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POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 2

Thessaloniki
December 2015

POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS

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> *Oliver Twist was not hungry (...) Oliver Twist gave food to writers and politicians, public figures and revolutionaries in their fight for some kind of a different world. (...) Oliver Twist contributed to thousands of political murders, terrorist acts and is possibly the reason behind coup d' etats and arsons.*
>
> Julian Popov[1]

Introduction

In this paper I trace the transformations of Bulgarian liberal anti-populist discourses from 1989 until the political crisis in 2013. By utilizing the term 'anti-populist' I mean to focus on how the signifier 'populism' is used: not in terms of a theory of populism, but in terms of a danger that needs to be uprooted by liberal 'technicians'. This also relates to the various elitist forms of opposition to 'the people' – which are often fuelled by anxieties about the supposed dangers associated with 'the crowd', 'the masses', etc. – and, more broadly, to discourses that attack the very use of notions such as 'the people' in political struggles as 'ideological manipulation' or 'demagoguery'. My main argument is that populism (and anti-populism) in Bulgaria is neither a remnant of its socialist past nor a negative side-effect of its 'inefficient' or 'unaccomplished' transition to liberal capitalism. What I want to suggest is that *the spectre of populism is the 'constitutive Other' of contemporary Bulgarian liberalism*.

Anti-populist discourses are obviously not the only entities that have been constitutive of liberal political identities, since these have functioned alongside other technocratic discourses, revolving around signifiers such as '(anti)corruption', 'transparency', 'good European practices', as well as anti-communism. These have been embedded in a teleology of 'transition' from totalitarianism to liberal democracy. Importantly, this teleology was initially posited as a gradual substitution of state government by civil society governance, the latter being represented by experts on democratisation, liberal think tanks and so on. Liberal empty signifiers, however, have regularly turned into floating signifiers in political struggle, thereby redrawing the political frontiers. Moreover, these signifiers have not been the exclusive preserve of the elites, but have become operational in a number of grass-roots protest movements.

In the first two sections of this paper I position my argument within the wider debate on how anti-populism and post-democracy are connected, and shortly elaborate on my approach towards the question of (anti)populism, which draws on

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[1] Journalist and an ex-minister from a recent expert caretaker government in Bulgaria.

the framework of the 'Essex School' of discourse analysis. I then analyse anti-populism in post-socialist Eastern Europe, and, last, its historical transformations in post-1989 Bulgaria. Given this broad scope, I can only sketch the general trends and thus some specificities are bracketed (e.g. the distinctions between (post)dissident and technocratic anti-populism). Given the fact that Eastern European anti-populism remains vastly understudied, I believe such bracketing is justified.

Researching anti-populism in the context of post-democracy

Populism is often understood as a danger for democracy. In most media, political and even academic discourses, the existence of a pre-given populist essence is presupposed. This sometimes creates contradictory definitions of what populism is. Anti-populists tend to be careless with the facts. For instance, Alexander Andreev claims the German political party *Die Linke* is populist and hence 'against gays, and even against foreigners', substantiating similar arguments with no references but with the adverb 'naturally' (Andreev 2007: 151-2). Anti-populist expertise is sometimes mixed with personal emotions – 'Hugo Chavez is an awful man' (Heisbourg 2007: 101) – or outright insults – 'they [the populists] are not very good at thinking' and 'recruit their active supporters from the shadowy corners of society' (Andreev 2007: 150-2). In this context, 'populism' seems to be something experts instantly recognise when they encounter it, by *intuition*, but cannot clearly define. However, without a theory of populism, anti-populism remains an *inclination*: a tactical political instrument, which might be furthering de-democratisation.

The rapprochement between post-democracy and anti-populism has been analysed critically in the literature (e.g. Rancière 2006). The 'fallacy of anti-populism' (Krastev 2007a: 59-61) has even been attacked by some liberal intellectuals and experts.[2] The critique of anti-populism has been most forcefully articulated within the Essex School of discourse analysis. Ernesto Laclau's interpretation of the populist reason, for instance, simultaneously constitutes a critique of the anti-populist reason (Laclau 2005a).

Giorgos Katsambekis argues that anti-populism 'needs to be studied in its own right as distinct discursive repertoire and probably as part of the on-going post-democratic turn of western democracies' (Katsambekis 2014b: 52; cf. Katsambekis & Stavrakakis 2013). Katsambekis claims that 'populism' has become 'part of the (post-democratic) story', whereby 'the people' are discursively marginalized. Importantly, anti-populism relies on populist (only in reverse) discursive distinctions, namely 'the people' versus 'the elite'. In that sense, every study of populism is always-already a study of anti-populism, and vice versa.

The antagonism between populism and anti-populism, as Yannis Stavrakakis shows, emerges as 'a crucial ideological cleavage in the Greek public sphere'.

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[2] Such delineating of 'acceptable' from 'dangerous' populism is often highly normative (cf. Schmitter 2006). Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev (2008) differentiate between 'soft' and 'hard' populism. Populism, they claim, is not a 'leftist revolt of the masses', as most populists 'are *de facto* neoliberal', hence 'soft'. But they forget 'soft' populism could also be exclusionary. The Greek LAOS, as Katsambekis demonstrates, 'belongs to the broader family of far-right xenophobic neopopulist parties in Europe [...] yet it became overnight a "reliable political partner" [...] as long as it would support the austerity' (Katsambekis 2014a: 571). Articulations between populism and liberalism, however, lie outside the scope of this paper as its topic is liberal anti-populism.

'Populism', in anti-populist discourses, 'emerges as an empty signifier *par excellence*, and therefore a vessel capable of accommodating an excess of heterogeneous meanings, becoming the synecdoche of *an omnipresent evil* and associated with all its manifestations imaginable: irresponsibility, demagogy, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism' (Stavrakakis 2014: 508-509). Sometimes anti-populist discourses are 'downgrading populists to subhumans, to bare life: cave men, Neanderthals, and troglodytes' (Stavrakakis 2014: 510). Demonization of populism (and 'the people') furthers de-democratisation, leading to what Rancière depicted as 'to govern without people' or 'to govern without politics' (Stavrakakis 2014: 510).

The articulation of anti-populism with post-democracy is not unique to Greece. Indeed, pitting 'populism' against 'Europe' is widespread. But the recent rise of left populism in Southern Europe posits the questions of which 'Europe' and which 'populism' (Stavrakakis 2014: 511; cf. Katsambekis & Stavrakakis 2013). In other words, understanding the symbolic efficiency of anti-populist discourses has become ever more pertinent, and in this regard Eastern Europe presents a fruitful example.

(Anti-)Populism in political struggles

Before turning to my empirical analysis, I will briefly sketch how I will deploy Essex-School discourse analysis for conceptualising political identification (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Mouffe 1993, 2000, 2013, Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000, Howarth & Torfing 2005, Laclau 1994). More specifically, I rely on Ernesto Laclau's (2005a, 2005b) understanding of populism as the articulation of differential ('democratic') demands into a chain of equivalence. The chain itself is enchained to a master demand, an *empty signifier* (the *point de capiton* in Lacanian parlance), which marks the limits of the political subject by pointing towards a shared enemy (the 'constitutive Outside'), that itself negatively constitutes political identities from the outside. If populism is conceptualized in this way, we see that 'the people' is not a denial of pluralism, but exactly the opposite. It is pluralist by definition, as it assembles a homogeneous identity out of heterogeneous demands, incommensurable practices, ideologies, contexts, and social groups, and its internal coherence is sustained solely via the negation of its outside.

In this approach, signifiers do not reflect a social reality that is already out there, but are formative of such a reality. Signification, in other words, is not purely descriptive, but productive, and struggles over definitions are therefore always-already struggles over the (retroactive) constitution of their object of reflection (Laclau 2005b: 101-117; Laclau 1996: 36–46). Thus a 'real' populist practice is not needed for 'populism' to be ascribed. Nevertheless, the conditions of possibility for the symbolic *efficiency* of performative utterances are embedded in concrete (political, theoretical, etc.) practices. As Katsambekis (2014a: 557) explains, 'discourse doesn't only build hegemonic narratives (...) It also reflects and justifies a set of already existing institutions as well as social relations and practices'. Hence the anti-populist 'fear of the masses' needs to be placed within the 'broader shift from the *political* (as antagonism, rupture, etc.) to the *post-political* (as management, administration, consensus, etc.) and from democracy to post-democracy' (Katsambekis, 2014a: 557-8).

Ernesto Laclau's 'strictly formal' understanding of populism (as the dominance of the *logic of equivalence* over the *logic of difference*) is synonymous with *any* political identity formation (Stavrakakis 2004, cf. Laclau 2005b). According to Stavrakakis, as

Laclau's formalism deepens, 'the signifier "the people" is replaced – more or less – by the production of empty signifiers in general' (Stavrakakis 2004: 262). This risks 'los[ing] the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete political analysis' if the 'structural location of "the people" (...) as defining criterion in the analysis of populism' is not taken into account (Stavrakakis 2004: 263-4).

Formal analysis of anti-populism poses a further challenge. The adversarial figure (which is constitutive of *political* subjects), could be anything – *even* 'the populists'. This raises the question: should liberal anti-populism be located within the logic of difference or within the logic of equivalence? Does it call for (liberal) administration or for (democratic) politics? If the 'populism' in anti-populist calls for technocratic governance is also an empty signifier (in that it is able to integrate multiple fantasies, affects, positions, demands, etc.) then this would destabilise the strict distinction between the *political* logic of equivalence and the *administrative* logic of difference.

Chains of equivalence can be destabilised when (substantial) parts of the demands inscribed in the chain are 'differentially absorbed' (Laclau 2005a: 130). The other possibility is that political frontiers are redrawn through the appropriation of the signifiers (from *empty* to *floating*) that sustain them. The concept of the *floating signifier* thus enables us to understand the limits of the political subject as something that are constantly redrawn in political struggle. Historically, in political practice frontiers can be 'blurred as a result of the oppressive regime itself becoming hegemonic – that is, trying to interrupt the equivalential chain of the popular camp by an alternative equivalential chain, in which some of the popular demands are articulated to entirely different links', or when 'the *same* democratic demands receive the structural pressure of *rival* hegemonic projects' (Laclau 2005a: 130-133).

Laclau mentions that after 1989 in Eastern Europe 'the market' did not signify only economic governance, but integrated calls for 'the end of bureaucratic rule, civil freedoms, catching up with the West, and so forth' (Laclau 2005a: 95). Thus 'the market' can function as a *floating* signifier in *various* camps (e.g. dissidents', workers', liberal, etc.) that can *all* struggle for hegemony. Ivan Krastev's interpretations of populism in the current post-political setting are useful for understanding this problem (see Krastev 2000, 2002, 2007a, 2007b, 2012). Krastev asserts that populism does not have an autonomous discourse, but is, rather, a popular democratic appropriation of liberal signifiers (e.g. anti-corruption, transparency). Constant accusations of corruption give the impression that the entire political elite is corrupt. The unconditional trust in transparency can be transformed into an anti-establishment conspiracy 'theory' (cf. Krastev 2013). Shortly afterwards, frontiers are *constantly* redrawn by tactical (re)appropriations of signifiers (by different camps): there is no moment of pure administration of difference.[3]

By collapsing strict oppositions between administrative institutionalisation and populist political resistance, order and anomie, stability and crisis, liberal governance and democratic resistance, we can see that, in line with Chantal Mouffe's account of the 'democratic paradox', liberal democracy is always-already open to redrawing its frontiers (Mouffe 2000). Furthermore, crisis (and dislocation) need to be problematized in order to analyse the Bulgarian situation post-1989 as we often

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[3] For this line of interpretation, see Arditi 2010: 493-494.

witness popular mobilisations behind technocratic slogans (e.g. 'projects not parties', 'there is no left and right, only right and wrong').

Populism and nationalism after socialism

Anti-populist and alarmist understandings of populism are widespread in post-socialist Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s Adam Michnik wrote:

> The hateful chauvinism is a degenerate reaction to the human need for national identity and national sovereignty, a need that was beaten down by communism. The envious populism is a degenerate reaction to the human longing for a just social order. Into the place left empty by Communist ideology, these two fiends steal. Like a cancer attacking the fragile human organism, they attack the tender emerging organism of our pluralist European democracy and our normal market economy (Michnik 1993).

Using nationalism and populism interchangeably, and associating both with socialism, is widespread in Bulgaria too. Often, this position, as in Michnik's[4] case, does not oppose nationalism *per se*, but instead its alleged *degenerate* forms, which supposedly stem from a 'lack' of 'authentic' nationalism during socialism. More recently, the widespread 'nostalgia' for socialism (cf. Todorova & Gilles 2012) has also been associated with 'populism' (e.g. Krastev 2009).[5]

    In an article entitled 'Left Wing, Right Wing, Everything: Xenophobia, Neo-totalitarianism, and Populist Politics in Bulgaria', Kristen Ghodsee claims the Bulgarian populist party Ataka is not so much far-right, but 'neo-totalitarian', where a 'radical left agenda' is 'just beneath the xenophobic rhetoric' (Ghodsee 2008: 36). Ghodsee similarly argues that Ataka's discourse is closer to the left as it voices criticism of *corrupt* privatisation, opposes 'the West', and has an 'extreme Slavophile devotion to Russia' (Ibid.: 37). Such interpretations tend to not analyse Ataka's discourses directly, but are mediated by existing understandings of the liberal political activists[6] who dominate the Bulgarian public sphere. Careful analysis of Ataka's discourse, however, shows that their economic demands are sporadic and are structurally located as 'weaker components' within its populist chain of equivalence. They tend to be 'subsumed by the party's hegemonic framing of

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[4] Adam Michnik famously formulated the popular idea that 'nationalism is the last stage of communism' (1991). For an illustrative example of the interpretation of nationalism as 'essentially communist determined' due to so-called 'anti-Western socialisation' see Mungiu-Pipidi 2004: 55. Similarly, Eastern European populism is at times explained as 'imprinted into the mass mentality specific to post-communism' (Boboc 2014: 196).

[5] Earlier, however, there were different claims. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1989) wrote that the rise of nationalism should not be 'construed as a lament for communism', as it was supposedly also 'a liberation for those who have had to live under its stultifying and dehumanizing regime', while the alarmist tone here is redirected towards balkanist (cf. Todorova 1997) stereotypes like 'Eastern Europe's nationalisms still tend to be more volatile, more emotional and more intense than those in the West' (Brzezinski 1989).

[6] For example, in her depiction of Ataka as 'more communist than fascist', Ghodsee (2008: 36, 39) relies on statements by an anti-communist politician and her interview with the head of a mainstream liberal NGO, who was also an important dissident before 1989.

economic issues along ethnic and cultural line[s]'.[7] Furthermore, they ignore that Ataka associates itself with the western far-right and its anti-Semitism is *simultaneously* anti-communist and anti-liberal. Ataka's 'dismissal of socialist, liberal, or any other globalist doctrines as anti-national' is 'typical of the extreme right wing' (Todorov 2013: 3).

Ghodsee (2008: 36) writes that 'few have recognized the radical left agenda' of Ataka, even though depicting populism as *essentially* left-wing has been the dominant mode of interpretation in Bulgaria,[8] and in Eastern Europe more generally (e.g. Tismăneanu 1998). For instance, Svetoslav Malinov writes that populism is unfolding in a 'Marxist understanding of the essence of politics', defined as 'opposition of the "oppressed and exploited" against their exploiters' (Malinov 2007: 74, 72).

Vladimir Tismăneanu (1998: 157, cf. 2000) also asserts that populism should not be attributed to the right, which, he argues, tends to be associated with 'liberal individualism' against 'national collectivism'. He sees post-socialism as a manichean conflict between 'liberals' and 'militant nationalists' (Tismăneanu 1998: 66): liberals are champions of 'dialogue, tolerance, and inclusion', and nationalists stand for 'assimilation, segregation, or exclusion'. According to Tismăneanu (1998: 66), '[i]n post-Leninist countries, one encounters among the illiberal nationalists former communists, socialists, neofascists, traditional conservatives, and populists committed to the search for a "third way" between communism and capitalism', united against 'democratic, liberal, modern values'.

The think-tank expert and sociologist Stefan Popov is an illustrative example of the popularity of anti-populism among Bulgarian liberal intellectuals. According to him, populism is omnipresent due to the success of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU), a left agrarian populist party that used to be strong in the interwar period (cf. Hatzopoulos, 2008:125-152, Bell 1977). Popov writes that 'the spirit' of the 'agrarian person and his party' is reproduced today, and that it consumes the whole political field (Popov 2014: 289). In Popov's idiosyncratic approach, populism, understood as the denial of political representation, emerges out of a clash between the 'natural narrow-mindedness' of 'rural mentality' and the 'emancipated urban consciousness' (Popov 2014: 290-291). Upon an encounter with modern representative democracy, the 'rural mentality' goes 'through stress and disorientation (...) refusing the logic of representation' (Popov 2014: 293). This is because the 'agrarian mentality' operates in temporal structures that precede the historical phase of the party form (Popov 2014: 293-4).

Other Bulgarian anti-populist experts and intellectuals have produced very different understandings of what populism is. Anti-populism here functions as an

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[7] Here I take advantage of the careful analysis of Ataka's newspaper by Martin Marinos (2015) who deploys Laclau's theory of populism.

[8] The liberal press in Bulgaria often publishes articles explaining why populist parties are left-wing (cf. Mateev 2007). Similar positions are also strongly present in liberal intellectuals' discourses (e.g. Penchev 2007). (Neo)liberal think tanks and politicians often use 'populism' interchangeably with 'welfare' and 'left-wing'. In general any perceived lack of austerity is often called 'populist'. KRIB (Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria) also argue against public regulation of the economy by using 'populist' and 'left' interchangeably. There are left-wing political activists who have tried to turn anti-populist discourses around and assert 'austerity is populist', but this remains outside the scope of the current analysis.

inclination and not as a theory. The notion of populism is always employed tactically in concrete political struggles and conjunctures. For example, Smilov and Krastev write that it 'is not useful to conceptualise Central European populism as "political radicalism" or "extremism"' (Krastev & Smilov 2008: 9) – even though in an article on the 'The Banality and Extremism of Populism', Smilov ponders on the most 'useful responses to extremely acute and dangerous forms of turbo-charged populism'[9] (Smilov 2007).

Thus, my argument is that 'populism' in Bulgarian liberal anti-populist discourse should be understood as the 'constitutive Other' of contemporary Bulgarian liberalism. In this sense, 'populism' should not be strictly associated with crises of liberal administrative governance, but viewed as a discursively constituted figure that functions as the condition of possibility for *preventing* crisis and sustaining the legitimacy of liberal 'reforms'.

Importantly, liberal 'reforms', should not be understood as the imposition of a pre-given set of neoliberal practices, ideas and technologies of governance. That is to say, the liberal call for technocratic governance is not a call for concrete demands. Here the signifier 'reforms' involves a variety of imaginaries, demands, positions, and so on, the uses of which change in time (cf. Medarov & Tsoneva 2014). The key point here is that *what tends to unite them is a (negatively shared) anti-populist inclination* – the call for the governance of those who are able by virtue (and not by democratic delegation) *vis-a-vis* the supposed 'totalitarian masses'.[10] To put it shortly, liberal anti-populism tends to reproduce *formally* a post-democratic institutional arrangement, and does not superimpose a pre-social set of governmental practices. In order to elaborate this point further, I shall now examine the post-1989 transformations of anti-populism in Bulgaria.

The shifting grounds of (anti)populism: Forging the liberal consensus and the appearance of populism

After 1989 a two-party model was formed in Bulgaria that pitted the ex-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) against the newly formed anti-communist coalition, Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). Both shared a common vision for a transition to liberal capitalism, and their difference was asserted on the basis of a projection onto the past (Raichev & Stoichev, 2004: 28-9). Liberal capitalism promised to dissolve the privileges and inequalities of the socialist state into a sort of universal 'affluent middle class'. The socialist past, however, was seen by BSP as an integral part of national history and pre-socialism was presented as 'fascist barbarism'. UDF, on the other hand, had their main slogan as '45 years is enough', claiming that socialism was a break with Bulgaria's 'authentic' national history and had cut its links to a supposed

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[9] 'Turbo' is a common reference to post-Yugoslav popular commercial music. In anti-populist discourses in Bulgaria 'turbo-folk' music is depicted as 'low culture' and often blamed for everything from racism and sexism to low levels of economic growth. Influential political scientists in Bulgaria (cf. Lomeva 2007) have actually claimed populism is popular music (or 'chalga', the Bulgarian version of 'turbo-folk') in politics.

[10] In Rancière's (2006: 12) analysis of the shift to contemporary post-democratic societies, a fear of 'the people' is associated with the redefinition of the notion of totalitarianism: 'the properties that were formerly attributed to totalitarianism, conceived as the State devouring society, have quite simply become the properties of democracy, conceived as society devouring the State'.

pre-socialist 'developed bourgeois democracy'. According to UDF, instituting liberal capitalism necessitated a radical break with the past via economic shock therapy. For BSP, on the other hand, this could be achieved through gradualist reforms.

BSP formed a government in 1994, supported by rural populations (cf. Creed 1998: 263-278), on a mandate to tame the most radical liberal reforms in agriculture. BSP's contradictory attempts to engineer a 'humane neoliberalisation' by, for example, retaining national price controls but liberalising foreign trade, failed dramatically and resulted in a severe banking crisis, staple food shortages and hyperinflation. All this created the mass anti-communist mobilisation that toppled the government in 1997.

UDF blamed the 'unreformed communists', and won the 1997 elections with a mandate for shock therapy as a way out of the crisis. UDF presented this as a choice between the 'abnormal Asian-communist' historic deflection and the desired 'return' to the supposed 'Euro-Atlantic' normality. Austerity, which at the time was dubbed 'unpopular measures', was presented as a 'temporary' but necessary evil needed to aid the anti-communist desire for purification from the imagined threat of 'Totalitarianism'. The elevation of the discourse of 'unpopular measures' to governmental reason in 1997 was concomitant with the restructuring of the UDF. It was transformed from a pluralist movement (Union of Democratic Forces) to a technocratic and centralised party (United Democratic Forces).

Ivan Krastev, in his articles from the 1990s for the main business weekly *Capital*, argued in defence of 'pragmatism' and 'unpopular measures' (Krastev 1996), and, once UDF pushed for radical privatisation and imposed austerity after 1997, was amongst the first to warn against 'left populism' (Krastev 1998), which was understood as the popular appropriation of anti-corruption rhetoric *against* (neo)liberalisation. In 1997 Krastev wrote that the 1990s were marked by an 'unwritten contract between the liberal economists and the democrats' (Krastev 1997). The democrats, according to Krastev, were responsible for providing 'political support for radical economic reforms', whilst 'the experts', on the other hand, stayed 'away from party politics'. The exhaustion of this initial 'will to market' led to a failure of the 'democracy instead of capitalism' model. The 1997 technocratic shift extended executive power and enabled a 'stronger presence of the state in the non-economic sphere', alongside privatisation and austerity. In other words, Krastev asserted that the unification of the UDF marked a shift towards a kind of non-democratic radical liberalism (the so-called unpopular reforms), which in turn then fell under *direct* technocratic leadership.

In fact, all of *Capital*'s weekly articles from this period are indicative of the shifts in liberal anti-populist discourse. Between 1994 and 1997 'populism' was projected onto the government, then in 1997 it disciplined the UDF to push for reforms by arguing that it needed to tame its internal 'excessive' democracy. With the post-1997 imposition of austerity and privatisation, 'left populism' emerged as a dangerous subversion of anti-corruption rhetoric. Anti-corruption discourses were previously deployed by liberal activists against the 1994-1997 BSP government.

The 1997-2001 UDF government marked the consolidation of a (neo)liberal consensus and the dissolution of the 1990s two-party model. In 2001 the exiled heir to the throne Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha returned to Bulgaria and formed a new

political party, National Movement Simeon II (NDSV), with an explicit expert-technocratic agenda and won the elections.

It is precisely this institutionalisation of the liberal hegemony that brought the notion of 'populism' into mainstream political discourse in Bulgaria. Here, 'populism', as understood by liberals, signifies not so much a concrete political subject, but a situation – a 'populist zeitgeist' (Mudde 2004). Mainstream Bulgarian liberal intellectuals (Smilov 2010, Popov 2006) argued that 'populism' should not be understood as a danger to democracy *per se*, but as a constant threat of 'excessive' democracy: it was an illiberal temptation that would contest liberal constitutionalism, or, to borrow Ivan Krastev's phrase, was a form of 'democratic illiberalism' (Krastev 2007b), that needed to be countered by liberal technicians.

The very consolidation of liberalism, which had rendered all parties much the same, disintegrated the boundaries of the liberal political identifications that had emerged in the 1990s. It also posed a menace for electoral mobilisation. That is to say, the conditions of possibility of the liberal consensus were at the same time its conditions of impossibility. As mainstream Bulgarian liberals have often argued, post-2001 liberalism 'became a victim of its own success'.

From the perspective of a discursive approach, the post-2001 emergence of 'populism' in mainstream political discourse does not point towards new populist practices, but to it being the 'constitutive Other' of liberalism itself in the context of the post-political liberal hegemony. Post-2001 liberal anti-populism is the discursive strategy that constitutes a supposedly illiberal (but democratic) external frontier, which is needed for the articulation (and recuperation) of the liberal subject itself.

The spectre of populism was also projected onto the far-right Ataka party, a group which emerged in 2005 as a reaction to the liberal consensus. Liberals also insisted that the supposed danger of populism existed in mainstream parties as well, and needed to be tamed. Ataka itself became more mainstream and supported two governments (centre-right GERB government after 2009 and nominally centre-left after 2013). NDSV and GERB's reliance on charismatic leaders and their sometimes antagonistic rhetoric, were named 'soft' (and hence *safe*) populism and thus, as I have argued above, were considered acceptable.

Protests = populism

The 1990s witnessed the rise of the liberal promise that all-encompassing *political* subjectivities, such as 'the people', were to be left in the totalitarian past. The pluralist 'civil society', represented by special interest groups and NGOs, embodied this utopian promise of post-political and post-historical administration of difference *from below* (see Szacki 1995, Dahrendorf 1997). Momchil Hristov (2010) demonstrates how this vision of displacing 'the people' with 'civil society' was concomitant with the shift towards a non-adversarial and consensus-based understanding of 'politics'. According to Hristov, the opposition between 'civil society' and 'the people' actually reproduced old liberal anxieties about popular democratic participation, such as Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of the 'tyranny of the majority' or Gustave Le Bon's fears of the 'ignorant crowd' (Hristov 2010: 58). The discourse of 'the civil society against the state' in Bulgaria has been appropriated by a number of popular *political* mobilisations. At times these broke with the logic of difference that was supposed to govern the uses of the signifier 'civil society'.

Around this term a number of (mostly environmentalist) chains of equivalence were built in the 2000s. Similar genealogies, as I have hinted, could be traced in the appropriations of other *liberal* signifiers (e.g. rhetoric against corruption, transparency).

One effect of the post-2001 liberal consensus was that none of the political parties were able to contain the nodal points which fixed their identities. This meant that all of the major empty signifiers became floating signifiers, and were mobilized in a variety of directions and in different ways. For instance, 'the struggle against corruption', was initially used to build liberal chains of equivalence, able to accommodate widespread discontent with capitalism (especially after 2007 when the EU accession failed to fulfil popular expectations for universal prosperity). The narrative about 'corruption' fixed liberal identities by stating it was not capitalism *per se* that should be blamed: the problem was that Bulgaria did not yet have a 'real' transition, 'real' market, 'real' competition, 'real' civil society, etc.. However, all political parties used anti-corruption rhetoric against their opponents, thus eventually excluding the whole political elite from the liberal chain of equivalence they were trying to form. All political parties were seen as corrupt, and anti-corruption became the nodal point in a series of protest mobilisations (mostly environmentally inspired and targeting the privatisation of natural parks, fracking and the liberalisation of GMO food production). This, however, did not challenge liberal signifiers *per se*, but only their representatives (NGOs, parties), culminating in the mass environmentalist protests of 2011 around the main slogan 'We are the State!'.

This shift was especially pronounced after 2009, when a new centre-right party (GERB) formed a government with the support of the far right Ataka. GERB, led by Borisov, an ex-karate fighter, promised to fight corruption. The difficulty of sustaining this narrative forced GERB to complement it with anti-communist and anti-Turkish rhetoric. Nevertheless, GERB's anti-communism cannot be seen as a continuation of the 1990s type of this discourse. It is completely novel, and able to integrate the widespread nostalgia for socialism with anti-communism. This anti-communism is not directed against the past, but against the present (cf. Tsoneva 2014), and combines the remnants of both the UDF and BSP political discourses from the 1990s into new floating signifiers. Borisov also spread conspiracy theories about secret communist and Turkish plots interfering with his rule, trying to kill him, etc.. However, GERB could not retain a monopoly over this rhetoric. It was also severely attacked for being 'corrupt' and Borisov himself was often blamed for being a 'communist' in disguise.

During GERB's time in government liberal anti-populist discourses were explicitly directed against protest mobilisations. These were dubbed 'populist' and their demands were deemed 'illegitimate'. Moreover, when the government succumbed to protest demands this was explained as a 'result of populist pressure'. For example, GERB imposed a ban on shale gas fracking after massive protests and Borisov later accused his own party members of being victims of 'environmental populism'. Oppositional political parties also branded GERB as 'populist' because of its inability to resist protest demands.

Liberal anti-populism, directed against protest movements, culminated with the highly acclaimed 'stability' regime of 2009-2013 (which had cut the budget deficit from 4% in 2010 to 1% in 2012). This government fell from power in February 2013 in the midst of mass protests against private electricity distribution companies. These

protests were dubbed 'populist' by liberal intellectuals and activists. Even the WSJ (Parkinson 2013) were scared that ousting the pro-austerity government would mean 'populist economic policies'. At that time, one Bulgarian anti-populist intellectual (Dobchev 2013) even talked about 'a mongoloid horde, which knows only how to plunder, but can neither sow, nor plough', and thus 'takes us back to the cave'.

What anti-populist commentators missed, however, was that the February protests in 2013 exploited key *liberal* signifiers ('anti-corruption', 'anti-monopoly', 'transparency', 'civil society', but also 'the people') to form popular chains of equivalence. Liberal signifiers are not privileged objects of the elites but are dispersed and lend themselves to popular appropriations. Such was the case in February 2013 when people marched for nationalisation of the energy companies under the banner of anti-monopoly, free market and anti-corruption. Protesters demanded direct civil society rule and for political parties to be abolished. In other words, they hijacked chief signifiers of 'the Transition' against its former representatives – the political elite and liberal experts. What was challenged were not liberal empty signifiers but their representation. In this presentist movement (cf. Lorey 2011), 'civil society' was mobilized as a weapon against political mediation (parties and NGOs) and even economic mediation (electricity distribution companies) by a popular political subject calling for 'all power to the civil society' (cf. Tsoneva 2013).

No protests = populism

In May 2013 a new coalition was formed by the BSP and a pro-minority party. It also received backing from Ataka. In Sofia the controversial appointment of a media mogul as a head of national security led to protests demanding his resignation. Initially these demonstrations were large, with participants from all sides of the political spectrum. The second protest wave was mostly limited to Sofia, but continued much longer. Though numbers dwindled over time, the protests were very persistent and the movement continued into 2014. It was monopolized by liberal activists and ex-UDF intellectuals who saw the movement as a way to return to power by reviving 1990s anti-communism. Protesters called for 'European values', 'morality in politics' and a 'genuine break' with the Communist past.

Liberal activists, explicitly supported by big business, asserted cynically that the poor protested in February, but that the second wave were 'middle class' activists, marching not for welfare, but for 'values', against the shadow elite. In so doing, they relied on anti-communism in the imaginary figure of the 'unproductive-parasitic communist oligarch' who pulled the strings from behind and brainwashed the masses with 'populist ideology'. A mainstream liberal economist (Ganev 2013), in a pseudo class analysis, claimed that previously the 'unproductive' oligarchy had provided welfare, and the poor (he called them proletarians) had provided votes, but that now the 'productive bourgeoisie' was rising to resist this alliance. Similar anti-populist discourses went as far as outright social and ethnic racism (for further analysis of this, see Dawson 2014, Nikolova 2014). In this sense, 'middle class' became a far more exclusive category than when compared with discourses from the 1990s.

Unlike the 1990s, when anti-communist protests raised some genuinely anti-elitist slogans (such as 'power to the people' or 'down with the red bourgeoisie'),

the 2013 protests were pronouncedly anti-populist, presenting themselves as 'the quality' against 'the quantity' (of apathetic non-supporters of the protests), the 'GDP generators' against the 'parasites on welfare', creators of value versus the faceless crowd, etc.. I am not claiming those groups pre-exist their naming sociologically. They were constituted performatively in a political struggle in the very process of naming. The same divisions were also adopted by supporters of the government and thus stabilized further. Now, to be a 'liberal anti-populist' meant to protest on the streets; there were even riots in support of austerity in a movement claiming there was a shadow elite which was trying to derail Bulgaria from the EU, portraying bankers as communists, and using extremely antagonistic (even racialising and dehumanising) terms against the supposedly manipulated silent majority. Practically all anti-populist liberal intellectuals and activists enthusiastically supported the movement. What was formative of the new temporal fixation of liberal identities was, rather, their opposition to the very chance of de-monopolization of liberal signifiers, such as civil society, a chance that manifested itself for a short moment in February 2013.

'Populism' was also projected onto the government, even though, in terms of concrete policies, the austerity regime was not questioned. A good example is the Do-It-Yourself grass-roots newspaper 'Protest', founded during the anti-populist protests in 2013. 'Protest' published, and continues to publish, numerous articles against populism. For example, in an article on populism, entitled 'Who Steals Our Wealth' (Mateev 2014), we are told that for 'non-economists' it is hard to grasp (as they are brainwashed by 'populism'), but 'our' problem is not the big banks, international capital or foreign forces. Instead, it is 'the most dangerous monopoly': the government with its constant 'regulations', 'redistributions' and 'populism'.

Conclusion: The effects of 2013

Eventually the protests succeeded and the government collapsed in 2014. A new government was elected at the end of 2014, which included liberal and centre-right parties, as well as the extreme right coalition Patriotic Front (PF). One of the two parties from the PF called in their political program for the interment of the Bulgarian Roma in camps outside cities. The healthcare minister in the new cabinet, who was from a nominally liberal party, called Roma 'animals' and the main pro-minority party a 'cancer' that 'just needs to be cut'. Nonetheless, one of the most influential anti-populist experts in Bulgaria claimed that the new coalition was the 'ideologically purest and most feasible option' (Smilov 2014).

In this context, the new objective of anti-populists was to make a distinction, once again, between the acceptable racist far-right and the unacceptable populists. One interesting tactic to establish equivalence between political groups was using the imaginary figure of 'Putin'. Smilov (2015), for instance, compared the Greek political party SYRIZA with the Bulgarian Ataka (currently in opposition) as essentially identical 'populists' since both are allegedly 'pro-Putin'.

To sum up, in this paper I have shown how liberal anti-populist discourses not only reflect post-democracy but are also constitutive of it. Interpreting anti-populism enables us to probe the discursive mechanisms that sustain liberal hegemonies. Anti-populism does not have a pre-given meaning, but is always-already embedded in historical conjunctures and is often deployed as a tactical instrument in political struggle. Therefore, liberal hegemony should not be understood as the

operation of a purely administrative logic of difference, but as something that constantly adapts to a shifting political terrain.

Today, given that the new government is supported by many liberal activists and intellectuals, anti-populism seems to be effective once again. Anti-populism enables intellectuals to re-direct their discontent with the government (for, say, promoting nationalist cultural projects or racist violence) towards the abstract figures of the 'bad popular taste' and 'populism'. In this context, it will be very interesting to see if this ever-shifting liberal spectre of populism could ever be transformed into a material force. This is, nevertheless, a political and not a theoretical question.

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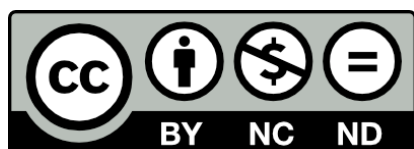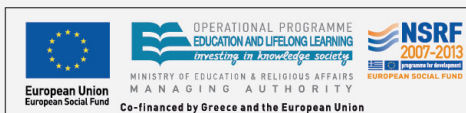
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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.