International Studies on Populism | 9

Reinhard Heinisch | Aneta Cekikj | Klaudia Koxha [Eds.]

# Perspectives on Populism

## Diverse Voices from the European "Periphery"

Nomos

International Studies on Populism



Band | Volume 9

Reinhard Heinisch | Aneta Cekikj
Klaudia Koxha [Eds.]

# Perspectives on Populism

## Diverse Voices from the European "Periphery"

Nomos

The open access publication of this title was made possible by the umbrella initiative „Hochschule.digital Niedersachsen“ of the German state of Lower Saxony.

**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

ISBN 978-3-7560-1200-8 (Print)
978-3-7489-1728-1 (ePDF)

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1200-8 (Print)
978-3-7489-1728-1 (ePDF)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Heinisch, Reinhard | Cekikj, Aneta | Koxha, Klaudia
Perspectives on Populism
Diverse Voices from the European “Periphery”
Reinhard Heinisch | Aneta Cekikj | Klaudia Koxha (Eds.)
318 pp.
Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1200-8 (Print)
978-3-7489-1728-1 (ePDF)

1st Edition 2024



Published by
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden
www.nomos.de

Production of the printed version:
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden

ISBN 978-3-7560-1200-8 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-7489-1728-1 (ePDF)

DOI https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748917281

Online Version
Nomos eLibrary

# Preface

## *1. Perspectives on Populism – Diverse Voices from the European 'Periphery'*

Populism has been described as the most important new political phenomenon of our time. Its impact on Europe, the Americas and beyond, has been profound. Enormous attention has been directed toward the rise of populism in countries like France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and the United States. More recently, however, Central European member states of the European Union (EU) such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic have also come into focus, as their populist trajectories have presented serious repercussions for European integration. Despite the significant rise of populism across Europe, political systems further to the East and Southeast have largely escaped public and scholarly attention from outside the region itself. Therefore, the areas which many consider to be on the 'periphery' are generally less well understood. Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia all have aspirations to join the EU and forge closer ties with the rest of Europe. Their economies remain intertwined with Western Europe and the European Single Market as a whole. As Europe is embroiled in a new conflict, countries that either have a clear perspective on EU membership but find themselves on hold seemingly forever, or that are politically divided over their 'European' future, are particularly affected and internally polarized. Populism thrives under such conditions by creating or exacerbating divisions between 'them' and 'us' in order to assert or consolidate its power: Understanding these mechanisms is one of the main goals of this book.

First, we need to say a few words about the geographic terminology that we use in this book. It is difficult to clearly demarcate Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southeastern Europe, as various historical, political, and cultural factors determine how these countries are classified and through which lens they are perceived. The choice of which yardstick to apply remains a source of controversy as categorizations based on historical experiences clash with categorizations based on language and culture or with those based on future aspirations. It also goes without saying that even seemingly clear geographic classifications carry problematic connota-

tions and can lead to confusion when geographic and political conceptualizations are highly incongruent. Greece and Bulgaria, or Estonia and Finland, for example, are neighbors geographically, but these countries underwent different political developments in the 20th Century and are therefore distinguished as 'East' and 'West.' Moreover, Bulgaria, a Balkan country that, much like other countries in the region, emerged as an independent state following the decline of the Ottoman Empire later became part of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet sphere of influence. In contrast, the Western Balkans, much of which was once part of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, were considered closer to the so-called West because of their relatively open borders and strong economic ties to Northern and Western Europe. It is therefore ironic that Bulgaria became a member of the European Union already in 2007, while Western Balkan countries such as Bosnia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, as well as Albania and Kosovo seem to be perennially stuck in a waiting position. Thus, they belong to a kind of European periphery, in so far that they are still denied full EU membership some 40 years after the fall of Communism.

The cases of Georgia and Armenia are even more complicated, as both countries are former Soviet republics. The extent to which they qualify as European at all is sometimes contested since the Caucasus spans the space between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Even if the majority of Georgians and Armenians consider themselves European, it is not immediately clear that the majority of Europeans share this view. The long Christian traditions in these two countries and their differences with neighboring Muslim-majority countries have undoubtedly heightened the desire to seek a closer connection to the West and further political integration with Europe. Nevertheless, the ties to other societies in the post-Soviet space and especially to Russia itself also run deep. Thus, the westward orientation of Georgia and Armenia is fraught with complications and any simple categorization of these countries will inevitably fall short. What all these cases have in common, however, is that the boundaries between what is considered political mainstream and what is politically radical are blurry so that populism is often a common feature affecting national politics. As such, we will refer to the cases analyzed in this book collectively as Eastern Europe, while we refer to Eastern member states of the EU except for those in the Baltic as Central European countries. We are aware of this imperfect categorization given that Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are all on the Adriatic and thus to the West of several EU member states bordering the Baltic. Whenever we wish to denote the countries of the

Western Balkans as a subcategory, we will also refer to them as Southeastern Europe. Nonetheless, we want to acknowledge the problematic nature of such designations.

The countries featured in this volume differ as a whole from Western Europe, not only because each has experienced a difficult transition from authoritarianism and a planned economy to democracy and a market economy, but also because of how populism has manifested itself. While populist parties in Western Europe initially emerged as a form of protest by political outsiders who were opposed to 'insider' politics, or the effects of immigration and globalization, the European 'periphery' differs in this respect. Throughout both Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), party systems in transitional democracies were generally not sufficiently established to form a consolidated political mainstream, against which new political actors could present themselves as radical outsiders.

Nonetheless, there were political elites among the old intelligentsia and dissident groups as well as, of course, the former *nomenklatura* or privileged loyalists of the Communist Party, who, to the extent they survived the transition, formed an established elite of sorts. Then, there were those individuals who were able to take advantage of the rough and tumble ways of the transition and emerge as a new class of political operators. In their new political roles, they often sought to consolidate and protect the economic gains they made amidst the chaos of the economic transition. Thus, we have seen selective alliances form between former members of the *nomenklatura* and those representing the *nouveau riche*, who were intent on legitimizing their new positions. Populism as a style and a discourse often becomes a way to achieve this goal as it is able to shift attention from exiting problems to new symbolic issues and identify new public enemies. Alternatively, populism can serve as a strategy to mobilize people against those who were leading the transition and those who have emerged as elites after the transition.

Populism can do this more easily in Eastern Europe because, unlike in Western Europe, political institutions have not consolidated to the extent they have elsewhere, and voters generally have not yet established lasting political ties to parties. However, we must admit that this is also changing in Western Europe. Unlike the former transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe that are members of the EU, the cases discussed in this book are not and have to deal with radical populism outside the institutional framework of the EU, which offers strong political and economic counter-incentives.

Overall, the political landscape in Eastern Europe is less consolidated than in Western Europe. Thus, populism is more ubiquitous as the relationships between different groups of political actors tend to be fluid and diffuse. Because the political systems across the region are less institutionally consolidated, they also offer more room for the emergence of charismatic personalities, who are able to translate their economic wealth or their status as a public celebrity into political resources. There, populist leaders can often quickly establish a following because voters have not yet formed strong political loyalties. Despite the considerable political volatility in these countries, there is a tendency to pay them insufficient attention outside the region and dismiss them as politically less mature, where political 'pathologies' such as public corruption, authoritarianism and populism are expected as given and regarded as endemic.

Another concern is the unclear political future of these countries. The general orientation toward 'the West' and the prospect of developing a close relationship with Brussels and even acquiring EU membership have long been an incentive to encourage national political development in the Balkans and in the European post-Soviet states.

The numerous crises in the EU, accession fatigue, and growing internal dissent, as well as a more assertive Russia and rising authoritarianism have made the prospect of rapid EU membership even more uncertain. This, too, has led various political actors to call for a different direction, allowing Moscow and Beijing to expand their influence in the region. However, the war in Ukraine could again change the political and economic development of these countries and accelerate the pursuit of EU membership, which in turn raises other issues such as the questions of collective security and confronting Russia. The aim of this book is therefore to provide an informed assessment of the role of populism, its causes, and its political consequences in areas that often do not receive the attention they deserve and are generally less visible in the European political landscape.

The emergence of populism as a major research agenda in Western Europe has also led to the development of specific theoretical and methodological approaches that dominate mainstream research in Western academia, particularly in political science. The most commonly used approach in the study of populism throughout Europe is the so-called ideational school, which conceives of populism as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde 2004). Other schools of thought conceptualize populism more as a discourse or a 'strategy' employed by political actors or view populism as a style or even as performance. However, these debates are shaped by experiences derived

from Western Europe and, in some cases, the United States. By contrast, studies of populism undertaken in Eastern Europe by local specialists may offer unique approaches and nuanced insight but often do not connect well with the broader scholarly literature. Moreover, scholars steeped in the regional political history often overestimate the extent to which people outside the region understand the political developments in areas only covered selectively by Western news media.

The scholars studying Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have nevertheless the best opportunity to develop an understanding of how populism works in their respective countries and offer us as readers more than just a glimpse into these political systems. They contribute to our understanding of a phenomenon as variable as populism, which British scholar Paul Taggart (2000: 10, 15) described as chameleon-like. As the political problems and certain political pathologies once primarily associated with Eastern Europe are drifting westward, the insights by scholars intimately familiar with East European political systems may help readers elsewhere understand political changes that are likely to matter also in Western politics and beyond.

This book addresses these issues and existing gaps in our understanding of the European 'periphery' by focusing attention on both political developments and the analysis of these developments from the very perspectives of scholars working in the post-transition political systems themselves. The twelve chapters in this volume were written by experts on the political systems of their respective countries. Although they differ in their approach to populism and its perceptions, they also relate their work to frameworks that are generally well established in political science. This common focus was developed in an EU-funded authors' workshop at the University of Salzburg in 2018, which formed the basis for this book project.

Lastly, it should be noted that the term 'periphery' is not meant to imply that these countries are marginal or 'less European,' but that they are peripheral in the perception of most Europeans. These countries are also further away from Europe's political and economic power centers and are therefore much more exposed to countervailing forces. This, too, makes them different and deserving of special consideration.

The Editors

# Table of contents

# List of figures

# List of tables

# Acknowledgements

An edited volume is by definition a collaborative endeavor, and the volume editors would like to thank the contributing authors for their dedication and commitment to the project at hand despite many competing pressures. Apart from the editors and authors, this project would not have come about without the following individuals. We are especially indebted to Carsten Wegscheider for reviewing early drafts of several chapters and Diana Hofmann for her input in finalizing the manuscript. We need to thank Franz Kok for securing the funding that made the initial workshop possible, where many of the authors met for the first time and where this book was conceived. We must also acknowledge the support from the University of Salzburg and the Department of Political Science for hosting this workshop. The authors also wish to thank Krista Bolton and Sonila Nezha for their assistance with editing the final draft.

# List of Names and Acronyms

| English Name | Acronym | Original Name |
|---|---|---|
| Alternative for Germany | AfD | Alternative für Deutschland |
| The Red-Black Alliance | AK | Aleanca Kuq e Zi |
| Action of Dissatisfied Citizens | ANO | Akce nespokojených občanů |
| Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party | ARF | Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun |
| Alliance for Albanians | ASh | Aleanca për Shqiptarët |
| Ataka | Ataka | Ataka |
| Movement BESA | Besa | Dvizenje Besa / Lëvizja Besa |
| Prosperous Armenia | BHK | Bargavatch Hayastan kusaktsut'yun |
| Communist Party of the Russian Federation | CPRF | Kommunističeskaja Partija Rossijskoj Federacii |
| Democratic Montenegro | DCG | Demokratska Crna Gora |
| Democratic Front | DF | Demokratski front |
| Enough is Enough | DJB | Dosta je bilo |
| Democratic People's Party | DNP | Demokratska narodna partija |
| Democratic Party of Albanians | DPA | Demokratska partija na Albancite / Partia Demokratike Shqiptare |
| Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro | DPS | Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore |
| Democratic Union for Integration | DUI | Demokratska unija za integracija/ /Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim |
| Serbian Movement Dveri | Dveri | Srpski pokret Dveri |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| United Russia | EP | Yedínaya Rossíya |
| Forward Italy | FI | Forza Italia |
| Hungarian Civic Alliance | Fidesz | Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség |
| National Front | FN | Front National |
| Freedom Party of Austria | FPÖ | Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs |
| Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria | GERB | Grazdani za Evropeyskoye Razvitie na Bulgaria |
| United National Movement | GNM | Gaertianebuli Nacionaluri Modzraoba |
| Armenian National Congress | HAK | Hay Azgayin Kongres |
| Heritage | Heritage | Zharangut'yun |
| Armenia Revolutionary Federation Party | HHD | Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun |
| Republican Party of Armenia | HHK | Hayastani Hayrapetians Kusaktsutyun |
| Armenia Alliance | HP | Hayastan dashink |
| People's Party of Armenia | HZK | Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Kusaktsutyun |
| Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity | IMRO-DPMNU | Vnatreshna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija-demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo |
| IMRO – People's Party | IMRO-PP | VMRO-Narodna partija |
| There is Such a People | ITM | Ima takav narod, |
| Movement for a Better Hungary | Jobbik | Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom |
| Civil Contract | KP | K'aghak'atsiakan paymanagir, |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Communist Party of the Russian Federation | KPRF | Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii |
| Northern League | LN | Lega Nord |
| Democratic League of Kosovo | LDK | Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës |
| Liberal Democratic Party of Russia | LDPR | Liberal'no demokratich-eskaya partiya Rossii |
| Libra Party | LIBRA | Lista e Barabartë |
| Together Movement | Lëvizja Bashkë | Lëvizja Bashkë |
| Socialist Movement for Integration | LSI | Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim |
| Self-determination Movement | LVV | Lëvizja Vetëvendosje |
| Round Table – Independent Georgia | MMTS | Mrgvali Magida – Tavisufali Sakhartvelo |
| National Democratic Party | NDP | Nacionalna Demokratska Partija |
| National Democratic Revival | NDR | Nacionalna demokratska prerodba / Rilindja Demokratike Kombëtare |
| National Movement for Stability and Progress | NDSV | Nacionalno dviženie za stabilnost i văzhod |
| National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria | NFSB | Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bŭlgariya |
| We, Tirana | Ne Tirana | Ne Tirana |
| New Serbian Democracy | NOVA | Nova srpska demokratija |
| New Social Democratic Party | NSDP | Nova socijaldemokratska partija |
| # Initiative/Hashtag initiative | NTH | Nisma Thurje |
| Rule of Law | OEK | Orinats Yerkir |
| United Patriots | OP | Obedineni Patrioti |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Democratic Party of Albania | PD | Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë |
| Party for Democratic Prosperity | PDP | Parija za demokratski prosperitet / Partia për Prosperitet Demokratik |
| Party for Justice, Integration and Unity | PDIU | Partia Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet |
| Law and Justice Party | PiS | Prawo i Sprawiedliwość |
| The Georgian Dream Party | PKO | Partia Khartuli Ocneba |
| Socialist Party of Albania | PS | Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë |
| Movement for Change | PzP | Pokret za promjene |
| Revival | Revival | Vazrazhdane |
| The Party of Democratic Action | SDA | Stranka demokratske akcije |
| Social Democratic Union of Macedonia | SDUM | Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija |
| Direction – Social Democracy | SMER | Smer – sociálna demokracia |
| Citizens' Union of Georgia | SMK | Sakhartvelos Mokhalakheta Kavshiri |
| Socialist People's Party of Montenegro | SNP | Socijalistička narodna partija Crne Gore |
| Serbian Progressive Party | SNS | Srpska napredna stranka |
| Alliance of Independent Social Democrats | SNSD | Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata |
| The Socialist Party of Serbia | SPS | Socijalistička partija Srbije |
| Serb List | Srpska lista | Srpska lista |
| Serbian Radical Party | SRS | Srpska radikalna stranka |
| A Just Russia — For Truth | SRZP | Spravedlivaya Rossiya- Za pravdu |
| Swiss People's Party | SVP | Schweizerische Volkspartei |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| National Liberation Army | UÇK | Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare |
| Flemish Bloc | VB | |
| Way Out Alliance | Yelk | Yelk Dashik |

# Notes on the Contributors

**Authors in this edited volume:**

**Ashot Aleksanyan**, Professor, Department of Political Science, Yerevan State University, Armenia

**Nane Aleksanyan** MA in Public Administration, Yerevan State University, MA candidate of Law at Eurasia International University, Armenia

**Aneta Cekikj,** Professor of Political Science, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia

**Simon Clarke,** Associate Professor, American University of Armenia and The British University in Egypt

**Ruben Elamiryan**, Associate Professor, Department of World Politics and International Relations, Russian-Armenian University & Department of Political Science, Public Administration Academy of Armenia

**Reinhard Heinisch**, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Austria

**Despot Kovačević,** Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia

**Klaudia Koxha**, PhD Fellow, University of Salzburg, Austria

**David Matsaberidze,** Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

**Slaviša Orlović,** Professor, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia

**Maja Savić-Bojanić**, Associate Professor and Dean, Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Daniel Smilov,** Associate Professor, University of Sofia; Program Director, Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Ruzha Smilova**, Senior Assistant Professor, Political Science Department, Sofia University and Programme Director (political analysis), Centre for Liberal Strategies

**Avdi Smajljaj**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Sciences and International Relations at Epoka University, Albania

Assistant Professor, Political Sciences – Fame College, Prishtina, Kosovo

**Nemanja Stankov**, Lecturer, Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro

# Chapter 1: Introduction: Populism and 'Periphery'

*Reinhard Heinisch, Aneta Cekikj, and Klaudia Koxha*

## *1. Introduction*

How has populism influenced political developments in European countries further east and southeast, such as Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia? To what extent do populist patterns in a region which many consider to be on the European 'periphery' resemble populist patterns in the political and economic core countries of Europe? These were the guiding questions for the authors of this volume, who have taken on this research and shared their perspectives. This book contributes to the growing literature on populism, as it addresses the political systems that have often received only marginal attention from the international public and within the scholarly community. It intends to add to the existing literature in two important ways. First, it discusses country examples with an eye toward the role of populism in both Western and Central Europe, two regions that have received the most scholarly attention to date. Second, the various country studies are presented from an analytical and theoretical perspective that reflects the viewpoint of the country specialist(s). However, it also explains where there are similarities and differences regarding the theoretical approaches used to analyze populism and its impact throughout Western Europe.

## *2. Why focus on the 'periphery'?*

The interest of political science in the rise of populism in Western democracies and, more recently, in Eastern and Central Europe, was accompanied by the relative neglect of similar developments elsewhere. The extent to which other areas have come into focus, theoretical explanations and frameworks that worked well in established democracies raise questions about their applicability in different political and historical contexts. The Western Balkans was one such area that, despite its geographic proximity to

Central Europe, fits neither the Western nor the Central European political mold. In fact, it was poorly understood outside the community of regional specialists and had long been considered a hotbed of nationalism. The region has been associated with the ethnic and religious conflict ranging from the Balkan Wars of the early 20th Century to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Ethnic tensions, a lack of economic opportunities, cultural traditionalism, and public corruption were considered endemic features (Jenne and Bieber 2014; Bieber 2018; Pržulj and Kostadinović 2014) and therefore not seen in the context of the rise of radical populism in other parts of Europe.

Another area of Europe that has largely escaped the attention of populism research is the Caucasus region. It has also been marked by considerable instability since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like the Balkan countries (see Linden 2008; Pajnik et al. 2016; Krasteva 2016), the Caucasus region aspires to varying degrees to join the European Union and to be closely linked to Western Europe. However, the greater geographic distance to Western European power centers and the latter's all-important relationship with Russia have further overshadowed how this region is perceived. Moreover, the integration of much of Central Europe into the European Union (EU) in 2005 and 2007, respectively, has resulted in new political and sociocultural divisions in the EU, raising apprehension about absorbing new members. As a result, the appetite for expanding the EU into areas that are politically and culturally even less well understood by most Europeans has diminished. The former EU Commissioner Olli Rehn once remarked about the EU's Eastern and Southeastern neighborhood that it was Brussels' policy goal to make the region such as the Western Balkans as boring as Western or Northern Europe (EN Info 200). This comment sums up the perception of these lesser-known parts of Europe in the sense that they require pacification of sorts and a transformation.

The Balkans and the Caucasus form a kind of 'periphery' in the minds of many Europeans, as they seem to demarcate an area of transition to the world beyond Europe. These notions are, of course, constructions that reflect the reality that the centers of political and economic power in the present day are located in Western and Northern Europe, so that developments away from there receive less public and scholarly attention. Indeed, this 'periphery of Europe' is routinely viewed as troublesome but culturally and politically inscrutable, economically backward, and the site of "ancient hatreds" (Majstorovic 1996; Schwartz 1999). Since former Yugoslavia was neither part of the West nor the Soviet bloc, with relatively open borders

and a limited private sector, it remained an enigma to some, because it did not fit into the binary understanding of the world during the Cold War and immediately thereafter. In contrast, Georgia and Armenia are best known for their important but separate Christian traditions. They are also distinct from other countries covered in this book because of the former's long inclusion in the Soviet empire and thus their political systems are even less well-known outside the region.

Some have therefore accused the EU of approaching its Southern and Eastern neighbors with normative imperialism (Pänke 2015). In many ways, this has also been Moscow's justification for its own expansionism, which it frames as a necessary step to push back against a Western (European) encroachment. Whether through the pursuit of strategic interest or a sort of administrative stumbling forward, moving Western Europe closer to Europe's frontier in the East and Southeast is seen as inviting trouble by important voices in the West (Mearsheimer 2014), who feel vindicated after Russia's war of aggression against the Ukraine. Others may draw precisely the opposite conclusions, stressing the necessity to integrate these countries as soon as possible into a common European framework.

### *3. The challenges of the concept of populism*

It has not been easy to situate the EU's eastern and southern neighbors within the literature on populism. For one, populism in the region has not been treated as a particularly pressing problem that required special attention. Instead, the politics in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were defined by these countries' relationship with the EU, with special attention placed on their shaky political institutions, the rise of ethno-politics, and the role of oligarchs. Armenian and Georgian politics have also made headlines in the West in the context of national political instability and conflictual relations with Russia and, in Armenia's case, also with its neighbor to the East. Instead of populism, the political challenges across Central and Eastern Europe appear to come either from radical right populism (Minkenberg 2002, 2017) or, more generally, creeping authoritarianism (Bieber 2018). In fact, populism as a threat to democracy seems so deeply entrenched that it hardly appears to merit separate attention (but see Stanley 2017). In any case, the mainstream literature on populism has devoted its focus mainly on those former Communist countries that have since joined the EU, particularly the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, and to

a lesser extent, Bulgaria and Romania (for an overview, see Gherghina et al. 2021).

Research on populism has been characterized by a variety of approaches, which makes the uniform application of such conceptualizations to emerging political systems difficult. To this day, there is sometimes passionate disagreement about whether populism is a style, a mode of expression, a political strategy, a discourse, an ideology, a zeitgeist, a political logic, or the like (Roberts 2006; Stanley 2008; Barr 2009; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). As a result, controversies about which criteria should be used to identify and classify populism persist. To some extent, these disagreements are rooted in different political experiences with the phenomenon of populism. For example, whereas populism is a relatively recent phenomenon in European democracies, it has a longer tradition in Latin America. The influential theorist and Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1977; 2005) noticed the connection between populism in Latin America and modernization pressures, as various political systems had failed to channel this pressure into a stable democratic institutional development. In its absence, charismatic personalities shaped the political discourse to create a popular hegemonic bloc through which populist leaders could mobilize and achieve their political ends.

In Europe, the most influential approach in empirical research to date was pioneered by the Dutch scholar Cas Mudde (2004). In the article "The Populist Zeitgeist," he conceives of populism as "an ideology that ultimately divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté énérale* (general will) of the people." This conceptualization is at the heart of the so-called ideational approach to populism (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). It views populism as a 'thin' ideology or set of ideas that can be activated in people and combined with 'thick' ideologies to form radical right and radical left populism (Heinisch et al. 2021).

Other scholars have developed different approaches to defining populism, such as Aslanidis (2016)—populism as a discursive claim—, Moffitt (2016)—populism as political style, performance, and representation—, and Pappas (2019)—populism as illiberal democracy. Some scholars view the ideational model as 'too reductionist,' especially when grappling with political conditions outside Western Europe that do not allow for the clear demarcation between populist and non-populist (Aslanidis 2016; De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019).

The underlying concern about the application of a conception that has worked well in Western Europe has to do with the peculiarity of how populism initially manifested itself in Western Europe. It first appeared in the form of *Poujadism,* a powerful mixture of anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-parliamentarism (Heinisch et al. 2021). It combined the anti-dirigist tax revolt with a sociocultural agenda in which state bureaucrats and ethnic minorities were 'the villains' and small shopkeepers 'the heroes.' Tax protests and anti-partisan and anti-corruption sentiments were characteristic of the early populist parties also in Austria, France, Italy, and Denmark, where the perception of established parties holding a monopoly on power has had a long history. In these countries, the involvement of the established parties in high profile cases of political corruption ultimately laid the groundwork for political outsiders and new alliances to take on the political establishment. In other cases, populist parties emerged in the context of secessionist protests against 'corrupt' or 'unresponsive' national governments, such as the Flemish Bloc (VB) in Belgium and the Northern League (LN) in Italy. The perception of the erosion of national sovereignty through accession to the European Union is another factor in the rise of populist protests, as exemplified by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), which championed the anti-European cause early on. As populist parties mutated from bourgeois protest parties to parties representing voters who felt threatened by modernization and internationalization, especially lower-educated men in traditional and nonprofessional occupations, populists adapted their agenda accordingly. Identity politics, anti-immigration positions, Euroscepticism, criticism of globalization and free trade, as well as topics like law and order became permanent fixtures in the programs of almost all populist parties across the continent (Van Spanje 2010; but: Rooduijn et al. 2014).

Populism in Western and Northern Europe thus formed in the context of ultra-stable political systems whose very entrenchment fueled the radical opposition. Thus, there was a clear division between the political mainstream and typically one outside challenger. This is not the case in Eastern and Southeastern European countries, whose political systems underwent several transitions and where institutions remained unconsolidated and politics remained much more in flux (Kitschelt 1992; Schöpflin 1993; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Evans 2006; Enyedi and Bértoa 2018). What Minkenberg (2015: 34) dubbed the 'under-institutionalization' of the party system is reflected in voter fluctuation and frequent splits and reconstitutions. This makes parties "disconcertingly fluid" and contributes to the "porous boundaries

between the radical right and the mainstream right" (Minkenberg 2015: 34).

### *4. Populism as a symptom of a crisis of legitimacy*

Populism in Western Europe appeared as a symptom of a crisis of legitimacy and a failure of representation on the part of established political institutions and mechanisms. Later on, socio-cultural issues such as immigration and cultural identity became more salient, fueling the rise of the radical right. Both issues, political legitimacy and cultural identity, are also important factors explaining the surge of populism in Eastern Europe. Thus, the populist radical right across Europe mobilizes its supporters on the basis of the alleged illegitimacy of those in power and their complicity in undermining the sovereignty and status of the native population, which is threatened by elites and dangerous outsiders. These cultural 'others' include, for example, immigrants and ethnic minorities or the European elites, who are blamed as scapegoats and villains of economic modernization and political integration for the problems of the native populations in the EU accession countries. Since the economically weaker countries on the periphery of Europe are particularly dependent on the EU and the political goodwill and economic support of Western Europe, it is propagandistically easy for populist actors to portray political reform requirements for accession candidates as an attempt to 'impose' a foreign agenda on traditional population.

A closely related factor that sets post-communist transition countries apart from those in Western Europe is party system development. In an effort to emulate the archetypes of the West European political model, the political parties throughout post-communist Europe initially followed the traditional pattern of socioeconomic cleavages by establishing parties of the center right and center left. While this development made sense in Western Europe in the industrial age, when the conflict between labor and capital was the defining experience, it was far less relevant in conditions where almost everyone agreed on the need to integrate the emerging economies into the European market. Because the creation of a market economy and closer economic integration with Europe were almost universally accepted and resources were scarce, there were few economic policy differences over which the parties could credibly compete.

In those CEE countries that first acceded to the EU, the major right-wing parties had to decide whether to compete with a socioeconomic agenda by pushing for more market liberalism, or rather focus on sociocultural issues by claiming to defend sovereignty, national interests, and the established order (Buštíková and Kitschelt 2009; Minkenberg 2015; Pirro 2015). While left-wing parties became eastern versions of liberal social democracies, the mainstream right often moved much further to the right, so as to distinguish itself from centrist and center-left positions (Harmsen and Spiering 2004: 28; Riishøj 2004; Minkenberg 2017). Thus, in CEE, we encounter a political context shaped by transition and post-transition from Communism, fluid social structures, and the weakness of civil society (Evans 2006: 258).

It stands to reason that we expect similar political processes to take place in the countries studied in this volume. Although they are not members of the EU, they all aspire to acquire membership or are shaped by their economic and political relations with the EU. As in other parts of Eastern Europe, socioeconomic contestation is largely off the table. A focus on sociocultural issues therefore seems more promising to right-wing parties. Where linguistic and ethnic differences were not sufficient, such as in the former Yugoslavia, religion and cultural traditions became instrumentalized for radical mobilization.

The CEE countries that are now member states, which include the Visegrad countries, the Baltic states, as well as Croatia and Slovenia, have struggled to some degree to combat corruption, develop stable and well-functioning political institutions, and contain authoritarian impulses, despite receiving significant political and economic support from Brussels. We can only imagine the challenges faced by political systems in which there are fewer resources and thus opportunities to develop stable and lasting institutions. In such a situation, political personalities can play a paramount role. They act as 'change agents,' individuals who make a credible promise to the electorate to bring about significant change (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2021). These personalities may come from outside politics, such as from the world of business or entertainment and are uniquely able to convert their economic or communications capital into political capital.

Studies of populism have shown that public corruption, political fragmentation, a weak party system, and the excessive personalization of politics have contributed to the rise of populism (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). In addition, we also know that insufficient consolidation of democratic and legal institutions are risk factors for democracy. Therefore, the combination

of these two developments is an important factor in shaping the state of democracy in the countries discussed in this book.

Of course, all of the above developments can be observed in one form or another in Western democracies as well, but they are more prominent in transitional and post-transitional societies because of the conditions prevailing there. We notice, however, that political trends in Western political systems are moving in the direction of politics that we know from Eastern and Southern Europe, in the sense that party systems are becoming more fragmented and more polarized with respect to sociocultural issues. Therefore, understanding the 'periphery' can also be a means to understand recent developments in established democracies (Lane and Ersson 2007; Enyedi and Bértoa 2018).

### *5. Introducing the book's authors and chapters*

In Chapter 2, Daniel Smilov and Ruzha Smilova provide a conceptual link between analyzing populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The chapter presents populism as a form of democratic illiberalism, which combines a commitment to procedural democracy with a critique of some substantive liberal values such as pluralism, separation of powers, constitutional limitations, and minority rights. Populists advocate the direct and efficient transmission of the undistorted, genuine will of the people to the public arena. By claiming that the political establishment does not represent the 'true' interests of 'the people,' the populists are able to position themselves as an anti-corruption party that breaks with politics as usual. The populist logic entails that politics is inherently corrupt and hijacked by private interests on behalf of a few.

Citizens of CEE countries are accustomed to this anti-establishment discourse, in part because the transition to liberal democracy was generally elite-driven and fraught with painful experiences. During this period, populist parties have not only gained prominence in virtually all post-communist countries but have become governing parties in many of them. This development links those post-transition countries in the EU with those stuck in the perpetual waiting process for accession. In that chapter, the authors also argue that a conceptual distinction between radical and centrist populists is useful for analyzing both the supply and demand sides of populism. They argue that the latter type of populism should not be con-

sidered a radical challenge to liberal democracy, but rather as reflecting the post-ideological views of large segments in society in a catch-all manner.

Chapter 3 by Ashot and Nane Aleksanyan connects directly to the previous segment by discussing the success of populism throughout the European peripheries of the post-Soviet states in the context of the EU's Eastern Partnership. The chapter argues that differences in stability and effectiveness of the regional order impact how populism manifests itself in these countries. The EU's Eastern partnership creates a cleavage, especially concerning the relations of other post-Soviet countries vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. As a result, new populist forces emerge, claiming to represent the people's views on this matter. While domestic factors and political culture shape populism, that chapter argues that the populist agendas in post-Soviet societies are also influenced by those countries' respective geopolitical positions and relations with the EU and Russia. What makes this analysis different from other explanations of populism is the focus on external causes in the form of political constraints created by great power relations between rival blocks.

In Chapter 4, Simon Clarke argues that the political environment of post-Soviet countries, particularly Armenia, is compatible with, and conducive to populism. In particular, the chapter takes issue with arguments that the former Soviet states, with their authoritarian and patrimonial structures, are anti-populist and shows that the opposite is true. In fact, personalistic leadership styles, clientelism, and patronage have proven to be conducive to populist politics, by neglecting the role of ideology and political position-taking. The lack of clear ideological positions among political parties makes them more likely to adopt populist positions. The analysis assigns two prominent political leaders in Armenia to coordinates on a left-right axis and democratic-authoritarian axis to illustrate that they exhibit authoritarian tendencies despite making claims to the contrary. Finally, the chapter also explores the question of whether left-wing populism has a similar or different impact on democracy than right-wing populism, as studies of other political systems suggest.

Chapter 5 by Ruben Elamiryan analyzes the development of populism in the process of the democratic transition in Armenia. While populism can be found on both sides of the ideological spectrum, or moving between left-wing and right-wing ideology, the case of Armenia illustrates the lack of clear ideological fault lines in post-communist societies and exemplifies populism without a defined ideology. The analysis includes three of the most prominent parties in Armenia that were quick to garner public sup-

port but have witnessed a significant decline in recent years. Importantly, they all emphasize the central position of the populist leader within the party. Although they have successfully capitalized on economic issues or soft nationalism, their agendas have failed to indicate their ideological positions. The chapter argues that the personalization of politics and the lack of clear ideological stances have contributed to the short-term effect of populism as a mobilization strategy in Armenia. Populism appears as a feature of political parties in government, not for the purpose of gaining power through mobilization, but rather to keep it through other means for which populism is best equipped.

Chapter 6 by David Matsaberidze analyzes populism in Georgia using a discursive-historical approach. The chapter compares populist discourses expressed in the rhetoric of presidents and prime ministers. It analyzes the nationalist or populist appeals in which these political leaders appropriate the concepts of 'the people' and 'the nation.' Post-Soviet Georgian political discourse is thus a mixture of rhetorical populism and ideological nationalism. All of these narratives place the Georgian nation and the Georgian citizen at the center of the discourse and use populism and nationalism as central axes for legitimizing their political projects and the politicians that pursue them. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of populist rhetoric that shows how the discourse is divided into master and sub-frame structures and how expectations are raised but remain unfulfilled. It also explores the discrepancy between promises and the failure to meet expectations, which has led to the downfall of various incumbent presidents—a feature that has characterized Georgian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Chapter 7 by Avdi Smajljaj analyzes the trajectory of the populist political party Lëvizja Vetëvendosje or Self-determination Movement which saw its primary mission as being a radical opposition to the political establishment before becoming itself part of the government in Kosovo. The account focuses on this development, which risks strengthening authoritarian practices and limiting political competition as this formerly populist opposition party suddenly finds itself grappling with governmental power. The chapter provides an overview of the historical context in Kosovo and the causes for the success of Vetëvendosje while discussing its shifts in populist rhetoric and practices upon switching its role from opposition to government. The text expands more generally on the dilemma of populists in power, such as the struggle to keep the sweeping promises they made while in opposition and their limited capacities while in government. We

see how the recourse to the familiar practices of their opponents, such as the pursuit of their own form of clientelism, eventually becomes their mechanism for legitimizing power, which in turn has further negative effects on democracy.

Chapter 8 by Nemanja Stankov is devoted to Montenegro and analyzes the conditions that would seemingly allow for populist parties to emerge. He concludes, however, that none of the parties in Montenegro can be considered populist according to the definition of populism as a 'thin ideology,' but that several can be classified as selectively populist. His analysis shows that opposition parties are unable to clearly distinguish themselves as anti-establishment. We see that the dominant establishment party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), has successfully monopolized the issue of Montenegrin independence from Serbia and Montenegro, by turning an anti-establishment message into an attack on the state and national independence. This chapter also examines the populist attitudes of the electorate by providing an analysis of individual-level data.

Chapter 9 by Klaudia Koxha and Reinhard Heinisch examines populism in the political mainstream in Albania. As a case study, Albania is useful for understanding populism in a context that is somewhat different from the rest of the region in terms of political stability, fragmentation, and nationalism. The chapter shows that Albania, like other countries in the Balkans, has in recent years established a regime of competitive authoritarianism that combines authoritarian leadership with populism and legitimization through an upcoming EU membership. First, this chapter discusses the literature on populism in transition societies in the Albanian context and examines what facilitates populism as a feature in mainstream political discourse. After examining the broader political landscape and the 2019 local elections, this chapter highlights European Union integration as an important component in the populist rhetoric of Albania's main established political parties. It also shows the close association of populism with an authoritarian leadership style.

Chapter 10 by Despot Kovačević and Slaviša Orlović provides an analysis of the main political actors in Serbia, the political parties and their leaders in connection with populism. Focusing on the causes of the surge of party-based populism in Serbia, their main argument is that changes in the party system have turned political parties into direct enablers of this development. The chapter proceeds from historical and contextual analysis, beginning with the breakup of Yugoslavia. The general framework explaining the surge of populism is centered on the conditions created by

a polarized society, the existence of a strong political leader and party, and a state of permanent crisis. Their analysis focuses on the parties that exhibit the highest levels of populism and highlights the consequences of this development. These include the decline of democratic values, threats to media freedom, and a crisis of parliamentary politics.

Chapter 11 by Aneta Cekikj on North Macedonia shows how the dominant national political figure, Nikola Gruevski, leader of a mainstream conservative political party, relied largely on populist strategies to remain in power. The author shows how Gruevski successfully exploited the precarious conditions of a protracted national transition—from political uncertainty about the country's future in Europe to internal ethnic and political divisions—to his own advantage. The chapter presents different conceptualizations of populism and shows how they apply to the North Macedonian case. It analyzes the discursive construction of 'the leader' and 'the people,' the identification of enemy groups, such as 'the elites' and professional classes, all of which contrast starkly with earlier efforts to project a more progressive, pro-European, reform-oriented image. As in other countries in the region, populist actors have politically profited from creating and maintaining a sense of crisis in order to present themselves as 'defenders' of 'the common people.'

Chapter 12 by Maja Savić-Bojanić emphasizes the leader-centered nature of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the personalization of politics, and the establishment of a partocracy. Populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily informed by ethnonationalism and the country's religious division. Populists reinforce the construction of the people along these lines while keeping a certain distance. They do not necessarily rely on the personification of the people they claim to represent, but rather construct a higher authority derived from their family heritage, such as fame and inherited charisma, which is desirable as such and provides a political norm for what or who a leader should be. The revolt against the past and 'the Others' presents itself in the form of anti-establishment discourse but remains embedded in an emotional and robust yet simple language that overemphasizes heroism, historical myths, and symbols within a single ethnic group in a divided society.

This book offers a variety of perspectives on populism and makes clear that the conceptualizations prevalent in Western academic discussions may not apply or may not fully apply to conditions in post-transition Europe, particularly in the regions furthest from the European Union. In most of these countries, populism combines ideology, discourse, and political

practice. In this sense, it is linked to measurable political realities in terms of conditions of opportunity, choice of strategy, and choice of policy, but it is also often purely rhetorical, resorting to empty signifiers. In all cases, populism constructs notions of friend and foe, of people who are threatened or in crisis, and who need to be saved. The dominant ideological component is nationalism, which demarcates 'the people' along ethnic and cultural lines from the internal 'other' and the external 'enemy.' The internal 'other' may be another ethnic group or a perceived political enemy that threatens the larger national project such as liberal NGOs. The external 'enemy' may be the European elites, an expansionist Russia, a neighboring state, foreign NGOs or George Soros.

Clearly, the discussion of populism continues to resonate in both the social sciences and in public debate. Populism research must remain open to the perceptions and experiences of people and scholarly communities that are typically less able to shape these international debates. Despite local differences in the way the phenomenon manifests itself, populism everywhere has many familiar features that remain constant across national and political boundaries. It is primarily a reaction to political change that undermines the legitimacy of existing institutions and established rules while opening opportunities for political entrepreneurs. Typically, populists use their available resources to appeal directly to citizens. In many cases, populists are wealthy individuals who have benefited from economic change, or they have had privileged access to the media, or they have in some way emerged as figures in the chaotic political upheavals that followed the fall of Communism and the period thereafter. In their appeals, they often follow a narrative that constructs a people in need of salvation or defense from 'others,' or from the perceived enemies of the 'sacred' community. Populists either promise radical changes in a supposedly intolerable situation or present themselves as the only possible defenders of 'the people' against nefarious forces.

Typically, the world of populists is black and white, and their style is full of hyperbole and emotional language. Their political and communicative modus operandi is responsive but less responsible. They often try to evoke a permanent state of crisis in which they present themselves as the only saviors. However—and this is the difference to other political radicals or pure nationalists—populists can often change their tune, appear more moderate, and claim to do everything to secure their country's future in the West or in an integrated Europe. Populists are able to adapt flexibly and do not

seem to cling to ideological dogma when it suits their political agenda and ensures their hold on power.

Political ideologies or political agendas are often temporary affairs that can be sacrificed when convenient. While in many cases, populists are not the champions of authoritarianism, they are perceived to be, their policies and influence have nevertheless negatively impacted fledgling democracies and prevented them from consolidating and thereby undermined the rule of law. In all of these countries, populism has found extremely favorable conditions in the form of high levels of political distrust combined with weak institutions and enormous economic disparities. Under these conditions, it was easy for populists to find their villains and scapegoats.

The decades following communist oppression and economic inefficiency, when many ordinary people felt the sting of economic insecurity as they watched others achieve phenomenal wealth or saw the enormous influx of foreign capital and culture pouring into previously more insular societies, must have left many citizens confused and frustrated. Nevertheless, the ever-adapting populists managed to make credible promises and secure the support of significant segments of the population, who in the end were always disappointed. Then, either the people had to be convinced of the culpability of 'the enemy' in why the populist government's promises had failed to materialize, or other populists emerged who reformulated the nationalist narrative and appealed to a different form of salvation. Nevertheless, all forms of populism claim to defend or restore sovereignty in the name of 'the people.' In this way, populism in the 'European periphery' fits easily into the broader literature on populism in general. We now invite our readers to delve headlong into these *Perspectives on Populism* and experience the *Diverse Voices from the European 'Periphery.'*

## *Works cited*

Aslanidis, Paris. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Apr. 2016, pp. 88–104.

Barr, Robert R. "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics." *Party Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Jan. 2009, pp. 29–48.

Bieber, Florian. "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans." *East European Politics*, vol. 34, no. 3, Routledge, July 2018, pp. 337–54.

Bustikova, Lenka, and Herbert Kitschelt. "The Radical Right in Post-communist Europe. Comparative Perspectives on Legacies and Party Competition." *Communist and Post-communist Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, Elsevier BV, Nov. 2009, pp. 459–83.

Cooper, Robert. 2002. "The New Liberal Imperialism." The Observer, April 7, 2002, at www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/07/1, accessed April 12, 2015.

De La Torre, Carlos, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Do We Need a Minimum Definition of Populism? An Appraisal of Mudde's Conceptualization." *Populism,* vol. 2, no. 1, Brill, May 2019, pp. 79–95.

EN Info "EU wants a "boring Western Balkans", Rehn tells Foreign Affairs Committee. 2008: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr_info/2008/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE_IPR(2008)04-03(25654)_EN.pdf

Enyedi, Zsolt, and Fernando Casal Bértoa. "Institutionalization and De-institutionalization in Post-communist Party Systems." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 32, no. 3, SAGE Publishing, Apr. 2018, pp. 422–50.

Evans, Geoffrey. "The Social Bases of Political Divisions in Post-Communist Eastern Europe." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 1, Annual Reviews, Aug. 2006, pp. 245–70.

Gherghina, Sergiu. "How Far Does Nationalism Go? An Overview of Populist Parties in Central and Eastern Europe." *Political Populism: Handbook of Concepts, Questions, and Strategies of Research*, edited by Reinhard K. Heinisch et al., Baden-Baden., Nomos, 2021, pp. 239–56.

Gidron, Noam and Bonikowski, Bart. "Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda". *Working Paper Series*, no. 13, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2013.

Harmsen, Robert, and Menno Spiering. "Euroscepticism and the Evolution of European Political Debate." *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration*, edited by Robert Harmsen and Menno Spiering, Brill, 2004, pp. 13–35.

Hawkins, Kirk A., and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. "Introduction: The Ideational Approach." *The Ideational Approach to Populism,* edited by Kirk A. Hawkins et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2018.

Heinisch, Reinhard, et al., editors. *Political Populism: Handbook of Concepts, Questions and Strategies of Research*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021.

---. "Reclaiming National Sovereignty: The Case of the Conservatives and the Far Right in Austria." *European Politics and Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, Taylor and Francis, June 2019, pp. 163–81.

---. "Returning to Europe and the Rise of Europragmatism: Party Politics and the European Union Since 1989." *The Routledge History of East Central Europe Since 1700*, edited by Irina Livezeanu and Arpad Von Klimo, 1st ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 416–64.

Heinisch, Reinhard, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Comparing Populist Organizations." *Understanding Populist Organization: The Radical Right in Western Europe*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 221–44.

---. "Fixing the Taxonomy in Populism Research." *Political Populism: Handbook of Concepts, Questions, and Strategies of Research*, edited by Reinhard K. Heinisch et al., Baden-Baden., Nomos, 2021, pp. 111–30.

Jenne, Erin K., and Florian Bieber. "Situational Nationalism: Nation-building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox." *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 13, no. 5, Taylor and Francis, June 2014, pp. 431–60.

Kitschelt, Herbert, et al. *Post-Communist party systems: Competition, representation, and inter-party cooperation*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1999.

Kitschelt, Herbert. "The Formation of Party Systems in East Central Europe." *Politics and Society*, vol. 20, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Mar. 1992, pp. 7–50.

Krasteva, Anna. "The Post-communist Rise of National Populism: Bulgarian Paradoxes." *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe*, edited by Gabriella Lazaridis et al., London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 161–200.

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books, 2005.

---. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London, Verso Books, 1977.

Lane, Jan-Erik, and Svante Ersson. "Party System Instability in Europe: Persistent Differences in Volatility between West and East?" *Democratization*, vol. 14, no. 1, Taylor and Francis, Feb. 2007, pp. 92–110.

Linden, Ronald H. "The New Populism in Central and Southeastern Europe." *Problems of Post-Communism*, Taylor and Francis, May 2008.

Livezeanu, Irina, and Arpad Von Klimo. *The Routledge History of East Central Europe since 1700*. London, Routledge, 2017.

Majstorovic, Steven. "Ancient Hatreds or Elite Manipulation? Memory and Politics in the Former Yugoslavia." *World Affairs*, vol. 159, no. 4, 1996, pp. 170–82.

Mearsheimer, John J. "Getting Ukraine Wrong." *The New York Times*, vol. 13, 2014.

Minkenberg, Michael. "Profiles, Patterns, Process. Studying the East European Radical Right in Its Political Environment." *Transforming the Transformation? The East European Radical Right in the Political Process*, edited by Michael Minkenberg, 1st ed., London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 27–56.

---. "The Radical Right in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations." *East European Politics and Societies,* vol. 16, no. 2, 2002, pp. 335–62.

---. *The radical right in Eastern Europe: Democracy under siege?* New York, Springer, 2017.

Moffitt, Benjamin, and Simon Tormey. "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style." *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, Wiley-Blackwell, June 2014, pp. 381–97.

Moffitt, Benjamin. The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation. Stanford UP, 2016, openlibrary.org/books/OL28850379M/Global_Rise_of_Populism.

Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Jan. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Pajnik, Mojca, et al. "Populism in the Slovenian Context: Between Ethno-nationalism and Re-traditionalisation." *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe*, edited by Gabriella Lazaridis et al., London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 137–60.

Pappas, Takis S. *Populism and Liberal Democracy*. Oxford UP, 2019.

Pänke, Julian. "The Fallout of the EU's Normative Imperialism in the Eastern Neighborhood." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 62, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, Nov. 2015, pp. 350–63.

Pirro, Andrea L. P. "The Populist Radical Right in the Political Process: Assessing Party Impact in Central and Eastern Europe." *Transforming the Transformation? The East European Radical Right in the Political Process*, edited by Michael Minkenberg, 1st eds., Routledge, 2015.

Pržulj, Živka, and Svetolik Kostadinović. "Cultural Roots of Corruption - the Case of Western Balkans." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research, Aug. 2014.

Riishøj, Søren. "Europeanization and Euroscepticism: Experiences from Poland and the Czech Republic." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 35, no. 3, July 2007, pp. 503–35.

Roberts, Kenneth M. "Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-roots Organization in Latin America." *Comparative Politics,* vol. 38, no. 2, 2006, pp. 127–48.

Rooduijn, Matthijs, et al. "A Populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe." *Party Politics*, vol. 20, no. 4, SAGE Publishing, Apr. 2012, pp. 563–75.

Schöpflin, George. *Politics in Eastern Europe: 1945–92.* Oxford, Blackwell, 1993.

Schwartz, Stephen. "Beyond 'Ancient Hatreds': What Really Happened to Yugoslavia." *Policy Review*, Hoover Institution, Oct. 1999, www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-58253210/beyond-ancient-hatreds-what-really-happened-to.

Stanley, Ben. "Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 2017, pp. 140–58.

---. "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 13, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2008, pp. 95–110.

Taggart, Paul. *Populism*. Buckingham, Open UP, 2000.

Van Spanje, Joost. "Contagious Parties: Anti-immigration Parties and Their Impact on Other Parties' Immigration Stances in Contemporary Western Europe." *Party Politics*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2010, pp. 563–86.

# Chapter 2: Centrist and Radical Populism in Central and Eastern Europe[1] [2]

*Daniel Smilov and Ruzha Smilova*

## *1. Introduction*

There is an emerging consensus that populism is a form of democratic illiberalism (Krastev 2006; Krastev 2007; Pappas 2014; Pappas 2016; Pappas 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2018; Mounk 2018; Galston 2018; Smilova 2021). Populism combines a commitment to procedural democracy with a criticism of some substantive liberal values, such as pluralism, separation of powers, constitutional constraints, and minority rights. Populists challenge these values in the name of their vision of unrestrained 'general will' of a homogeneous people. The populists' promise is that, unlike the established elites, they will ensure a direct and efficient transmission of the undiluted, genuine popular will in the public arena. By claiming that the political establishment has failed to represent the true interests of the people, populists position themselves as anti-corruption agents. The populist logic entails that the establishment parties betray the public good and thereby engage in inherently corrupt politics, and as a result, democracy becomes a government captured by private interests on behalf of a few.

---

1 A draft of this chapter was presented at the 2021 CES Virtual 27th International Conference of Europeanists *Europe's Past, Present, and Future: Utopias and Dystopias*, panel "Radical Populism and Democracy: Reconceptualizing a complex Relationship with New Theorising and New Empirical Evidence." The authors would like to thank Martin Dolezal, Reinhard Heinisch and the other panelists for their comments and suggestions.

2 This chapter has been developed as part of the Project "PaCE" and received funding from the European Union´s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the grant agreement No 822337.
The views expressed in it reflect only authors' own views and reflect in no way PaCE or European Commission's opinions.

The citizens of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries[3] are well accustomed to this anti-establishment discourse. In many of these countries, where the transition to liberal democracy was long, painful, and elite-driven, this has become the dominant discourse over the last two decades (Engler et al. 2019). During this time, populist parties not only rose to prominence in virtually all of the post-communist countries, they became ruling parties in most of them. Such is the case in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia. Classifying political parties in CEE countries into populist and non-populist categories is a risky business, since populist discourse and populist strategies have been adopted by many players.

In this chapter, we argue that conceptually distinguishing between radical and centrist populists is useful to analyze both the supply and demand of populism. The distinction between centrist and radical right-wing populism in CEE countries has long been discussed (Učeň 2007; Stanley 2017; Havlík and Voda 2018; Pytlas et al. 2018). Populism comes in a variety of degrees and shades, but the degree of radicalism and behavior of the party, as well as the population segments it appeals to, matters for practical and theoretical purposes.

Some populist parties challenge the elements of liberal democracy, which are not part of the core of its underlying ideology. We call such political players centrist populists. There are substantive differences between their ideas and policies and those of the more radical challengers of liberal democracy. For instance, the former Tsar Simeon II of Bulgaria was not convinced that he needed a political party of his own in order to rule the country. He won the parliamentary elections in 2001 by using the registration of a minor political player. More than one year after the elections took place, he maintained his refusal to convert his broad political movement into a party organization. This position was underpinned by explicit and implicit criticisms of the polarization that political parties bring about. Simeon II claimed that he was essentially above all parties and that he personally represented the nation. Such a political strategy and positive voter response fall under contemporary definitions of populism, as they presuppose an understanding of 'the people' that is not particularly pluralist. But this type of populism, which is close to the personalistic populism

3 The countries covered in the chapter are the post-communist EU member-states in Central and Eastern Europe. The trends discussed also apply to some of the accession countries in the Western Balkans.

of Berlusconi in Italy, cannot by any means be treated as a radical challenge to liberal democracy. Thus, it makes sense to speak of centrist populism, which claims to be beyond left and right ideological divisions and reflects the views of large groups in society in a catch-all manner.

In 2021, another centrist populist player with a very strong electoral result emerged in Bulgaria. Slavi Trifonov's party, There is Such a People (ITN), perhaps does not need further proof of its populist character than its name. The party stands for the introduction of a majoritarian electoral system in which people would presumably vote for persons, not parties. Established by a popular Bulgarian TV personality, ITN is strongly personalistic. The party is fond of referendums, has called for direct election of police chiefs, and openly rejects the value of left and right ideologies. Apart from these points, little is known about its political views. Overall, ITN promises fast, direct, undiluted representation of the people's interests. Yet, ITN is neither against the EU and NATO, it is not openly xenophobic or homophobic, nor does it challenge human rights or democracy. While the party is definitely populist, it does not make sense to classify it as a radical populist party.

In contrast to ITN, a wide variety of radical right-wing populist parties in CEE countries have challenged central aspects of the liberal-democratic order. These parties endorse much of the radical right-wing agenda; they tend to be xenophobic, homophobic, autocratic, anti-pluralist, strongly against the EU and NATO, or at least argue for major reforms of these institutions. Such parties advocate the idea of 'Europe of the fatherlands.' Many of them openly or tacitly sympathize with autocratic regimes, such as Putin's Russia. Fidesz in Hungary has become such a party under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. Since 2010, the party has transformed Hungary to such a degree that scholars have argued that it is not a democracy anymore (Halmai 2020a; Halmai 2020b). PiS in Poland is following a similar path. The radical right-wing party Attack in Bulgaria, as well as a rising newcomer, Revival, also fall into this category. Both parties have campaigned for Bulgaria to withdraw from NATO and the EU, are strongly Eurosceptic, pro-Russian, and skeptical of liberal democracy in general.

Centrist and radical populism are political offshoots of the same phenomenon: democratic illiberalism. Both reflect the frustrations of the electorate with certain aspects of liberal democracy and are rooted in anti-establishment personalistic political entrepreneurship. Yet, the role that centrist and the radical populists occupy in their respective polities is different. The rise of centrist populists has obfuscated the ideological borders

between the different parties. The rise of radical right-wing populists, on the other hand, has placed immense pressure on the constitutional frameworks of the CEE states and strained their relationship with the EU.

Radical right-wing and centrist populists can coexist within a single party system. This phenomenon can be observed in many CEE countries. Examples include Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, and GERB and the United Patriots in Bulgaria. Furthermore, some parties have become increasingly radicalized over the course of their development. Fidesz and PiS have followed this course, as they have transformed from centrist populist into radical right-wing populist parties over the last two decades. We aim to explore the relationship between different degrees of radical populists in the region and the mechanisms of populist radicalization.

## *2. Definitions of centrist and radical populism*

In this analysis, we adopt the ideational approach to defining populism, which conceptualizes populism as a thin ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Cas Mudde has defined its essential elements: the Manichean division between the good people and the corrupt elite and portrayal of 'the people' as homogeneous. Takis Pappas (2014; 2019) has also convincingly argued that populism always contains a degree of illiberalism, arguing that populism is essentially democratic illiberalism. Still, it is worth asking: To what degree should anti-liberalism be present in a party's agenda and activities in order for it to qualify as populist?

It has been suggested that populist parties can be divided into 'soft' and 'hard' types, depending on the degree of radicalization observed in their messages (Smilov and Krastev 2008). Other scholars, such as Atila Agh (2019), have also adopted this distinction in their work . In more recent years, scholars have employed a similar and overlapping distinction between centrist and radical populism. While some populist parties feature certain elements of populism in the form of a thin ideology, such as the use of anti-establishment tropes, they often lack other elements, such as people-centrism and the invocation of the general will (Pytlas et al. 2018). In this chapter, we list the characteristics of centrist and radical populist parties based on the policies they pursue. The characteristics listed below are

derived from case studies of populist parties in CEE countries, developed within the PaCE (Horizon 2020) project[4].

The actors and parties that uphold some anti-liberal policies and meet a list of minimum requirements are called centrist populists, as they provide moderate criticism of some peripheral elements of the liberal-democratic doctrine. This criticism is mostly focused on the representative structures of liberal democracy (types of parties, role of parliaments, type of electoral systems and representation) and is shared by many members of the electorate. Strong majorities in all liberal democracies, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, do not trust the political parties and even the parliaments of their countries.[5] Against this background, the criticism of liberal democracy set forth by centrist populist actors thus reflects the views of the median voter.

### 2.1. *Centrist populism: supply-side characteristics*

The following list of characteristics of centrist populism is derived from case studies of paradigmatic 'moderate' or centrist populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, including NDSV, GERB, and There Is Such a People (ITN) in Bulgaria, Hungary's Fidesz from the beginning of the 2000 until 2006, ANO in Czechia (Buštíková and Guasti 2018; Havlík 2019), and SMER in Slovakia. Not all parties share all of these characteristics, but all of the characteristics are shared by most of these parties, and in this sense, this list makes a strong case for at least a clear family resemblance that is persuasive to the political observer:

1. Anti-establishment: Centrist populists argue that the established parties do not represent the will of the people due to corruption or elite inaptness, a strategy that has been characterized as "anti-elitism for moderates" (Stanley 2017). Political parties that pursue this strategy have been called "anti-establishment reform parties, which combine moderate so-

4 Skleparis, Dimitris, et al. *D1.1. Historical and Political Development Of Populism In Europe*. PaCE, 2021, cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PaCE_D1.1_Historical-and-political-development-of-populism-in-Europe_social-movements.pdf.

5 Recent data show that trust in political parties in EU 28 is "very much a minority view" - only 18% among the nationals of EU28 declared in 2017 to trust them (and 77% - to distrust them). This makes political parties the lowest scoring institution measured by the Standard EB88/Autumn 2017. The next least trusted institution are national parliaments - 35% trust.

cial and economic policies with anti-establishment appeals and a desire to change the way politics is conducted" (Hanley and Sikk 2016) and have long been identified and studied (Pop-Eleches 2010). For a more recent detailed account of the diverse forms of anti-establishment politics in CEE countries, see Engler et al (2019);
2. Skepticism of 'thicker' ideologies of the left and the right: This is a particular characteristic of technocratic populists (Havlík 2019);
3. Criticism of the transition in Eastern Europe;
4. Distrust of political parties: Political parties are portrayed as nefarious mediators of the popular will. Thus, populists favor direct democratic means and forms of representation that are less dependent on political parties;
5. Personalism: A charismatic populist leader is a better vehicle of the will of the people (Gurov and Zankina 2013; Pappas 2020);
6. Skepticism toward constitutional constraints. These include liberal democratic features such as the division of power, independent constitutional bodies, checks and balances and the rule of law. As secondary values, these could be sacrificed for the purpose of the more efficient political representation of the popular will;
7. Executive aggrandizement: This refers to the tendency of excessive concentration of power in the executive;
8. Mild nationalism: This refers to a form of nationalism that is not outwardly aggressive but intends to appeal to internal unity and tradition, thereby weakening liberal and internationalist counter tendencies;
9. Welfare policies are not to burden the middle class. Taxes should be flat and low, so that there is no massive redistribution in favor of the most deprived members of society, i.e., this type of populism is not a response to leftist revolt of the masses, Smilov and Krastev (2008: 10).

This agenda is centrist since it is designed to capture the votes of majorities, namely to attract large non-marginalized groups. It contains a promise to quickly resolve societal problems without the complications of cartelized party system and parliamentarian politics. Simeon II, for instance, promised to "put Bulgaria in order" within 800 days (Guechakov 2001). Centrist populists can also be technocratic, like in Czechia, where they have promised to bypass parties and partisanship by relying on experts or by using business models of running the country. As such, this strand of populism is based on a Schmittean belief in the role of personalities in politics. The German constitutional scholar of the Weimar and the Nazi

periods developed the decisionist theory of politics, which over-exaggerated the role played by persons and downplayed the role of rules and institutions. Carl Schmitt (1984 [1922]) argued that politics essentially is what happens in a 'state of exception,' in which established rules are useless. Relying on individuals rather than institutions is a salient feature of most of the contemporary populist parties as well, and it ultimately leads to a focus on executive power. Viktor Orbán has used this model of leadership expansion throughout his career, even in his more moderate and centrist phases. Andrej Babiš in Czechia is also a clear example of this phenomenon.

Criticism of transition is the most distinctive element of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. It takes a variety of forms. Sometimes there is an element of nostalgia towards the socialist past. It is more common, however, to criticize the 'liberal elites,' who have allegedly hijacked the transition and led it in a wrong direction. Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland are the prominent examples of the latter. Generally, the criticism of the post-Soviet transition seems semantically tied to the anti-establishment feature of the centrist populism.

The defining feature of centrist populism is its anti-establishment *Weltanschauung*. The established elites are portrayed as corrupt or otherwise inept and in need of replacement. As far as people-centrism is concerned, centrist populism is mildly nationalist but does not go as far as to reject pluralism altogether. Rather, centrist populists rely on the perception that a charismatic leader is closely connected to the people. This connection is the most important element of centrist populist politics. Centrist populists claim to uphold the will of the people and express it more efficiently than others. Even so, their skepticism of party democracy and parliamentarian procedures does not go as far as to suggest implementing constitutional reforms that could lead to plebiscitarian democracy or autocracy.

### 2.2. *Radical populism: supply-side characteristics*

Radical populism features all or most of the elements of centrist populism, but it also contains a number of more radical upgrades in the form of challenges to liberal democracy. Its definitive characteristics are:

1. Skepticism of and attacks on individual rights, especially the right to privacy, sexual orientation, and gender identity;

2. Skepticism of and attacks on minority rights, including ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities;
3. "Symbolic thickening" (Kotwas and Kubik 2019) of the populist ideology by combining it with another ideology—such as nativism—to denote the 'enemies' of the 'true people.' This shift from politics to symbolic politics (Krasteva 2016) is achieved by instrumentalizing collective victimhood (Kreko et al. 2018), mobilization of collective resentment (Bonikowski 2017), and the longing to restore lost authenticity and regain lost national pride (Krastev and Holmes 2019), which may verge on collective narcissism (Marchlewska et al. 2018);
4. Attacks on independent judiciaries and other constitutional bodies (Zürn 2021), including attempts to staff them with party loyalists;
5. Attempts to take over the media and reduce pluralism;
6. Anti-EU, anti-NATO, pro-autocratic policies, glorifying the *Realpolitik* nationalist heritage of the 1920s and 1930s in the region;
7. Attacks on NGOs, especially foreign funded ones (as 'foreign agents' or 'traitors');
8. Aggressive redistributive measures, including increasing social benefits which target the 'true' members of the people and exclude minorities;
9. Instrumentalization of the police and prosecutors against political opponents who are deemed disloyal to the will of the people;
10. Attempts to entrench a particular religion or specific religious views in public life and the constitution;
11. Unconstitutional nationalization of property;
12. Altering the constitution to establish an illiberal democracy.

The case studies on which this list is based include paradigmatic instances of radicalized populism, such as Fidesz after 2010, PiS, Ataka and other 'patriotic' parties in Bulgaria, Jobbik in Hungary, and several other formations of the radical-right. Central to these characteristics of populist radical right-wing parties is the challenge posed to liberal democracy. This is not the case with centrist populist parties. There are two main vectors of radicalization:

1. Aggressive majoritarianism. According to this doctrine, the true representatives of the people have the right to take over all independent institutions, including judiciaries, media regulators, and central banks. They have the right to suspend constitutional restraints and even (more importantly) use their power to weaken the opposition. In doing so, they can instrumentalize the law for partisan purposes in order to grant favors to their loyalists and punish their opponents. Viktor Orbán's Fundamen-

tal law of 2011 is a clear example of an accomplished system of aggressive majoritarianism.

2. Turning the state into an ethnically homogenous and Christian polity. Radical populist leaders, such as Orbán, Kaczyński, and Siderov, uphold a vision of the state as an ethnically pure and religiously defined polity. Many of their policies—such as the vehement rejection of accepting refugees with Islamic background or different races (in contrast to migrants from the Ukraine or the former Soviet Union, for instance) is a clear expression of this radical aspiration. The desire for homogeneity is usually coupled with homophobic attitudes and opposition to the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe.

### 2.3. *Centrist populism: demand-side characteristics*

There is a certain paradox about the drivers of populism in Eastern Europe. Political frustrations, such as distrust of political parties and parliaments, are widespread. The question then is why only some parties are populist but not all of them. This question is quite relevant, since in some Eastern European polities, even "mainstream" parties have adopted much of the populist agenda. Take for instance the Bulgarian Socialist Party. As the successor to the former communist party, it has attempted to turn itself into a European center-left party. For a certain period of time (until 2014), this attempt was mostly successful. One of its former leaders, Sergei Stanishev, served as the president of The Party of European Socialists (PES). Nevertheless, his own national party currently opposes the Istanbul Convention, strongly rejects the influx of migrants and refugees, has displayed a significant degree of skepticism toward the EU and NATO in particular, and has expressed pro-Putinist views and nostalgia for the Soviet era. If this party can be called mainstream, then there is hardly anything special about the populists.

Setting such curiosities aside, the fact is that people who vote for centrist populist parties generally have political complaints and frustrations about the functioning of liberal democracy. These voters do not generally come from groups of economically deprived people (for more detailed discussion on economic factors for voting populist in CEE countries, see section 2 of this chapter). Indicators of political frustration, however, seem to be over-inclusive, while indicators of economic deprivation are significantly under-inclusive in explaining the centrist populist vote.

Much has been said in the literature on populism about the 'cultural drivers' of populism. And indeed, there are plausible theories to be explored. For instance, the theory of "demographic panic" (Krastev 2020) maintains that Eastern Europeans are extremely protective of their ethnicity, religion, and national identity, because of their declining, ageing populations and massive emigration of young people to the West. While it is true that populist leaders have significantly contributed to the creation of this panic, it is questionable whether the present moment, which is witnessing rapid economic development in Eastern Europe, is really an opportune moment in history to invoke the possible decline, and possibly extinction of these societies.

The cultural explanation, furthermore, fails to explain the success of populist parties in CEE countries empirically. Cultural factors do not seem to be particularly good predictors of the centrist populist vote. Some explanations do not work well because they are over-inclusive. For instance, only PiS is positively correlated with anti-LGBT attitudes, whereas this correlation does not exist among people who have voted for GERB and Fidesz. Anti-immigration attitudes also are a poor predictor of the populist vote in the region, in contrast to the vote for radical right parties in Western Europe. There are more apparent paradoxes: GERB in Bulgaria, for instance, is negatively correlated with ideas of strong government. Thus, cultural factors have a mixed record; some of them seem over-inclusive, while others are under-inclusive in Eastern Europe (for a more detailed discussion on the cultural drivers for populism in the CEE region, see section 2).

The following picture emerges. People who vote for centrist populists may not be economically worse off, older, or less educated than the supporters of other parties. Furthermore, they may not feel culturally underrepresented by the established or mainstream parties. Still, they may have political frustrations in heavily constitutionalized, cartelized political systems. By voting for populist players, such voters may believe they are taking a shortcut to a desired political outcome. Thus, their motivation to vote populist is 'political' in the narrower sense of pertaining to the functioning of the representative structures of democracy:

1. Voters could be frustrated by the cartelized and over-constitutionalized (excessively constrained) character of contemporary political systems and may see populists as a tool to weaken the party cartels and to push

through a partisan agenda without the consent of the opposition and other players, or without a delay due to checks and balances.
2. Voters may be frustrated by what they perceive as corruption or 'state capture' by established political parties. The collapse of the party system in Italy in the 1990s was produced in this way, and this has been the model of emergence for many populist actors in CEE countries.

Political grievances about corruption are thus at the heart of the causal mechanism leading people to vote for populist parties, especially in CEE countries. Virtually all successful populist players have developed a strong anti-corruption message. Venting frustration with 'democracy without choices', populists focus public attention not so much on socio-economic matters, but on the issue of corruption and identity politics ("in order to mount distinctive appeals at a time when the differences between parties on economic issues has narrowed, many parties have put more emphasis on identity or values issues" (Gidron and Hall 2017: 60)). Political frustrations and grievances do seem to play a central role in explaining populist voting patterns in the region.

Yet, the question remains of whether frustration with the political process is widespread and reflected in the attitudes of most voters. For example, trust in political parties in the European Union had averaged to around 15% in 2017. Bértoa and Rama (2020) find a causal link between the increase in votes for populist anti-establishment parties and two structural factors: the volatility of the public vote and the fragmentation of the party systems. According to these authors, political factors alone—without recourse to underlying economic or cultural explanations—are associated with the decision to vote for anti-establishment populist parties.

Cartelization of the political parties (Katz and Mair 1995) may per se be considered a form of corruption. Hence, populists often campaign for the reduction of the number of MPs as a way of 'punishing' a political class which is perceived to have become alienated from the people (Smilov 2020). Parties in the government fail to ensure the desired balance of responsible and representative government, which is "a principal source of the democratic malaise that confronts many Western democracies today" (Mair 2009). Recent empirical studies of the profile of 'populist citizens' in countries across Europe and Latin America demonstrate that these are dissatisfied democrats—they highly value democracy, yet find faults in its performance, as they feel they underrepresented (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020).

Populists have largely succeeded in convincing voters that the political establishment is corrupt in a deep, structural way. It is hardly surprising, then, that in recent years political grievances have increasingly affected the median voter and ever larger groups in the center of society (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018). Populism can thus be understood as a reaction to the widespread perception of corruption. Populist parties have often come to power after serious corruption scandals by promising to eradicate corruption from politics, or 'drain the swamp,' and the like. Some prominent cases include the rise of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy in the early 1990s after the major party funding scandals, Tsar Simeon II promising to rid the country of the corrupt politicians in the 1990s, GERB coming to power in Bulgaria in 2009 with a strong anti-corruption message, and Fidesz returning to power in 2010 after the major corruption scandals that plagued the Socialist Party. Corruption and anti-corruption have also been turned into a major, if not the most significant political factor over the last decade in Romania, Czechia, and Slovakia.

In conclusion, at the level of voter attitudes, the political causal mechanism outlined here implies a link between voting for centrist populist parties and frustration with (cartelized) mainstream political parties, over-constitutionalization of politics (national or supranational), and frustration with the power of elections to change policies.

The political mechanism for mobilizing populist voting is important because it explains why populist parties emerge even without a deep economic crisis, as the cases of PiS in Poland and other centrist populist parties in CEE countries demonstrate. This 'political' explanation is not limited to CEE—it applies to the cases of Forza Italia, and possibly to the Brexit vote in the UK and to Trump's election.

### 2.4. *Radical populism: demand-side characteristics*

While the question of populism in all of its forms is difficult enough, the question of what drives and accounts for the radicalization of politics is even more complex. There is a common sense theory that describes the radicalization of populism in Eastern Europe, which is borrowed from the theory of the rise of the radical right in the West. According to this theory, there are socially deprived groups of the population (in economic and cultural terms), who are dissatisfied with the functioning of liberal democracy. These poorer, lesser educated and rural people vote for radical right parties.

In times of economic crises like in 2008 or during the immigration crisis of 2015 and 2016, as the number of immigrants grew, so did the vote for the radical right. Such theories can help explain the emergence and the rise of parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and possibly the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

The problem with this theory is that it is difficult to confirm it empirically in Eastern Europe. First, populism has emerged not as an expansion of radical right parties in the region. Fidesz was actually a liberal party. NDSV and GERB started as centrist populists of the Berlusconi type. So, Eastern Europe is not so much a case of expansion of existing radical right attitudes. Secondly, populism started to rise to prominence in the region before the economic crisis of 2008. GERB won elections in 2009 in Bulgaria, but its leader, Boyko Borissov, rose to political prominence in 2007. NDSV won elections in 2001. Fidesz and Viktor Orbán gradually radicalized, but they had become a very influential political force before 2008 as well. The same could be said of PiS. Thus, in Eastern Europe the more interesting phenomenon seems to be the radicalization of centrist populism.

Thirdly, as the discussion from the previous section suggests, it is difficult to establish a link between economic factors, economic crises and populist vote—radical or not. Yet, there is logic to the argument that the economic crisis of 2008 ultimately helped Fidesz and PiS to radicalize their stance. From this perspective, it can be plausibly argued that economic crises or crises such as the migration crisis promote the radicalization of centrist populism and its transformation into a radical version. Although many more studies are needed to fully substantiate such a theory, it seems at least prima facie plausible.

### *3. An alternative theory of radicalization of centrist populism*

The argument that we advance in this chapter is that what is defined here as centrist populism in Eastern Europe is the basic phenomenon which underlies the success of populism in the region. Others have instead argued that the success of the populist radical right in highlighting some issues (such as opposition to ethnic minorities) or introducing entirely new issues (opposition to Islam and non-European migration) has led to shifts in important positions of more centrist actors, paving the way for the spread of populism, regardless of the electoral success of the radical right actors themselves (Pirro 2015). Recognizing the role of the populist radical right in

shifting some positions of the centrist populists does not deny, in our view, that the basic phenomenon behind the success of populism in the region is centrist populism.

Most of the important populist parties, which have ruled their countries in Eastern Europe, have started as centrist populists and only later have radicalized.[6] A particularly spectacular case of this unexpected trajectory is Fidesz in Hungary, which even has its origins as a liberal party in the early 1990s. It gradually transformed into a centrist populist party and then radicalized, taking on its present form. The radicalization of the party started in the early 2000s and escalated in the period 2006-2010.

Another case of a centrist populist party becoming radicalized is PiS in Poland. This party, which started as a right-conservative splinter from *Solidarność*, was generally inspired by Orbán's example and followed many of the steps that he took in Hungary, including the partisan takeover of the judiciary and the strategic clashes with the EU, meant to mobilize nationalist support.

Not all centrist populist parties follow this path of development, though. Some of them transform into liberal parties and then simply disappear. This was the trajectory of NDSV, the party founded by Tsar Simeon II. After a year in office as the prime minister, Simeon II finally set up a political party, which eventually became a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). After the 2005 parliamentary elections, NDSV was only a junior coalition partner in a ruling coalition. By 2009, the party had effectively disappeared from the political scene. This example suggests that turning a centrist populist party into a mainstream liberal party is not easy. The successful cases of institutionalization of such parties ebb in the direction of increased radicalization.

This point is illustrated by the trajectory of another centrist populist party in Bulgaria: GERB. In 2009 it became the largest party in parliament. It was founded around another charismatic figure, Boyko Borisov, whose political career began as the bodyguard of Tsar Simeon II. GERB campaigned on a strong personalistic and anti-corruption agenda and has been a governing party in Bulgaria for the better part since 2009 (with a brief interruption in 2013-2014). In 2021, it was finally replaced in office by a newcomer. Although GERB itself did not radicalize visibly over the

6 A dynamic not predicted by the theory of radical populism, as Stanley (2017) points out. He recognizes, however, the role of PRR in clearing the path to radicalization for such more moderate parties.

years, it got into a coalition with radical populists (United Patriots, including parties such as Ataka) and actually helped them quite a lot in attaining electoral success. Gradually, the politics of the coalition government started to include openly homophobic elements, demonstrated by their rejection of the Istanbul Convention (Smilova 2018; Smilova 2020), and strong anti-immigrant messages. Under pressure from radical nationalist populists, GERB even embroiled Bulgaria in a dispute with its neighbor North Macedonia, even though GERB was previously a strong supporter of the rapid admission of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. This process may be called 'radicalization by a proxy,' and it is very important in parliamentary systems with proportional representation, where legislatures are fragmented, and complex coalitions are needed for the formation of government.

Based on these and other case studies, the following picture emerges in Central and Eastern Europe:

1. Centrist populists rise to power;
2. Some of these centrist populists manage to remain in power for more than one electoral cycle (the technocratic populism of ANO in Czechia is a case in point). Others transform into liberal parties (NDSV), but this does not seem to be a successful strategy of institutionalization;
3. Paradigmatic cases such as Fidesz, PiS, and GERB suggest that radicalization is a successful strategy for institutionalizing a populist political actor and gaining enough electoral influence to guarantee a position in government.
   a. Radicalization could take a direct form. Both Fidesz and PiS have become much more radical than their earlier centrist versions.
   b. Radicalization could take place 'by a proxy.' This occurs when the centrist populists govern alongside radical populists and start implementing key issues from their agenda. A notable example includes GERB's third cabinet (2017-2021) in coalition with 'United Patriots' in Bulgaria.

If the radicalization of centrist populism is a key element in populism's natural dynamic, the question remains: What are the catalysts of such radicalization? As discussed above, the prevailing theories suggest that radicalization is primarily driven by economic factors, specifically the deterioration of the economic status of constituencies, either real or perceived.

As previously noted, one of the challenges regarding Central and Eastern Europe is that this explanation does not fully account for the complexity of

the region. In many CEE countries, the radicalization of centrist populists occurred during periods of economic growth and an improved standard of living for the overall population. Recent empirical studies find weak or no significant correlation between indicators such as economic hardship or deprivation (be it objective, relative, or perceived) and voting for populists in CEE countries (Santana et al. 2020). Hanley and Sikk (2016) also demonstrate that the enabling conditions for the breakthrough of anti-establishment reform parties in the region include high and rising levels of corruption. However, such parties are more often successful during periods of economic prosperity. In some paradigmatic cases of populist parties in the region, such as GERB and Fidesz, even a statistically significant negative correlation between economic indicators (such as growing perceived inequality and perceived relative deprivation) and populist vote is -0.21** (GERB) and -0.26** (FIDESZ), respectively (Smilova et al. 2020b). This suggests that economic grievances alone do not make the voters for such parties distinctive from the rest of the electorate. Economic factors seem to better explain the success of 'nativist parties'—or radical populist parties—such as the AfD and Front National (FN) in Western Europe and to a lesser extent the most successful right-of-the-center populists that command absolute majorities and enjoy several terms in office—most notably in CEE countries, but also in Italy (Forza Italia under Berlusconi).

Another notable explanation of the radicalization of centrist populists pertains to fundamental cultural changes in societal values towards social conservatism. A number of authors have argued that voting for populist parties is caused by major cultural shifts, namely large segments of voters becoming more conservative and more nationalist, thereby giving wings to populist leaders. There is evidence that the voters of populist parties in CEE countries, too, are strongly involved in identity politics. The 'cultural backlash' thesis, for example, explains this support as "retro reaction by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change" (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 1), brought about by the Silent Revolution (Inglehart 1977) and the societal shift towards post-material values and cosmopolitan multiculturalism. These changes have produced a powerful backlash among the older generations (particularly among the lesser educated members with lower income) against the post-material values promoted by the ruling elite, leading to the success of 'authoritarian populist' forces across the globe.

There is indeed some evidence that CEE societies have become more socially conservative over the last two decades. However, the question

concerning the direction of causality remains: Is the growth of socially conservative values the cause of radicalization, or is it, rather, the effect of the radicalization of specific political players? Mainstreaming of specific topics in the media, for instance, may be the explanation for the observed shift in public attitudes.

There is reason to doubt the cultural explanation for populism in the CEE region. In some countries, the voters of the populist parties—either centrist or radical—do not appear to be either more socially conservative or more autocratic than the rest of the electorate. The cultural explanation fails to fully account for the spectacular success of populist parties in CEE countries, for example, where parties such as Fidesz and PiS do exceptionally well among the young voters as well as among all other age groups. Furthermore, while support for illiberal values, particularly anti-LGBT values, may be positively correlated with support for populist radical right-wing parties in the established democracies in Europe, with regard to CEE populism it is only the voters of PiS (0.42***) who are most likely to support this party if they have anti-LGBT attitudes. Support for Fidesz or Jobbik, or support for the populist GERB or the more radical ethno-populist United Patriots in Bulgaria, for example, is not predicted by higher than average opposition to LGBT or other liberal values. Another set of illiberal values—endorsement of strong government—is positively correlated with voting for PiS, but not voting for GERB or Fidesz, which are instead negatively correlated. Anti-immigration attitudes are also not strong predictors of the populist vote in CEE as expected, and the explanation may be the domination of such attitudes across the ideological and political divides between mainstream and populist parties in CEE. Furthermore, the voters of populist parties in CEE do exhibit relatively weaker anti-immigrant attitudes than the voters of PRR in some established democracies in Europe (for details on these findings concerning cultural drivers for populism in CEE, see Smilova et al. 2020a; Smilova et al. 2020b).

If the most popular economic and cultural explanations do not offer a straightforward explanation of the radicalization of centrist populist parties in CEE, then there must be other drivers and mechanisms that produce this effect. Here, we suggest an alternative explanation according to which there is a built-in tendency in centrist populism towards radicalization. This radicalization may well partly be an effect of populist parties in power responding to the 'incumbency challenge,' as has been demonstrated for the case of Fidesz (Hegedüs 2019). The theory that we advance traces the process of radicalization of centrist populism through the following steps:

1. Voters are frustrated with the politics of liberal democracy, which they see as cartelized, overly complicated, excessively constrained by a variety of constitutional bodies, and structurally corrupt;
2. They opt for a centrist populist who promises to provide a personalistic shortcut in the political arena—a by-pass of the complicated and difficult to understand procedures. The centrist populist promises to shake up the system as a whole and ultimately restore the respect for the will of the people;
3. The centrist populists win elections and gradually they become 'the system.' At the next election, they either have to step aside as the part of the 'establishment,' or they must seek further proofs of their radicalism as a potential challenge to the system;
4. Many parties decide to 'radicalize' in either an economic or cultural direction, in order to preserve their reputation as credible systemic challengers and as a threat to the status quo. Since the personality of the leader is no longer sufficient to motivate voters, they start to look for more socially divisive issues, which could demonstrate their transformative potential;
5. Eventually some populist leaders start to nurture the idea of an alternative form of democracy, such as illiberal democracy and pursue a significant constitutional and systemic change.

   This theory does not rely on dramatic economic or cultural shifts in society. Actually, it argues that radicalization is going to take place:
   1. with or without an economic or an immigration crisis;
   2. that it is in the nature of populism to polarize societies and to radicalize its anti-systemic, anti-liberal message over time;
   3. this radicalization of the populist message obviously results in some cultural shifts as well. For instance, people may become more homophobic if political parties and the media manage to mainstream the topic.

### *4. The intrinsic limits of ideological and strategic radicalization*

So far, we have argued that centrist populist parties show a built-in tendency to radicalize over time. In order to preserve their image as direct transmitters of the will of the people, populists (especially after a term in power) have to demonstrate that the systemic constraints do not apply to them and that they could initiate and carry through ever more substantive changes

to the system. They thus continue to challenge more and more elements of the liberal democratic system. At the end of this spectrum of radicalization lurks an entirely different form of democracy, namely, illiberal democracy.

The problem with this strategy is that over time it starts to alienate the centrist voters—the very ones who have been responsible for the initial success of the party. Indeed, if the populist party remains in office, it could attract more of the ideologically committed voters who are radical on cultural or economic issues. It could also start attracting extremist voters from the margins of society. But at the same time, such a party would run the risk of scaring off more centrist voters. At some point, these would start to defect, seeking refuge with a mainstream party or in a new centrist populist party.

In our previous research, we identified and analyzed two groups of voters for populist parties: strategic and ideological (Smilova et al. 2020a; Smilova et al. 2020b). Ideological populist voters are or feel economically or culturally deprived. They see the populist party as a real system changer that is likely to bring politics more in line with their preferences. In essence, ideological voters are rational utility maximizers in a specific way - they seek the party that is closest to their substantive ideological preferences.

Strategic voters, on the other hand, choose a populist party not because it better reflects their ideological preferences in terms of content, but because they see it as an efficient instrument that offers a more effective way of translating these preferences into governmental decisions and actions. Thus, this vote choice is a means of cutting through the complications of constitutional liberal-democratic politics. Strategic voters, too, are rational choice maximizers, but their agenda is not about ideologically motivated transformation of the system—they simply seek the most efficient instruments to satisfy their preferences within the system. From this perspective, populist parties are just bargaining chips for strategic voters to extract concessions from their opponents. In this way the voter threatens the opponent with potential systematic changes in the future without actually being interested in these changes. These changes are just bargaining techniques for extracting concessions.

For instance, many strategic voters could opt for a populist party since they see it as an instrument for keeping taxes low for the middle classes. The other elements of the populist message might just be bargaining chips for such voters, i.e., 'if you don't agree with this agenda, we won't compromise on other ideological issues.' Since the voters of many of the Eastern European populist parties are not ideologically different from the voters

of other parties, we may assume that strategic voting is not an insignificant phenomenon. As the centrist parties become more radical in their messages, ideological turnout may actually increase. Finally, at a certain point, when the populist party becomes too radical, an exodus of strategic voters can be expected.

There is a wide range of strategic reasons for voting for populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond):

1. They represent a good and sometimes even better alternative than the mainstream parties for securing a lower/flat tax for the middle classes;
2. They offer a strong argument for nation-centered policies at the EU level;
3. They provide an argument for the lack of redistribution toward generally unpopular population segments, like the Roma or the refugees;
4. They provide a justification for prioritizing additional social benefits for the middle classes, such as loans and subsidies for working families with children, as in Hungary.

All these strategic reasons for voting for populists relate to a common point: Populism can serve as an excuse for the abrogation of certain solidarity obligations of the middle classes toward the most vulnerable members of society. It also provides a justification for the unrestrained self-centered politics of majorities, whether in economic terms or in terms of party affiliation. Thus, not only do populist parties promise to efficiently carry out the wishes of the people, but in terms of bargaining over resources, a populist party can be a good bargaining chip. If it has many anti-systemic, anti-liberal messages with which it can threaten its opponents, ultimately these elements can be traded for greater payoffs for the voters of that populist party. Such political trading may occur at the national or even at the EU level.

On the basis of this analysis, we suggest there are two types of radicalization of populism.

1. Ideological radicalization:
   Ideological radicalization happens when voters truly become illiberal and when they become committed to a radical transformation of liberal democracy. What they want is a systemic change, and they see the populist party as the tool for creating an illiberal democracy— another system of government.
2. Strategic radicalization:

> Strategic radicalization happens when leaders and their voters see the populist party as an instrument to put pressure on their opponents in the bargaining over resources (Gurov and Zankina 2013; Guasti 2020). The central goal of the voters and the leaders is not systemic change, but rather to extract competitive advantages, both political and economic. The leaders hope to defeat the 'mainstream,' and the voters want more resources in terms of, say, lower taxes, less redistribution, more attention to their cultural and religious preferences and the like.

The point is that strategic and ideological radicalization are processes that can happen simultaneously, and if so, can potentially limit each other. An increase in ideological radicals (and political messages of this kind) is likely to deter strategic radicals in certain situations. Simply put, in a real crisis where the system is really under pressure and threatening to collapse, the strategic radicals would most likely defect.

Empirical data from Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate both the ideological and strategic form of radicalization. It is true nevertheless, that despite the evident processes of radicalization, all of the countries that we discuss remain defective albeit liberal democracies. The only exception is the case of Fidesz in Hungary, which can now be characterized as an illiberal democracy (Smilova 2021) if not yet as an outright 'electoral autocracy'.[7] It is sufficient to compare them to Russia and Turkey in order to see the differences between liberal democracy and its authoritarian alternatives. Overall, Eastern European member states of the EU have endured the COVID-19 crisis in ways comparable to established Western democracies without much damage to their institutions. This is a mark of democratic resilience. Moreover, these East European countries still have citizens who generally are strongly pro-European and committed to trans-Atlantic cooperation with the US.

This may not be a guarantee that liberal democracy will survive and thrive in the region. But it does support the thesis that much of the radicalization of populism may be strategic in nature. This radicalization is driven by the opportunistic behavior of both political leaders and voters who seek

7 Even though Viktor Orbán's Hungary may have already taken the 'turn' towards illiberal deconsolidation of liberal democracy, the rest of the CEE populist regimes discussed in this chapter are definitely still at the stage of yet reversible 'swerving' towards such deconsolidation (Buštíková and Guasti 2017). The recent resolution of the European Parliament from September 2022 to declare Hungary 'an electoral autocracy' may just be a controversial political position rather than an accurate account of the type of regime Orbán is building during his three terms in office.

competitive bargaining advantages in the allocation of resources. In times of real existential crises, such opportunistic behavior is likely to decrease. At least thus far, this seems to have been the case. But the future, of course, remains open.

## *5. Conclusion*

We sought to define centrist and radical populism through the types of challenges each of these phenomena present to liberal democracy. We further sought to demonstrate that the paradigmatic cases of successful populist parties that have ruled their countries in the region (NDSV, Fidesz, GERB, PiS, ANO, SMER) all started as centrist populist parties. Prominent cases, such as PiS, Fidesz and GERB have radicalized—either themselves, or through cultivating a relationship with a more radical coalition partner. Thus, we claimed that centrist populism is essential for the success of populism in general, and the radicalization of centrist populism seems to be a good strategy for the institutionalization of populist parties over time. Finally, we advanced a theory underpinning the radicalization of centrist populism which does not rely on economic deterioration or fundamental cultural changes in society. We argued that there is a built-in tendency in centrist populism towards radicalization, which shows itself when strategic and ideological voting for populists is taken into account.

Our argument raises a question that cannot be answered here: Whether the developments described here are peculiar to Central and Eastern Europe. Our understanding is that they are not—centrist populism and its trajectory towards radicalization over time can also be observed in Italy. The election of Trump and the radicalization of his position in office is also a case that may be analyzed through the proposed theoretical lenses. Nevertheless, additional research is needed to further explore these insights.

## *Works cited*

Ágh, Attila. *Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe: The Divide in the EU and Emerging Hard Populism*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019.

Bértoa, Fernando Casal, and José Rama. "Party Decline or Social Transformation? Economic, Institutional and Sociological Change and the Rise of Anti-political-establishment Parties in Western Europe." *European Political Science Review*, vol. 12, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Nov. 2020, pp. 503–23..

Bonikowski, Bart. "Ethno-nationalist Populism and the Mobilization of Collective Resentment." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 68, Wiley-Blackwell, Nov. 2017, pp. 181–213.

Buštíková, Lenka, and Petra Guasti. "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no. 4, Cogitatio, Dec. 2017, pp. 166–76.

---. "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 33, no. 2, SAGE Publishing, May 2018, pp. 302–30.

Engler, Sarah, et al. "Assessing the Diversity of Anti-establishment and Populist Politics in Central and Eastern Europe." *West European Politics*, vol. 42, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, May 2019, pp. 1310–36.

Galston, William A. "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2, Johns Hopkins UP, Jan. 2018, pp. 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0020.

Gidron, Noam, and Peter Hall. "The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 68, Wiley-Blackwell, Nov. 2017, pp. 57–84.

Guasti, Petra. "Populism in Power and Democracy: Democratic Decay and Resilience in the Czech Republic (2013–2020)." *Politics and Governance*, vol. 8, no. 4, Cogitatio, Dec. 2020, pp. 473–84.

Guechakov, Julia. "Bulgaria: Wild Card in Elections Could Be King." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, February 2001. https://www.rferl.org/a/1095851.html.

Gurov, Boris and Emilia Zankina. "Populism and the Construction of Political Charisma." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 60, no. 1, Taylor and Francis, Jan. 2013, pp. 3–17.

Halmai, Gábor. "How COVID- 19 Unveils the True Autocrats: Viktor Orb Á N's Erm Ä Chtigungsgesetz." *I · CONnect*, 1 Apr. 2020a, www.iconnectblog.com/2020/ 04/ how-covid-19-unveils-the-trueautocrats-viktor-orbansermachtigungsgesetz.

---. "Hungary is no longer a democracy," Interview by Felix Schlagwein. *Deutsche Welle*, 14 May 2020b, https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-is-no-longer-a-democracy-says-hungarian-legal-scholar/a-53442394.

Hanley, Seán, and Allan Sikk. "Economy, Corruption or Floating Voters? Explaining the Breakthroughs of Anti-establishment Reform Parties in Eastern Europe." *Party Politics*, vol. 22, no. 4, SAGE Publishing, July 2016, pp. 522–33.

Havlík, Vlastimil. "Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 66, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, Apr. 2019, pp. 369–84.

Havlík, Vlastimil, and Petr Voda. "Cleavages, Protest or Voting for Hope? The Rise of Centrist Populist Parties in the Czech Republic." *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, Wiley-Blackwell, June 2018, pp. 161–86.

Hegedüs, Daniel. "Rethinking the Incumbency Effect. Radicalization of Governing Populist Parties in East-Central-Europe. A Case Study of Hungary." *European Politics and Society*, vol. 20, no. 4, Taylor and Francis, Jan. 2019, pp. 406–30.

Inglehart, Ronald. *The Silent Revolution*. Princeton UP, 1977.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash." *Social Science Research Network*, RELX Group (Netherlands), Jan. 2016.

Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, and Steven M. Van Hauwaert. "The Populist Citizen: Empirical Evidence from Europe and Latin America." *European Political Science Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Feb. 2020, pp. 1–18.

Katz, Richard J., and Peter Mair. "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy." *Party Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Jan. 1995, pp. 5–28.

Kotwas, Marta, and Jan Kubik. "Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 33, no. 2, SAGE Publishing, Apr. 2019, pp. 435–71.

Krastev, Ivan. "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 4, Oct. 2007, pp. 56–63.

---. "New Threats to Freedom: Democracy's Doubles. *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 17, no. 2, Apr. 2006, pp. 52–62.

---. "The Fear of Shrinking Numbers." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1, Johns Hopkins UP, Jan. 2020, pp. 66–74.

Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*. 1st ed., Allen Lane, 2019.

Krasteva, Anna. "The Post-Communist Rise of National Populism: Bulgarian Paradoxes." *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe*, edited by Gabriella Lazaridis et al., 1st ed., London, Palgrave Macmillan London, 2016, pp. 161–200.

Krekó, Péter, et al. "Beyond Populism: Tribalism in Poland and Hungary." *Political Capital*, 2018.

Mair, Peter. "Representative versus Responsible Government." *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies Working Paper*, vol. 9, no. 8, (2009).

Marchlewska, Marta, et al. "Populism as Identity Politics: Perceived In-group Disadvantage, Collective Narcissism, and Support for Populism." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, vol. 9, no. 2, SAGE Publishing, Mar. 2018, pp. 151–62.

Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Harvard UP, 2018.

Mudde, Cas. *Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism*. The Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, University of Pennsylvania, 2018, tps://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century.

---. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Sept. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2017.

Pappas, Takis S. "Political Charisma and Modern Populism." *Routledge International Handbook of Charisma*, edited by José Pedro Zúquete, 1st ed., London, Routledge, 2020.

---. *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*. Oxford UP, 2019.

---. "Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 49, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Jan. 2014, pp. 1–23..

---. "The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 4, Oct. 2016, pp. 22–36.

Pirro, Andrea L. P. "The Populist Radical Right in the Political Process: Assessing Party Impact in Central and Eastern Europe." *Transforming the Transformation? The East European Radical Right in the Political Process*, edited by Michael Minkenberg, 1st ed., Routledge, 2015.

Pop-Eleches, Grigore. "Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism." *World Politics*, vol. 62, no. 2, Cambridge UP, Apr. 2010, p. 221.

Pytlas, Bartek, et al. "Multiple Varieties of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *ECPR General Conference. Hamburg, 22- 25 August 2018*, epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/49575.

Santana, Andrés G., et al. "At Odds with Europe: Explaining Populist Radical Right Voting in Central and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2, Routledge, Mar. 2020, pp. 288–309.

Schmitt, Carl. "Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty," translated by George Schwab, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, M. I. T. Press, 1985; first German edition 1922; rev. 1934), 36.

Skleparis, Dimitris, et al. *D1.1. Historical and Political Development of Populism in Europe*. PaCE, 2021, https://cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PaCE_D1.1_Historical-and-political-development-of-populism-in-Europe_social-movements.pdf.

Smilov, Daniel. "Efficiency, Authority and Representation." *Deliberative Democracy in the EU: Countering Populism with Participation and Debate*, edited by Steven Blockmans and Sophia Russack, London, Rowman and Littlefield International, Ltd, 2020, www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Deliberative-Democracy_2CU_Vol3.pdf.

Smilov, Daniel, and Ivan Krastev. "The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper." *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Grigorij Mesežnikov et al., Bratislava, Slovakia, Institute for Public Affairs, 2008, pp. 7–13. pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00004891/01/1214822685__populist_politics.pdf.

Smilova, Ruzha. "The Ideational Core of Democratic Illiberalism." *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2021, pp. 177–202.

---. "The Ideological Turn in Bulgarian Constitutional Discourse: The Rise against 'Genders." Critical Essays on Human Rights Criticism, edited by Sajó András and Renáta Uitz, Hague, Eleven International Publishing, 2020, pp. 177–98.

---. "Promoting 'Gender Ideology': Constitutional Court of Bulgaria Declares Istanbul Convention Unconstitutional." Oxford Human Rights Hub, 2018, https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/promoting-gender-ideology-constitutional-court-of-bulgaria-declares-istanbul-convention-unconstitutional/.

Smilova, Ruzha, Daniel Smilov, Martin Dolezal, Marco Fölsch, Reinhard Heinisch and Viktoria Jansesberger. "D4.1 Causal Mechanisms of Populism." *PaCE H2020 Project, WP4: Causal, Policy and Futures Analysis*, 2020a, https://cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PaCE_D4.1_Causal-mechanisms-of-populism.pdf.

---. "D4.2 Theoretical Model of Causes of Populism." *PaCE H2020 Project, WP4: Causal, Policy and Futures Analysis*, 2020b, https://cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PaCE_D4.2_Theoretical-model-of-causes-of-populism_30Nov2020.pdf.

Stanley, Ben. "Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 2017, pp. 140–58.

---. "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 13, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2008, pp. 95–110.

Učeň, Peter. "Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, Mar. 2007, pp. 49–62.

Vehrkamp, Robert, and Wolfgang Merkel. *Populismusbarometer 2018: Populistische Einstellungen Bei Wählern Und Nichtwählern in Deutschland 2018*. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1 Oct. 2018, www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/populismusbarometer-2018.

Zürn, Michael. "How Non-Majoritarian Institutions Make Silent Majorities Vocal: A Political Explanation of Authoritarian Populism." *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 20, no. 3, Cambridge UP, May 2021, pp. 788–807.

# Chapter 3: Mapping Populism in the European Post-Transition Periphery[1]

*Ashot Aleksanyan and Nane Aleksanyan*

## *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

1 an earlier version of this text was published in *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University*, Vol. 1 (2), September 2022, pp. 73-91. We have been given permission to reprint this text.

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 20th Century and the start of the 21st 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' 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 became 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 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.

### *Works cited*

Arato, Andrew, and Jean L. Cohen. *Populism and Civil Society*. Oxford UP, 2021.

Arditi, Benjamin. "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics." *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 72–98.

Berend, Ivan T. *The Economics and Politics of European Integration: Populism, Nationalism and the History of the EU*. New York, Routledge, 2020.

Breyfogle, Nicholas B., et al. "Russian Colonizations: An Introduction." *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History*, edited by Nicholas B. Breyfogle et al., New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 1–18.

Carrion, Julio F. *A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford UP, 2022.

Csehi, Robert. *Routledge Studies in Anti-Politics and Democratic Crisis*. New York, Routledge, 2021.

De La Torre, Carlos. "What Do We Mean by Populism?" *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, edited by Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord, New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 29–37.

Delegation of the EU to Georgia. "Georgia and the EU." 2021. *European Union External Action*, Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/49070/georgia-and-eu_en.

Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Moldova. "The Republic of Moldova and the EU." *European Union External Action*, 2021. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova/1538/republic-moldova-and-eu_en.

Delegation of the EU to Ukraine. "Ukraine and the EU." *European Union External Action*, 2021. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/1937/ukraine-and-eu_en.

EUR-Lex. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 161/3, 3-2137, 2014a. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/295/oj.

---. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 261/1, 57, 4-742, 2014b. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2014:261:FULL&from=EN.

---. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union*, L L 260/4, 4-738, 2014c. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/492/oj.

---. "Comprehensive and enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 23, 26 Jan. 2018, 4-466. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2018/104/oj.

Di Nucci, Ezio. *The Control Paradox: From AI to Populism*. Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2021.

Fieschi, Catherine. *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism*. Agenda Publishing, 2019.

Gabrisch, Hubert, et al. "Sovereign default Risk in the Euro-Periphery and the Euro-Candidate Countries." *MPRA Paper No. 41265*, 2012, Accessed Feb. 02, 2022. https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/41265/.

Gamkrelidze, Tamar. "Georgia's External Frontier on Russia Sedimented and Unmalleable: Engagement Politics and the Impact of the Three-tier Warfare." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, Taylor and Francis, Jan. 2022, pp. 536-55.

---. "The Project of Europe: A Robust Attempt to Redefine Georgian Identity." *East European Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3, Routledge, May 2019, pp. 351-71.

Ghaplanyan, Irina. *Post-Soviet Armenia. The New National Elite and the New National Narrative*. New York, Routledge, 2018.

Glenn, John G. "Disciplining the Sovereign Periphery of Europe." *Foucault and Post-Financial Crises: Governmentality, Discipline and Resistance*, edited by John G. Glenn, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019, pp. 153–91.

Gräbner, Claudius, and Jakob Hafele. "The emergence of core-periphery structures in the European Union: A complexity perspective." *ZOE Discussion Papers*, 6, ZOE: Institut für zukunftsfähige Ökonomien, Bonn, 2020. Accessed 02 Feb. 2022. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/224134/1/172895116X.pdf.

Graney, Katherine. *Russia, the Former Soviet Republics, and Europe since 1989*. New York, Oxford UP, 2019,

Gregor, A. James. "Populism of the Russian Federation." *Political Populism in the Twenty First Century: We the People*, edited by Maria Hsia Chang and A. James Gregor, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, pp. 21–39.

Heinisch, Reinhard, et al. 'Populism and ethno-territorial politics - conclusions: bridging legacies in understanding party mobilization.' *The people and the nation: populism and ethno-territorial politics in Europe*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch et al., New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 280-290.

Heinisch, Reinhard, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Introduction." *Understanding Populist Party Organisation: The Radical Right in Western Europe'*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 1–18.

Huber, Robert A., and Christian H. Schimpf. "Populism and Democracy - Theoretical and Empirical Considerations." *Political Populism: A Handbook*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch et al., Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017, pp. 329–44.

Kim, Seongcheol. *Discourse, Hegemony, and Populism in the Visegrád Four*. New York, Routledge, 2021.

Kinsella, Stephen. "Conventions and the European Periphery." *SSRN*, Jan. 2012, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2155577.

Klobucka, Anna. "Theorizing the European Periphery." *Symplokē*, vol. 5, no. 1/2, 1997, pp. 119–35. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40550405. Accessed 02 Feb. 2023.

Krekó, Péter. "Populism in Power: The Tribal Challenge." *The Psychology of Populism: The Tribal Challenge to Liberal Democracy*, edited by Joseph P. Forgas et al., New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 240–57.

Lane, Philip R. "The European Sovereign Debt Crisis." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 26, no. 3, American Economic Association, Aug. 2012, pp. 49–68.

Manucci, Luca. "Populism and Collective Memory." *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, edited by Michael Oswald, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022, pp. 451–68.

Payaslian, Simon. *The Political Economy of Human Rights in Armenia: Authoritarianism and Democracy in a Former Soviet Republic*. New York, I.B.Tauris and Co Ltd, 2011.

Pejović, Astrea, and Dimitar Nikolovski. "Introduction: Memory Politics and Populism in Southeastern Europe - Toward an Ethnographic Understanding of Enmity." *Memory Politics and Populism in Southeastern Europe*, edited by Jody Jensen, New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1–11.

Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, and Lisa Zanotti. "Populism and the Welfare State." *Handbook on Austerity, Populism and the Welfare State*, edited by Bent Greve, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, pp. 41–53.

Schwörer, Jacob. *The Growth of Populism in the Political Mainstream: The Contagion Effect of Populist Messages on Mainstream Parties' Communication*. Switzerland, Springer Cham, 2021.

Stengel, Frank A., et al. "Conclusion: Populism, Foreign Policy, and World Politics." *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, edited by Frank A. Stengel et al., Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019, pp. 365–72.

Van Herpen, Marcel H. *The End of Populism: Twenty Proposals to Defend Liberal Democracy*. 1st ed., Manchester UP, 2021.

Vorländer, Hans. "Populism and Modern Democracy - an Outline." *The Comeback of Populism: Transatlantic Perspectives*, edited by Heike Paul et al., Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH, 2019, pp. 13–27.

# Chapter 4: Populism in Armenia: A Conceptual Framework and Its Application[1]

*Simon Clarke*

## *1. Introduction*

The Republic of Armenia is a semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian independent state in the Caucasus region. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, since the latter's collapse, Armenia has shifted towards liberal democracy and capitalism but has become mired in corruption and authoritarian rule (Freedom House 2018). Armenia retains an ambivalent relationship with Russia; while it is dependent on Russia for military security, Armenia remains suspicious of its motives. Armenia is in a state of conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over the status of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which, according to most international actors, forms part of Azerbaijan but has declared its own independence and has close ties to Armenia. Armenia also has tense relations with another neighbor, Turkey, due to the latter's support for Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and also its refusal to recognize the genocide of Armenians that occurred starting in 1915 under the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Armenia holds regular elections, parliamentary and presidential, and there is a diversity of political parties and actors competing in the semi-democratic system.

This chapter will address the question of whether populism is an aspect of the political scene in Armenia. It expands on the argument that populism is largely absent from post-Soviet states due to the prevalence of patron-client political relations creating a political environment not conducive to populism (March 2017: 220-1). Furthermore, discussions of populism in Armenia and the post-Soviet region are largely absent in the academic literature. A study of 158 articles on populism in 14 academic journals finds that the focus falls mainly on the geographical areas of Western Europe or Latin America and no article discusses populism in the former Soviet

1 I thank Reinhard Heinisch, Klodiana Beshku, and other participants at a workshop on populism at the University of Salzburg in April 2018 for helpful comments on an early presentation of this chapter. I am also grateful to the European Union's Erasmus+ program which funded my participation in the workshop.

Union (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017a). This lack of academic coverage may be thought to indicate an absence of populism in the post-Soviet states, such as Armenia.

However, this chapter will argue that despite these indications, populism is alive and well in Armenia. The first section provides a conceptual framework for defining and classifying populism. Section two provides a map of different types of populism. Sections three and four provide an overview of populist actors in Armenia. Section five demonstrates that they fit the defining features of populism. The chapter concludes with supporting explanations for populism in Armenia and contests March's claim that patronal politics precludes populism. On the contrary, the presence of patronal politics is compatible with populism. As the chapter will show, the political environment in Armenia is not only compatible with but conducive to populism; the absence of strongly ideological political parties makes it more likely that actors take a populist stance.

## *2. Understanding populism*

The concept of populism is largely contested in political science. In this case, it involves examining movements or actors labeled as populist and identifying what they have in common. Commonly cited examples of populism include the farmers' political movement and the People's Party in late nineteenth century U.S., the Russian revolution and sometimes later Stalin himself, fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, the dictatorships in the 1950s and 60s of Juan Perón in Argentina, Carlos Ibáñez in Chile, and Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in Columbia, anti-immigration political parties in Europe, Hugo Chávez, Berlusconi, Erdoğan, Trump, and the Brexit decision. But defining populism is not just a matter of trying to come up with a general concept which captures all these instances. It is also partly a matter of stipulation; stating that such-and-such is what the concept ought to mean given other theoretical commitments such as usefulness, conciseness or simplicity, and appropriate fit with other political concepts. Hence understanding populism turns upon at least two factors: firstly, how much a definition fits the phenomenon it is intended to capture and secondly, how useful it is as an analytical tool. Populism has been

defined as either an ideology, a movement, a strategy, or a style, and may consist of combinations of these aspects.[2]

Instead of adopting a single definition of populism, this chapter will set out a number of characteristics or markers of populism. This way, the concept of populism can be understood as consisting of a set of family resemblances, rather than having a definitive set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Judis 2016: 13-14).[3] The most common characteristics that emerge from the literature on populism are (1) the antagonism between people versus elites, (2) personalistic leadership, (3) direct communication, and (4) short-termism. The first is central to Cas Mudde's ideational understanding of populism, whilst the second and third belong to the strategic or organizational understanding of populism favored by other scholars.[4]

The first characteristic of populism is that it views society as "ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and [...] argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004: 543; Canovan 2004: 242; Judis 2016: 14).[5] Populism conceives of the people as a homogeneous whole, downplaying class, ethnic, or other divisions (Müller 2016; Deiwiks 2009: 2) and holds that the will of the people is somehow ignored or not given its appropriate place in decision-making by elites that have opposing interests.

A second marker of populism is personalistic leadership. This person is often viewed by many as charismatic (Weyland 2001: 13-14; Canovan 2004: 243; Diewiks 2009: 5). This defines leaders who use their communication skills, persuasiveness, and general appeal to influence others. Charismatic leaders are able to connect with people on an emotional level and forge intense and deep bonds with their followers.

A further characteristic of populist actors, whether individuals, parties, or movements, is direct communication to 'the people.' Populists speak

2 For more discussion of the conceptualization of populism see the essays in Part 1 of Heinisch et al. 2017 and the essays in Part 1 of Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017b.

3 The concept of family resemblances is originally from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953); the idea being that we can recognize several individuals as members of a family even though they share no essential condition(s) and instead they possess a number of overlapping similarities. See also Laclau 2005:7.

4 For more on these different approaches to populism, see the essays in part 1 of Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017b.

5 Cas Mudde has more recently reiterated and further defended the definition in Mudde 2017. For this characteristic, see also the entry for 'Populism – Political' in Miller et al. 1991: 394.

directly to the people rather than through intermediaries (Weyland 2001; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). In doing so, they present themselves as authentic and legitimate representatives of the people.

A final characteristic of populism is that it focuses on the immediate or short-term interests and will of the people. It is the starvation of the people that now calls for political action, or the immediate threat posed by immigrants, or the urgent need for a change of government. Populists tend not to hold long-term views about politics, focusing instead on what they state is the immediate interest of the people. This last characteristic is not as common in definitions of populism as the first three. There is not space in this chapter to fully justify its inclusion, however it is necessary to further differentiate populism from a belief in democracy in general. Advocates of democracy hold that the will of the people should prevail and that there should be direct communication to the people and perhaps personalistic leadership. Populism, however, seems to be a distinct idea from a general belief in democracy, and the characteristic of short-termism can help explain why.[6]

The understanding of populism as per the above characteristics is a morally neutral one; they leave open the possibility that populism can be justified or unjustified depending on whether it poses a threat to democracy. There is nothing wrong per se with championing the people against elites, having a personalistic leader, communicating directly to people, or focusing on the short-term. But the focus on the will of the people, without saying too much about what that is, leaves populism open to the charge of naivety and simple-mindedness, ignoring political complexities, and creates avenues for gaining political support by using simple slogans. Personalistic leadership also tends to distract from complex policy issues. Direct communication again favors simplicity over complexity, and the focus on the short-term makes populism open to the charge of unwisely ignoring long-term consequences. This is not, however, to condemn all populism. Perhaps corrupt elites are obstructing the people's will, perhaps having a personalistic leader can be justified, perhaps direct communication is what is needed, and perhaps short-term solutions are sometimes what is most

6 For more on short-termism as a characteristic of populism, see Müller 2016: 13 and Guiso et al. 2017. Short-termism is also suggested by the entry on populism in *Encyclopedia Britannica*: a populist program, it says, "promotes the interest of common citizens and the country as a whole … without regard to the consequences for the country" (Munro 2023).

justified. In other words, the characteristics of populism may or may not be justified—that is a separate question from describing what populism is.

### *3. Mapping populism(s)*

Populism is a 'primitive' political concept, not in a pejorative sense, but in that its characteristics are too broad, making it an undeveloped political outlook. In particular, the feature of populism which pits the people's will and interests against corrupt elites allows room for various interpretations of people's will and interests.[7] Does the interest of the people lie in being as happy as possible, as wealthy as possible, as free as possible, a combination of all these, or something else? Populism per se does not remain agnostic about what in particular the people's interest consists of. Particular populist actors may, however, specify a view of the people's interests more precisely, and this is why populism may come in different varieties. For example, right-wing populists focus on the will and the interests of the people being subverted by meddling government or liberal elites, while left-wing populists emphasize the subversion of the will and the interests of the people by big businesses and corporate interests.

Additionally, we can differentiate between democratic and authoritarian populist tendencies. Do the people know their own interests best, and are they able to exercise those interests through their own will? If so, then populism will support democracy in the form of elections and even more directly through referenda and other forms of direct participation. This is democratic populism. Or, are there leaders who know better what the interests of the people entail? Can those leaders do a better job of serving the people's will, perhaps because of existing elites blocking the will of the people? If so, the result is authoritarian populism. Instead of the people's interests and will being expressed through democratic decision-making, better to trust in a single person or group of people who can cut through the institution red-tape to give expression to what the people really need and want (Dix 1985; Norris and Inglehart 2018).[8]

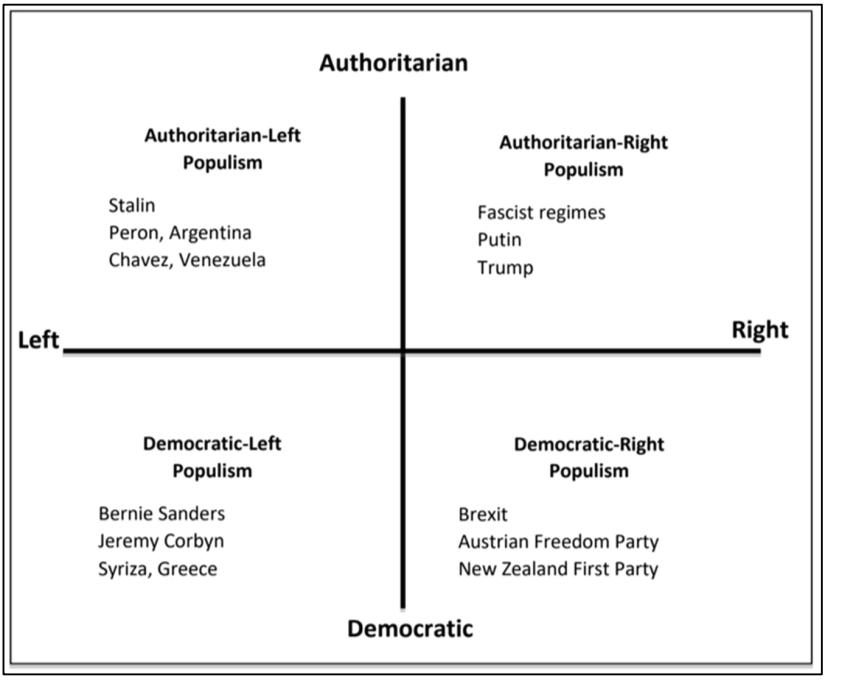
7 Mudde makes the same point, defining populism as a 'thin-centered' ideology, one that can be combined with others (Mudde 2004: 544; Mudde 2017: 30).

8 Norris and Inglehart (2018) discuss authoritarian-populism at length, but it should be noted that their understanding of authoritarianism, as involving values of conformity, security, and loyalty elides the distinction I am making between right-wing populism

Note that the democratic-authoritarian distinction cuts across the left-right distinction. The left-right distinction refers to the substance of policies that populist actors favor. Typically, left-wing populists favor policies of welfare-state and state intervention in the economy, are pro-abortion, pro-gay rights, etc. Right-wing populists often, but not always, favor conservative/classical liberal/libertarian policies, such as free market policies and are against abortion and gay rights (Betz 1994; March 2011: Chapter 6). The democratic-authoritarian distinction refers to the political decision-making process which results in these policies, whether they are left-wing or right-wing policies. When we combine these two distinctions, we can conceive of four different varieties of populism; authoritarian populism can be either left- or right-wing, and similarly, democratic populism can be either left- or right-wing. Alternatively, left-wing populists can be either democratic or authoritarian, while right-wing populists can also be either democratic or authoritarian. Figure 1 below sets out these four types and provides examples of each. I do not intend to present these examples as definitive, nor will I defend their classification. I offer them as suggestive of the broad types I am providing a taxonomy of.

and authoritarian populism. By authoritarianism I merely mean non-democratic forms of government where the people are not included in decision-making. Norris and Inglehart (2018) take this as part of authoritarianism, but also mix in substantive values affecting policies, such as being anti-abortion, against LGBTQ+ rights, etc. In my taxonomy such positions would be right-wing populism but not necessarily authoritarian.

*Figure 4.1 Populism map*




*Source:* Author's own analysis.

The left-right distinction and the authoritarian-democratic distinction crossing each other is a general phenomenon of politics, not just populism. Political systems and parties in general can be placed in such a classification. For example, Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. belong to the democratic-left and democratic-right, respectively. Similarly, dictatorships can be either left-wing in their policies (for example, Soviet communism) or right-wing (for example, Russia today). But I suggest that these two distinctions are useful for illustrating varieties of populism. When the relevant factors (left or right; democratic or authoritarian) are combined with the characteristics of populism described previously, we get the four types of populism set out in the graph above. Hence, we can perceive what is meant when populism is sometimes described as a separate dimension of politics, different from both left-right ideologies and different from democratic-authoritarian systems of government (Laclau 2005: 14-15, who

credits Worsley 1969 for the insight). Populism, as understood in terms of the characteristics described, cuts across other dimensions of political classification but combines with them to create (at least) four different types of political populism.

## *4. A populist revolutionary*

Having set out the necessary conceptual framework, I now turn to the situation in Armenia. The presence of populism can be identified in the political environment of Armenia in a number of individuals, parties, and movements. There are two individuals in particular I will focus on: Nikol Pashinyan and the 'Velvet Revolution' of April 2018 and Gagik Tsarukyan and his party Prosperous Armenia (BHK).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Nikol Pashinyan was a journalist and editor of newspapers which were highly critical of the ruling Republican government. One of his newspapers was closed down by the government in 1999. He was an organizer of the Armenian National Congress (ANC) during the 2008 election in which former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan was defeated by the Republican candidate, Serzh Sargsyan, and was the principal organizer of mass protests following the election, alleging that the election had been fraudulent. During these protests, several people were killed and Pashinyan was arrested and spent a term in prison before he was released in 2011. He won a seat in the National Assembly in 2012 and also left the ANC to set up his own political party named Civil Contract (KP). In 2016, the KP joined forces with two other parties to form an alliance named the Yelk Alliance or Way Out Alliance (Civil Contract 2018; National Assembly 2018b; European Friends of Armenia 2017: 17-18). The alliance won 8% of the vote in the 2017 elections, securing nine seats in the 105-seat chamber (Election Guide 2018). The Way Out Alliance also contested in local elections later in the same year, and won one-fifth of the seats on the Yerevan City Council. Pashinyan and the Way Out Alliance are of a liberal persuasion in favor of free market policies and low taxes. In the past, they have advocated leaving the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union to form closer ties with the European Union (Armenian Weekly 2017; PanArmenian Net 2017).

Pashinyan was on the fringes of the country's politics until April 2018, when he became the leading figure of large demonstrations against the rul-

ing regime. The ruling Republican Party (RPA) president, Serzh Sargsyan, came to the end of his ten-year term as president. The party had previously (after a disputed constitutional referendum held in November 2015) made constitutional changes which weakened the powers of the president's office and strengthened those of the prime minister. Sargsyan had publicly pronounced he would not run for prime minister, but in early 2018, he signaled a reversal. Pashinyan and his supporters began a protest in late March 2018, starting in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, calling for a stop to Sargsyan's move to become prime minister. The number of protesters was initially small, with 4,500 estimated on the day the protest reached Yerevan (Atanesian 2018), but the size of the protests grew to over 50,000 after Sargsyan was elected by the National Assembly to become Prime Minister. People also engaged in acts of civil disobedience, such as blocking roads by physically sitting in intersections, paralyzing much of the capital city and beyond. Pashinyan and some other leaders of the protests were arrested on April 22, 2018 but released the next day, and Sargsyan unexpectedly resigned the same day. In front of huge crowds, Pashinyan called for a 'people's prime minister' to be elected. He was at first blocked by the RPA, however, following another week of protests and civil disobedience was chosen as prime minister. However, the RPA maintained almost the absolute majority in parliament.[9]

This was a stunning sequence of events, surprising to everyone in and outside the country. In a snap election called by Pashinyan in December 2018, the My Step Alliance, which included the KP, won a massive 70% of the vote, resulting in 88 of the 132 seats in the National Assembly, in an election that was considered by international observers as free and fair (Election Guide 2018). The incumbent RPA-led government achieved less than 5%, which was below the minimum electoral threshold. This marked the removal of a party that had been in power for twenty years. The political scene remained turbulent and particularly so in 2020. Like the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic struck Armenia severely. Moreover, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh reignited from September to November 2020, with Azerbaijan initiating hostilities and retaking parts of the disputed territory. The brief war was viewed as a defeat for Armenia and resulted in demonstrations against the Pashinyan government. Snap elections were held in 2021, but the KP still won 54% of the vote and held 71 of 107

9 In the fallout of the events, several members of the Republican party defected, ending its majority in parliament.

seats in the assembly. Although less than the 70% in the previous election, Pashinyan's party was running alone rather than as part of a coalition, and so it was a decisive victory. The main opposition, Armenia Alliance (HP), led by former president Robert Kocharyan, received 21% and 29 seats, and an alliance containing the RPA managed to gain 5% and 7 seats (Election Guide 2018).

Much work remains to be done by political scientists regarding the causes, significance, and effects of what has been called Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' and the subsequent events. Here however, I will focus on the relation with populism. Is Pashinyan a populist, and were the protests a case of populism in action?[10] Pashinyan and the protests in general fit the first three characteristics of populism outlined earlier in this chapter: emphasizing the people versus corrupt elites, personalistic leadership, and direct communication with the people. The protests were clearly guided by a discourse of people versus a corrupt elite, with the targeted elite being President Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling RPA government. This was explicitly present in statements of Pashinyan and the protestors' calls for a people's prime minister. The overarching narrative of Pashinyan was 'to turn the people's will into a political reality' (Bedevian 2017). At one point, he even suggested that the prime minister should be chosen directly by the people in the central square of the capital city (Gadarigian 2018). Other illustrative statements include: "The real power in Armenia stems from the people gathered in Republic Square" (Gadarigian 2018). Emphasizing the division between the people and the ruling elite, Pashinyan stated:

"Beloved nation, proud citizens of Armenia. People in parliament have lost the sense of reality. They don't understand that 250,000 people who came onto the streets in Armenia have already won. Power in Armenia belongs to you—and not to them" (The Economist 2018). Similarly, upon becoming prime minister, Pashinyan stated that "the power of the few in Armenia has been overthrown and the power of the people … has been established" (Armenpress, 2018).

Illustrating Pashinyan's personalistic style, the article continues that he "managed to personify Armenians' resentment against a corrupt elite. Donning Che Guevara-style fatigues, he went around the country on

10 I include social movements, not just individuals and political parties, as themselves potential populist actors. In doing so, I follow Mudde, who discusses the 'versatility' of populism, in that it can be a characteristic of protests, not just individuals and parties (Mudde 2017: 39).

foot, preaching non-violent protest" (Roth 2018). Pashinyan addressed the crowds in the central square every day during the protests, giving fiery speeches against the ruling elite. The movement was very much dominated by his personality. He initiated it and set its agenda and procedures. He maintained a fervent following amongst his close advisors and the crowds too. "You can absolutely compare him with historical figures like Gandhi and Nelson Mandela," one of his advisors said (Roth 2018).

Whether Pashinyan satisfies the characteristic of short-termism is less clear. One indicator of a short-term perspective emerged during a policy discussion on the issue of local government reform. Reforms can have short-term costs but overall gains in the longer term, and Pashinyan expressed a focus on the short term. When asked about consolidating local government structures, he noted that the resulting loss of jobs may have priority in this thinking, that a concern for short-term unemployment would outweigh long-term gains (Vardanyan 2014: 41-42). To focus on short-term jobs rather than on long-term structural reform is an indicator of the short-termism characteristic of populism.

Upon gaining power, Pashinyan initiated anti-corruption actions against the former regime, including charging former president Robert Kocharyan with a crime in connection with the violent breakup of protests. These charges were dismissed by the Constitutional Court, whereupon Pashinyan proceeded to reform the Court itself (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 2020). This may be viewed as a populist attack upon the rule of law and due procedure, but it should be noted that members of the Court had been appointed by and maintained close ties with the former regime. Another policy of the Pashinyan government was to reduce income tax rates to a flat tax of 23%, when there were previously three tax brackets of 23%, 28%, and 36% (Hetq, n.d.). This simple act of reducing taxes could be viewed as a populist stance. Yet, its effect on reducing taxes for the rich is decidedly un-populist.

Unlike populist leaders in other countries, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, Pashinyan did not question the science of COVID-19, nor was he a vaccine-skeptic. A state of emergency was declared in March 2020 and a lockdown was imposed. It was initially enforced, although enforcement was later relaxed. Armenians have been hesitant to follow social distancing and to get vaccinated, resulting in large numbers of cases and deaths, particularly in late 2020 (World Health Organization, n.d.).

To conclude, it seems that Pashinyan was a populist during the Velvet Revolution throughout the first years of coming to power, although his

populism has tempered somewhat the longer he has been in power. This is a general characteristic of populism that has been noted by several scholars (e.g., Krause and Wagner 2019, but for a contrary view see Schwörer 2021).

### *5. A right-wing populist*

While Pashinyan is the most prominent populist politician in Armenia, he is not the only one. Gagik Tsarukyan, a wealthy businessman and former arm-wrestler (European Friends of Armenia 2012)[11], formed the BHK in 2004. It is a conservative nationalist party, advocating for economic liberalism, in support of businesses, and assistance to the most vulnerable in society (European Friends of Armenia 2012: 10). In the elections for the National Assembly of 2007, 2012, and 2017, the BHK won 15%, 30%, and 27% of votes, respectively. In Armenia's partly-proportional system of seat allocation, these votes resulted in 26 seats (of 131), 37 (again of 131), and 31 (of 105 seats in a reformed system) in the assembly (Election Guide 2018). Hence, the BHK was a major force in Armenian elections, even though it did not take part in government. It usually supported the Republican government from 2007 to 2012, but the BHK had a period of opposition in 2012-13 before again turning to support the ruling RPA government once more (European Friends of Armenia 2012: 2). Its support declined to 8% in the 2018 election and even further in the 2021 election—to just 4%.

Tsarukyan fits the mold of a wealthy populist politician. Contrary to one source (Nazarian 2021), it is he and not Pashinyan who is Armenia's Trump. He uses his vast wealth for philanthropic purposes, providing agricultural assistance and free medical aid to less well-off members of society (The Economist 2007). The BHK is closely identified with its leader, Tsarukyan, and since the 2017 elections, its parliamentary presence is even officially referred to as the 'Tsarukyan faction,' with several members of the assembly who do not belong to Prosperous Armenia joining the bloc.[12] Tsarukyan is now no longer the leader of the BHK officially but seems

11 Tsarukyan claims to be the former world arm-wrestling champion; his personal website states 'In 1996 he was declared the world arm-wrestling champion' (Gagik Tsarukyan Official Website, n.d.). He in fact came third in 1996 and 1998 (Armwrestling Archives, n.d.).

12 See the website of the National Assembly of Armenia, which lists members of the Tsarukyan faction, most of whom are members of Prosperous Armenia but some of whom are not (National Assembly 2018a).

to be the de facto leader of the Tsarukyan alliance. The BHK favors close relations with Russia. Several years ago, it criticized the government for its perceived pro-Europe leanings and then praised the government when it announced the decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union (Grigoryan 2014).

Further analysis of the political views of Tsarukyan and the BHK strengthens the case for classifying them as populists. As a result of the framework of analysis set out in the first part of this chapter, we are looking for (1) championing of the interest and will of the people, understood in a primitive, ideologically-thin way, (2) personalistic leadership, (3) direct communication to the people, and (4) focus on the immediate rather than on long term interests. We will also look for evidence to locate him and his party on the left-right, authoritarian-democratic populism compass.

According to a report by Open Democracy, prior to the election of 2017, Tsarukyan runs "on the universal populist promises of jobs, lower taxes and patriotism—none of the high-brow ideological rhetoric." He also champions his working-class roots and anti-intellectualism; "I am from a working family… I am no Harvard graduate. My life has been my university," he is quoted as saying at a campaign rally (Sanamyan 2017). Two pre-election statements by Tsarukyan outline his and the party's views. In one he states that the key objective of the Tsarukyan Alliance is simple: "to create appropriate conditions for workers who participate in the Armenian economy so that they no longer want to leave the country, but choose to stay instead, to support their families and their country" (Tsarukyan 2017a).

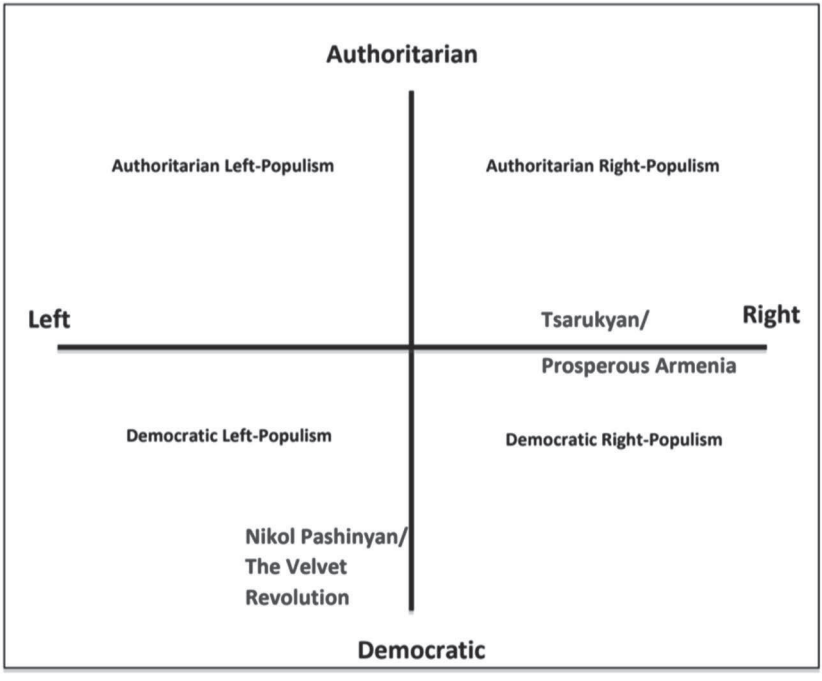
Working people "should not be interfered with" and conditions should be created "that are as favorable as possible to them" (Tsarukyan 2017a). If elected, he and the party will "start working to improve the lives of all Armenians" (Tsarukyan 2017a). He also mentions that "it is only possible to fix the backbone of our economy in the short term with effective and fair management and with sound economic policies" (Tsarukyan 2017a). These vague statements about the interests of the people and the reference to the short-term support classify Tsarukyan and the BHK as populist based on the first and fourth criteria. The second and third criteria, personalistic leadership and direct communication to the people, are also satisfied by Tsarukyan. He is the face of the BHK and its events are personal rallies focused on him. He has even produced a documentary about himself that aired on his own television channel. At rallies, he speaks directly to the people and walks among them, interacting with young and old alike.

More specific policies were mentioned in another pre-election statement, where Tsarukyan advocates for a favorable environment to small and medium businesses by exempting them from taxation for three years, raising the average pension by €48 per month and increasing the minimum salary to €153 per month (Tsarukyan 2017b). These help us locate Tsarukyan on the right side of the populism compass due to the pro-business stance but not too far right since they favor some social assistance to the less well off. Where to place them on the authoritarian-democratic dimension is less clear. Tsarukyan advocates for "strong democratic political leadership" but then states his alliance would work to put in place "a technocratic government" (Tsarukyan 2017b) which has authoritarian connotations. Along with their pro-Russian sympathies, there is enough evidence to place him and the BHK somewhere in the middle of the authoritarian-democratic dimension.

### *6. The populist map in Armenia*

Having surveyed these manifestations of populism in Armenia, I now locate them in the conceptual graph presented earlier. As stated previously, Tsarukyan and the BHK can be located in the middle of the right side and on the border between authoritarianism and democracy. Pashinyan and the revolutionary movement can be classified in the lower half of the compass as extremely anti-authoritarian democrats. The guiding principle of him and the movement was the undemocratic nature of the ruling government and the need to replace it with a government that would reflect the will and interests of the people. For the left-right dimension, Pashinyan and the movement can be placed in the left-side quadrant. They are in favor of social assistance and a fairer distribution of wealth, but Pashinyan and the KP are clearly in favor of pro-liberal market freedoms. Hence, they should be placed in the lower left quadrant but not too far left, close to the border. Figure 2 below places the populist actors in Armenia in their respective positions in the populism compass.

*Figure 4.2 Armenia's populist map*




Source: Author's analysis

*7. Discussion*

As has been shown, populism is present in two locations in the political landscape of Armenia. But what general explanation can be given for the presence of populism in Armenia? I argue in favor of two factors. The first is in response to March's claim, noted at the beginning of this chapter, that populism is typically not found in post-Soviet states due to the prevalence of patron-client political relations. In such relations, patrons of high economic status provide benefits to persons of lower status in return for support to the patron (Scott 1972: 92; Baghdasaryan 2017: 3). Individuals organize their political activities around the exchange of rewards rather than around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological beliefs (Hale 2014: 9-10, 20). The political situation in Armenia, like that of many post-Soviet states,

is one of political patronage. Political actors, whether presidential candidates or political parties, act as patrons towards factions of the public, providing benefits in return for political support. Most political parties in Armenia are based on the patron-client relationship (Hale 2014: 356). March argues that patronal politics is incompatible with populism because the former is a kind of authoritarianism while the latter is fundamentally democratic. The former Soviet states are "authoritarian, patrimonial, and hence anti-populist" (March 2017: 220). Appearances of leaders such as Putin as populist are mere mirages, he claims, since they are in reality elitist by nature. I argue that it is a conceptual error to hold that populism is incompatible with political structures dominated by patron-client relations. As I hope to have shown in the first section, the notion that authoritarian politics are incompatible with populism is untrue; populism can be either authoritarian or democratic. Furthermore, the compatibility of populism and patronal politics can be seen by considering the nature of the two. A populist actor, one who emphasizes the antagonism between the people and corrupt elites, has a personalistic leadership style, communicates directly with the people, and focuses on short-term solutions to problems, could very well simultaneously engage in patron-client relations, offering benefits to followers in return for their support.[13] Gagik Tsarukyan of the BHK, discussed in the previous section, is an illustrative case. Tsarukyan offers benefits to his supporters in the form of housing and welfare support. His championing of the people against elites, his personalistic style, direct communication, and short-termism mark him as populist. Hence, the presence of patron-based politics in Armenia is no barrier to populism.

The second explanation for populism in Armenia builds on the first, which shows that populism characterized by clientelism is possible in a post-Soviet political environment. But what makes it likely? Scholars have pointed to a number of conditions which promote the emergence of populism. According to Deiwiks, whom I follow, there are two chief conditions (Deiwiks 2009: 3). Deiwiks has a third condition, charismatic leadership, which I leave out, since I have been including it as a defining feature of populism rather than a factor explaining why populism occurs. First, poor socioeconomic conditions or crises such as civil, political, eco-

13 See Müller 2016: 4, who also notes the compatibility of populism and clientelism and Kenny (2017: 32-33) who argues from empirical grounds that political parties can be populist and patronage-based at the same time. Hale notes something similar when he comments that patronal politics 'can be a form of mass empowerment' (Hale 2014: 19), although there he is mainly referring to corruption and bribes.

nomic, or natural, together with the political system's inability to cope with these problems. This condition is satisfied in Armenia's case, which has been through several crises in recent years, such as the flaring up of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. A continuous low-level conflict, tensions increased in April 2016 with several hundred casualties on both sides. The economy has for several years been in a dismal condition, with a third of the population living at the poverty-line (Gevorgyan 2018).

The second of Deiwiks' conditions for the emergence of populism is the opaqueness of political institutions. In this way, the political arrangements of the society are such that it is unclear who rules and how. People lose trust in government and perceive it as no longer responsive to their needs. This also is a characteristic of Armenia's politics. The last two decades have seen the RPA-led government become dominant but through questionable elections, accompanied by a loss of public trust. Caucasus Barometer is a regional survey of public opinion asking questions on a number of dimensions. The barometer shows low levels of trust of parliament and executive government in Armenia since 2008 (Caucasus Barometer 2018). The perceived opaqueness of the government in Armenia further explains the emergence of populism there.

A further explanatory factor is particularly relevant for Armenia. Populism seems connected with ideological politics in an inverse relationship: the greater the degree of ideological content of politicians' and political parties' policies and manifestos, the less scope there is for populism. Conversely, the less ideological the parties are in a political environment, the more scope there is for populism to occur. This can be connected to the ideological thinness or primitiveness noted earlier. Although populism has some ideological content, by focusing on the people's will and interest against those of corrupt elites, as discussed previously, that content appears shallow in the sense of being left open for the people's interest/will to fill in the gaps. Populism's characteristic as a thin or primitive ideology creates a condition for making its emergence more likely. Political environments in which ideological parties are lacking mean that populism is more likely to occur. An ideological vacuum is an ideal place in which populism can flourish. The absence of sophisticated political parties and actors with reasonably well-worked out left- or right-wing platforms and manifestos mean that parties and actors who instead simply emphasize 'the people'

against 'the elites' are more likely to garner support.[14] Armenia fits this situation. Few parties have any ideological content to their election manifestos, instead having general policies, such as reducing corruption and providing security. Hale notes the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party (ARF) is an exception to this rule due to having an ideological position as a traditionally socialist party (Hale 2014: 356). However, over recent decades, its socialism has become so watered-down that it is barely an ideological party any more. The lack of sophisticated ideological debates in Armenian politics is another explanatory factor of the presence of populism.

Several factors account for the occurrence of populism in Armenia. Populism is compatible with (rather than contrary to) the patron-client political relations that exist in Armenia, much like the former Soviet Union. Moreover, Armenia has poor socioeconomic conditions and crises and opaque political institutions, both of which are conducive to the emergence of populism. Finally, the ideological deficit of many of the political parties in Armenia make it more likely for the characteristics of populism to prevail.

## *8. Conclusion*

This chapter has identified two populist political actors in Armenia by way of a general conceptualization of populism and provided supporting explanations. Populism is indeed present in Armenia. This finding is important for several reasons. First, it enriches our understanding of the political landscape of a former Soviet Union country. We seek to understand different political systems, and identifying populism is a further component of the general task of understanding politics. Second, although there is still work to be done on the consequences of populism, there is reason to think those consequences are significant. An empirical study of populism across many societies found that when populists come to power, populist rule ultimately results in a decline in effective constraints on executive government. One

14 However, one must be aware of a chicken-and-egg situation here. An ideological vacuum may be a precondition for populism but on the other hand, perhaps an environment favorable to populism makes ideologically sophisticated parties and actors less likely to emerge. Whatever the precise causal connection however (more complexly the factors could be mutually reinforcing), the hypothesis being put forward here is that a less ideologically rich political environment corresponds with greater scope for populism.

year of populist rule results in an average decline of five percentage points in judicial independence, two percentage points in political rights, and 1.6 percentage points in civil liberties (Kenny 2017: 44). Since a populist leader has become prime minister of Armenia, the question is whether this could lead to similar results. However, it should be noted that other studies see these consequences resulting from right-wing and authoritarian populists (Norris and Inglehart 2018) rather than left-wing populists, such as Pashinyan. What happens in Armenia will provide further data for assessing these more general claims about populism.

*Works cited*

Armenian Mirror-Spectator. "Armenian Parliament Votes to Replace Constitutional Court Judges." *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 23 June 2020, mirrorspectator.com/2020/06/23/armenian-parliament-votes-to-replace-constitutional-court-judges. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Armenian Weekly. "New Opposition Bloc Formed in Armenia." *The Armenian Weekly*, 24 Jan. 2017, armenianweekly.com/2017/01/24/new-opposition-bloc-formed-in-armenia. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Armenpress. "The Oligarchy in Armenia Has Failed, the People's Power Has Been Established: Nikol Pashinyan." *Armenpress*, 19 Oct. 2018, armenpress.am/arm/news/951532.html. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Armwrestling Archives. "World Armwrestling Federation Results (1990-1999)." *The Armwrestling Archives*, www.thearmwrestlingarchives.com/waf-world-results-1990-1999.html. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Atanesian, Grigor. "Sargsyan Officially Nominated for Office Amid Continuing Protests." *Eurasianet*, 15 Apr. 2018, eurasianet.org/s/sargsyan-officially-nominated-for-office-amid-continuing-protests. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Baghdasaryan, Milena. "Before the Voting Day: The Impact of Patron-Client Relations and Related Violations on Elections in Armenia." *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, vol. 98, 2017.

Bedevian, Astghik. "Sarkisian's Continued Rule 'Unacceptable' to Opposition Bloc." *Azatutyan*, 15 Sept. 2017, www.azatutyun.am/a/28738112.html. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Betz, Hans-Georg. *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

Canovan, Margaret. "Populism for Political Theorists?" *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Routledge, Oct. 2004, pp. 241–52.

Caucasus Barometer. "Caucasus Barometer Time-series Dataset Armenia." *Caucasus Barometer*, 2018, caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-am/codebook/?q=trust+&w=. Accessed 8 June 2018.

Civil Contract. "The Civil Contract Official Website." *The Civil Contract*, 2018, civilcontract.am/Home/AboutUs. Accessed 7 Apr. 2018.

Deiwiks, Christa. "Populism." *Living Reviews in Democracy*, vol. 1, 2009, pp. 1–9.

Dix, Robert H. "Populism: Authoritarian and Democratic." *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, Latin American Studies Association, Jan. 1985, pp. 29–52.

Election Guide. "IFES Election Guide: Armenia." *Election Guide: Democracy Assistance and Election News*, 2018, www.electionguide.org/countries/id/12.

European Friends of Armenia. "Armenia 2012: An Introduction to the Party-political Landscape." *EuFoA*, 30 Mar. 2012, web.archive.org/web/20160330003104/http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/ArmeniaPoliticalPartyGuide.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2023.

---. "Armenia 2017: An Introduction to the Party-political Landscape." *EuFoA*, 30 Mar. 2017, eufoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Armenia2017PartypoliticalLandscapeGuide_28March-2017.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Freedom House. "Freedom in the World 2018: Armenia Profile." *Freedom House*, 2018, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/armenia.

Gadarigian, Hrant. "Nikol Pashinyan to International Press: "Our Movement Isn't Pro-West or Pro-Russia."" *Hetq.am*, 24 Apr. 2018, hetq.am/eng/news/87979/nikol-pashinyan-to-international-press-our-movement-isnt-pro-west-or-pro-russia.html. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Gagik Tsarukyan Official Website. "Biography of Gagik Tsarukyan." *Gagik Tsarukyan*, tsarukyan.am/en/biography. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Gevorgian, Astghik. "Poverty in Armenia." *Ampop Media*, 7 Aug. 2018, ampop.am/en/poverty-in-armenia. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Grigoryan, Armen. "Armenia: Joining Under the Gun." *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, edited by S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2014, www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13053-putins-grand-strategy-the-eurasian-union-and-its-discontents.html.

Guiso, Luigi, et al. "Demand and Supply of Populism." Unpublished paper, 2017. http://www.heliosherrera.com/populism.pdf.www.heliosherrera.com/populism.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Hale, Henry E. *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2014.

Heinisch, Reinhard C., et al. *Political Populism: A Handbook*. Baden, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017.

Hetq. "Armenia's Parliament Approves Controversial Flat Tax Bill." *Hetq.am*, 25 June 2019, hetq.am/en/article/105005. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Jagers, Jan, and Stefaan Walgrave. "Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 46, no. 3, Wiley-Blackwell, May 2007, pp. 319–45.

Judis, John B. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

Kenny, Paul D. *Populism and Patronage: Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia, and Beyond*. 1st ed., Oxford UP, 2017.

Krause, Werner, and Aiko Wagner. "Becoming Part of the Gang? Established and Nonestablished Populist Parties and the Role of External Efficacy." *Party Politics*, vol. 27, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Apr. 2019, pp. 161–73.

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books, 2005.

March, Luke. "Populism in the Post-Soviet States." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 214–31.

---. *Radical Left Parties in Europe*. 1st ed., London, Routledge, 2011.

Miller, David, et al., editors. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1991.

Mudde, Cas. "Populism: An Ideational Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 22–47.

---. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Jan. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016,

Munro, André. "Populism: History, Facts, and Examples." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/populism. Accessed 20 July 2023.

National Assembly. "National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia: Nikol Pashinyan's Page." *The National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia*, 2018, www.parliament.am/deputies.php?sel=details&ID=1260&lang=eng. Accessed 17 July 2023.

---. "The Official Website of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia." *The National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia*, 2018,

www.parliament.am/deputies.php?sel=factions&lang=eng. Accessed 19 July 2023.

Nazarian, Garen. "Armenia's Trump." *EVN Report*, 5 Apr. 2021, evnreport.com/opinion/armenia-s-trump. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2018.

PanArmenian net. "Armenia Elections: YELQ Program Taps Army Reform, EU Association." *PanArmenian Net*, 6 Mar. 2017, www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/234256. Accessed 18 July 2023.

Roth, Andrew. "'He's Not a Populist, He's Popular': Nikol Pashinyan Becomes Armenian PM." *The Guardian*, 8 May 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/08/he s-not-a-populist-hes-popular-nikol-pashinyan-becomes-armenian-pm. Accessed 19 July 2023.

Rovira Kaltwasser, Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. . "Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism,* edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds ., Oxford UP, 2017a, pp. 1-24.

---. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 2017b.

Sanamyan, Emil. "Running for Tsar: Armenia's Gagik Tsarukyan." *Open Democracy*, 28 Mar. 2017, www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/running-for-tsar-armenia-s-gagik-tsarukyan. Accessed 18 July 2023.

Schwörer, Jakob. "Less Populist in Power? Online Communication of Populist Parties in Coalition Governments." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 57, no. 3, Cambridge UP, Mar. 2021, pp. 467–89.

Scott, James C. "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Mar. 1972, pp. 91–113.

The Economist. "Armenia's Murky Politics." *The Economist*, 13 Apr. 2007, https://www.economist.com/news/2007/04/11/armenias-murky-politics.

---. "Armenia's Revolution Continues, as Its Opposition Leader Nears Power." *The Economist*, 3 May 2018, www.economist.com/europe/2018/05/03/armenias-revolution-continues-as-its-opposition-leader-nears-power. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Tsarukyan, Gagik. "Armenia Deserves Better." *New Europe*, 26 Mar. 2017, www.neweurope.eu/article/armenia-deserves-better. Accessed 20 July 2023.

---. "Working for a Better Armenia." *Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe*, 28 Mar. 2017, www.acreurope.eu/item/gagik_tsarukyan_working_for_a_better_armenia.

Vardanyan, Arpine. *Local Government Reform in Armenia: Challenges and Prospects for Success*. American University of Armenia, 2014.

http://dspace.aua.am/xmlui/handle/123456789/606

Weyland, Kurt. "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1, City University of New York, Oct. 2001, p. 1.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Blackwell Publishing, 1953.

World Health Organization. "Armenia Vaccination Data." *World Health Organization*, covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/am. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Worsley, Peter. "The Concept of Populism." *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, edited by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, Palgrave Macmillan, 1969.

# Chapter 5: The Specificities of Populism in Countries of Democratic Transition: Challenges for Armenia

*Ruben Elamiryan*

## *1. Introduction*

The emergence of newly established democracies in the former Soviet Union has forced the national ruling elites to rethink their mechanisms of acquiring and maintaining legitimacy and public support. Armenia has faced a full spectrum of profound political development crises, arguably more so than any other post-Soviet country. The long list of crises that Armenia has endured includes the 1988 Spitak earthquake, the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, linear liberalization, voucher privatization, closed borders with two of its four neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey), as well as challenging international relations, especially with the West and Iran. In this chapter, I argue that the development of populism in the post-Soviet states, specifically in Armenia, has been caused by the protracted democratic transition, resulting in the inability to overcome the crises of political development (crises of distribution, mobility, identity, political participation, and legitimacy).

Before analyzing the case of Armenia, populism must first be defined. In the first section, I explore the multifaceted nature of populism as a concept and discuss how it can be interpreted as an ideology, movement, syndrome, and manipulative mechanism. This section is followed by an extensive in-depth assessment of the current application of populism in the former Soviet Union. In this context, I propose and test an approach according to which three key opposition parties, the Armenian National Congress (HAK), Rule of Law (OEK), and Heritage, are populist. Drawing from Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) concept of a 'populism triangle,' which is formed by 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and 'the general will,' I examine and compare these parties in terms of how they have engaged with four issues which are central to Armenian politics to gain public support. These are national social and economic development, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, foreign policy, and the convergence of political and ethnonational populism. This makes it possible to determine the

main specificities of the populist agenda in Armenia, which is based on charismatic leaders and is particularly hybrid in nature, appearing to be a combination of a thin-centered ideology, movement, and strategy.

As theoretical and empirical material, I use a wide variety of published academic research, reports, and studies on the theoretical perception of populism and its application in the post-Soviet space. Taking into account the research gap on populism for the Armenian reality, I analyze the political programs of the discussed political parties and speeches of their leaders. In addition, an interview with a party-member was conducted to compensate for the missing information concerning one of the political parties. In this chapter, I examine the development of populism in Armenia from the mid-2000s until the parliamentary elections of 2017. This timeframe was chosen because the discussed political parties were most active and popular during that period of time.

## *2. Populism as a concept*

Populism is a multifaceted concept, leading to a wide range of interpretations. Various authors have defined populism as an ideology, a movement, a syndrome, and even a manipulative mechanism. In Contemporary Populism, Gherghina et al. (2013: 357) define populism in four different ways, namely as a:

1. Political behavior or movement which celebrates the roles and values of the popular classes.
2. Demagogic behavior oriented towards satisfying people's expectations.
3. In arts, the depiction of people as a positive ethical model.
4. A Russian movement of the second half of the 18th century.

The first definition presents the category of 'people-based populism' and the desire to uphold the general will, while the second definition stresses the demagogic essence of populism. To achieve their political goals, the political theorist Margaret Canovan theorizes that:

> a populist leader relies on specific feelings such as fear, envy, selfishness, and to a certain extent, on racism and nationalism. She argues that populists are often demagogues who make use of techniques of persuasion and manipulate the public opinion in order to get wider support. (Gherghina et al 2013: 357)

There is also the Laclauan approach to populism. According to the scholars Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), the work of Laclau is often cited in works of political philosophy and critical studies, as well as in case studies on West European and Latin American politics. This approach is based on the famous Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau and his more recent collaborative work with Chantal Mouffe. The latter perceived populism to be not only a key component of politics, but also an emancipatory force. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

> in this approach liberal democracy is the problem and radical democracy is the solution. Populism can help achieve radical democracy by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo. (:3)

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) present a more recent approach, one which describes populism as a political strategy which is "employed by a specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers. It is particularly popular among students of Latin American and non-Western societies" (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017:3). In this context, populism is a strategy or a set of tactics.

A professor of Yale University, Paris Aslanidis (2015), has also set forward some possible definitions of populism. He focuses on Weyland's approach to defining populism as "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power-based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Aslanidis 2015: 97). The author concludes that:

> we consider 'discourse' as much better suited to characterize the conceptual genus of populism. If we do away with the unnecessary ideological clause in Mudde's formulation, we are left with a purely discursive definition: populism modestly becomes a discourse, invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding 'the People' of their rightful political authority. It becomes an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People. This is, more or less, how the concept has been operationalized in the growing quantitative literature mentioned earlier. (Aslandis 2015: 96)

Interestingly, this approach outlines the necessity of a strong and charismatic leader for populism to work effectively. A charismatic leader can concentrate power and maintain a direct connection with the masses. "Seen

from this perspective, populism cannot persist over time, as the leader sooner or later will die and a conflict-ridden process for his replacement is inevitable" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 3). It is worth mentioning that this is precisely what occurred in the former Soviet Union, including in Armenia, where all populist forces have been led by strong and charismatic leaders. However, the idea of a charismatic and strong populist leader is contested by Aslanidis (2015), who has taken a different approach to defining populism, one which stresses that the above-mentioned characteristic of populism has been gradually losing its currency (pp. 88-104). What is interesting is that this approach is partially true in regard to post-Soviet space. A clear example is the so-called EuroMaidan in Ukraine. It is hard to claim that Yatsenyuk, Klichko, and Turchinskiy, arguably the most famous representatives of the Ukrainian revolution of the year 2014, were charismatic leaders.

A third approach to populism defines the concept as "a folkloric style of politics, which leaders and parties employ to mobilize the masses," particularly popular within (political) communication studies as well as in the media (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) characterize this type of populism as being amateurish and unprofessional political behavior, one which is aimed at maximizing media attention and popular support.

> By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with 'the people' in opposition to 'the elite' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 4). Based on the multifaceted nature of populism, they define populism as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6)

The definition of populism as a 'thin-centered' ideology proposed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser comprehensively describes the concept. Hence, this chapter will use this definition as a basis for analyzing populism in Armenia. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser explain that

> unlike 'thick-centered' or 'full' ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, socialism), thin-centered ideologies, such as populism, have a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is

> even assimilated into—other ideologies. In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public. Consequently, populism by itself can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6)

This idea of populism attaching itself to other ideologies is very important for our work, as it may explain why populism does not allow political forces in Armenia to gain more public support. In my opinion, the reason is that they do not apply (or at least successfully) any ideology to their political programs. It is worth emphasizing the three core concepts of populism identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017): the people, the elite, and the general will. This chapter will use this triangle scheme to analyze the public debates and political programs of HAK, the OEK, and Heritage. This assessment is based on the comparative discussion of the cases of Russia, Belarus, and Central Asia, as examples of state-sponsored populism. This approach is contrasted to those post-Soviet states, which (at least formally) have striven for democracy. In these cases, populism can mostly be described as being opposition driven. This comparison enables the identification of various forms of populism in the post-Soviet space. These are state-sponsored populism and opposition-based populism, as well as a hybrid form of these two—which is what most often occurs.

The logic of this work demands further exploration of the concept of populism to highlight some more specificities. For instance, Aslanidis criticizes Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) definition. According to him

> the attempt to preserve ideology as populism's genus by resorting to its alleged thinness is open to three major lines of criticism. First, the very notion of thinness is conceptually spurious; second, this position entails significant methodological inconsistencies in the framework of its proponents; and third, its essentialist connotations erect insurmountable obstacles with regard to classification and measurement. (Aslanidis 2015: 89)

It is worth mentioning Canovan's outline of the so called 'new populism.' According to her

> the populism that is most likely to be in the news today is the so-called 'New Populism' of the past decade or so: a collection of movements, broadly on the right of the political spectrum, that have emerged in many

> established liberal democracies, challenging existing parties and mainstream policies… Typically confrontational in style, these movements claim to represent the rightful source of legitimate power—the people, whose interests and wishes have been ignored by self-interested politicians and politically correct intellectuals. (Canovan 2004: 241)

Finally, an American political scientist Philippe C. Schmitter discusses populism in terms of "movements." He defines the concept as

> a political movement that draws its support across or with disregard for the lines of cleavage that are embodied in existing political formations and does so by focusing on the person of its leader who claims to be able to resolve a package of issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded. (Gherghina et al. 2013: 328)

Thus, I will use Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser`s (2017) approach to identify populist manifestations in post-Soviet reality and Armenia and reveal their specificities and how they differ to the European and Latin American contexts.

### *3. Populism in the post-Soviet space*

The disintegration of Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union ultimately triggered a series of multidimensional political, economic, social processes throughout the region. The collapse of the totalitarian system and the process of democratization along with other developments laid the foundation for populism to flourish. However, despite the seeming similarities between countries in the post-Soviet space, the process of democratization was different in each country. This has been reasoned by a wide variety of circumstances, including the quality of the elites, the regional and global geopolitical issues they faced, as well as each country's historical and civilizational background and traditions. As a consequence, this has led to unique manifestations of populism in various parts of the former Eastern Bloc, a region which has occasionally shown similarities to their populist North American, European, and Latin American counterparts.

During the late 1980s, many Soviet republics faced the rise of nationalist movements. The collapse of the totalitarian state with its underdeveloped liberal-democratic and market traditions created a social and ideological vacuum, one which was logically filled with national ideology that was framed as a national renaissance in a national state. This allowed Hunting-

ton (1996) to forecast the 'clash of civilizations' as a basis for the new world order. According to a Russian researcher Baranov (2004), the former nationalist nihilism (which was the mainstream in the USSR) was replaced by the 'dictate of nationalism,' stressing such concepts as 'national sovereignty,' 'national independence and freedom,' and so on. He continues to discuss the ways that the rapid changes, uncertainties and instability have created favorable conditions for populist leaders who use nationalist rhetoric to gain public support.

The new leaders used national populism to demonstrate their love and care for their nation's culture, history, and language. However, they ended up only making appeals. In their speeches, they promoted national feelings and instructed people to search for the guiltiest among other nations.

According to a Russian political scientist Abdualatipov, almost all the leaders from the former Soviet Republics gained power due to national populism. He states:

> It is easy to gain power through national populism; however, this method very soon leads the politician to the most radical forms of national patriotism. Whenever the same leader (e.g., after gaining power) tries to establish equal relations with other states, he is dismissed. Hence the whole tactic is based on increasing of national emotions. The motive is simple – to keep power. (Baranov 2004: 370)

Thus, we see that the collapse of the USSR and process of democratization in post-Soviet space started with nationalist populism as it was the easiest method during that period of time to gain public support and acquire legitimacy.

The picture has changed for some countries since 1990s. For instance, the Russian researcher Baranov (2015) thinks that nowadays populism widely applies left-conservative positions, promoting the idea of the leading role of the state to provide social justice. At the same time, the combination of the conservative ideology with the values of justice is becoming the main characteristic of Russian political discourse, since it was initiated by the ruling elite and demanded by different social groups.

There is a popular opinion that populism is suited for those who are not able to rationally evaluate the actions, behavior, and declarations of politicians. However, during crises times, even well-educated and successful people want to hear simple and clear solutions to complex challenges. Very often, this kind of demands increases during periods of modernization. Provided that most (if not all) of the post-Soviet states are still in the

process of democratic transition as well as political, economic, and social modernization, this creates favorable ground for populists.

In support of this idea, Baranov (2015) draws on the approach of Altermatt and Gudvin (2015), who claim that populist movements appear when rapid modernization upsets the balance of the economy, politics, and culture in a society. Consequently, this can lead to uncertainties, fear, and tension among people. It is worth mentioning that while discussing the situation in Central and Eastern European countries, Baranov (2015) discusses that in the period of post-communist transformations, new populist leaders and parties appeared throughout this region and largely exploited national and social problems for political gains.

In this context, a Russian political scientist Achkasov (2018) thinks that we are witnessing the rise of populism in both Eastern and Western Europe. However, the electoral success of right-wing populist parties depends not only on their opportunities to express their dissatisfaction and fears with the voters in regard to the current radical economic and social changes, but also on a number of national factors. Among them are the political-cultural traditions of the country, specificities of political environment, and relations with the leading political forces.

As previously mentioned, populism is rather different in Central and Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and in post-Soviet countries, on the other hand. For instance, Baranov (2015) points out that one difference between European and Russian political practice is how populism is used by politicians in power. In this regard, populist strategies are used to legitimize power and to distract voters from social problems. In this context, the tough political and economic relationship between Russia and the West provided fresh air for populism. Particularly, the discourse around the concept of justice is shifting from a domestic policy agenda and a mandatory discussion of the issue of wealth and poverty to foreign political agenda.

Baranov (2015) states that Russian politicians appeal to populist methods not to accentuate the issue of social justice but to re-orient citizens alongside these problems, depending on their actuality, public importance, and public demand. At the same time, this kind of policy is related to people`s expectations. In this regard, it is important to mention that the development of populist tendencies is fraught with costs due to controversial nature of populism, which reflects the controversies of mass consciousness. These costs are the more serious the weaker democratic traditions in a society present. Moreover, populism has certain margins of its effectiveness beyond which it does not work, but, vice versa, serves as a black PR.

Particularly, populism undermines people's trust in institutions and serves as a weapon of political struggle. It promotes a decrease of political activeness, alienation of people, economic and political turmoil, as well as social disorder. For instance, in Armenia, populist politics among different oppositional forces during the late 2000s ultimately led to loss of faith in the future and massive emigration.

Thus, populist technologies have enabled the political elites to foster geopolitical interests in Russia, which contradict the views of those who are aligned with the interests of the West. The latter is partially rooted in a struggle over spheres of influence in the post-Soviet area, which is more important than social problems. However, Baranov (2015) thinks that the great power policy, the unique Russian way, and patriotism are not able to solve current problems of socio-economic development.

> Populist strategies are effective in short run (we will clearly see that in the case of Armenia). That is why they are used in electoral campaigns. However, populist strategies in government only offer short-term, limited effects. (Baranov 2015: 34)

When it comes to Central Asia as a part of the post-Soviet space, I would like to discuss the following World Bank review (2016) about the economic situation in Europe and Central Asia. The report is titled *Polarization and Populism*. According to the report, the developing tendencies of global uncertainties, Brexit, rising terrorism, and conflicts around the globe have fostered a sense of instability among people regarding their political and economic futures. This has led to the rise of populist parties, movements, and leaders, that have offered seemingly simple solutions to complex issues. These solutions are presented as being able to provide economic development and increase the standard of living. These parties and movements are becoming popular among people who are disappointed in 'traditional' methods of carrying out democratic reforms, particularly, among people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The above-mentioned report measures the level of polarization among the voters in the region. According to an economic analysis over the last four years (for 2016), a 1% decrease in GDP growth on average brought a 3.1% increase in populist forces. At the same time, a lower life satisfaction and political polarization may also be connected to lower economic mobility. The report stresses that the post-Soviet space, particularly Russia and Central Asia, have experienced a decrease in consumption, an increase in poverty, and the exacerbation of social problems as a result of a weak

economic structure and decreasing raw materials prices. “The countries have not managed to provide active reforms in terms of crisis to strengthen diversification of economy and break dependence on oil or other raw material with simultaneous development of non-primary sectors of economy” (World Bank 2016). In Eastern Europe and Central Asia consumption dropped 4.8% in 2018 in comparison to the 1.2% GDP decrease.

At the same time, the researcher Karimov (World Bank 2016) thinks that more structural reforms are necessary. Such reforms could lead to wider access to education, medical services, as well as the creation of new jobs. Thus, policy reforms should be directed towards the establishment of more equal opportunities, as opposed to social transfers from Russia. The policy should be aimed at decreasing the sense of threat on a rapidly changing labor market and providing life-long education to prepare people to the new conditions and providing appropriate unemployment insurance (World Bank 2016). In this context, it is also interesting to consider the case of Belarus and its model of populism.

After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Belarus did not manage to avoid the crisis of modernization. Thus, the country experienced instability in its economic and political transition. This established the necessary ground for populism, as it “rise[s] during the periods of crises, critical periods of societal development and political instability, when majority of people lose faith towards tomorrow” (Bogapova 2015: 106). According to the researcher Bogapova, the Belarussian President, Aleksandr Lukashenko, won the presidential election in 1994 as a non-partisan Member of Parliament that was tough on corruption, a quality which people needed during that period of time (Bogapova 2015: 106).

At the same time, the aforementioned approach that ruling elites use populism to increase public support for Russia applies to almost all post-Soviet countries. From this perspective, according to Bogapova (2015), Lukashenko constantly uses populist methods to legitimize his power. His populist techniques include blaming foreign forces for domestic problems, which enables social consolidation through securitization. The logic is that in conditions of foreign pressure, only a strong and charismatic leader can save the people and the country. Baranov (2011) believes that authoritarianism is justified in terms of the president's paternal care: "The life of the Belarusian people is under the strict supervision of the head of state, who is quietly called Batka - he will scold and praise, support and punish." Makarenko (2017) raises the question of how it was possible for a populist agenda to become popular in countries with a stable liberal democracy

and a developed civil political culture. According to him, populism is a very complex issue, which he explains in simple terms by the resonance of various factors. On the one hand, the rise of populism is explained by the deterioration of economic conditions and, consequently, important aspects that affect people's lives.

On the other hand, populism is fostered by the fact that different sources receive and analyze information about the political sphere, resulting in distrust of mainstream information. According to Makarenko (2017), "the content of this populist coalition" can vary from country to country, but the main line of distinction runs along the "winners versus losers" in the new economy. This means that the populist agenda is pursued by social groups that are not among the poorest, but among the penultimate 25% of postmodern society. This group is relatively safe from poverty, but afraid of losing something more. From a cross-regional perspective, it is worth shortly elaborating on Latin America and Europe to perceive the specificities of populism more clearly in post-Soviet reality. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2011):

> there is a consensus among scholars working on Latin American populism that it is predominantly left wing. For instance, two reviews of the different waves of Latin American populisms demonstrated that most of them are characterized by their egalitarian stance and their support for a growing state intervention in the economy—the cases of Fujimori in Peru, Menem in Argentina, and Collor de Mello in Brazil representing the exceptions to this trend. Furthermore, the current wave of Latin American populism is unambiguously distinguished by its leftist nature. Indeed, both Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez see themselves as left-wing leaders and, at the same time, the scholarly literature considers them to be prime examples of the new (radical) left in Latin America. (Rovira Kaltwasser 2011: 21)

They continue and explain that, in contrast to Latin America, populism in Europe is associated with the right-wing ideologies.

> This is somewhat surprising as few populist radical right parties define themselves openly and unequivocally as right wing. In fact, both Jörg Haider and Jean Marie Le Pen would have stressed that they are 'neither left, nor right.' Instead, they would argue that the left-right distinction is no longer relevant and is mainly used by the mainstream parties to give the people a false sense of difference and competition. That said, while

> no party openly claims to be left wing, some do self-identify as right wing (e.g., the Belgian Flemish Block or the Hungarian Justice and Life Party). Moreover, at least in the West European context, most European populists would see the mainstream right as the lesser evil. (Mudde et al. 2011: 25)

Thus, we can conclude that European populism is mainly right-wing, as it is largely connected and rooted in nationalism as a host ideology. At the same time, populism in Latin America is more left-wing because of its close connection to 'Americanismo.' As a result, European populism is more 'domestic' and tends to develop struggles against internal subjects (for instance, ethnic minorities and immigrants). When it comes to Latin America, the perceived threats identified by populists are more 'external,' and thus populists search for enemies and solutions for domestic problems outside their countries, for instance, by blaming foreign powers.

Thus, we see that post-Soviet experience of populism is rather unique and different from other parts of the world. If populism in Latin America is largely left-wing and populism in Europe is largely right-wing, then populism in Russia and Belarus comprises both elements. What is different is that populists are the ruling elites, while in other post-Soviet countries (which strive to achieve democracy) it is more the privilege of opposition. I will discuss this second group of post-Soviet countries which are striving towards democracy in detail in the next part of the chapter by examining the case of Armenia. The balance between 'state-sponsored' and 'opposition' populism is more about proportions, as all sides apply this mechanism to gain public support. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that despite unique features, post-Soviet populism, generally speaking, complies with Mudde's definition. The only difference is that when we speak about state-sponsored populism, we witness transformation of the second pillar, i.e., 'the corrupt elite,' which can no longer be the case. However, the fight against corruption remains in their agenda, too.

## *4. Populism in Armenia*

Nowadays, Armenia faces the whole spectrum of crises of political development. These include distribution, mobility, participation, identity, and legitimacy. According to an Armenian political scientist Mariam Margaryan (2018), these issues are much deeper than in other post-Soviet countries. This is conditioned by Spitak Earthquake of 1988, the ongoing Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict, linear liberalization, voucher privatization (in contrast, for instance, to Baltic states, where contract privatization took place), as well as closed borders with two of four neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey) and difficult relations of the third neighbor and with the West. This situation largely affects the political agenda of various political forces in Armenia, equipping them with whole spectrum of populist arsenal. Based on the information above, I will analyze the political programs of the following political forces in Armenia by using the theory of populism as a thin-centered ideology: the HAK, the OEK, and Heritage. Moreover, in my opinion, the strategies of all these forces have followed the theory of Mudde.

The HAK was established in 2008. The party was led by the first president of Armenia Leven Ter-Petrosyan. The Congress comprised eighteen political parties and organization. In the period of 2012-2017, the HAK was presented in Parliament of Armenia with seven deputies. In February 2013, the HAK was transformed into the Armenian National Committee Party (HAK-y veratsvum e 2013).

The peak of the HAK power fell on 2008 when its then-leader, Leven Ter-Petrosyan, ran a presidential campaign. According to the Central Electoral Commission of Armenia, the presidential candidate managed to receive 21.5% votes (Levon Ter-Petrosyan 2008). However, Ter-Petrosyan and the HAK did not agree with the results and initiated multi-thousand protests in capital Yerevan, claiming victory. My consideration of the HAK and its leader as a populist force is based on the approach that it operated with full spectrum of populism arsenal, outlined by Mudde.

To justify this approach, I will now refer to the HAK and Leven Ter-Petrosyan's 2008 electoral program and other conceptual documents as they relate to Mudde's populism triangle. To appeal to people, the HAK publicly presented a social economic policy comprehensive reform program called '100 steps.' This was mainly aimed to fundamentally change the economic situation in Armenia and to provide people's productive participation in sustainable economic development. In discussing the 'corrupt elite,' the program states that:

> the essence of the current political system is based on the concentration of the country's economic resources in the hands of a few oligarchs and their families, as well as the use of state power leverages to provide super profits for that group. Illegal tax and customs privileges, monopolies, provision of extra profits for importers by strengthening the national

> currency – dram, as well as violation of ownership rights led to critical drop of production and export, elimination of free competition, baseless increase of prices, decrease of business activeness. All these factors brought to gradually worsening of social-economic conditions for the people." It continues: "Believe us that the electoral programs of the current candidates do not differ by their words and populist promises. At the same time, I deviate from the standards and traditions should try to speak to people with simple and clear language… (Electoral Programs)

Regarding the general will, the HAK program maintains that "in order to change the situation we need fundamental reforms (…). Only 'massive all-national movement' which is not connected or depended on the system-connected oligarchs can go against the regime for the development of people and state and provide the necessary reforms" (Electoral Programs, 2018). Interestingly, the HAK program states that it is ready to present to people's judgment. This demonstrates that the HAK not only speaks about 'political will' in referencing reforms, but the party has also presented the exact mechanisms and solutions to achieving its goals. However, the search on the ground has not provided any real indications of these mechanisms. In this regard it is also worth analyzing the '100 Steps' program of the HAK (2010):

- 15. Public governance by polls
- 37. Sufficient growth of the state budget. With the necessary steps, by 2010, the budget will be increased to USD 4.5-5 billion (from approximately USD 3 billion in 2017).
- 38. Refund of deposits.

The latter is a very sensitive issue in Armenia, as most middle and old age individuals had lost their deposits in Soviet banks, due to them being frozen after Armenia gained independence. However, the program talks about multi-billion USD sums. For this reason, it is not clear how the HAK was going to cover that budget.

- 83. Sufficient growth of education spending providing 1% of GDP.
- 91. Subsidization of agricultural production.

As we can see, these points focus mainly on social economic factors, which resembles the Latin American case. However, the HAK does not suggest any answer to the main question: How to increase the budget and GDP to support all these measures? At the same time, it is interesting to mention the

absence of a nationalism component in the HAK and their Ter-Petrosyan programs. On the contrary, provided that the most salient nationalist topic within Armenian society is Turkey and Azerbaijan, the candidate from the HAK advocated for reconciliation with Turkey.

This step required the party to distance itself from the nationalist part of the electorate, while appealing to those who were exclusively more concerned with socio-economic development. Notably, the program did not criticize the Soviet past (as some other populist forces in Armenia and other post-Soviet countries have done). Rather, it clarified that in terms of peace, the period of the Soviet past has become one of the most unique periods in Armenia's three-thousand-year history. Despite the Civil War of 1921, collectivization and hunger (1928-1933), Stalin terror (1937-1938) and World War II, all of which had very negative implications, during that period no enemy entered the territory of modern Armenia. It is enough to mention that almost no European nation managed to escape from this kind of tragedy (Electoral Program, 2018). This could be a step to gain support from those who had this memory of 'old good times,' or the generation of '*homo soveticus*,' as well as appeal to the past and to the people, to their collective memory.

We see the continuation of 'the people' versus 'the elite' discourse in the program. It states that:

nowadays we have correlation from the mainstream development, as state deprived from the perspective of prosperity and sentenced to miserable existence, a people with lost mental calmness. The reason, on one hand, is the disintegration of the USSR and as a consequence, wide ranges of social and economic crises. On the other hand, current situation is determined by the ruling elites (Electoral Program, 2018).

Thus, we see that the program described what the people dreamed about, providing a long list of people's wishes. However, we do not see clear suggestions as to how to overcome the problems and make the dream a reality.

At the same time, the electoral manifesto specified the following major programmatic thrusts in the areas of domestic policy, foreign policy, rule of law, the economy, and social policy. The following points deserve closer attention. Also here, the question of how these promises would be implemented remains open. For example, one of these promises call for an annual income growth of 20% of salaries, and 30-40% for pensions, as well as the development of private pension foundations. Another such point is paying AMD 500.000 (approximately USD 1000) for the first child, AMD

one million for the second one, and 1.5 million for the third (Electoral Program).

It is worth mentioning that the HAK was the major opposition force back in 2008, having acquired a great deal of public support. After Ter-Petrosyan had lost presidential elections to Serzh Sargsyan (the former president of Armenia in 2008-2018), Ter-Petrosyan and the HAK organized massive protests to demand a re-election.

During the 2012 Parliament elections, the HAK promoted only seven deputies to the country's parliament, otherwise known as the National Assembly of Armenia. The reason for this kind of rapid failure will be discussed below. However, at this point, it is worth remembering words of Baranov (2015) that populism is generally a short-term strategy and does not survive in the long run.

When it comes to the organizational structure of the HAK, back in 2008, the presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrosyan managed to form an electoral bloc, one which was comprised of more than twenty political parties and initiatives, including Heritage, which I discuss below, as well as a few dozens of NGOs. Interestingly, the section of the Party official website which details the history does not provide the history of the movement, but rather the biography of the leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan. To conclude my analysis of the HAK, it is necessary to mention that during the 2017 Parliamentary elections, the party did not receive a single seat, which was objective enough, provided its very low level of public support.

### *5. The Armenian Renaissance Association and the OEK*

The OEK was established in 1998. The founder, Arthur Baghdasaryan, was elected Party president. For a long time the party cooperated with ruling political forces. Its representatives held various positions in the legislative and executive bodies within the coalition with the ruling Republican Party. Baghdasaryan held the positions of the Speaker of the Parliament and Secretary of the National Security Council. In 2017, the OEK joined the Armenian Renaissance Association (HVM), which was formed earlier in 2016 and encompassed ten parties and 51 NGOs.

It is worth mentioning that the OEK was the only political force among those which this chapter discusses that formed part of the ruling coalition with the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK). However, after leaving the coalition, the OEK started to severely criticize the government

which it was once a part of and the reforms in which it participated in, anticipating public support by opposing the 'corrupt elites.'

This step was used by political opponents of Baghdasaryan and the OEK to demonstrate his dishonesty and populist nature, as well as to reveal his plan to reshuffle forces leading up to the parliamentary elections of 2017. At the same time, it is necessary to accept that the pre-electoral meaning of such a move was too evident to bring in political dividends and allow Baghdasaryan to play the game he had planned. As a result, for the first time in more than ten years, Baghdasaryan and his party were not able to receive a single mandate in the new Parliament.

When it comes to the organizational structure, it is worth mentioning that the official website under section "Party" contains only the party history and the biography of its leader. At the same time neither the old web site of the OEK nor the new one contains any political program (strangely enough for a political party). More clarity with the OEK populist nature brings the interview with one of the OEK/HVM representatives who wished to remain undisclosed.

The young party member outlined 30 key programmatic points of the party. Among others it is worth outlining the following:

- 17. Development of health insurance system.
- 18. Implementation of measures devoted to decrease prices for gas, electricity, drinking water and irrigation water.
- 19. Support in the amount of 500.000 AMD to every newly married.
- 20. Pension increase for people with restricted abilities.
- 21. Annual increase of minimal wages.
- 28. Decrease of prices for utility services.

These articles are notable with their clear social essence, which brings the party closer to the left-socialist populism. Why populism? Because the political force does not explain how it will promote the implementation of these steps. Moreover, it had leverages for initiation of reforms to achieve this vision while being in the government. However, it never happened on the ground. Interestingly, this political force did not apply any nationalist rhetoric.

The next political party I would like to discuss is Heritage. It considers itself a national-liberal political force, which was established in 2002 by an Armenian public figure and former minister of Foreign Affairs Raffi Hovhannisyan. This is the only party among our populist examples which applied soft nationalist agenda to its political program. The Party program,

as the previous cases, followed Mudde's logic and developed through the above-mentioned triangle: people – corrupt elite – general will. According to the Party Charter, the main objective was to foster the prosperity of Armenian people, and to provide to the upcoming generations well-developed, free and prosperous Armenia. The goal should be accomplished based on universal and national values, as well as past civilizational heritage (Charter). It continues and provides the following list of problems, which needs to be addressed to establish the conditions for national development:

1. Establishment of democratic state in Armenia based on rule of law
2. Development of civic initiatives and their establishment in civil life (Charter).

It is interesting enough (especially for Armenian political life) that a political party speaks not about how to gain power, but to develop civil society. However, Heritage claimed 'participation' in the functioning and establishment of Armenian state and local authorities through free elections. They did not specify the struggle for power or presence in the parliament as one of the main goals to promote legal changes. According to the Charter, Heritage had the following structure: Congress, Council, Board, and President of the Board, Charter Committee, Audit Committee, and territorial divisions. The highest party body is the Congress. However, as in previous cases, power was concentrated around one person. Initially, it was Raffi Hovhanissyan, and then it was Armen Martirosyan, who was recently elected as the Board President. It is worth mentioning that the official web page contains the pre-election program for 2005 and 2008, but not for 2013, which was when the party leader and presidential candidate Raffy Hovhannisyan was closest to success.

The elaboration of these programs allows us to clearly see Mudde's conceptual triangle. Concerning the people, Heritage sees Armenia of future as a state, where a person is the highest value with its rights and freedoms, the state serves the people, the citizen forms the basis of state, the people are the source of state power, the nation is the anchor, and their freedom integral to sovereignty. Regarding social-economic implications: Armenians, who are important economic drivers in other countries, should not live in poverty in their homeland. Interestingly, Heritage regarded the EU membership agenda for Armenia as a priority. However, the question about how realistic it is remains open. As mentioned above, Heritage injected some nationalist discourse into public debate. It stated in particular that "Armenian people should first of all rely on its own forces." The party

also claimed recognition of independence of Artsakh (Nagono-Karabakh Republic) or its reunification with Armenia; and promoted stimulation of repatriation. This of course rings hollow after Azerbaijan seized that territory by force in late summer of 2023.

Regarding the elites: "The main responsible for our failure are, undoubtedly, authorities, which are not formed by the people with free and fair elections. Those in power continuously have promised to change the life but accused in their failure everyone except themselves. They unacceptably abused people`s trust…" (Program). Based on the above two ideas they claim to represent the general will. Thus, we see that Heritage followed the 'classical' populist logic presented by Mudde with thin-ideological nature. In addition to social and economic it developed the populist agenda based on nationalist sentiments. The above-presented research allows to conclude that populism in Armenia is a comprehensive and multifaceted combination of global populist trends, post-Soviet experience, as well as domestic specificities. Moreover, it is a combination of thin-centered ideology, as well as populist strategy and tactics. Armenia has witnessed populism of the economy and identity. However, in contrast to the European case, the issue of identity in Armenia has mostly geopolitical essence and is about the geopolitical orientation the country should take for effective transition.

All of these parties have at least one thing in common: in exact political time, they were on the peak of political glory with strong public support. However, they lost this political capital in a very short period of time. Particularly, all the discussed cases, i.e., the HAK, Heritage, and HVM have used, fully or partially, the following issues in their populist agendas:

- National social-economic development
- Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
- Foreign policy priorities
- Convergence of political and ethno-national populism

To answer the question why populism is continuously failing in Armenia, I would outline the following reasons: First, populism is short-term in general. Second, political forces do not heavily rely on an ideological component. All parties have acted according to the logic and ideological underpinnings of liberal democracy with the minor addition, in some cases, of nationalist features. Finally, all these forces claim that only they can 'save' Armenia. This is why prior to each election we see long and boring negotiations among opposition leaders who seek to establish a united front against the

ruling elites, which ultimately tends to fail. Finally, I conclude that populist forces in Armenia are based on the idea of a strong and charismatic leader.

## 6. Conclusion

The research evidently demonstrated the multifaceted nature of populism. Depending on regional or national contexts, populism tends to take the form which will bring the most dividends to the actors who practice it. On one hand, this proves that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work with populism. On the other hand, we see that there are certain schemes, i.e., people-elite-general will, which can be applied to analyze populism in North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, the post-Soviet populism has a unique feature, i.e., 'populism-from-above,' which is when forces in power apply populism not to gain but hold onto power. Interestingly, this approach could extend to other regions of the world, where people are motivated by decline of democracy. Another specific feature of post-Soviet populism is defined by the ongoing crises of political development. These crises have equipped populist leaders with 'easy solutions' to struggle for power.

In this context, the only way to avoid populism or at least to decrease its impact is to develop participation in democracy, polyarchy, and the overall shift from democratic transition to democratic consolidation.

## Works cited

ANK. "Electoral Programs." *ANK official website*, http://www.anc.am/?page_id=1060#tab1. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

ANK. "Hay Azgayin Kongresi patmutyun." *ANK official website*, http://www.anc.am/?page_id=1021. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

ANK. "Patmutyun." *ANK official website*, http://www.anc.am/?page_id=1023. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

ArleAm. "'Orinats' Yerkir' Kusakts'ut'yuny Dadarets'num E Ir Gortsuneut'yuny." *ArleAm*, 10 Feb. 2017, www.1in.am/2089227.html. Accessed 21 June 2018.

Armen Press. "HAK-y Veratsvum E «Hay Azgayin Kongres» Kusakts'ut'yan." *ArmenPress*, 8 Feb. 2013, armenpress.am/arm/news/707689. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

Achkasov, Valeriy Alekseevic. "Nacional-populism v psot-kommunisticheskikh stranakh Centralnoy I Vostochnoy Evropi: prichini rosta elektoralnoy podderjki." *Vestmik MGIMO*, no. 5, 2011, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/natsional-populizm-v-postkommunisticheskih-stranah-tsentralnoy-i-vostochnoy-evropy-prichiny-rosta-elektoralnoy-podderzhki. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Russian).

Aslanidis, Paris. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1, SAGE Publications, Oct. 2015, pp. 88–104.

Baranov, Nikolai Alekseevic. "Nationalniy populism kak istochnik konfliktov na postsovetskom prostranstve." *Forum Nacia i mir*, Ezhegodnik Instotuta sravnitelnoy politologii RAN, Moskva, Misl, 2004, pp. 363-382 (in Russian).

---. "Populism kak factor politicheskoy ekstraordinarnosti (na primere Respubliki Belarus)." *Sbornik nauchnikh statey*, Krasnodar, 2011, pp. 84-92 (in Russian).

---. "Vozrojdenie populizma: Evropeyskiy opit i Rossiyskie praktiki." *Vestnik SbGU*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015, pp. 25-36, http://vestnik.spbu.ru/html15/s06/s06v3/03.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Russian).

Bogapova, Anastasia. "Populism v postsovetskoy Belarusi." *Materiali 4-oy mejdunarodnoy konferencii: Politicheskie processi na postsovetskom prostranstve*, 14 April 2015, http://umka.volsu.ru/newumka3/upload/637551515712111selectionpr.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Russian).

Canovan, Margaret. "Populism for Political Theorists?" *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Informa UK Limited, Oct. 2004, pp. 241 52.

Gherghina, Sergiu, et al. *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms*. Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2013.

Heritage Party. "Charter of the 'Heritage' Party", *Heritage Party Official Website,* https://www.heritage.am/hy/about/charter?showall=&start=1. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018 (in Armenian).

---. "'Heritage' Party Official Facebook Page." *Heritage Party Official Facebook Page*, www.facebook.com/Heritage.am. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

---. "Program-2005." *Heritage Party Official Website*, www.heritage.am/en/about/program. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

Hraparak. "Inchi e veratsvum OEK-y." *Hraparak,* 29 April 2014, https://hraparak.am/posts/591fb113e3d84d0d37fd6531/ինչի-է-վերածվում-օեկը. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Armenian).

Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Lragir. "Hay Azgayin Kongress. 100 Qayl." *Lragir*, 23 Feb. 2010, www.lragir.am/2010/02/23/32618. Accessed 21 June 2018 (in Albanian).

Martirosyany, Armen. "Yntrvets varchutyan anxagah." *Heritage Party Official Website,* 25 February 2018, https://www.heritage.am/hy/news/580-25022018. Accessed 21 June 2018, (in Armenian).

Makarenko, Boris Igorevic. "Populism i politicheskie institute: sravnitelnaya perspektiva." *Byulleten' obshchestvennogo mneniya. Dannyye. Analiz. Obsuzhdeniya,* vol. 124, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 8-21 (in Russian).

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, Oxford UP, 2017.

---. "Voices of the Peoples: Populism in Europe and Latin America Compared." *Working Paper No. 378*, Kellog Institute for International Studies, July 2011, http://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/378_0.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2018.

Ter-Petrosian, Levon. "In February 19, 2008, Levon Ter-Petrosian Received Between 30-35 Percent (490,000 - 570,000 Votes) - Aniarc." *Ani Armenian Research Center*, 20 Aug. 2015, www.aniarc.am/2015/08/20/u-s-deplomat-in-february-19-2008-levon-ter-petrosian-received-between-30-35-percent-490000-570000-votes. Accessed 21 June 2018.

World Bank. "ECA Economic Update: Polarization and Populism." *Office of the Chief Economist*, November 2016,

https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/494811479976405381/pdf/Polarization-and-populism.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2018.

# Chapter 6: The Rotating Populist Discourses of Post-Soviet Georgia: The Nation, the State and the People (1991-2018)

*David Matsaberidze*

## *1. Introduction*

The politics of post-Soviet independent Georgia have been highly personalized in that they have been shaped by influential political figures who have acted as charismatic leaders. Their common goal was to achieve popular support for the establishment, to maintain and exercise power, hence the claim, 'on behalf of the people,' and to create policies that would transcend national and social boundaries. The ruling political parties sought to unify the population and pursued a discursive strategy in which the people were symbolically elevated and pitched against an imagined or constructed internal or external 'other.' Already the rise of ethnic Georgian nationalism during the late 1980s and early 1990s presented an 'imperial' Russia as the external 'other.' Ethnic minorities in Georgia—Abkhazians and South Ossetians—were framed as the internal 'other' and depicted as a serious threat to the integrity of the state and the very nationhood of the newly independent Georgia. Although both presidents and prime ministers routinely blamed all problems and hardships on their predecessors, they nonetheless all followed the same well-worn schemas for addressing pressing problems. This supports the assumption that any kind of politics pursued in Georgia has an inherently populist style and character, as the two, populism and politics, largely overlap in this country.

In Georgia, it is taken for granted that political leaders are populists because of their emphasis on charisma and personality. However, although circumstances favored the emergence of political populism and a populist discourse of persuasion was a widespread phenomenon, these developments were neither inevitable nor automatic. Thus, the mantra that all politics is populist per se must be rejected and should be recognized as a syndrome rather than an as an ideology. The former involves a set of political discursive practices that help create and maintain dividing lines

between political opponents and political parties in domestic politics. Such political discourse typically encompasses the charismatic leader, popular societal demands, strong nationalist component, and the usual affirmation of the common people by the elites.[1] It also involves a special kind of political practice that form a functional and/or strategic part of the political process (Van Dijk 1997: 18). It juxtaposes the texts and speeches of professional politicians who pursue political ambitions and objectives in public debate with the various addressees of political communication events, namely the audience, i.e., the citizens, the population, in order to fulfill certain purposes and achieve goals. (Van Dijk 1997: 12-14). This is not only a discursive mode of making policy, but also shapes the overall political agenda and public opinion, which in turn legitimizes policy decision-making. While neither all politics is discourse, nor can all political analysis be reduced to discourse analysis, politics and policymaking also means engaging in discursive practices (Van Dijk 1997: 38). Therefore, reflecting on discursive practices contributes not only to our understanding of customary political practices, but also to their relationship to the social and political context and its detailed properties, including the constraints on discourse itself (Van Dijk 1997: 39-41).

The chapter compares populist discourses expressed through the rhetoric of presidents and prime ministers with messages that contextualize populism as a political tool of elites. It contrasts "ideological-political discourse with ideological-political ideological and political arena through an "emphasis/de-emphasis on our/their good/bad actions" (Van Dijk 1997: 28), where "nationalist or populist appeals in political argumentation are classical examples of persuasion by making reference to the benefits for the nation and people" (Van Dijk 1997: 30). Post-Soviet Georgian populism is a mixture of populism in policymaking and nationalism in ideology. The discursive exploration of the political context, the political process, and the political system shows how everything is permeated by references to symbolic politics, popular constructs, symbols, certain forms of language and text, and practices of legitimation through media and opinion formation. This allows politicians to control the public discourse and thus in part of the public mind (Van Dijk 1997: 43-44).

1 The text and talk of professional politicians, or political institutions, such as presidents and prime ministers, and other members of government, parliament or political parties, both at the local, national and international levels, includes both the speaker and the audience.

The following categories defining the political text and context apply selectively to the different phases of post-Soviet Georgia following Van Dijk (1997: 16-18):

- social sphere (all five presidencies),
- political systems (with the exception of the Gamsakhurdia era, the immediate transitional period after the former Soviet political system was dismantled and the new one had not yet been established),
- political values (the Saakashvili presidency, which brought Western values through ideas and ideals into the domestic and foreign policy decision-making process);
- political ideologies (nationalism perceived and expressed differently through the president's national-political projects);
- political institutions (legislative, executive, and judicial, which do not counterbalance each other during all presidencies);
- political organizations, political groups, and political actors (which are intertwined and usually associated with the strong leader/personality/actor);
- political relations, political process, and political actions (orchestrated and defined by the strong political personality, mainly the leader of the ruling political party, acting either as president or prime minister);
- political discourses and political perceptions (the first defined by the strong political leader in accordance with the second one—societal expectations/public opinion).

The chapter focuses on the structures and strategies of texts and discourses. It argues that the first president, Sviad Gamsakhurdia, was a redemptive populist who wanted to free the Georgian nation from the Russian yoke, thereby responding to the anti-Soviet sentiments of the time. His successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was a pragmatic populist who restored order and stability to the ransacked nation after the civil war and ethnic conflicts of the early 1990s by introducing a civil society discourse built on democratization and state-building. The third president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was an idealistic populist who used an idealist, pro-Western discourse to renew the Georgian nation through modernization and democratization in the mode of a Western, civic nation. Since 2012, a kind of loss of the national idea can be observed in the political discourse, as the populist discourses of President Giorgi Margvelashvili (2013-2018) and the incumbent prime minister clash: The former defends the constitutional backbone of the state, i.e., a functioning democratic state for the people, while the latter propagates

left-wing populism to restore dignity and ensure the social well-being of the people, which threatens the national idea. The prime minister's discourse is more widely accepted in society because politics becomes personal in light of a leader who succeeded in defeating the so-called 'brutal regime' of the previous government (Ivanishvili vs. Saakashvili). This aspect is a constant feature of the rhetoric of the post-Saakashvili political leadership.

The study employs methods of qualitative analysis and refers to the discourse-historical approach—a method of "systemic collection and analysis of information, which is related to particular past events and enables to explain present developments for prediction of the future" (Connaway and Powell 2010: 79). The method of process tracing, in its causal inference line (Bennett 2010: 207-219), reconstructs the shifting political tendencies through the secondary analysis of public speeches and State of the Union addresses, as well as commentaries and policy papers.

## *2. The general context of the populist discourses of the people of Georgia*

All Georgian presidents focused their rhetoric on the multiethnic Georgian nation to mobilize the masses through the discourse of persuasion. This was constructed around the pressing problems of the day. Georgian presidents have instrumentalized social divisions and operated with empty signifiers. Initially, such discourse was based on nationalist and independence rhetoric (Gamsakhurdia 1989-1991), then on order and stability (Shevardnadze 1993-1999), and then on failed attempts at fighting corruption—despite some notable successes in state institution building and the consolidation of the nation (Shevardnadze 2000-2003). This period was followed by state-building versus nation-building (Saakashvili 2004-2012), and finally, by attempts to restore the people's dignity and their confidence in the state by shifting between prioritizing social welfare and reinforcing constitutionality and state institutions (different prime ministers vs. President Margvelashvili 2012-2018).

This raises the following questions: What messages and strategies have been used by politicians to target their audiences in Georgia? To show how the discourse of persuasion has shaped Georgia's political leaders as populists, it is first necessary to deconstruct the following policy approaches: anti-imperialism (*Gamsakhurdia*), stability and order (*Shevardnadze*), reform and modernization under democratization (*Saakashvili*), and social justice and legitimacy vs. the strengthening of state institutions (PMs vs.

Margvelashvili). Especially in the last case, political discourse has led to the creation of internal boundaries through dichotomizations within social space, as well as changing modes of articulating social, political, and ideological content. Populist discourse "simplifies the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise" (Laclau 2005a: 17). Such discourse is evident in the rhetoric and practices of Georgian presidents and prime ministers. They all follow a "logic of simplification and try to make certain terms imprecise for political action." Thus, bringing the broader context into the analysis helps uncover whether "the 'vagueness' of populist discourses [was] the consequence of social reality itself, [which] in some situations [may be] vague and undetermined" (Laclau 2005a: 18), or whether such 'vagueness' was due to politicians employing populism as an effective strategy to communicate with the people and promote their political goals.

The emergence of post-Soviet populist discourses in Georgia coincided with the period referred to in the literature as the triple transition, or simultaneous changes in the political (democracy), economic (market) and broader society (state) spheres. This notion of a triple transition is a characteristic feature of post-socialist transitions, especially throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Offe 1991). In what may be considered actually a "quadruple transition" (Kuzio 2001: 174), the cases of transformation of post-Soviet states (including Georgia) require us to consider a fourth component: the construction of the nation. This became the central element of the populist discourses of each Georgian president. In the face of changing social and political realities, Georgia's presidents have resorted to competing public political narratives. They have done so by forming temporally and spatially defined narratives of political actors that contained the most important messages of the time in order to manipulate national political discourses. These metanarratives have centered on different types of ethnic or civic nationalism, plundered the "marketplace of ideas" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 66), and destabilized the socio-political environment in Georgia. Such narratives were especially destabilizing during periods when power transition took place between governments. This happened because "national mythmaking becomes an attempt to mobilize support for nationalist doctrines or discredit opponents through dubious arguments, [...] the product of deliberate elite efforts to mobilize latent solidarities behind a particular political program" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 66).

With the exception of the transition of executive power from Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze, all of the changes of government were peace-

ful, but all involved a mixture of nationalism as ideology and populist rhetoric as a strategy for mobilizing the population around the presidents' main agenda (see above). Three aspects are necessary to understand the influence of nationalism on (re)shaping Georgia's internal and external political discourses: ongoing social changes (or challenges), pre-existing ethnic-symbolic resources, and a new ideological movement (arguably nationalism) that emerged from the first two during the transition period. These three features of the Georgian political landscape form the basis for the politically motivated narratives that link specific developments in order to impose the desired order by establishing causal links between selected events and the planned political discourse. Against this backdrop, each president managed to fill in the empty signifiers of the time by using the links between nationalism and populism in his rhetoric, which have focused on the cause of independence (Gamsakhurdia), order and stability (Shevardnadze), state-building vs. nation-building (Saakashvili), and a functioning state for the people vs. the dignity of the people (President Margvashvili vs. acting prime minister).

The populist rhetoric of the presidents of Georgia has concentrated on different aspects of transition, as mentioned above. Each president overwhelmingly focused on politics, but Gamsakhurdia failed in his project, as it was motivated by ethnic nationalism but performed poorly in the economy and faltered in the area of cultural policy—which is necessary for the multi-ethnic country. Shevardnadze succeeded in domestic and foreign policies in terms of stabilization, directing the former according to the principles of civic nationalism and the latter according to geopolitics. He failed, however, in the sustainable development of state institutions, which were significantly harmed by corruption. Saakashvili, in his ambitious program of state-building and nation-building, succeeded in the former, primarily due to reinforcement of state institutions, and partly in the latter with non-secessionist minority regions. However, Saakashvili failed in the conflict with the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after which the country found itself in its greatest political crisis: the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008.

The duality of power between President Margvelashvili and the Prime Minister (Ivanishvili and his successors) led to a dichotomy of populist discourse in Georgia as long, as the former focused on strengthening the constitutional backbone of the state, whereas the latter turned to left-wing populism. Both failed, but the latter discourse survived because of Ivan-

ishvili's strong socio-political capital, given that personality plays an outsize role in Georgian politics.

It is difficult to make similar predictions for the current president, Salome Zurabishvili, for a number of reasons. First, like Margvelashvili, she is also handpicked by Ivanishvili, even though her presidential powers are limited as a result of new provisions that the parliament added to the constitution during Margvelashvili's presidency. Introduced in 2017, these constitutional amendments had the aim of preparing the country to become a parliamentary republic, a vision that came into effect with the election of the new president, Salome Zurabishvili, in 2018. As she has not engaged in any risky political behavior thus far, it is difficult to predict what Zurabishvili's domestic and foreign policies will look like, especially in the context of relations with the former prime minister and still influential figure in Georgian politics, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Thus far, Zurabishvili has shown herself to be politically in line with the ruling Georgian Dream Party and avoids inciting a rift between the office of the president and that of the prime minister. President Zurabishvili has also not pardoned ex-President Saakashvili, who returned to Georgia from exile in early October 2021 and was subsequently arrested by the Georgian Dream leadership for alleged mismanagement during his presidency. Nevertheless, Saakashvili's imprisonment did spark a new wave of anti-government protests among Georgia's opposition parties.

The following sections analyze the populist discourses of post-Soviet Georgia according to the presidencies during 1991-2018 and explore populist discourse through the deconstruction of their structure, policies, and ideology. The study skips the term of the current President Salome Zurabishvili. Due to the constitutional amendments of 2017, Georgia became a parliamentary republic and the president assumed a symbolic function in Georgia's political life, while the main power is now in the hands of the prime minister; although in the latter case, the populist discourse of the welfare state is still maintained. The analysis shows how nation, state, and people merged in public discourses and how these concepts were instrumentalized by political elites in existing and changing contexts to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies. The rotating populist discourses of Georgia's political leaders, expressed in various populist messages and focused on the nation and the people, formed the basis for their self-perception(s) as saviors of the country. Their populist rhetoric was not consistent, but rather responded to fluctuating socio-political conditions. The baseline of their populism was to dichotomize the past and present in

terms of both positive and negative contexts, but never offered a reliable path to the future, i.e., a sustainable political approach.

The populist cause never focused on the democratic origins of the nation/state, but rather limited itself to attacking political opponents and their policies by labeling them 'backward-looking' and 'not forward-looking.' The idea of the nation/people came first and foremost in their rhetoric, as the nation is the primary entity around which the population/ electorate is effectively mobilized. Thus, political leaders conflated and equated the Georgian people and the Georgian nation while presenting their political goals as directly related to the demands and welfare of the Georgian nation/people.

### 2.1 *Zviad Gamsakhurdia: The cause of independence*

Georgia's first democratically elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, is considered a populist leader by both the public and scholars (Jones 2013), however, it is difficult to distinguish between his rhetoric and his policies. Due to his short presidency, he failed to develop concrete policies for the country's domestic and foreign affairs. Obviously, his rhetoric succeeded in mobilizing the masses for the national liberation movement that eventually emerged under his leadership and direction, although he failed to consistently formulate and determine the priorities and course of Georgia's domestic and foreign policy throughout his presidency. Domestically, he alienated his former political partners and ruled out any cooperation with the opposition. In terms of foreign policy, he misjudged the geopolitical realities of the post-Soviet states in general and the Caucasus in particular. First, he incorrectly assessed the differences between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation and erred in predicting future Georgian-Russian relations. Second, he was unsuccessful in attracting the political interests of the Western partners in order to position them as countervailing forces vis-à-vis Russia.

The populism of Zviad Gamsakhurdia was quite simple: He equated his personality with the people by creating a discourse about certain political and social events. Gamsakhurdia's failure to transform his personality from the leader of the national liberation movement to the president of a multinational country determined his method of governance. Rather than respond to the changing political and socioeconomic context of the time, he tried to gain the political loyalty/support of the masses by constantly

invoking the past to make projections about the future. With this rhetoric, he presented Soviet Union as the sole reason for the demise of Georgian statehood and saw the latter as the salvation for the Georgian nation and people. He denounced the Soviet past—its dictatorship, totalitarian character, and communist ideology in general—as a threat to the future political-economic and socio-cultural development of the Georgian nation (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 37), and he attempted to demonize the ex-Soviet nomenklatura. For example, he ruled out the possibility of former Soviet Union Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze rejoining Georgia's leadership, "as he would be pursuing Kremlin policies and therefore would have no chance of winning the support of the Georgian people" (Gamsakhurdia 2013g: 158). Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia's constant emphasis on traitors, enemies of the people, and provocateurs by referring first to the Kremlin and later to his political opponents and the intelligentsia, referring to the Soviet cultural elites, alienated many of his former allies. Within a year of his election, they would switch to the opposition and support Shevardnadze's return to Georgia after the coup d'état.

After becoming president of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia's charisma turned to authoritarian tendencies. He sought to justify his ambition to dominate Georgian political life and marginalize the opposition by invoking the parliamentary elections of October 28, 1990, as an expression of the aspirations of the Georgian people, who had shown the highest national and civic consciousness and the will to fight for the restoration of Georgia and to support his political party, the *Round Table – Independent Georgia*, to power (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 23). This development culminated on March 31, 1991 in the referendum on the issue of declaration of independence of Georgia from the Soviet Union. This political party's record success in parliamentary elections and strong support for the country's independence in the referendum, as well as the high turnout in the 1991 presidential elections provided popular legitimacy (in contrast to his position as chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR, prior to Georgia's independence on April 9, 1991). Gamsakhurdia used this political strength when radicalized opposition and paramilitary formations demanded his resignation: "I was elected with 87 percent support of the Georgian people. These people demand that I remain in power to defeat the criminals operating in the country" (Gamsakhurdia 2013b: 423). Thus, he equated his personality as a popularly elected president with the will of the Georgian nation/people and claimed to conduct national politics in the spirit of the people so as to

strengthen the foundation of the new republic against the challenge of the opposition.

Yet, Gamsakhurdia had significant weaknesses such as no experience in leading the political, economic, and sociocultural affairs of an independent country. He had an insufficient understanding of international affairs and the geopolitical situation around Georgia. To compensate for these weaknesses, Gamsakhurdia utilized persuasion discourse. It focused on the Kremlin and Soviet policies as the main reason for the demise of the Georgian nation. Therefore, any public actor connected with Soviet-era officials and intelligentsia, even those active in the transition, were to be excluded from the politics of a newly independent Georgia, as "they were rejected by the Georgian people because of their collaboration with the communist regime—with the enemies of Georgia" (Gamsakhurdia 2013a: 208).

Gamsakhurdia sharpened this political line by calling the opposition 'traitors' to Georgia and the Georgian nation. In this way, he set internal boundaries himself, sometimes going after powerful political and social actors, whose actions he labeled treasonous (Gamsakhurdia 2013d: 224). This aspect had negative consequences, both for his presidency and for the newly created Georgian state. In consequence, a part of his government went into opposition to the president and was supported by Soviet-era intelligentsia, who plotted to oust Gamsakhurdia in what has become known as the Georgian coup d'état. This internal military conflict took place from December 22, 1991 to January 6, 1992 and subsequently triggered the Georgian Civil War.

The conflict pitted forces which were loyal to President Zviad Gamsakhurdia against several paramilitary organizations. Much of the action concentrated on the siege of the Georgian Parliament building, where Gamsakhurdia was isolated, cut off from relations with the masses. Being captive in the basement-dining hall of the parliament building (referred to as the bunker by his opponents) during December and January 1992, he attempted to mobilize mass support for his fight against the plotters. In his rhetoric, he declared the coup an assault not only to his political power, but also to the Georgian state and nation. The opposition was framed as enemies of the Georgian people and the interests of the Georgian state (Gamsakhurdia 2013e: 132-133). This kind of rhetoric was the last political tool available to him in order mobilize the population at the time. However, due to the overall instability and economic difficulties during the post-independence period, as well as the general chaos in the government and on the streets, people no longer supported him. Gamsakhurdia was forced to

seek political asylum abroad and left a devastated country after only fifteen months in power, lasting from November 1990 to January 1992.

Following Gamsakhurdia's fall, a Military Council took power in Tbilisi, bringing back Eduard Shevardnadze, the last Soviet Foreign Affairs Minister, to have him take the reins of government. This prompted a revolt by the supporters of the ousted president, who continued their armed struggle against government of Shevardnadze. In the fall of 1993, Gamsakhurdia returned to Georgia in a failed bid to regain power. When this rebellion was eventually crushed with the help of Russian military, Gamsakhurdia was forced to go into hiding. He was found dead in early 1994. Subsequently, Shevardnadze ruled in Georgia until he himself was ousted in the so-called 2003 'Rose Revolution.'

Throughout Gamsakhurdia's short presidency, he failed to set coherent political priorities for his government. This was in part due to his political inexperience apart from being a dissident under the communist regime. He made the mistake trying to align the political future of the country with his own and that of his political his party, Round Table – Independent Georgia. Initially, both he and his platform enjoyed the support of the Georgian people. After all, Gamsakhurdia had been elected president in 1991 with 86.5% of the vote and an electoral turnout of over 83% (Gamsakhurdia 2013c: 131).

He also assumed that Georgia's independence would be generally recognized and that his foreign policy course would eventually be endorsed by the leaders of Western countries. To this end, he sent messages to the presidents and heads of international organizations to arouse their interest in the brave little nation that fought against the Soviet Union, but to no avail. Georgia was not recognized internationally until after his passing. Due to Georgia's delayed international recognition, which was caused by the geopolitical turmoil following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, Gamsakhurdia sought to strengthen his political positions in the country. In doing so, he drew a sharp line of distinction between the previous government as a 'Russian colony' and his popularly elected government: "A colonial government is not elected by the people, while the current national government was elected by the people, which ended Georgia's colonial status and replaced the center-appointed regime with a popularly elected government" (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 27). As a result, Gamsakhurdia felt that he had to be accountable to the nation that had supported him in the elections and gave televised addresses and public speeches.

Gamsakhurdia intended to rally the Georgian people around the newly elected national government (Gamsakhurdia 2013C: 129). To remain in close contact with the people, he governed the country from the streets, through mass rallies, rather than through political institutions. Neglecting to build and solidify institutions and remaining internationally isolated, Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric significantly alienated the political opposition, which made it difficult for him to effectively address the multitude of domestic challenges. This prepared the way for his downfall. These forces, composed of both political actors and representatives of the intelligentsia, joined those social groups that later sought ways to legitimize the military council established after Gamsakhurdia's ouster and were ultimately responsible for inviting Shevardnadze to become the new head of state for a transitional period and then president.

### 2.2 *Eduard Shevardnadze: order and stability*

After the civil war, Eduard Shevardnadze promised to bring order and stability to the Georgian state. After he was invited to take the reins of power, he was made the de facto head of the state during a transition period from 1992 to 1995, dubbed the 'interregnum' (Jones 2012). He subsequently became the second democratically elected president of Georgia by securing a majority of the popular vote. Consolidating the Georgian nation was viewed as prerequisite for strengthening his political power after the civil war that took place in winter of 1992 and the ethnic conflicts in both Abkhazia (1992-1994) and South Ossetia (1991-1993). Faced with ransacked state, a destroyed economy, and demolished state institutions, Shevardnadze focused his rhetoric on restoring order and stability and establishing the foundation for a new Georgian state with a government that would be accountable to the citizenry.

One of Shevardnadze's greatest assets was that he enjoyed enormous international prestige and recognition as the last Soviet foreign minister associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and the relatively peaceful dissolution of the nuclear superpower Soviet Union. This was a marked contrast to his predecessor, Gamsakhurdia. In his political speeches and public appeals, which generally focused on a discourse close to the people, Shevardnadze emphasized the need to rebuild the Georgian state in accordance with the interests of its citizens, who should hold politicians accountable in all aspects of state-building (Shevardnadze 1997: 1). In

this way, he laid the foundation for democratic popular control of the government by engaging the general public (Shevardnadze 1997: 3). The motto of order and stability was advanced through measures of political stabilization, economic revitalization, and restoration of territorial integrity, which were controlled and implemented primarily by the Georgian people, who supported government policies to this end. Restoration of territorial integrity and improvement of social conditions of the population were leitmotifs of all his speeches and were framed as goals of a near or distant future.

These slogans filled interchangeably empty signifiers in his rhetoric and were meant to divert society's attention from its present ills. Through his statements about the government's struggle to restore territorial integrity (Shevardnadze 1997: 32) and constant invocation of his international experience and prestige, Shevardnadze argued that his government was actively engaged in resolving territorial issues through its internationalization and was seeking Georgia's international recognition; both aspects were presented as a particular political breakthrough that stood in radical contrast to Gamsakhurdia's presidency (Shevardnadze 1999: 50). His declarations did not remain merely rhetorical, as most international states recognized Georgia's independence and the country became the 179th member of the United Nations in July 1992. In addition, a number of international formats were created to resolve the country's territorial conflicts; however, since these remained ineffective, Shevardnadze had to divert the people's attention from territorial issues to the state's urgent socio-economic problems, calling the settlement of the latter a necessary condition for the resolution of the former.

His motto of 'order and stability' was aimed at pacifying the masses after the lawlessness in the state. Paramilitary formations rampaging through the cities, mafia groups usurping the economic resources of the state, etc. worked perfectly in the context of the post-civil war period. The promise of political stabilization and improvement of economic conditions was translated into necessary measures to fight corruption (Shevardnadze 1997: 14). Shevardnadze announced the fight against street crime and later transformed it into the government's fight against 'corrupt officials' (Shevardnadze 1997: 15).

Nevertheless, he did not succeed in rallying the population around him through the 'national agreement.' A population divided between the groups that supported his government and those who continued to support former President Gamsakhurdia further complicated the task of state and nation

building. Therefore, Shevardnadze's main task was to find ways for national reconciliation of the divided nation after the civil war, and he tried to win the political parties inside and outside the government to this goal by designating external enemies of Georgia as the main threat to the consolidation of the Georgian people and nation (Shevardnadze 1998: 67-68). Thus, his policy was based on the securitization of the state (external threats) and citizens (internal challenges).

Shevardnadze briefly outlined the primary and secondary tasks of his government: the proper assessment of the 1991-1992 developments for the integration of a divided national consciousness on the basis of political consensus (Shevardnadze 1999: 11), while the unification of the fractured consciousness of the Georgian nation would pave the way for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity (Shevardnadze 1998: 71). To this end, Shevardnadze announced a series of inclusionary laws that were later passed by the parliament as a sign of moving from rhetoric to action in the state- and nation-building process: First, laying the groundwork for civic nationalism as a gesture to minorities (and the international donor community) while preserving the privileges of Georgia's titular population (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 24). Second, abolishing the hurdles for the first parliamentary elections in 1992 in order to promote broad representation of the fragmented political landscape, i.e., the various interest groups in society. As a result, all political parties and electoral blocs (except the supporters of Gamsakhurdia) participated in the elections of October 11, 1992, from which twenty-four political groupings won seats in parliament.

The goal of the election was to give Shevardnadze's government legitimacy—therefore, emphasis was placed on representation and many parties and groups were given the opportunity to enter parliament (Aprasidze 2016: 107). Through these measures, Shevardnadze purposefully focused on the citizen whose interests and opinions were to be represented, while also designating citizens as controllers of the state-building process. In this way, Shevardnadze was able to claim that his policies and political (economic) decisions took into account the interests of all citizens of Georgia, regardless of where they lived or their ethnic background (Shevardnadze 1999: 18). He demanded from the other actors in the government sincerity and accountability to the citizens of Georgia, since they, the elected officials, worked for the people and their fate as politicians was in the hands of the people (Shevardnadze 1997: 21). In this way, Shevardnadze tried to create the impression that the citizen was placed at the center of politics, and as proof of his motto of order and stability, unlike in the Gamsakhurdia era,

the government was no longer governed from the street, but from the state institutions through representation.

The main thrust of his rhetoric during the second term focused on the achievements of order and stability, as they allowed a renewed focus on improving the social and economic conditions of the population. In economic policy, Shevardnadze focused mainly on the provision of basic social services to the Georgian population: salaries, pensions, household services. By facilitating economic reforms, he hoped for a gradual but continuous improvement of the social and economic conditions of the population and the resolution of their basic social problems (Shevardnadze 1997: 8).

In terms of budgetary policy, Shevardnadze emphasized the significant contribution of the state to restoring the economy and improving the state's defense capabilities (Shevardnadze 1998: 22). The planned reforms were aimed at creating favorable conditions for the development of individual potential of citizens and its future development (Shevardnadze 1997: 16). Although economic and social conditions remained strained, Shevardnadze attempted to popularize the planned reforms through various mitigating policy measures and promises: the provision of basic state health insurance (Shevardnadze 1999: 48), the creation of one million jobs for Georgia's citizens, and the implementation of specially tailored state subsidy programs to substantially improve citizens' socio-economic conditions (Shevardnadze 1997: 43). Thus, his rhetoric and policies were oriented toward social issues, although the 1998 economic crisis undermined both his economic policies and his political foundations. Shevardnadze's policies failed both in terms of conflict resolution: The new format of "Geneva talks" did not produce tangible results in terms of the expected internationalization of the conflict resolution process (Shevardnadze 1998: 50), and in terms of economic improvement, in which unsuccessful attempts to fight corruption did not play a final role. His initiative to publicly discuss the main precepts of the Anti-Corruption Council failed (Shevardnadze 1998: 8): Experts and public opinion did not support his government's anti-corruption policy as it did not produce tangible results (Shevardnadze 1998: 5).

The stalemate that developed between the decline of the economic situation and the failure of the anti-corruption policy, as well as the apparent relegation of territorial issues to the backstage of politics, allowed his former cabinet member and later main opponent Mikheil Saakashvili to fill the empty signifier with the slogan of fighting corruption and building efficient state institutions that would allow the state to integrate. After the October 2003 parliamentary elections, Saakashvili ended Shevardnadze's

reign on November 23, 2003, on the pretext of gross violations of electoral procedures and falsification of the final election results. As a result of the peaceful protests, he dissolved the elected parliament before its opening and resigned from the presidency. The event was later dubbed the "Rose Revolution," which, according to Saakashvili's rhetoric, ended post-Soviet rule in the country and ushered in a 'mental revolution'—the transition from Soviet thinking to the European type of citizen-centered state- and nation-building process (based on the principles of civic nationalism), which was presented as a necessary condition for solving the country's main challenge: territorial integrity.

### 2.3. *Mikheil Saakashvili: state-building and nation-building*

The third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, focused his rhetoric on building a multi-ethnic Georgian nation through state institutions, without distinguishing citizens along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines. The nation-building process would lay the foundations for state-building. The ultimate goal of this approach would be to build bridges with the inhabitants of Georgia's breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His rhetoric drew on Georgia's historical experience and included references to the middle centuries of the Georgian kingdom, when Georgia became a united and strong state. This was reflected in his slogan "Forward to David the Builder" and tendency to recall the liberal forefathers of the second half of the 19th century, such as the revered pater patriae Ilia Chavchavadze, who founded Georgian national consciousness (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 32). The reconciliation process began with negotiations with former supporters of the Gamsakhurdia government (Saakashvili 2004: 2), who were included in Saakashvili's new cabinet in ministerial positions. This could be seen as the first sign of a unification of state consciousness.

The idea of a multi-ethnic Georgian nation was an open-minded national project of the Georgian state, accompanied by special political measures: Upon coming to power, Saakashvili appointed the Minister of State for National Accord Issues and the Minister of State for Civil Integration; he established the Council for National Minorities and the Council of Religions, which reports to the State Prosecutor's Tolerance Center. Saakashvili also appointed the Presidential Advisor for Civil Integration and established a Council for Civil Integration and Tolerance under the Presidential

Administration to coordinate these various bodies under his supervision (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 39).

The mechanisms and policy documents developed by these centers were put into practice. Saakashvili's nationalist-minded activists sought to encourage minorities to engage with ethnic Georgians and adapt to their language. As a concrete example, the government cited the tailor-made program *The Georgian Language for Future Success*. The program organized special trainings for BA students, who were afterwards sent to the regions with ethnic minorities to teach the Georgian language for a year. Upon finishing, they received state scholarships to enroll in MA programs at Georgia's universities. Meanwhile, after completing secondary education, minority representatives continued a one-year intensive Georgian language course at higher education institutions and were admitted to BA degree programs after passing the exam. This facilitated the integration of regionally concentrated ethnic minorities into the multi-ethnic Georgian state in both the short and long term (Saakashvili 2005: 6). Authorities began to enforce pre-existing language laws that had been ignored under Shevardnadze and required civil servants to perform their duties in the state language, supported by the provision of Georgian language programs (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 37-38). The national integration policy of the government after the Rose Revolution was designed under the motto which had been conceived by Saakashvili: Building the multi-ethnic Georgian nation (Saakashvili 2010: 1), which was to be a motherland for all inhabitants of the Georgian state, driven by the policy of civic nationalism.

By constantly appealing to the legacy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) and invoking the demise of the first popularly elected government of Gamsakhurdia, Saakashvili managed to draw a contrast to the Shevardnadze government, which was considered "elitist and detached from society." By contrast, the post-Rose Revolution government was depicted as having been "brought to power by the Georgian people" (Saakashvili 2004: 1). He sought to erase the dividing line between the elites in government, or elected representatives, and the people he represented. For this purpose, deputies and government officials should maintain a direct link with the masses, as they were thought of the main incubators of ideas for the development of the Georgian state. Therefore, politicians should coordinate their reform-oriented ideas with the Georgian people (Saakashvili 2004: 10). Saakashvili successfully reaffirmed his policy decisions and actions by invoking the common will of the people to legitimize his party's policy priorities as the political will of the Georgian nation

(Saakashvili 2007: 13). For example, when he decided to reduce the number of deputies to 150, he had this question put to a referendum in connection with the presidential elections after the Rose Revolution and later required deputies to agree to this move because they could not go against the will of the people (Saakashvili 2005: 11). Similarly, he raised the issue of Georgia's future membership in NATO in a referendum related to his interim presidential election in January 2008.

Given the harsh economic conditions and the lack of basic welfare provisions in the country during the Shevardnadze government, Saakashvili focused his policies on providing basic services to the population. His rhetoric after the Rose Revolution focused on increasing pensions (Saakashvili 2004: 7) and devising special employment programs, including the special retraining programs implemented by the government: Within two years, 42,000 people graduated from the program and obtained employment, representing 2.4% of those who found jobs in 2006 (Saakashvili 2007: 17).

Drawing a sharp contrast between the present and the Shevardnadze era allowed Saakashvili to successfully consolidate power and buy time for what he called "mental revolution," or what is referred to in the transition literature as multiple transitions. In this way, post-communist transformations are not linear processes with given outcomes, but rather the result of social and political struggles and [...] touch all aspects of life and are best seen as a multiplicity of connected economic, political, ideological, and cultural processes (Eichler 2005: 71). Transforming this argument into a popular message, Saakashvili referred to the "hard legacy" of Shevardnadze and tried to persuade people to give him more time (Saakashvili 2004: 9) by drawing a contrast between the past and the present.

Following the Rose Revolution that had ousted Shevardnadze, Georgia was in need of rebuilding its internal order and international reputation. The country was seeking to overcome the previous political chaos and demoralization, its low international profile, and a diminished civic consciousness on the part of the population (Saakashvili 2005: 1-2). In a marked departure from Shevardnadze, the Saakashvili government, after strengthening key state institutions, ultimately succeeded in providing the population with basic social services, increasing the budget, consolidating revenues, providing basic health insurance for the most vulnerable (Saakashvili 2006: 15), and improving overall socioeconomic conditions in the country (Saakashvili 2007: 11). Saakashvili credited these achievements "not to particular government officials and politicians, but to the Georgian

people" (Saakashvili 2005: 3-4), thus the links between the government and the people was constantly maintained in his rhetoric and provided him with opportunity to create and fill in various empty signifiers for the sake of maintaining power.

Through his resounding success in stabilizing politics and improving economic conditions, Saakashvili greatly advanced the slogan of "mental revolution," which was sometimes even portrayed as a "generation gap" that alienated the old Soviet intelligentsia. Accustomed to being "patronized by Shevardnadze, the welfare intelligentsia was severely damaged under Saakashvili" (Hale 2015: 369); although "Saakashvili was perhaps correct in defining the intelligentsia as corrupt and unfit to run a state, but there was no necessity of alienating it publicly" (Cornell 2013: 31). Later, multi-billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili bought their political loyalty by paying them salaries and providing social support for several years (Lebanidze and Kakachya 2016: 143), and when he decided to enter Georgian politics, the very intelligentsia from the Soviet era reinforced his image as promoters of the Georgian people and the Georgian state in society. This fact facilitated Ivanishvili's rise to power in the country after the parliamentary elections in October 2012.

### 2.4. *Giorgi Margvelashvili vs. prime ministers: Functioning state to the people vs. dignity of the people*

The emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his political coalition "The Georgian Dream" signaled a new political era in Georgian politics. Having made a massive fortune in Russia's economic transition, Ivanishvili returned to Georgia in 2012 where he founded The Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia party. On October 7, 2011, Ivanishvili announced his intention to lead the opposition in 2012 Georgian parliamentary elections, and on February 21, 2012 he announced the establishment of the opposition coalition by the name Georgian Dream. He became leader of the coalition of opposition parties and his coalition won the Georgian parliamentary elections against incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement party. In late 2012, Ivanishvili became prime minister only to leave politics again a year later. In his rhetoric, he sharply criticized the previous Saakashvili government for its lack of people orientation and dismal results.

The Georgian Dream vowed to provide basic social services and strengthen the rule of law. The party's campaign and program for the 2012 parliamentary elections were populist given their rhetoric and promises—all of which lacked indication as to how they would be funded. The Georgian Dream aimed at gaining popular legitimacy by pushing popular policy priorities. Thus, the victory of The Georgian Dream in the October 2012 parliamentary elections was seen as an expression of 'the will' of 'the Georgian people,' who had succeeded in defeating the previous regime, which was no longer seen as fit to govern the country and the nation both politically and morally ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 1-2).

The socially oriented program of The Georgian Dream focused mainly on the unjust system of budget allocation in the past—despite providing little evidence as to how it would implement the all the promises made about administrative and financial improvements in education, revenue, budgetary spending, and the pension and insurance system. The declarations by the representatives of The Georgian Dream were mainly populist and, in reality, were never really implemented. Although several policy measures did get enacted, notably within the health and agricultural sectors. However, these did not significantly improve the social situation of the population as a whole. By comparison, the list of promises that failed to be adequately implemented and funded is large. It includes the failure to adequately distribute of revenues for the improvement of households ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 62), to provide basic social services to the population, to reduce the consumption tariffs for gas and electricity ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 27), and to improve the education system through reforms and an increase in funding ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 63). These promises were largely never implemented because they were out of step with internal and external economic developments.

The Georgian Dream justified these failures by pointing to the economic crisis in connection with the conflict in the Ukrainian and the failed legacy of the Saakashvili government in the political domain (faltering democratic institution, authoritarian and ruthless governance), in the economy (a failed libertarian project), and in social life in general (elite-centered, not citizen-centered) ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 24-26). The socioeconomic promises of The Georgian Dream are examples of extreme populism: Depending on one's conception of populism, a populist economic program can mean either a platform that promotes the interests of citizens and the country as a whole, or a platform that aims to redistribute wealth in order to gain popularity without considering the consequences

of inflation or debt on the country's economy (Livny 2016: 169). The lack of evidence-based micro- and macroeconomic forecasting in conjunction with optimistic promises added to the pressure already on government to live up to its rhetoric. Extremely populist slogans such as "one million for each village to be managed by self-government," announcements of cheap electricity and low gas prices, free water, and the likes remained empty promises.

President Giorgi Margvelashvili was more focused in his rhetoric on uniting citizens and politicians under the main cause of the country, whereas Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and his successors, Irakli Gharibashvili and Giorgi Kvirikashvili, were more orientated on state-building in terms of institutional development. They considered the social welfare state as an integral part of state-building process. Margvelashvili ascribed his success in the presidential elections to the Georgian people, who united around him under one and the same cause. This vision stood in stark contrast with the vision of Bidzina Ivanishvili. He rather assumed that Margvelashvili's presidential nomination and subsequent electoral success was due to Ivanishvili's personal initiative and merit (Margvelashvili 2013: 1).

If the rhetoric of the prime ministers during this period had the effect of dividing the Georgian people into supporters of The Georgian Dream and the United National Movement, Margvelashvili tried spreading unifying messages: "The highest ambition of politician and primary aim should be the unification of its country and people, thus institutional cooperation between different interest groups is necessary" (Margvelashvili 2017: 1). He undertook concrete policy initiatives to this end, announcing a campaign "the Constitution Belongs to Everyone" as a platform for public discussions of amendments before the final approval of the constitutional commission's decision on the new draft constitution by the parliament. The public discussions were intended to ensure involvement of larger segments of the population in the process of drafting a new constitution. It was also meant to reflect the interests of entire population and ensure their voice should reach the government and politicians.

By highlighting constitutional norms and initiating public debates on them, Margvelashvili sought to create a new center of power vis-à-vis the prime minister to ensure institutional and political balance in the country. The Georgian Dream described the criticism of the constitutional amendments offered by the main opposition party, the United National Movement, as non-cooperative and even accused Margvelashvili of engaging in

cohabitation politics between himself and the opposition party. Despite the negative attitude of the masses toward Saakashvili's reign and personality, The Georgian Dream's conflict with the president also undermined its own alternative discourse to Margvelashvili, which was mainly aimed at strengthening a functional Georgian state.

The populist discourses of the prime ministers and President Margvelashvili obviously clashed, although the former contained more issues that were in popular demand than the latter. Since Georgian society is largely disinterested in politics and becomes active mainly at the ballot box, President Margvelashvili's messages were more abstract and 'elitist' in people's mind than even the unrealistic narratives and promises of the prime ministers of The Georgian Dream. Thus, we can conclude that the socially oriented discourse of populism is currently more successful in Georgia than the principle- and state-centered one.

### *3. Bridging politics and populism: the case of Georgia*

This investigation does not refer to a specific definition of the term in the standard academic literature on populism, agreeing with Peter Wiles' argument that populism is "a syndrome, not a doctrine." Considering that the more determinants are included in the general concept, the less it is able to provide useful analyses, the study differentiates rhetoric and ideology of a particular leader and does not seek for distinction between a movement and an ideology (Laclau 2005a: 9) for the deconstruction of populism on the Georgian case. The chapter understands populism as a "category of political analysis—midway between descriptive and normative understanding, which intends to grasp something, crucially significant about the political and ideological realities to which it refers" (Laclau 2005a: 3). It uncovers existing connections between politics and populism in Georgia without going into normative debates over its characteristics. In its political side, the following aspects are relevant to argue for the populist discourse-formation in Georgia since the early 1990s:

1. Messianic nature of leaders;
2. An emphasis on welfare policies and employment;
3. Continuous appeals to the people—as a claim to empower the 'common person' and the capacity to motivate largely un-political individuals to participate;

4. Professed aims of restoring some dignity to politics, which, instead of representing the aspirations of society, often functions as a pork-barrel business run by corrupt and cynical political impresarios (Laclau 2005a: 74).

The term populism is applied here to various policy choices and the rhetoric of different politicians, primarily that of presidents. Considering the fact that populism is regarded here as a symptom, an underside or internal periphery of democratic politics, this investigation shares the idea that "its nature varies in accordance with contending discursive articulations of the concept and populism might be less of a stand-alone phenomenon, than one that intertwines with contemporary politics" (Arditi 2007: 75-76). With this in mind, the characteristics of discourse of persuasion in the Georgian case allow us to identify various features of populism in the Georgian socio-political setting. Presidential rhetoric is often devoid of ideology, even in the case of nationalism, aiming instead directly at policy-making. Populism is employed as a policy-making tool (Heywood 2012: 125-150). Therefore, in the Georgian context this study finds that populism is connected to politicians' intention of broad non-ideological coalition building. It means to create unifying appeal to 'the people' (Laclau 2005a: 6). The populist politicians of Georgia try to blend structures, policies, and ideology in their messages through the power of nationalism—presenting the nation as a political project created in the name of the people in order to achieve the people's desired political goals (Özcan 2005: 163-193). Each president of Georgia had a certain charisma, expressed through their distinct narratives, all of which had nationalist overtones. Considering the different strategies to mobilize the masses, discourses created by each president were all quite vague due to their fluctuating rhetoric. Populist discourses allowed political leaders to "encompass a great variety of trends, including the creation of mass political parties [...] and the cult of personality that aggrandizes the stature of the leader and which is turned into a quasi-messianic figure [...] and the role of a leader as political broker who bypasses formal mechanisms of representation whenever it suits them" (Arditi 2007: 73). Each Georgian leader created mass political parties in order to gain power, engaged in a personality cult, and presented himself as the savior of the people and the Georgian state. They portrayed themselves summarily as the quintessential political brokers in the nations' social and political life. The personality and aura were meant to cement the particular national-political project pursued at the time.

Populism is thought to defy an analytical perspective: Instead of political rationality, it is populism's vagueness, ideological emptiness, anti-intellectualism, and transitory character that stand out. Populism appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of structuration of political life (Laclau 2005a: 13). Thus, the deconstruction of the Georgian case moves "from the mere analysis of the content of ideas to the role that they play in a particular [political-cultural] context; the task is not so much to compare systems of ideas quo ideas, as to explore their performative dimensions (Laclau 2005a: 14). This analysis demonstrates under what conditions and reality the particular messages of the political leaders in office were successful when taking power and pushing national policies.

The Georgian case reveals differences from the standard perception of the conception of populism and politics, in that it is not a specific political program or movement that promises to restore sovereignty to the common people who had been betrayed by corrupt elites. It also does not share with other interpretations of populism the idea of being attached to a left-wing and the right-wing host ideology. Thus, it neither opposes powerful business and financial interests, nor established socialist and labor parties. Rather, the Georgian case of populism associated with a radical form of politics: It evolves around dichotomization between the in-group and out-group formation. It follows the logic of 'who is with us' (the government) and 'who is against us' (the opposition) politically. Georgian populist politics is not driven by political parties, as politics is characterized by the low popularity of political parties, relatively low turnout, low party membership, weak partisan identities, and a weak grounding of parties in civil society. Georgian political parties are often characterized by top-down hierarchical structures in which the chairperson is the single most important figure. Political candidates are selected on the basis of personality or charisma, rather than real political issues, or simply against the current government to show dissatisfaction, as opposed to an actual candidate (Kakachya 2013: 48). Georgia departs from other European cases, where populist trend is typically tied to representative democracy and the decline of liberal democratic politics. By contrast, as "politics in Georgia is about leadership, not representation [...], political parties are largely built around personalities, rather than constituencies" (Kakachya 2013: 57-58). In the personalized form of Georgian politics, political parties lose their importance and elections confirm the leader's authority rather than reflect the different allegiances of the people.

The political discourse in Georgia has been always elitist, politicized, and disconnected from the public at large (Lutsevych 2013). Georgian parties lack a programmatic profiles and ideological affinities. They are difficult to locate on the left-right spectrum of classical political ideologies. One reason behind their ideological sterility might be the fact that Georgian "political parties have not grown out of social cleavages and do not represent large segments of society" (Kakachya 2012: 23-35). Linz and Stephan claim that democratic transition and especially democratic consolidation must involve political society. Thus, a lively civil society necessary for a democratic consolidation (Linz and Stephan, 1996, p. 9) is largely absent in Georgia. This facilitates the emergence of populist leaders in politics, who mainly appear prior to elections and instrumentalize deeply-entrenched societal cleavages for their personal political profit.

The fact that during election campaigns party programs and ideological profiles remain in the background is a peculiar characteristic of the Georgian [party] politics. As the OSCE final report summarized for the 2012 parliamentary elections, and which holds true for other elections as well: "The election campaign is often centered on the advantages of incumbency on the one hand, and private financial assets, on the other, rather than on concrete political platforms and programs" (OSCE/ODIHR 2012: 1). The populist rupture is further reinforced by the fact that parties perceive themselves to be accountable more to personalities, i.e., to their leaders, rather than to their electorate, i.e., to 'the people.' This enables political leaders to size and successfully fill in the empty signifier, which paves their way to the power structures of the country. In the case of Georgia, "populism allows for the construction of the identity of people and positions them against named adversaries—the elites, the oligarchy, government, or what is relevant at a particular time and in a particular context" (Arditi 2007: 82). Generally, this strategy is employed by elites, who aim to dominate the "marketplace of ideas" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 5-40) by invoking nationalist discourses in an appeal to the 'common people.'

The concept of populism explains the Georgian post-Soviet politics in terms of a specific mode of articulation, independent of the actual content that is articulated [...], which is defined by the production of empty signifiers and construction of political frontiers. The discourses of this articulatory logic can start from any place in the socio-institutional structure—be it political organizations, established political parties, or revolutionary movements. As Laclau puts it, "Populism does not define the actual politics of these organizations but is a way of articulating their themes-whatever

those themes may be" (Laclau 2005b: 44). The all-embracing theme in the post-Soviet Georgia was nationalism and the nationalist discourse, ethnic or civic. Nationalism, as a political project, was configured in a variety of ways by the different presidents modulated by different types of populist discourse. First, not all populists are nationalists and not all nationalists are all populists. Secondly, even if all populisms were nationalist and all nationalisms populist, it would be necessary to distinguish populist nationalisms and nationalist populisms: Populist politics is vertical and it constructs 'the people' by opposing it to 'the elite' and claim to represent 'the people.' Contrary to this, nationalism is horizontally constructed around the claim to represent the nation, which is discursively distinguished from the outsiders. This distinction between populism and nationalism helps to understand how populism and nationalism are articulated and connected in different kinds of political rhetoric by political entrepreneurs. The question is how these down/up and in/out constructions of 'the people' and 'the nation' are related (De Cleen and Galanopoulos: 2016). The Georgian case shows that this depends on the skills of political leaders to bridge nationalism (read ideology) and populism (a policy making tool) to draw a particular policy line and to secure legitimacy from the people.

According to Laclau (2005b: 41-43), populism's dynamics rely on continuously reaffirmed internal boundaries, forming the basis of the persuasive populist discourse. Nevertheless, these boundaries can be subverted rather than eradicated, by altering their political implications instead. As the core elements of popular discourse lose their full meaning, they become somewhat vacant, allowing for diverse reinterpretations of their associated contents (Laclau 2005b: 41-43). The process of rearticulation involves partially retaining the central signifiers of popular radicalism, even as they become hollow and adaptable, facilitating an interchange between them. While empty and floating signifiers may largely overlap, in history, no society has remained so consolidated that its internal boundaries were immune to subversion or change. Similarly, no deep organic crisis exists without certain forms of stability imposing limitations on subversive tendencies (Laclau 2005b: 41-43).

In the Georgian case, filling-in the empty signifier was the primary precondition for success of any opposition group, intent on mobilizing the people against the existing government through the power of nationalism.

In the case of Georgia, "populism could not be imagined as internal periphery of liberal-democratic politics, rather it simply denotes crowd-pleasing politicians who are hard to distinguish from demagogues. They will

make any promise, no matter how unattainable, as long as it advances their cause, and who will tweak legal procedures and institutional arrangements shamelessly to adjust them to their needs" (Arditi 2007: 75-77). This is the most precise characterization of the populist policies in Georgia, given that since the declaration of independence, populism has been used as a policy tool to manipulate by democratic practices, rather to 'contain' people through democratic institutions via power of nationalism.

### *4. The contextual rhetoric of presidents and the transformative populist discourses*

The comparison of populist discourses in the post-Soviet Georgia according to the presidents in office could be framed through deconstruction of the following schematic construction: 1. Master frame; 2. Sub-frame; 3. Claims posed and 4. Propositions vs. dispositions in their rhetorical narratives. Georgian populism follows to the logic of the populism understood as a discourse—elites referring to 'the people' in a way what was termed by Ernest Renan as a 'daily plebiscite' (Renan 1996: 52-54) for a constant re-claiming of legitimacy through maintaining links with the nation (read people). As already stated, populist rhetoric has been implicitly or explicitly connected to nationalism, which was always adjusted to the context. These links between nationalism and populism in the rhetoric of the presidents of Georgia were demonstrated through the labels of the cause of independence (Gamsakhurdia), order and stability (Shevardnadze), state-building vs. nation building (Saakashvili) and a functioning state to the people vs. dignity of the people (president Margvelashvili vs. incumbent PM), which successfully filled-in the empty-signifiers of the time.

The populist discourse of the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, centred on the cause of independence. It was constructed through the anti-imperial narrative, namely the struggle for independence from the Soviet Union. Russia at the time was democratizing under Boris Yeltsin, a former Soviet Union autocrat, and he was perceived as a real threat to the statehood and nationhood of Georgia. Its sub-frame was a constant search for the enemies of Georgian nation and Georgian state, sometimes implicitly or explicitly referring to ethnic minorities residing on the territory of Georgia and intent on undermining the statehood and nationhood of the multinational country. This approach resulted in the dubious claims against the imperial centre: Moscow and the local national minorities. The latter

were presented either as settlers or newcomers on Georgian soil and/or the objects of manipulation by the Kremlin. Gamsakhurdia's populism showed itself in a flood of propositions and claims which reinforced the ethnic aspect of the Georgian nationalism on the one hand and alienated national minorities on the other. The national project presented Georgia as a sacred nation, under the patronage of the Virgin Marry, and hence as a spiritual mission focused on the supremacy of the Georgian nation vis-à-vis ethnic minorities (Gamsakhurdia 1991), particularly that of Abkhazians and South Ossetians. This schema mobilized masses on ethnic grounds and divided the multi-ethnic Georgian nation. The anti-imperial and pro-independence narrative of Gamsakhurdia filled in the empty signifier of the time, fulfilling the demands of the majority of the population by the late 1980s and declaring independence of Georgia from the Soviet Union in 1991. Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia failed to cope with the challenges faced by the newly independent country. These challenges stemmed from inside in the form of political opposition and ethnic minorities, as well as from the outside, in the form of policies emanating from the different power-centers in the heart of the disintegrated empire—the Kremlin.

The populist discourse of the second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, became concentrated on establishing order and stability in the country. His master frame referred to the benefit of the geopolitical location of Georgia in the Caucasus for resolution of its problems, which included economic hardships and long-term concerns surrounding its territorial integrity. The sub-frame promoted the eradication of paramilitary formations in the country and the restoration of centralized power over those territories, which were effectively controlled by Tbilisi.[2] The promise of bringing order and stability to the country was injected into the public discourse and filled in the empty signifier at that time. The early claims of taking the country out of the legacies of the civil war that took place in winter of 1992 were fulfilled, but the promises to promote sustainable economic development and improve the social-economic conditions of the population (with notable success in 1994-1997) remained unsuccessful due to the economic crisis in Russia and increased corruption in the state apparatus.

Shevardnadze's main propositions to bring the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic institutions and employ its geopolitical location to attract

2 With the exclusion of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which became frozen after the ceasefire agreements with local separatist forces were brokered with help from Russia in 1994.

Western powers and create a security framework were ultimately successful by the early 2000s. Georgia became main transport corridor, delivering the Caspian and prospectively Central Asian gas and oil recourses. It also joined the cargo transfer through Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway to the European markets and was granted the Georgian Train and Equip Program [GTEP] by the US for the improvement of defence capabilities of Georgia militaries. However, Shevardnadze failed in his domestic societal projects and ultimately did not fulfil his promise to combat corruption in the country. Vague prospects of restoring the country's territorial integrity had shifted the population's attention to the improvement of social-economic conditions, which could not be met and significantly damaged Shevardnadze's political power during his second presidential term (2000-2005). The fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2003 enabled opposition to topple his government, as Mikheil Saakashvil and his political party, United National Movement, took over and forced Eduard Shevardnadze to resign.

The populist discourse of the third president, Mikheil Saakashvili was centered on an ambitious attempt at state-building and nation-building, simultaneously. It invoked the populist master-frame under the motto of a so-called mental revolution, which meant to signify a break with the legacies of the post-Soviet era. Saakashvili's sub-frame concentrated on reinforcing state institutions and promoting nation-building. During his tenure, civic nationalism promoted earlier by Eduard Shevardnadze was reinforced by policies and institutional mechanisms devised to enable successful and sustainable development. These efforts were intended to allow for the peaceful reintegration of secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His claims on combatting corruption and reinforcement of state institutions met the demands of society. Saakashvili's internal discourse mainly succeeded, but Saakashvili failed in international politics around the Caucasus in general and the Georgian war in particular. The claims of seeking eventual membership in the EU and NATO ensured that the country's existing precarious internal (vis-à-vis secessionist regions) and external (primarily vis-à-vis Russia) security arrangements vanished. First, there were the failed hopes of a membership action plan at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008. Second, there was the fallout from the five-day Russian-Georgian War in August 2008. Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in September of the same year.

Saakashvili's claims of ensuring state security and the restoration of territorial integrity through the Euro-Atlantic drive of the country had

clearly failed. Nevertheless, the war cemented the image of Russia as the primary enemy of Georgia in the public discourse. This enabled Saakashvili to maintain power and restart the pro-Western policy line, given the imminent security threats emanating from Russia. Although society's demands, i.e., the preservation of statehood vis-à-vis the Russian encroachment had been achieved after the war, the disillusionment of the society about the prospects of restoration of territorial integrity undercut the president's standing. An alternative and seemingly more pragmatic discourse which implied the need to come to an arrangement with Russia to preserve Georgian interests had contributed to the emergence of the new opposition under the leadership of the ex-Russian business tycoon, Bidzina Ivanishvili. His political alliance, The Georgian Dream, eventually defeated Saakashvili's political party with the promise of mending relations with Russia by launching a policy of 'normalization' and improving the social-economic conditions of the population largely through leftist social welfare policies. However, not long after his electoral victory, Ivanishvili's own leftist populist discourse clashed with the discourse of the president he had hand-picked, Giorgi Margvelashvili, as the latter focused on constitutionality, institution-building, and the separation of powers in Georgia.

Margvelashvili's own populist master frame centered on the constitutional reinforcement of the state institutions, often clashing with the prime minister. Its sub-frame concentrated on the necessity of maintaining a constitutional balance between the different branches of the government, with a president as an important power-broker under the parliamentary republic (Georgia was transformed from the semi-presidential and in effect super-presidential republic into the parliamentary republic after the constitutional changes of 2010). The above-mentioned propositions of Margvelashvili did not resonate with the masses who were mainly focused on improving their everyday social conditions. Thus, his narrative was bested by the social populism of Ivanishvili and the successive prime ministers during 2013-2018. This forced Margvelashvili to abstain from presidential elections in 2018. The population favored the leftist populist messages promoted by The Georgian Dream, which still had strong roots in Georgian society. Margwelashvili's narrative was at odds with Ivanishvili's counter-narrative, which was more in line with popular expectations. Finally, one could argue that so far it is hard to differentiate any such characteristics in narrative of President Salome Zourabishvili. This is probably because it is too early to make predictions about her positioning within the [political] public sphere of Georgia through domestic and foreign political discourses. The last three

years of her presidency have shown that she has no intention of pursuing independent policies different from those of the prime minister and that her actions are mainly aligned with the domestic and foreign policies of the ruling The Georgian Dream party.

## *5. Conclusion*

This article demonstrated that the post-Soviet Georgian populism is a discursive creation of political elites around the primary cause of a particular context. It is a strategy of political leaders, mainly those of presidents and prime ministers to communicate with the masses according to challenges and needs at the time. As such, they style themselves as the messianic leaders or saviors of the Georgian nation and state. In the case of Georgia, populism as a discourse is connected with nationalism. The changing context has defined the shifting populist discourses since the early 1990s; first Zviad Gamsakhurdia emerged as a heroic and messianic figure, bringing independence to Georgia; his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, brought order and stability to a looted and devastated country in the aftermath of the civil wars and ethnic conflict, shifting Georgia to a pragmatic pro-Western line; the third president, Mikheil Saakashvili, under the motto of 'breaking with the soviet past' and building on the achievements of his predecessor, took country closer to the West via ideational pro-Western discourse, yet he failed to appreciate the geopolitical realities; after 2012, the populist discourse was split between President Margvelashvili, and the respective prime ministers in office. Devoid of real national appeal, they concentrated on pitting state building efforts against social welfare provisions and criticizing Mikheil Saakashvili.

The comparative analysis of the presidential rhetoric and policies demonstrate that the Georgian population is conjunctional. Influenced by the past legacies and future promises of political elites, the empty signifier is exploited by politicians and filled-in with the main causes of the present. Nevertheless, the gap between rhetoric and policies has contributed to the demise of each of Georgia's presidents. Notwithstanding some success in the state-building process, Georgia has yet to complete its nation-building project: Gamsakhurdia steered the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic towards independence, but not without the destruction of the state and nation. Shevardnadze stitched the pieces together but could not avoid the failure of state institutions. Saakashvili tried to unite the nation and built

state institutions through the multi-ethnic project of the Georgian nation, having succeeded in some borderlands, while failing in others (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 43). This fact forced him to limit the democratization process in the name of modernization, which finally led to the demise of his political power. Concerning the future fate of Georgia's current leadership, as long as The Georgian Dream's promises and expectations of the masses are not aligned, the end of the current government and its populist promises will arrive sooner or later like its predecessors.

The clash of the rhetoric of president Margvelashvili and the prime minister centered on both the institutional reinforcement of the state, on the one hand, and the provision of social welfare for the people, on the other hand. This division has further sharpened the existing dividing lines in the society. In turn, this has provided ample avenues for free-floating empty signifiers to move from the periphery to the center of politics. There are solid gaps and cracks in the domestic and foreign politics of the government led by The Georgian Dream, which has caused disillusionment of the masses. Yet, there is no leader on the horizon who to fill-in the empty signifier with a new cause through rhetoric centered on the viable solutions to the pressing challenges of the time. Considering the strong legacy of personification of politics in Georgia since the country's independence, the emergence of a new charismatic leader, whatever sort it will be, would lead to a new cycle in the Georgian politics, followed by a change in the current government in office—or one might ask whether the period of personalized politics has run its course in Georgia. Comparing the emergence and the demise of previous leaders proves that it is hard to predict the transformation of the Georgian politics. It also decreases the likelihood the end of personalized politics. Despite this, the population has grown somewhat tired of the expectations of would-be failed messiahs, which could lead to a gradual shift from personalized to party politics. But this future is far away, as political parties are voted not for their political programs, but for their leaders, who present themselves as messianic figures.

Georgian populism is kind of *sui generis*, determined by the post-Soviet politics centered on wider nationalist appeal—be it anti-imperial/independence seeking (Russia), or with ethnic or civic overtones (in domestic politics). It is firmly attached to the personality of the leader, not to a function of party politics as is the case in established democracies.

The master- and sub-frames of the presidential rhetoric have contributed to the flexibility of the empty signifier, which, in turn, has enabled the country's leaders to effectively maintain their power through a mixture

of populism and nationalism, the former being the strategy and the latter being the host ideology. Divided into a master-frame and sub-frame, populist rhetoric has structured and disseminated particular claims and presented them through claim-making and expectations. The gap between these promises and reality has in each case contributed to the demise of the president in office. All of these narratives have made the Georgian nation and the Georgian citizen the center of the discourse, employing populism and nationalism as the central axes to legitimize their political projects and mobilize the masses. This has been an enduring feature of Georgian politics since its independence after the fall of the Soviet Union.

*Works cited*

Aprasidze, David. "25 Years of Georgia's Democratization: Still Work in Progress." *25 Year of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects*, edited by Gia Nodia, Tbilisi, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Ilia State UP, 2016, pp. 91–129.

Arditi, Benjamin. "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics." *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference Populism Revolution Agitation*, Edinburgh UP, 2007, pp. 54–87.

Bennett, Andrew. "Process Tracing and Causal Inference." *Rethinking Social Inquiry*, edited by Henry E. Brady, and David Collier, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010, pp. 207–19.

Berglund, Christofer, and Timothy Blauvelt. "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration?" *25 Year of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects*, edited by Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi, Adenauer Stiftung and Ilia State UP, 2016, pp. 11–55.

Bidzina, Lebanidze, and Kornely K. Kakachya. "Georgia's Protracted Transition: Civil Society, Party Politics and Challenges to Democratic Transformation." *25 Year of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects*, edited by David Aphrasidze and Ghia Nodia, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Ilia State UP, 2016, pp. 130–61.

Connaway, Lynn Silipigni, and Ronald R. Powell. *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*. 5th ed., Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010.

Cornell, Svante E. *Getting Georgia Right*. Edited by Ingrid Habets, Centre for European Studies, 2013.

De Cleen, Benjamin, and Antonis Galanopoulos. "Populism, Nationalism and Transnationalism – an Interview with Benjamin De Cleen, Assistant Professor at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, on Nationalism Vs Populism in Europe, the Flemish Far-right and the Limits of the Cordon Sanitaire." *Open Democracy*, 2016, www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/you-can-use-populism-to-send-migrants-back. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

Eichler, Maya. "Explaining Postcommunist Transformations – Economic Nationalism in Ukraine and Russia." *Economic Nationalism in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric Helleiner and Andreas Pickel, London, Cornell UP, 2005, p. 71.

Gamsakhurdia, Zviad. *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia*. Ganatleba, 1991.

Gamsakhurdia, Zviad. "'Each Permanent Resident of the Republic Will Be Citizen of Georgia,' Interview of the Journalist of the Newspaper Argumenti i Facti V. Savichev With the President of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 2, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013a, pp. 206–11.

---. "Interview of the President of the Republic of Georgia, Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia with the Journalists of the American TV CNN, 25 December 1991." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 2, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013b, pp. 423–25.

---. "New Year TV Address of the Head of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Tomi 1." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 1, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013c, pp. 128–35.

---. "Press Conference of Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia for Georgian, Soviet and Foreign Journalists." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 1, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013d, pp. 218–29.

---. "Press Conference of the President of the Republic of Georgia, Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia With the Journalists of Georgia and Foreign Countries, May 27, 1991." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 2, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013e, pp. 129–40.

---. "Speech of the Head of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia at the Session of November 14, 1990." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 1, Tbilisi, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013f, pp. 23–40.

---. "Speech of the President of the Republic of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia at the Session of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Georgia, June 7, 1991." *Leaders of the Georgian State – Official Documents, Speeches and Interviews*, vol. 2, Tbilisi, The National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2013g, pp. 151–64.

'Georgian Dream' Coalition. "Founding Declaration of Political Coalition "Georgian Dream"". Tbilisi, *IVote.ge*, 2012, www.ivote.ge/images/doc/pdfs/ocnebis%20saarchevno%20programa.pdf. Accessed 27 Feb. 2018.

Heywood, Andrew. *Political Ideologies – an Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Jones, Stephen F. *Georgia: A Political History since Independence*. London and New York, IB Tauris, 2013.

Kakachya, Kornely K. "Democratic Governance in Georgia: A Mixed Record." *The Culture of Governance: The Black Sea*, edited by Melanie Sully, Vienna, Institute for Parliamentarism and Democracy Questions, 2012.

---. "Georgian Politics in Transition: Trends and Obstacles for Potential Transformation." *The South Caucasus 2018 – Facts, Trends, Future Scenarios*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013, pp. 43–63.

Kuzio, Taras. "Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?" *Political Studies Association*, vol. 21, no. 3, SAGE Publishing, Sept. 2001, pp. 168–77.

Laclau, Ernesto. "Populism – Ambiguities and Paradoxes." *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005a, pp. 3–20.

---. "Populism: What's in a Name?" *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, London, Verso, 2005b, pp. 32–49.

Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Livny, Eric. "Georgia's Revolutions and Economic Development." *25 Year of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects*, edited by David Aphrasidze and Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Ilia State UP, 2016, pp. 162–208.

Lutsevych, Orysia. *How to Finish a Revolution: Civil Society and Democracy in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*. Chatham House, 2013, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0113bp_lutsevych.pdf. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

Margvelashvili, Giorgi. *Annual Parliamentary Speech of the President of Georgia*. 07 April 2017.

Margvelashvili, Giorgi. *Inaugural Speech of the President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili*. 17 Nov. 2013.

Offe, Claus. "Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1989, pp. 865–81.

OSCE/ODHIR. "Georgia Parliamentary Elections 1 October 2012: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report." *OSCE/ODIHR*, Warsaw, OSCE/ODIHR, 2012, p.1. www.osce.org/odihr/98399?download=true. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018.

Özcan, Ali. "Nationalism: Distilling the Cultural and the Political." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 11, no. 2, Taylor and Francis, July 2005, pp. 163–93.

Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" *Becoming National: A Reader*, edited by Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, Oxford UP, pp. 41–55.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. *Annual Speech of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili at the Plenary Session of Parliament*. 2010.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. *Annual Speech of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili at the Plenary Session of Parliament*. 22 April 2004.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. *Annual Speech of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili at the Spring Parliamentary Session*. 2007.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. *Annual Speech of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili at the Spring Parliamentary Session of Feb.10, 2005*. 2005.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. *Annual Speech of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili at the Spring Parliamentary Session of Feb. 14, 2006*. 2006.

Shevardnadze, Eduard. *Report of the President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the Domestic and Foreign Political and Economic Affairs at the Parliamentary Session of February 16, 1999*. 1999.

Shevardnadze, Eduard. *Report of the President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the Parliamentary Session of Feb 3, 1998*. 1998.

Shevardnadze, Eduard. *Report of the President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the Parliamentary Session of May 27, 1997*. 1997.

Snyder, Jack, and Karen Ballentine. "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas." *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 2, the MIT Press, Oct. 1996, pp. 5–40. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.2.5.

Van Dijk, Teun A. "What Is Political Discourse Analysis?" *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 11, no. 1, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Dec. 1997, pp. 11–52.

# Chapter 7: Populists Alone in the Government: The Case of Vetëvendosje in Kosovo

*Avdi Smajljaj*

## *1. Introduction*

Kosovo, Europe's newest democracy, continues to face the challenges of a protracted transition process. A recent wave of populism has undermined the consolidation of democracy. The most significant manifestation of populism in Kosovo's party system is the Self-determination Movement (LVV). The populism of the LVV is focused, among other things, on the consistent propagation of an expansive anti-establishment agenda. The party frames society as being polarized between the 'evil elites' and the 'good people,' which is expressed in the populist rhetoric of its chairman, Albin Kurti. By winning the majority of votes in Kosovo's multiparty system of proportional representation elections, the LVV succeeded in forming its own government. This rare event placed the party in a unique position to influence the country's political system, state functions, and democratic development, and has led to a dynamic evolution, one which has mobilized Kosovo's politics and attracted new populations. In this way, the country's democratic development has been positively impacted. In the long term, however, it can also have negative consequences by strengthening latent authoritarian tendencies and limiting political competition. This chapter first discusses the concept of populism in power and then applies its insights to the populism of the LVV and the context in which it emerged and developed. The analysis focuses on how the party came to power and how it behaves as a populist governing party. Given the relatively short time the LVV has been in power, the conclusions drawn here can only be considered preliminary.

## *2. Populists in government*

Populism is often considered to be an inherently oppositional phenomenon, because a populist party in public office is still a special and

relatively rare occurrence. In the case of Kosovo, a new, not yet fully consolidated democracy on the European periphery, it is likely to have a lasting impact on the country's development. The LVV came to power in a political flash in 2019, in a mere time span of about fifty days. The party formed a coalition government with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), which was considered by the public to be the relatively more acceptable option among the more established parties. Nevertheless, the LVV branded the LDK as forming part of the corrupt political elites throughout its campaign. The reason for the public's more positive reception of the LDK could be the great sympathy which the citizens felt for their former leader, who had led the peaceful resistance towards independence in the 1990s. After the end of the coalition, the LVV was able to re-enter the government on its own in 2021, as it received the required majority for a sole government. In doing so, the LVV took advantage of an opportunity when a group of LDK members split off and joined the LVV's electoral lists. As a result, the LVV leadership felt it could contest and win the elections on its own and ultimately returned to power. Nevertheless, based on the pre-election polls, it remains questionable whether the LVV could have achieved this victory without the breakaway of LDK members, who probably would not have passed the 5% electoral threshold on their own (Gazeta Reporteri 2021).

Already, the LVV's first appearance in government has posed a dilemma for Kosovo's democracy. The problems were clear from the beginning of their coming to power. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, when the LVV placed first among the political parties and started negotiating coalition agreements, this immediately raised the question of how a populist party would manage to govern and how durable such a coalition would be, given the LVV's previous anti-establishment rhetoric. These concerns proved well-founded when the coalition collapsed after only fifty days. The LVV's second term in government, following the elections of February 2021, was more durable, given that it did not have to contend with a coalition partner that it regarded an establishment party. Nevertheless, the party seems to be plagued by political fatigue and has failed to meet the expectations of voters across the country. The first major public disappointment with populists in government occurred when the LVV lost the local elections in November 2021, less than nine months later. The question of why this was the case will be approached through the theoretical lenses of populism and populists in government.

As the concept of populism remains debated among scholars, the role of populism as a governing force, as well as of populist leaders and parties in

public office, is still subject to analytical ambiguity. Given that no universally accepted definition of populism currently exists, the study of populism, broadly speaking, can be approached in two different ways. One approach suggests that the failure of populists in government is not predetermined and instead depends on the present opportunity structures and other context-related factors (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). The re-election of populist figures, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, among other leaders, provide evidence for this position. However, considering the LVV from this perspective would be problematic, since the coalition government it initially formed was too short-lived to leave a lasting impact or demonstrate any ability to govern. The LVV framed this period in such a way that the party appeared like a victim of collusion between the establishment parties, whose joint efforts led to the party's removal from power.

Another theoretical approach to populism in power, one which is more pessimistic, views populism as fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of government. This approach highlights the contradictory nature of populism, which ultimately dooms populists in power to fail (Mény and Sorel 2002: 18; Müller 2016). This pessimistic perspective appears to have more explanatory power for the Kosovo case. Heinisch (2003: 101) has made similar observations in the case of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, which thrived in opposition but failed once it was in power. Moreover, Canovan (1999: 12) claims that due to the inability of populists to keep their usually inflated promises once in power, they are destined to lose the electoral support. With regard to the durability of populist parties, Taggart (2004: 270) notes that they tend to come and go. In fact, the fate of the LVV in the government seems to come closest to these pessimistic assessments. The LVV was highly successful in mobilizing the public and polarizing society by engaging in populist mobilization strategies. Following the rapid collapse of the first LVV government, the subsequent LVV government also began to show signs of fatigue only a year into its term in office, thereby resulting in the disillusionment of many of its voters, as evidenced by the party's steep losses in subsequent local elections. This turn of events is even more remarkable if we consider the historically unprecedented electoral victory the party had achieved just one year prior. The experience of the LVV thus adds to our understanding of populists in power not only in established democracies, but in this case, in a developing democracy.

## 3. Defining populism

Among the most widely shared conceptualization of populism is the ideational theoretical approach that considers populism as 'a thin-centered ideology that structures society into two separated, homogenous and antagonistic groups, the 'corrupt elite' and the 'the pure people,' and politics as the expression of the *volonté générale* of the sovereign 'pure people' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6). The people are portrayed as victims of the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 7). Relevant for this case study of Kosovo is also Roberts' definition (1995: 88), which was developed in the Latin American context. Roberts (1995) sees populism as upholding a personalistic and paternalistic, although not necessarily charismatic, kind of political leadership. In this way, populism is a heterogeneous, cross-class political coalition focused on subaltern sectors of society; a top-down process of political mobilization that either bypasses institutionalized forms of mediation or subordinates them to a more direct link between the leader and the masses; an amorphous or eclectic ideology characterized by a discourse that emphasizes lower social strata or is anti-elite and/or anti-establishment; an economic project that uses widespread redistributive or patronage methods to create a material base of popular support.

These contextual characteristics are also strong in Kosovo and the Western Balkans. Müller (2016: 19-20) provides a similar definition of populism in power. It highlights the aspects of emotion and sentiment as important factors in the populist's ability to claim superior morality as the intermediary of political imagination. Presenting politics as a platform of morally 'pure' people, who are struggling against the morally 'inferior' elites is a standard strategy of populist mobilization. This rhetoric is how populist parties promote the belief that they possess the absolute truth. When in government, this approach inevitably clashes with the daily demands and necessary compromises that come with decision-making, leading to 'narcissistic stress' and dissonance as they claim the moral high ground and fail to live up to expectations. As the populists are unable to fulfill their political promises, which were clearly inflated before they came to power, they inevitably face a backlash once in office.

*4. The populism of Vetëvendosje!*

Soft elements of populism among political parties are a common occurrence in the electoral discourse in Kosovo. These tendencies have manifested themselves to some degree in the language of electoral campaigns, indicating that the country's democratic system lacks political maturity. They took the form of expressions of inter-party electoral communication during campaigns and often represented little more than an amateurish attempt to gain votes through vocal attacks on peer parties. Such occurrences should, however, be distinguished from a hard-populist anti-establishment discourse. Compared to the LVV's anti-establishment populism, the softer elements of populism displayed by other parties in the Kosovar party system in particular do not seem to have had any immediate consequences. Nonetheless, the soft populist rhetoric of the other parties has clearly contributed to the LVV's progress towards forming a government on its own. Although the LVV initially hesitated to label itself a political party, it fulfills the criteria to be qualified as a populist party. Its brand of populism has been present throughout its existence and been displayed in its political and electoral programs (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje2019b[1]; Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019c[2]). It is also evidenced in the party's political discourse, public posture, and its behavior as a member of the opposition and a leader in the government. The origin of the LVV dates back to the early 2000s, when it registered as Network of Action for Kosovo (KAN). It later transformed into the Self-determination Movement, before it became a political party. By presenting itself as being anti-establishment, it fulfills one of the fundamental criteria of populism. Its anti-establishment orientation has been the party's most consistent aspect since its early days as a movement.

The LVV was officially registered as a political party when it decided to participate in elections, although it had initially rejected voting as a means of bringing about real political change (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019a). As will be discussed in later sections, however, its anti-establishment outlook has eroded over time, and the LVV has been increasingly taking on the

1 Manifesto of the LVV has no date of when it has been published, but its statute specifies that it is one of the founding documents of the movement (Article 4, Statute of the LVV available at: https://www.vetevendosje.org/statuti/).

2 This is short version of the program. The long version has never been created and published. Inside the program there is no date of publication. Here is the year when it has been made public during the electoral campaign in 2019, that includes 100 points meant to be the issues covered in the program.

characteristics of an established party in the government. Originally, the real reason for the formation of the LVV was to protect sovereignty and to achieve the unification of Kosovo with Albania. In doing so, the LVV mobilized against the role of the international community, which seemed to limit the goals of the country and the LVV. The party's stood against the role that the international community occupied and still occupies today (the LVV protest[3] actions). This is also reflected in the name of the party, *Vetëvendosje*, which means self-determination. In this way, the international community has inevitably become part of 'the establishment' and the target of the LVV's anti-establishment agitation. The LVV accused the international community of diminishing Kosovo's right to sovereignty and limiting the possibilities for the unification of Albania (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019b; Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019c). The latter goal served to reinforce the LVV's anti-establishment rhetoric and made it question Kosovo's statehood in its previous form. However, the LVV did not succeed in fully clarifying its ultimate national goal because of the presence of Albanians living in other neighboring countries. Since Kosovo's political system is ruled by constitution and remains a multiethnic state, it has no constitutional authority to advocate for merging with any other state (*Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Art. 1.3* 2018). This is a fundamental principle of the state that the LVV has not accepted, although it seems to have tolerated it during its time in power. This principle limits national sovereignty and prevents Kosovo from joining other states, in this case Albania.

In Kosovo, constitutional amendments require not only a two-thirds majority in parliament, but also a two-thirds majority among the minorities represented in parliament and thus the consent of the Serbian minority population, which is de facto an unattainable undertaking. Nonetheless, the comprehensive Kosovo status settlement proposal (UN Security Council 2007) submitted by Martti Ahtisaari in 2007 was also not accepted and rejected by the LVV, including by inciting mass protests. The Ahtisaari package proposal, which became part of the constitution, emphasized the role of the international community, limited Kosovo's sovereign right to unite with other states, and expanded the rights of minorities, particularly the Serbian minority of Kosovo. This was achieved in part through decentralization, which the LVV vehemently opposed (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2006). As a result, the LVV neither recognized nor respected the official

3 At the webpage of the LVV (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2021a) most of the protests of anti-establishment character have been deleted.

state symbols, the flag and anthem, and it continued to uphold the flag and anthem of Albania. The LVV deputies take their oath of office in parliament and local assemblies with an Albanian flag placed in front of them, although procedurally they are not authorized to remove the Kosovar flag from the assembly itself (Gazeta Blic 2021).

The LVV strongly rejected the official dialog between Kosovo and Serbia on the unresolved issues between the two countries. Instead, the LVV proposed some kind of dialog with the Serbs in Kosovo, which in reality seems to be an unrealistic proposal, considering the circumstances and context. Rejecting the dialogue was very popular in the eyes of the public, but it was not viewed as a practical solution for the completion of the final status negotiations. *'Jo Negociata*, *Vetëvendosje'* (No Negotiations, Self-determination) is one of the mostly often heard slogan of the LVV. It is even attached to the traffic lights, targeting drivers waiting for the light to turn green.

The general anti-establishment goal of the LVV is the establishment of the Third Republic in Kosovo (Fakte Plus 2021). This is an allusion to the recent electoral victory along the lines of developments in post-revolutionary France. Accordingly, the First Republic is seen as the proclamation of the Republic in July 1990. The Second Republic began with the current state's independence on February 17, 2008, which, according to the LVV, as mentioned above, has not developed as expected. Thus, the LVV presents the establishment of the Third Republic as a means to overcome the current order (Fakte Plus 2021). The LVV's negative attitude toward the current state also extends to its institutions, as the party consistently behaves in an anti-constitutional manner, using all means, including illegal ones, to impose its political point of view. In this regard, the LVV has showed disrespect for the symbols of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), claiming that their role was to limit the country's sovereignty. They even threw eggs and tear gas canisters towards MPs from the established parties during a parliamentary session to prevent them from voting on the international agreement to resolve the border conflict with Montenegro (Zëri 2018).

The elements of the LVV's populist anti-establishment activities listed thus far were insufficient to bring the LVV into government. As an opposition party, it had won only a portion of the seats, but not a majority.

*Table 7.1 Votes for the LVV from 2010 to the last elections*

| | Votes | Percentage | Seats |
|---|---|---|---|
| **2010** | 88652 | 12.69 | 14 |
| **2014** | 99397 | 13.59 | 16 |
| **2017** | 200135 | 27.49 | 32 |
| **2019** | 221001 | 25.49 | 29 |
| **2021** | 438335 | 50.28 | 58 |

Source: Komisioni Qëndror i Zgjedhjeve

What boosted support for the LVV was the further expansion of the anti-establishment rhetoric. The LVV accused the 'nefarious' elites and the corruption of 'the establishment,' not only for engaging in political compromises and deal making, which would be necessary to achieve the kind of state that the LVV opposed, but also for causing the political, economic, and society 'ills' that the 'good' people were facing as a result. In doing so, the LVV pointed squarely at the political establishment, specifically the mainstream political parties which had governed Kosovo for some twenty years after the war. The LVV publicly accused these parties for engaging in corruption, nepotism, state capture, clientelism, favoritism, and patrimonialism, as well as for pursuing a route to privatization that, in their view, had produced no economic development but rather increased unemployment, poverty, and economic underdevelopment in general (World Bank n.d.). The data contained in international and national reports, e.g., from the EU, regularly show that corruption is widespread in Kosovo. In its reports on Kosovo, also the organization Transparency International has highlighted the problem of corruption in Kosovo (Transparency International 2022). Accusing the mainstream parties of state capture is a common talking point of the LVV. On many occasions, Kurti has appealed to television viewers not to compare him with 'them,' i.e., the other parties, while presenting himself as the savior of the state (Declaration of Kurti) who does not engage in state capture (RTV Dukagjini 2021).

In an attempt to demonize the other parties, the LVV has continuously vowed not to enter into coalitions with the establishment parties. No coalition with those who captured the state, as declared by Haxhiu (2016), one of the proponents of the LVV. This helped the LVV to present itself in the eyes of the public as morally 'pure', as the sole protector of 'the people,'destined to cure the 'evils' caused by the 'others,' i.e., the establish-

ment parties and elites. This form of othering and the overall expansion of the party's anti-establishment agenda during a time when discontent was high in Kosovar society contributed decisively to the LVV's unprecedented electoral victory in 2021. Its campaign touched on very sensitive and painful issues for individuals who had lost faith in politics due to the exploitation of the public good by politicians at the expense of the citizens.

Kurti sensed this development very well and used it very skillfully to gain power. Politicians who are affiliated with the ruling parties also engage in such behavior, but what the LVV has done is make a gross generalization about the entire political establishment, demonizing and discrediting political parties and politicians of all stripes, threatening them openly and aggressively, criminalizing them and their behavior, and accusing them of abusing the public. An evocative electoral promise to the masses was Kurti's slogan "*Hajnat ne burg*" ("thieves to the prison"), which became very popular and mobilized many. Such calls exemplify the populist rhetoric of this political party, since it is obviously not the government that imprisons people under an institutional separation of powers. Given the inadequate access to public information concerning the mandate of political institutions, such a populist promise resonated with citizens who perceived themselves as everyday victims and witnesses to corruption and state capture. This promise was further strengthened by the leader of the LVV, who, unlike the leaders of other parties, successfully managed to stay away from any corruption scandals involving money or other material benefits. The populist characteristic of dividing society into two camps, i.e., the 'corrupt' elites, who the LVV accused of acting at the expense of the 'pure' people, ultimately transformed the party into a populist political party situated on the fringe of the party system with a narrow anti-establishment agenda.

Thus, it was able to grow from a grouping of ideologically motivated students and activists into a mass populist party with a broader anti-establishment agenda that achieved an unprecedented electoral victory in the short history of democracy in Kosovo. While the anti-establishment discourse of the LVV helped bring the party into power and enabled it to govern without a coalition partner, it also raised expectations that the party would find difficult to fulfill. This development will be explored in detail in the following section.

## 5. The LVV's rise to power

The political, economic, and social environment in Kosovo is a fertile ground for the emergence of a 'populist savior' to enter politics and government. Concerning the prospects for the development of democracy and populism in Kosovo, the context is very similar to that identified by Roberts (1995: 88) in Latin America. The unconsolidated democratic system of Kosovo and the ongoing multiple system transformations have resulted in a type of democracy that is incapable of protecting the public and their interests. Instead, a system has been created which can be exploited by those in power. This unfortunate reality has contributed to a widespread negative view of politics and democracy in society, whereby those in power can easily exploit state resources and public goods to pursue their narrow interests at the expense of society (Freedom House n.d.). Such exploitative behavior has significantly damaged trust in politicians and the legitimacy of public institutions. These conditions were skillfully exploited by the LVV to increase electoral support for them while they formed the opposition, which then, as Müller put it, allowed them to colonize the state and its institutions (2016: 44). The 'proclamation' of the LVV to oppose privatization on ideological grounds proved correct, although even the non-privatized companies did not perform significantly better either. Kosovo's privatization process was conducted in such a manner that made it very profitable for some politicians and their clientele but proved costly for the economy (Briscoe and Price 2011; GLPS and BIRN 2018). Moreover, there are reports which indicate, in extreme cases of privatization, considerable areas of land were bought by politicians for relatively little money (Loxha and Elshani 2015; Gazeta Express 2020). These findings have provided leverage to the current LVV government, making it easier for LVV politicians to discredit the opposition parties whenever they criticize the current LVV-led government. The failures of privatization in Kosovo as the potential underpinning of the economy has been attributed to the work of the established elites and all major political parties.

Kosovo is fertile ground for the emergence of personalistic leadership. This was the case with the traditional establishment parties until recently, before they lost their strongholds, and it applies also to the current populist leader in power. The sociological perspective on leadership best explains the emergence and success of leaders in the case of Kosovo. Since Kosovo is still a developing society with relatively little complexity and a limited ability to organize interests, the majority of its citizenry forms a relatively

undifferentiated mass public, with only a few layers separating them from the leader. This fact has contributed to the organizational difficulty that parties have faced and has added to their legitimation problem while fostering a very personalistic political model. Parties and institutions are not able to mediate between the leaders and the masses. This is also the reason for the lack of integration among civil society organizations in Kosovo (Rrumbullaku 2019). In fact, most NGOs remain donor-driven (EU Commission 2016) and have no integration capacities. Interest groups and labor unions in the public sector are very frail, and they remain almost nonexistent in private sector. The traditional institution of the family is still the predominant institution in Kosovo and therefore also has a considerable influence on politics and the economy, as it makes the largest contribution to the economy through remittances.

The populist discourse of the LVV developed as an interaction between the demand side, i.e., the people demanding change, and the supply side, i.e., the LVV's promises to enact change. The latter presented itself as a group of anti-politicians and outsiders fighting against the more established elites. In doing so, a strong relationship developed, and the LVV succeeded in winning over a significant portion of the public, even though Kurti's promises were not accompanied by an extensive electoral program (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2021b). What mattered most to the masses, was the trust which they had developed in the form of emotional and enthusiastic attachments to the leader of the LVV and the party on the one hand, and the disappointment and distrust which they felt toward the other parties on the other. The enticing promise of "*Hajnat ne burg*" ("thieves to prison", see Epoka e Re 2021), appealed to most people and drew large crowds to the LVV's rallies.

After the 2019 parliamentary elections, the party's populist character was also on display throughout the process of forming a coalition, when it had to deal with an establishment party. It took approximately three months for the LVV to negotiate an agreement with the LDK. Regardless of this fact, the coalition agreement, at least in terms of the governing coalition program and its policy orientation, was almost entirely devoid of substantive policy proposals and mostly concerned the ministerial positions (Krasniqi-Veseli and Sadiku 2020). As a result, the LVV's approach to forming a coalition government was complicated and protracted. Indeed, they did not negotiate the potential government program and policy direction as parties normally do. Instead, the LVV had to balance its radical campaign rhetoric with finding common ground with a potential coalition partner.

At the same time, the party struggled with its tendency to overpromise, its thin substantive agenda, and its relative reluctance to move from opposition into its government role, all of which contributed to a long government formation process. After nearly three months of trying to negotiate a coalition agreement, the two parties agreed on the division of the government in terms of ministerial posts assigned to one party or the other. The lack of trust between the two parties was on display for all to see.

It was the first time that a populist party led a governing coalition in Kosovo. Among the first interesting developments was the LVV's attitude toward the issue of state symbols, since they must be procedurally observed and respected. This was a clear sign that the party's new role in public office presented challenges that at least minimized the space for populist anti-establishment agitation. This would be different the second time the LVV formed a government, when the party ruled without a coalition partner and for a much longer time. As noted above, the LVV-LDK coalition lasted only a relatively short time. The government collapsed when then-Prime Minister Kurti fired the Minister of Interior, an LDK politician, largely over personal reasons. The LDK viewed this decision as a breach of their coalition agreement. It needs to be emphasized that this self-induced crisis unfolded during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, without taking into account the political consequences.

The LDK, along with two other parties, had enough votes to form a new government, forcing the LVV back into the role of the opposition. It was feared that the LVV would not leave the government offices and instead claim to have the majority of votes among all parties, and that no government would be formed without it. The LVV announced protest rallies, but they did not follow through because of COVID-19, with the exception of a large rally at the beginning. Nonetheless, they indicated their populist positions toward public institutions and official procedures, when the new prime minister and ministers chose not to follow the protocol of transition of power—which would normally see them personally hand over their respective ministries to incoming prime minister and ministers.

The LVV remained in the opposition until after the early elections on February 14, 2021, as a result of the decision of the Constitutional Court (Constitutional Court 2021), which found that the government was not in compliance with constitutional provisions and brought down the government. The illegitimacy of the government that replaced the LVV-led government demonstrated in the eyes of the public the alleged victimization of the LVV by the establishment parties, which reinforced populist rhetoric

and further demonized the parties as they united to oust the LVV from its leadership role in the government. As it happened, this development proved to be very opportune for the LVV to increase populist momentum and thereby mass support.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2013) argument on geographic differentiation, which shows that the inclusive populist framework can be applied to cases outside of Latin America, does not apply to the case of Kosovo. This is because populist mobilization has further demonized the already discredited mainstream parties. Almost no one believed that the LVV would achieve such an unprecedented electoral victory. The proportional electoral system (Gazeta Zyrtare 2008) and the multiparty system that split the votes was considered to be a sufficient institutional and political obstacle. Yet, the LVV managed to beat all of the traditional establishment political parties—a historical feat. The LVV doubled the number of votes, gaining 50.28% of all the votes, which enabled it to form a government on its own.

As Kitschelt and McGann (1995: 201) note, the Manichean dichotomy of 'good' versus 'evil' is useful for parties seeking to move from periphery to the center of power. In the case of the LVV, this strategy proved highly successful. However, it can be argued that this can backfire once such a party is in power (Canovan 1999: 12; Heinisch 2003: 101), as the party lacks the experience and expertise to implement its agenda. As a result, the LVV has resorted to blaming the more established parties for the problems it encountered as a leader in the government. Another strategy of the LVV has been to distance itself from its previous campaign promises, such as lowering the cost of energy, by stating that the campaign was "a political goal" and not a "firm commitment" (Gazeta Metro 2021).

### *6. The populist LVV in public office*

On March 22, 2021 (Radio Evropa e Lire 2021), the new government was elected, one which was solely comprised of LVV politicians. In its new role, however, the LVV transformed itself into the established elite. Müller (2016) points out that this is a conceptual contradiction of populism once populists come to power. As a leader in the government, one inevitably becomes 'the establishment elite,' even if one claims to work for 'the people' and against 'the elites.' The LVV's experience in the government has so far shown that they are gradually filling public institutions with party loyalists, contrary to what they had been saying in opposition' One of the first visible

signs of the LVV's transformation into an established elite was the fleet of cars which they have been using in office. The LVV once criticized the dark jeeps that the former government officials used. But now LVV officials seem to appreciate them and even use them for non-state but rather party activities, including an electoral campaign for party candidates in Albania and in local elections in Kosovo (Thaqi 2021). This behavior clearly shows a contradiction in the LVV's rhetoric and behavior, as the LVV once made such topics as part of its strategy to demonize the other parties.

Most interestingly, at the very beginning of its second term in government, one of the first actions taken by the LVV was to delete numerous documents from its website. These documents dealt with important issues that the party had taken up during its time in the opposition, specifically those issues that could now be seen as contradicting the government's current rhetoric (Rashiti 2021). This face-saving mechanism shows once again that the LVV has changed over time since adopting a leadership role in governance.

The slow beginning of the new LVV-led government has resulted in persistent demands on behalf of the public to initiate the promised changes and carry out reforms. Nonetheless, it took approximately two months for the government just to present its own governing program (Zyra e Kryeministrit 2021b). The LVV's governing program, however, did not differ significantly from the programs of previous governments, nor did it align with the exaggerated promises that the LVV had made while on the campaign trail. If implemented in its entirety, this current program will likely produce a similar performance to the past programs of previous governments. Normally, a governing program should be based on the parties' election manifestos and echo the electoral promises made during the campaign. It should indicate the parties' ideas and vision of how they plan to govern, or in populist terms, how they plan to cure the country's political, economic, and societal 'ills.' In case of the LVV, this did not take place. Complaints about the delay of the promised reforms were initially met with the argument that things take time and that the LVV had just gotten started. When the government was finishing its first year in office, the justifications changed, and the LVV was instead pointing the finger at the previous parties in power. These were accused as having been "irreparably damaged" the country for twenty years, and as such, the LVV's ability to move forward with the promised reforms had been hindered. The twenty years of bad governance has become a common catchphrase for the LVV-led government.

Needless to say, political observers were curious to see how the LVV-led government would adapt to the constraints of Kosovo's constitution, which it had consistently opposed as a member of the opposition, including when the party rejected Ahtisaari's comprehensive solution (Kallxo 2020). Yet, it appears that the LVV has since adapted itself to the constitutional requirements and usage of state symbols. The party's leader once ignored the Kosovo flag, even disparaging it publicly, describing the flag as a flag '*lara-lara*' (Gazeta Reporteri 2019b). He also once declared that he would remove the flag from his office. However, he now seems to take a much more pragmatic and accepting approach (Gazeta Reporteri 2019a). Prime Minster Kurti continues to keep the flag of Albania in his party office instead of Kosovo flag, and at a meeting between LVV politicians and members of the diaspora in the summer of 2021, only the Albanian flag was present (Syri Kosova 2021).

Concerning the question of whether minorities—including the Serbian minority—should be granted the right to participate in governance, as Ahtisaari's proposal had called for, Prime Minister Kurti now seems to agree. Moreover, the Serbian minority ministers were not even excluded from the Serbian minority party, the Serb List, for directly challenging the government's actions in the northern part of Kosovo, where Serbian demonstrators blocked special police units, and one minister was among the organizers. Surprisingly, the LVV in the government seems to be more tolerant of the situation. The same applies to the issue of decentralization, which the LVV categorically rejected some time ago. The issue of initiating a dialogue with Serbia was categorically rejected by Prime Minister Kurti and the LVV, a move which they considered to be interfering with internal affairs, including with the rights of the Serbian minority and the unexercised sovereign rights in the northern part of Kosovo (Telegrafi 2012).

A widely known slogan of the LVV regarding the dialogue is "*Jo Negociata, Vetëvendosje*" ("No Negotiations, Self-Determination"). Since the formation of the LVV-led government, the issue of dialogue has been largely neglected in comparison to previous governments, although a deputy prime minister is responsible for initiating dialogue. The LVV and the prime minister need time to find a face-saving solution to justify their shifting positions toward Serbia. As mediators of the dialogue, the international community, the U.S., and the EU are exerting increasing pressure to reach an agreement on the unresolved issues. A series of formal meetings between the prime minister and the Serbian president, brokered by the EU's special envoy, reflected the tense situation in which Prime Minister Kurti currently

resides, as he is somehow trying to show steadfastness in order to save face with his supporters. However, it appears that international pressure is mounting, and he will either have to work faster toward finding a solution or find a way to leave the government if he chooses not to accept an internationally sponsored and supported solution.

It would seem that the LVV and the prime minister have forgotten one of their most important political goals, i.e., unification with Albania. As a political party whose main goal was once unification with Albania, the LVV has since downgraded this goal to the point of stating that the prime minister will vote for it if a referendum is organized in a democratic way. What a drastic change: Once a leader of a radical political idea, who, among other things, repeatedly questioned the foundations of the Kosovar state, he has arrived at the position of an ordinary citizen in stating that he would vote, like most ordinary citizens, if someone else organized the referendum (Qeriqi 2021).

The possibility that a populist party could capture the state poses a challenge to democracy in Kosovo. One of the main features of the previous governments was the capture of the state and institutional apparatus, which was carried out by populating the institutions, agencies, public companies, and governing boards with party militants and family relatives. The LVV and its leader once promised to remedy this situation (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2015). Yet, the LVV is continuing down the same path as the mainstream parties. As Müller (2016) predicted, the LVV has justified this on the grounds that the state, institutions, public enterprises, and boards of directors remain 'trapped' in the service of the old establishment. By hiring people based on their ideology, loyalty, and trust in the government, the LVV can advance reforms and avoid sabotaging the government's work. To date, the tendency is that most of the boards of directors, executives of independent institutions, CEOs of public enterprises, university boards, etc., have been dismissed and largely replaced by supporters of the LVV.

It is interesting that the parties which once behaved in the same way are now blaming the LVV for appropriating the institutions and the state (Gazeta Scanner 2021). The same is happening with the politically appointed diplomats. Similar to before, the process of their reappointment was accompanied by favoritism, however, unlike before, the ministries have been flooded with inexperienced party members with low expectations in their performance. The prime minister's somewhat paranoid attitude toward the people he works with, i.e., the party leadership, was decisive here. In an interview in which he was asked why he included party members in the

institutions, he replied that they were proven experts and were trusted (RTK 2021).

As far as the reforms introduced to fulfill the promises are concerned, the government has so far taken steps to implement the promised overhaul of the judicial system. A concept paper has been drafted so far. However, the EU has criticized this move, pointing out to the government that the mechanisms to reform the judiciary are not yet in place and that a full reform should only be considered once all other mechanisms have been exhausted (DG NEAR 2021: 4). Another major concern of the experts is that the state and the institutions that could use such a vetting process to capture the judiciary. On the other hand, a very popular measure is the state distribution policy, whereby subsidies for young mothers and children were created by government decree, which was also a promise of the LVV (Zyra e Kryeministrit 2021a).

## *7. Conclusion*

To sum up, the case of the LVV, a populist party which has been in government for about a year at the time of this chapter's writing, seems to align with the pessimistic theoretical approaches to studying populists in power. The party had a slow start in governance and sought to justify this delay by highlighting the amount of time it took for them to come to power. Over time, the party found another justification for not meeting even the minimum expectations, namely, that things were so damaged by the previous ruling parties that the situation was unredeemable. Moreover, the LVV has begun to engage in the same problematic behavior of reclaiming the state and staffing public institutions with family members and party insiders, a development which the party has justified on ideological and loyalty grounds.

The experience of the LVV in the government has resulted in citizens' disappointment with the "very last hope," as the LVV was considered the last hope. This has signaled a crisis of legitimacy and trust in politics and Kosovar democracy, as evidenced, among other things, by the massive exodus of citizens. Unable to bring about the promised change, the government has instead put into perspective and normalized the performance of the former established political parties, which have been portrayed by the LVV as the culprits responsible for the 'ills' in society. This has given the impression that the blame for the shortcomings lies in the context and not

with the political actors, such as the former established political parties. That the public was disappointed with the LVV became evident in the local elections which were held just nine months after the party had won the parliamentary elections in a landslide. The LVV's defeat in the local elections has thus facilitated the gradual return of the establishment parties to government and signaled a loss of confidence in the populist party. By discrediting itself during its time in power, the LVV unintentionally is normalizing the behavior of former establishment parties and making itself appear as part of 'the establishment.'

*Works cited*

Albertazzi, Daniele, and Duncan McDonnell. *Populists in Power*. 1st ed., London, Routledge, 2015,

Briscoe, Ivan, and Megan Price. "Kosovo's New Map of Power: Governance and Crime in the Wake of Independence." *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, 2011.

Canovan, Margaret. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Mar. 1999, pp. 2–16.

"Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Art. 1.3." *Zyra e Kryeministrit*, Mar. 2018, kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Kushtetuta.e.Republikes.se_.Kosoves-2.pdf.

Constitutional Court. *Decision of the Constitutional Court*. 21 Jan. 2021, gjk-ks.org/decision/vleresim-i-kushtetutshmerise-se-vendimit-te-kuvendit-te-republikes-se-kosoves-nr-07-v-014-te-3-qershorit-2020-per-zgjedhjen-e-qeverise-se-republikes-se-kosoves.

RTV Dikagjini. "Declaration of Mr. Kurti, Distinguishing Himself from the Parties That Captured the State." *RTV Dukagjini*, by RTV Dukagjini, 12 Feb. 2021, m..com/dukagjinirtv/videos/albin-kurti-mos-me-krahasoni-me-ata-qe-e-kane-kapur-shtetin-une-nuk-e-beje-ate/459567238547449/?__so__=permalink&__rv__=related_videos. Accessed 15 Jan. 2022.

DG NEAR. "Kosovo Report 2021." *European Commission*, 19 Oct. 2021, neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2021_en. Accessed 25 July 2023.

Epoka e Re. "Kurti ne Fushe-Kosove: Hajnat e Kane Vendin ne Burg." *Epoka E Re*, 12 Feb. 2021, www.epokaere.com/kurti-ne-fushe-kosove-hajnat-e-kane-vendin-ne-burg. Accessed 2 May 2021.

EU Commission. "Kosovo: Civil Society Facility 2014- 2015." *European Commission*, IPA/2014/031-605.05, EU Commission, 2016.

Fakte Plus. "Lëvizja Vetëvendosje Paralajmeron Shpalljen e Republikes se Trete." *Fakte Plus*, 9 Feb. 2021, fakteplus.net/levizja-vetevendosje-paralajmeron-shpalljen-e-republikes-se-trete. Accessed 25 July 2023.

Freedom House. "Countries and Territories." *Freedom House*, freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores.

Gazeta Blic. "Asamblistet E VV-se ne Prishtine Betohen me Flamurin Kuqezi." *Gazeta Blic*, 7 Dec. 2021, gazetablic.com/asamblistet-e-vv-se-ne-prishtine-betohen-me-flamurin-kuqezi. Accessed 15 Jan. 2022.

Gazeta Express. "Kush jane Zyrtaret qe blene Toke nga Privatizimi me Çmime prej 1 deri ne 3 Euro?" *Gazeta Express*, 17 Oct. 2020, www.gazetaexpress.com/kush-jane-zyrtaret-qe-blene-toke-nga-privatizimi-me-cmime-prej-1-deri-ne-3-euro. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

Gazeta Metro. "E Shtrenjtoj Çmimin e Rrymes, Habite Kurti: Fushata Zgjedhore nuk Eshte Zotim as Premtim, por Synim." *Gazeta Metro*, 24 Jan. 2021, gazetametro.net/e-shtrenjtoj-cmimin-e-rrymes-habite-kurti-fushata-zgjedhore-nuk-eshte-zotim-as-premtim-por-synim. Accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

Gazeta Reporteri. "Albin Kurti Flet Serish per Flamurin e Kosoves, Tregon nese do ta Heqe nga Zyra." *Gazeta Online Reporteri.net*, 24 Sept. 2019a, reporteri.net/lajme/albin-kurti-flet-serish-per-flamurin-e-kosoves-tregon-nese-do-ta-heqe-nga-zyra. Accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

---. "Kurti e Quan Serish 'lara-lara' Flamurin E Kosoves." *Gazeta Online Reporteri.net*, 23 Sept. 2019b, reporteri.net/lajme/kurti-e-quan-serish-lara-lara-flamurin-e-kosoves. Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.

---. "Sondazhi i Fundit: VV 41%, PDK 20%, LDK 15% - Vjosa Osmani Nuk e Kalon Pragun." *Gazeta Online Reporteri.net*, 7 Jan. 2021, reporteri.net/lajme/sondazhi-i-fundit-vv-41-10-pdk-20-80-ldk-15-70. Accessed 10 Jan. 2021.

Gazeta Zyrtare. "Ligji Nr. 03/L-073 per Zgjedhjet e Pergjithshme ne Republiken e Kosoves." *Gazeta Zyrtare E Republikes Se Kosoves*, 2008, gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2544. Accessed 25 June 2023.

Haxhiu, Albulena. "LVV-ja Eliminon per Koalicion Ata qe e Kane 'kapur Shtetin.'" *Zeri*, 3 Nov. 2016, zeri.info/aktuale/115205/lvv-ja-eliminon-per-koalicion-ata-qe-e-kane-kapur-shtetin. Accessed 20 Sept. 2021.

Heinisch, Reinhard. "Success in Opposition – Failure in Government: Explaining the Performance of Right-wing Populist Parties in Public Office." *West European Politics*, vol. 26, no. 3, Taylor and Francis, July 2003, pp. 91–130.

Kallxo. "13 Vjet Nga Vrasja e Mon Balajt dhe Arben Xheladinit ne Proteste." *Kallxo*, 10 Feb. 2020, kallxo.com/lajm/13-vjet-nga-vrasja-e-mon-balajt-dhe-arben-xheladinit-ne-proteste. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

Kitschelt, Herbert., and Anthony J. McGann. *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2015.

Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve. "Zgjedhjet per Kuvend te Kosoves." *KQZ*, www.kqz-ks.org/zgjedhjet-e-pergjithshme.

Krasniqi-Veseli, Luljeta, and Mimoza Sadiku. "Nenshkruhet Marreveshja per Koalicionin Qeverises." *Radio Evropa e Lire*, 2 Feb. 2020, www.evropaelire.org/a/lvv-ldk-marreveshje-koalicion-/30411933.html. Accessed 2 Oct. 2021.

Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. "Aksionet." *Lëvizja VETEVENDOSJE!*, 2021a, www.vetevendosje.org/category/aksionet. Accessed 13 Sept. 2021.

---. "Broshura me Planet e Serbise Per Kosoven." *Vetëvendosje!*, 2006, www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/decentralizimi1494292753.pdf. Accessed 22 Oct. 2021.

---. *Historik i 'Levizjes VETEVENDOSJE!'* 2019a, www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Historik_i_Levizjes_VETEVENDOSJE1494292852.pdf.

---. "Manifesti i Vetevendosje! –s." *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!*, 2019b, www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Manifesti-11494292623.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2021.

---. "Programi Elektoral i Levizjes Vetëvendosje." *Vetevendosje!*, 2021b, www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Programi-2021-LV.pdf. Accessed 29 July 2023.

---. "Proteste Kunder Kapjes se Shtetit." *YouTube*, 4 Apr. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju-rkvKzxzg. Accessed 5 Jan. 2022.

---. "Zhvillim dhe Shtetndertim: Bashke Eshte e Mundshme." *Vetevendosje!*, 2019c, www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Programi-2021-LV.pdf. Accessed 22 June 2021.

Loxha, Arbereshe, and Delfine Elshani. "Panic Selling: Assessing the Main Challenges and Deficiencies of Kosovo's Privatization Process." *BIRN*, edited by Albana Merja et al., Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2015, birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Report-on-Privatization.pdf. Accessed 2 July 2023.

Mény, Yves, and Yves Surel. "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism." *Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan)., 2002, pp. 1–21.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. "Exclusionary Vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 48, no. 2, Cambridge UP, Apr. 2013, pp. 147–74.

---. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, Oxford UP, 2017.

Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Qeriqi, Ahmet. "Albin Kurti: Edhe Une do te Votoja Referendumin per Bashkim me Shqiperine, nese Behet ne Forme Demokratike." *Radio Kosova e Lire*, 22 Nov. 2021, www.radiokosovaelire.com/albin-kurti-edhe-une-do-te-votoja-referendumin-per-bashkim-me-shqiperine-nese-behet-ne-forme-demokratike. Accessed 31 Jan. 2022.

Radio Evropa e Lire. "Votohet Qeveria Kurti 2." *Radio Evropa e Lire*, 23 Mar. 2021, www.evropaelire.org/a/konstituimi-kuvendi-i-kosoves-/31162451.html. Accessed 18 Aug. 2021.

Rashiti, Valon. "Derguti per Fshirjen e Arkivave te Vetevendosjes – 'Filloi Viti Zero.'" *Albanian Post*, 7 Feb. 2021, albanianpost.com/derguti-per-fshirjen-e-arkivave-te-vetevendosjes-filloi-viti-zero. Accessed 19 Nov. 2021.

Roberts, Kenneth B. "Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case." *World Politics*, vol. 48, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Oct. 1995, pp. 82–116.

Rrumbullaku, Oltion. *Studimi per Rinine – Kosove 2018 / 2019*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019, library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/15289.pdf.

RTK. "RTK Prime - 100 Diteshi i Qeverise Kurti 01.07.2021: Interview with Prime Minister Kurti." *YouTube*, 1 July 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMD7hnkjofg. Accessed 2 Aug. 2021.

Syri Kosova. "Kryeministri Kurti Pret Mergimtaret pa Flamurin E Kosoves." *Syri Kosova*, 23 July 2021, www.syri.net/syri_kosova/lajme/275044/kryeministri-kurti-pret-mergimtaret-pa-flamurin-e-kosoves. Accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

Taggart, Paul. "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Routledge, Oct. 2004, pp. 269–88.

Telegrafi. "VV Proteste Kunder Rifillimit te Bisedimeve me Serbine." *Telegrafi*, 21 June 2012, telegrafi.com/vv-proteste-kunder-rifillimit-te-bisedimeve-me-serbine. Accessed 20 May 2021.

Thaqi, Dorentina. "Kurti Harron Kritikat, se Bashku me Ministrat Aktivizohet Ne Fushate." *KOHA*, 2021, www.koha.net/arberi/296059/kurti-harron-kritikat-se-bashku-me-ministrat-aktivizohet-ne-fushate. Accessed 20 Dec. 2021.

Transparency International. "2021 Corruption Perceptions Index - Explore Kosovo's Results." *Transparency International*, 25 Jan. 2022, www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/ksv.

UN Security Council. *Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement*. S/20007/168/Add1, 26 Mar. 2007, reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1DC6B184D02567D1852572AA00716AF7-Full_Report.pdf. Accessed 2 July 2023.

World Bank. "The World Bank- Kosovo Overview." *World Bank*, data.worldbank.org/country/kosovo?view=chart. Accessed 25 July 2023.

Zeri. "Vetevendosje Hedh Gaz Lotsjelles per te Treten Here." *Zeri*, 21 Mar. 2018, zeri.info/aktuale/191454/vetevendosje-hedh-gaz-lotsjelles-per-te-treten-here. Accessed 29 Oct. 2021.

Zyra e Kryeministrit. *Government Decision on Allowances for Young Mothers and Kids*. 2021a, kryeministri.rks-gov.net/mbledhja-e-31-te-qeverise.

---. "Programi i Qeverise 2021 – 2025." *Zyra e Kryeministrit*, 2021, kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Programi-i-Qeverise-se-Kosoves-2021-2025.pdf. Accessed 27 July 2021b.

# Chapter 8: Populist Electorate without Populist Parties: The Curious Case of Montenegro

*Nemanja Stankov*

## *1. Introduction*

Researching populism is by no means a new phenomenon in social sciences. The field has been on a rapid expansion since the 1990s and has witnessed the (re)emergence of several populist parties across Europe and Latin America. Most scholars who investigate this phenomenon have focused on macro-level analyses of structural factors that enable the rise of populist parties. Apart from taking hold in diverse political environments, what makes this area of research more challenging and therefore interesting is the simple fact that populism crosses traditional ideological lines. Specifically, populism is suited for both right and left ideologies, as it combines its main message with the 'host' ideology (Rooduijn 2014). Along those lines, populism combined with nativism constitutes the populist radical right (Rooduijn 2014). Yet, it can also be constitutive of the populist radical left (social populism) (March and Mudde 2005).

While research on the rise of populist parties in Western Europe has been extensive, limited attention has been devoted to analyzing populism in the Western Balkans. Along those lines, Montenegro stands out as an interesting case, appearing on the surface to be a primary candidate for the emergence of populist parties. The political landscape of Montenegro has been dominated by the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS) since the introduction of pluralism in 1990 up until the August 2020 election, and the DPS has established itself as the dominant political elite. What is more peculiar is the fact that populist sentiment is prevalent throughout the Montenegrin society. A casual observation of public discourse reveals a significant amount of discontent with the political processes and the economic landscape of the country. As poor macroeconomic performances are viewed as one of the principal sources of support for populist parties, these conditions in Montenegro are rather ideal for a populist party to emerge, yet no such party exists. Instead, some opposition parties have occasionally used populist rhetoric, but their usage of it has

been insufficient to be labelled as truly populist. This chapter explores the factors that have shaped Montenegrin politics, and the question of why, in a context which appears conducive to populism, a full-fledged populist party has failed to emerge.

The answer to this question begins with an in-depth examination of the structure of party competition in Montenegro. This chapter engages with a recent claim laid out by Džankić and Keil (2017) that the DPS is a peculiar case of state-sanctioned populism. In this context, the DPS has consistently used populist mechanisms to justify its clientelist methods. While there is some merit to this argument, the DPS is not a populist party, at least not according to the conceptual framework of ideational populism (see: Mudde 2007). By monopolizing the issue of state independence and creating an image of the DPS as a party which is protective over the state, I argue that the practice of 'othering' does not constitute a case of state-sanctioned populism but has instead been effective in preventing the emergence of a full-fledged populist party in opposition to the DPS. Therefore, the occasional flirtation with populist rhetoric on behalf of opposition parties should be perceived as an inability to clearly detach themselves from the 'anti-state' label given by the DPS, as opposed to a full-fledged populist platform.

In order to test these propositions, I look at electoral behavior. If the 'othering' mechanisms of the DPS are proven effective, then they will be successful in neutralizing the populist sentiment in the electorate. If, however, the occasional populist rhetoric of Democratic Montenegro (DCG) and Movement for Change (PzP) is successful, then it should result in a clear electoral advantage for these parties among the populist electorate. These mechanisms are tested by using the most recent database with populist items on individual level, the Montenegrin National Election Study (MNES) database from 2016.

## *2. The absence of populism in Montenegro*

Although the field has suffered from lack of conceptual clarity over the years, a moderate consensus on what populism actually is has recently been reached. Initial attempts to define the phenomenon have conceived of populism as a tool that organizes the oppressed people against the ruling elite by emphasizing popular issues, thereby uniting those in opposition to the ruling elite (Laclau 1977). Here, it is evident that political parties utilizing

such a mechanism need to clearly delineate who and what constitutes as 'the people.' Along those lines, Canovan (1981) argues that what clearly creates an image of 'the people' is a focus on anti-elitism. These initial considerations have led to a more comprehensive approach, which, apart from the anti-elitist dimension, incorporates a strong adherence to popular sovereignty and creates an ethical claim about the nature of 'the people.' According to this ideational approach, populism is a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2007: 23). The 'good people' are contrasted with the evil and corrupt elite, who threaten the alleged purity and unity of the sovereign people (Akkerman et al. 2014). This conceptualization implies the existence of three separate, yet intertwined dimensions of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and homogeneity and virtuousness of the people (Manichean worldview). In other words, while the definition implies the existence of distinct dimensions of populism, it is the combination of these, rather than one single idea, that constitutes populism. These dimensions are reflected on the individual level (demand side populism) in the form of populist attitudes (see: Stanley 2011). As these attitudes lack full ideological content, populism is neither situated on the left nor the right but can be attached to a variety of host ideologies (Rooduijn 2014).

Having laid out the definition of populism that this chapter utilizes, I now attend to the question of which factors enable the success of parties that have incorporated a populist outlook into their rhetoric. In his book on the success of populist right-wing parties in Europe, Mudde (2007) explores macro and micro level explanations. Among other factors, he evaluates several enabling conditions, such as the modernization hypothesis, the presence of political crises, and the categorization of parties and an authoritarian legacy (Mudde 2007). It can be argued that each of these conditions are somewhat present in Montenegrin society. First, the modernization hypothesis has been expanded to include the transition from state socialism to capitalist democracy (Othon 2000). While the importance of this hypothesis for the emergence of populism has received mixed results (Mudde 2007), Montenegro satisfies this condition, as it has undergone a process of state transition. Some argue it has not been consolidated yet (see: Vuković 2010), as the country experienced its first peaceful transition of power only in August 2020, following the end of the DPS's thirty-year tenure in power.

Second, political crises are conducive to the success of populism, particularly in countries exhibiting high levels of unemployment and dissatisfaction with democracy (Mudde 2007). Both of these conditions are present and prevalent in Montenegro. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the beginning of 2018 from the Employment Agency of Montenegro shows an unemployment rate of 20.40%, while 59.28% of respondents for the Montenegrin National Election Study (MNES) are dissatisfied with democracy. Furthermore, the country finds itself in a constant state of political crisis. Since 2015, there have been frequent protests, which culminated in religious protests against the content of the Law on Religious Freedoms in 2019 and 2020. In the case of the religious protest organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church, a significant number of citizens took to the streets to contest two provisions of the stated law. These included a provision requiring the registration of all religious organizations with the state authorities, as well as Article 62, which stated that all religious monuments built prior to 1918 lacking clear ownership deeds would be considered cultural heritage and in ownership of the Montenegrin state. These religious protests, popularly termed '*litije*' (a term usually referring to religious processions), more so than any other political issue, have demonstrated how strongly polarized Montenegro is, both within the electorate and among party elites. With a few exceptions, the party elites and an electoral body composed of then-opposition parties were against the Law on Religious Freedoms, whereas the pro-government structures were in favor of these developments. Further illustrating the extent of elite polarization and the inability to cross party lines were the parliamentary boycotts, which were frequently used by the opposition parties prior to the transfer of power in 2020.

Third, the cartelization of political parties is a favorable condition for the success of populism (Mudde 2007). It can be argued that, at times—but certainly not always—the nature of party competition in Montenegro has been organized along the lines of the government versus the opposition (seldom representing the independence vs. union politics) (see: Stankov 2019). After a brief period when some of the opposition parties had participated in the interim government in 2016, the nature of party competition soon reverted to its usual patterns of competition. This point can be illustrated with two examples. First, during the 2018 presidential election, almost the entire opposition grouped around a single presidential candidate, Mladen Bojanić, in hopes of successfully challenging the candidacy of the leader of the DPS, Milo Đukanović. Second, after the August 2020 parliamentary election, the new parliamentary majority consisted of traditional opposition parties and

quite clearly followed the institutionalized nature of the aforementioned party system.

Fourth, the remnants of an authoritarian legacy have been linked to the success of populism (Mudde 2007). The long-term rule of the DPS in combination with the party's previous ties to the League of Communists of Montenegro in 1991 indicates that some leftovers of the authoritarian legacy are still present. Here, I primarily refer to the capture of state resources by the DPS to incur an electoral advantage (see: Džankić and Keil 2017). However, perhaps even more troubling for the democratic consolidation of the country, the government which formed after the transfer of power in August 2020 seems to have followed the pattern of regime change outlined by Levitsky and Way (2010). Instead of carrying out a substantive regime change and democratization of the system, the newly formed government co-opted the state in a similar fashion to the DPS, namely, for its own political agenda.

Additionally, the success of populist actors during times of crises is facilitated by "the combination of persisting political resentment, a (perceived) serious challenge to 'our way of life,' and the presence of an attractive populist leader" (Mudde 2004: 547). Furthermore, the visibility of corruption scandals contributes to this feeling of persistent political resentment (Mudde 2004). Similarly, Inglehart and Norris (2016) provide evidence that cultural backlash and the challenge to 'our way of life' is the primary driver for populist support in the U.S. In addition to the briefly explained crises surrounding the Law on Religious Freedoms, Montenegro seems to satisfy these conditions rather well, namely, corruption is perceived as one of the main issues in the political sphere. According to the MNES, 80.6% of respondents stated that corruption is very or substantively present in the political system. Furthermore, the political adoption of values grounded in respect for human rights in areas of sexual freedoms and women's rights are perceived as a threat to traditionalism and have been openly opposed.

Considering these factors, Montenegro appears to be a primary candidate for the emergence of an attractive populist leader, yet no such leader appeared. What could be the reasons behind this? Through the lenses of the ideational approach to populism, I will analyze the rare occurrences of populism in the Montenegrin political context. This exploration begins with the well-established political elite, the DPS, followed by an examination of two opposition parties, the DCG on the left and the PzP on the right.

### 3. The ruling political elites: Democratic Party of Socialists

Democratic life of Montenegro has been dominated by the DPS. This is an oversimplification of the amount of control and influence that one party managed to exercise over the last thirty years. Džankić and Keil (2017) argue that one of the mechanisms that the DPS has employed to remain in power is a form of state-sanctioned populism. Building on the definition of Taggart (2000), Džankić and Keil (2017) emphasize five features that have enabled the DPS to remain in power: (1) control over the economy; (2) substantial development aid as the source of strong patronage and clientelist networks; (3) control of key state institutions; (4) corruption; (5) change of discourse in response to the demands of the population. As such, the DPS is not a populist party per se, but rather a party that exploits populist discourse when suitable. Here, the DPS has employed several populist messages to strengthen and legitimize its clientelist networks. First in line is a strategy of 'othering,' which has created an imagery of anti-state enemies and portrayed the DPS as 'the savior' of the Montenegrin independence and the state itself (Džankić and Keil 2017). In the process of 'othering,' the DPS has capitalized on ethnic cleavage-based politics, clearly distinguishing between 'us' (Montenegrins) and 'them' (Serbians), who would deny 'us' the right to live in 'our' own independent state. While this strategy was crucial during the immediate years prior to the referendum on independence from Serbia in 2006 (Džankić and Keil 2017), this discourse has remained constantly present, particularly leading up to the 2020 national parliamentary election. Recent examples of this strategy and how it has been utilized will be demonstrated in the following sections, which deal with opposition parties, the DCG and the PzP. The DPS has also included the following additional populist elements in their strategy: an emphasis on the 'heartland' (nationalizing policies including the change of language, state symbols, and so on), a constant state of crisis in which the DPS appears as the primary problem-solver, a chameleonic-like, vague party ideology, and the 'cult' of personality of the party leader, Milo Dukanović (Džankić and Keil 2017).

While there is some merit to the claim that the DPS has utilized populist strategies at times by 'othering' political opponents, utilizing the leader's charisma, and emphasizing the heartland (Džankić and Keil 2017), the party has undoubtedly remained in control of the political processes and mechanisms of representative democracy. Furthermore, the uninterrupted rule gradually led to a state of captured institutions, thereby allowing the

DPS to exercise political influence over the judiciary, the economy, the state-owned media, and so on. The party's wide-reaching influence, combined with the electoral winning streak, has created an image of invincibility (Komar and Živković 2016). Along these lines, although they have used populist mechanisms to exercise control, they do not qualify as a populist party, at least not according to the ideational approach. 'Them' in this context are not the political elites, but rather state enemies (both foreign and domestic). It is not the *volonté générale* that will ensure Montengero's independence, but rather the control wielded by the DPS over state institutions. Unlike a populist party, the DPS is a party of the political establishment that is accountable for the (perceived) failures of representative democracy. The party remains notorious for its clientelist network and corruption scandals. In contrast to Džankić and Keil (2017), what I propose here is that these strategies do not constitute a form of state-sanctioned populism but can be useful in understanding why opposition parties in Montenegro have not taken on the mantle of full-fledged populism. The elaboration of this argument follows in the next sections on the DCG and the PzP.

## *4. Populist flirtation of Democrats in Montenegro*

At the forefront of populist rhetoric in Montenegro is a left-wing party, the DCG. The party emerged as a new political actor in 2015, when a part of the Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (SNP)[1] seceded and adopted the role of a fresh and politically untainted force on the Montenegrin political scene. In the initial months, the DCG established a complex internal organization with a central headquarters accompanied by committees in every local municipality in Montenegro (Demokrate Crna Gora 2018). Here, the DCG established the party's Congress as the main decision-making body responsible for the party's program, which would be scheduled to convene at least once every four years. In between the regular congressional sessions, the Executive Committee is the chief managing body of the party, consisting (among others) of the party leader, vice presidents, and

1 Socialist People's Party. The party emerged in 1998 following a split in the DPS to the supporters of Milo Đukanović and supporters of Momir Bulatović. Internal party conflict reached its culmination with both political leaders running for president in the 1997 Montenegrin presidential election. After Bulatović had a relative majority of votes in the first round, Đukanović managed to win the Montenegrin presidency in a head-to-head runoff two weeks later.

presidents of the municipal party committees. Furthermore, the Executive Committee is balanced with a quota system in place for at least 30% women and 30% of members under the age of thirty.

While the visibility of the party is primarily reliant on the visibility of the party leader, Aleksa Bečić, the presence of local councils is felt due to the party's extensive door-to-door campaigning strategies, social-media platforms, and adherence to local issues. As such, several campaigns run by the DCG at the municipal level represent a newfound approach to campaigning on local issues and problems via a community-based strategy, rather than confronting political opponents in more general public settings. Along these lines, local elections in Montenegro have been dominated by the same issues of state loyalty and ethnic affiliation, as previously mentioned. Here, instead of continuing the tradition of cleavage-based politics, in 2016, the DCG used the slogan *Pobjede, ne podjele!* (Victory, not division!) in their national campaign. In 2020, they used the slogan *Mir je naša nacija!* (Peace is our nation!). At a municipal level, instead of focusing on national issues as most parties often do, the DCG emphasized local issues. Their campaign strategy in the city of Herceg Novi is indicative of this approach, where the party focused on the introduction of a decentralized system of local decision-making, preservation, and modernization of the Meljine hospital, as well as the complete overhaul of infrastructure that would facilitate a successful tourist season in the summer months (source: Demokrate Crna Gora 2018).

By utilizing these strategies, the DCG was relatively successful on a national level. The party managed to secure 10.01% support the first time they ran for election, i.e., in the 2016 parliamentary election. Furthermore, the DCG continued to establish a strong base and build party infrastructure at the local level, which resulted in successful political appearances on seven local elections in 2016 and 2017. Here, the DCG was able to secure significant local support in larger Montenegrin towns (Herceg Novi 24.22%, Budva 19.5%, Mojkovac 17.16%) while they were less successful among the smaller communities (Petnjica 3.25%, Tuzi 5.3%) (State Electoral Commision 2018). Lastly, the party was clearly consolidated after it managed to increase its electoral support at the national level in 2020, when it won 12.53% of the votes in the 2020 parliamentary election.

The main ideological messages of the party have revolved around the issues of economic inequality, social justice, and dignity of the 'common worker.' Sometimes, attached to this leftist ideological approach are ideas

of people's unity, popular sovereignty, and the rejection of the corrupt and incompetent political elites. At the founding assembly, the party's leader, Aleksa Bečić, said that one of the primary goals of the party would be the reconciliation of 'the people' and the restoration of faith in politics and politicians. Moreover, Bečić stressed the catastrophic socio-economic conditions of the country and blamed the DPS for systemic corruption.[2] More recently, in a meeting with the Estonian diplomat and former head of the EU delegation in Montenegro, Aivo Orav, Bečić stated that the established political elite cannot implement the necessary reforms in the EU accession process, as doing so would imply dealing with a corrupt system which they themselves had established and are a part of. Furthermore, he emphasized that Montenegro is in dire need for pure, competent, and fresh political figures to fulfill the dream of the people, that is, acquiring EU membership (Demokrate Crna Gora 2018).

In addition to prominent leadership figures, party members at the local level have also articulated populist messages. In reaction to the DPS's characterization of the DCG as a party which seeks to exploit the spoils of office, the local committee from the city of Nikšić stated that the DCG had been primarily established 'to free' the country from the mafia's embrace of the DPS, whereby 'the boss,' Milo Đukanović, has promoted himself, his family, and his colleagues into the elite echelons of society, meanwhile, an increasing number of common folks have been forced to turn to communal kitchens for food (Vijesti 2018). Similarly, when commenting on a state-owned ferry operator, Barska Plovidba AD, the vice president of a local committee in the multiplicity of Bar, Dragan Tufegdžić, stated that he believes there are competent people in the company who are being prevented from doing their jobs, due to the short-term benefits presented by the clientelist network of the DPS (Vijesti 2018). Last but not least, following a good electoral result in the local elections in the city of Kotor, members of the local parliament from the DCG refused to receive monetary compensation for their work, citing the slogan, "Serving the people!" (Demokrate Crna Gora 2018).

We have thus far identified all three constitutive elements of populism in the political agency of the DCG. Occasionally, they emphasize the 'good' nature of 'the common people,' who they depict as being divided and

2 'It is not enough that they have eaten our past and our present, but under a smoke curtain of societal division, they would like to eat away our future too' (*Portal Analitika*, 2018).

ruled by the corrupt and incompetent elite (mafia). Yet, despite this, they describe them as if they are holding out for the implementation of 'real' democratic principles and adherence to 'the will' of 'the people.' Here, an effort can be identified to construct the notion of 'the people' as all citizens of Montenegro, a classification devoid of ethnic identity. However, while these elements are indeed present, they are not used consistently enough for these political actors to qualify as full-fledged populists. Instead, the party typically refers to specific policy issues in their campaigns on both the local and national stage, whereby populist mechanisms are seldom utilized to strengthen the main political messages of the party. The DCG has utilized populist messages to justify their competence in matters of economic development and social policy, while simultaneously trying to distance themselves from the cleavage-based nature of the system.

Nonetheless, the DCG is still under attack by the DPS for being an anti-state party. Here, the DPS has relied on the strategy of 'othering' in order to construct a suspicious political history of the party. As a primary example of this mechanism, the DPS's president Milo Đukanović, at the party convention held days prior to the local election in Mojkovac (2017), emphasized the 'dark history'of the DCG and the party from which they seceded, SNP. Specifically, he argued that they are trying to present themselves as a new political force while hiding their true identity: the identity of those who tried to deny Montenegro its independence, who organized violent demonstrations and persecuted Montenegrin youth, and who openly oppose the euro-Atlantic value system. Therefore, their 'new' appearance cannot erase the fact that their interests regarding the future of the country are dubious (Radio Televizija Crne Gore 2017). This small demonstration gives more merit to the dominant political strategy of the DPS while at the same time sheds additional light on reasons why Montenegro does not have a full-fledged populist party. Even with its ideological content and campaigning on issue positions, the DCG is still entrenched in the cleavage-based politics of the DPS. Full-fledged populism would be counterproductive as it would expose the lack of clear issue stances the party identifies with, presenting a simple anti-elitist (anti-DPS) approach to politics. In a scenario with no substantive political message, the DPS would much more easily argue that such a party is actually anti-state rather than anti-establishment.

*5. Anti-establishment of Movement for Change*

Another candidate for consideration is a right-wing party, the PzP, founded in 2006, when an NGO, Group for Change, institutionalized as a political subject. In the 2006 parliamentary election, the PzP enjoyed relative success (13.14% of votes) followed by a rapid decline in 2009 (6.03% of votes), as the party leader Nebojša Medojević (and other opposition candidates) lost the presidential race in a sweeping victory of the DPS candidate, Filip Vujanović (State Electoral Commision 2018). The results of the presidential election in 2008 signaled the inability of the PzP to substantively challenge the dominance of the DPS. Furthermore, it appears that by that point, the party had lost its credibility as a new political force and a catalyst for a political change. While still nominally existing as a separate political entity, prior to national parliamentary election in 2012, the PzP joined a loosely organized political association, the Democratic Front (DF).[3] In the following years, the PzP acted on the political scene as an equal partner to the other large constituting members of the DF, a Serbian nationalist right-wing party, New Serbian Democracy (NOVA) and Democratic People's Party (DNP).

Several features of populism can be identified in the political discourse of the PzP. The PzP has emphasized the criminal and conspiratorial nature of the regime by focusing on its close ties with drug and tobacco smuggling organizations, which has resulted in these criminal structures plundering 'the common people.' This can be observed in several statements of Nebojša Medojević[4] as well as statements made by the party's VP, Branko Radulović, who has emphasized the regime's lack of legitimacy, as it has not followed the electoral will of 'the people.' The former has maintained that the DPS functions as a political version of the Pink Panthers which, instead of gold, steals 'the electoral will' of 'the people' (Portal Analitika 2018), whereas the latter has characterized its policies not as a product of the electoral will, but rather of 'captured institutions' that are used in the process of state robbery (Večernje Novosti 2017). In addition to making accusations of economic robbery, the PzP has consistently claimed electoral fraud through various mechanisms (Vijesti 2018). Here, we see that the

3 By 2018, any distinction between the constituting members of *DF* would be hard to disentangle.

4 On 19 September 2016, Nebojša Medojević tweeted: Not all members of *DPS* are thieves, but all thieves are members of *DPS*.

PzP constructs the notion of 'the people' as the citizens of Montenegro who are not a part of the DPS's criminal organization, but instead those who have been exploited and robbed by the political elites for their own personal interests. Furthermore, by focusing on electoral fraud, the PzP clearly identifies the bending of the *volonté générale*.[5] Their anti-elitism is not a general populist tendency against elites of representative democracy as such, but a specific opposition to the DPS as the political establishment. Furthermore, by entering in alliance with a Serbian right-wing nationalist party, NOVA, their anti-elitism increasingly becomes blurred and portrayed by the DPS as an anti-state approach.

Recent developments following the national parliamentary election have shed light on this process of melting and on the inability of the PzP to clearly distinguish itself as a populist anti-establishment from an anti-state party. The election day was marked by a failed coup d'etat, which is currently in stages of getting a judicial epilogue. Namely, several members of NOVA and DNP were charged with providing logistic and political support to a group of foreign mercenaries to take over state institutions on the eve of elections and to potentially assassinate the DPS's leader, Milo Đukanović. Furthermore, there are some indications that the process was supported and even partially funded by Russian nationals with close ties to the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. The DPS skillfully used these events to create a discourse which framed the attack as one against the state rather than against a rival party, one ultimately aimed at reviving the statehood issue and potentially leading to reunification with Serbia. As part of the DF, the PzP found itself caught in the crossfire, implying at least an unintentional involvement, where their anti-elitist approach has increasingly been perceived as an anti-state agenda and the betrayal of national interests. Taken in conjuncture, these developments indicate an inability on behalf of the PzP to distinguish themselves from the nationalist segment of the DF and to utilize clear populist rhetoric.

5 Through the period of co-functioning within *DF* the strategies of political actions significantly changed for *PzP*. While populist tendencies can be identified here, they are embedded in a deeper structure of a mafia state concept. While still insisting on the issues of deep and systemic political crises, caused by the capture of state institutions and mafia state, alongside its partners from *DF*, *PzP* engaged in organizing several protests in 2013, 2015, 2016 and even boycotted the Parliament on the basis of electoral fraud.

## 6. Voting behavior in Montenegro

With the political context of Montenegro in mind, I now turn to the possible effects that populist attitudes (the demand side of populism) could have on voting preferences. The exploration begins with a question: What attracts people to populist content that spans across multiple ideologies? Ultimately, the question is whether these attitudes actually translate into support for populist politicians. On the one hand, the appeal of populist politicians has been associated with a low social and economic status (Lubbers et al. 2002; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Spruyt et al. 2016), dissatisfaction with democracy (Bowler et al. 2017), ideological proximity (Van Der Brug et al. 2000), political cynicism (Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013), conspiratorial thinking (Castanho Silva et al. 2017), feelings of discontent (Rooduijn et al. 2016; Spruyt et al. 2016), anger (Rico et al. 2017), membership in stigmatized social groups (Spruyt et al. 2016), declinism, and personal vision of society (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Recently, populist attitudes on the demand side have been found to consistently relate to support for populist politicians in circumstances when relevant policy considerations on both the left and the right are included (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018).

Following Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018), I arrive at the first assumption, namely, that the presence of populist attitudes is predictive of voting for a populist candidate/party. Here, I build on the proposition of Stenner (2005), namely, that populist attitudes interact with the political context and produce distinct patterns of behavior. In the case of general loss of confidence in political elites (Stenner 2005), populist attitudes can be activated, thereby resulting in an increased likelihood of voting for a populist candidate. Simply put, populist individuals vote for populist candidates. This assumption is almost tautological. However, the evidence from the sparse literature on this relationship is quite ambivalent (see Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). In their analysis of nine European countries, Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018) provide further support to the claim that populist attitudes are robust predictors of support for populist parties (on both the left and the right). However, the question of what is the precise mechanism that translates populist attitudes into voting behavior still remains unanswered. Are populist politicians a natural match for people with populist attitudes, or are they the only available option for punishing the elites? Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018) argue in favor of the former, namely, that voting for populist parties goes beyond a

protest vote against the elite. This is based on the empirical observation that populist attitudes are relevant when issue positions are considered and are found to moderate the effects of issues on populist party support, especially for median voters (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018).

How can we properly evaluate this question in the case of Montenegro when there are no full-fledged populist parties currently in existence? An implicit assumption of the activation model of Stenner (2005) is that populist attitudes should not exert any influence on the political system if not activated. In a context where some parties occasionally use populist rhetoric, we can assume they are the only ones capable of attitude activation. Along these lines, if they are successful in activating populist attitudes, their populist rhetoric should result in a positive evaluation of the party among populist individuals. Furthermore, if the political strategies of the DCG and the PzP are more successful than the DPS's strategies of 'othering,' it should result in a clear electoral advantage among populist voters against the DPS and other opposition parties. In other words, we would expect populist attitudes to form a part of a natural vote for the DCG or the PzP, thereby decreasing the likelihood of voting for the DPS.

## *7. Data, measurement, and methods*

To test the proposed hypothesis, I rely on data from the MNES survey, collected in November and December 2016, during the months following the October parliamentary election.[6] The sample consists of eligible voters, all eighteen years of age and older, who were interviewed face-to-face and selected through a stratified random sampling procedure. The sample consists of 1,213 respondents, averaging 47 years of age, with a gender distribution of 51.02% male and 48.911% female. The median household income category ranges from €401 to €450 per month, while the ethnic distribution of the sample is careful towards bias (Montenegrins = 48.16%, Serbs = 30.23%). Overall, the sampling procedure resulted in a representative sample that closely reproduces the demographic distribution, according to the latest census data.

6 While the rest of the chapter dwells into political processes that extend to more recent elections in 2020, here I am limited with data availability. Namely, to the best of my knowledge, there are no publicly available datasets with both data on voting preferences and populist attitudes for more recent elections in 2020.

Dependent variables: To operationalize evaluations of parties and their leaders, the study uses questions from MNES surveys which ask about general impressions on an eleven-point scale. Here, I recoded the variables so that higher numbers indicate more favorable evaluations.

For parties, the study uses variables on the DPS, the DCG, and the DF. For party leaders, I use questions on Đukanović (DPS), Bečić (the DCG), and Medojević (PzP). As for vote choice, a series of dummy variables was created from the question: "Who did you vote for in the 2016 parliamentary election?"

Independent variables*:* The main independent variable, populism, is an additive average index created from various items available in MNES to measure populism. Out of seven available items, I retained five with good measurement reliability scores. This reduction increased the levels of Cronbach's Alpha from initially 0.62 to 0.8 overall. This question asked respondents to signal whether they agree with the following statements: (A) what people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles; (B) most politicians do not care about the people; (C) politicians are the biggest problem of Montenegro; (D) people, not the politicians, should make the most important political decisions; (E) most politicians care only about the interest of the rich and powerful. Further important concepts were operationalized through the incorporation of questions on the perception of the quality of government on a four point scale, satisfaction with democracy (four points), perception of corruption (five points), interest in politics (four points), as well as whether Montenegro should become an EU and NATO member state (dummy variables).

Control variables*:* An additional pool of socio-demographic variables in the analysis include gender, education, income, as well as dummy controls for Montenegrin and Serbian ethnicity. The analysis begins with likability of each political party as the dependent variable. The models were fitted using OLS procedure and produced in all three cases satisfactory level of model fit.[7] Next, by retaining the same model structure, I look at candidate evaluations. As a final step in the analysis, I evaluate the relationship between populist attitudes and voting in a logistic regression setting. Apart from evaluating vote choice against all parties in the competition, I look

7 Regression assumptions were satisfied in all models, although small issues were encountered with collinearity when Serbian ethnicity and support for NATO were both included.

at whether populist attitudes have provided an electoral advantage to the DCG and the DF among the voters of opposition parties.

## *8. Results*

The results indicate that when controlling for important factors of success of populist parties, populism decreased the likability of the DPS by -0.41*** ($R^2$= 0.71), while it was positively related with the evaluations of the DCG 0.35** ($R^2$= 0.17) and DF 0.48*** ($R^2$= 0.32) (Table 8.1). The results also show that overall satisfaction with the state of Montenegrin politics (government and democracy), as well as support for EU and NATO membership increases the likability of the DPS, while the perception of corruption works in the opposite direction. As for the DCG and the DF, the results show a positive effect of interest in politics and Serbian nationality, while support for EU decreases the likability of the DF and the DCG. Furthermore, support for NATO membership is negatively correlated to the likability of the DF. One result that stands out is the negative relationship of Montenegrin ethnicity and the evaluations of both the DCG and the DF. While the DCG has emphasized the non-ethnical nature of their policies and party ideology, and the DF has constituent members that were pro-independence and played a decisive role in the 2007 constitution change (PzP), the results indicate that the DPS's strategy of portraying them as anti-state parties has been successful and further alienated members of Montenegrin ethnic groups.

The results for candidate evaluations are relatively similar, as populist attitudes reduced the likability of Đukanović by -0.33** (R2= 0.66), while having a positive effect on the likability of Bečić 0.45** (R2= 0.2), and Medojević 0.36** (R2= 0.28) (Table 8.2). Here, satisfaction with the state of democracy and the government of Montenegro and support for EU and NATO membership positively relate to Đukanović, while perception of corruption demonstrates a negative effect. Interest in politics and Serbian ethnicity both increase the likability of Bečić and Medojević, while Montenegrin ethnicity and support for EU membership demonstrate a negative effect. Here, following the same pattern as in the previous models, the results show that ethnic cleavages are an important factor in determining party and candidate support in Montenegro, further validating the 'othering' strategy of the DPS.

*Table 8.1 Regression results: Evaluation of political figures*

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | DPS | DF | Demokrate |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Populism | −0.408*** | 0.476*** | 0.351** |
| | (0.133) | (0.179) | (0.177) |
| Democracy | 1.102*** | −0.254 | −0.286 |
| | (0.146) | (0.190) | (0.187) |
| Government | 1.341*** | −0.057 | 0.067 |
| | (0.148) | (0.192) | (0.189) |
| Interest in Politics | 0.229** | 0.813*** | 0.559*** |
| | (0.114) | (0.148) | (0.145) |
| Corruption | −0.451*** | 0.278 | 0.325 |
| | (0.155) | (0.212) | (0.208) |
| NATO | 2.155*** | −0.946** | −0.483 |
| | (0.281) | (0.367) | (0.364) |
| EU | 1.356*** | −0.706** | −0.757** |
| | (0.276) | (0.344) | (0.342) |
| Serbian | −0.198 | 2.168*** | 0.799* |
| | (0.322) | (0.416) | (0.413) |
| Montenegrin | 0.286 | −0.666* | −1.038*** |
| | (0.257) | (0.348) | (0.342) |
| Male | −0.322* | −0.438* | −0.358 |
| | (0.195) | (0.258) | (0.253) |
| Education | −0.174*** | −0.042 | 0.244*** |
| | (0.065) | (0.087) | (0.084) |
| Income | −0.059*** | −0.009 | −0.041 |
| | (0.022) | (0.029) | (0.029) |
| Constant | 0.693 | 0.421 | 1.251 |
| | (1.009) | (1.346) | (1.322) |
| Observations | 571 | 551 | 587 |
| $R^2$ | 0.713 | 0.335 | 0.187 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.707 | 0.320 | 0.170 |
| Residual Std. Error | 2.248 (df = 558) | 2.908 (df = 538) | 2.949 (df = 574) |
| F Statistic | 115.774*** (df = 12; 558) | 22.549*** (df = 12; 538) | 11.037*** (df = 12; 574) |
| *Note:* | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Source: Author's own data, own calculations

*Table 8.2 Regression results: Party leaders evaluation*

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Đukanović | Medojević | Bečić |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Populism | −0.328** | 0.357** | 0.454** |
| | (0.143) | (0.158) | (0.178) |
| Democracy | 1.168*** | −0.029 | − 0.217 |
| | (0.157) | (0.166) | (0.188) |
| Government | 1.294*** | 0.072 | 0.021 |
| | (0.159) | (0.166) | (0.189) |
| Interest in Politics | 0.147 | 0.596*** | 0.647*** |
| | (0.122) | (0.131) | (0.146) |
| Corruption | −0.345** | 0.240 | 0.305 |
| | (0.167) | (0.186) | (0.208) |
| NATO | 1.749*** | −0.467 | − 0.252 |
| | (0.300) | (0.320) | (0.365) |
| EU | 1.693*** | −0.988*** | − 1.040*** |
| | (0.295) | (0.300) | (0.343) |
| Serbian | −0.523 | 1.766*** | 1.138*** |
| | (0.344) | (0.359) | (0.413) |
| Montenegrin | 0.425 | −0.912*** | − 0.946*** |
| | (0.277) | (0.304) | (0.344) |
| Male | −0.207 | −0.308 | −0.554** |
| | (0.209) | (0.226) | (0.254) |
| Education | −0.123* | 0.070 | 0.261*** |
| | (0.070) | (0.077) | (0.085) |
| Income | −0.074*** | − 0.013 | − 0.044 |
| | (0.024) | (0.026) | (0.029) |
| Constant | 0.178 | −0.354 | 0.926 |
| | (1.086) | (1.184) | (1.340) |
| Observations | 574 | 549 | 591 |
| $R^2$ | 0.673 | 0.296 | 0.214 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.666 | 0.280 | 0.198 |
| Residual Std. Error | 2.422 (df = 561) | 2.540 (df = 536) | 2.968 (df = 578) |
| F Statistic | 96.307*** (df = 12; 561) | 18.802*** (df = 12; 536) | 13.133*** (df = 12; 578) |
| *Note:* | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Source: Author's own data, own calculations

In contrast with the previous results, populist attitudes had no effect on voting behavior, except for providing an advantage to the DF against the opposition block in 2016. The only consistent predictor is support for NATO membership, which works in favor of the DPS and against the DF and the DCG. Additionally, satisfaction with democracy increases the likelihood of voting for the DPS and decreases the likelihood of voting for the DCG.

Finally, interest in politics is a predictor of electoral support for both the DF and the DCG, while Serbian ethnic affiliation was significant only for the DF. Similarly, Montenegrin ethnicity is a positive predictor of electoral support for the DPS.

*Table 8.3 Logistic regression results: Voted for a party*

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | DPS | DF | Demokrate |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Populism | −0.408*** | 0.476*** | 0.351** |
| | (0.133) | (0.179) | (0.177) |
| Democracy | 1.102*** | −0.254 | −0.286 |
| | (0.146) | (0.190) | (0.187) |
| Government | 1.341*** | −0.057 | 0.067 |
| | (0.148) | (0.192) | (0.189) |
| Interest in Politics | 0.229** | 0.813*** | 0.559*** |
| | (0.114) | (0.148) | (0.145) |
| Corruption | −0.451*** | 0.278 | 0.325 |
| | (0.155) | (0.212) | (0.208) |
| NATO | 2.155*** | −0.946** | −0.483 |
| | (0.281) | (0.367) | (0.364) |
| EU | 1.356*** | −0.706** | −0.757** |
| | (0.276) | (0.344) | (0.342) |
| Serbian | −0.198 | 2.168*** | 0.799* |
| | (0.322) | (0.416) | (0.413) |
| Montenegrin | 0.286 | −0.666* | −1.038*** |
| | (0.257) | (0.348) | (0.342) |
| Male | −0.322* | −0.438* | −0.358 |
| | (0.195) | (0.258) | (0.253) |
| Education | −0.174*** | −0.042 | 0.244*** |
| | (0.065) | (0.087) | (0.084) |
| Income | −0.059*** | −0.009 | −0.041 |
| | (0.022) | (0.029) | (0.029) |
| Constant | 0.693 | 0.421 | 1.251 |
| | (1.009) | (1.346) | (1.322) |
| Observations | 571 | 551 | 587 |
| $R^2$ | 0.713 | 0.335 | 0.187 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.707 | 0.320 | 0.170 |
| Residual Std. Error | 2.248 (df = 558) | 2.908 (df = 538) | 2.949 (df = 574) |
| F Statistic | 115.774*** (df = 12; 558) | 22.549*** (df = 12; 538) | 11.037*** (df = 12; 574) |
| *Note:* | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Source: Author's own data, own calculations

The results presented here follow a certain logic. Regarding the focus of this chapter, populist attitudes are related to support and positive evaluations of parties and leaders, but they do not clearly translate to behavioral outcomes. In other words, while populist individuals disproportionally dislike the DPS and Đukanović and disproportionally like the DCG and Bečić, as well as the DF and Medojević, these positive/negative evaluations do not exert any influence on actual vote choice. Instead, other factors take on greater importance. Party preferences are still dominated by ethnic cleavages, where Serbian ethnic affiliation and opposition to NATO are the most consistent predictors of support for opposition parties. These results imply that the DPS's tactics of 'othering' have been effective in shaping party competition and freezing it to the domain of ethnic cleavages,[8] and the future of the (resolved) statehood issues. Here, the occasional populist flirtation of the DCG and the PzP appears inefficient in mobilizing populist sentiment, and their electoral base is still largely ethnically defined. I argue that this piece of evidence is demonstrative of the success of the DPS's strategies and explains why, despite the presence of enabling conditions, Montenegrin parties are not full-fledged populist.

## *9. Discussion*

The previous section presented evidence to the argument that the absence of electoral advantage from populist voter/party linkage is what limits the success of populist ideology in Montenegro. While this is a valid explanation, this chapter cannot provide causal evidence in support of that claim, nor does it automatically disregard other potential factors that could be of importance. However, recent developments in the Montenegrin political landscape seem to follow this logic rather well. It would seem that much more than COVID-19, the alternation of power in August 2020 opened up the space for populism to emerge. The newly formed parliamentary majority consisted of an ideologically diverse set of three coalitions loosely

8 Additionally, it is clear from the analysis that satisfaction with the political elites, and the support for the proclaimed euroatlantic foreign policy goals provide a clear-cut advantage for the ruling *DPS*. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with the elites does not spill over to clear cut support for occasionally populist *The DCG* and *PzP*. Here, dissatisfaction with democracy was positively related only to voting for *The DCG* without having any effect on overall party and leader evaluation. What these results indicate is that dissatisfaction with democracy in Montenegro fostered electoral support for *The DCG* because they were a new political party, rather than because they were populist.

connected by their opposition to the previous regime: (1) For the Future of Montenegro; (2) Peace is our Nation; (3) Black on White. Apart from an adversary position towards the DPS, there was very little common ground in terms of domestic and foreign policy priorities. The deadlock resulted in an experimental executive structure termed 'expert government' (technocratic) that saw the exclusion of all party leaders and politicians from ministerial positions apart from Dritan Abazović (URA-Black on White), who became Vice Prime Minister.

In other words, both Prime Minister Krivokapić and other Ministers in the government were politically unknown with no (visible) party affiliation. Unbound[9] by voter linkages and party structures, government officials quickly adopted a populist framework. Three frames could be identified here. First, they refer to themselves as the representatives of 'the people,' rather than the citizens or the electorate. Since February 2022, this is especially true in the case of the former Minister of Finance and Social Care, Milojko Spaić, and the Minister of Economic Development, Jakov Milatović.[10] Second, they have positioned themselves as 'guardians of the people' against the criminal and corrupt political elites. Not only the DPS, but also other political elites, are included in this category, albeit to a lesser degree. Third, as the protectors of 'the will of the people' they are 'the forces of good, fighting against the forces of evil.' I argue that this outline adds validity to the argument presented in the previous sections, namely, since government officials in an 'expert government' did not compete in elections and were not political representatives of any party,[11] they would be less susceptible to the strategy of 'othering.' In a sense, they were competing for positive attitudinal evaluations, not behavioral (electoral) outcomes. In that regard, extrapolating from the empirical analysis of this chapter, populist rhetoric would serve that purpose rather well.

9 At least in the perception of the Prime Minister and the expert Ministers in the government, as they managed to last a little more than a year in power, with the parliament of Montenegro passing a vote of no-confidence in February 2022.

10 As an example, on 23 January 2022, Jakov Milatović joined protests against the parliamentary session that had a vote of no confidence on the agenda. Twitting about his involvement in the protests Milatović said: 'We came back for *the people,* and we work for *the people*! It is a great pleasure when *the people* recognize our efforts. It provides for additional strength.'

11 After the vote of no confidence in February 2022, Spaić and Milatović anounced that they will be forming a political movement.

## 10. Conclusion

This paper evaluated the structure of party competition in Montenegro according to the ideational approach to populism. I focused on evaluating the role of the DPS, especially the strategy of 'othering' and how this restrains the maneuvering space of its political rivals. I argue that this strategy is grounded on the structure of ethnic cleavages, which constitute the primary basis of party competition, thereby limiting the ability of rival parties to develop into full-fledged populist parties. Instead, populist rhetoric is seldom utilized by the DCG and the PzP, to the extent that they cannot be labelled as populist. Primarily, I argue it is the consequence of their inability to clearly distinguish themselves as anti-establishment parties without being caught in the ethnic-based anti-state rhetoric of the DPS. This argument is supported by empirical evidence, as the DPS was able to demobilize populist sentiment in the electorate and freeze party choice to issues related to ethnic affiliation. In other words, the DCG and the PzP were unable to activate populist attitudes of the electorate and use them to their advantage.

This chapter contributes to the existing literature on populism in several ways. First, it is one of the rare explorations of populist practices in Western Balkans, particularly in Montenegro. Second, I explore the question of why no populist party has emerged in Montenegro, despite the presence of conditions which are likely to favor the rise of populist parties. Here, issue-based party competition embedded in a wider web of ethnic cleavages was sufficient in disabling the emergence of populist parties. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that even though populist attitudes are prevalent in the electorate, they do not exert any sort of identifiable effect on the political system of Montenegro. The populist political parties were unable to activate these attitudes and establish a populist electoral base.

## Works cited

Akkerman, Agnes, et al. "How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters." *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 47, no. 9, SAGE Publishing, Aug. 2014, pp. 1324–53.

Arzheimer, Kai, and Elisabeth Carter. "Political Opportunity Structures and Right-wing Extremist Party Success." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 45, no. 3, Wiley-Blackwell, May 2006, pp. 419–43.

Bowler, Shaun, et al. "Right-wing Populist Party Supporters: Dissatisfied but Not Direct Democrats." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 56, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Feb. 2017, pp. 70–91.

Canovan, Margaret. *Populism*. 1st ed., London, Junction Books, 1981.

Castanho Silva, Bruno, et al. "The Elite Is up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, Wiley-Blackwell, Aug. 2017, pp. 423–43.

Demokrate Crna Gora. "Official Web Presentation of Demokrate." *Demokrate Crna Gora*, 2018, demokrate.me. Accessed 5 May 2018.

Džankić, Jelena, and Soeren Keil. "State-sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, Routledge, Feb. 2017, pp. 403–18.

Elchardus, Mark, and Bram Spruyt. "Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 51, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Jan. 2016, pp. 111–33.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash." *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, no. RWP16-026, August 2016.

Komar, Olivera, and Stanislav Živković. "Montenegro: A Democracy Without Alternations." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 30, no. 4, SAGE Publishing, June 2016, pp. 785–804.

Laclau, Ernesto. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1977.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2010.

Lubbers, Marcel, et al. "Extreme Right-wing Voting in Western Europe." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 41, no. 3, Wiley-Blackwell, May 2002, pp. 345–78.

March, Luke, and Cas Mudde. "What's Left of the Radical Left? The European Radical Left After 1989: Decline and Mutation." *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, Springer Science+Business Media, Apr. 2005, pp. 23–49.

Mudde, Cas. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2007.

---. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Sept. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Othon, Anastasakis. "Extreme right in Europe: a comparative study of recent trends." *Discussion Paper no.3*, The Hellenic Observatory, 2000.

Portal Analitika. "Portal Analitika - Najvažnije Vijesti Iz Crne Gore I Svijeta." *Portal Analitika*, 6 March. 2018, portalanalitika.me/clanak/183887/becicizabran-za-predsjednika-demokratske-crne-gore-demokrata/;

Radio Televizija Crne Gore. "'Kazniti Konvertite Koji Koaliraju S Četnicima.'" *RTCG - Radio Televizija Crne Gore - Nacionalni Javni Servis*, 2017, www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/184635/kazniti-konvertite-koji-koaliraju-scetnicima.html. Accessed 6 Mar. 2018.

Rico, Guillem, et al. "The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism: How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes." *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, Wiley-Blackwell, Dec. 2017, pp. 444–61.

Rooduijn, Matthijs, et al. "Expressing or Fuelling Discontent? The Relationship Between Populist Voting and Political Discontent." *Electoral Studies*, vol. 43, Elsevier BV, Sept. 2016, pp. 32–40.

---. "Vox Populismus: A Populist Radical Right Attitude Among the Public?" *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 20, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Jan. 2014, pp. 80–92.

Schumacher, Gijs, and Matthijs Rooduijn. "Sympathy for the 'Devil'? Voting for Populists in the 2006 and 2010 Dutch General Elections." *Electoral Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, Elsevier BV, Mar. 2013, pp. 124–33.

Spruyt, Bram, et al. "*Who* Supports Populism and *What* Attracts People to It?" *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 2, SAGE Publishing, Mar. 2016, pp. 335–46.

Stankov, Nemanja. "Springing up Like Mushrooms After the Rain: „New" Parties in Montenegro's Institutionalised Party System." *Politics in Central Europe*, vol. 15, no. 1, Metropolitan University Prague, June 2019, pp. 163–85.

Stanley, Ben. "Populism, Nationalism, or National Populism? An Analysis of Slovak Voting Behaviour at the 2010 Parliamentary Election." *Communist and Post-communist Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, Elsevier BV, Dec. 2011, pp. 257–70.

State Electoral Commision. *DIK*, 2018, dik.co.me. Accessed 3 Mar. 2018.

Stenner, Karen. *The Authoritarian Dynamic*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2005.

Taggart, Paul A. *Populism*. Philadelphia, Open UP, 2000.

Van Der Brug, Wouter, et al. "Anti-immigrant Parties in Europe: Ideological or Protest Vote?" *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 37, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Jan. 2000, pp. 77–102.

Van Hauwaert, Steven M., and Stijn Van Kessel. "Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross-national Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 57, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Feb. 2018, pp. 68–92.

Večernje Novosti. "Vesti- Saznajte Sve Najnovije Vesti Dana." *Novosti.rs*, 2017, www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:436314-Branko-Radulovic-DPS-%20%20Opstaje-na-podelama. Accessed 6 Mar. 2018.

Vijesti. "Vijesti Online - Najnovije Iz Crne Gore I Svijeta." *vijesti.me*, 2018, www.vijesti.me. Accessed 6 Mar. 2018.

Vuković, Ivan. "The Post-communist Political Transition of Montenegro: Democratization Prior to Europeanization." *Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 59–77.

# 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 (Kēlliçi 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*

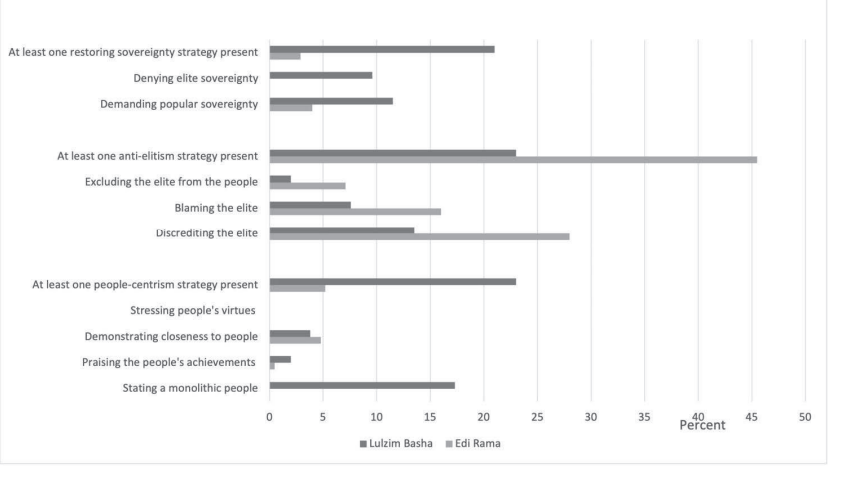
### 4.1 *Case study – Local elections of 2019*

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 to 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/outsiders 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.

## Works cited

ABC News Albania. "Basha Apel Qytetareve per Bojkot ne 30 Qershor." *YouTube*, 25 June 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA51qzi2XkA. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Al Jazeera. "PM Edi Rama on Elections: 'Albania Is Not Ready to Join the EU.'" *Al Jazeera*, 16 June 2019, www.aljazeera.com/program/episode/2019/6/16/pm-edi-rama-on-elections-albania-is-not-ready-to-join-the-eu/?gb=true. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Aslanidis, Paris. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1, SAGE Publications, Oct. 2015, pp. 88–104.

Barr, Robert R. "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics." *Party Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1, SAGE Publications, Jan. 2009, pp. 29–48.

Bieber, Florian. "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans." *East European Politics*, vol. 34, no. 3, Informa UK Limited, July 2018, pp. 337–54.

---. "What is a Stabilitocracy?" *Balkans in Europe Policy Blog*, 5 May 2017, biepag.eu/article/what-is-a-stabilitocracy.

Bohle, Dorothee, and Béla Greskovits. "East-Central Europe's Quandary." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 4, Project Muse, 2009, pp. 50–63.

Bold News. "Zgjedhjet/ Basha: Edi Rama njesoj si Ramiz Alia, por Fati i tij do te jete me…" *Bold News*, 25 June 2019, boldnews.al/2019/06/25/zgjedhjet-basha-edi-rama-njesoj-si-ramiz-alia-por-fati-i-tij-do-te-jete-me. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Bruhn, Kathleen. "To Hell with your Corrupt Institutions!: AMLO and Populism in Mexico." *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, Cambridge UP, May 2012, pp. 88–112.

Casullo, María Esperanza, and Flavia Freidenberg. "Populist Parties of Latin America: The Cases of Argentina and Ecuador." *Political Populism: A Handbook*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch et al., 1st ed., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017, pp. 291–306.

Cianetti, Licia, et al. "Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking Beyond Hungary and Poland." *East European Politics*, vol. 34, no. 3, Informa UK Limited, July 2018, pp. 243–56.

Deutsche Welle. "Shqiperi - Opozita Djeg Mandatet dhe Kerkon Zgjedhje." *Deutsche Welle*, 19 Feb. 2019, www.dw.com/sq/shqip%C3%ABri-opozita-djeg-mandatet-dhe-k%C3%ABrkon-zgjedhje-t%C3%AB-parakohshme/a-47578315.

Džankić, Jelena, and Soeren Keil. "State-sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, Informa UK Limited, Feb. 2017, pp. 403–18.

EEAS Press Team. "Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the Latest Developments in Albania." *European Union External Action*, 2019, www.eeas.europa.eu/node/58486_en.

Enyedi, Zsolt. "Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 63, no. 4, Informa UK Limited, Jan. 2016, pp. 210–20.

Ernst, Nicole, Sven Engesser, and Frank Esser (a) "Bipolar Populism? The Use of Anti-Elitism and People-Centrism by Swiss Parties on Social Media." *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 3, Wiley, Aug. 2017, pp. 253–61.

Ernst, Nicole, Sven Engesser, Florin Büchel, Sina Blassnig, and Frank Esser. (b) "Extreme Parties and Populism: An Analysis of Facebook and Twitter Across Six Countries." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 20, no. 9, Informa UK Limited, May 2017, pp. 1347–64.

Exit News. "Basha: Terheqja e Keshillit te Europes nga 30 Qershori Tregon se Zgjedhjet Jane te Paligjshme." *Exit News*, 26 June 2019, exit.al/basha-terheqja-e-keshillit-te-europes-nga-30-qershori-tregon-se-zgjedhjet-jane-te-paligjshme. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Exit News. "Televizioni Privat i Edi Rames nuk Kontrollohet nga AMA." *Exit News*, 2 June 2018, exit.al/televizioni-privat-i-edi-rames-nuk-kontrollohet-nga-ama. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Gazeta Rilindja Demokratike. "Korrupsioni i PS ne Banken e te Akuzuarve." *Gazeta Rilindja Demokratike*, no. 439, 18 Aug. 1993, p. 1.

Gazeta Tema. "Fshati i Harruar ne Vlore: 600 Banore ne 2019 Ende Kerkojne Uje e Rruge." *Gazeta Tema*, 25 June 2019, www.gazetatema.net/2019/06/25. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Gazeta Zeri i Popullit. "Programi i Partise Socialiste te Shqiperise." *Gazeta Zeri i Popullit*, 8 Dec. 1994, p. 1.

Hawkins, Kirk A. "Is Chávez Populist?" *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 42, no. 8, SAGE Publishing, Feb. 2009, pp. 1040–67.

Heinisch, Reinhard, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Analysing and Explaining Populism: Bringing Frame, Actor and Context Back In." *Political Populism: A Handbook*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni, 1st ed., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017, pp. 105–22.

---. "Understanding Populist Party Organisation. The radical right in Western Europe" *Palgrave Macmillan UK*, Palgrave Macmillan, Nov. 2016.

Herman, Lise Esther. "Re-evaluating the Post-communist Success Story: Party Elite Loyalty, Citizen Mobilization and the Erosion of Hungarian Democracy." *European Political Science Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, Cambridge UP, May 2016, pp. 251–84.

Innes, Abby. "The Political Economy of State Capture in Central Europe." *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Jan. 2014, pp. 88–104.

Jera, Evalda. "Albania, a Wonderful Example of Coexistence and Religious Tolerance." *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, EUSER, Aug. 2015.

Kajsiu, Blendi. "The Instrumentalisation of Media in Albania." *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, vol. 60, no. 1, De Gruyter, Jan. 2012, pp. 31–52.

Kelemen, Daniel, and Mitchell A. Orenstein. "Europe's Autocracy Problem: Polish Democracy's Final Days?" *Foreign Affairs*, 16 Jan. 2023, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/poland/2016-01-07/europes-autocracy-problem.

Kelliçi, Klejd, and Blerjana Bino. "Populizmi dhe Komunikimi Politik: Nje Analize Kritike e Ligjerimit Politik te Aleances Kuq e Zi ne Raport me Sistemin e Partive ne Vend." *Politikja: Populli Dhe Populizmi*, edited by Klodiana Beshku, Tirane, Flesh, 2013, pp. 87–104.

Kochenov, Dimitry. "EU Enlargement and the Failure of Conditionality: Pre-accession Conditionality in the Fields of Democracy and the Rule of Law." *Kluwer Law International eBooks*, vol. 59, Kluwer Law International, Jan. 2008, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA88084927.

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books, 2005a.

---. "Populism: What's in a Name?" *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, London, Verso Books, 2005b, pp. 32–49.

Lapsi.al. "SPAK per skandalin e 'Patronazhisteve:' Nuk ka korrupsion aktiv ne zgjedhje." *Lapsi.al,* 1 October 2021, https://lapsi.al/2021/10/01/spak-per-skandalin-e-patronazhisteve-nuk-ka-korrupsion-aktiv-ne-zgjedhje/. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge UP, 2010.

Melady, Thomas Patrick. "Albania: A Nation of Unique Inter-religious Tolerance and Steadfast Aspirations for EU Integration." *Academicus: International Scientific Journal*, vol. 7, Academicus, Jan. 2013, pp. 13–18.

Mudde, Cas. "In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 15, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Dec. 2000, pp. 33–53.

Müller, Jan-Werner. "Eastern Europe Goes South: Disappearing Democracy in the EU's Newest Members." *Foreign Affairs*, 17 Feb. 2023, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2014-02-12/eastern-europe-goes-south. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. "EU Accession Is No 'End of History.'" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 4, Johns Hopkins UP, Nov. 2007, pp. 8-16.

Pace, Michelle. "Paradoxes and Contradictions in EU Democracy Promotion in the Mediterranean: The Limits of EU Normative Power." *Democratization*, vol. 16, no. 1, Taylor and Francis, Feb. 2009, pp. 39–58.

Pavlović, Srđa. "Montenegro's 'Stabilitocracy': The West's Support of Đukanović Is Damaging the Prospects of Democratic Change." *EUROPP*, 23 Dec. 2016, blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilitocracy-how-the-wests-support-of-dukanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

---. "West is Best: How 'Stabilitocracy' Undermines Democracy Building in the Balkans." *EUROPP*, 5 May 2017, blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Qori, Arlind. *Ideja e Evropes dhe Ideologjia Shqiptare: Studim i Rolit te Idese se Evropes ne Ideologjizimin e Ligjerimit Politik Shqiptar te Pasvitit 1991*. University of Tirana, 2015.

Rupnik, Jacques. "From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2007, pp. 17–25.

Rupnik, Jacques, and Jan Zielonka. "Introduction: The State of Democracy 20 Years On." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 27, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Dec. 2012, pp. 3–25.

Sedelmeier, Ulrich. "Anchoring Democracy From Above? The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania After Accession." *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Jan. 2014, pp. 105–21.

Shekhovtsov, Anton. *Is Transition Reversible?: The Case of Central Europe: Case Studies*. London, Legatum Institute, 2016.

Tokrri, Renata. "Pluralist Albania- Religious Tolerance or Peaceful Coexistence?" *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, EUSER, Oct. 2019, pp. 39–45.

Transparency International. "Albania: Alarm over indications of personal data breach, election campaign violations." *Transparency International*, 22 April 2021, https://www.transparency.org/en/press/albania-alarm-over-indications-of-personal-data-breach-election-campaign-violations# . Last accessed 16 December 2023.

TRT Shqip. "Zgjedhjet Vendore ne Shqiperi – Kryeministri Rama i Cileson Historike." *TRT Shqip*, 30 June 2019, www.trt.net.tr/shqip/turqia/2019/06/30/kryeparlamentari-sentop-vizitoi-vrapcishtin-dhe-ohrin-1227435. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

Young, Antonia. "Religion and Society in Present-day Albania." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 14, no. 1, Taylor and Francis, Jan. 1999, pp. 5–16.

Zaloshnja, Eduard, and Arsen Zlaticanin. "Nje Defekt i Rendesishem i Sistemit Elektoral 'Islami'" *Gazeta Tema*, 22 Nov. 2011, www.gazetatema.net/2011/11/22/nje-defekt-i-rendesishem-i-sistemit-elektoral-islami. Last accessed 16 December 2023.

# Chapter 10: Populism as a Technique of Power in Serbia

*Slaviša Orlović and Despot Kovačević*

## *1. Introduction*

This chapter contains an analysis of the main political actors in Serbia through the lens of populism. It examines the causes for the rise of populism in Serbia, where the main populist actors are parties and their leaders. The main theoretical argument of this chapter is that changes in the party system have led to a rise in populist tendencies among political parties, who have acted as key actors in sustaining the rise of populism in Serbia. The primary subjects of this chapter are the political parties which have demonstrated the highest level of populism. These political parties are not only the main actors in Serbian political processes, but also the creators of populist narratives.

The changes in Serbia's party system after 2000 are reflected in the shift from polarized to moderate pluralism. One direct consequences of the rise of populist tendencies in Serbia can be observed in the decline of democratic values, jeopardized media freedoms, and a parliamentary crisis. The evident crisis of certain parties has led to the emergence of new movements and the creation of new parties. Initially, these new movements were successful in acquiring support, but they lost this support in the subsequent election cycle. This chapter focuses on the 'mainstream' political parties, i.e., the actors who have taken part in Serbian political processes for an extended period of time: the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS).

The first section of our analysis explores the characteristics of the historical and political context of Serbia, starting from the fall of communism to the present-day. Serbia has undergone several phases of changes which have contributed to a context that favors populist tendencies. Our research and argumentation are based on the widely accepted theoretical framework found in contemporary analyses of populism (Mudde 2004, Stanley 2008, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Miler 2017, etc.,).

This chapter focuses on the key factors which have influenced the rise of populism in Serbian politics, placing emphasis on the most important el-

ements that are in causal relation with the populism of parties, movements, and leaders in Serbia. The first level of analysis is related to the party system and factors which have influenced its creation, i.e., "the institutional and social-structural characteristics" of the party system (Orlović 2015a: 117). Among these characteristics, one can find many elements which favor the development of populist politics.

The second section of this chapter deals with the actors themselves, i.e., the parties and their leaders. Here, our research is based primarily on content analysis of parties' programs (manifestos) and an analysis of political topics which were publicly raised by their leaders. In this way, the paper builds on the existing research and relevant analyses of populism in Serbia, while quantitative measures are used for the purpose of confirmation of the thesis. Our analysis will be grounded in the proposed theoretical framework, and any conclusions and their implications will therefore be based on existing research. These findings will perhaps lead to the possibility for solid predictions of future developments and draw some avenues for further research in the domain of populism in Serbia.

## *2. Historical and political context*

In this chapter, we analyze Serbia's historical context, since it has directly influenced the current rise of populism. Serbia has undergone a series of transformations which were almost always followed by conflicts, crises, and a desire for strong leaders. The country's recent post-communist history has witnessed clear democratization attempts and strong resistance. However, this process has been upended by the economic crisis and the rise of populism. The last decade of the 20th Century in Serbia was marked by the dominance and populist rule of the SPS. Subsequent democratic changes reduced the power of populism to a significant extent. However, 2012 signaled a new wave of populism marked by the dominance of one party, the SNS. These events have resulted in the current political context of Serbia, which favors populist tendencies.

In modern history, Serbia has experienced many different forms of government; from a monarchy to a republic, from a federal unit to a state union and, finally to an independent parliamentary republic. According to the country's constitution, which was adopted in 2006, Serbia is a parliamentary republic with a semi-presidential system. After the World War II and the establishment of the communist regime in Yugoslavia, Serbia

was one of the key federal states. During Tito's regime, Yugoslavia changed constitutional elements, such as in 1974, when two autonomous provinces were established within Serbia, both of which were provided with the same rights of participation as the federal units. The communist regime managed the ethnic problems and conflicts, but the republic's stability was embedded in Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death and the weakening of communist ideology, under the pressure of external influence, Yugoslavia entered a crisis, and the possibility of dissolution of the state emerged.

The requirements for transitioning from a monopoly of communists, i.e., a single-party system, into one which is multipartisan, as well as from a command economy into a market economy, expanded very quickly. The collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe and changes in the Soviet Union greatly impacted Yugoslavia. One of the indicators that suggested the impending dissolution of Yugoslavia was the decision to hold the first multiparty elections in 1990. Yugoslavia did not have general elections, only the republics and their representatives in the federal institutions held elections. The nationalists won all the elections in each republic. In Serbia, the nationalists were represented by the successors of the communists, i.e., the SPS, led by Slobodan Milošević, who became the new Serbian national leader. Only Serbia and Montenegro remained part of Yugoslavia until 2006, while all the other republics became independent (in war or in peace) towards the beginning of the 1990s. What distinguishes Serbia as a case study is that its multiparty system was established in a special context, one which was characterized by "the UN sanctions introduced upon Serbia during the 1990s, the NATO bombing campaign, (…) and then the separation of Montenegro through the referendum and the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and Metohija" (Orlović 2015b: 12).

Serbia experienced a slow transition under the leadership of the former regime of the SPS and the opposition, which split into two blocks. The nationalist bloc was represented by the SRS and the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), while the second bloc was represented by the Democratic Party (DS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), and many other smaller parties. The key political issues in 1990s were the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and ethnic problems in Kosovo and Metohija, which Milošević's regime used as an integrative factor of the nation and to make himself the one and only factor of stability. Economic instability, nationalist rhetoric, wars, and crime marked the context in which the institutions in Serbia were being established.

Since 1990, the electoral and party systems have been changed several times. Some changes were due to external influence, some were made to meet the demands of the opposition, but most of them were politically engineered by the regime itself. Pluralism in Serbia has had two periods, from 1990 to the fall of Milošević's regime in 2000, and after the democratic changes of 2000. Serbia's democratic transition was delayed, because it was dominated by one party (the SPS) throughout the 1990s. The democratic changes in 2000 were led by the united opposition of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). The new democratic government upheld European integration as the most important political goal. Despite this, Serbia has had a permanent problem of Kosovo and Metohija, whose unresolved status produced many other problems in the area of EU integration.

In practice, the electoral system has undergone several phases of change. The first ten years were "characterized by party disputes about the electoral system and frequent changes of the electoral law" (Jovanović 2015: 29). During this period, Serbia had the majority two-round system with 250 MPs (1990) and the proportional system with nine constituencies (1992, 1993) and later with 29 constituencies (1997) (Jovanović 2015: 38). After the political changes of 2000, Serbia established a proportional electoral system with a single constituency. In the years after 2000, the only reforms carried out concerned the representation of national minorities and women, the allocation of mandates, and the electoral threshold (from 5% to 3%).

During the 2000s, after a period characterized by dominance of the SPS, the party system in Serbia moved between moderate and polarized pluralism. The first years of the post-Milošević era witnessed "the breakup of the umbrella organization DOS due to the leaders' vanity and the parties' programmatic differences, the fragmentation of the party system increased" (Orlović 2008: 207). The most pro-European relevant parties in the first years were the DS, led by Zoran Đinđić, and the DSS, led by Vojislav Koštunica, and many others smaller parties. On the other side of the coin, the former regime was represented by the SPS without Milošević and the SRS, which acted as the most radical and Eurosceptic party and had the greatest support of voters. Intraparty relations of the SRS and the departure of part of its leadership ultimately led to significant changes in political life in Serbia. The establishment of the SNS, led by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, and their victory in the 2012 elections resulted in the defeat of the DS, the DSS, and other small parties, with the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić becoming highly popular. This chapter provides an analysis of the

political life in Serbia after 2012, a period which is characterized by the rise of populism.

### *3. Theory and argument*

Populism is not a new concept, but it has experienced a great expansion in the 21st Century. The concept of populism does not have a universal definition. There are many different interpretations of populism, and it is often related to the crisis of democracy. The last decade of world politics has been characterized by the rise of populist parties, movements, and leaders. This trend has affected stable Western democracies, as well as new democracies which were created after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, including Serbia. Following the electoral success of populist parties is the usage of populist mechanisms to remain in power. Populism has become a characteristic of many left-wing and right-wing movements and parties. A number of economic, social, and political factors are directly correlated to the rise of populism. The conditions which generally facilitate the success of populism are a polarized society, the existence of a strong political leader and party, and a state of permanent crisis. The basic argument which we underline is that the character of the party system significantly influences populist tendencies. Party systems with a dominant party emphasize the power of one party and leader. This indicates that the tempo and political processes are dictated by the strongest actor, although there are other present political actors with less or little power. In order to maintain their dominance and power, the ruling party must constantly produce new threats to the regime, thereby fostering the state of permanent crisis. The legacy of communism and titoism, followed by a state of confrontation and opposition to Western democracies led by Milošević, has had a large influence on the current rise of populism in Serbia.

There are many questions concerning populism as a concept that must be addressed before we dive into the case of Serbia. While "it is easier to show who is a populists than to explain what populism [is]" (Orlović 2017a: 46), we can define some basic tenants of populism. First, we need to underline the differences between populism in stable democracies and populism in new democracies. Second, we need to theoretically define populism. Is populism a type of ideology, political strategy or political mechanism, a style of political public speech and communication with voters or all of that?

All around the world "populism is an extremely heterogeneous political phenomenon—individual populist actors can be left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9). Many stable Western democracies are challenged by populist parties and movements, but stable democratic institutions constrain populist political practices. This kind of stability is reflected in a situation "where populist parties cannot form a government as the primary actors (and still in many cases are not acceptable as part of the ruling coalition)" (Spasojević 2018: 2).

In Eastern Europe, the emergence of populism occurred in Russia, through a populist movement called *narodnichestvo*, a name which directly translates to 'populism' in English (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 32). After the October Revolution, communism gave rise to populism in many social segments. All countries within the Eastern Bloc had a social context which was favorable to populism. The Yugoslavian brand of soft communism, a specific form with its own concept of self-governance, provided a special context for the case of Serbia. We should also emphasize the process of the transition to democracy as a determinant of populism in Eastern Europe. The transition took the form of rapid democratization and Europeanization processes in the post-communist countries associated with the EU.

Other developments have also contributed to the rise of populism in Serbia. Over the last decade, "the wave of populism [emerged] in parallel with the wave of the global economic crisis (…) since 2008 there was an increase in social inequality, waves of terrorist attacks in Europe and fear from terrorism, the immigrant crisis and the crisis in the Eurozone" (Orlović 2017a: 47). All of this has contributed to the rise of populism in many stable, but also in new and unconsolidated democracies.

How does one define populism? Populism should be understood as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9), one which is based on three core concepts: the people, the elites, and the general will. It should be added to this assumption that as a "thin ideology, as Stanley points out, populism "is diffuse in its lack of a programmatic center of gravity, and it is open in its ability to cohabit with other more comprehensive, ideologies" (Stanley 2008: 99-100). Some authors emphasize populism as an ideology based upon "hostility" (based on De Raadt et al. 2004; Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 97 , 2004) to representative democracy. The antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites' is the basic level at which the populists conduct their politics. On the basis of this relation and other characteristics, populism requires a framework to analyze specific

case studies. If we want to show that populism is an ideology of certain political actors in Serbia, then we need to study their political programs and formal party documents in order to understand how these political parties, movements, or leaders frame their rhetoric.

The classical theory of social cleavages cannot explain the new social tendencies marked by the rise of populism. This is why a new social cleavage that demarcates 'the establishment vs. anti-establishment' should be considered in this analysis. On the one hand, "political institutions are unable to articulate the interests and demands of citizens and deliver the expected results. They are exhausted and flogged by stagnant political elites that are absorbed by the system and blocked the flow of fresh ideas, frames and fresh air" (Orlović 2017a: 50). On the other hand, "as a reaction and response to such a state, the anti-establishment candidates, leaders and parties appear. Populism is a synonym to 'opponents of the establishment' who, although without clear and crystallized political ideas, mobilize voters on emotions against the elite, channeling disappointment and inciting distrust in those in power" (Orlović 2017a: 50).

Populist rhetoric entails a list of characteristics and elements in order to qualify as populist. As Krastev says, "the magic formula of the populists' success is dependent on ten elements: authentic anger, unrestrained hatred of the elites, policy vagueness, economic egalitarianism, cultural conservatism, compassionate radicalism, measured euroscepticism and anti-capitalism, declared nationalism, undeclared xenophobia, anti-corruption rhetoric" (Krastev 2006). Depending on the political context and current needs, populists tend to incorporate these elements into their rhetoric. Populist parties and politicians tend to integrate populist rhetoric into political programs, and especially in their electoral campaigns, slogans, and speeches. It is this perspective on populism which will guide our analysis on populist leaders and parties in Serbia.

In this article, we rely on Paul Taggart's model of populism to analyze populist actors in Serbia. Taggart's model offers a catch-all view of populists' features. This theoretical frame is useful for analyzing any political party, movement, or leader with populist tendencies. According to this framework, populism has five characteristic features: hostility towards representative politics, 'the heartland' and 'the people,' a lack of core values and chameleonic nature, and a sense of extreme crisis and a charismatic leader (Taggart 2006: 273-275). The first feature, i.e., hostility towards representative politics, refers to the way in which populists target institutions of representative politics. Because representative politics is based on the

relationship between the masses and their representatives in institutions, or 'the elites,' populists tend to rely on procedures of direct democracy to accomplish their goals.

The concept of the heartland is another core element of populism, according to Taggart. Populists frequently exploit the desire for an ideal world and country and make it the ultimate goal of their political program. As Taggart says, "populists construct 'the people' as the object of their politics" (Taggart 2006: 274). Other ideologies also have their own "ideal world" based on their vision of the future, but the populist view is based on a nostalgia for the past.

The lack of core values is a characteristic of populism. This is partially due to the different conceptualizations of 'the heartland,' which require different ideological positions among populists. The 'chameleonic' nature of populism does not allow for a consistent relationship to similar issues; thus, we cannot define core values of populism. Populists do not possess a shared identity with other populists in different contexts. The fluid nature of populism makes for a broad ideological range of parties and leaders that can be considered populist.

As the fourth feature of populism, Taggart (2006) points out a contextual reason for the rise of populism. The general consensus is that populism is essentially a reaction to an extreme crisis and an unstable society. During times of big changes—or during an economic or a political crisis—the division between the elites and masses is frequently exasperated, which populists then exploit to acquire electoral support. The world economic crisis of 2008 created a space for populism to emerge in many countries. In economic crises, many citizens lose confidence in their political and state institutions, and democratic processes must play defensive role to ameliorate such situations.

During times of crisis, programmatic politics may become more personalized. When this happens, charismatic leaders become even more important. Due to their lack of traditional and institutional legitimacy, populist actors frequently rely on charisma as a source of political legitimacy (Veber 2006). Political speeches which deflect political responsibility from the speaker and depict complex political issues as easily solvable are a means for charismatic leaders to come to power in a short period of time. Because of this, they do not need core values, stable institutions, and a consistent ideology.

## 4. Case description

The Serbian parliamentary elections of 2012 witnessed the rise of one dominant party and resulted in a crisis of other relevant parties. This led to changes in the party system and the appearance of new populist tendencies. In our analysis, we will focus on three political parties and their leaders: the center-right SNS, the left-wing SPS and the far-right SRS. When it comes to other political parties, especially the new ones, such as the Serbian Movement Dveri and Enough is Enough (DJB) we have also observed some populist elements, but the SNS, the SPS, and the SRS are the best cases to show the nature of populism in the Serbian party system. These three parties were also the parties of the old regime, the one which preceded the county's transition to democracy. In today's Serbia, they represent new policies and occupy new roles. The elections of 2012 marked a turning point which established "a coalition of two types of populism—quasi-left and quasi-right" (Lutovac and Marković 2017: 91). Rather than claim that these parties are populist, our approach is to analyze the populist elements in their programs and actions.

The former right-wing politicians who departed from the SRS and formed the SNS, a centrist and catch-all party, have utilized all available resources to remain in power. Since the elections of 2012, the opposition parties have been in a state of permanent crisis and lacked the possibility to produce new politics. As the new ruling party with Aleksandar Vučić as its leader, the SNS developed a new pro-EU policy. With this as its political platform, the SNS has been able to establish its catch-all character. In the first years of their parliamentary rule, the SNS and Vučić have managed to establish a new pro-European, anti-corruption, progressive image.

The SRS has so far managed to survive the departure of some of its leadership and the split in the party. Its new leader, Vojislav Šešelj, returned to the Serbian parliament upon his release from the Hague tribunal. As a right-wing party, the SRS is known for its extreme politics and populist promises. Due to its conflicts with the democratic parties in the party system, the SRS has continued to be the most extreme party in Serbia.

The SPS, the party which dominated politics throughout the 1990s, has formed a part of all government coalitions since 2008. This has created an image of the party as the ideal coalition partner for parties belonging to both sides of the political spectrum. As a left-wing party, the SPS has typically occupied governmental positions in areas related to social policy. SPS politicians have also occupied other positions of power, i.e., prime

minister, minister of defense, as well as positions in the police force and in foreign affairs. However, the distribution of ministries depends on the strength of the parties within the coalition, which was especially evident after the 2020 elections. In this context, these three parties represent the basis for analyzing populist politics in Serbia.

## *5. Analysis*

After democratic changes were adopted in Serbia, political parties exploited the division between those who were in favor of the 'DOS regime' and those who were against it. This ultimately resulted in hostility towards representative politics and the established democratic structures. The parties in power, the SNS and the SPS, accused the former ruling parties (the DS, the DSS, etc.) of being responsible for Serbia's problems, particularly its economic problems. The 'former yellow regime' is the most frequently used phrase in public speeches about the ruling parties.

The first chapter of the 'White book,' the SNS political program on reforms, explains all economic problems through the criticism of the previous government of Serbia (2008-2012). In the chapter on the economic policies of the democratic government, they use adjectives such as "catastrophic," "dramatic," and "unscrupulous" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 4-5). This political program remained in place even after the SNS had won the elections, as they did not offer a new program. After coming to power, the SNS continued labeling specific domestic or international structures as enemies who is ready to use 'all mechanisms against the Serbian government.' Another significant event was Aleksandar Vučić's presidential campaign in 2017, when he ran as a candidate of the SNS. During the campaign, Vučić made the most public appearances of all candidates, with 82.1% of his rhetoric being characterized as populist (Bešić 2017: 168), of which half (49.1%) was criticism of his opponents (Bešić 2017: 170).

Although the leadership of the SNS presented itself as being pro-European and in partnership with the EU and international community, they depicted the opposition as 'foreign mercenaries' when speaking in the public and with the pro-government media. They also directed this kind of criticism towards independent and regulatory institutions that had criticized the government and other public institutions. As the leading political party in the government and the dominant party in the system, they engaged in

a hostile campaign against the former establishment, which they blamed for the country's poor economic situation.

The second most powerful party in the government, the SPS, has also expressed hostility towards established structures. In the history of multipartism in Serbia, the SPS has taken part in most government coalitions, although they were hostile to the international community during their early years of coming to power (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 99). After 2008, they made some soft pro-EU changes. In internal political relations, they justified the regime from the 1990s and tried to transfer all the responsibility to the DOS parties. Ivica Dačić, a leader of the SPS once said that "the 5th of October was a betrayal carried out and prepared and financed from abroad" (Tanjug 2017), thus challenging the legality and legitimacy of the democratic changes that had taken place. In the political program of the SPS, there are some populist elements that relate to how they view politics. In a chapter about the current state of the world, the SPS criticized liberal democracies, arguing "that order brought addiction instead of freedom, exploitation instead of equality, class division instead of class fraternity" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 5). As a socialist party, they have conducted themselves similarly to other leftist parties that likewise exhibit populist elements and engage in criticizing representative democracy.

The right-wing SRS, which has been part of the opposition since October 5th, but also before that, has remained hostile to representative politics in many ways. The SRS is the most popular Eurosceptic and anti-EU party in Serbia. They do not want to make any space for dialogue with the EU. They perceive the established politics advocating for Serbia's integration into the EU as unacceptable and anti-state. Even though the public speeches of the SRS leader, Vojislav Šešelj, and other party members are full of criticism of the EU, the political program of the SRS does not mention the EU or the European integration of Serbia.

For the SRS and Šešelj, a common political practice is the disqualification of political competitors. They frequently characterize all opposing attitudes as 'being under foreign influence,' condemning the actors as 'domestic traitors.' In his presidential campaign, Šešelj reserved 52.4% of his rhetoric to criticize his opponents (Bešić 2017: 170). Generally, the SRS tends to denounce their established opponents with undemocratic rhetoric by disregarding their democratic legitimacy.

The 'heartland' and 'the people' are descriptors frequently used by many of the political parties in Serbia. Regardless of their ideology, parties have used the notion of 'the heartland' to motivate conservative voters. The

parties have aimed to represent themselves as bottom-up parties, generated from the masses. The confrontation between 'the elites' and 'the people' forms the basis of these parties' political rhetoric. The rise of populism in Serbia is mostly sustained on the topics of the Serbian lands, especially Kosovo and Metohija, which are perceived as forming 'the heartland' of the Serbian state. Kosovo and Metohija are very important in every election and have represented the biggest challenge for every government that has come to power. Caring about 'the people' is one of the most useful determinants of a party's popularity. In Serbia, 75.2% of the population believes that most politicians do not care about the people, and half of population thinks that the people need to make political decisions (Lutovac 2017: 17).

Calling upon the will of the people is a frequent tactic of the SNS. 'The people' and 'the heartland' are leitmotifs of many chapters of the SNS's political program. In that regard, 'Kosovo and Metohija – part of Serbia' and 'Fatherland and Diaspora – inseparable whole' are meant to communicate that the party cares about 'the heartland' and 'the people' (Serbian Progressive Party 2011). The program's commitment is that the SNS "cannot and will not recognize the independence of Kosovo" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 37), which has been highlighted several times in public by the party's leadership. In some other provisions, the SNS has indicated an imbalance between program and practice. This is especially evident in a paragraph stating that "the abolition of Serbian institutions in the north of Kosovo and Metohija is unacceptable, because they represent the only guarantee of the survival and protection of the Serbian population from discrimination" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 38), while the Brussels Agreement of 2013 abolished these institutions. The SNS also 'believes in our people' and, as a catch-all party, aspires to have all social groups as voters. In the first elections, the SNS presented itself as a party of 'the ordinary people' and spoke against 'the alienated elite' (the DS), and after that, they presented themselves as the defenders of democratic government against the usurpers who had deceived the people (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 115). The leader of the SNS, Aleksandar Vučić, in his presidential campaign of 2017 relied heavily on patriotic and nationalist narratives[1] (74.8%, 22.6%) (Bešić 2017: 170).

1 Patriotic narratives attachment to Serbia as a homeland, a heartland, independent of nationalist discourse. Nationalist narratives attachment to identification with the nation and insisting on the national virtues and national identity (See Bešić 2017: 165).

The clearest indication of populist positioning can be observed in rhetoric concerning the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. In the program of the SPS, there are many uncompromising attitudes about the supposed heartland of Kosovo and Metohija. The problem of Kosovo and Metohija is "the most important state, national, historical, moral and spiritual question of the Serbian people" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 21). Having been in power during the war in Kosovo and Metohija in 1999 and before that, the SPS seeks to deny all responsibility for the war. Also, in the political practice, the leader of the SPS and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2020, Ivica Dačić, made Kosovo and Metohija the first priority of foreign politics and exempted the withdrawal of the recognition of the state of Kosovo into a number of countries.[2] Additionally, the SPS uses 'the people' as a core value of its politics. The SPS "is a party of a democratic left that has a lasting base in the people" (Socialist party of Serbia 2010: 11) and "it is an obligation of everyone to act on behalf of the people and work for its good" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 13).

The political reorientation of the SPS started with a political program which was adopted in 2010 and some radical changes about socialist ideology (Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 127). In the elections of 2012, as a ruling party, the SPS ran a critical campaign against other government parties and also against opposition parties. In doing so, the SPS and its leader, Dačić, used highly demagogic rhetoric when describing the need for "a peaceful revolution that will bring workers and poor people into power" (Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 128). After the elections of 2012, the SPS formed part of every government coalition, as it possessed the image of a party whose presence was necessary for the stability of the government. In the modern multiparty history of Serbia, the SPS had candidates in every election except in the presidential elections in 2017 because of the deal the party had forged with the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić.

The SRS, as the most radical party when it concerns the heartland, has also clearly demonstrated populist characteristics. The party has differed from other parties in relation to the heartland attitudes. The idea of the 'Great Serbia' has been a political goal of the SRS since the party was established. The concept of a 'Great Serbia' incorporates all Serbian

2 To 7.12.2018, recognition was withdrawn by 12 states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). After this, there were some more withdrawals of recognition, but the Washington agreement in September 2020 stopped the process for a year, but there is still the potential to continue.

countries and territories, including Kosovo and Metohija, the Republic of Srpska, the Republic of Srpska Krajina, Montenegro, and parts of Macedonia (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 101). This idea, while impossible to actually implement, has been introduced in all political campaigns and has contributed to the SRS's image. The leader of the SRS, Vojislav Šešelj, is notable for his extreme discourse on nationalist and territorial aspirations, which he justifies on the basis of the 'historical right' of Serbs.

The lack of core values is a result of the inconsistent ideology of these parties. This chameleonic nature is one of the most apparent populist features of these parties. The SNS, the SPS, and the SRS each have different ideologies; they are positioned as center-right (SNS), left-wing (SPS), far-right (SRS). However, in practice, we can find many examples of their ideological inconsistencies.

As the dominant party in Serbia's party system, the SNS has transformed its ideology in many ways. After its electoral victory in 2012, the party became a catch-all party, as it advocated for interests of various social groups and coalitions (pre and post-election), each of whom upheld different priorities and ideologies. Introducing policy reforms to reduce the salaries and pensions of government representatives went against the ideology of the SNS, but these reforms aligned with the ideology of the SPS. In ideological terms, the SNS has heterogeneity which is possible and necessary because of its catch-all strategy. We can't clearly define the ideology of the SNS, but this is the case with most political parties in Serbia. In their political communications, the SNS predominantly uses double tactics—the first with its leader, Vučić, and his "tranquil tones and calming passion," and the second with his close associates who have "the role of initiator of verbal conflict" (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 116). The party's chameleonic nature is evident in light of these double communication tactics and its catch-all approach, both of which are useful when the party has voters from different social groups. However, this tactic does not allow for the party to have clearly defined core values.

On the other hand, the SPS shifted from being socialist to center-left. This is especially evident considering the new political program the party adopted in 2010. As we have already mentioned, government coalitions which formed after 2012 engaged in reforms that did not correspond to the SPS' ideology. Some politicians from the party's leadership perceive 'socialist ideology' as unusable in modern politics (see Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 127). The SPS altered its approach after 2008 with the Declaration on the Reconciliation between the DS and the SPS, which was created with

an aim of minimizing the cleavage between 'the old' and 'the new regime.' However, after they formed the coalition with the SNS in 2012, the SPS once again started exploiting this cleavage in their political communication.

One of the key problems of the SRS is the party's lack of core values in its economic program. This party has maintained a consistent position when it comes to the majority of important political issues, especially issues concerning national interests, Euroscepticism, and anti-NATO attitude. However, in their program and in their public discourse on the economy, the SRS has shown the populist chameleonic nature. In the economic program of the SRS, the starting point for the development of society is the concept of a liberal market economy (Serbian Radical Party: 31), but this party disseminated economic policy proposals in their political communications and electoral campaigns which contradict the notion of a market economy. The SRS made election promises such as "bread for three dinars" and communicated with workers and poor people, because the core structure of its voters belongs to these social groups (Goati 2013: 81). Contradictions between the formal economic program and the structure of the SRS voters opens up space for populist communications and its chameleonic character.

The global economic crisis of 2008 negatively impacted the already struggling economy of Serbia and produced conditions which favored the rise of populism. All parties referred to the crisis in their political communication, either to justify their criticism or their excuses, depending on the role they occupied. The open issue of the status of Kosovo and Metohija and its unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 produced permanent problems and a sense of crisis in Serbian politics. Parties in power have used public space to share ideas about permanent crises and the possibilities of engaging in war or a coup. This general sense of crisis dominated the parties' electoral programs of 2012, as parties sought to offer solutions to fix the economic, financial, social, and political crisis (Atlagić 2012: 65).

The atmosphere of fear concerning the stability of the state produced the system of stabilitocracy. "Governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law" (Bieber, 2018). The leading actor in this process was the SNS.

International reports evaluating the freedom of press around the world have indicated a perpetual decline of press freedoms in Serbia and point to the big impact which the ruling party has had on the media. The SNS and

pro-SNS media has used public appearances to emphasize the permanent vulnerability of the state because of 'foreign factors', and some opposition parties and their respective leaders. For example, "only in 2018, 'Informer' and the 'Serbian Telegraph'[3] announced wars and conflicts on the front pages 265 times" (Živanović 2018). Also, the SNS has used the media to delegitimize the political opposition as "corrupt elites from the previous regime and tycoons who robbed the people and the state" (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 119). The SNS continues to successfully scapegoat the previous government for the lack of its own political success, even though they have been in power for almost ten years.

During the 1990s, the SPS frequently turned to crisis rhetoric, but they reduced this type of communication in recent years. Thanks to its collaboration with both sides of the political spectrum (DS-SNS), the SPS aims to represent itself as a relevant participant in the political processes. The party has engaged in a mixture of peaceful communication and occasional criticism in the context of 'everyday possible war.' The leader of the SPS, Dačić, as Minister from 2016 to 2020, used the political crisis of Kosovo and Metohija to win victories in diplomacy. The party tried to cover up economic problems with promises of improving the position of workers and pensioners in the future, all without offering any tangible solutions. After the elections of 2020, which were boycotted by a large number of opposition parties due to poor election conditions, Dačić entered a new role as President of Parliament, leading an internal dialogue between political parties about problems concerning free and fair elections. In observing the strategy of SPS, the need to approach ordinary people with informal language, but without anti-elitist attitudes, is evident (Mikucka-Wojtowcz 2017: 113). The SPS has shifted from behaving like a populist party to one that exhibits some elements of populism.

Although the SRS formed the opposition for the greater part of the last three decades, the party has played some role in the governmental politics as well. During the 1990s, they operated as the "favorite oppositions," behaving as the ideal type of populist party (Mudde 2000; Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 122). Occupying the position as the strongest Eurosceptic party, the SRS has exulted over every crisis of the EU and criticized the European integration of Serbia with the prognosis of the disintegration of the EU. In the new context of the SNS-led government, they also acted like an opposition party close to the government. As opponents of the

3 Pro-SNS tabloids with the largest circulation among the print media.

ICTY, NATO and the EU, the SRS has used every moment to dispute their relations with Serbia, especially in relation to the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. In terms of popularity, the SRS has benefited from crisis situations in every election, but after the party split, the SNS took over a big part of its 'extreme voters.' In its political communication, the SRS has sought to produce a sense of crisis or contribute to the existing one with its extreme and intolerant speech.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis has been integral to the populist tendencies of parties. The pandemic has shown the true face of populism in Serbia, and the ruling parties, i.e., the SNS and the SPS, have stood out in particular. This showed all the characteristics of populism. The SNS and SPS' tendency to abuse a crisis situation and their chameleonic character were especially obvious. Wining the 2020 election, which was conducted during the pandemic, the ruling parties also celebrated their victory over COVID-19. After the end of the election process, which coincided with an increase in deaths and infections, new culprits were sought. During the pandemic, the ruling parties accused the opposition parties of rejoicing at the bad state of the virus and using it for political purposes. Although there are many examples of populism, it is especially impressive that President Vučić addressed the public through the media and tabloids with the message that there will not be enough cemeteries to bury everybody. He did this just three months before the elections (Alo 2020).

The fifth feature of populism, the charismatic leader, is present in Serbian politics through the presidentialization of parties. This process is closely related to the non-programmatic policies of the parties and efforts to construct an image of the leader (Orlović 2017b: 23). Parties in Serbia are predisposed to create charismatic leaders, who occupy an essential role in a populist party. Candidate lists in most of the local and parliamentary elections contain a party leader's name. The image of the leader is often the central issue for the reputation of the party. In the hunt for voters, the leader is a symbol, the message, and the program (Orlović 2007: 36). In the world of non-programmatic politics and the personalization of politics, not all politicians are equally popular. In Serbia, the popularity of a party and its leader have a very similar result. For example, Aleksandar Vučić appears to be the most popular politician with a mean of 4.81, as opposed to Dačić (4.10) and Šešelj (2.73). All opposition leaders received negative evaluations (Todosijević 2017: 112-113).

As the leader of the SNS, Aleksandar Vučić represents a comparative advantage for the party. His image is based on "his own sacrifice because of the strenuous work for citizens" (Mikucka-Wojtowcz 2017: 113), and he has successfully conveyed the message that he is irreplaceable and omnipresent in all situations, especially in crises. As the Deputy, Prime Minister, the Prime Minister, and finally, the President of Serbia, the popularity of Aleksandar Vučić has continued to grow. The approach of the SNS and the government is to focus on Vučić, as all the ministers and party members use every moment to confirm the importance of his role in all processes. For some, Vučić personifies everything that populism is. This is due to his demagogic rhetoric, the cult surrounding his personality, and his tendency to oppose the discourse of the 'corrupt elite' (Lutovac and Marković 2017: 91). However, a study of his style of communications in the presidential campaign has shown that analytical style prevails (88.7%) over pathetic (67.2%) and promises (61.8%) (Bešić 2017: 170). Obviously, Vučić is the most useful advantage of SNS coalition, and his image-building efforts have been the most important mechanism in maintaining in power.

Across the aisle, the leader of the SPS, Ivica Dačić, has shown a significantly different style of political communication and image building. His frequent use of "*Bre*," a colloquial, everyday expression (Slavujević 2017: 188) has been carried out with the aim of producing an image of an ordinary man and reducing his distance to the voters. He has used the same style in the communication with foreign officials. This was the case when he sang in Brussels, when he sang for Erdogan, and when he engaged in an informal conversation with Zaharova. He has also used every opportunity to send the message to potential voters that the SPS has enough power to make big decisions. After Milosevic's departure from the presidency and after difficult times for the SPS, Dačić emerged as the winner in many of the conflicts, gaining the reputation of being a leader willing to make deals.

Vojislav Šešelj has led the SRS since the party was founded, and he has never been replaced. During the process in front of the Hague tribunal, Tomislav Nikolić was the leader of the party, but only in his capacity as the party's vice-president. Šešelj based his image on his years of being in disdain of the communist regime and a lawyer with a large number of publications. His views on history and politics have had a great impact on his voters. All party members and leadership "keep collecting and publishing everything he says in public in his name" (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 106). It should be emphasized that he was expected to take on an even more important role after his return from the Hague, due to his criticism of the

authorities. However, his criticism of rival parties and the opposition has grown stronger. He did not change his rhetoric, but he began to use new media channels (tabloids, realty shows, etc.) to target more extreme voters.

## 6. Conclusion

Political parties in Serbia and their leaders have shown themselves to have populist tendencies. By relying on Paul Taggart's theory of the five features of populism, we analyzed a representative sample of three political parties. After the 1990s and the end of Slobodan Milošević's populist rule, there were many challenges in creating substantive political change in Serbia and carrying out the democratization process, including the assassination of former Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, a unilateral proclamation of the independence of Kosovo, the economic crisis of 2008, the splitting of the strongest opposition party, the SRS, and the establishment of the SNS. In this context, the 2012 electoral victory of the SNS represented a new chapter in the party system. The rise in the popularity of the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić resulted in populist tendencies in all aspects of political life.

The SNS, the SPS, and the SRS have each engaged with different elements of populism. The SNS-SPS coalition government implemented many unpopular reforms with austerity measures. This provided space for populism to thrive. The majority of political parties in Serbia are characterized by non-programmatic and personalized politics. Concerning their hostility towards representative politics, the SNS and the SPS have reduced their capacities, but they still often refer to their 'unnamed foreign enemies' in practice. The SRS has continued to blame the EU and 'the West' for domestic problems in Serbia.

Perhaps the clearest populist indicator of these three parties is their alleged sacrifice for 'the people,' who are victimized by 'the elite.' The ruling party, the SNS, has targeted enemies of 'the people,' who are members the former regime and opposition politicians. Their coalition partner, the SPS, has used this strategy to relinquish all responsibility. The SRS has continued to play the role of the favorite opposition, much like it did in the 1990s.

The issue of Kosovo and Metohija is important for defining populism in Serbia. The need to find a solution and to respect the obligations upheld in the agreements are unpopular, and the government has continued to blame the former regime for its failures and problems. It has sustained a crisis that

has enabled them to present themselves as 'the saviors' of the state and its people. Stability is the primary goal of the ruling party, even if stability is achieved at the expense of democratic institutions. The rise of populism in Serbia has influenced the media and freedom of press within the country, and it has negatively impacted democracy.

While the rise of populism in Serbia is evident, the political leaders and parties in power have indicated that they possess only some populist tendencies. Therefore, while the SRS is close to fitting the profile of a pure populist party, we cannot make the same conclusion about the rest of the parties which we examined. However, we can conclude that the ruling parties are indeed contributing to the further rise of populism in the future.

## *Works cited*

Alo. "Neće Nam Biti Dovoljno Ni Novo Groblje, Ni Lešće, Ni Bežanija." *Alo*, 25 Mar. 2020, www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/korona-virus-aleksandar-vucic-zabrana-izlaskavanredno-stanje-u-srbiji-penzioneri-policijski-cas/298734/vest. Accessed 3 Dec. 2021.

Atlagić, Siniša. "Izborna kampanja u Srbiji 2012: od tematske do personalizovane." *Izbori i formiranje vlade u Srbiji 2012*, edited by Slaviša Orlović, Beograd, Univerzitet u Beogradu Fakultet političkih nauka Centar za demokratiju, 2012.

Bešić, Miloš. "Populizam u narativima predsedničkih kandidata na predsedničkim izborima u Srbiji 2017. godine." *Populizam*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut za društvene nauke Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 2017.

Bieber, Florian. "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies." *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 10, 2018, pp. 176–85. CIRSD, https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2018-issue-no-10/the-rise-and-fall-of-balkan-stabilitocracies. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Goati, Vladimir. *Izbori u Srbiji i Crnoj Gori od 1990 do 2013. i u SRJ od 1992. do 2003.* Beograd, Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju, 2013.

Jovanović, Milan. "The Electoral System of Serbia." *How to Make Intra-Party Democracy Possible?*, edited by Zoran Stojiljković, Dušan Spasojević, and Jelena Lončar, Beograd and Podgorica, University of Belgrade Faculty of political sciences and Center for monitoring and research (CeMI), 2015.

Krastev, Ivan. "The New Europe: Respectable Populism, Clockwork Liberalism." *openDemocracy*, 2006, www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/new_europe_3376.jsp. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Lutovac, Zoran, and Ksenija Marković. " "Opasni (neželjeni) drugi" i populizam u Srbiji." *Populizam*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut za društvene nauke Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 2017.

Lutovac, Zoran. "Odnos građana prema političkoj eliti i reprezentativnoj demokratiji." *Građani Srbije i populizam – javno mnjenje Srbije 2017*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut društvenih nauka Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 2017.

Mikucka-Wojtowicz, Dominika. "Populizam u političkim strankama – strategija ili ideologija?" *Populizam*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut za društvene nauke Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 2017.

Miler, Jan-Verner. *Šta je populizam?* Beograd, Peščanik, Fabrika knjiga, 2017.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Announcements." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2018, www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/pres-servis/saopstenja/20669-2018-12-07-10-21-04?lang=cyr.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012.

---. *Populism – A Very Short Introduction*. New York, Oxford UP, 2017.

Mudde, Cas. "In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 15, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Dec. 2000, pp. 33–53..

---. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol.39, no.3, 2004, pp. 541-563.

Orlović, Slaviša. "Ideologije i programi u partijskom sučeljavanju." *Ideologije i političke stranke u Srbiji*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut društvenih nauka, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2007.

---. "Parties and the Party System of Serbia and European Integrations." *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans Online*, vol. 10, no.2, 2008, pp. 205-222.

---. *Partije i partijski sistemi*. Fakultet političkih nauka Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2015a.

---. "Konstitucionalno-institucionalno ustrojstvo Republike Srbije." *How to Make Intra-Party Democracy Possible?*, edited by Zoran Stojiljković, Dušan Spasojević, and Jelena Lončar, Beograd and Podgorica, University of Belgrade Faculty of political sciences and Center for monitoring and research (CeMI), 2015b.

---. "Populistički izazov demokratji." *Demokratski otpori normalizaciji autoritarzima u Evropi*, edited by Nebojša Vladisavljević and Dragan R. Simić, Beograd, Udruženje za političke nauke, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2017a.

---. "Prezidencijalizacija partija u Srbiji." *Politički život*, no.14, 2017b, pp. 7-27.

Serbian Progressive Party. *"White Book" – Program of the Serbian Progressive Party*. Oct. 2011, www.sns.org.rs/sites/default/files/bela-knjiga_0.pdf. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Serbian Radical Party. *Program of the Serbian Radical Party*. 2015, www.nova1.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/wp-content//uploads/2015/04/SRSprogram.pdf. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Slavujević, Zoran. *Pohodi na birače u ime države i naroda. Izborne kampanje u Srbiji od 1990. do 2016. godine*.Beograd, Čigoja štampa, 2017.

Slavujević, Zoran Đ., and Atlagić, Siniša. *Vreme neispunjenih obećanja*. Beograd, IP Dobar naslov, 2015.

Socialist Party of Serbia. *Program of the Socialist Party of Serbia*. Dec. 2010, www.sps.org.rs/documents/PROGRAM%20SPS.pdf. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Spasojević, Dušan. "Transforming Populism – From Protest Vote to Ruling Ideology: The Case of Serbia." *New Politics of Decisionism*, edited by Violeta Beširević, The Hague, Eleven International Publishing, 2018.

Stanley, Ben. "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 13, no.1, 2008, pp. 95-110.

Stojarová, Vera, and Hana Vykoupilová. "Populism in the Balkans – The Case of Serbia." *Central European Political Studies Review*, vol. 10, 2007, pp. 95-112.

Stojiljković, Zoran, and Dušan Spasojević. "Populistički Zeitgeist u "proevropskoj" Srbiji." *Politička misao*, vol. 55, no.3, 2018, pp. 104-128.

Taggart, Paul. "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no.3, 2006, pp. 269-288.

Tanjug, Beta. "5. Oktobar Je Prevara... Gde Su Sad Oni, A Gde Sam Ja?" *B92.net*, 5 Oct. 2017, www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2017&mm=10&dd=05&nav_category=11&nav_id=1311059. Accessed 15 Dec. 2018.

Todosijević, Bojan. "Populistički stavovi, izborna izlaznost i izborno opredeljivanje." *Građani Srbije i populizam – javno mnjenje Srbije 2017*, edited by Zoran Lutovac, Beograd, Institut društvenih nauka Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 2017.

Veber, Maks. *Politički spisi*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2006.

Živanović, Katarina. "Koje Su Sve Ratove Najavljivali Tabloidi U 2018. Godini? - Društvo - Dnevni List Danas." *Dnevni List Danas*, 1 Jan. 2019, www.danas.rs/drustvo/koje-su-sve-ratove-najavljivali-tabloidi-u-2018-godini. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.

# Chapter 11: Populists in Government: The Case of IMRO-DPMNU's Rule in North Macedonia 2006-2016

*Aneta Cekikj*

## *1. Introduction*

Populism is becoming part of the political landscape in the Balkans and is also receiving attention in the academic discussion. In a region which has at times found itself embroiled in nationalist and ethnic conflicts, multiple decades of prolonged democratic transition have created fertile ground for the emergence of a new phenomenon: Populism among mainstream political parties. This is evident in the case of North Macedonia and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU), a mainstream party whose disgraced former leader, Nikola Gruevski, practiced an amalgam of populist and authoritarian politics for ten years when he served as the country's prime minister.

Despite the party's identity as a Christian Democratic Party, its membership to the European People's Party, and its prominent role in the national parliament since the country's independence in 1990, the IMRO-DPMNU and its leader, Nikola Gruevski, have largely relied on populist strategies to remain in power from 2006 to 2016. During his early years as Prime Minister, Gruevski portrayed himself as being similar, both in style and appearance, to 'the common man.' He cultivated an image of himself as a technocratic leader who was constantly working to uplift the country and engaging with 'the people.' To achieve this, he relied on highly efficient party organization, internal party discipline, and a unified group of high-ranking supporters. Both Gruevski and the IMRO-DPMNU enjoyed high ratings among voters for a number of years and managed to maintain a large multi-party coalition with their Albanian partner and a number of smaller political parties representing ethnic minorities in North Macedonia.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how Gruevski successfully exploited the structural conditions of a prolonged transition. An economically poor and ethnically divided country, characterized by an authoritarian political

culture and engaged in disputes related to national identity with neighboring countries, North Macedonia saw Gruevski remain in power and win eight rounds of national and local elections in a row. During this time, the party sought to maintain its mainstream orientation by working with the EU in the accession process and participating in NATO activities toward future membership.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the context and historical development. The subsequent section presents different competing theories of populism and shows how they apply to the case of IMRO-DPMNU. In this section on theory, I distinguish between centrist and radical populist parties (Stanley 2017), including specifics relevant to the region of the Balkans. I use this theory to analyze the North Macedonian case in order to uncover the main elements of the IMRO-DPMNU's populism project. In last remaining sections, I shift the attention to the structural conditions of North Macedonian society that facilitated the spread of populism. I present the main elements of the populist strategy, i.e., a construction of 'the people,' and the party apparatus on which the leader relied for logistical support, as well as the themes exploited and some of the policies implemented to support this populist project.

## *2. Politics in North Macedonia: political parties and ethnic dynamics during transition to democracy*

One of the smallest countries in the Balkans, North Macedonia faced significant challenges in its transition to democracy. Although the country gained its independence peacefully in 1990 and was spared the bloodshed of the Yugoslav wars, it struggled to receive international recognition from its neighbors and was hindered by internal ethnic disputes and regional instability. Some notable challenges included the so-called 'name issue' with Greece. This dispute between the two countries concerned the name 'Macedonia' and ultimately led Greece to block North Macedonia's admission to the EU and NATO and even impose an economic embargo on the newly independent country. The second greatest challenge concerned the country's ethnic Albanian minority, which comprises approximately 25% of the country's population. In 2001 widespread discontent led to a small-scale armed conflict and introduced significant changes to the constitutional system by introducing elements of consociationalist power-sharing (Lijphart 1977).

Although North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic society, during the initial ten years of the country's post-transition, the country's politics was dominated by a relatively moderate discourse. The country's trajectory was unlike that of Serbia and Montenegro, where major authoritarian actors took the center stage throughout the 1990s (Laštro and Bieber 2021). In the parliamentary democracy of North Macedonia, the president's role is mostly symbolic, and their veto powers are limited. The country's party system is structured on ethnic grounds; the Albanian minority has several political parties; smaller ethnic minorities that comprise 5% or less of the total population have their own political parties. The latter usually enter into pre-electoral and governing coalitions with the ethnic North Macedonian parties. The Macedonian block consists of the center-right, Christian Democratic IMRO-DPMNU, which presents itself as the successor of a famous revolutionary organization that fought for Macedonian independence during the late nineteenth century, and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDUM), whose members identify as reformed communists. Having competed for power since the 1990s, the IMRO-DPMNU and the SDUM usually form coalition governments with one of the several ethnic Albanian political parties.

Since the 1990s, the IMRO-DPMNU has elevated the 'Macedonian cause' in its ideological profile (Hristova 2011). During the 2001 ethnic conflict, the party's representatives held harder lines in the peace negotiations. Later on, there were public statements which rejected the peace agreement by some of the party's representatives. The IMRO-DPMNU opposed the decentralization reform of 2005, which was passed with the intention of integrating ethnic minorities into the majority population at a local level and enabling them to exercise certain collective rights. Despite the SDUM and the IMRO-DPMNU each belonging to different party families—the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats—ideological distinctions were not a prominent factor in national politics. Therefore, these were quite important lines of division between the SDUM and the IMRO-DPMNU. While in office, both parties pursued neoliberal policies throughout the country's economic restructuring during the 1990s. Their ideological distinctions became more visible only after 2003, due the IMRO-DPMNU's positions on the liberalism-conservativism ideological axis, specifically on

issues related to ensuring the right to abortion, protecting LGBTQ+ rights, and upholding traditional family values.[1]

The ideological profile of the ethnic Albanian political parties is almost exclusively concentrated on the advancement of the collective rights of Albanians in North Macedonia (Hristova 2011; Kadriu 2011). Throughout the 1990s, the most popular ethnic Albanian political parties were the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), which formed a coalition with the SDUM from 1992 to 1998, and the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA), which formed a coalition with the IMRO-DPMNU from 1998 to 2001. After the 2001 conflict, a new political party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), developed from the paramilitary organization, the National Liberation Army (NLA). A number of other political parties representing the country's Albanian minority were also formed, but they were significantly less successful than the DUI, which, at the time of this article's writing, has been in the government for almost twenty years, since 2001—with the exception of the period during 2006–2008.

Such was the norm until 2016, when, due to the suspicion that the DUI was involved in corruption as the IMRO-DPMNU's coalition partner, new political parties began to appear and gain bigger shares of the vote in 2016 and 2020. This was the case with the Movement BESA, which split in 2018 into BESA and Alternative (Alternativa) (part of the SDUM-DUI government for one year 2022-2023) and the Alliance for Albanians, which joined the SDUM-DUI government in February 2023, after the Alternative party left. The DUI is currently experiencing an internal split for the first time in the form of an ongoing process involving a group of several mayors and other prominent figures within the party, who have threatened to form their own faction.

The first post-conflict government led by the SDUM and the newly formed DUI (2002–2006) implemented unpopular reforms for the ethnic Macedonian majority related to the peace accord, but they did not manage to improve the economic situation, which largely contributed to their 2006 electoral loss in the national elections. In 2006 the IMRO-DPMNU formed a coalition government with the second largest ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). This coalition did not survive more

1 It should be mentioned that IMRO-DPMNU experienced several splits of the party membership, especially after 2003, when the party went through a process of internal restructuring. New political parties were formed around important individuals in the party, most noticeably the one of the former presidents Ljubco Georgievski- IMRO-People's Party. However, the electoral success of these parties was limited.

than two years, due to the parliamentary boycott of the DUI, based on the use of ethnic veto rights. After a new agreement on ethnic issues was reached through international mediation, early elections took place in 2008, whose results were similar to the previous one. The outcome forced the IMRO-DPMNU to accept the reality of ethnic politics, and the party formed a coalition government with the DUI, the winning party of the Albanian block. This coalition was in office until the early 2016 elections.

This illustrates the complexity of the North Macedonian political scene. As a small country with a population of around two million and many small political parties, the electoral rules do not favor small political parties. The rules introduced in 2002 established a proportional model with six districts and a 5% electoral threshold, all but ensuring the dominance of the two largest political parties within the Macedonian bloc. These mainstream parties have remained dominant by absorbing the votes of the smaller political parties in pre-election coalitions. This makes it difficult for radical or populist actors to emerge outside the established parties. The only exception is the radical left-wing party Levica (The Left), which also strongly relies on right wing nationalist ideology.

## *3. Approaches to populism relevant for the case of North Macedonia*

In the literature, there are numerous interpretations of what constitutes as populism. Several approaches have been used to analyze the phenomenon or normatively evaluate it. Among these approaches is the ideational approach, which interprets populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2007); other scholars have interpreted populism as a political discourse (Laclau 2005; Aslanidis 2016), as a kind of political strategy (Weyland 2001) and as a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The differences between these approaches can be attributed to the ways in which populism has been experienced in different historical, political, and social contexts (Heinisch et al. 2017: 22).

According to the ideational approach, an antagonistic relationship between 'the corrupted elite' and 'the pure people' lies at the heart of populism. This Manichean worldview allows populist actors to claim that they alone can correct the injustices carried out by the elites and ultimately realize 'the will' of 'the people' (Mudde 2007). If, however, we ask, for example, what this will entail, then populism becomes very ambivalent in

its assertions. Mudde (2007) conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, one which is devoid of any ideological content that may characterize one's preferences for certain economic policies or social values. Hence, populism can be easily adjusted to fit any host ideology or social context, giving it the quality of being chameleon-like. In practice, populism found its hosts with ideologies ranging from the radical left to the radical and nationalist right.

Laclau's political philosophy characterizes populism as a kind of political logic. At the heart of this approach, there exists an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites.' However, contrary to Mudde's interpretation of populism, 'the people' are not a homogeneous construct (as the ideational approach suggests). Rather, 'the people' are different societal groups which are connected by "chains of equivalence" due to their demands being unmet (Laclau 2005). This broader approach to populism means it can be applied to different social contexts. Recent approaches inspired by this tradition have introduced the usage of frames in the study of populism and rejected the ideational approach on the basis of the extreme absence of ideological content (Aslanidis 2016). In this context, frames can be used to determine the degree of populism on a continuum by analyzing empirical cases through discursive analysis of texts produced by populist actors. Katsambekis (2022: 59-60) has criticized the ideational approach on the grounds that the alleged homogeneity of 'the people' is not empirically observable in many recent cases, maintaining that the category of a 'morally pure' people is not only present in populism, but can be observed in other instances of political mobilization or ideology.

An innovative concept that connects the stylistic and discursive elements of populism with the strategic dimension is the idea of populism as performance. The approach to analyzing populism as a style renders the concept all but devoid of ideological content. Populism as a style or a performative technique can be frequently observed in today's era of mediatized politics (Moffit and Torney 2014). Weyland's (2001) approach to analyzing populism as a strategy describes a political practice predominately observed in Latin America. In a region where so-called cartel parties have introduced such forms during periods of modernization, these regimes have benefited from mass support, and most importantly, a strong leader. According to Weyland's definition, populism is "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland 2001: 14).

Scholars have also used gradational approaches and point to the ambivalent nature of populist claims and actions, in order to broaden the scope of narrow definitions and allow for comparative analysis (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017). Accordingly, "populism should be understood as making inherently ambivalent claims diffused by individual and collective actors designed to challenge the status-quo in favor of people's empowerment and of elite change" (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 110). Purpose ambivalence—presenting two mutually contradictory positions or shifting the argument depending on political arena in which it is articulated—is a frequent tactic used by populists. Taggart (2002) referred in this context to the chameleon-like qualities of populism.

The theoretical distinction between centrist and radical populist parties in the literature on political parties can be used to analyze the North Macedonian case (Stanley 2017; Smilov and Smilova in this volume). Here, it is helpful to consider Stanley's (2017) approach to distinguishing between politically moderate populist actors—who criticize liberal institutions and ideology—and radical populist actors—whose rhetoric and programs are characterized by xenophobia and extreme nationalism. This distinction was introduced in the analysis of the populist parties emerging from the post-communist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that joined the EU during the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds. Although these political actors are populist both in terms of their rhetoric and their programs, at the same time, their views on European integration are closely aligned with the stances of the moderate or mainstream political actors of their respective countries (Stanley 2017). This type of political competition, which can be observed in the newer EU member states, differs significantly from the classic ideological positions of populist actors in Western Europe, many of whom hold openly anti-EU and anti-immigration views. Populism in the CEE region has also been seen as a response to the process of transition and globalization (Stanley 2017). Scholars have also sought to explain the success of 'ethno-populism' in the Central European countries which have fared better economically and were exposed to less problematic transitions to democracy throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Vachudova 2020). According to Vachudova (2020: 334), ethno-populism in these countries is a "strategy for winning votes and taking control of the polity." Other scholars have attributed the spread of populism to the high levels of corruption in the post-communist countries (Smilov and Smilova in this volume).

Regardless of the social context, it seems that populism is a response to the crisis of legitimacy of political institutions and actors (Heinisch et al.

2017: 21) and this is quite obviously the case in the Balkans, where there exists a widespread perception of governments engaging in corruption, which has seriously eroded trust in institutions (Kapidžić 2020). Authoritarian and clientelist practices are largely exploited by ruling parties (Bieber 2018; Kapidžić 2020; Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Populist actors in the Balkans have also seized on the cause of nation-building and national identity (Dzankic and Soel 2017). This is evidently the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. In addition, various economic and political problems, frequent political crises, and the authoritarian political culture have provided ample opportunities for populist actors to emerge. Why populism is present among the mainstream political parties in the Balkans is a valid theoretical question.

To this end, the approach to defining populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' can be applied to the case of North Macedonia, as the main elements of this approach can be clearly observed in the activities of the IMRO-DPMNU. As will be shown in later sections, 'the people' occupied the center of the IMRO-DPMNU's populism project. The party's agenda has included waging a fight against the communist elites in political, academic, and professional spheres. However, several years before adopting this strategy, the IMRO-DPMNU attempted to rebrand itself as a modern, pro-European center-right conservative political party. In doing so, the IMRO-DPMNU originally sought to distance itself from the radical and nationalist profile it had maintained throughout the 1990s. The IMRO-DPMNU has also had a somewhat good position to criticize the elites who guided the country's transition, since prior to 2006, it spent only three years in government, from 1998 to 2001.

Elements of the other approaches can also be traced, such as the ambition to economically reform and improve the country, which was an important component of the Gruevski's program. Big infrastructural projects, mainly construction of roads and highways, were framed as modernization efforts to finally (re)build the country. This is a prominent element of the Weyland's (2001) description of populism derived from Latin American tradition and politics. However, the fact that the leader was coming from an established political party and had access to organizational structure and clientelist network limits the applicability of this approach to the IMRO-DPMNU's case (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Of course, the social context in which this approach was originally developed was completely different than the one in 1960s Latin America.

The element of ambivalence is also present, especially when defining 'the people.' A more detailed discussion of 'the people' will be later presented. In North Macedonia, where authoritarian policies were implemented by a mainstream political party whose strategic political orientation has always been acquiring EU and NATO membership, this ambivalence has manifested not only in the party's rhetoric, but in other areas as well. For example, the standards for membership to the EU and NATO conflicted with some of the actions Gruevski had carried out, i.e., exhibiting hostility against the NGO sector and certain interest groups. As will be shown, although the party's tax policy was of right prominence, some economic and social policies addressing part of the population had leftist characteristics, such as the increase of social transfers.

The use of the discursive approach is certainly promising in the analysis of the employed frames of the populist actor in North Macedonia. However, the empirical consequences, the success and the longevity of the populist project needs some explanatory factors which discursive approaches themselves cannot provide. The following analysis includes a presentation of the demand factors for the emergence of populism in North Macedonia.

### *4. Structural conditions and demand for populism in North Macedonia*

Structural conditions in North Macedonia, similar to the neighboring Balkan countries, were quite favorable for populist politics to emerge. The North Macedonian economic transition produced a small number of winners and a large number of losers. The country has demonstrated a weak economic performance through its low GDP grow rates, comparatively low levels of foreign direct investments, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and rising levels of income inequality. According to the World Bank data, North Macedonia in 2010 had the highest value of the GINI index in the region: 43.3. Increasing by 28.1% since 1998, this value represented the highest increase throughout the region during this time period. The percentage of people living below poverty line in North Macedonia increased from 21% in 1998 to 31% in 2010 (Tevdovski 2015). Citizens perceived the problems of unemployment, poverty, and corruption as more pressing than the ethnic relations (UNDP 2010).

Inefficient state institutions, widespread corruption, problems with media and judiciary independence, and the rule of law in general were all mentioned in various international reports and in academic research about

the country (Gjuzelov and Hadjievska 2020). Political parties maintained clientelist relations and displayed a lack of political will to overcome these democratic deficits (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Instead, the parties became the main actors of the repeated political crises which were resolved through international mediation or "leaders' meetings" (Krasniqi et al. 2019). Currently, trust in the country's institutions is low. Quite tellingly, North Macedonian citizens trust international institutions (EU and NATO) more than they trust their own national institutions. Whereas the public's trust in the country's army and police force is similar to how much they trust the EU and NATO, the public's trust in the government, the parliament, the judiciary, and especially political parties, represents the lowest among all institutions (IRI 2017).

Most research on political culture in North Macedonia has found that authoritarian values and conservative attitudes among the country's population were widespread. The same applies to leftist values in relation to the state's role in the economy (Simoska et al. 2001; Hristova 2011, OSI and ISPJR 2010; Maricikj and Petkovski 2014). In a study conducted in 2010, 50.7% of the respondents thought that "too much democracy is a bad thing." In a similar line of reasoning, 40% agreed with the statement that "political leaders should be listen to, obeyed, and respect," and 68% agreed that "the most important thing is that the state is led by one man with authority" (Simoska 2010, 19-36). Seventy-one percent of citizens in the European Values Survey of 2008 think that is very good or fairly good "To have a strong leader who won't be preoccupied with the parliament and elections" (Maricikj and Petkovski 2014: 12).

Around 70% of North Macedonian citizens, regardless of their political party affiliation, share leftist economic and social values. In other words, the voters of the main political parties, namely the SDUM, the IMRO-DPMNU, the DUI and the DPA, have demonstrated that they believe that social differences between citizens should be as small as possible, that the role of the state in the economy should be bigger, and that the state should provide more and better social services (Hristova 2011: 192-197).[2] Conservative values are widespread. This is especially the case concerning negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, demands for higher punishment

2 However, the main differentiation among the loyal voters of these parties is the attitudes toward the communist past. The supporters of IMRO-DPMNU are much more critical toward communist past than the supporters of SDUM; also, supporters of DUI have more favorable attitudes toward the communist past than those of DPA.

for criminal behavior, support for traditionalism, and support for strong leaders (Hristova 2011: 197-200). These trends also reflect the attitudes of the youth population (Topuzovska et. al 2013, 2019). These findings were confirmed recently by European Social Survey data.

## *5. IMRO-DPMNU as a populist actor*

### 5.1 *Why did IMRO-DPMNU adopt a populist strategy?*

As mentioned in previous sections, when forming a government coalition in 2006, the IMRO-DPMNU immediately tried to break from the previously established rule by forming a coalition with the DUI, the winning party of the Albanian political block. This was because the DIU was the main actor in the ethnic conflict. Instead, the IMRO-DPMNU entered into a coalition with the DPA, in a move that reaffirmed their alliance, which dates back to 1998–2001. This decision led to a political crisis, one which was ultimately resolved through international intermediation, informal (ethnic) agreements, and early parliamentary elections in 2008, after which the IMRO-DPMNU included the DUI in government. In 2006 initial steps toward the so-called 'antiquization' were taken through the decision to rename Skopje International Airport as Alexander the Great. In 2008, after Greece vetoed the accession of the country to NATO and negotiations involving the name issue were unsuccessful, the IMRO-DPMNU decided to double down on this strategy. So, although the position of the IMRO-DPMNU on issues related to national identity was always present, after the veto for the NATO membership in 2008, the party made a significant turn. From this point on, the signs of the party's ambition to gain control of the key sectors of society began to appear.

In the following chapters, the elements of IMRO-DPMNU's populist strategy will be explored in detail. This was indeed an ambitious political undertaking: a grand (populist) project with several important components that spanned an entire decade. How this was carried out will be shown through the description of: the construction of the leader, the analysis of the definition of 'the people,' the populist themes that were exploited, and the social policies that were undertaken in order to target specific portions of society who were more likely to become supporters of the regime.

### 5.2 *Constructing the populist leader*

Since the party entered into parliament in 2006, Nikola Gruevski, the former leader of the IMRO-DPMNU, practiced a new policy making style. Initially, Gruevski's leadership approach resembled a technocratic style of governance. Later on, his style of governance began to acquire more characteristics of authoritarianism. As the party's president, Gruevski introduced a rebranding of the party's program, which he used as an agenda setting and propaganda tool. The IMRO-DPMNU's program highlighted the party's aims and policy positions in a highly detailed manner, serving as a kind of a check list for political action at the micro level. The 2006 election program, which was titled, "Revival in 100 Steps," contained no less than 110 pages (A4 print format). The program focused primarily on the economy, including a large list of planned projects, which ranged from the reconstruction of local roads to the overhaul of public administration.

The 2006 program represented a turning point in North Macedonian politics. Up until this point, the programs of political parties usually contained neutral language and introduced very few specific policies. The success of this new approach was reaffirmed by the results of the 2008 early elections. Leading up to election day, the new program was widely distributed among citizens. The program contained no less than 190 pages, which included a report on the realization of the 2006 program. Free copies were easily accessible, and the program was promoted on TV commercials. The IMRO-DPMNU's electoral victory in 2008 demonstrated the success of this new approach and the 'politics of hard work.' Therefore, it is unsurprising that the party's program for the 2011 early elections contained 280 pages, the 2014 program 380 pages, and the 2016 program 516 pages. The purpose of this propaganda tool was not only to inform the citizens and enable democratic participation, but it was also intended to support the myth of the superiority of the IMRO-DPMNU's party organization under Gruevski.

Rhetoric which stressed the value of 'hard work' was crucial to maintaining Gruevski's public image as an extremely hard-working politician. He continued to cultivate this image of himself the entire time the IMRO-DPMNU remained in power. He referred to his program and the projects it contained on every possible occasion, especially during speeches at various events. He cultivated an image of himself that indicated he was fully in control of all measures taken and personally supervised their implementation. At the same time, he would also frequently blame the opposition for

not having a program, and in fact, for never having one. He frequently suggested that the opposition had done nothing to solve the problems of the people and society. In addition to the broadcasting of public meetings, he would ask ministers or other responsible officials to report about the progress of certain projects in front of cameras. These conversations were carried out during his frequent field visits around the country. The officials would report to him in such a way that demonstrated a high level of respect. Occasionally, they would also offer gentle critique of the work they had carried out, for example, by suggesting that additional things had to be done, which was immediately accepted by the responsible person in question. These scenes typically took place in the presence of citizens and were later widely broadcasted on national media. This PR strategy was aimed to show that 'real' leaders, like Gruevski, are personally engaged in with the rest of society. It had been frequently suggested that he was responsible to the people at all times, and he was in fact the representative of the general will and exercising power in the name of the people. On these occasions, Gruevski was dressed rather informally, and sometimes even bizarrely, in his attempts to signal that he was one of the 'ordinary' people.

This PR strategy was supported by a highly developed network of party officials and personnel on both the central and local level. Over the course of more than a decade, his power within the party was indisputable and remained unchallenged. High party officials, which included his close relatives—his cousin was appointed head of the intelligence agency—were active in daily political activities, and always made sure to sufficiently praise his leadership. This logistical support was instrumental to expanding and maintaining control over the established networks of clientelism, a typical feature of North Macedonian politics since the 1990s. For more than two decades, representatives in public office used public resources to finance party supporters and attract new supporters, especially when electoral campaigns were taking place (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). In a country where at times 30% of the population was unemployed, receiving employment in public administration is often viewed as a reward for party activists. As such, it was strategically wielded as one of the most powerful instruments to remain in power. Several news scandals revealed that the conditions of employment in the public sector or similar benefits included naming ten to fifteen people who would cast their votes to the IMRO-DPMNU. It is a well-known fact that relations to political elites are important for doing business in North Macedonia. Investigative journalists have discovered

business deals and firms with the high level of political party leadership among both the IMRO-DPMNE and the DUI. Some of these allegations are cases that have been brought to court by the Special Public Prosecutor's office, an institution that was created in 2015 to investigate the criminal behavior that came to light through a wiretapped conversation between the IMRO-DPMNU officials.

A well-developed network of journalists, political analysts, and public and private media personnel were closely involved with the ruling parties of Gruevski's coalition. Most members of the national media, including members of the public broadcasting service, were under control of the IMRO-DPMNU by 2011. The wiretapped conversations, which were published by the SDUM in 2015 and turned into large scale scandal, demonstrated the close ties between the IMRO-DPMNE officials, the party's PR officers, and the owners and editors of at least two of the largest national TV stations. In this conversation, which was revealed to the public, the former gave explicit directions to the latter. For several years, these national media giants would report on governmental activities in public without criticism. Nikola Gruevski, the ministers, and other high-rank party representatives refused to take part in any political debates with their political opponents. In doing so, they prevented any public political debate from taking place in front of a wide audience, which had been an established practice since the 1990s. Instead, Gruevski would usually show up at some of the government-controlled media for an interview, during which he could speak without any interruptions and receive praises by the show's host. As a result, any space for the opposition continued to shrink more and more over the years.

Moreover, in 2011, the police arrested the owner, the executive editors, staff, and even some of the family members of those who ran the country's biggest private TV station, A1, one of the few remaining media institutions to critically report on the government's activities and routinely receive high audience ratings. The charges were serious, among them was tax evasion in connection with the other businesses that the owner possessed. The public's impression was that this action was first and foremost political revanchism. By 2011, media freedoms had been significantly suppressed, a trend which was reflected by the country's lower ratings in relevant international reports dealing with media freedoms.

In combination with specific policies and populist myths, this strategy was highly successful in creating the impression that the IMRO-DPMNU was working hard to solve the country's economic problems. This impression resulted in high levels of trust in Gruevski and victory in three rounds

of early parliamentary elections (2008, 2011, and 2014). In the 2016 early elections, which were scheduled to take place after the wiretapping scandal, the IMRO-DPMNU gained even more votes than the SDUM. The party won large victories in the 2009 and 2013 local elections. Additionally, the winning candidate of the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections was the IMRO-DPMNU's candidate.

*Table 11.1 Votes by parties/coalitions at parliamentary elections in North Macedonia (2006–2016) (number of votes and percentage of total votes)*

| | **Parliamentary elections 2006** | **Parliamentary elections 2008** | **Parliamentary elections 2011** | **Parliamentary elections 2014** | **Parliamentary elections 2016** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *IMRO-DPMNU and coalition* | **32.50%** 304. 572 | **48.78%** 481. 501 | **38.98%** 438.138 | **42.98%** 481.615 | **38.14%** 454.577 |
| *SDUM and coalition* | **23.31%** 218. 463 | **23.64%** 233. 284 | **32.78%** 368.496 | **25.34%** 283.955 | **36.66%** 436.981 |
| *DUI* | **12.12%** 113. 522 | **12.82%** 126.522 | **10.24%** 115.092 | **13.71%** 153.646 | **7.28%** 86.796 |
| *DPA* | **7.50%** 70. 261 | **8.26%** 81. 557 | **5.90%** | **5.92%** 66.393 | **2.60%** 30.964 |
| *New Social Democratic party (NSDP)* | **6.04%** 56. 624 | | | / | / |
| *IMRO-People's Party* | **5.85%** 57.077 | | | | |
| *National Democratic Revival (NDR)* | | | **2.67%** 29.996 | | |
| *Movement BESA* | / | / | / | / | **4.86%** 57.868 |
| *Alliance of Albanians* | | | | / | **2.95%** 35.121 |

A survey from October 2011 demonstrated that 49.6% of respondents— a large amount by North Macedonian standards—were satisfied with Gruevski's first one hundred days in office. The survey also showed that 47.2%

of respondents believed that the government would fulfil its electoral promises, and 45.8% of respondents characterized the government as being reform-oriented. Gruevski ranked as the country's most trusted politician (23.9%). The next politician on the list had three times less support; B. Crvenkovski (SDUM) amounted to 8.1%, followed by the Albanian leaders, A. Ahmeti of the DUI (7.4%) and M. Tachi of the DPA (3.4%) (Makedonska Nacija 2011)

Gruevski's ratings remained consistently high, even after the wiretapping scandal, up until the formation of the new government in May 2017 and prior to the incident in the parliament of April 27, 2017, in which IMRO-DPMNU supporters entered the parliament building by force and attacked the opposing MPs. A poll from September 2017 indicated that levels of public trust in Gruevski had lessened significantly compared to March of that same year; still, 30% of people indicated in the September poll that they held a very favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of Gruevski (IRI 2017)

### 5.3 *Constructing 'the people'*

A crucial element of Gruevski's strategy was his construction of 'the people.' Petkovski (2016) showed that Gruevski's usage of the expression 'the people' was done intentionally. During formal addresses, in front of an international audience, or in his capacity as prime minister, Gruevski would use both the terms 'citizens' and 'the people.' On other occasions, such as during party rallies or crisis situations, he would exclusively use 'the people.' In moments when he faced critique from EU officials or EU progress reports, he would frequently state that 'the people' had demonstrated their will during the last parliamentary elections, or he would point to the current political ratings as proof that 'the people' supported his course of action. Gruevski repeatedly used 'the people' to justify his actions and policies. This was his response to the scandal of December 2012, when members of the opposition and some journalists were removed from the parliament.[3] It was also his response to the first large scale student protests toward the end

3 In this case, as Petkovski has illustrated, in one of his speeches, the people were assigned a position to decide over legal dispute as to whether the actions taken by the president of the parliament and the security of the building were legal, even though this was a special task assigned to a committee formed to examine the scandal (Petkovski, 2016).

of 2014, to being shown the wiretapped conversations in February 2015, and to the massive protests in 2015 and 2016.

Gruevski's construction of 'the people,' although rarely explicitly in line with the purpose of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2005), was predominantly used in a nativist sense. Initially, this was not done to demarcate his enemies. Gruevski invoked 'the people' because of the strong ethnic cleavage in North Macedonian politics. In terms of who controls certain ministries and institutions, local self-government units, as well as public resources, political spheres of influence are clearly divided among coalition partners according to ethnicity. Members of the electorate rarely vote across ethnic lines. As such, Gruevski received limited support from ethnic Albanian citizens. However, when it came to socio-economic issues, it seems that Gruevski's construction of 'the people' applied to all citizens of North Macedonia, regardless of ethnicity. This seems to be the case, especially when one considers Gruevski's decision to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008, his decision to adopt a law on the usage of the languages spoken by at least 20% of the population (Albanian language), his appointment of the first defense minister of Albanian origin (a former NLA commander), and his decision to form a government coalition with the DUI between 2008 and 2016. These actions and policies demonstrate that, for a period of time, Gruevski's had managed to overcome the IMRO-DPMNU's prejudices from the past.

Things began to change once there was a limited pool of topics which could be exploited for an election campaign. This was obviously the case after the wiretapping scandal erupted in 2015, which indicated that the government was not working only for 'the people,' but had instead resorted to undemocratic practices. As a result of this scandal, the narrative of Gruevski and the IMRO-DPMNU as saviors of a North Macedonian state belonging only to ethnic Macedonians became relevant once again. The 2016 elections campaign exploited the ethnic fears of Macedonians concerning the federalization of the state. Gruevski claimed that the SDUM's leader, Zoran Zaev, had made a pact with Albanian political parties in a so-called 'Tirana deal,' brokered with the help of politicians from Albania for the federalization of the North Macedonian state and recognition of the Albanian language as a second official language in the country, only to seize power. The IMRO-DPMNU intentionally spread disinformation that ethnic Macedonians would have to pay large sums of money if they didn't speak Albanian. This kind of paranoia primarily spread on the government-controlled media and also social media and throughout small towns in

the country's eastern region, where the population is predominantly ethnic Macedonian.

This permanent state of crisis fueled the proliferation of propaganda. The propaganda machinery which supported Gruevski managed to keep his ratings high. The IMRO-DPMNU even won the largest share of votes in the early 2016 elections that took place in December. However, since the IMRO-DPMNU election campaign was fundamentally anti-Albanian, it proved rather difficult for the party to form a government with the DUI. This contentious situation lasted for two months. While the mandate to form a government was given to the SDUM's leader, Gruevski and supporters of the IMRO-DPMNU organized protests, where they engaged in hate speech. In several interviews, Gruevski claimed that he might not be able 'to control the anger of the people.' This statement can be interpreted as tacit approval of the protesters and encouragement for them to express their anger. As the formation of the new government and the end of his government was approaching fast, Gruevski announced in an interview that 'the people' should take matters into their own hands. He stated that it was not enough for them "only to sit in front of the TVs in their slippers" (Sitel TV 2017). This eventually happened on 27 April 2017, the day of the constitutive session of the new parliament, which would oversee the appointment of the country's first Albanian speaker and a new government. In terrifying scenes broadcasted on television, crowds of protesters entered the parliament, and the opposition leader and other MPs were attacked and beaten. Extensive pressure campaign on behalf of the international community and large-scale protests helped end his rule.

## *6. Populist themes*

### 6.1 *Fight against the lazy and corrupt (communist) elites*

As previously mentioned, the revival project which led to Gruevski's initial electoral victory in 2006 was largely founded on comparisons between Gruevski and the 'lazy and corrupt elites.' The elites in question had purported ties to leaders of the communist party or had participated in the privatization process which caused the population to become impoverished in the 1990s. This was one of the most important topics during the early years of Gruevski's rule. B. Crvenkovski, the president of the SDUM throughout the 1990s as well the 2000s, who was a key figure of

that party, was particularly targeted. He was mentioned on a daily basis on various occasions. Throughout the 2011 election campaign, Crvenkovski's name and photograph were used in negative propaganda to remind the voters of the bad times the country had faced under his leadership during the 1990s. Since most of the active NGOs were critical toward Gruevski's rule and were ideologically rather liberal, they also became targets of his propaganda. Civil society activists were labeled as traitors for being too close to SDUM. George Soros and the Open Society Foundation were also central targets of Gruevski's propaganda.

This sort of propaganda escalated when the first massive protests took place against the IMRO-DPMNU in 2014 and continued to play out over the next two years. In a three-part magazine interview, Gruevski presented a-tailored PR story to explain how Soros and the NGOs he financed were systematically working to obstruct his government. In the interview, he also claimed that these NGOs have presented Soros with an inaccurate image of North Macedonia, and if he himself would personally visit the country and stay for two weeks, then he would support Gruevski's policies. He also mentioned that young people have been brainwashed at various indoctrination sessions organized by NGOs. (Netpress 2017)

### 6.2 *IMRO-DPMU as a protector of national identity – the use of history*

The topic of national identity was comprised of several related subthemes. These topics included the Albanian minority and the reinforcement of certain elements of Macedonian national identity through the country's ancient past and the orthodox religion. Discussions of these topics were accompanied by conservative policies in order to maintain 'the longevity' of the nation. Such policies included financial incentives for couples to have a third child, anti-abortion laws, and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. As previously mentioned, the IMRO-DPMNU has traditionally promoted itself as a protector of the position of the ethnic Macedonian majority in the country. This topic was almost absent after the government with the DUI was formed in 2008, but it became dominant once again during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

The reliance on historical narratives connected to the ancient period was not a novel strategy when the IMRO-DPMNU introduced its populist project. When the party was founded in 1990, the IMRO-DPMNU

portrayed the country as descendent of Ancient Macedonian kingdom and promoted the view that Macedonians living in neighboring countries should be united.[4] However, this time, unlike in Socialist Yugoslavia, the political elites could not count on the protection of a much larger state with a good international position. The main objections related to the use of ancient narrative came from Greece, which considered itself as the sole descendent of the history of the Macedonian kingdom. Great historical topics were at the very core of the nation-building process of what is now North Macedonia. Bulgaria also questioned the Macedonian identity by refusing to acknowledge the existence of Macedonian language and Macedonian people (Maleska 2003; Marinov 2010). However, references to the ancient past throughout the 1990s remained on the margins and were performed by certain right-wing individuals with a particular interest in history (Leitner-Stojanov 2020; Vangeli 2011).

When the IMRO-DPMNU took office in 2006, this myth was reintroduced on an unprecedented scale. Among the earliest signs of this process, what was later named "antiquization," was the renaming of Skopje airport into 'Alexander the Great' in 2006. The main highway in the country was also renamed 'Alexander the Great' in 2008, and the national stadium in Skopje was renamed 'Philip II.' These decisions were met with confusion and protest by the left-wing politicians and intellectuals who considered these decisions as part of a dangerous strategy that would ultimately undermine the country's position in international relations. Greece possibly perceived these steps as provocation and vetoed Macedonian accession to NATO in 2008.

However, after 2008, this narrative was implemented even more decisively. It was set forth by public intellectuals and through cultural practices, and it was undoubtedly state-sponsored. In the initial years of antiquization, intensive public debates between intellectuals supporting the project and their opponents took place mainly through the media (Leitner- Stojanov 2020). Intervention into the cultural and identity practices was done in a number of spheres using several channels of communication. One of the main proponents of antiquization was the archaeologist Pasko Kuzman, who served as the Director of Cultural Heritage Protection Office. He

4 In the official historiography during communism, the relationship of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia to the ancient kingdom of Macedonia was not central, but neither was it suppressed. Essentially, Socialist Macedonia had an exceptional opportunity to integrate the ancient origin in its official historical narrative, without this being perceived as a threat to Yugoslav identity (Marinov, 2010; Vangeli, 2011).

received more funds for carrying out research and public financing from the Ministry of Culture for cultural projects related to the protection of the ancient past. The financing of national research projects gave exclusive priority to ancient historical topics. The updated 2008 edition of the History of Macedonian people, published by the Institute of National History, devoted several chapters to the period of Ancient Macedonia.

The popularization of antiquization was supported by the media, including the national broadcasting service. In television programs and talk shows broadcasted by national and local media, intellectuals explained the ancient origin of ethnic Macedonians and the role of 'our' ancient Macedonian kingdom. Television campaigns used to promote tourism were designed around ancient themes. National holidays' celebrations included aesthetics not previously seen. For example, in the celebration of the important uprising of the historical IMRO, the most important symbol of the IMRO-DPMNU, the traditional fighters from that time were replaced with ancient warriors of Alexander the Great (Vangeli 2011). Within several years, this kind of cultural production permeated public discourse, and antiquization became a strong dividing factor among the public.

Without doubt, the pillar of antiquization became one of the most important elements of Gruevski's populist project. One the most visible and ambitious undertakings of antiquization was the famous Skopje 2014 project. The project started in 2010 and included an architectural redesign of the city center; new buildings or new facades of old buildings were constructed in a neo-classical style; a large number of statutes of historical figures were erected; a small square was named after the ancient town of Pela. This neoclassical architecture was never typical for Skopje's architecture, a city which had been rebuilt in a socialist realist style after the earthquake of 1963. The crown jewel of this project was the erection of statutes of Philip II and Alexander the Great in the central square of Skopje in 2011. The statue was twenty-eight meters tall and named Warrior on a Horse.

On rare occasions, Gruevski was the one who promoted this unprecedented transformation of the central square of Skopje. This was only in his later years in office when he was trying to defend the project from the accusations about its costs. The official focus of the government was on EU integration and economic development. Gruevski's purported agenda remained the battle with the old, communist corrupt elites, and continuously work hard to improve the living conditions of 'his people.' This position was hardly sustainable, as the cultural interventions became more

and more intensive and provoked growing opposition from domestic and international actors.

### *7. Social benefits for 'the people' and policies of punishment for 'the elites'*

While in power, Gruevski designed and implemented a significant number of policies that targeted specific segments of the population. What is important in the context of populism is that most of them were actually of leftist prominence. The salaries of the public administration were increased by 5–10% periodically, with an aggregate increase of 35%. Social transfers for the poor and unemployed were increased by more than 70%. The lowest pensions for senior citizens were increased by more than 60%. These kinds of policies were previously either non-existent, or not sufficiently visible among the public, and certainly were not of such dimensions. In addition to these changes, a whole new financial line of subsidies for agricultural producers was implemented. This decision turned out to be among the most successful measures the IMRO-DPMNU government took to ensure the votes of the agricultural producers (Cvetičanin et al. 2023; Ordanovski 2011). Many additional benefits for retired people, such as free public transport and free thermal tourism ensured that Gruevski was highly popular among seniors, despite the fact that this group is traditionally seen as tending to vote left because of their connection to communism.

In his defense of 'the people,' Gruevski engaged in conflict with various professional and expert organizations, as well as with the academic elites. For example, in 2012, there were protests of medical doctors, because of crucial changes in the medical system, which included calculating doctors' salaries for working overtime without prior consultation. Despite the public objections of architects' organization, the IMRO-DPMNU proceeded forward with the implementation of the project Skopje 2014. His fight against academic institutions was obvious due to the multiple attempts to interfere with the autonomy of the universities, which provoked organized reaction of the higher education professors (Fakulteti.mk 2015). In the media, Gruevski personally named professors close to the opposition whom he thought failed to publish sufficiently. Those who dared to criticize government policies in public were attacked by a well-prepared PR strategy. At the same time, Gruevski became famous for not accepting critique and never faltering from its positions. These practices were tailored to undermine and suppress autonomous associations, a development which is associated

with authoritarianism and illiberal democracy. However, the PR team of the party framed them in populist discourse, constructing an image of a leader who could represent the people and fight against the corrupt elites.

Simultaneously, Gruevski allied himself with other types of interest groups, who would support his economic policies and control any potential opposition. For example, while maintaining rather distant relations with the biggest and older chamber of commerce, his government became close to the younger, second largest chamber of commerce, whose membership panel consisted of small and medium sized enterprises. Unusual for a center-right party, Gruevski also managed to become allies with the country's trade unions. The largest trade union, as well as a number of smaller umbrella trade unions, were heavily criticized by leftist organizations for being under significant influence of Gruevski.[5]

The Macedonian Orthodox Church has also proven itself to be close ally of the party. For example, in 2009 when the first protests of architecture students against Gruevski's project to redesign the central square by building a church took place, the church was unofficially involved in the organization of counter protests, which saw a huge crowd of religious people, some of whom physically attacked the students. Ultimately, the large-scale student protests, the groups of university professors who opposed the educational reforms which had been carried out without consultation of the relevant associations, the wiretapping scandal, and the 2015–2016 protests which came as a reaction to the scandal, were instrumental in removing Gruevski from power.

## *8. Conclusion*

This article presented the strategic use of populism by the IMRO-DPMNU, one of the largest mainstream political parties in North Macedonia since the country's independence in 1990. Despite being pro-EU, the party under Gruevski's leadership largely relied on populist practices, including the construction of a personalistic leader, in order to remain in power. This was accompanied by firm party control over the media, the judiciary, the economy, civil society, and other pillars of liberal democracy. These

5 A bizarre case was the example of protests by high school teachers and their union in 2015, who were opposed publicly at a press conference by the trade union of Firefighters (!), a branch trade union which belonged to the same umbrella trade union with the aforementioned high school teachers trade union, but was close to Gruevski.

developments have led to the characterization of Gruevski's regime as authoritarian/hybrid regime (Bieber 2018; Kapidžić 2020). Populism was an important instrument to support these authoritarian practices and to ensure continuous electoral support. This grand political project relied on a specific mix of populism, authoritarianism, and ethno-nationalism.

Populist themes were used interchangeably in accordance with current needs and included a number of topics. These topics included saving 'the ordinary people' from 'the lazy and corrupt political elite,' protecting Macedonian ethnic interests from the country's large Albanian minority, attacking the opposition and 'traitor' NGOs, and constructing a novel Macedonian identity rooted in the ancient kingdom of Alexander the Great. The reliance on historical narratives and cultural practices to reinforce the ancient identity represented a political myth that traced the origin of the modern Macedonian nation to ancient times. In fact, this narrative emerged as a response to neighboring countries contesting some of the important identity markers of ethnic Macedonians. At the same time, it was a tool which served to mobilize the public, encourage them to vote, and participate in protests in support of the creators of the project.

*Works cited*

Aslanidis, Paris. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Apr. 2016, pp. 88–104.

Bieber, Florian. "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans." *East European Politics*, vol. 34, no. 3, Routledge, July 2018, pp. 337–54.

Cvetičanin, Predrag, et al. "Captured States and/or Captured Societies in the Western Balkans." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Routledge, Feb. 2023, pp. 1–22.

Dzankic, Jelena, and Soeren Keil. "State-sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, Routledge, Feb. 2017, pp. 403–18.

Fakulteti.mk. "Професорски Пленум Испрати Писмо До Еврокомесарите Тибор Наврачичи И Јоханес Хан." *fakulteti.mk*, 8 Jan. 2015, www.fakulteti.mk/news/15-01-08/profesorski_plenum_isprati_pismo_do_evrokomesarite_tibor_navrachichi_i_johanes_han

Gjuzelov, Borjan, and Milka Ivanovska Hadjievska. "Institutional and Symbolic Aspects of Illiberal Politics: The Case of North Macedonia (2006–2017)." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2020, pp. 41–60.

Heinisch, Reinhard, et al. *Political Populism: A Handbook*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017.

Heinisch, Reinhard, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Analysing and Explaining Populism: Bringing Frame, Actor and Context Back In." *Political Populism: A Handbook*, Nomos, 2017, pp. 105–22.

Hristova, Lidija. "Value and Political Orientations of the Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia." *Political Identities in the R. Macedonia*, edited by Lidija Hristova, Skopje, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University and Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical research., 2011, pp. 187–206.

International Republican Institute. "Macedonia Poll: September 2017." *IRI*, 18 September 2017, www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-9-18_macedonia_poll.pdf.

К 3 Televizija. "ГРУЕВСКИ СО ПОВИК ДО НАРОДОТ ДА ЈА ОДБРАНИ ДРЖАВАТА." *YouTube*, 20 Mar. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RQVHA68b00.

Kadriu, Bekim. "The Participation of the Albanian Political Parties at the Parliamentary Elections of 2008 in the R. Macedonia"." *Political Identities in the R. Macedonia*, edited by Lidija Hristova, Skopje, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University and Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical research., 2011, pp. 139–56.

Kapidžić, Damir. "The Rise of Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2020, pp. 1–17.

Katsambekis, Giorgos. "Constructing 'The People' of Populism: A Critique of the Ideational Approach from a Discursive Perspective." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 27, no. 1, Routledge, Nov. 2020, pp. 53–74.

Krasniqi, Vjollca, et al. "Leaders' Meetings: Facilitating or Replacing the Formal Political Processes in the Western Balkan Countries?" *Meaningful Reform in the Western Balkans. Between Formal and Informal Practices*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 117–32.

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books, 2005, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA85918053.

Laštro, Claudia, and Florian Bieber. "The Performance of Opposition Parties in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes: Three Case Studies from the Western Balkans." *European Political Science*, vol. 20, no. 4, Palgrave Macmillan, Mar. 2021, pp. 617–29.

Leitner-Stojanov, Darko. "From the Margins to the Centre: The Myth of Ancient Origin as a Basis for Division in Contemporary Macedonian Society." *We vs. The Others: Symbolic Divisions in North Macedonia*, edited by Jovan Bliznakovski and Petar Todorov, Skopje, Centre for research of nationalism and culture-CINIK., 2020.

Lijphart, Arend. *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. Yale UP, 1974.

Makedonska Nacija. "Gruevski Politichar so Najgolema Doverba." 04 November 2011, mn.mk/aktuelno/5121-Gruevski-politicar-so-najgolema-doverba.

Maleska, Mirjana. "With the Eyes of the 'Others.'" *New Balkan Politics*, no. 6, 2003, www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/WITH%20THE%20EYES%20OF%20THE%20%E2%80%9COTHERS%E2%80%9D. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Maricikj, Bojan, and Ljupcho Petkovski. *Political Culture, Europeanization and Fears in Macedonia.* Skopje, Macedonian Centre for European Training, 2014, www.akademik.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Izvestaj-Evrometar-2014-MK_WEB.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Marinov, Tchavdar. "Historiographical Revisionism and Re-articulation of Memory in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." *Sociétés Politique Comparées*, vol. 25, May 2010, pp. 1–19.

Moffitt, Benjamin, and Simon Tormey. "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style." *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, Wiley-Blackwell, June 2014, pp. 381–97..

Mudde, Cas. "In The Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 15, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Dec. 2000, pp. 33–53.

---. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2007.

---. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Sept. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. "Populism: Corrective and Threat to Democracy." *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, edited by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira-Kaltwasser, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 205–22.

NetPress. "Interview of Gruevski for Republika- the NGO Sector Must Not Remain in the Hands of Soros." *NetPress*, 13 Jan. 2017, netpress.com.mk/intervju-gruevski-za-republika-graganskiot-sektor-ne-smee-da-ostane-vo-racete-na-soros. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Ordanovski, Sasho. "The story of Macedonian populism: All we want is everything" *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 2011, http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep07053.9.

OSI (Open Society Institute) and (ISPJR) Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research. *Political Culture and Identities.* Skopje, Open Society Institute and Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, 2010, fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/publications/politicka-kultura-identitetite_web.pdf. Accessed 26 July 2023.

Petkovski, Ljupcho. "Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing 'The People' in Macedonia's Illiberal Discourse." *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, vol. 3, no. 2, Centre for Southeast European Studies, Dec. 2016, pp. 44–66. www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/sites/default/files/papers/petkovski_authoritarian_populism.pdf.

Simoska, Emilija, et al. *Political Culture of the Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia.* Skopje, Institute for sociological, political and juridical research, 2001.

Daniel, Smilov, and Ruzha Smilova. "Centrist and Radical Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *Perspectives on Populism – Diverse Voices from the European 'Periphery,'* Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2023.

Sitel TV. "Nikola Gruevski: Napadnata E Unitarnosta Na Državata." *YouTube,* 26 Feb. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKk7UT2Px0w.

Stanley, Ben. "Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *The Oxford Book of Populism*, edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al., Oxford University Press, 2017,

Taggart, Paul. "Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics." *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 62–80.

Tevdovski, Dragan. "Income Inequality in Macedonia: Mechanisms and Solutions." *CEA Journal of Economics*, 2015.

Topuzovska-Latkovic, Marija, et al. *Youth Study Macedonia 2013*. Translated by Blerina Starova-Zlatku, Skopje, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013.

---. *Youth Study North Macedonia 2018/2019*. Skopje, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019, library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15266.pdf.

UNDP. *People-Centred Analysis*, Skopje, UNDP Skopje Office, 2010

Vachudova, Milada Anna. "Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe." *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 3, Routledge, July 2020, pp. 318–40.

Vangeli, Anastas. "Nation-building Ancient Macedonian Style: The Origins and the Effects of the So-called Antiquization in Macedonia." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 39, no. 1, Cambridge UP, Jan. 2011, pp. 13–32.

Weyland, Kurt. "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1, City University of New York, Oct. 2001, p. 1.

# Chapter 12: Populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: "folksy" Politics in an Ethno-Nationalist Partocracy

*Maja Savić-Bojanić*

## *1. Introduction*

Populism is a long-contested term in political science whose definitions offer broad interpretations. With interpretations ranging from a unitary concept (Ionescu and Gellner 1969: 3) to specific typological orientations calling for variations between "agrarian populism and political populism" (Canovan 1981), how to define populism is surely a matter of scientific debate. Stigmatized as a danger to democracy, almost as a political pathology, populism indicates a guileless, folksy, and often simplistic political content which promises "a quick treatment for the cure of its immediate manifestations; and the causes are ignored" (Ghergina et al. 2013: 4). Nowhere is this last interpretation of populism more applicable than in case of post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a country-symbol of an ethno-nationalist partocracy,[1] with some 140[2] registered political parties in which only a handful have effectively held influential political posts and filled both chambers of the country's Parliament.

Stuck in a limbo of post-war socio-economic ills, Bosnia and Herzegovina currently stands in the European backyard that is still burdened by war-time memories, narratives of reconciliation, and little progress. All of this is worsened by the fact that the majority of its leading political parties in the years following the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 have led explicitly ethnically oriented politics, frequently evoking the 'vital national issue' question, and doing very little to address the real societal problems. The country's geographical division into two distinct ethnic units, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the Republic of Srpska (RS), does not ease the already fraught situation, but further exacerbates

1 Form of government in which one or more political parties lead the country's politics and where the role of the citizen or individual politicians is limited or missing entirely.

2 The Central Election Commission of BiH lists 149 registered political parties as of September 2017.

the nationalist, regressive, and reproachful rhetoric which can be observed in the discourse of mainstream ruling parties.

In such a constellation, the analysis of the populist traits of these political organizations is necessary and needed, insomuch as little academic research is available locally or internationally on this subject. Alternatively, as De Raadt et al. (2004) argue, populist behavior, if seen as an ideology, is very hostile towards representative democracy, a case in point for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there is limited citizen and individual involvement in politics. In other words, political activism is confined in the hands of a handful of political parties, and apart from a few locally organized movements, these parties have, more or less continuously, ruled over this small state (Repovac-Nikšić et al. 2022).

Hence, this chapter is devoted to two historically prominent political parties from both entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska): the Party of Democratic Action (SDA)[3] and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD).[4] More precisely, this work is an analysis of the level to which the two parties exhibit populist traits outlined in the available academic literature on populism (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2002; Mény and Surel 2002; Taggart 2004; Gherghina et al. 2013). The justification for the choice of these two particular cases lies in the fact that, just as Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2017) claim, to examine populism is to focus on the role of the actor(s) who are the key protagonists of populist labels and the true carriers of populist claims. Ultimately, the leaders of the SDA and the SNSD, possessing both the endogenous conditions and exogenous conditions of possibility (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 113-115), have successfully been able to upkeep their credibility and notably remain trusted as critical change agents among 'their people,' thus effectively creating policies and politics in BiH for a few decades.

## *2. The approach*

Comprehending populism is a difficult matter, most notably if the analysis succumbs to a belief that all political parties can and do exert populist characteristics from time to time (Raadt 1998; Mudde 2002). However,

3 Stranka demokratske akcije (SDA).
4 Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata (SNSD).

there are specific 'populist traits' which can be examined. Canovan (1999) regards populism as a revolt against the ruling elite in the name of the people. According to her, populism has only one authority and that is 'the people,' whose style is simple and direct and whose focus is on 'the populist mood,' which usually evokes emotions and enthusiasm.

Mény and Surel (2000; 2002) also place the primary focus on 'the people,' stressing the role of the community and downgrading the 'horizontal cleavages' (left vs. right), whereby the people are portrayed as victims of the ruling elites, as a betrayed bunch who are subjected to corruption and victimized through political abuse of power. In this context, populist leaders rise, carrying a strong belief of 'betrayal of the people' and demand that "the primacy of the people" (Mény and Surel 2002:13) must be re-established and led by the new (populist) leader.

Similarly, Taggart (2000; 2002) accepts the paramount essentiality of 'the people' while also emphasizing antagonism towards 'others.' This hostility towards 'the other' is the key feature of populism according to Taggart, since there must exist a true crisis between the two for populism to emerge (Taggart 2002: 69). In this context, populism offers clear rules of the game, simple and easy solutions and clear orientation. For Taggart (2002), populist movements are episodic and occur as a reaction to a crisis. Ultimately, this signifies a 'chameleonic' nature of populism.

Finally, but just as others, Mudde (2004) defines populism as an ideology whereby the society is split into two realms: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite.' In this constellation, he argues that politics should be the "volonté générale" of the people (Mudde 2004: 543). Thus, it is clear to see that most definitions of populism center on the popular revolt against the established political structures, a revolution in which a charismatic leader takes over the process and acts as the critical communicator between the good people and the evil 'other.'

Hence, according to these definitions, it is possible to point to several indicators of populist behavior and tendencies: the role of the people, leadership (characterized by a charismatic leader with extraordinary qualities), and promotion of cultural harmony through emotions and simple language (the focus here is on ethnic harmony), coupled with anti-establishment discourse, or rather revolt against the existing structures. The last indicator leans closely on to negativism, that is "the negative drive of populism [...] apparent in many ways because populists are always much clearer about what they are against than what they are for" (Taggart 2002: 72).

In what follows, this work examines the extent to which the above-mentioned traits are present in the two political parties selected for this study. This chapter investigates how these parties construct 'the people' based on their ethnicity and religion, whether their organization is 'chameleonic' in nature when adapting to current political trends, in order to achieve success, impact politics, liaise with other parties, and ultimately answer the question of what is the level of populism that they exhibit.

## *3. Populism among Bosnian ruling parties: from simple folks to revolt*

### 3.1 *The role of the "people"*

In the midst of the Yugoslav demise and the raging war in the neighboring Croatia, the 1st Congress of the SDA was held in Sarajevo in November of 1991. The then-president of the party, Alija Izetbegović, formerly accused of Bosnian nationalism for publishing a manifesto titled "Islamic Declaration" in 1970 and imprisoned in 1983 for five years, warned the gathered crowds of what the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina would entail for its people:

"[…] some new cartographers, completely unaware that they are sitting on a powder keg, are drawing new maps and massively dividing Bosnia [...] If the keg explodes, everything will disappear in smoke and shame, the cartographers and generals, and all parties and leaders, and all laws and institutions, and the majority of what generations have built through years. Because they are unlucky and cannot be destroyed, three bloody and defeated groups will remain, confused and brought on the verge of barbarianism" (*History of the SDA* n.d.).

At that time, it was clear that the term 'the people' did not pertain only to Muslims, although Izetbegović was a declared Muslim, but comprised all three groups, including Serbs and Croats and possibly numerous other ethnic minorities that resided in the country. However, the SDA's 'personal profile' further describes that:

> SDA was a response to 50 years of political and cultural marginalization of Yugoslav Muslims and an obvious atmosphere of war which fell over Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a broad 'people's movement,' it became the carrier of political emancipation of Bosnian Muslims and key political actor in defending the state and legal continuity of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of the 20th Century. (*History of the SDA,* n.d.)

Clearly, the framing of 'the people' was initially ambivalent, almost hesitant. This was a natural outcome considering that the war in BiH had not yet begun,[5] so ethnic labels were avoided and instead everyone was put into a hybrid category of 'groups,' although their numbers (three) were specified. Hence, an ethnic connotation, although hidden, was halfheartedly disguised. The SDA's example clearly supports the fact that the use of the term 'people' varies across contexts and time, as the second example demonstrates a clear ethno-nationalist appeal of the party, clearly outlining its ethnic preferences and thereby tailoring its political goals. In the case of the SDA, the synonym for 'the people' are exclusively Muslims, as they furthermore declare that the SDA defines itself as a "political union of citizens of Yugoslavia who belong to Muslim cultural and historical circles […]" (*History of the SDA* n.d). The SDA's manifesto further reveals the strife for the "cultural rights protection of Bosniaks[6] in Sandžak (Serbia) and other regions" (SDA Manifesto, 2015).

Consequently, 'the people,' from an ambivalent categorization, emerge into an ethnos, a trait typical of the changing and transitional political environments of post-communist spaces. What is true of BiH, however, is that the country did not experience the typical post-socialist re-birth of a nation-state where the single people, the one nation, would be presented as a "natural extension of the demos" (Mikenberg and Perrineau 2007: 30), hence preventing the SDA from putting the entire population at the center of its populist discourse. This resulted in a very careful approach to 'the people,' where the initial 'ordinary men' soon became, with the changing socio-political context, the men of Muslim cultural and historical roots, thereby extending the party's goals and aspirations to ethno-nationalism, a populist trait which is archetypal of transitional democracies of South East Europe.

That the SDA focuses on 'the people,' engages in the 'us vs. them' discourse and posits a homogenous mass of Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) as their 'people' is indicated in its 2011 election campaign slogan "The People Know" (*Narod zna*) and "Country before everything" (*Država, prije svega*). Amir Zukić, the then Secretary General of the SDA, explained the meaning

5 However, it would do so less than half a year later, in April of 1992.

6 The Bosniaks are considered to be Muslims. They are the largest ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina and one of the three constituent peoples, according to 1995 Dayton Constitution.

of this slogan, in which 'the people' are placed at the center and represent the highest judicial authority (the people decide):

First, the people should really know who worked the most and whose main priority is this country and this people, ahead of all personal and individual interests. Second, SDA is the people's party and a member of European People's Parties. Third, people should be reminded of all those reasons and facts which point to what SDA did for BiH." (Al Jazeera Balkans)

Clearly, the political officials of the SDA speak in the name of 'the people' ("who did the most?"), act in the name of the people (people's party) and make decisions for them (reminding of what the party did for the people). The role of 'the people' in the eyes of the SDA changes yet again, clearly pointing to its chameleonic nature, the adjustment that occurs in viewing the masses as it fits the socio-political contexts and timeframes. The obvious label of 'us in general,' which pertains to SDA voters (Bosniaks – Muslim) is void of an ethnicity, but it points rather to a religious attachment which differentiates between 'us' and 'them' (other groups or citizens who refuse to identify with either of the three constituent peoples).

Quite the contrary to the SDA stands the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). Positioned as a right-wing party when it comes to social policies and center-left when it comes to the economy, the SNSD is ideologically a social-democratic Serb nationalist party. Founded in the post-Dayton period, more precisely in 1996, the SNSD was considered a moderate, new, and non-nationalist alternative to the Serb Democratic Party (SDS).[7] However, its real successes can be traced back some twelve years ago to 2006, when the party won 41 out of 83 seats in the National Assembly of RS with close to 45% of the popular vote. It was at this time that the party adopted an aggressive approach to Serb nationalism and even propagated the breakup of BiH with the secession of the smaller entity from the rest of the country.

Hence, the ideological orientation of the SNSD, unlike in the case of the SDA, experienced a significant switch, which was mainly brought on by rising nationalist tendencies in early 2006 when the police reform—which the SNSD deemed unconstitutional and termed as an attempt to "amend the Constitution of the Republic of Srpska" (Monograph "20 Years of Srpska" 2016)—changed the party's priorities. Once again, the focus of such new nationalist rhetoric as fabricated by the SNSD's political officials was on

7 Srpska demokratska stranka (SDS).

'the people.' However, the rhetoric of the SNSD does not embrace Serbs in the way which the SDA points to Muslims; instead of the 'us in general' label, the voters of the SNSD can be deemed as 'genuine citizens:' A permanent feature of the policy led by the SNSD for all these twenty years has been the responsibility towards the Republic of Srpska and victims fallen for its formation [...] Unfortunately, those who lost their third consecutive election in the Republic of Srpska are part of the government at state level at the moment (Monograph "20 Years of Srpska" 2016:27).

Clearly, the 'genuine people' are those who gave their lives for the RS. Yet, they were misled by 'them,' who are still trying to deceive its creators by participating in state-level government. Hence, the split between two types of Serb supporters is obvious. Moreover, the monograph states that the SNSD "is a political party of free people and spirit, the party of peace, changes and economic progress, equality and justice [...] " (Puhalo 2008). The ambivalent language of "free people and spirit," with its emotional simplicity and a straightforward message of a good-spirited party, emphasizes the genuineness—the message that is so attractive to ordinary voters who indeed do see themselves as carries of such traits.

Despite these divisions which the language of the SNSD clearly portrays in its manifest, the questions pertaining to national interests, that of all Serbs, do not entail such divides. When Milorad Dodik, who has been leader of the party since 2010, announced a popular referendum for 2016 on the issue of celebrating Republic Day Srpska, a holiday that is illegal and not recognized at the national level, the divisions between Serbs disappeared. He spoke in the name of 'the people:'

> The referendum on the question of the Day of Republic of Srpska is not a test balloon, as pointed by Bakir Izetbegović,[8] but a question of our status and a question of our lives. Nobody can minimize the referendum on the Day of the Republic in such a way [...] You should object the attempts of Bakir Izetbegović, who thinks that can he can tell us what the day of Republic of Srpska is and decide in our name [...] . I call the people to take part in the referendum [...] (RTS 2016)

Here, the nationalist tendencies of the SNSD are installed in a singular voice of a powerful leader. He speaks in the name of the people and calls upon the people. By calling them 'the us,' which clearly denotes all Serbs living in the RS, a sense of common identity is installed into the people

8 Leader of SDA and a Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency.

and authority is installed into the leader. The chameleonic nature is yet again obvious: in this case 'the people' are the subject of party preferences and serve to support the leader's authority over time, but across varying contexts and spaces. The 'true people,' who were once just the loyal ones, have now become 'all the people,' or 'the us,' a construction, just as in the case of the SDA, based on ethnicity and religion. The leader, and a charismatic one, perceptibly plays a strong role in such constructs and will thus be examined in greater detail.

### 3.2 *The leader and charisma*

Charisma, as presented by Max Weber "inheres in the relationship between a leader and his followers" (Van der Brug and Mughan 2007: 31), which means that charisma, by itself, is not a single indicator of the leader's ability to attract and keep the follower masses bound together. Hence, charisma has more to do with influence than with personal virtue, at least when it comes to its connection to populist leaders. Van der Brug and Mughan (2007) argue that "charisma is often attributed to populist party leaders [...] after their parties have registered electoral success in the polls" (31). In the post-Dayton political reality of BiH, this last trait is easily observable. To lead an ethno-national party and present 'the people,' i.e., the voters, as the saviors of their ethnic group, is not an effortless venture. In fact, it takes much charisma to lead masses in 'their' struggle for ethnic predominance or success. Sačić (2007) states that: "If the criticism delivered by 'the enemy' has a strong basis, the leader-charisma without which ethnopolitics could not be established, takes the scene [...] Ethnopartisan democracy is based on fronting a charismatic personality and not on political programs" (149-150).

The charismatic leader, hence, takes the center stage in the quest for ethnic supremacy. In attaching the label of a 'charismatic leader' to current, but also long-time leaders of SDA and SNSD, is not entirely applicable, as neither possess the true charisma and the "extraordinary qualities of a charismatic leader" (Gherghina et al. 2013:4). However, in the case of both leaders, Bakir Izetbegović (SDA) and Milorad Dodik (SNSD), two different types of leadership are discernible, neither projecting a true charisma, but nevertheless efficiently exerting influence and authority on 'their people.'

When Alija Izetbegović, the founder of SDA and a long-time leader of Bosniaks in the post-Dayton period, died in October of 2003, his son Bakir,

who stepped into the world of politics some three years before, entered the Parliament of BiH in 2006. In 2010, he was elected as the Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency, and in 2015, he became the president of the SDA. Surely following the footsteps of his charismatic father, Bakir entered into a 'political template' that was left over—safeguard democracy, foster the economy, and protect Bosnian Muslims. On the other hand, Izetbegović has been one of the leading figures of the party for almost eighteen years, thus his charisma had a chance to be dispersed. However, Izetbegović never had the charisma of his father and was, in fact, often critiqued for lack of real leadership, mediocre eloquence, and blunt phrasing, which was strongly illustrated with the phrase which explains BiH's and Turkey's current relations: "Alija recognized a future strong leader in him and left him to take care of BiH, as his legacy. I think that Erdogan is carrying this legacy well [...] " (Klix.ba 2017).

Izetbegović uttered this sentence publicly, and while he was praised by Bosniaks, the statement angered the general public and especially his political opponents. However, it is difficult to speak of charisma here, and although this declaration does excite the SDA's voters (Bosniaks), nothing about it is fascinating, promising, or calling. In fact, Izetbegović directly jeopardizes his credibility, as he sees the land as his own, as that of his family and father, and ultimately as Turkey's heritage. Not only does this imperil the security of the country, it also undermines his credibility as a leader whose party's aims are to safeguard democracy and the stability of the country. And even though it might seem like Izetbegović is acting like the protector of BiH, he rather personalizes politics and risks making inter-party adversaries. This personalization of politics, in fact, lies in the core of transforming a democratic society into a partocracy and also a leader-centered party (Cavalli 1994; Karvonen 2010). In this process of individualization, the voters' trust may collapse, as a "shift from collective bodies to monocratic top" (Viviani 2017) occurs and shatters leaders' credibility. Moreover, this strong statement was not a strategy intended to appeal to voters (which would explain the act of personalization, but not necessarily populism). Rather, it was a strategic act of trying to appeal to 'the people' who identify with BiH, a strong Bosniak sentiment, and the first and deceased leader, as well as to create a sense of belonging to the party, which has such an important foreign power safeguarding what their first leader created for them. This is what makes this act a populist one, although the charisma is largely lacking. A charismatic populist leader never portrays himself as a representative of the people, which, in this case, Izetbegović

did, but as the member of the people. By showing a degree of 'ownership' over the country, Izetbegović did precisely the opposite.

In an interview for Faktor, a local media outlet, Bakir Izetbegović also commented on the question of his personal charisma, which, as stated by the interviewer, has long been disputed:

> It is a fact that I was elected on all levels, whenever I was a candidate [...] I had strong rivals. I also won the inter-party elections, apart from those during the 5th SDA Congress in 2009. My rise lasted for more than a decade. It was slow and thorough. I gradually convinced the party structure and the people that they can lean on me. There was a lot of work and results—successful appellations to the Constitutional Court, investments, credits, and new friendships in the region and abroad… (Faktor.ba 2015)

As observed, the representation of the leader as part of 'the people' is missing. He is not the serving leader, but rather the ultimate power which the common men should thank for all their successes. The distance that Izetbegović creates with such statements clearly shows a lack of charisma that a true people's leader should have. On the contrary, he praises himself and not the people who elected him. Hence, in the case of Bakir Izetbegović, one can only speak of his 'inherited charisma' and the importance of 'family fame,' the endogenous conditions which shaped this leader's populist profile.

Quite the contrary to Izetbegović stands Milorad Dodik, the president of the SNSD, whose popularity is rising steadily—despite a previous decline—reaching a current of 47% in the RS.[9] As Dodik enjoyed the support of the Serbian population in the RS (he won 46.9% of the vote in 2007), he also benefited from the initial trust of foreign powers, including the most influential players such as the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union, which offered aid packages to the smaller entity during his term in office. But even after he lost the external support, Dodik remained an iconic figure in BiH's politics in general. In contrast to Bakir Izetbegović, his supporters often call him 'Dodo,' which shows that his voters often feel like he is one of them. His numerous singing acts at popular weddings, pre-election campaigns, and religious celebrations distance him from the purely political and elitist circles. In doing so, he shows his 'folksy' nature, which is precisely what ordinary people consider

9 Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022.

to be charisma. He is the leader who fascinates people with his jokes, a trait appealing to common men, as well as his blunt, sharp, and often times inappropriate statements, which divert the political opponent's attention to his personality, rather than to political debates.

However, Dodik has not tried to downplay his extremist opinions about Bosnia and Herzegovina, often calling it a 'rotten state' for which he cannot wait to dissolve. He also has not refrained from inviting illegal paramilitary groups from the RS to this entity's parliament and is readily photographed with them. His public engagement appears indiscreet, openly ultra-nationalist, secessionist, and very appealing to the common masses outside of BiH. He openly exploits topics related to the RS' independence, but also talks about peace, reconciliation, and democracy. His messages are mixed and resonant, which does not necessarily entail trust that a charismatic leader embodies in his relationship with the common men, but he indubitably plays on people's longing for social change and does so at the right time. This trait is easily observable in his comment on current brain drain from the RS: "Brain drain is real and nobody is denying it, we cannot prohibit people to leave. However, I personally know people from Laktaši who went to Germany and are now pleading to return to their previous jobs" (Dodik 2018a).

A message to the people which contains personal details, an emotional story, but no solution to the problem is appealing at first. Again, Dodik has failed to cultivate trust, but his statements have resonated in the heads of his followers and influenced them. Personal stories create a weak bond, but a bond, nevertheless, between a leader and their followers, allowing them to wield an influence which is necessary for a leader to be considered charismatic.

As observed, the charisma of the leader is not always consistent with populism. While in the case of the SDA and the SNSD, the party leaders displayed a certain degree of charismatic authority, one based on 'inherited charisma' and the other on simplicity and approaching the 'common man,' it cannot be said that the charismatic role of the two leaders is detrimental to the success of the party, at least not in the case of the SDA. A charismatic leader articulates the demands of the people and fulfills them. What is evident in the two cases observed is a mere influence, a rather weak one, as both rely on multiple and very weak attributes, i.e. inherited fame and advertising resources (endogenous conditions), personalized stories and simple communicative skills, and self-esteem, all of which dangerously undermine their influence and increase the distance between the leader and

the critical mass of support. As both party leaders are strong political competitors, they have altered their populist claims in response to socio-economic changes and contexts beyond their control, illustrating once again, in the words of Taggart (2004), the 'episodic nature' of populism..

### 3.3 *Playing with emotions through linguistic simplicity: an expression of revolt in an ethno-nationalist context*

To dwell and grow as a populist party in an ethno-national, post-conflict space entails the existence of a political playground that illuminates emotions which stem from an ethnic past and symbolism—to hate and fear. All these sentiments are part of ethno-nationalist politics, a type of populism in itself, which relies on the creation and maintenance of constant inter-ethnic conflict. The result is twofold—an emotional incitement and revolt against 'the other,' which sometimes, but not by always by default, represents the 'establishment.' In the case of the SDA and the SNSD, the 'anti-establishment' is precisely 'the other,' so the populist discourse does not draw from the typical 'anti-elitist' dialogue, but rather the revolt against the other ethnic group, the 'Sarajevo-centered state level, Bosniak-led institutions' in the SNSD's views, as opposed to 'stability-shattering, peace-endangering and secessionist Serb fractions of the country,' in the language of the SDA. Hence, when examining the role of emotions in the examined parties' discourse, a joint analysis of the presence of 'revolt' (the anti-establishment) is a necessary precursor to understanding the dynamics of the SDA's and the SNSD's populism in an ethno-nationalist Eden.

In understanding the emotional play of the populist discourse in an ethnically divided society, we can lean on the definition of ethnopolitics proposed by Mujkić (2008) who defines it as

> [...] some kind of a melting pot of various bits and pieces of political doctrines and principles: socialism, liberal democracy, fascism, romantic nationalism, religious nationalism, but also a melting pot of various cultural pieces: historical narratives, mythologies, literature, religion, tradition, or other events that are considered of vital importance to the identity of one particular ethnic group. Unlike most other political doctrines, ethno-politics as non-doctrine has no other goal or vision, or eschatology – but to remain in power [...] its reason d'être is crisis, appeal to constant existential danger of the group. (22)

Translating the concepts of historical narratives, the importance of myths and the symbolic value placed on tradition, notably religious tradition in the examined context, but also the notion of 'territory of imagination' in the words of Taggart (2004), into the political reality of BiH, the emotional game used to provoke a reaction among 'the people' represents one of the most notable populist traits in the political performance of the SDA and the SNSD.

Provoking an emotional outcry among its voters is regularly used in the discourse of Bakir Izetbegović, notably when talking about the country's stability or threats to its unity, which present itself in the form of other political parties. Usually, the revolt part of his discourse lies in imagined threats against the country as produced by 'others:'

> In this country you have parties whose main business is to hurt it, divide it, make in it some new entities, collect political points, but you also have this (SDA) which is the cement, the bond of this country, which offers solutions, pulls forward, does not cheat on the people, and offers ready-made solutions. (Klix 2017)

The emotions provoked are obviously fear, as spurred by potential divisions and threats to the country's safety, but also pride in a sense of belonging to the party which 'does not cheat' and 'offers solutions.' The simplicity is yet another component which is evident in this statement. It is easy to understand, but it offers no real solution and only seemingly recognizes the ills of BiH's people ('the ready-made solutions'). That emotions and simplicity do not end with such straightforwardly accusatory statements is mirrored in the SDA's use of historical narratives to bring up the common past and potentially keep its supporters:

> You cannot defeat the people who do not recognize defeat. If somebody said then—look what those who are ready to jointly attack BiH have—nobody would tell that the war would last so long and that we would not be defeated [...] we supplied all the resources, and now we hear from 'smart heads' that we were not organized, that we had no logistics and that people organized randomly. One thousand tons of weapons, fuel, food, each day [...] those are the heroes whom you don't know, about

> whom nobody speaks and writes. But they will write about them, God willing […]. (Bakir Izetbegović speech 2017)[10]

The 'remind and rule' factor, as an emotional and linguistic play, is used interchangeably to provoke a popular outcry based on collective memory and ostensible downplay of important facts. What is more, the focus on the heroic achievement of unknown heroes is used to remind the people of the past hardships that the Bosniaks went through during the war. Hence, the use of emotional speeches with simple and easy to understand language is strongly present in the public discourse of the SDA's leader. The indirect message is easy to perceive, as the words 'somebody,' 'they,' and 'smart heads,' empty of deeper meaning and devoid of labels, are used to clearly distinguish between 'us' and 'them,' a trait which is an indicator of ethno-political discourse and romanticization of one's 'own people.' The emotions of the SDA's supporters are also spurred through the use of historical narratives which point to injustice committed against 'the people:'

> The new distribution of power and a changed political reality, which placed Bosniaks from the role of a majority to the level of endangered national minority, caused a cultural and spiritual crisis, not only among Bosniaks [...] Bosniaks are the bonding tissues of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the foundation and frame for Bosniaks' survival [...] .they were bound to disappear as a political and cultural player, the aim was to kill their self-conscious as special people [...] their aim was the same: to eliminate Bosniaks as a political, social, religious and cultural and linguistic special group, the culmination of which was between 1941 and 1945. (Faktor.ba 2017)

The focus on the past is especially interesting in this context, as historical narratives rarely play an important role in the populist speeches of Western European parties. The exclusivity of such discourse, however, remains very relevant in post-Dayton and the post-conflict context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where strong emotions are provoked by deep interpretations of past regime dealings with a specific ethnic group. Interestingly, history is not only tied to recent wartime events. It is also used to mobilize the people and ensure support through emotions, as the SDA attempts to strengthen the ethnic unity of Bosniaks through a linguistic attack of the past regime:

10 The speech was made on August 4, 2017, on the mountain Igman near Sarajevo, a strategic wartime location and a stronghold of the Bosnian Army in the period from 1992-1995, during a traditional event "The Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

> The statements of leading communists, such as Edward Kardel, who said that 'Muslims are not and cannot be a nation, but only an ethnic group' or Moša Pijade who said that 'Muslims have nothing to do with the question of nationality' or Milovan Đilas who abolished an existing recognition of Muslims as a nation [...] clearly depicts the future position of Bosniaks within the context of new Yugoslavia. (Faktor.ba 2017)

The claims against the former regime can also reinforce present support for a populist party. In the eyes of the people, a leader who pledges recognition, assurance of survival, and a fight against those who are perceived as enemies, is an extraordinary vanguard of the group. The emotions recalled are reinforced by simple language, but again, without solutions to the present situation. Hence, the revolt against the existing situation is present, but embedded in emotionally charged messages typical of populist leaders in ethno-national contexts.

A similar emotionally charged populist platform is offered by Milorad Dodik of the SNSD, whose statements and speeches bring forward emotions mostly through the revolt against the existing Bosniak structures reinforced by foreign presence and historical narratives, expressed as injustices towards Serbs coupled with the romanticization of Serb people.

> We are all for this referendum. We will not accept the position of the judiciary and the Court [...] we talk with the Prime Minister and President of Serbia, and Serbia supports BiH and the Dayton Agreement [...] BiH is a country that does not serve anything except as a foreign playground [...] Izetbegović can ride the balloons that he is talking about [...] Bosniaks in BiH have lost their identity. (Politika 2016)

On another occasion, the Vice-President of the SNSD, Nikola Špirić, adds that:

The very announcements of the president of the party, Milorad Dodik, that he might run for the Serb member of BiH's Presidency created havoc [...] they are aware that Serb people know that the RS will have everything with Dodik and the SNSD, and that BiH will only have what was written in Dayton (Klix 2018).

The anti-establishment revolt is clear—the SNSD does not support the foreign influence, which is obvious in the politics on the state level, and, in his opinion, led by the SDA. The only credible actor is the Serb kinstate, although Serbs in BiH are not a national minority and are, in fact, a constitutionally recognized constituent group. Additionally, the claims about

the leading political party in BiH (SDA) are yet another demonstration or revolt against the mainstream political party from the larger entity. By undermining the credibility of its leader, Izetbegović, Dodik plainly and in very crude and simple language expressed his views about Bosnia and Herzegovina, bluntly connecting its existence only to the Bosniak people. In this context, this is what served his policy to organize a referendum about the celebration of the National Day of the RS, once again showing the SNSD's very thin ideology, since on another occasion he speaks: "The RS is ready to accept the Constitution of BiH [...] We are looking for answers on many issues in BiH, but they are missing [...] It is redundant to even speak about it; I am not crazy to create an international intervention" (Dnevni List, January 14, 2018).

Although the SNSD and especially its leader Milorad Dodik, do occasionally recognize the supremacy of state-level institutions over those belonging to the two entities, including the RS, the latter is the primary tool of strong emotional ties that the SNSD creates to bind the Serbs living in the RS, who are, after all, its main supporters:

[...] unquestionably, the RS is a permanent category for the Serb people, articulated by a generation of people who live here, who dreamed those ideas of freedom [...] I think that Serbs did not create the RS so that only they can be free, they gave it also to others who want to live here, regardless of how different they are [...] They are now aware that the RS is on a right path. That is the biggest value. (RTRS 2018)

Just as Izetbegović touches on the ideas of longstanding unity and ethnic freedom of Bosniaks, Dodik exploits the ideas of liberty and uses it to point to 'the people,' who, with their own creation, have reached their ultimate goal of being free and on the right path. Again, these words are empty of meaning, thus emphasizing the use of simplistic language which is so common among populist leaders in general. The emotional play is further reinforced using historical narratives which overemphasize the role of Serb heroism and injustice committed towards them. In discussing the verdict of the tried war-criminal Ratko Mladić, a wartime General of the Army of the RS, Dodik emphasizes his heroic role:

No matter the verdict, we all have a feeling that it aligns with what we have seen committed against the Serbs so far, Ratko Mladić will stay a legend among the Serb people. He was a man who gave all his professional and human capacities for the defense of freedom of the Serb people, no matter where he was. A man who commanded the Army of the Republic of

Srpska, an army which defended the freedom of this people and an army which made possible the creation of the Republic of Srpska. (N1 2017)

The final verdict of Ratko Mladić as a war criminal presented an excellent opportunity for creating an emotional response among the people in the RS. Labels such as an 'our war hero' and 'Serbian hero' were seen as big panels across the RS in the early winter of 2017. The 'remind and rule' trait is hence also present in the rhetoric of the SNSD, thus reiterating the importance of emotional language and romanticization of one's own people (wartime heroes) in populist discourse in divided ethno-nationalist contexts. Furthermore, distant history and the blame placed on all other regimes, except for the current, is also a characteristic of the SNSD. The firm belief in the martyrdom of Serbs is clearly portrayed in Dodik's speech delivered in February 2018:

> We did not create a single Karađorđe, but many of them, known and unknown heroes who fought for freedom. Serbs had to go through many deceptions, one of them being Yugoslavia [...] today, the Serb people have two states—Serbia and the RS. We proudly gather around the idea of Serbian people. (Dodik 2015b)

Again, by recalling historical heroes (Karađorđe) and reinforcing ethnic unity, the SNSD assures its supporters of their people's survival; they are tied to Serbia, they have two states and are assured that they will never go again through the past treacheries in the name of others. Thus, just as in the case of the SDA, the revolt against the past, the existing 'other' regimes, and parties, presents itself in the form of anti-establishment discourse, but remains embedded in emotional and strong, yet simple language which overemphasizes heroism, historical myths, and symbols, and uses them to remain a mainstream leader among a single ethnic group in a divided society.

## *4. Conclusion*

The image of the SDA and the SNSD that emerges is one of a populist party which lacks a coherent political agenda, which rather presents itself as anti-establishment. Without a struggle to find their place on the political playground of post-Dayton BiH and assure support among ethnically divided voters, these two mainstream parties, both of which have exhibited a strong historical presence in the post-war period, demonstrate the

chameleonic nature of populism. Worried about issues related to historical presence, ethnic solidarity, liberty and assurance of individual ethnic supremacy, and not about moral salience, the trajectory of the SDA and the SNSD does not support the argument that populist parties are moralistic rather than pragmatic. The only emphasis that both parties place on the common good is that of a common good of their ethnic group. Thus, their discourse is highly emotional, offering simplistic outlooks on 'the other' and overemphasizing 'otherness' in finding blame for BiH's current feeble development. Simple messages that they convey easily translate into oversimplified policies directed solely against this 'other.' Moreover, both parties never went through an existential crisis, which furthered their political strength and assured they would receive support in mainly ethnically clear areas. This situation allowed them to behave like non-populist parties; they had an inner strength that was regularly assured through strong hierarchical organization. Furthermore, the fact that, at least in the case of SDA, the importance of 'inherited leadership' and consequently leadership charisma attached to a non-charismatic leader is what led the party further and assured continuous support among its voters.

On the other hand, folksy vernacular, and 'cheap' ethnicity-driven talk is what defines the weak charisma as exhibited by the SNSD's leader. In both cases, we can observe "highly emotional and simplistic discourse that is directed at the 'gut feelings' of the people" (Mudde 2004: 543). Such emotional appeals are reinforced by historical narratives that draw a clear line between historical circumstances and the current status of an ethnic group. The latter creates a sense of crisis, and people in the "heartland" (Taggart 2004) are threatened, an urge that mobilizes "the people" in times of real socio-political change. Such party behavior paints a picture of political urgency in an ethno-national political context. Although it only weakly mirrors the populist discourse seen in Western democracies, it achieves success through the manipulation of emotions such as faith, pain and pride. These fundamental feelings lead to further disorientation of people through the use of historical narratives that place them squarely on the pedestal of ethnic saviors. Such voter manipulation makes it possible to put anything "ethnic" on the political agenda and is one of the strongest features of political parties in ethnically divided post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## *Works cited*

Canovan, Margaret. *Populism*. New York, Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1981.

---. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, Mar. 1999, pp. 2–16.

De Raadt, Jasper, et al. "Varieties of Populism: An Analysis of the Programmatic Character of Six European Parties." *Working Papers Political Science*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2004, pp. 1-23. research.vu.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/70284501/Hollanders_Raadt_and_Krouwel_2004_Varieties_of_Populism.pdf.

Džananović, Nedžma and Valida Repovac Nikšić. "Populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Horizontal Traditions and Vertical Novelties". *Populist Political Communication across Europe: Contexts and Contents,* edited by Agnieszka Stępińska, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2020, pp. 15–36.

Dodik, Milorad. "Dodik: Sramota Što Je Vučurević Imenovan Za Ambasadora." *ATV*, 2 Feb. 2018a, www.atvbl.rs/dodik-sramota-sto-je-vucurevic-imenovan-za-ambasadora. Accessed 29 July 2023.

---. "'Srbi Morali Da Prođu Mnoge Zablude, Jedna Je Jugoslavija': Interview for B92." *B92.net,* 15 Feb. 2018b, www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=15&nav_id=1359145. Accessed 29 July 2023.

Gherghina, Sergiu, et al. *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.

Heinisch, Reinhard, and Oscar Mazzoleni. "Analysing and Explaining Populism: Bringing Frame, Actor and Context Back In." *Political Populism: A Handbook*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni, 1st ed., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017, pp. 105–22.

"History of the SDA." *The Official Website of the SDA*, www.sda.ba/stranica/historijat-sda/9. Accessed 1 Aug. 2023.

Ionescu, Ghita, and Ernest Gellner. *Introduction: Populism - Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. Edited by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.

Mény, Yves, and Yves Surel. *Par le Peuple, Pour le Peuple: Le Populisme et les Démocraties*. Paris, Fayard, 2000.

---. "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism." *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, New York, Palgrave, 2002.

Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge UP, Sept. 2004, pp. 541–63.

Mujkić, Asim. *We, The Citizens of Ethnopolis*. Sarajevo, University, Human Rights Centre, 2008.

Puhalo, Srđan, et al. *Ideološki Profil Glasača i Apstinenata u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Edited by Igor Lukšić and Nebojša Petrović, Artprint, 2008, library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/06047.pdf.

Repovac-Niksic, Valida, et al. "The Social Movement for Truth and Justice - Pragmatic Alliance-building With Political Parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Filozofija i Drustvo*, vol. 33, no. 1, Jan. 2022, pp. 143–61.

RTRS. "Dodik Za RTS: Republika Srpska Je Trajna Kategorija Za Srpski Narod." *Republika Srpska - RTRS*, 9 Jan. 2018, lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=284857. Accessed 29 July 2023.

RTS. "Dodik: The Referendum Is Not a Trial Balloon, but a Matter of Life." *RTS Region*, 15 Aug. 2016, www.rts.rs/vesti/region/2420463/dodik-referendum-nije-probni-balon-vec-pitanje-zivota.html. Accessed 3 Aug. 2023

Taggart, Paul. "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Routledge, Oct. 2004, pp. 269–88.

---. *Populism*. Buckingham, Open UP, 2000.

---. "Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics." *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, 2002, pp. 62–80.

Van Der Brug, Wouter, and Anthony Mughan. "Charisma, Leader Effects and Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties." *Party Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Jan. 2007, pp. 29–51.