

## Chapter 3: Mapping Populism in the European Post-Transition Periphery<sup>1</sup>

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### *1. Introduction*

The successes of populist forces in the post-Soviet states on the European periphery have been predominantly local in nature. This is mainly due to the weakness of political institutions, the multi-party system, civil society organizations (CSOs), social media, civic culture, etc. Consolidated authoritarian regimes, illiberal democracy, and populist electoral successes have given rise to a public discourse about the root causes of this phenomenon as well as the factors that could explain the differences in the level of popularity of populist leaders, groups in political parties, and movements that have attracted support for populists. With the development of democracy and CSOs in European peripheral countries, public opinion has acquired new opportunities and become a special tool for regulating political relations. The possibilities of its expression and transmission to the highest levels of power have increased with the development of social networks and the media, which have enhanced its influence on the political sphere and stimulated the development of democracy.

A historical study of populist political parties located in Eastern Partnership countries (EaP) and Russia will make it possible not only to analyze the various factors that have influenced the electoral support of populists in each of these countries, but also to compare the impact of the above-mentioned factors in these states. The difficulty in finding a suitable definition of populist parties for this purpose is due to the reality that, unlike most political forces in developed democratic systems of EU member states, such parties in European peripheral and post-peripheral countries do not adhere to typical European traditional party structures and ideologies. Moreover, their respective ideologies and values contain many contradictions and

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distorted positions inherent in both right-wing and left-wing parties, which makes it extremely difficult to group them according to the classical scale of the party spectrum.

Within the framework of this chapter, the task of identifying the factors that have influenced the electoral activity of populist parties in European peripheral and post-peripheral countries is facilitated through a comparative study of the EaP mechanism. Multilevel cooperation within the framework of the EaP is carried out in the political, social, and economic spheres and has largely defined the EU's relations with European peripheral countries since 2008-2009. As part of the analysis of the EU's agreements with Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia, areas of relations will be identified and an assessment will be provided on the effectiveness of ongoing programs involving the dynamics of statehood and the evolution of nation and state building, the quality of democracy, political parties, CSOs, social networks and movements, and finally, of the levels of populist rhetoric of political actors.

## *2. The leap from post-Soviet sovereignty to a European transit periphery*

The agenda of populist parties in post-soviet states on the European periphery is unique in terms of content and can be boiled down to popularizing issues that are 'silenced' by the political establishment. These issues include the protection of national, religious, and cultural identity, the adoption of tough measures aimed at combating political corruption and crime, the protection of traditional family values, the maximum restriction of gender policy, the tightening of the policy of LGBTQ+ groups, and sharp criticism of public institutions. One distinctive feature of the populist forces in post-soviet states is the way in which the majority of actors have called for the protection of the rights and interests of 'ordinary people' and the wider use of the tools of direct democracy. In doing so, they have directly opposed one of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, that is, taking the opinion of the minority into account (Arditi 2005; Arato and Cohen 2021).

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century were marked by significant structural changes in the system of international relations. Initiatives such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the EaP were understood by the political elites in post-Soviet countries as an opportunity to depart from the post-totalitarian system, the center of which

was Russia, and return to Europe (Breyfogle et al. 2007). The enlargement of the EU in 2004 and in 2007 once again demonstrated the attractiveness of the political, social, and economic model embodied by the European Community (EC) for Central and Eastern European countries. The mechanisms of enlargement, neighborhood, and partnership have brought the EU geographically closer to Russia, which lays claim to its special role in the new world order. Between Russia and the EU are countries which have long been part of the Soviet Union and belong to Europe. Given the challenging economic, political and social transformations that post-Soviet countries have witnessed in recent years, as well as their growing interaction with the EU, the European model is of interest to them (Berend 2020; Kim 2021). A shared historical past has been a factor both in repelling post-Soviet states from Russia and bringing them closer to it. Close economic ties with Russia—under the conditions of the raw material nature of the Russian economy—has not contributed to the successful social and economic transformation of the post-Soviet countries on the European periphery.

A realignment of geopolitical forces is taking place, one in which the role of centers of gravity will be played not only by Western European countries, but also by peripheral countries and countries close to this center (Kinsella 2012; Klobucka 1997; Krekó 2021). In the context of the deepening process of globalization and Euro-Atlantic integration, the geopolitical aspirations of many developed modern states are intensifying to a certain extent. In this regard, some actors of international relations are purposefully expanding their spheres of influence towards the various states within the post-Soviet space, given their geopolitical and geostrategic significance. It is quite obvious that the post-Soviet sovereign states, regardless of their geographical location and stage of development, need external assistance and cooperation with other countries (Di Nucci 2021).

The transformation of post-Soviet countries in terms of their geopolitical and regional stability and the political consequences of the collapse of the totalitarian political system of the Soviet Union can be observed even thirty years later. For several decades, the post-Soviet states, in pushing back against Russian hegemony, have sought to strengthen their bilateral relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and Turkey, and actively participate in the processes of the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, the Council of Europe, the EU, and other international and regional entities.

The greatest challenge for the states which have taken real steps towards the democratization of their political regimes has been European and Eu-

ro-Atlantic integration, which could facilitate their ability to become full members of the EU and NATO in the near future. Therefore, for the Russian political elite, the European integration of the post-Soviet countries has become one of the primary indicators of the challenge of global political and economic processes. The aspirations of geopolitical actors and small states which seek to join the EU have resulted in a European integration process that has extended far beyond Europe, influencing not only the countries on the European periphery, but also North and Latin America, East Asia, and South Asia (Kim 2021).

The European trend requires a global outlook, which is impossible without a comparison of the integration processes in order to identify their particular features and general patterns. Without a comparative study of such similarities and differences, it is impossible to evaluate the stability of the Newly Independent States (NIS) and the effectiveness of the regional order of the European periphery (Huber and Schimpf 2017). The integration and enlargement of the EU, as a result of the specific post-Soviet and post-communist countries that have entered the EU, have brought its borders closer to the Russian Federation. The democratic dimension of the EU enlargement policy has determined the new priorities of the EU's Eastern policy in the form of establishing neighborhood-relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova (Delegation of the EU to Georgia 2021; Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Moldova 2021; Delegation of the EU to Ukraine 2021).

The EU has utilized all the mechanisms of soft power available to its disposal in order to attract the six post-Soviet EaP countries into its sphere of influence and oust Russia from this region. Russia is trying to resist these EU efforts and, in opposition to the EaP program, is actively developing Eurasian integration projects. In 2014, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia each signed Association Agreements (AA), as well as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU (EUR-Lex 2014a; EUR-Lex 2014b; EUR-Lex 2014c).

For Russia, The AA/DCFTA poses a threat to the interests of the Customs Union and the free trade area within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and warns of a possible change in established trade relations with the EU's peripheral countries. An essential part of the AA/DCFTA is the commitment to carry out political and economic reforms to increase the transparency of the economy, to introduce a clear mechanism for holding competitions for government orders, to take measures against monopoly and corruption in the economy, and to approve European bank-

ing standards. The result of these transformations should be bringing the political and economic environment of the three states closer to European norms and eliminating the most obvious flaws in the existing political and economic systems. Armenia is the most important strategic ally of Russia. The development of close cooperation with Armenia is the most important priority in Russia's policy concerning the post-Soviet space, especially in light of the deterioration of its relations with Georgia during the presidency of Mikhail Saakashvili and Ukraine since 2014. In 2017, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Armenia and the EU was signed (EUR-Lex 2018). Although Armenia made its so-called 'integration turn' in favor of cooperation with Russia back in 2013, refusing to sign the AA with the EU, the further development of relations between the EU and Armenia deserves the closest attention from all interested parties, including Russia.

Given the complexity of sustainable European integration, frozen conflicts, and conditions that are characterized by neither war nor peace, the EU seeks to promote the peaceful resolution of ethno-political conflicts, thereby confirming its commitment to support the efforts and approaches of the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, and NATO. The mechanisms for delineating its preferred countries bring the EU's multilateral and bilateral relations with Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova to a new level, regulating dialogue in both political and economic spheres. The effective implementation of these agreements will bring tangible results to the citizens of countries on the European periphery by contributing to the strengthening of democracy and political, economic, and social stability through large-scale reforms. Over time, this will likely have a positive impact on the quality of life of citizens (Gabrisch et al. 2012; Lane 2012).

The situation is different for the two European peripheral countries, since Azerbaijan and Belarus are fundamentally different in their national models of European and Eurasian integration. If Azerbaijan distances itself from European and Eurasian integration efforts and instead pursues an independent policy in the post-Soviet space, then this will be aimed at developing regional relations with Turkey. The EaP platform on energy security is a key point in the cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU, one which is aimed at the joint development of economic strategy and other issues between the EU and its eastern neighbors. In this regard, Azerbaijan considers its importance for the energy security of the EU and its role in the Southern Gas Corridor, having signed contracts for the extraction and transportation of gas to European markets.

The growing geopolitical turbulence associated with the intensified confrontation between Russia and the West has significantly influenced the strategy of European integration of Belarus since 2014. Although a number of unifying organizations have been created in the post-Soviet space over the past few years under the hegemony of Russia, it is the Russian-Belarusian integration relations that have undergone the greatest development. For the political elite of Belarus, it has become important to implement strategic tasks within the framework of the Russian-Belarusian integration and the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Thus, the consolidated authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan, contrary to their European integration obligations as European peripheral countries, made integration with Russia and Turkey their strategic orientation in their foreign policy.

### *3. Sources and dimension of political populism*

In the post-Soviet countries, where liberalism and democracy have been eroded, political parties are still being formed and do not represent a large number of electoral groups, and parties practically copy each other's programs, new political groups constantly appear and proclaim themselves to be the so-called true voice of 'the people.' Some fertile soil is needed for populist leaders and groups to emerge. In the post-Soviet space, democratization is accompanied by strong populist elements. Each time the government and the parliament do not maintain a mechanism for dialogue with CSOs, or when a structural contradiction forms in political discourse, populist elements are strengthened, ideologized combinations arise, and corresponding political actors (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Heinisch et al. 2020). After a comparative analysis of the history of political populism in the post-Soviet countries, three waves can be distinguished in its development, thereby drawing a clear line between the spontaneous nationwide movements and organizations of the late 1980s and early 1990s (the first wave), the so-called 'privatization groups,' new political parties, and liberal reforms that achieved limited success in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and the countries of the South Caucasus in the 1990s (second wave), and the actual populist leaders and parties that entered the political arena in the 2000s (third wave). This does not apply to the Baltic countries, since, unlike other post-Soviet states that later joined the CIS and retained their overall economic, social, and political orientations towards Russia, the Baltic countries immediately declared their goal of integration into Western

military and its political and economic structures. The Baltic States entered into the main Euro-Atlantic integration structures of the EU and NATO in 2004, that is, they implemented the key foreign policy tasks of the previous decade, the symbol of which was the slogan ‘return to Europe’ (Graney 2019: 171-200). This presented to the political elites and ruling parties the question of finding new goals in the field of European foreign policy, which has become the most important factor of legitimation in their domestic and foreign policies.

Due to the high geopoliticization of European integration, the tendency to perceive the activity of European peripheral countries through the prism of a balance of interests in areas subject to the influence of major players in world politics has intensified. Under these conditions, the paradigm in which small and medium-sized states are unable to influence the world order due to incomparable resource potential has undergone natural transformations. The European peripheral countries, having found themselves in the epicenter of geopolitical confrontation, have begun to take into account the nature and state of geopolitical processes more fully in order to protect their national interests. It has become possible to talk about the relevance of developing a geostrategy for European peripheral countries as an auxiliary tool in building foreign policy in the geopolitical environment (Gabrisch et al. 2012).

Populism poses a threat to the democratization of the political institutions, cultures, values, and norms of the European peripheral countries, as it has become tools for populist leaders, groups and parties to limit or freeze liberal and democratic processes (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Heinisch et al. 2020). One of the main challenges associated with populism arises from the attempts to define ‘the people’ who populists claim to represent. As a result, some significant items were included in the party programs, and the groups arose that were dissatisfied with such a universalist approach. It is these groups who have become the target audience of populists in the post-Soviet space (Huber and Schimpf 2017). Political populists actually express only the demands of narrow groups, although they present them as the ‘whole people.’ In this way, they construct a single, homogeneous people with a single set of requirements. In order to successfully construct a notion of ‘the people,’ such a construction must be somehow marked, limited, and this is usually achieved through negative identification, that is, by pointing out certain vulnerable groups as threats to national unity (strategy ‘we are not them’).

In fact, a comparative study of the popularity of populist parties in post-Soviet countries is possible through the study of the institutional experience of Western European party and electoral systems, the characteristics of the populist parties and their leaders, and the interaction of populist parties with other political forces. In this context, it is possible to identify features that examine populist groups and parties through the prism of the evolution of the multi-party system (Van Herpen 2021; Vorländer 2019). It is clear that institutional factors, as well as the characteristics of the populist leader and group itself, are key in influencing the electoral success of populist parties.

In modern European peripheral political life, there is a common denominator, which is the populist core. This core consists of antagonistic relations between the 'good (clean) people' and the 'bad (corrupt) elite.' An aspect of populism is the opposition of 'the people' to the imaginary 'other.' This 'other' may be represented by specific individuals, the entire political elite, the top of a financial corporation or business, as well as immigrants and economic refugees. Sometimes this 'other' turns out to be the starting point for the construction of 'the people.' In this regard, 'the people' is defined, first of all, by denying eligibility. Exploiting the rift between 'the people' and 'others' is the foundation of populism in European peripheral countries. In the ideological dimension, populism protects the virtuous and equal people from various elites and dangerous 'others,' who, in turn, can deprive (or try to deprive) the sovereign people of civilized and political development, as well as their political rights, values, and voice.

The European peripheral countries populists embrace the ideas and mentality of the people, identifying themselves with them. Populist groups and leaders do not represent the interests of the people, but consider themselves an integral part of them, that is, they are the people. For their part, people welcome the populist leader as their own, but at the same time consider him better than themselves and recognize that he is endowed with often allegedly charismatic qualities that give the right to rule (Stengel et al. 2019).

The strategic importance of populism in political processes on the European periphery can be demonstrated using the concept of the "median voter," i.e., an average voter who belongs neither exclusively to the right nor to the left spectrum of political ideology, and thus the following statements seem to hold true (Schwörer 2021): first, politics will be populist when the likelihood of a politician and leader being re-elected is high, since, in this case, both a moderate and a right-wing politician will try to shape



the electorate by choosing a left-wing and conservative political course. Second, populist politics are also more likely to occur when the politician and leader is truly a conservative, thus appealing to the already established traditions and values of the electorate. Third, a politician and leader is likely to use populism to divert attention from corruption. Finally, populist politics are most likely to occur when there is a high level of polarization in society, which means a larger gap between the median voter and the moderate politician on the one hand, and right-wing politics on the other. In other words, populist politics signal the choice of a strategy in which the candidate will build an election campaign in accordance with the interests of the median voter.

The instrumental nature of populism in European peripheral countries has resulted in an appeal to the values and traditions of the masses, language simplification, anti-elitist, and people-centric demagoguery. Populism is thus one of the driving forces behind the formation of electoral behavior of voters (Gregor 2021). Populist rhetoric may include technological operations (language, image, and events) to influence the electoral process. On the one hand, electoral behavior is a system of interrelated reactions, actions, or inactions on behalf of citizens, behavior which is carried out in order to adapt to the conditions of political elections. On the other hand, electoral behavior is a set of objectively determined and subjectively motivated actions on behalf of voters who exercise their right to choose according to their internal attitudes and their own understanding of the situation leading up to the election. The objective factors are age, social status, education, and domestic and foreign policy, and the subjective factors are the individual psychological qualities of the voter, their upbringing, culture, the impact of social networks and the media, and the influence of political groups and leaders. In this context, post-Soviet electoral preferences can be defined through the motivational component of the electorate, which consists of three elements: emotional, rational and evaluative. The emotional element is characterized by the voters' perception of the ways in which candidates behave and communicate. In turn, the rational component is based on the expectation of certain behavior from the candidate based on knowledge of the program and the strategy that it represents. As for the evaluative element, it includes the opinion of the electorate concerning the significant qualities of a political figure. In real political practice, the motivation for electoral choice is represented by a combination of the above-mentioned elements in various proportions.

Given the heterogeneity and discontinuity of the political space in countries on the European periphery, the use of populist approaches in modern transformational societies is impossible. This is because when studying electoral processes, one should take into account the specifics of the historical development of these countries, which is inextricably linked with ethnic, cultural and territorial communities that stand out for their individuality due to their own unique social, economic, cultural, and regional identities. Electoral orientations are subjective-objective in nature, indicating that the political preferences of the population are objective and stable, while there is an impact on them from party candidates, groups, and leaders (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021).

In light of the discourse about the preferences of the electorate in post-Soviet countries, it is obvious that electoral behavior is based not only on socioeconomic status, but also on the value and cultural paradigm of transit communities. That is, the electoral preferences of the voters in these countries determine the cultural archetype that exists in the political practice of their state. Thus, in the electoral political space of the European peripheral countries, there are the following types of electoral behavior: patriarchal, traditional, clientele, protest, and marginal. It should be noted that the electoral preferences of citizens in these countries are determined by a combination of objective and subjective factors with a predominance of the irrational principle. Through the articulation of populist rhetoric and demagogy in their programs, parties and politicians are able to manipulate political expectations and subsequently electoral preferences, both at the national and regional level.

#### *4. The ruling party as a populist phenomenon*

The modern understanding of the phenomenon of the ruling party, parliamentary parties, and extra-parliamentary parties lies in the fact that the political party is seen not only as an institution of the political system of society, but also as an element of the social system and therefore as a special kind of social organization community. In post-Soviet society, regardless of the type of social structure and political system, the party in power plays an important role and parliamentary parties play a partial role. Even in post-Soviet countries where coalition governments have been formed and several political parties are in the parliament, they are not able to influence

the activities of the ruling party and the executive branch (Gräbner and Hafele 2020).

It is clear that there are also many deficiencies in the post-Soviet governing and opposition parties when it comes to changing leadership in these parties according to democratic principles. In addition, there is the typically opaque distribution of authority between the various levels of organizational leadership in the party and the party base. Another fact is the mismatch between the emerging party system and the social and cultural conditions and class structures in these societies. In the party organs, there are numerous possibilities for manipulating party decisions and many shadow mechanisms, as well as deficient organizational principles, which have a negative impact on the formation and competence of the leading parties. These also impact the procedures for nominating candidates for elective public office, party membership, and so on. The ruling party, firmly entrenched in the modern post-Soviet political system, is not the key means of aggregation, articulation, and representation of the interests of citizens in power structures, both on a national scale and in the regional, and even in the local segment of politics. Rather, the post-Soviet ruling parties, by their nature, perform unique functions of controlling state power through CSOs, thereby ensuring the representation of the interests of their interests, and not public groups. In doing so, they can limit the mechanism of political responsibility and accountability of the authorities, recruit the political elite and institutions of political mobilization, and structure the political space according to their own considerations (Payaslian 2011; Ghaplanyan 2018; Csehi 2021). With the change in the functions of the ruling parties and the organizations controlled by them, they are transformed according to their group capabilities, which directly depend on the type of political regime they operate within. The projection of the political reality in which the ruling parties function is associated with the embodiment of the respective capabilities of the leaders and groups of these organizations, primarily in terms of maintaining their position in public power from the influence of opposition forces and CSOs (Glenn 2019; Carrion 2022).

Post-Soviet ruling parties of this or that type and subtype may arise under certain conditions. The conditions for the formation of a moderately dominant subtype of ruling party arose in Russia after the elections to the State Duma of the Russian Federation on December 19, 1999 and have changed since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin. In the Russian party system, a peculiar subtype of the ruling party in power was regularly reproduced based on the results of the presidential elections of 2000, 2004,

2008, 2012, and 2018, as well as the State Duma elections of 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016, and 2021.

When studying the populist typology of the ruling parties, as well as when comparing the political and party systems of the post-Soviet and modern periods, it becomes obvious that, for example, Russia is characterized by a Russian-centric populist type of ruling parties. It is noteworthy that the main mechanisms of Russian-centric populist activity are aimed not only at the internal, but also at the external political spheres. For the ruling party, United Russia, the slogans 'Russian Abroad' and 'Compatriot Abroad' have become new populist elements in the successful development of the Russian World in order to preserve the Russian geopolitical and cultural space.

At present, United Russia clearly dominates in comparison with other parties. However, only President Putin has found a special place in the political system of Russia, and his position is at the top of the power pyramid. In this type of political system, President Putin, with the help of the so-called 'populist Iron Curtain party,' i.e., United Russia, controls the branches of public power. Such a system contrasts with the post-Soviet type of party-political systems, in which the ruling party occupies a central position and directly controls all political institutions.

The functioning of the ruling party, United Russia, in comparison with other parties of the State Duma, is based on softer populist methods, such as leadership. This stimulates activity and the promotion of initiatives by pro-government federal and regional CSOs. Common to the post-Soviet and modern types of pro-Russian ruling parties is their reliance on the President of Russia, and not on public power. Only through the consent of the President of Russia can they gain access to state resources and other advantages arising from their position in Russian society.

The level of interaction between Russia and the Russian peripheral countries, i.e., Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Baltics, is largely an indicator of the stability and development of both Russia and these countries. The issues of Russia's 'violent and threatening cooperation' with foreign compatriots in Russian peripheral countries have been incorporated into populist rhetoric and are often heard in the speeches of President Putin, members of the government, and top state officials. In these populist actions and strategies of Russian foreign policy, which through the common Soviet past and post-Soviet heritage, very often target the citizens and territories of the NIS, show that Russia considers its periphery (backyard) and the people living

there as its own demographic resource. The consequences of this Russian position have not been properly appreciated for a long time (Pejović and Nikolovski 2022; Gamkrelidze 2019; Gamkrelidze 2022).

The promotion of a *Russkiy Mir*, a Russian World would likely result in an increase in Russia's influence over the Eurasian integration of the NIS. Their response would likely highlight their Euro-Atlantic integration and other international processes. This in turn would only increase Moscow's motivation to increase its efforts to fight so-called 'Russophobia,' and thereby preserve the civilizational and cultural identity of the Russian ethnos. In the Russian peripheral countries, the implementation of an effective diaspora policy, interaction with compatriots, and support and protection of their rights is defined as one of the priority areas of Russia's foreign policy, fixed in various foreign policy concepts.

The processes of institutionalization of new Russian political parties led to populist activation after the legal reforms of 2011-2012. This was closely linked to the underrepresentation of certain public groups in the Russian political process, as well as the political alienation of some segments of Russian society, resenting for example civil society organizations that were labeled foreign agents for receiving grants from Western European countries (Fieschi 2019; De La Torre 2021). All this makes the question of a profound reform of the Russian system toward a return to political competition more topical than ever. As a result, it is necessary to explore not only the historical, political and legal foundations of party activity, but also the current problems and contradictions observed in the institutionalization of Russian parties in the context of limited electoral competition.

The challenge of carrying out a comparative study on post-Soviet populism is the contradiction between the priorities of domestic and foreign policy declared at the conceptual level and the executive foreign policy of Russia since 2000. The activation of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the development of Euro-Atlantic integration processes in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, has been vigilantly followed in Russia. As a result, this led to new foreign policy strategies and national security doctrines in its relations with Ukraine, Moldova. Since 2003, the so-called populist problems of the European peripheral countries have been the subject of the ruling United Russia party and other parliamentary parties, i.e., the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The traditionally populist issues of

the European peripheral countries are also discussed in President Putin's programmatic pre-election articles.

Three spheres (military-strategic, political, and cultural-ideological) are closely linked to populism and mythologization of the past and therefore also to the ideologization of the present. As previously mentioned, this ideologization is promoted by the ruling party, United Russia, but also by the LDPR and the KPRF. A wide range of problems have complicated relations in these spheres, problems which are largely associated with the widespread negative image of Russia in the societies of European peripheral countries. In an attempt to increase the dependence of post-Soviet countries on Russia, President Putin and the ruling party, United Russia, have formulated a populist discourse to provide answers to the following questions about the role of Russia in the transforming system of international relations: 1) Is Russia the periphery of Europe or the center of Eurasia? 2) How is Russia fighting for the periphery of Europe or Eurasia? 3) Why does the European post-transitional periphery need a new strategy? 4) How sovereign are the peripheries of Europe?

In fact, since 2003, after Russian legislative elections to the State Duma, which saw United Russia become the ruling party, alongside the KPRF and the LDPR, Russian-centric populism at the state level has become ideologically charged and begun to legally limit electoral competition. This reality has ushered in the threat of the usurpation of political power, the destruction of the political opposition, the lack of civil dialogue in the search for solutions to social problems. The accumulation of social contradictions and the underrepresentation of public interests in the political system can lead to destabilization, the emergence of non-systemic parties and movements, and the radicalization of the opposition. Creating opportunities and conditions for the institutionalization of political parties, on the contrary, helps to stabilize the political process and to include all social forces in a constructive political dialogue (Manucci 2022).

In many ways, Russian populist rhetoric has persisted in the political discourse of Belarus. Such rhetoric hides the contradictions in the perception of consolidated authoritarianism, the state system, and the style of political leadership of President Alexander Lukashenko. Given the geopolitical position of Belarus, which possesses the closest political, economic, social and cultural ties to Russia, the presence of a long and open border between Russia and Belarus has served as the foundation for various integration projects between the two states. The populist agenda of the Belarusian political elite includes the formation of the strategic vector of Belarus's

foreign policy, the mechanisms of its maneuvering between the EU and Russia, as well as China and neighboring countries. The political leadership of President Lukashenko, which has largely influenced the formation of both domestic and foreign policy of the state, also deserves a separate analysis. This is important in order to clarify the specifics of the correlation between internal problems of Belarus's political and economic development and the country's populist foreign policy strategy. To predict the model of interaction between Russia and Belarus, even in the short term, it is possible to reconstruct in detail the political populist experience of the Belarusian elites, their resources, and the potential of their influence both in world politics and at the regional level. In addition, populist rhetoric is part of the public speeches of President Lukashenko and other senior officials of both the Republic of Belarus and the Union State of Russia-Belarus, a supranational organization which is related to Belarusian foreign policy.

Since 2013, when Belarus—under the influence of Russia—did not sign an association agreement with the EU, it began a new stage of populist rhetoric, targeting the EaP and European integration. Anti-Western propaganda and anti-European populist rhetoric became part of the election campaign of President Lukashenko in the Presidential elections of 2015 and 2020, as well as in the Parliamentary elections of 2016 and 2019 among non-partisan candidates for deputies. And since 2021, President Lukashenko has suspended Belarus's participation in the EU's EaP initiative in response to EU sanctions.

The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which was introduced by President Lukashenko as a mechanism for an illegal republican referendum, grants the president enormous power in a nod to populist aspirations and eliminates the principle of separation of powers. But the president's populist attempts to usurp power have limited even the checks and balances that the Constitution provides. The parliament is not an independent institution of power and is completely subordinate to the president, while the constitutional majority of deputies are non-partisan. Local power belongs to the presidential vertical, appointed by the head of state. The main part of the populist rhetoric of President Lukashenko is Soviet nostalgia. He has frankly expressed regret over the destruction of the USSR and has taken steps to restore its most significant elements (an administrative pyramid with strict hierarchical subordination, personnel policy, attitude to law, the role of the KGB, etc.). Such a model of governance is not based on the Constitution, nor on laws which ensure the separation of powers, guarantees of

human rights, the presence of opposition, and an independent media, but rather on the unlimited power of the executive branch of the state.

By refusing to carry out reforms, the authorities deliberately have maintained the old social model of society. The majority of the population is united in the former structures, which, in a somewhat modified form, has continued to play the role of a totalitarian framework. For example, labor collectives, as before, perform not only socio-economic, but also political functions. The conscious politicization of the former semi-totalitarian structures is taking place in parallel to the restriction and neutralization of political and public functions that appeared during the years of reforms of non-state organizations. Lukashenko considers the development of CSOs and civil initiatives to be a form of anarchy, and any criticism of CSOs is viewed as hostile and destabilizing. The current ruling team is creating a populist model which is characterized by a kind of authoritarian corporatism, a controlled market, and a controlled democracy. To maintain communication between the government and society, political representation has been replaced by functional representation. Politics has been reduced to the interaction between the executive branch and a limited circle of influential corporate unions. In exchange for their obedience and agreement to play according to the rules approved by government agencies, these corporate organizations have been granted a monopoly to represent the interests of the relevant segments of the population, sectors of the economy, etc. Moreover, these corporate unions are placed in such a position which does not actually entail representing the interests of the relevant segments of society in relations with the state, but rather has them carrying out public policy in these areas (Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, Republican Public Association 'Belaya Rus').

The crisis of Russian-American and Russian-European relations that erupted in 2014 as a result of the change of power and the armed conflict in Ukraine had a significant impact on the foreign policy of Belarus. Its president, long and not unreasonably dissatisfied with the state of the country's relations with Russia, perceived the crisis as an opportunity to unfreeze relations with the West and extract political and financial dividends. Belarus has not recognized Russian sovereignty over Crimea, but it has taken an anti-Ukrainian stance on the conflict in Donbass. Of course, Russia and Belarus still remain allies, held together by multi-level interdependence and the structures of the Union State, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The dynamics



of bilateral relations have resembled pendulum swings before, albeit not to this extent.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative study suggests that the populist agenda in countries on the European periphery is a consequence of Russia's direct and indirect interference in domestic political life, as it has attempted to divide post-Soviet societies into pro-Russian and pro-Western (Russophobic) blocs.

The European neoliberal tradition is based on the thesis of the interdependence of countries, their political parties, and CSOs, as well as on the resulting possibility of their rational choice in favour of long-term peace for European peripheral countries. Through the formation of norms on democratic governance, the growth of the welfare of citizens, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the notion of human rights, the EU has been successful in influencing political processes in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia. Mainly, however, the conducted analysis testifies to the limitations of such an impact on the European transitional peripheral countries, taking into account the frozen conflicts, military security factors, the Second Karabakh War in 2020, and the threat of territory annexation and military intervention in Ukraine since 2014.

The EU mechanisms of improving cooperation and communication of political parties and CSOs in countries on the European periphery were supposed to create opportunities to review national interests and share successful state-building and nation-building practices. Strategies concerning ideological influence, which form part of Russia's foreign policy towards post-Soviet countries on the European periphery and include hard and soft power carry the risk of monopolization and restrictions from the Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Such strategies have allowed the Russian political elite to impose their ideas on the current world order through different actors, thereby imposing them from above through the so-called 'countries-partners' or 'allied countries' in the absence of possible alternatives. The CIS, the CSTO, the Customs Union, the Common Economic Space, and the EAEU are Russia's peculiar so-called 'integration trap' and 'security trap,' which President Putin, the ruling United Russia party, the LDPR, the CPRF, and other Russian actors have used to deter post-Soviet countries from engaging in Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Through their populist rhetoric, the Russian political elite have described their inte-

gration initiatives in the Eurasian space as holding ‘epochal significance’ and as representing a fundamentally new level of integration, one which fully preserves sovereignty while ensuring national security and closer and more harmonious economic cooperation between states.

Russia determines its own external and internal political vector of development precisely with the help of hard power. This has further destabilized transitional countries and regions on the periphery of the EU. It is no coincidence that conflicts have sharply escalated in different regions of the European transitional peripheral countries, military clashes and war have occurred, and new risks of war are still emerging. Some examples include the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in Transnistria, the war in Ukraine since 2014, Second Karabakh War of 2020, and the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, for the political elite, political parties, and CSOs of these countries, the question of the need to maintain stability and preserve peace through joint efforts to develop experience in coordinated actions has become of great importance. It is no coincidence that, under conditions of neither war nor peace, as well as the securitization of the political agenda among the political parties in these countries, populist rhetoric refers specifically to pro-Russian and Russophobic issues. This stage is rather difficult, but extremely dynamic, creating new opportunities, new risks, and new trajectories for the development of the ruling party, the multi-party system, and CSOs in these countries, including Russia’s populist agenda. To identify these new risks, opportunities and development options have become the subject of political discourse among the political elites in post-Soviet countries on the European periphery.

In these countries, the change in the populist agenda towards the field of national security lies in the increasing importance of social and economic threats. Such threats include the lack of vital resources (primarily food, water and energy), demographic problems, global poverty, unemployment, low education levels, poor health care systems, environmental and epidemiological problems, and climate change. To a large extent, the emergence of these threats is the result of ineffective counteraction to military-political challenges and the expansion of the populist agenda of these countries.

Another aspect of Russian populist rhetoric which relates to confronting a wide range national security threat allegedly posed by the Euro-Atlantic community to the European periphery is the so-called ‘Collective West.’ With the exception of Russia, China, and India, most of the world’s leading countries are part of the Euro-Atlantic community (Collective West).

The so-called 'Collective West' carries enormous economic potential and political influence, and it has also achieved a significant advantage in the field of military security since the early 1990s over most countries in the world. In this context, the formation of the Russian world in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration and globalization is of particular importance, especially in the light of the strengthening of the Russian positions within supranational organizations and the development of ideas and concepts concerning the future world order in the post-Soviet space.

At this stage, for the European transitional peripheral countries, populist rhetoric is largely defined by the Russian world, the core of which is Russia. Such rhetoric is intended to unite (by force and hard power) compatriots of post-Soviet countries and the Russians abroad living around its political center. If the Russian world, as a cultural and civilizational phenomenon, were to unite on the basis of the 'Russianness' of its members and their self-identification with Russia, as well as their knowledge of the Russian language and sense belonging to Russian culture, then this would represent a threat and a challenge to the political elite and parliamentary parties and CSOs of the European transitional peripheral countries. The threat would be the loss of sovereignty. The activation of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the development of Euro-Atlantic integration processes in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, has been vigilantly followed in Russia. As a result, this led to new foreign policy strategies and national security doctrines in its relations with Ukraine, Moldova. Paradoxically, in fact, the rallying of compatriots means the forced consolidation of representatives of the diaspora in European transitional peripheral countries and interference in the internal affairs of these countries, which would create a transcontinental entity. In this regard, the populist aspect of the notion of the Russian world lies in the fact that it is not promoting the unity of Russians or Russian-speaking citizens in other countries, nor is it strengthening their ties with their historical homeland and preserving their civilizational identity, but on the contrary, it is an opportunity to create real threats and geopolitical difficulties for these countries.

The political parties of the European transitional peripheral countries are in development and shifts are taking place. This may lead to the strengthening of the party oligarchy, personalized politics, and ultimately to the establishment of authoritarianism by the party leadership. Along with the phenomenon of personalization of politics, the phenomenon of personalization of the voter has also become relevant. Voter behavior, under

the influence of a number of mechanisms, has led personalized parties to achieve electoral success. The populist party landscape in these countries is a two-pronged process: ‘domestication’ of parties by business and, at the same time, domestication of business by parties. In this regard, despite the fact that these countries have ruling parties, they have not yet become the dominant party. The outcome of this process depends on the ability to find a balance point between politics and business, between electoral and personalized parties, and between political leaders and groups. Since 2014, the evolution of the multi-party systems of Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia has shown that is a crisis of stability in Euro-Atlantic integration. The parties based in transitional democracies on the European periphery are facing not only new political and communication technologies, but also an increase in populism and disillusionment within their societies and widespread criticism of their structures and the processes taking place within them. These developments have been accompanied by the departure of many party members and electorates.

Meanwhile, the stability of the transitional democracies on the European periphery directly depends on the quality of the work carried out by the ruling and parliamentary parties. In the course of political dialogue and partnership with CSOs and intra-party discussions, they have reduced their level of populist rhetoric and broadcasted the political positions, wishes, and needs of their members and voters, thereby realizing the function of articulating social interests. The electoral programs of the ruling and parliamentary parties of these countries represent strict political rationality. This is the most important political tool that gives voters the opportunity to make an informed choice and assigns responsibility to the parties themselves for their declarations. Each of them outlines the vision of key points, five of which are related to domestic politics: culture and education, proper social policy (including labor policy and employment, family, pension policy and health care), integration policy, national security policy, and tax and financial policy.

The ruling and parliamentary parties of the European transitional peripheral countries, in search of a balanced path for national development and under the influence of the Russian threat and national security, initiated the polarization of society into supporters and opponents of its political and cultural modernization. In turn, this has resulted in the emergence and success of populist parties, which, under certain circumstances, can become full-fledged political players. This is important in order to understand the possibilities of further transformations of the party system of these coun-

tries and their way out of the crisis of stability, the trap of security and integration, the tendency to blur the center, and the emergence of new effective parties. In addition to the general requirements concerning the ruling and parliamentary party's activities, populist contradictions and inconsistencies between state requirements and party capabilities are natural. Thus, there are three groups of populist defects to be observed among the ruling and parliamentary parties located in the post-Soviet transitional democracies: 1) institutional contradictions that arise in intra-party relations, 2) systemic collisions in which there is a conflict between parties and authorized executive bodies, as well as with the institutions responsible for organizing the electoral process, 3) defects in state foreign policy, whereby contradictions are observed at the strategic level between public authorities and parties.

In general, issues surrounding national security and the growing threat of Russia have undoubtedly had a populist and destabilizing effect on the party systems of European transitional peripheral countries. The reasons for this have included an excessive emphasis on exclusivity with no alternative to the guarantees of Russia's security, as well as liberal values as a platform for the country's political life. The growth of nationalism, the mood of political nativism, a split within the centrist and center-left parties, the success of populism as a response to voter sentiment, Euroscepticism, Russophobia, criticism of the elites, the outflow of members from parties, the arrival of new and young politicians, security issues, and social tension have dominated and continue to dominate both the domestic and foreign policies of these countries.

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