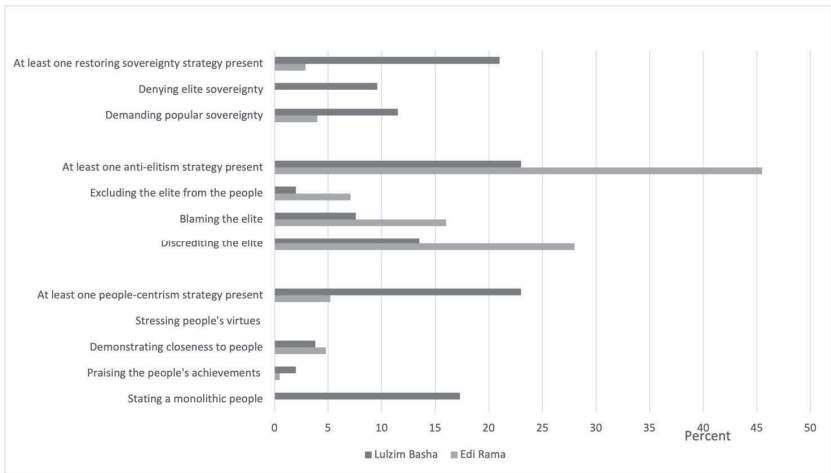
##### 4.1 Case study – Local elections of 2019

Since the discursive approach assumes that populism stands for behavior that fulfills a specific political function, it suggests that the populist phenomenon is relevant at a specific time and in specific situations. Once the political function is fulfilled, the populist phenomenon starts to fade

(Aslanidis 2015). Therefore, in this section, we focus on a specific moment in Albanian politics, namely on local elections that took place on June 30, 2019. Our analysis consists of Twitter (now X) posts and public statements by the two main political leaders, Prime Minister Rama and then-opposition leader Lulzim Basha, as well as reports by various media outlets on the political situation, especially in the four months leading up to election day.

The analysis of Tweets is limited to the period from January 2019 to June 2019, as the opposition leader did not have a Twitter account before that. We analyze Tweets based on the three main populism dimensions, namely people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoration of sovereignty. We excluded Retweets and Tweets with links without a statement from the author of the Tweet. Thus, we arrived at a total of 131 Tweets for Edi Rama and 48 Tweets for Lulzim Basha posted during the analysis period. To give a more general picture of the data, at least 51 Tweets contained the minimum one populist dimension in the case of Edi Rama, but this can only be said of 28 Tweets in the case of Lulzim Basha. These were later coded at a (quasi) sentence level, yielding 211 units of analysis for Rama and 52 units of analysis for Basha. We build on coding schemes from previous research (Ernst et al. 2017 a/b) that identify a set of sub-categories for each populist dimension.

Figure 9.1: *The proportion of the populist communication strategies in percentage*



Source: Authors' own data

We note that Prime Minister Rama uses Twitter more frequently than the opposition leader Basha. The latter seems to be more people-oriented, whereas Rama appears to be anti-elitist. The targets in Rama's case are either individual opponents or an undefined group of conspirators and charlatans (whether from the political sphere or the media). It is noteworthy that whereas the opposition leader utilizes Twitter in a more professional, campaign-like manner, Prime Minister Rama's Twitter account primarily consists of popular expressions and comments on everyday life, often characterized in a mocking style. Thus, in the case of Prime Minister Rama, populism seems to be more of a style.

Although the analysis of the Tweets is limited to the period from January to June 2019 for comparative reasons, we need to address the dispute over the 2019 elections, which is already rooted in the political developments that began already in September 2018. First, Prime Minister Rama announced then that the election campaign would start earlier than usual. The opposition camp had already boycotted parliamentary sessions several times. In the months that followed, they initially attempted to reach an agreement on the vetting of politicians, after which they pushed for early parliamentary elections, before finally proposing the formation of an interim government and postponing the election date until the interim government could offer a guarantee of free and fair elections. After the massive student protests in December 2018, the populist discourse of the opposition camp and, in response, by the ruling party, became increasingly intense, reaching its peak during the last four months before the election.

During the four months leading up to the 2019 local elections, after a failed attempt to call early parliamentary elections, the PD and other opposition members decided to renounce their mandates. The decisive factor was a development pertaining to judicial reforms. When the opposition proposed a parliamentary review of politicians, it was rejected by the majority. Opposition leader Lulzim Basha claimed that the political crisis was not political, but rather the result of politicians collaborating with criminal organizations. Thus, the opposition demanded that such relations between politics and criminality should first be investigated.

In his rhetoric, Basha described the 2017 election, which resulted in the PS prevailing over the opposition, as rigged and heavily influenced by the support of criminal organizations and the mafia. Moreover, Basha argued that going after the links between politics and criminality is a crucial prerequisite for becoming a European state. In response, Prime Minister Rama tweeted that the only way to enable the vetting of politicians is to focus on

reforming the judiciary because a strong judiciary would not permit any politician to escape justice.

The opposition renouncing their mandates led in fact to the first one-party elections since the country's democratization. In doing so, the opposition was pressuring the parliament to agree to a transitional government, which they argued was the only means by which to achieve free and fair elections (Deutsche Welle 2019). The opposition leader therefore presented this demand as something which went beyond satisfying the opposition's political interests; it was a demand made on behalf of the people and, as such, represented a clear condition for their participation in the local elections.

As a next step, the opposition mobilized voters and organized several protests. This, in turn, allowed the opposition leader to repeatedly denounce the election as illegitimate and declare that 'the people' had spoken. In response, Prime Minister Rama referred to the protesters as "a minority" (Tweet by Edi Rama, 31 Oct 2018). On several occasions, he described the opposition's actions as being organized by a "bunch of movie extras" (Tweet by Edi Rama, 31 Oct 2018). These labels suggest he attempted to portray the protests as a fictional reality rather than a demonstration by the people.

In addition to the concept of free and fair elections, a central theme of the opposition leader's rhetoric was the process of European integration. In this context, the alternative proposed by the opposition was depicted as a guarantee that Albania would begin negotiations with the EU. However, in a statement offered by High Representative and Vice President Federica Mogherini and EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, the EU described the opposition's actions as counterproductive, framing it as a violation of the democratic choice of Albanian citizens that would ultimately undermine the progress the country had made during the process of joining the EU (EEAS Press Team 2019).

Nevertheless, the opposition did not give in, instead continuing its massive protests against the government and the local elections. On election day, June 30, 2019, these protests were accompanied by acts of violence against state institutions and the election administration. Prime Minister Rama described the ongoing protests as being organized by a "mindless herd" that is inventing crises that do not exist and thereby "burdening" the prime minister with the task of restoring the country's image in the eyes of international partners (Tweet by Edi Rama, 30 June 2019). In doing so, he

characterized the attacks on the electoral authority as attacks on the entire nation.

Nearly two weeks before the election took place, on June 18, the European Council postponed the decision on the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania until October 2019. Notwithstanding the criticism that EU representatives had previously voiced, the leader of the opposition, Lulzim Basha, interpreted the Council's decision in his favor, stating that the postponement was a clear indication that the elections would not take place. In addition, for the first time since the fall of the dictatorship, the Council of Europe decided it would not send a delegation to observe the elections. Basha placed great emphasis on this decision, stating that it was not due to a request from the opposition, but simply due to the fact that the election itself was illegitimate (Exit News 2019).

The EU once again seems to be part of the rhetoric, not only as an aspiration, an idea of belonging, or a representative of an ideology (Qori 2015), but also as a source of legitimacy. In this regard, the PS and PD used the statements and attitudes of the EU and other related institutions to legitimize or delegitimize the local elections accordingly. The Socialist Party considered the joint statement by Mogherini and Hahn as supportive and encouraging to proceed with the preparations for the election as planned, while the PD considered the decisions taken later by the Council of Europe as a clear sign of the illegitimacy of the election.

In the context of the local elections, both the government and the opposition considered the actions of their opponents to be anti-democratic. The opposition's leader, Lulzim Basha, accused Prime Minister Rama of holding one-party elections that violated pluralism, a core element of liberal democracy. In turn, Prime Minister Rama called the opposition's refusal to participate in the elections anti-democratic, characterizing it as an act that undermines the country's integration into the European family and violates the citizenry's right to vote.

Both politicians similarly described their opponents' actions as measures that would set the country back. Basha described the one-party election as a feature of the former socialist regime. He even compared Prime Minister Rama to the former communist leader Ramiz Alia, who "wanted to deceive the people" and manipulated the country's first pluralist elections by allowing former communist organizations to participate in the place of any real political alternatives (ABC News Albania 2019; *Gazeta Tema* 2019; Bold News 2019).

By comparison, Prime Minister Rama stated that canceling or postponing the election date would undermine democracy, as doing so would require politicians to decide on a process where the people should decide on the politicians—not the other way around (Al Jazeera 2019). He tweeted that the “anti-election coalition” (Tweet by Edi Rama, 23 April 2019) could not take the people hostage. Moreover, he said, the opposition’s lack of participation in the elections is an act of self-exclusion that leads to political suicide.

After this populist discourse on Election Day, Prime Minister Rama described Election Day as “historic” in the sense that it demonstrated that no one could violate the people’s sovereignty. He added that holding the elections as planned, even without the opposition, only showed that those who try to take away the people’s sovereignty are doomed to fail (TRT Shqip 2019).

As early as September 2018, Prime Minister Rama appears to have been working to promote the legitimacy of an election taking place without the opposition. At the time, the opposition had boycotted parliament on several occasions, including the first parliamentary session. Prime Minister Rama tweeted about the opposition’s decision to boycott, stating that since the opposition leader was not where he should be, the parliamentarians would have to do without him. Prime Minister Rama explained that the 2019 local elections would not be a competition between parties, as anyone could win without an opponent. Rather, he said, it was about “winning the hearts of the people, taking responsibility for their problems and disappointments, and healing their wounds” (TRT Shqip 2019).

#### 4.2 *Populism and authoritarianism*

Democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe has been the subject of numerous scholarly debates, with much attention focused on the two most dramatic cases: Hungary and Poland (Kochenov 2008; Sedelmeier 2014; Müller 2014; Herman 2016; Kelemen and Orenstein 2016; Cianetti et al. 2018.) Scholars have identified a multitude of causal factors explaining such democratic backsliding: The removal of EU accession conditionalities (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007; Rupnik 2007; Rupnik and Zielonka 2012; Sedelmeier 2014) and the subsequent inability of the EU to sanction regressive member states; the lack of liberal democratic values among political elites in Central and Eastern Europe (Innes 2014); socioeconomic frustra-



tions generated by the Great Recession and the aftermath of the eurozone crisis (Bohle and Greskovits 2009); institutionalized patterns of polarized populist competition (Enyedi 2016); and the geopolitical influence of Russia (Shekhovtsov 2016; Cianetti et al. 2018).

Populism in Albania, as in the Balkans more generally, occurs in the context of established competitive authoritarian regimes (Bieber 2018). In the Western Balkans, where, in most cases, democratic conditions have deteriorated in the past decade, EU cooperation with autocratic leaders willing to make concessions at the international level (especially on geopolitical and security issues) has resulted in some stability but at the expense of civil society development, media independence, and democratic pluralism at home (Cianetti et al. 2018). The main question one might raise is why EU integration seem to be of such interest to authoritarian leaders like Rama, especially given that the EU clearly demands liberal democratic standards while populism implies illiberal tendencies?

While the EU's close engagement in the region and pre-accession conditionality are expected to provide governments in the Western Balkans with strong incentives to promote democratic rule, the EU's transformative power as an incentive for continued democratization has diminished over time (Bieber 2018). Combined with weak democratic structures in the Balkan region, this has encouraged the return of competitive authoritarian regimes (Bieber 2018). We use the term competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010) given that incumbents often abuse the democratic rules of the game and their position in office to gain an unfair advantage over other candidates, leading to a significant imbalance in the playing field. Although opposition parties may participate and formally compete, these regimes are not fully democratic due to the substantial bias towards established political entities (Levitsky and Way 2010).

External actors such as the EU could become involved in even the playing field. However, as our analysis has shown, the EU is often an unwitting source of legitimacy in party discourse. However, the EU is not merely an empty signifier that plays a symbolic role, but rather serves as a direct source of legitimacy by taking sides in domestic political conflicts. Leading up to the 2019 local elections, while the opposition repeatedly invoked European values to legitimize its demands, Prime Minister Rama received direct political endorsements in statements released by EU officials. The joint statement by Mogherini and Hahn, who focused only on the opposition's actions, describing them as counterproductive and threatening both the people's democratic right to vote and the path to the integration process

(EEAS Press Team 2019), ultimately enabled Prime Minister Rama's regime to undermine the opposition.

For governments that claim to seek EU accession and whose citizens favor such a policy, this kind of support is important to legitimize their rule and deflect criticism of undemocratic practices (Bieber 2018). If a government is *de facto* recognized by the EU or its member governments as a fully legitimate democratic actor, any criticism of autocratic rule by opposition groups is put into perspective (Bieber 2018). Any criticism of local autocrats is then dismissed as either sour grapes from a political loser or an attempt by regressive, undemocratic political forces to gain the upper hand (Pavlović 2016). This is exactly how Prime Minister Rama responded to the 2019 political crisis when he called the opposition undemocratic and losers, accusing them of violating citizens' right to vote, and declared on Election Day that any attempts to violate the sovereignty of the people would amount to political suicide.

This is related to the argument that the ultimate goal of the EU's strategy appears to be achieving stability and security objectives rather than democracy *per se* (Pace 2009) and that EU conditionality may indeed have failed in the Europeanization of the Western Balkans (Džankić and Keil 2017). In Southeastern Europe, stability has taken precedence over genuine democratization, thereby creating conditions for illiberal elites to establish and consolidate their power while playing the 'Europeanization' card and thus fending off challenges from below (Cianetti et al. 2018). Moreover, this external legitimacy granted to competing authoritarian regimes can very well be described as "stabilitocracy" (Pavlović 2016, Pavlović 2017; Bieber 2017), suggesting once again that the EU is primarily concerned with political stability rather than democratic standards.

In terms of populism and authoritarianism, the 2019 local elections were a clear example of a 'one-party show.' As we have seen in the analysis above, the external legitimacy provided by the EU has fueled the populist rhetoric of the authoritarian leadership. Prime Minister Rama's populist style is also evident in the way he communicates with the population. We have already noted that his tweets contain popular words and expressions of everyday life and are characterized by a mocking style. Prime Minister Rama is not only very active on Twitter, but also uses Facebook extensively and often responds to comments criticizing him or his work with the same mockery he uses against the opposition—in part because he often considers people who speak out against him as supporters of the opposition. Thus, he tends to view critics not as representatives of the people, or, at the very least, a

population segment that is dissatisfied with his government, but simply as people who speak on behalf of his political rivals.

To put it in a comparative perspective, the discourse of the PS in Albania and the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in Montenegro seem to follow a similar pattern. The latter has been described as “state-sponsored populism,” or rather, “a new form of populism dominated neither by far-right nor far-left discourse, but controlled by leading political elites in the country’s government” (Džankić and Keil 2017: 403). Both Prime Minister Rama and the chairperson of the DPS in Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, have referred to themselves as ‘protectors of the country’ against the ‘enemies of the people,’ which, in both cases, seemed to refer to the opposition and other critics. They differ, however, in terms of the central issues that are essential to them maintaining such an image. Đukanović, for example, has focused on the threat Serbia poses to Montenegro’s independence, whereas Rama has fixated on a general notion of the country’s prosperity that his opponents pose a risk to.

Control over the media is an important indicator of authoritarian government. Although the media in Albania have been highly instrumentalized and privatized to serve primarily the narrow interests of those who fund them, many of whom are closely aligned with those in power, they have still been able to act as a watchdog against political power (Kajsiu 2012). In the final years of his reign, however, Prime Minister Rama established a private broadcaster called ERTV—Edi Rama TV—thereby widening his control over the media. Thus, another feature of Prime Minister Rama’s populist discourse strategy has been the creation and extensive use of private media.

Through this online platform, Prime Minister Rama controls when and how he communicates with the population. The channel is funded with public money and its activities are not regulated by the Audiovisual Authority, although the channel also advertises private companies (Exit News 2018). In addition, private media outlets operating in the country often broadcast ‘ERTV news,’ instead of independently reporting on the activities of the Prime Minister’s Office. This is done in part because journalists are generally not allowed to freely participate in these activities.

Prime Minister Rama has publicly targeted the media and journalists, even when appearing on national television. Referring to journalists as part of a large ‘media garbage can,’ he accused them of spreading gossip. By disparaging the media, he has sought to legitimize his own personal channel, through which the Prime Minister’s Office disseminates ‘success stories’ of its work; broadcasting meetings of MPs and ministers, reporting on

challenges faced by everyday people, and proposing solutions through governmental intervention. The Prime Minister's Office decides whose voices will be heard, i.e., businesses, journalists, professors, public administration officials, and citizens who support the government. More recently though, he has also become part of the increasing popular media culture of podcasts in that he has established his own podcast 'Flasim' (Let's talk) where he invites celebrities, public figures, or professionals to casual conversations. Once again, he finds ways to reshape his image as a popular leader by using communication channels that are largely unprecedented for political leaders worldwide.

In 2021, close to the national election day, the PS became part of a scandal known as the patronage scandal, implying an unauthorized use of sensitive personal data of voters in Tirana by the Socialist Party through so-called 'patronageists,' allegedly working in their communities on behalf of the PS to collect data marking the political preferences of voters. Despite leaking the sensitive personal data of over 900 000 Albanians and stern reactions by the international community, such as 'Transparency International' calling for an inquiry (Transparency International 2021), the investigation concluded that there was not sufficient evidence of a misuse of personal data and 'active election corruption' (Lapsi.al 2021). Nonetheless, such an event implies that further mechanisms may be in place for maintaining influence and power. It should also be noted that the Democratic Party has suffered from fragmentation since the US declared PD's historic leader, Sali Berisha, as 'persona non-grata' in 2021, causing a dispute over the leadership of PD between Berisha and formal head of party, Lulzim Basha.

The Socialist Movement for Integration, on the other hand, has experienced a loss of political capital in these past years once the historic leader, Ilir Meta, resigned from the party to take on the position of President of the Republic of Albania in 2017 and the party's leadership passed down to LSI's long-time member and former leader's wife. Despite the return of the former LSI chairman to head the party, now under a new name that gives the impression it is a 'reformed party,' and a newly-created party by Berisha himself, claiming to represent the 'true democrats,' the results of the recent 2023 local elections have shown the significant weaknesses of the established opposition parties.

While these developments have facilitated the emergence of new political parties arising from civil society activism, such as 'Lëvizja Bashkë' or 'Nisma Thurje,' the results confirmed the PS as the leading party in 53 out of

61 municipalities in Albania. Whether the election of one representative in the Municipal Council in Tirana from ‘Lëvizja Bashkë’ and five representatives from ‘Nisma Thurje’ across five municipalities in Albania (including the largest municipality of Tirana) will have an impact in their political mobilization in the coming years and their performance in the subsequent national election, remains to be seen.

However, we conclude that Prime Minister Edi Rama’s mechanisms to stay in power and populist strategies to address citizens as a ‘commoner’ through personalized media content, against the backdrop of media capture and attempts to undermine media freedom, pose a serious challenge to newcomers in politics. Whereas typically ‘outsiders’ challenge the established party system via political mobilization, the Albanian case seems to be one where the established system constrains political mobilization and effectively precludes or severely impedes that outsiders challenge the political order.

## 5. Conclusion

In many respects, Albania represents a departure from the textbook case of populism in a transitional society described in the introduction to this book. This is because the nativist dimension and, in particular, the ethnic conflicts that often accompany populism in Central and Eastern Europe are less pronounced in Albania. Apart from the early years of the transition to democracy, when there was to some extent a national dimension in the discourse of political parties (mainly through the Democratic Party), no major political actors have advanced a nationalist agenda, and the challenging parties that have attempted to do so have failed. Moreover, few new parties have emerged that do not reference or are ideologically linked to any of the major parties (Këlliçi and Bino 2013). Albania is a case with an established political elite that has ruled the country for over 30 years.

In short, populism in Albania, despite some specific characteristics typically associated with the region and post-transition societies in general, exhibits a different pattern. We argue that while conditions in the earlier years of transition were favorable for populism, they do not explain the persistence of populism in a political system such as Albania’s. Therefore, we focus on recent political developments to examine populism as an instrumental part of discourse in the main political parties, namely the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. As we suggested earlier in this

chapter, a discursive analytical approach to the study of populism can draw a very nuanced political picture showing that political parties cannot be merely classified as populist or non-populist; it highlights the fact that populist discursive elements are scattered across the ideological spectrum and that their intensity varies over time (Aslanidis 2015).

As is often the case, populism is explained by a combination of factors that are, to some extent, highly context dependent. Our main argument is that in order to understand populism in Albania as probably the most common mobilization strategy in political competition almost three decades after the fall of the socialist regime, we should take into account a combination of factors: the lack of successful political challengers/outside to the establishment and the absence of clear ideological positions of political parties.

Analysis of the social media posts of the two main political leaders during the 2019 local election campaign shows that in both cases populism is a key element in the discourse. However, the opposition leader maintains a more professional social media campaign style, while the prime minister uses Twitter extensively to attack his opponents. In his case, populism seems to be more of a style characterized by ridicule and the construction of a vague category of political or civil actors who are considered enemies of the country and are often talked about pejoratively among the population.

As we already discussed earlier, Prime Minister Rama's political discourse shows clear signs of authoritarian leadership. His populist style is evident not only in the language he uses, but also in the way he communicates with the population. An analysis of his tweets shows that he uses popular expressions and everyday language while maintaining a mocking style. The prime minister is not only very active on Twitter, but also uses Facebook extensively, frequently denigrating people who speak out against him.

As he continued on in government, Prime Minister Rama took control of the media to an unprecedented degree by establishing his television channel. Thus, another feature of his populist discursive strategy reminiscent of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been the creation and extensive use of his own media, whose activity is not regulated by the proper authorities (Exit News 2018). In addition, other private media in the country often rebroadcast news from the prime minister's new channel instead of reporting on government activities themselves and independently.

Since we can rule out the nationalist or religious dimension as particularly relevant to the emergence of a populist discourse in the Albanian case, we see clearly in our analysis of the general political context and the 2019 local elections that a central theme in the populist discourse of the two main established parties is the EU and the integration process. While in the context of the 2019 local elections, the opposition mainly invoked European values to legitimize its demands, Prime Minister Rama found direct support for the continuation of the current political course in affirmative statements by EU officials. The joint statement by Mogherini and Hahn, which focused only on the opposition's actions, calling them counterproductive and threatening the people's democratic right to vote and the path to integration (EEAS Press Team 2019), enabled Rama's regime to undermine the opposition. In this regard, the EU is not just a symbolic actor but serves as a direct source of legitimacy by taking sides in a conflict in national politics. This is consistent with literature suggesting that the EU is more concerned with stability than democratic standards. The 2019 local elections are a clear example of a *de facto* one-party election, and as we have shown in the analysis above, the external legitimacy provided by the EU has fueled the populist rhetoric of the authoritarian leadership.

In sum, in Albanian politics, populist outsiders have failed to mobilize voters against the establishment over the past 30 years. Political challengers have mainly emerged from politicians previously associated with the establishment or by creating the image of a transformative and visionary politician within an established party, claiming to 'break ties' with old leadership practices, as was the case of Socialist Party leader, Edi Rama. Thus, populism in Albania is a strategic tool used by established parties for party competition, especially in elections. Although the salience of the EU as a political issue in the public discourse has declined, the topic continues to fuel populist rhetoric. In addition, Albania, like other countries in the Balkans in recent years has exhibited increasing signs of competitive authoritarianism, combining authoritarian leadership with populism, albeit with EU approval it seems. Although the recent fragmentation and weakening of the established opposition has led to the emergence of new political parties from civil society, it is not the 'outsiders' who challenge the established system. On the contrary, political mobilization comes from the established political forces, which confront the system in the name of 'reform' and try to see how far they can ultimately go to cement their power.



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