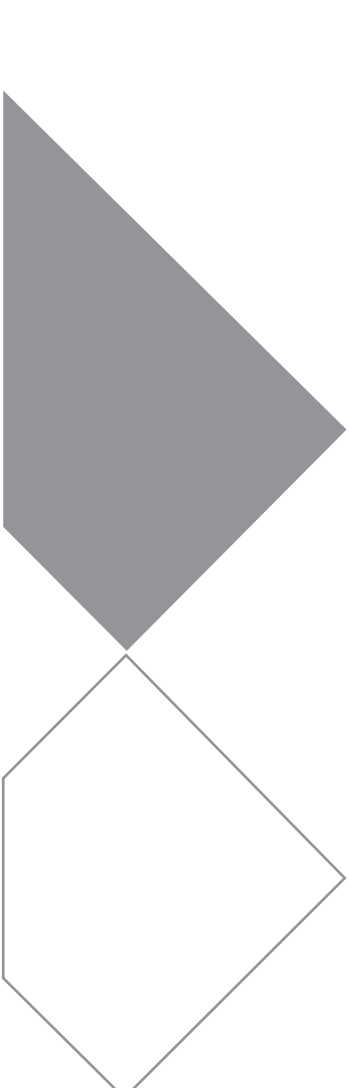




Populism: the Bulgarian case

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Abstract

The paper explores various aspects of populism focusing on the Bulgarian case study since 1989 with reference to its empirical manifestations, the legitimacy crisis and political culture traits. The text focuses on parliamentary represented parties and re-constructs the evolution of populism from an ephemeral phenomenon to an integral part of the political system. Particular attention is being paid to the year 2001, when the king's return unleashed the "populist moment" opening up the space for the massive influx of populist parties. The paper advocates the thesis that, with the exception of Ataka, populist parties generally remain within the limits set by constitutional democracy, yet at the same time, by reducing complexity to trivialized solutions they only aggravate the legitimacy crisis instead of overcoming it.

Key words: populism, Bulgaria, National Movement Simeon the Second, GERB, postcommunism.

Introduction

POPULISM HAS BECOME THE "new condition of the political in Europe" (Krastev, 2008, p. 26). According to Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, populism can be considered a major threat to Europe (de Rituerto, 9/4/2010). Last but not least, a "populist Zeitgeist" has been identified too (Mudde, 2004).

The victory of populism has usually been considered as in opposition to liberal democracy. Politicians such as Jörg Haider (Austria), Christoph Blocher (Switzerland), Silvio Berlusconi (Italy) or recently Geert Wilders (Netherlands), to cite a few, are often being identified as examples of populism.

Regarding the Eastern part of Europe, the accession to the European Union was assumed to be a proof of their democratic consolidation. The European perspective was assumed to have "a constraining effect on extremist and populist tendencies" (Bayer, 2002). The Balkans, too, were expected to head towards a model based on two major parties none of which could be classified as populist (di Tella, 1997, p. 193). Nevertheless, the "populist Zeitgeist" was identified in this part of Europe too, to be exemplified by politicians or parties like Robert Fico (Slovakia), Traian Băsescu (Romania) and Jobbik (Hungary). This has been accompanied by growing scientific literature on Eastern European populism (Mudde, 2000, Bachmann, 2006, p. 216) with studies about the subject flourishing now (Andreev, 2007; Bugaric, 2008; Bustikova; Kitschelt, 2009; Capelle-Pogăcean, 2007; Carothers, 2007; Lang, 2005; Barlai; Hartleb, 2008; Lang, 2009).

The convergence of Eastern and Western Europe with regard to the spread of populism may be indicative of a European tendency too. Twenty years after the demise of communism, democratic fatigue and

elite exhaustion, a crisis of the free market model and a crisis of the model of liberal democracy have been diagnosed (Rupnik, 2010). In both cases, there is a perceived discrepancy between democratic institutions presupposing a political culture of tolerance on the one hand and a populist rejection of democratic principles on the other. Bulgaria's accession to the EU was marked by the presidential race between an ex-communist and a nationalist (Rupnik, 2007). The Bulgarian political science community, too, seems "obsessed with the subject of populism" (Malinov, 2008, p. 1). As for the 2009 parliamentary and European elections, the rise of populist parties was discerned (e.g., Hein, 2009).

The difficulties in dealing with the phenomenon of populism stem from its analytical and normative vagueness. There is no definite concept of populism apart from some features such as the reference to the "people", the charismatic leader etc. Moreover, there is no agreement on its relationship to democracy and its possible implications for democratic consolidation either. While some scientists allude to "mobocratic" and illegitimately reductionist implications of populism (Todorov, 2008, Abts & Rummens, 2007), others attribute an emancipatory quality to populism (Drahokoupil, 2005, Žižek, 2006). Similarly, a distinction between "soft" and "hard" populism has also been proposed according to the degree of their radicalness (Lang, 2005).

This article traces the development of populism in the particular case of Bulgaria. The main thesis is that since the fall of communism, there has been a steady qualitative and quantitative amplification of the populist potential to become an integral part of the political system culminating in the one-party-rule of a populist party now. The article proceeds as follows: in the theoretical part of the article, a three-layer approach to populism is elaborated. It encompasses the empirical manifestations of populism, the "populist moment" of the legitimacy crisis and the "populist condition" as the theoretical underlying framework. According to this approach, the article first identifies populist parties which have been represented in parliament and goes over to elaborating the deepening legitimacy crisis and assesses Bulgarian political culture with regard to populist preconditions. An assessment of the role of populism for democracy consolidation rounds up the article.

Conceptual approach

There is a consensus that populism is related to democracy. Although there are different approaches to populism, we may point to some features of it

which most analysts agree on. According to a constructivist assumption, a constitutional democracy is marked by the open character of the process of defining social identities. Populism is a "thin-centered ideology concerning the structure of power in society" (Abts; Rummens, 2007, p. 408) which questions this open character in favor of a homogeneous image of the people defined against established structures (Abts; Rummens, 2007, p. 413). Similarly, Jan Drahokoupil defines populism as "a discursive representation of power and politics that constitutes political subjects in relation to a supposed fundamental antagonism between 'the people' and 'the powerful', 'us' and 'them', 'good and evil' (Drahokoupil, 2005, p. 67). Thus the concept of the people is organically conceived of and juxtaposed to an externalized enemy substantially hostile to it. The enemy could be the economic, political etc. elites (Mény 2003; Canovan, 1999, p. 5; Žižek, 2006). This idealized notion of the people is completed by a concept of democratic transparency (Canovan, 1999, p. 5, 6) which is institutionalized in direct democracy as the only appropriate means for the general will of the people to be heard. It is the people and not its elected representatives which emerges as a political subject. This inclusive power conception presupposes a stylized approach to social problems, a reduction of complexity of political, economic and social issues. To some analysts, simplification is the most important difference to democracy (Dahrendorf, 2007, p. 3; cf. Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407; Mény, 2003; Marchi, 2003). Furthermore, the general will becomes embodied in the charismatic person of a leader who personifies the discursive unity between him and the ruled (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407, Canovan, 1999, p. 5, Mény, 2003). Hence it is not institutionalized party structures or a coherent political program but rather the personality of the leader which provides for the coherence of the populist movement/ party (Canovan, 2004, p. 242; Andreev, 8).

The communication between the charismatic leader and the people is thus not ideologically predetermined; rather, a communication style between leader and people accounts for the popularity of the leader. An emotive and symbolic, at times tabloid language enforced by the media contributes significantly to the leader's popularity including the possibility of a "mediatic populism" (Andreev, p. 7, Canovan, 1999, p. 5, 6, Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407, Mény, 2003).

Upon identifying some main empirical manifestations of populism, we now can now elaborate some contextual features at a higher level of abstraction. As was mentioned, the charismatic leader claims to restore "popular sovereignty." This means that the representative character of parliamentary democracy is being questioned. Charismatic leaders as well as

appeals to direct democracy do not present a crisis but rather testify to it; i.e. they emerge from the perceived ineffectiveness of formal criteria of power and come to replace them (Ivanova, 140). This legitimacy crisis documents itself in declining voter turnout which epitomizes the declining faith in democratic solutions. Hence the legitimacy crisis can be broadly conceived as the “populist moment” which makes features of the underlying life-world intelligible and brings the “populist condition” to the fore.

At a third and most abstract level of analysis, we may state that populism reaches its highest point when emancipated from its personal emanations. The empowerment of the people without the transmission by representative institutions empowers the popular conception of the political too. Hence, in order to assess the populist quality of the political discourse and the strength of populist leaders/ parties, we need to know the prevailing conception of power and the political (Malinov, 2008, p. 5). So the analysis of populism has to identify the aforementioned empirical manifestations, the legitimacy crisis as the “populist moment” and go over to some features of the political culture which illustrate the underlying concept of the political.

The evolution of populism in Bulgaria

Populism as ephemeral phenomenon (1989-2001)

The decade following the demise of communism in Bulgaria was characterized by the emergence of a relatively stable two-party political system. The main parties dominating the political landscape were the successor party of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the oppositional Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a smaller party elected predominantly by the Turkish minority.

A closer look at the first free election campaign reveals a bifurcation of the political landscape between both big parties with their strategies reflecting each other. Both parties constructed notions of victims which they identified themselves with. The BSP presented itself as the defender of the potential losers from the demise of communism, whereas the UDF distinguished itself as the defender of the real losers of the communist period. Likewise, both parties articulated the idea of popular sovereignty – the BSP retreated from traditional socialist statist rhetorics and advocated a constitution “according to which

the people would be more powerful than the state” (BSP, 1990). It, too, declared itself in favor of direct democracy, especially on such sensitive topics as land restitution. The UDF, on the contrary, claimed to speak on behalf of the “people” as a victim of the “inhuman totalitarian system.” The UDF pretended to represent the “will of the thousands of martyrs who went through the prisons of the dictatorship, of those who died or experienced the horror of the camps, of those who disappeared without a trace or those who were tortured for all their life because of their love for democracy” (UDF, 1990). The BSP also resorted to a nationalist and anti-elitist rhetoric. This opposition was discursively reinforced through a linkage to the presumption of high social costs of the transition and the loss of cultural “uniqueness” (BSP, 1990). The antielitist rhetoric of the BSP was counterweighted by the stylized and extreme anticommunist rhetorics of the UDF particularly strengthened by a visual representation of Bulgaria as a map studded with skulls as symbols of communist concentration camps (UDF, 1990). The language adopted by both parties, too, was meant to address and activate deeply seated predispositions. Whereas the BSP referred to egalitarian ethic, the UDF used a religious, inspirational vocabulary, and by the same token, the UDF pledged to “inspire” the people, to tell the “truth” and appealed to “faith” of people. The polarization in the first election campaign was all the more reinforced by radical verbal attacks on each other as exemplified by depictions such as “dark blue cannibalism” (BSP about UDF) and “pink brainwashed creatures” (UDF to BSP). Yet even if these were signs which according to our conceptual approach bore witness to populist features, charismatic leaders were missing, and it was rather a populist form of discourse rather than a populist message of the parties.

In about 1992, the voter turnout began to decline and the number of floating voters rose (Karasimeonov, 2006, p. 87). This testified to a beginning retreat from politics and created the preconditions for the rise of new, unencumbered politicians with no affiliations to both big parties. This potential became embodied in a hitherto unknown political outsider, George Ganchev who in the ensuing presidential (1992, 1996) and parliamentary elections (1994, 1996) achieved remarkable successes. George Ganchev, who had worked in the USA, was the leader of the small party Bulgarian Business Block (BBB). Programmatically, he did not offer anything interesting. For the first time, the bifurcation and polarization in political discourse were superseded by an indiscriminate attack on the political elite altogether. His rhetorics witnessed an emergent attack on parliamentary democracy, which was testified in his depiction of deputies as “liars in parliament” (Stoyanov,

1997, p. 11). As a political outsider, George Ganchev presented himself as a self-made man who had established himself against the “cowardice” of his political opponents and the “dishonesty” of his political affiliates (Ganchev, 1995). Moreover, he not only claimed to incarnate a presumed moral superiority of the people against the political elite but at the same time, he was perceived as an impressive example of the Bulgarian success abroad. His appearance was broadened by a vivid and charismatic media presence as well as in the rather clown-like title of his autobiography too, namely “The true and intriguing story about a life full of dynamics and interesting turns” (Ganchev, 1995).

To sum up, George Ganchev was the emanation of emerging resentments and symbolized a kind of protest and disorientation after the highly emotional first post-communist socialist years. Although his electoral results were rather modest, he could be viewed as a sign of the qualitative transformation of the political space from a populist form of discourse to a populist message.

Populism’s rise to power: The ramifications of populism

The National Movement Simeon the Second

The June 2001 parliamentary elections caused a complete restructuring of the political landscape. This was preceded by the return of the last king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who had lived in exile since the abolition of the monarchy in 1946. Two months before the elections, he founded his National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSS). The party system suffered a major blow as NMSS as a movement with virtually no members (Spirova, 2005, p. 608) won a landslide victory of 42.7 % while both established parties of Socialists and Democrats reached 17.1 resp. 18.2 %.

In trying to explain his success, we may refer not only to his appearance as an outsider; a significant part of his success may be attributed to a continuation of a threefold tradition interrupted in communism.

First, he embodied the continuation of the monarchical tradition. Although he had ruled only through the regency, he fit into the predominantly positive memories of his father, King Boris III (1918–1943) (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2005). Even the name of his movement included the reference to the monarchical tradition. To this, a highly idealized notion of the Bulgarian people as the bearer of a “proverbial diligence” and an ancestor of a “glorious” history was added. This presumed moral superiority of the people who were living in “misery” was opposed to an

indiscriminate depiction of political elites as living in an “inexplicable richness” (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2001). He, too, presented himself as a modern martyr who “for decades” had “suffered because of the miserable fate [of the people]” (ibid.). Against this background, the political message during his electoral campaign consisted of only three points, namely the fight against corruption, a “new moral” in politics as well as a “considerable improvement” in the living conditions within 800 days (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2001).

Furthermore, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha resorted to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The reference it constituted one of the main pillars in his communication strategy, which was built upon a strong reference to established institutions through which he introduced a new symbolism of power. His political theology included the merger of a secular and a spiritual leader in his personality which was reinforced by a specific vocabulary appealing to emotions rather than to rationality, being expressed in concepts like “faith”, “mission”, “trust”, “spiritual renaissance”, “fate”, “sufferings”, “sacrifice” or “God.” His most known phrase became “Believe me!”. A significant part in his rise was played by the media too. In fact, the media contributed to the merger between private and public. A culmination of the mediatic populism was the coverage of the wedding of his daughter in 2002 presented as Bulgaria’s royal wedding. This could be considered a culmination all the more as there were no institutional indications of an official restoration of the monarchy.

To a certain degree, there was also a continuation of a language tradition because Saxe-Coburg-Gotha used a highly antiquated language of the pre-communist nobility and activated the image of a paternalistic, benevolent king, being also referred to by many as “His Majesty” (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2002).

The triple tradition identified explains his failure too. The demystification of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha set in when the image of him became embodied in a politician. His charisma underwent a steady routinization which included the destruction of the symbolic strains upon which he has built his authority. The recourse to the monarchy and his image of a unifier of the nation collided with his partisan behaviour, and his regal charisma was instrumentalized to back his property restoration claims. The new moral he stood for succumbed to pragmatism and coalitions with his former enemies. This neutralized his claim to pursue high morality in politics. Most importantly, he did not hold on his promises, esp. of significant improvement in the living standards.

Ataka and Order Law and Justice

Upon the routinization of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's charisma, the NMSS received only half of its support from 2001, i.e. 19.88 % in the June 2005 elections, and formed a coalition government with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and the BSP with the socialist Sergey Stanishev as prime minister.

The populist potential was occupied by two other parties, Ataka (Attack) and Order Law & Justice. A coalition Ataka round the party Ataka won 8.16 % in the parliamentary elections. In the presidential elections of 2006, the party leader Volen Siderov scored second. The central image of his rhetoric was an ethnic concept of the nation which was combined with an anti-elite attitude. Ataka's slogan was "Let's return Bulgaria to the Bulgarians" and in its programmatic "20 points" (Ataka, 2005) the image of the "one-national, monolithic Bulgarian state" was opposed to a variegated enemy concept including NATO, the "usurers' world oligarchy" in the guise of the World Bank and the IMF, the "corrupt elite," Turks and Roma and the EU (ibid.). The opposition between Bulgarians and Turks was further reinforced by an explicit reference to Eastern Orthodoxy as the "official" religion of the Bulgarians. Accordingly, Siderov portrayed his compatriots as heirs to the bearers of the "eldest culture in Europe" as well as those who had "civilized" the major part of Europe. To this, an antisemitic and a racist dimension were added, too, being reflected in the concept of the "gigantic genocide" (ibid.) committed on the Bulgarian nation as well as the idea that Bulgaria was ruled by politicians with a "non-Bulgarian DNA-code" (Anon, 31/3/2006). Siderov's rhetoric was completed by an agrarian protectionism calling for the prohibition of land acquisition by foreigners.

Altogether, Siderov challenged basic principles of parliamentary democracy as well as the consensus about the foreign policy priorities of the country. In contradistinction to the examples of populism cited above, Ataka was the first party to attack parliamentary democracy from within. Being a member of parliament, he proposed a draft law on the introduction of a voluntary paramilitary service and at the same time, he started a collection of signatures called "People's parliament" against the "corrupt and incompetent government" (Anon, 27/7/2008).

Another party which emerged as a reaction to Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's failure was Order Law and Justice (OLJ). It was a splinter party from the parliamentary group of the Agrarian Union formed in December 2005 under the chairmanship of the young deputy Yane Yanev. Yane Yanev seized upon lasting critique of the European Union, especially on the issue of corruption, in creating the image of a gradual capture of the state by organized crime. Respectively,

the political elite was described as a distant "oligarchy" of "white collar criminals" (Yanev, 2009). The anti-system appeal was strengthened by a reference to an idea of a distorted representation of the "millions of Bulgarians who did not go to the voting boxes any more" by a "mendacious and hypocritical political class" (ibid.) hence his support for direct democracy in the shape of national and local referenda (OLJ, n.d.). This distorted representation of the people was supposed to be remedied by the restoration of popular sovereignty by means of direct democracy. The change of the political system was presumed to culminate in the adoption of a new constitution and this was shown in street protests too. Beside this, he was the first to address the issue of Islamic fundamentalism in a discursive construction of an Islamist threat too. Yanev's popularity decreased – whereas in April 2009, he scored as the 4th most trusted politician receiving 23.4 % (Anon, 16/4/2009), in the parliamentary elections on July 5th, 2009, his party received 4.13 % of the vote.

Both Ataka and OLJ addressed issues rather untypical for Bulgarian political discourse such as antisemitism and Islamic fundamentalism. These testified to a globalization of populism rather than to deep seated features of political culture activated now. Both elaborated a central concept of the people. Yet while Siderov defined an ethnic concept of the notion in a clear contradistinction to enumerated enemies, Yanev's concept of the people was reduced to a kind of vaguely defined exhaustion from politics. For this reason, they differed in their attack on parliamentary democracy with Siderov exposing a much more radical version. Following the aforementioned distinction proposed by Kai-Olaf Lang (Lang, 2005) between soft and hard populism, it seems justified to classify Ataka and OLJ as a hard resp. soft forms of populism. Being created by members of parliament, both parties epitomized a weakness of militant democracy.

Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria

The third alternative of the status quo was presented by Boyko Borissov, a former fireman and bodyguard of last communist chief of state Todor Zhivkov and Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. In November 2005, he became mayor of Sofia. In April 2006, his movement GERB (a Bulgarian abbreviation for *Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria*) was founded to be transformed into a party with Boyko Borissov as its informal leader in December 2006.

Borissov seized upon fight against organized crime and corruption, and the discourse about it was superimposed on all issues. Problems were politicized rather than solved (Anon. 29.09.2008). Parliament,

too, was presented as a false, untruthful representation which was expressed in the vocabulary ("liars in parliament", "losers", et al.)

This critique of parliamentary democracy ushered in a support for direct democracy. In doing this, he went beyond the confines of municipal politics and transferred this requirement to national problems like issues in connection with the upcoming admission of Bulgaria into the EU. For example, he officially supported Bulgaria's entry into the EU, at the same time he insisted on the "defense of national interests" and referenda on sensitive questions. His concept of the people was rather eclectic, the vagueness of the concept only enhanced his popularity. He did not center exclusively on the nationalist alternative like Siderov nor did he articulate only exhaustion from politics like Yanev.

One of the major factors in his rise was his communication style. As a former fireman and bodyguard, he constructed a protective image of a tough law-and-order politician not shying at drastic measures. To cite an example, he advocated rather simple solutions, like the deployment of "Krum's laws" alluding to a Bulgarian ruler Krum (803-814), who is mainly known for his extremely hard penalties including corporal punishments. Borissov's popularity rested to a high degree on his subtle identification with the Church. This image was being constantly reproduced by the media which personalized the politics of GERB, concentrating exclusively on his personality. This charisma was reflected in a public opinion survey in December 2008, when 4% of the respondents declared they wished Borissov to be canonized (Velev, 2008).

Populism in power

The government of Sergey Stanishev was discredited due to a number of corruption affairs and particularly the ensuing deterioration of the relationships with the European Union, which ushered in a legitimacy crisis. A look at the election campaign of 2009 reveals a complete restructuring of the political landscape as compared to 1990. It was not a consolidated democracy as expected by transitologists but instead, heightened party fluctuation and a rising frustration potential prevailed. Whereas the election campaign of 1990 was marked by a polarization and bifurcation, in the 2009 election campaign fragmentation and alternating party affiliations prevailed.

The radicalness of symbols remained with the skulls of 1990 being transformed into an axe as an integral part of the visualization of the political message. It was not political party platforms but rather words such as "fight", "contest", "leaders", "majoritarian candidates", "fear" and "despair" to domi-

nate political discourse (Deianova, 2009). In public sphere increasingly devoid of civic topics, an opposition between the "good" people and the "bad elites" was constructed emancipated from its personal embodiments.

This legitimacy crisis reinforced by the media created the preconditions for the rise of charismatic politicians. The emergence of a party called "Leader" only came to confirm this. It was Borissov who profited from this situation against his background as mayor of Sofia. Correspondingly, his electoral campaign resembled Obama's as it was organized under the slogan "Let's show that Bulgaria can."

In the July 2009 parliamentary elections, GERB emerged as the strongest party and received 39.72% of the votes, which was roughly the same result Saxeburg-Gotha achieved in 2005. Yet contrary to him, Borissov formed his own minority government. For the first time since 1989, the complete executive power was put in the hands of a populist party.

Assuming of governmental responsibility caused discursive changes as the oppositional discourse gave ground to an official one. The populist juxtaposition between the rulers and ruled has been replaced by a new discursive bipolarity. This is centered round the antagonism between the new government, on the one hand, and externalized enemy images, on the other, being the old being mainly the previous ruling elite (Stanishev's government) and the international capital (the global financial crisis). Again, the measures taken by the government are designed in such way that "the people" be protected. Some measures were taken as a proof of this, for instance the proposal of seaside holidays free of charge for pensioners.

As for his political message, Borissov is articulating different, even opposing issues in the political discourse thus confusing political cleavages clearly identifiable so far. This vagueness and indeterminacy do not allow for a definite classification of his political stance. Several examples may illustrate this. In domestic politics, his relationship to the sensitive topic of communism embodied in its most visible symbol, the secret police, has been oscillating between a verbal delineation against them on the one hand and a readiness to cooperate with former secret agents on the other. In foreign policy, too, his energy policy, especially in relation to Russia, is not easily put into a coherent framework.

This mediation of tensions is characteristic not only of the level of political discourse; his communication style reveals continuous variations between paternalism and egalitarianism. On the one hand, he is addressing his political affiliates with their nick names; conversely, people also speak of him using only his first name or addressing him as "Big boy Boyko." On the other hand, he is being addressed

as “teacher” his party members the latter being described as “disciples.”

Altogether, there is a discernible tendency of personalization of politics being increasingly centered on Borissov’s personality, which is again being enforced by his communication style. Most decisions are being taken personally by him with the Council of Ministers persistently degraded. Indicative of this is that he uses the first person singular form when speaking, e. g. “I told them [i. e. the ministers]”, “I want to tell the Bulgarian pensioners that from my first day in office on, I will give them BGN 900 M (about € 450 M) more.” Borissov achieves mobilization too through a combative vocabulary. A closer look at his rhetorics reveals the frequent use of words like “war,” “battlefield,” “knocking down” etc. Thus the new juxtaposition between rulers and opposition is further enlarged by a verbal equation of the political contest with a sports ground or a military battlefield. In this way, the complexity of politics is being reduced to a dichotomous image where the political opponent is to be destroyed, like at war. This is being in a rather colloquial language in which antiintellectualist components are not missing either.

As was mentioned, media played a significant role in Borissov’s rise. After his electoral success, the “mediatic populism” of Borissov enlarged as a number of media changed their allegiance in favor of him. Currently, Borissov is the person most often mentioned and evaluated in media but also the person who most often evaluates. The image conveyed about him is predominantly neutral to positive. The juxtaposition between Borissov and the former government is being reproduced by the media, which for the most part expose a negative relationship to Sergey Stanishhev. Moreover, there is an anti-party attitude, affecting GERB too, which all the more contrasts with the positive image of Borissov conveyed by them (Media Index 2009).

To sum up, there has been a qualitative and a quantitative change in media policy towards Borissov. The disappearance of civil society discourse as identified with regard to the election campaign has been continued as the public space is constantly being replaced by the private life of the prime minister. A certain culmination of the mediatic populism can be considered his birthday in 2010 which has been covered by almost all mainstream media as an event of national importance.

Synopsis

The evolution of populism: issues and leadership style

In the course of the article, the evolution and development of populism in Bulgaria were reconstructed. Populism has been constantly on the rise. There is a consensus that the year 2001 marked a watershed in Bulgarian political life (Karasimeonov, 2006; Georgiev, 2009; Andreev, 2007; Popov, 2005 etc.) when upon the return of the king, the party system suffered a major blow and the propositions for a massive influx of populism were created. Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’s return was rather the “populist moment” which activated the “populist condition” receiving almost 40 % of the votes. In the 2009 elections, populist parties achieved more than the half of the votes for the first time since 1990.

As was shown in the course of the article, the five parties identified as populist constructed a simplified, homogeneous concept of the people by juxtaposing it to a specific enemy image. At the beginning, this image encompassed only the political elite. George Ganchev emerged in the immediate aftermath of communism and epitomized a beginning retreat from politics by reducing the latter to “a comedy show free of charge” (Stoyanov, 1997, p. 11). This image of the people was superseded by an ethnic concept of the nation as exemplified by Ataka which articulated an inward-looking nationalism directed against ethnic minorities like Roma or Turks and the world abroad. This ethnic concept of the nation has been promoted by all parties to a different extent. Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Borissov have been identified as the most full-blown examples of populism with NMSS and GERB distinguishing themselves as catch-all parties in whose agenda cleavages are persistently mediated.

As far as the notion of the people is concerned, there has been only a smooth transition from socialism. In fact, one can speak of a terminological substitution as against the background of late socialist nationalism, socialism did not collapse but was subtly substituted. In late socialism, the concept of the class struggle was substituted by the concept of the people and its pertaining characteristics such as the 1000-year-long cultural and state tradition, creative potential and national spirit, in other words, by all the things which have become the repertoire of present-day populism in Bulgaria (Penchev, 2007, p. 1).

The populist political message has been persistently broadening too. The agenda of populist parties has been enlarged to encompass a heterogeneous spectrum of issues. Populist parties have been capitalizing upon predominant topics in Bulgarian po-

litical discourse, particularly overall corruption and the ineffectiveness of the fight against organized crime. The main message of the populist parties since 1989 has been that “the only party that has never lost elections in the last decade is the mafia born out of the last regime” (Krastev, 2006). Furthermore, all populist parties have articulated social issues based on poverty as nodal point in the construction of the dichotomous worldview.

An evolution in the communication style is to be traced too as all parties have resorted to a simplistic language referring to colloquial figures of speech and activating popular negative conceptions of power. Whereas George Ganchev was rather entertaining, Ataka and OLJ have been focusing on law-and-order issues with Ataka accentuating nationalist aspects too and Yane Yanev advocating the need of a new constitution.

Finally, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Borissov have been having an encompassing agenda. It is possible to distinguish certain analogies between them. Both the NMSS and GERB began as movements to be later transformed into parties. Both increasingly resorted to national institutions such as the Church and introduced a mediatic populism with almost all media shaping a positive image of them. In both cases, the mediatic populism reached a certain culmination which was exemplified in the coverage of private events of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Borissov, namely the wedding of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's daughter and Borissov's birthday. Another analogy between them is the activation of a protective image of a ruler. Both have been appealing to beliefs rather to rationality which was exemplified by their vocabulary – whereas Saxe-Coburg-Gotha appealed to people to “believe” him, Borissov pledges to people that he will “protect” them.

In this respect, we can discern again a continuation of the political culture of communism – the first head of party and state in communism, Georgi Dimitrov, was officially depicted as “teacher” of the Bulgarian people; likewise, the last communist head of party and state, Todor Zhivkov, oscillated between paternalist traits and concessions to egalitarian aspirations due to his popular appearance and communication style.

The populist moment

As already mentioned, populism emerges in a legitimacy crisis trying to compensate it crisis through direct democracy, charismatic leadership and a closeness to voters. There is a relationship between legitimacy crisis and a declining voter turnout, which in turn is supposed to favor populist parties (Andreev, 2007, p. 20). This correlation can be traced in this

case study too. As the table shows, there has been a sharp decline in voter turnout in the first decade of postcommunism which coincided with the rise of George Ganchev's party. Correspondingly, he is often being described as the first Bulgarian populist whose rise resulted from the disillusionment of the people with the slow pace of transition (Karasimeonov, 2006, p. 77).

According to Margaret Canovan, the “populist mood” testifies to the “redemptive” side of democracy and has an extra emotional gradient which can turn into a campaign to bring a new renewal (Canovan, 1999, p. 6). The Bulgarian case illustrates this correlation as the emergence of populist parties was always accompanied by a rise in voter turnout (cf. 2001, 2009).

Until 2001, populism was part of the political rhetoric of many parties and leaders, but none of them became truly populist (Malinov, 9). Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was the first charismatic politician after George Ganchev, on whom expectations to liberal democracy were focused. His return in 2001 opened the space for the massive influx of populist parties. The following decade has been marked by the continuous broadening of the presence of populist parties in Bulgarian political landscape. As was shown, in 2001 a transformation of the public sphere took place with civil society topics gradually being replaced by issues of social fear, private topics etc.

Parallel with this, the political and economic modernization led to the installation of democratic and market institutions culminating in Bulgaria's admission in the European Union; on the other hand, however, it caused a rapid social decomposition which “hurt many while privileging few” (Krastev 2008). To this, a steady decline in purchasing power since 1989 is to be added (Ninov, 27/1/2010). A significant

Year	Party	Voter turnout	Election results
1990	–	90.60	–
1991	–	84.82	–
1994	BBB	75.34	4.73
1997	BBB	62.40	4.93
2001	NMSS	66.01	42.74
2005	NMSS Ataka	55.76	19.88 8.14 total 28.02
2009	GERB Ataka OLJ	60.20	39.72 9.36 4.13 total 53.21

Performance of populist parties in parliamentary elections since 1989 (Archive of Parliamentary Election Results n.d., Central Election Commission 2005, 2009)

factor for the legitimacy crisis has been the absence of decommunization which enabled communist formal and informal networks to survive with former communist elites still controlling much of economy, politics and media. With a delay, a law on screening former secret service files was adopted yet it does not foresee lustration and with small exceptions, former collaborators of the secret police are not banished from public positions. The absence of decommunization negatively affected postcommunist value change and did not allow for a genuine commitment to liberal democratic values.

Apart from this, the legitimacy crisis was deepened by inadequate support given by the West to Bulgaria. “Rebuilding the ship at sea” (Offe, Elster, Preuss, 1998) has brought many challenges and in Bulgarian political discourse, the concept of Europe is increasingly losing its positive content. This all the more as there is a widespread consensus in society in favor of Europe (Georgiev, 2007, p. 139).

To sum up, the development in Bulgaria confirms the dependence between a deepening legitimacy crisis and the rise of populism. The political and economic modernization, the decline in purchasing power, the expectations toward Europe as well as the absence of a thoroughgoing decommunization were identified as the main factors which deepened the legitimacy crisis and thus favored the rise of populism.

The populist condition

As stated in the conceptual approach, the legitimacy crisis brought deep seated predispositions to the fore. Beside the parties identified as populist, the pre-election discourse revealed a high affinity for populist topics. Almost all parties in Bulgaria can be considered exposing populist traits. Accordingly, political culture studies reveal a widespread predisposition in favour of a leadership of a “strong hand” (Georgiev March, 2009, p. 3) too or conclude that the typical Bulgarian politician is a “populist orator” (Yordanov, 2008, p. 59). As mentioned, the negative image of parties conveyed by the media only reinforces the personal positive image of Borissov.

In Bulgarian political culture, we can discern a certain anti-elite, egalitarian predisposition for which hatred towards the rich, the successful, educated as well as politics and politician is typical (Znepolski, 2008, p. 78). Despite the Europeanization of Bulgarian political culture since communism, traces of this attitude were to be reconstructed in the discourse of the populist leaders since then.

This egalitarian potential corresponds to a paternalist conception of power and a specific philosophy of adaptation to the powerholder (Znepolski, 2008,

p. 244). This power conception is in fact deeply rooted in Bulgarian political culture: “Bulgarian political leadership is rather vertically accentuated or even tempted by an ‘Asian spirit’ of power. The latter was cultivated in the ages of Ottoman impression (1396–1878, CC), refined by Russian imperial paternalism after the liberation of 1878, molded in a couple of authoritarian regimes before World War II and formulated in 45 years of communist isolation. Bulgarians seem more inspired by a leadership of the ‘strong hand’. Politics have rarely been perceived as a collective commitment of the national elite. It still seems a matter of grasping the chance, or taking advantage of being on the side of the winner” (Georgiev, 2009, p. 3). This holds true for postcommunism too, where the prevailing understanding of the political “can be formulated as a struggle for power” and “politics is understood as a process of imposing private interests on the public” (Malinov 5). Postcommunist Bulgarian culture is marked by a high level of personalization of politics (Ivanova 1994: 141) which helps explain the propensity for charismatic leaders.

As for the relation to the West and Russia, there is a dialectic between a sense of inferiority and a sense of moral superiority with regard to them. Beside the perceived inferiority, a feeling of distrust has emerged due to the fact that political, economic and social uncertainties in Bulgaria have been widely misused by the Great Powers (Georgiev 2009: 2). Against this background, the sudden rise of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who incarnated Western superiority and the ensuing sharp turn to a nationalistic reaction in the shape of Ataka become easily explicable.

Nevertheless, there are few preconditions for the success of topics such as anti-Europeanism and chauvinism. This can be explained with reference to the aforementioned widespread political consensus in favor of Europe. Moreover, foreign domination in Bulgaria created a specific art to cope with “otherness” and to bridge cultural asymmetries (Georgiev, 2009) as survival strategy. For the same reason, issues of antisemitism and Islamophobia, as put forward by OLI and Ataka, may give evidence of an intersection with Western European populism or be considered a proof of populism’s globalization; yet, they cannot generate broad political mobilization.

One of the greatest Bulgarian philosophers, Ivan Hadzhiiski, speaks of a gap between historical opportunities and their realization in Bulgaria (Hadzhiiski, 2002, p. 442). In 1879, one year after the liberation from the Ottomans, Bulgaria adopted one of the most democratic constitutions in Europe. Ironically, it was precisely the adoption of this constitution that brought populism to the fore (Malinov, 2008, p. 8). This gap can be reconstructed in recent history too. In 1991, Bulgaria was the first post-communist coun-

try to adopt a new constitution although Bulgarian democracy was not consolidated enough; in 2007, it became a member of the European Union although it only formally fulfilled the conditions for admission. We can conclude that there is a perceived “discrepancy between the form and the substance of liberal democracy” (Bugaric, 2008, p. 197), which deepens this legitimacy crisis as a precondition for populism.

At the end, we can summarize that NMSS and GERB have been the populist parties with the largest constituencies so far. The BBB of Zhorzh Ganchev and OLJ of Yane Yanev were identified as parties with rather limited constituencies, while Ataka can be positioned at the border between populism and right-wing extremism. Applying the aforementioned distinction proposed by Kai-Olaf Lang between soft and hard populism (Lang May, 2009) we may conclu-

de that Ataka is the only hard populist party evolved so far. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that soft populist parties do not question the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy, a populist party hardly meets the expectations it arouses, which was exemplified by Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Ataka as a reaction to his failure. On the one hand, populist parties have an inclusive agenda and contribute to a higher voter turnout and political participation, which is vital for democracy. Yet, on the other hand, the tendency of simplification of complex problems does not present a real solution and only further deepens the gap between politics and society. At this background, the emergence of populist parties confirms the legitimacy crisis and the task of democratic politics to make complex problems intelligible without resorting to simplifications or trivializations.

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Populismo: o caso búlgaro

Resumo

O artigo explora vários aspectos do populismo, enfocando o estudo de caso da Bulgária desde 1989, com referência a suas manifestações empíricas, à crise de legitimidade e aos traços da cultura política. O texto destaca partidos com representação parlamentar e reconstrói a evolução do populismo desde um fenômeno efêmero até tornar-se parte integrante do sistema político. Atenção especial é dada ao ano de 2001, quando o regresso do rei desencadeou o “momento populista”, abrindo espaço para a entrada massiva de partidos populistas. O artigo defende a tese de que, com exceção de Ataka, os partidos populistas permanecem geralmente dentro dos limites estabelecidos pela democracia constitucional, mas, ao mesmo tempo, ao reduzirem a complexidade a soluções triviais, agravam a crise de legitimidade em vez de superá-la.

Palavras-chave: populismo, Bulgária, Movimento Nacional Simeon Segundo, GERB, pós-comunismo.

Populismo: el caso búlgaro

Resumen

El artículo explora varios aspectos del populismo enfocando el estudio del caso de Bulgaria desde 1989, con referencia a sus manifestaciones empíricas, a la crisis de legitimidad y rasgos de la cultura política. El texto enfoca los partidos con representación parlamentar y reconstruye la evolución del populismo desde un fenómeno efêmero hasta tornarse parte integrante del sistema político. Atención especial es dada al año de 2001, cuando el regreso del rey desencadenó el “momento populista”, abriendo espacio para la entrada masiva de los partidos populistas. El artículo defiende la tesis de que, con excepción de Ataka, los partidos populistas permanecen generalmente dentro de los límites establecidos por la democracia constitucional, pero, al mismo tiempo, cuando reducen la complejidad a soluciones trivializadas, agravan la crisis de legitimidad en lugar de superarla.

Palabras clave: populismo, Bulgaria, Movimiento Nacional Simeon Segundo, GERB, post-comunismo.

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