Populists in power in Eastern Europe: the case of Bulgaria

Daniel Smilov

Abstract: The paper analyses the phenomenon of new populism in its Central European context with a special focus on the case of Bulgaria. The author explores the internal coherence of the concept of populism, the origins of the phenomenon, the conditions for its development, as well as the reasons for its different manifestations. Several theses are advanced in the course of the analysis. Firstly, at the conceptual level, new populism must be distinguished from “radicalism” and “extremism”. Although there are “softer” and “harder” versions of populism, what defines populism is not its radicalism or extremism, but its specific form of justification of political action: the strict adherence to and reflection of the will of „the people” understood as an identifiable homogeneous whole. The Central European experience shows that the dividing line between the “soft” and “hard” versions of populism is fluid: there is a tendency of populists to radicalise before elections, and to „soften” afterwards, especially if they are represented in parliament, and/or are part of governing coalitions.

Secondly, the paper argued that new populism is not a temporary post- EU accession phenomenon. There are more lasting constraints on politics and other general conditions, which contribute to the rise of populists. The traditional liberal-democratic parties lose their privileged place, and face increasingly tough electoral competition from new comers. This is partly explained by the diminishing value of the two main resources of these parties: the socio-economic ideologies of the „left” and „right”, and the stable and disciplined party organisation. On the one hand, globalisation limits dramatically the discretion of national governments in the socio-economic field; on the other hand, the development of new media and means of communication lowers the value of party discipline and hierarchical organisation for the purposes of electoral mobilisation. As a result of this, politics moves more and more from the socio-economic field, into the fields of identity, personal integrity and media (virtual) representation. These processes give an edge to populist new comers as compared to established „programmatic” parties.

Populism is difficult to conceptualize partly because it is extremely context-dependent. Probably, it is more adequate to speak of populisms in the plural. Political scientists use “populism” to describe both Chavez’ Venezuela and Putin’s Russia, even though these are markedly different regimes. Although both of them seem to be “democracy’s doubles”, they part with liberal democracy in different ways: Putin, in contrast to Chavez, is more market-oriented and co-operative vis-à-vis the US, especially regarding Bush’s global war against terror. Philippe Schmitter points out that the concept of “populism” is often abused in political discourse. By calling someone a “populist” people are just expressing their negative evaluation of a particular actor or political agenda. Overall, “populism” is most probably a “family resemblance” concept, so it will be a futile exercise to look for a very strict definition of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the populisms in Central Eastern Europe that are in our primary focus do share some important common characteristics.

First, populists in the region appeal to the people as a whole, as opposed to corrupt and impotent political elites. They present themselves as an alternative not to a specific political party or platform, but as an alternative to the existing representative system as a whole. They promise to reinvigorate political life, to bring back “substance” to politics. Secondly, populists (to varying degrees) oppose a key idea of liberal democracy: that the political

2 A Balance Sheet of the Vices and Virtues of ‘Populisms’, paper delivered at the conference the Challenge of New Populism, organized by the Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, in May 2006.
3 For a discussion of populism in Eastern Europe see Cas Mudde, “In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populism in Eastern Europe”, in Meny and Surel, Democracies and the Populist Challenge, Palgrave, 2002.
majority should be limited in important ways by constitutional constraints. The Central European family of populism is openly majoritarian – it is centred around the belief that the consent of the majority is the ultimate ground of legitimation in politics. Therefore, this type of populism is particularly opposed to the idea of minority rights. Thirdly, and again to varying degrees, populists challenge at least some elements of what they see as the “liberal consensus” of the transition period: market-oriented reforms, integration in the Euro-Atlantic organizations, rejection of nationalistic language and behaviour. Populists “challenge” all these “taboos”, reject the “political correctness” of liberalism, and give an opportunity for the citizens to discuss problems which have been “bracketed out” by the mainstream parties.

By way of introduction, it is important to provide an overview of some of the distinctive features of the Eastern European family of populists. This overview will be helpful as a background for the understanding of the Bulgarian case study. The first important feature of the Eastern European populism is that it is not “radicalism” or “extremism”. Extremism was the typical challenge to liberal democracy in the post-war period. Communists and neo-Nazis attacked the democratic polities in Western Europe with radical proposals for systemic change, which was to be carried out partly through violent means. Such calls for radical changes cannot be observed in the region today. Contemporary populists do not offer a political alternative to democracy. The problem is rather that the ideal of democracy they espouse is unattractive and dangerous: that it has a distinctive illiberal bias. Despite the revolutionary heritage of the region as a whole, populists in countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland have not resorted to extremist or radical means, and have rarely resorted to radical rhetoric. Hungary is a partial exception, where radical nationalist and anti-Semitic groups do play some in politics: also, some violence was used in the 2006-2007 demonstrations against the Socialist government. But overall, the impact of these groups is rather marginal.

Secondly, although not violent, extremist or radical, populism in the region comes in two forms, which for lack of better words will be referred to as „soft” and „hard”. “Soft populism” is a challenge to the existing system of representation and mainly to the existing party system. It is a signal of a crisis of representation: it thrives on popular perceptions that the established parties are corrupt, that they form cartels and are alienated from the people, that they are too ideological, etc. “Hard populism” is characterized by more severe threats to the constitutional framework: it challenges not only the existing structure of representation but also some of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, such as the protection of individual and minority rights, etc. As soft-populist parties one could identify the tsarist Simeon II’s NDSV (НДСВ) and Borisov’s GERB (ГЕРБ) in Bulgaria, Orban’s FIDESZ in Hungary, Fico’s Smer-SD in Slovakia. Hard populists are more difficult to come by, but they are by no means missing from the region. The most contentious and notorious example here is PiS, Self-Defence and League of Polish Families, in Poland, and the phenomenon of the Kaczynski brothers more generally: their stance against minorities, their attempts to criminalize their opponents, and the disrespect for entrenched constitutional principles and foreign engagements justify their depiction as “hard populists”. In the same categories are parties such as Siderov’s Ataka in Bulgaria, Meciar’s HZDS and SNS in Slovakia, and other smaller parties throughout the region.

Thirdly, the dividing line between the “soft” and “hard” versions of populism is fluid and ever changing. Since populist parties generally lack both developed party structure and discipline, and ideological coherence they are prone to changes in their overall profile. Their radicalism might increase or decrease not only during elections, but also while in office. For
instance, regarding foreign policy issues and minority rights Smer-SD could be described as moving towards more “hard” versions of populism while in office. Similarly, it can be argued that PiS in Poland evolved into “hard” populism throughout its term in the government. Siderov’s Ataka in Bulgaria, in contrast, was scaling down its radical rhetoric in the presidential campaign of 2006, in an apparent attempt to attract more moderate voters. Therefore, from the outset it is worth pointing out that there hardly exists any single consistent pattern of „softening” or „hardening” of populists while in office. Both possibilities are open to them, and it seems to depend on contextual factors which strategy they will ultimately employ.

Fourthly, populism in Central Eastern Europe cannot be simply dismissed as a post-accession phenomenon. It has been argued that the rise of populism is a specific post-accession phenomenon, which is due to inflated expectations concerning EU membership and fatigue from long-lasting austerity measures. There is little support for such an explanation, however. The mentioned post-accession factors might play some role in highlighting certain trends, but these trends were visible in the countries we studied from earlier on. Thus, the rise of populism started in Bulgaria as early as 2000-2001, when the ex-tds Simeon II made his return to the country. In Slovakia, Meciar’s style of hard populism was dominant for much of the 1990’s. In Hungary, Orban’s politics “mainstreamed” nationalistic populism towards the end of the 1990’s. Poland seems to fit best the “post accession” scenario, but there as well smaller populist parties existed throughout the 1990’s.

Fifthly, Eastern European populism is generally a by-product of the failure to create stable, programmatic (liberal) parties in the region. There is a tendency of falling trust in liberal parties. They manage to mobilize much fewer voters, and in very specific situations. There is essentially one specific situation, when liberals mobilize voters: when they are perceived as a last hurdle before a “hard” populist coming to power. This was the situation in 2006 in the Bulgarian presidential elections when Siderov from the hard-populist Ataka was beaten by a large margin by the Socialist candidate Parvanov. In the 2008 Polish parliamentary elections, the mobilization behind the liberal Civic Platform of Donald Tusk happened only when PiS became perceived as a “hard populist” party, explicitly threatening constitutional foundations. As regards to “soft populism”, established liberal parties seem to have very few answers to its rise. Bulgaria is a case in point, where “soft populism” has triumphed in most of the elections in the period 2001-2010. Slovakia also illustrates the thesis that “soft populists” enjoy significant public confidence in comparison to other actors.

Finally, Eastern European populism seems to be a by-product of a shift of party competition from the field of socio-economic matters to identity- and integrity-related issues: most importantly anti-corruption and nationalism. Central Europe is one of the regions in the world where constitutionalization of politics has been quite pervasive. All of the countries in the region have constitutional courts (many of them extremely powerful as the Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Slovak, etc.) and judiciaries, which impose serious “rule of law” constraints on the policy making of democratic bodies. Further, all of these countries have adopted and almost constitutionalized specific neoliberal economic policies, which are practically outside the reach of the political process. In Bulgaria there is a “currency board” which is a step further than an “independent” central bank. All of the countries aspire to become Euro zone members, which places further restrictions on their economic policies: consider the recent Polish constitutional amendments curbing the possibility for budget deficits. Finally, bodies such as the NATO, the Council of Europe, WTO, and, of course, the EU provide directly applicable norms and standards which domestic majorities need to take
seriously into account. All these constraints diminish the space for autonomous liberal
democratic policy making. Which is more important, the programmes of the liberal parties
come dangerously close to each other: as a result, the voters fail to see the differences among
them. Hence, motivation for voting for parties, which have accepted all the mentioned
constraints, is low: voting for them is perceived as making no difference. Thus it seems that
the better off (the “winners” of the transition) are only motivated to vote for liberal parties
when they perceive a serious danger from a “hard populist”. They remain unmoved in the
case of challenges from “soft populists”. In circumstances where the liberal parties are
increasingly losing their appeal and profile (except from cases of last-itch mobilization
against hard populists), nationalism and identity politics become more and more attractive to
the public. These platforms increasingly win votes. Even in countries, such as Hungary,
where populism has no separate exponents but has infiltrated at least one of the major parties,
nationalism and even xenophobia and anti-Semitism have become vote-winning strategies.
One of the effects of the rise of populist actors in Central Europe has been that they have
forced virtually all of the parties to adopt one form or another of “responsible” nationalism. It
is important that this is not a revival of the pre-WWII nationalism in the region. This type of
nationalism seems to be induced by some of the features of the present-day political
processes in Central Europe. Also, it copies quite liberally from the “identity” politics of
Western European parties.

Finally, Eastern European populism is not a leftist revolt of the masses in terms of more
etatist, more redistributive public policy. Populism in Eastern Europe is not a revolt against
neoliberalism. Paradoxically, most of the populist parties are de facto neoliberal in economic
terms (the best examples being Smer-SD in Slovakia, and GERB and NDSV in Bulgaria, but
also FIDESZ in Hungary and others). Many of the populist parties do feature calls for
“redistribution” of the benefits of the transition, but these calls usually mean that certain
corrupt elites should be punished (Ataka in Bulgaria, PiS in Poland, Smer-SD in Slovakia.
Redistribution thus is translated not in economic policies but in “anticorruption” measures.
There is no vision of different (say, social democratic) economic politics espoused by
populists. In this sense, rather paradoxically, populism in Eastern Europe is anti-egalitarian
and meritocratic: no surprise then that a former tsar was one of the first leaders of a populist
force in the region. Central European populism is a longing for new elites: new in the sense of
more responsible to the nation as a whole, and less corrupt (to the extent possible).

Overall, there is no evidence suggesting that populism in the region is a temporary
aberration from a certain vision of “normality”. There seem to be long-term changes in the
political process, which facilitate the spread of populism. First, politics has become much
more media-centred and personalized. The importance of loyalty to ideas and programs is
diminishing because of the more efficient means of social coordination (internet connections,
mobile technologies, cable TV and 24-hour news channels, etc.) Populist parties, with their
focus on communication and personalities, are much better suited for such an environment,
than “traditional” parties. The above mentioned “constitutionalization” of politics also has
done some permanent damage to the electoral chances and the political appeal of traditional
parties. In the new circumstances, people look for other channels of representation and
defence of their interests: citizens turn directly to courts and the judiciary, EU structures,
governments in the case of strikes, direct demonstrations, etc. Loyalty to parties and party
programs no longer seems to be the most efficient way to defend ones interests. Against this
background the traditional notion of a „programmatic party” appears to be the parties are the
weakest link. Populism has most dramatically affected the concept of a political party. Parties
in consolidated democracies are usually expected to be stable and programmatic. The rise of
populism is a serious challenge to this theory, since it has dealt a death blow to many “established” parties of the transition period, and has brought to the fore a host of new players. Further, populism has not made parties more programmatic, but on the contrary: it has almost devoid of meaning the concept of “party programme”. Is this phenomenon to be interpreted as “deconsolidation” of democracy in Central Europe? If not, what are the “post-party” forms of democracy, which are going to appear in the region. Populism is indeed antagonistic to liberalism, but is it going to permanently change our concept of democracy as well? It is too early to give conclusive answers to these questions: the Bulgarian case study offered below helps us to sharper some of our intuitions about the phenomenon.

1. The case of Bulgaria: three successive waves of populist new-comers

During the first decade after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Bulgarian political process was dominated by two ideological party camps. On the left there were the ex-communists (BSP – Bulgarian Socialist Party); right of the centre were the democrats – the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF), who were the driving force behind most of the liberalization processes initiated during this period. Thus, for more than ten years there was a resemblance of a generally established two-party system in Bulgaria structured along the left-right division typical of mature democracies. The BSP made extensive use of ideas such as the social state, greater intervention of the government in the economy, minimal privatization, stronger ties with former foreign partners and Russia in particular. The UDF, on its part, stood for more radical economic reforms, including privatization and restitution of agricultural lands and urban properties nationalized by the communist regime, full integration and membership into the Euroatlantic structures – EU, NATO, etc. Further, the two blocks had a different assessment of the communist past: the UDF was rejecting it as a period of oppressive totalitarianism, while the BSP was much more nuanced, attempting to stress the positive achievements of its predecessors in government. In short, the two main parties espoused different visions of the past and the future of Bulgaria, defended different programmes before the electorate, and demonstrated rather sharp divergences in terms of concrete policies. During most of the 1990s, Bulgarian society was passionately divided along the ideological lines drawn and promoted by the party system. The role of personalities in politics was secondary: party supported candidates as a rule won against popular leaders.4

The first populist wave

In 2001 all this dramatically changed, and the appearance of the stability and consolidation of the Bulgarian party system disappeared. The return of the former tsar Simeon II from long years of exile was an event, which was greeted by welcoming demonstrations in Sofia and the other major cities of the country. The gathering of large masses of people sparked reminiscences of the first years of the transition, when the ex-communists were forced out of government by popular pressure. In the same revolutionary vein, in 1997 the Socialist government of Zhan Videnov resigned under the continuous pressure from street protests. Not surprisingly, in 2000-2001 the then ruling government of Ivan Kostov (UDF) reacted rather nervously to the popular return of Simeon II to the country, and mobilized all of its resources with the intention of preventing him from participation in the political process. First, the Constitutional Court – in which the UDF had a clear dominance – banned Simeon II from participation in the presidential election because of

4 The most striking example of this was the win in the 1996 presidential primaries of the virtually unknown candidate of the UDF Petar Stoyanov against the former dissident and first democratically elected president of the country Zhelyu Zhelev.
residence requirements.\textsuperscript{5} Secondly, and more controversially, a Sofia court denied registration to the party National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) – the organisation with which the ex-tsar was planning to take part in the parliamentary elections. The denial was grounded in procedural considerations – the lack of support shown by signatures, etc: all of these were rather curious in the case of a political organization which was just about to win half of the seats in the Bulgarian parliament. All these efforts came to no avail, since Simeon II and NDSV managed to run in the elections even without being registered as a separate party: they used the registrations of two small and insignificant parties for that purpose.

The results of the June 2001 parliamentary elections were shocking: the NDSV won more than forty per cent of the vote and exactly half of the seats in the Bulgarian National Assembly. The result would have been an absolute majority in the parliament had it not been for several small parties which used Simeon II’s name on their ballot without his authorization – some three per cent of the vote were lost on such parties through voter confusion. All established “traditional” parties – the right-wing UDF, together with the left-wing Socialists - won less votes than Simeon II’s NDSV. The party system seemed to be the first victim of Simeon II’s arrival, which showed that it was not well established, the parties were not truly programmatic, and the political culture of the population was susceptible to fits of opportunism and populism.\textsuperscript{6}

It is justified to classify the coming of the former tsar to power as an instance of populism for the following reasons:

- He appealed to the people as a whole, without stressing the cleavages, differences and distinctions within this whole, and without assuming that there could be conflicting interest within the people, not all of which could be satisfied in the same time;
- Simeon II’s campaign portrayed the then-existing political elite as largely politically corrupt. Against this background, he presented his candidacy as the triumph of personal integrity in politics;
- Simeon was campaigning against the existing parties. For a long time after his arrival he refused to register the NDSV as a political party,\textsuperscript{7} still nurturing the idea that he was the tsar of

\textsuperscript{5}The 1991 Constitution requires that candidates for presidential office spend the five years in the country before the elections. This provision was introduced in 1991 specifically against Simeon II – ironically, it came to be applied ten years later than the original plan. In this case the Constitutional Court faithfully stuck to the plain text of the basic law, although on other occasions the CC has proven that it could interpret rather creatively constitutional provisions. For instance, several years before that the CC had returned all of the real estate property of Simeon II and his family, which amounted to millions of euro.

\textsuperscript{6}The electoral programme of NDSV looked like the manifesto of any fairy-tale hero: it sometimes defied the laws of nature, and, more often, the laws of economics. The beginning was innocent: the NDSV made it clear that it would follow the major policies of the former government, but would bring about more radical economic reforms, and would eradicate corruption, which is perceived as a major problem in Bulgaria. The heroic part started with the promise that the tsar would get things „substantially better” in the country within 800 days. One of the ways of doing so would be by simultaneously reducing the budget deficit to zero, and significantly cutting the taxes. This could have been possible if the country was to slash its welfare provisions – healthcare and education, in particular. But this was not what His Majesty’s Economic Experts had in mind – they were planning an immediate improvement of the situation of the ordinary people in Bulgaria, most of whom are heavily dependent on these anyway under-funded public services. Nor were the experts envisaging a default on the huge foreign debt payments of the country or abandoning of the tough budget restraints of the currency board: in their opinion, all their goals, contradictory as they appeared, were to be achieved simultaneously. The eradication of corrupt practices was addressed by a more plausible strategy – it would be impossible, it was argued, for a (former) tsar and all his men to dirty their hands in inappropriate activities.

\textsuperscript{7}Before the June 2001 elections Simeon indeed tried to do so, as stated above, in order to be able to compete for parliament. After he managed to send people to parliament, he refused to register a party.
all Bulgarians, not a simple party leader. Simeon II, himself, was not a member of parliament – his name was in the title of the party list but not among the party candidates;

- Simeon II’s movement was largely agnostic and indifferent towards political ideology. His main message was that the ideologies of the established political parties were already passe. In order to gain international recognition, NDSV first applied to the European People’s Party, and then (upon rejection) became a member of the European liberal parties alliance. This did not prevent Simeon II from inviting members of the ex-communist BSP in his government, like the minister of state administration Dimiter Kalchev.

- The sole source of mobilisation of the people behind Simeon II was personal – his personal charisma and historical legacy. Programme and party structure were non-existent as sources of mobilising electoral support. As to the party structure, it was already made clear that there was not sufficient time for institutionalising the movement in the country: the party list of NDSV was created in a haphazard way, little different from the lottery in its reliance on chance and formal equal opportunity for the second tier of the Bulgarian political elite, which has been left out from the patronage practices of the two major parties – the UDF and BSP. In terms of programme, Simeon II was arguing that this was an issue for the experts to decide – not an essentially political problem. For this purpose he invited young, educated Bulgarians from abroad (without any previous political experience) to become ministers in his cabinet, and to design the policies in different governmental sectors;

- In terms of political presentation and communication Simeon II stressed much more appearances than content. In terms of content he was minimalist and elusive: he spoke slowly and uttered well worn-out cliches. In terms of presentation, however, he was quite skilful in stressing the mass support and affection that he enjoyed, his non-confrontational, polite and kind political style, which was rather refreshing against the background of the rather unrefined Bulgarian political class.

- Finally, and probably most importantly, Simeon II was campaigning not on a specific coherent programme, as it was already pointed out, but on people’s expectations for what should be done. In short, he created the impression that after years of austerity measures finally there was coming the time of prosperity for everyone. The ex-tsar summed up these expectations in his promise to improve dramatically the situation in the country for 800 days.

The first wave of populism in Bulgaria, represented by the NDSV, demonstrated the electoral potential of the populist approach: for a very short period of time it managed to assemble and mobilise the people behind a charismatic leader. It must be stressed, however, that once in office the NDSV went through a complex evolution which transformed it from a populist movement into a “traditional” political party. First, after coming to power the NDSV cut back on many of the fantastical promises its leader made or suggested in the pre-election period. Ultimately, the NDSV led a government whose politics was continuous with the previous government: financial discipline and strong commitment for integration in NATO and the EU. The overall result of this was positive for the country. From the point of view of the NDSV, however, the revision of the pre-electoral promises led to a quite dramatic fall in public confidence in the movement and its leader: only two months after the June 2001 election the fall of support started to be noticed. First the movement failed to elect a president – the Socialists surprisingly won the 2001 direct presidential elections. Secondly, the rating of Simeon and the NDSV were steadily falling, reaching embarrassingly low levels for less than a year in government. In the 2005 parliamentary election the NDSV, which had already been registered formally as a political party, came second to the Socialist Party with roughly a third of its 2001 electoral result. In the 2007 EU parliamentary elections the support for the NDSV fell to a critical minimum of around six per cent, electing only one deputy to Brussels; this trend was confirmed by a very poor electoral result in the autumn 2007 local elections. Finally,
in 2009 NDSV managed to elect two candidates to the European parliament (due mainly to the appeal of EU commissioner Meglena Kuneva, who topped the party list). Most importantly, however, NDSV failed to clear the four percent electoral threshold in the July 2009 parliamentary elections and thus became an extra parliamentary party. Subsequently Simeon II stepped down as a party leader: at present, there are slim chances for survival of the NDSV in the long run.

Thus, NDSV can meaningfully be discussed as a populist actor only within the first year of its appearance on the political stage, and especially in the 2001 electoral cycle. After that the party was gradually disciplined by the Bulgarian institutional framework into a player very much resembling the parties that it had radically criticised. Ultimately, the NDSV was transformed into a relatively small traditional party with right-of-the centre, liberal orientation.

The second populist wave

Days before the 2005 presidential election the pollsters in Bulgaria were in for a big shock: out of the blue, a new political actor appeared claiming 8-9 percent of the voters’ support. Since this was so surprising, the rumour was that leading polling agencies delayed the announcement of their prognoses, because they feared the accuracy of the results. The new actor was a party organised around a TV journalist criticising the political establishment as corrupt and dangerous from the point of view of the national interests. The party was called “Ataka”, and the journalist Volen Siderov. His career trajectory had taken him to a regional cable network - TV SKAT, having a devoted following of nationalistic, anti-establishment bend. Siderov’s biography is instructive for the student of populism. In the beginning of the transition, Siderov was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper of the UDF Democracy. After that he became a journalist in one of the most influential dailies Monitor, a newspaper on the borderline between the serious press and the tabloids.

Ataka ultimately entered the Bulgarian parliament in 2005, surprisingly becoming the biggest opposition group in it (albeit for a short period of time, since the group soon after disintegrated): the other bigger parties – the BSP, the NDSV, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – formed a grand ruling coalition. The entering of Ataka in the Bulgarian parliament could be treated as an instance of populist politics and mobilisation for the following reasons:

- Ataka’s assent was a small-size replica of the assent of the NDSV to power: much of the analysis of the pre-electoral strategy of the NDSV is applicable to Ataka as well. The only difference was the nationalistic discourse and the language coming close to hate speech used by the new actor;
- Ataka was appealing to the Bulgarian people as a whole, denying the relevance of differences and cleavages embedded in the party system, and denying even the rights of ethnic minorities to political representation. Ataka was the first party in Bulgaria since the relative consolidation of Bulgarian democracy to challenge the legitimacy of the MRF (ethnic Turkish minority party in its essence). It was also the first party to use a thinly veiled racist language against the Roma minority in Bulgaria;
- The role of the personality of the leader of Ataka was undeniable. The lack of a party structure and organization was compensated for by personal charisma of a specific sort;
- The role of the media, and the TV SKAT in particular, explains much of the success of Ataka. This was the main tool of mobilization of electoral support of the organisation. SKAT is in fact a TV station which provides a forum for populist discourse. It has mainly publicist and analytical programmes, giving voice to the second, third and the lower tiers of the political and intellectual elite. Not surprisingly, the station is “anti-elitist” (meaning against the empowered
political elites), defends public morality, national interests, national integrity etc. All this is presented with a degree of popular culture, conspiracy theories, and tiny bits of high culture;  

- Ataka is not a programmatic party by any means. Its political agenda is a compilation of “expressive issues”, most of which are not translatable into concrete policy. For instance, the party stands for the revision of the results of the whole transition period, since all the transformations, it alleges, were done in an unjust way. It is not clear how such a revision could be achieved, however, short of a revolution leading to re-nationalisation of privatised assets. The party has never committed itself to such a concrete policy, however. The same is true of its position on the Roma: it is clear that the party views the Roma as the source of numerous problems, but it is not apparent what the party thinks about the solutions to these problems. Finally, the party relates immediately to symbolic issues, such as the closure of the nuclear reactors at the Kozloduy power plant, the destiny of the Bulgarian nurses in Lybia, the alleged national irresponsibility of scholars re-examining certain national myths, as the myths around the April 1876 uprising in Bulgaria, etc;

The culmination of Ataka’s political career thus far were the presidential elections in 2006 when Volen Siderov was one of the two candidates reaching the second decisive leg of the contest. There, Siderov lost to the Socialist incumbent candidate Georgi Parvanov by a very large margin – approximately 80 to 20 per cent. The situation was similar to the situation in France at the previous presidential elections when Le Pen lost to Chirac by a very large difference. In any event, coming second in the presidential election was a huge success for Ataka. It is important to stress that in order to receive this result, Ataka had to move slightly to the centre of the political spectrum, by scaling down its claims and adopting a much milder and acceptable for the general public political discourse. After the presidential election, however, the party moved back to more radical positions, influenced by its European counterparts from the alliance of right-wing extremist parties in the European parliament. One representative of the party in the EU parliament was involved in a number of racist scandals, the most notorious of which was his email insults to a Hungarian Roma deputy. At the 2007 elections for the European parliament the party did relatively well by winning 3 out of the 18 Bulgarian seats. Its support has been stabilised at a close to ten per cent of the voters, which gives it a good starting position in future elections in Bulgaria. In the autumn 2007 local elections, the party did also relatively well, by managing to form sizable groups of representatives in the local councils of a number of Bulgarian cities. In many cities its group was the third largest after the groups of GERB (see below) and the BSP.

In 2009 Ataka largely confirmed its results from previous elections: claiming around ten percent of the popular vote. It again managed to send representatives to the European parliament, and, most importantly, it succeeded in forming the fourth largest group in the Bulgarian National Assembly. Since the elections were won by GERB, which formed a minority government, Ataka became one of the staunchest supporters of this government in the assembly. In order to do this, it largely abandoned most of its radical rhetorics, and practically fully supported GERBs policy decisions. It was most revealing that Ataka dropped one of its passionately held pre-election goals: to ban the news in Turkish on the Bulgarian national TV. After GERB abandoned the idea to hold a national referendum on the issue, Ataka acquiesced to the decision of the senior coalition partner.

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8 It is very important that the network does not invest in the quality of the picture or the quality of the content of its programmes. This is probably an intentional aesthetic choice, which gives to the whole show a very “natural” air, bringing it close to reality TV and even the documentary genre. The overall effect is that it is as if “the people” express themselves in the programmes of this TV
The third populist wave

In 2007 there was another electoral shock for the political establishment in Bulgaria. At the May EU parliamentary elections a new political party – GERB – led by the popular mayor of Sofia Boiko Borisov won most of the votes. In the local elections in the autumn of 2007, GERB came out as the first political force in the country: 80,000 people more voted for the party-lists of GERB compared to the voters for the candidates of the Socialists. In circumstances of low turnout, this was a meaningful difference, although admittedly small in absolute terms.

GERB’s main resource was the personal charisma and appeal of its leader. The party was registered and set up only in 2006, reflecting the political ambitions of its leader to convert his general popularity into representation at the national level. Borisov, very much like Siderov, was member of the second tier of the political elite. His career started inconspicuously: during much of the 1990s he was a businessman of a specific, highly symbolic for Bulgaria type: the boss of a private security firm. These organizations were typical for the fledging private enforcement business, which was dangerously close both to the state security structures (police, secret services, etc.) and the criminal underworld. In such a context, Borisov could hardly avoid, even if he tried, contacts with people connected in the popular imagination with the “organized crime” and the “political mafia”. Therefore, his political CV, as composed by the public consciousness, starts with allegations for illegitimate, suspicious, and improper connections. His visual image also feeds such public perceptions as far as Borisov has espoused (consciously or not) the aesthetics of the good and reformed criminal: no hair, no glasses, always slightly unshaven beard, short and expressive speech in the idiom of the street, leather jackets, athletic looks, etc.

The first fact, which brought Borisov to the attention of the public, however, was that he was the bodyguard of the former communist leader Todor Zhivkov, while he was tried for crimes committed during his long stay at the helm of the totalitarian regime. Borisov’s career took off as late as the end of the 1990s, when he became the official bodyguard of Simeon II. This royal appointment elevated Borisov to the heights of politics, although this did not happen immediately. First, he became the head of the police under the government of the NDSV. In 2005 he ran as a candidate for parliament of the NDSV, and won a seat in parliament. He declined to leave the police for the parliament, however, and stayed on under the coalition government of the BSP, NDSV, and MRF. This did not last for long since in 2006 Borisov decided to run for the mayor of Sofia – elections which he won without a great difficulty. Borisov’s public ratings have been extremely high since 2002-2003, but it was only in 2005-2006 when he converted these ratings into political support. Borisov’s party GERB (abbreviation from Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria but also meaning “heraldic sign”, “coat of arms” in Bulgarian) became an electoral force only in 2007, although it remained outsied of parliament until 2009.

The parliamentary elections in Bulgaria on July 5, 2009 confirmed the already existing trend of diminishing of the electoral strength and appeal of the so-called „traditional” parties, identifying themselves along the left-right political spectrum: te BSP and the UDF (and its split-offs). As of November 2009, these „traditional” parties together enjoy the support of less than 20 % of the population. Most of the rest of the Bulgarian citizens express preference for new political players, who campaign mainly along two issues: the fight against corruption and mild nationalism. Since 2001, these new players have proven increasingly successful.

In line with this trend, in July 2009, the clear winner of the parliamentary elections was the political party GERB, which took 116 out of the 240 seats in the Bulgarian National Assembly.
Second came the incumbent BSP with 40 seats, which was more than twice less than what they had in 2005. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms – a regional party representing mostly the Bulgarian Turks - was the only party of the triple ruling coalition (BSP, MRF and NDSV), which was able to stabilise and even slightly increase its performance in comparison with 2005. In contrast, the party of the former tsar Simeon II – NDSV – failed to clear the 4% electoral threshold and remained outside of the parliament; this was a dramatic development having in mind that this party had won 40% of the vote of Bulgarians in the 2001 parliamentary elections. Of particular importance was the fact that most of the remaining vote went to populist and nationalist parties such as Ataka, „Order, Law and Justice“, and Leader, the first two of which got over the 4% electoral threshold. („Order, Law and Justice” itself is a new populist player: here it will not be discussed separately since much of what has been said for GERB and Ataka is relevant for it as well: it is a smaller party than these two, and mimics their development).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Percentage of the total vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Order, Law and Justice</td>
<td>174582</td>
<td>4.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>137795</td>
<td>3.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GERB</td>
<td>1678641</td>
<td>39.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)</td>
<td>610521</td>
<td>14.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATAKA</td>
<td>395733</td>
<td>9.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition for Bulgaria (BSP)</td>
<td>748147</td>
<td>17.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Coalition (UDF and Democrats for Strong Bulgaria)</td>
<td>285662</td>
<td>6.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the elections, GERB formed a minority single-party government, which relies on the support of Ataka and the Blue coalition. At first, the new populist player „Law, Order and Justice“ (LOJ) also supported the governing party, but after a few months the parliamentary faction of LOJ fell apart, and the remaining deputies started to pursue oppositionary course.

The reasons for categorising Borisov as a leader using populist strategies (and GERB as essentially a populist party) are the following:

- Borisov speaks directly to the Bulgarian people. Much of his success could be attributed to his ability to speak to the ordinary people, to look like many of them, and to articulate what they commonly think about complex governmental matters;
- Electoral success and mobilisation are to be attributed largely to personality factors, not programmatic issues. Borisov consciously attempts to present his party as a right-of-the-centre-party, but in terms of programme and policy, Borisov has been always elusive, using “symbolic issues” very much in Siderov’s manner. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ataka and Gerb are not seen as direct enemies, and that they have come to certain common positions on symbolic issues, such as the Kozloduy nuclear power plant, for instance;
- Borisov is to a large extent a product not of party life and party politics, but of media presentation. He has an extremely fine sense for PR matters and manages always to be in the focus of media attention. His use of street jargon in a relatively delicate manner and with a fine sense of humour makes him one of the media favourites;

Much of the analysis of Simeon II and Siderov could be applied to Borisov as well. He is much less aristocratic and more down-to-earth than Simeon, while being less nationalistic and fanatical than Siderov. From this perspective, Borisov presents a new stage of the fine-tuning of Bulgarian populist sentiments: it is spicier than the ex-tsar, but does not scare the people as
much as Siderov does. These simple reasons probably account for the electoral success of the new popular hero. Nevertheless, he should be treated as part of the same phenomenon, the features of which could be summed up as follows:

- Disintegration of the traditional, ideological, programmatic parties;
- Loss of the mobilisation force of ideological and programmatic coherence, and party loyalty in elections;
- Rising value of personal charisma, expressivist and aesthetic techniques of popular mobilisation;
- Appeal to the people as a whole, and treating their acclamation and support as the ultimate legitimisation in politics, trumping issues such as individual and minority rights, international conditionalities, etc;
- Heavy reliance on the public media, as a substitute of party structure in political mobilisation.

These are the contours of the “populist condition” in Bulgaria, which we set out to explore in more detail in this paper.

2. **Populists in power: analysis**

In order to examine the impact of populists in power below I will review to what extent they have introduced important policy changes or changes in the decision making process at the political level. As said above, the room for substantive differences among the main political parties in Bulgaria, especially in the socio-economic field, are not that great. There are serious constraints which all governing parties need to take into account. It will be instructive to review briefly these constraints, and to examine to what extent populists in power have observed them or not.

**Economic constraints:**

Economic policy was largely a discretionary area for the government until 1996 in Bulgaria. During these first transitional years, the Bulgarian Socialist Party was willing to engage in economic experimentation: it delayed the privatisation process, loosened financial discipline for the financing of loss-making state owned enterprises, etc. As a result, the financial situation in the country drastically deteriorated at the end of 1996, and the banking system virtually collapsed. In order to tackle hyperinflation, and to restore the trust in the banking system, the Bulgarian government established the so-called “Currency board” (currency council), which fixed the rate of the Bulgarian Lev to the rate of the Euro (the Deutsche Mark originally). This was the first significant constraint on discretion in the area of the economy, which deprived the government from the right to alter the exchange rate of the Bulgarian currency. The second major constraint was the conclusion of various agreements with the IMF and the World Bank, which provided for loans in return for fast reforms in the area of privatisation and the improvement of the functioning of the administrative apparatus. All of these limited significantly the room for the designing of radically different economic policies. Gradually, the two main parties – the UDF, and more significantly the Socialists – recognised these constraints as fully legitimate. This recognition, however, brought their economic programmes very close together, and made them virtually indistinguishable after 1997.

Populists in government have largely observed these neoliberal economic constraints very closely. First, NDSV in 2001-2009 pursued a course of strict fiscal discipline, budgetary surpluses and stability of the currency board. Simeon II invited London City bankers for his economic team: his finance minister Milen Velchev is still considered as one of the exponents of neoliberal economic style of policy. GERB actually copied the tsarist policies in the area: Borisov invited a World Bank economist – Simeon Dzankov – to become finance minister.
Djankov has made the joining of the Euro and the balanced budget a top priority of his politics, even in circumstances of a serious economic downturn. Thus, in this important area of economic politics, populists have opted for continuity with previous governments. Their impact in terms of change and innovation has been minimal thus far.

**Political constraints:**

The accession of Bulgaria to EU and NATO imposed a virtual “political board” on the Bulgarian government. It had to report regularly to the EU Commission on progress in agreed upon reforms, as well as to coordinate its foreign policy with EU and NATO partners. The room for independent initiatives was decidedly decreasing, although of course it could not be fully eliminated. For instance, although the Bulgarian population was as a whole against the intervention of NATO against Milosevic’s regime, the Kostov UDF government gave permission to NATO for the use of Bulgarian air space for attacks against Yugoslavia: the only act of defiance was the refusal to accept Albanian refugees in Bulgaria.

In the area of substantive reforms of the administration and the judiciary, the influence of the EU Commission was very strong: a fact which has been well studied and documented. The overall result of the monitoring and the conditionalities was by and large positive from the point of view of liberal democracy and its entrenchment in Bulgaria. For our purposes it is important to note that this monitoring and the imposition of the conditions by foreign partners brought the programmes of the mainstream parties close to each other even further: simplistically put, they had to agree to follow strategies elaborated together with foreign partners.

The presence of NDSV, Ataka, and GERB have not made a big difference vis-a-vis these political constraints. Both GERB and NDSV are fully supporting closer European integration and rely substantially on the support of European partners in domestic politics (respectively the EPP and the European liberals). Both of these parties are also for loyal and active Bulgarian membership in NATO – Bulgaria participated with soldiers in both the Iraq and Afganistan operation of western partners. Upon its coming to power in 2009, GERB has signaled its willingness to revise some major Russian projects in the Bulgarian economy: the plan to build a second nuclear power station at Belene, and two pipelines (Southern Stream and Bourgas-Alexandroupolis). In contrast with the Socialists, GERB advocates a more restrained approach in the economic relations with Russia, which is in line with the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country.

Ataka has been rhetorically most opposed to the political constraints. The party joined a Euroskeptic faction in the EU parliament in 2007, and in the period 2007-2009 seemed to develop in a general Euroskeptic position, staunchly supporting Russian nuclear power projects in Bulgaria, and closer ties with Russia in general. All this ended abruptly when Ataka started to support the GERB government in July 2009. Since then Ataka has avoided all Euroskeptic speech or action, and has followed the lead of GERB vis-a-vis the energy projects. Thus, it could be concluded that upon coming to power, the populist players have largely observed the political constraints applicable to the other parties, even at the cost of serious change in rhetoric, as in the case of Ataka.

**Judicial constraints:**

The Bulgarian Constitutional Court and the Bulgarian judiciary have asserted themselves strongly during the transition period. During the 1990s, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court managed to “bracket out” from political competition at least four main areas: restitution of agricultural land, restitution of urban property, judicial independence, and independence of the
public electronic media. In all these four areas there was significant political disagreement. In the first two, the disagreement was between the left and the right: the BSP and the UDF. The Socialists opposed the restitution of property nationalised by the communist regime, and instead, introduced a scheme of compensation for the assets with state bonds. The UDF, with the decisive help of the CC in this regard, prevailed: the principle of full restitution for nationalised assets was promoted to the rank of a constitutional principle.

Regarding the independence of the judiciary and the media, the political dividing line ran not so much between left and right, but between government and the opposition: throughout the 1990s, Bulgarian governments had tried to assert their influence in these areas. Here again the CC was quite instrumental in curbing these attempts.

Since the beginning of the new century, the CC has focused predominantly on the issue of judicial independence, interpreting this principle to prevent the possibility of any major reform of the judicial system. This has brought the Court as a whole in conflict with the political establishment: most of the parties at the present moment would go for more radical reforms than the CC would be willing to permit. In any event, however, the constitutionalization of a very strict conception of non-interference with the judicial system has further decreased the possibilities for radically different ideas of judicial reform—a policy area which became central in the period 2001-2007.

International courts, and especially the ECtHR, have had a similar impact on the Bulgarian political process, although much more limited. One issue which comes to mind is the legitimacy of ethnic minority parties. The pressure of the Council of Europe and its bodies was key for the legitimisation of the Movement of Rights and Freedoms, which is generally an ethnic minority party. Without the existence of such foreign standards, this legitimisation would have been more difficult (all this does not mean that the ECHR standards of political freedom are fully applied in Bulgaria).

The advent of populist players to power has not affected these judicial constraints on politics. NDSV has not made difference at all. GERB and Ataka have adopted a more confrontational course against the Bulgarian judiciary since 2009. Borisov and his deputy prime minister Tzvetanov have often attacked the Bulgarian judiciary as corrupt, inefficient and excessive lenient to alleged criminals. It is important to note that this rhetorical pressure has not through with actions. For instance, despite their criticisms, GERB have not attempted to interfere with the personnel policies of the judiciary carried out by the Supreme Judicial Council. Neither have GERB or Ataka suggested that they would disregard judicial decisions. All this supports the conclusion that populists have generally observed judicial constraints despite their pre-election rhetoric.

Mainstreaming nationalism I – electoral competition and voting rights

A major impact of the advent of populism in Bulgarian politics has been the mainstreaming of nationalism of a specific moderate type. In the 1990s the overtones of Bulgarian politics have been much more liberal: no one had seriously challenged the ideas of ethnic tolerance, de facto minority rights, etc. Since 2001, and especially with the emergence of Ataka and GERB, the „liberal consensus” of the 1990s has started to unravel. Most dramatic has been the change in rhetoric. But apart from this change, there have been important policy changes as well. Since these changes have been subtle rather than abrupt,
here I offer a short case study of one especially contentious policy area: the voting rights of Bulgarian Turks having Bulgarian passports but living in Turkey.

In the 1980s, the then communist regime of Bulgaria adopted a policy towards the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, according to which Bulgarians with Turkish origin were forced to adopt Slavic names. This led to a great wave of emigration back to Turkey in 1989. After the one-party system collapsed in 1989, many reclaimed their Bulgarian citizenship, but only some of them resettled in Bulgaria, while others who regained Bulgarian passports preferred to remain in Turkey.

According to official migration statistics, Turkish migrants with dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship form a community of around 380,000 people. Under the 1998 citizenship law, these migrants have the right to regain their Bulgarian citizenship while keeping their Turkish citizenship. As dual citizens, they develop and share dual loyalty, rights and obligations (Özgür-Baklacioglu 2006: 322).

The rise of populism in Bulgaria meant that the voting rights of Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin who are resident in Turkey came increasingly under attack. These rights are the same as those of other citizens; that is, they can participate in parliamentary, presidential, local and EP elections in Bulgaria. Debates about these voting rights arose first in the 1990s. Thus, on the eve of parliamentary elections in December 1994, the possibility of significant support for the MRF by Bulgarian Turkish voters in Turkey was strongly debated in the Bulgarian media. MRF supporters were estimated at 150,000 eligible voters. The main question was whether citizens with dual citizenship who were not resident in Bulgaria had the right to influence Bulgarian internal politics. However, this debate was not revived in the 1997 parliamentary elections when Bulgarians had much more serious crises to deal with, such as trying to survive after the economic crisis of 1996.

During all general elections held in the past fifteen years, the interested parties (specifically the MRF) have mobilized large numbers of Bulgarian Turks with voting rights who reside permanently in Turkey to vote either in polling stations in Turkey (in over 70 locations in 2005) or to be transported by bus to Bulgaria to cast their votes there.9 Bus transportation has been widely available during municipal elections in Bulgaria. In the June 2001 parliamentary election, the MRF received 38,840 of the 50,000 votes cast in Turkey. In this way, the votes of the dual citizens living in Turkey helped elect three MRF members to the Bulgarian Parliament (it needs to be noted, however, that dual citizens have neither a special representation quota nor specially designated MPs as their representatives). The local elections in 2003 showed similar results, when dual citizens contributed to MRF electoral victories in twelve municipalities as well as the election of 695 local municipality council members and advisors.

Protests against the voting rights for dual citizens have been expressed by political parties, public opinion as well as some scholars (e.g. Boyadjiev 1996).10 In 2007, however, these

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9 Some Bulgarian elections have coincided with major Muslim holidays, in order to make the ‘electoral tourism’ possible.
10 In 2006, the radical nationalist party Ataka proposed amendments to the 1998 Law on Bulgarian Citizenship. These amendments were meant to eliminate dual citizenship. The party proposed that a Bulgarian citizen cannot be a citizen of another country, with the exception of citizens of Bulgarian ethnic origin and Bulgarian culture. These privileges would be confined to persons living permanently in neighbouring regions in Greece,
protests escalated into a campaign by all of the opposition parties, in which individual members of the ruling majority also took part (including the BSP chairman of parliament who in a crucial vote on some of the debated residence requirements, sided with the opposition).

The conflict over the voting rights for dual citizens emerged in relation to the first European Parliament elections in May 2007. The question was whether the National Assembly should introduce specific residence requirements for voters in European Parliamentary elections, which would disqualify the Bulgarian Turks living in Turkey. The opposition parties (Ataka and GERB among them) proposed these requirements, which soon gained widespread public support. According to a study by the Alpha Research Agency, public opinion in Bulgaria was clear with some 78.7 per cent of all Bulgarians supporting residency requirements in these elections. Such a high rate of popular approval is comparatively rare in Bulgarian politics. The sole opponents of the new regulation were supporters of the MRF.\(^{11}\)

In the ensuing heated parliamentary debates some members of the opposition even argued that MEPs elected with the help of Bulgarian voters in Turkey would in fact represent Turkey rather than Bulgaria. After four hours of debate over the controversial text, 80 opposition MPs walked out of the plenary hall. Ultimately, the ruling coalition allowed all citizens to be enfranchised regardless of where they resided. In the subsequent election, the MRF did exceptionally well and came in third with 20.26 per cent, just behind GERB (a centre-right populist party) with 21.68 per cent and the BSP with 21.41 per cent. The MRF received a total of 392,650 votes.

In the following local elections of 2007, attempts to introduce the residency requirements succeeded initially, but were then dramatically watered down through various legal technicalities, which made it possible to claim residency only on the basis of a permanent address registered on one’s identity card, which virtually all people have, even if they live abroad. Thus, the practice of ‘electoral tourism’ continued unabated.

It is important to note, however, that the MRF is gradually losing the public debate on residency requirements, and if they were to join the opposition, a reversal of policy is very probable. What is striking in the emerging dominant public opinion is the lack of a principled vision of citizenship. Some who support the denial of voting rights argue that this measure will eliminate possibilities for vote-buying and electoral fraud; others see it as a punishment for the ‘corrupt’ MRF; while still others try to argue that only taxpayers should have political rights; and last, but not least, are the Ataka supporters, who believe that ethnic Bulgarians should be privileged in terms of political rights. This cacophony of angry voices is the mark of populist mobilisation.

The angry voices received a new chance for expression during the 2009 electoral cycle. Two elections took place in the country in June and July: the first one for the European Parliament, and the second one for the national parliament. As mentioned above, the newcomer

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Macedonia, Serbia and Romania, and also including Bessarabian Bulgarians. The Bulgarian Parliament rejected the proposal with nineteen votes ‘for’, 78 ‘against’ and 26 abstentions (Telegraph, 8 June 2007).

GERB emerged as the biggest Bulgarian party after these two elections, while the triumvirate of BSP, MRF and NDSV lost most of its supporters. NDSV failed to enter the parliament, BSP’s representation was reduced by more than 50%, and only the MRF preserved and even slightly increased its representatives. For our purposes, it is important to mention that residency requirements – effectively preventing from voting citizens residing outside Bulgaria in countries not members of the EU - were introduced for the European Parliament elections, but not for the national one. Thus, Bulgarians living abroad could vote only for the National Assembly, and they did this massively. There were long queues in front of Bulgarian embassies in all major world capitals on July 5. Most of the votes from abroad came from Turkey, however. According to the official data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some 89,071 Bulgarian citizens living in Turkey took part in the parliamentary elections, as most of them voted for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Against a background of 153,154 foreign votes altogether, this result showed that the MRF was the major beneficiary of the voting-abroad procedure. In comparison, in the European Parliament Elections in June 2009 only around 12,000 votes were cast abroad, due to residency requirements limiting voting only to Bulgarians residing in the EU countries: the biggest beneficiary was GERB, followed closely by MRF.

These results reignited the campaign against voting abroad. This time, the Bulgarian electorate in Turkey became the primary target, and the validity of the elections in the polling stations in Turkey was challenged before the Constitutional Court. All in all, however, the campaign illustrates the growing mobilisation power of moderate nationalism in Bulgarian politics. It is true that all parties are careful to distinguish between campaigning against MRF and campaigning against the Bulgarian Turks. All of the parties make it clear that they are against MRF (with the qualified exception of the BSP). Yet, there is a thin line between political correctness and political hypocrisy, which is not always visible for the public at large. Generally, the consolidation of most of the ethnic Bulgarian parties against the MRF has legitimised moderate nationalism in mainstream political discourse.

**Mainstreaming of nationalism II – citizenship politics:**

The 2009 parliamentary elections added a new twist to the debates on citizenship and immigration. The winner of the elections - GERB, which formed a minority government supported by most of the other parties in parliament with the exception of the BSP and MRF. The incorporation of nationalism in mainstream politics was well illustrated by the fact that the radical nationalist party Ataka also supported the new government. A further illustration of this phenomenon was the nomination of professor Bozhidar Dimitrov for Minister without portfolio responsible for the Bulgarians living abroad. Professor Dimitrov is a well-known Bulgarian nationalist, who is an active participant in the symbolic warfare between Bulgaria and Macedonia. His publicly expressed position (in books, TV programmes, etc.) is that the Macedonian nation and language are artificial and therefore non-viable products, whose main rationale was to separate Bulgaria into two parts. As a historian of prominence, Dimitrov has significant following in Bulgaria, and his statements are often commented by the media in Sofia and Skopje. His appointment as a minister was a move which was greeted by many in Bulgaria but scandalised the liberal establishment in the country. It is too early to tell whether there will be any tangible policy results from this curious appointment: most likely it was simply a side-effect of the electoral campaign, where Dimitrov was used by Borisov to rally the nationalist voters. Yet, Dimitrov has often expressed views that ethnic Bulgarians living in the neighbouring countries should become Bulgarian citizens quickly and in big numbers. These policies are now being turned into specific policies through changes into the citizenship law.
How consequential these changes will be remains to be seen, but an active policy stance against the problem of Bulgarians living abroad is a policy change, which can be attributed to the coming of populist parties to power.

The primacy of anticorruption and the fight for law and order:

Finally, an important impact of populists in power has been the primacy of anticorruption policy and the fight against crime in the setting of governmental agenda. Simeon II and NDSV were the first to recognize these as top governmental priorities, and since then all governments have followed this pattern. Especially evident is it in the GERB government, whose popularity crucially depends on its anticorruption stance. For this purpose Borisov appointed his closest associate Tzvetanov as minister of interior and deputy prime minister. Since July 2009 Tzvetanov has organized a number of very successful operations against high-profile (alleged) criminals (court proceedings are still pending). According to polls, these operations are the key reasons for the relatively high ratings of the GERB government around a year in office.

It is important to note that there has been an evolution of policy in this area. In the period 2001-2009 governments relied mainly on institutional and legislative reforms coordinated with the EU Commission. Thus, various anticorruption acts, strategies and action plans had been elaborated, a centralized agency was set up in 2008 (DANS – the State Agency on National Security). Instead of relying on such a strategy, the GERB government resorted to a succession of high profile operations against public figures with dubious reputation. The effect of these campaigns is yet to be assessed, since they are ongoing at the time of writing. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the success of the GERB government is crucially dependent on similar operations. If they finally fail in court, the popularity of this government will be undermined, given the worsening of the economic situation in the country.

Conclusions

The paper has analysed the phenomenon of new populism in its Central European context with a special focus on the case of Bulgaria. The main conclusion from the Bulgarian case study has been that the impact of populists in power has been most significant in two areas: the mainstreaming of moderate nationalism, and the prioritising of anticorruption and the fight against crime in governmental agenda. Populism has had surprisingly marginal effect on other policy areas, including the socio-economic field and foreign relations (including EU matters). This experience is not idiosyncratic: the author believes that similar conclusions could be drawn for countries such as Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and others.

The paper has briefly explored the internal coherence of the concept of populism as applied in the Eastern European context, the origins of the phenomenon, the conditions for its development, as well as the reasons for its different manifestations. Several theses have been advanced in the course of the analysis. Firstly, at the conceptual level, new populism must be distinguished from “radicalism” and “extremism”. Although there are “softer” and “harder” versions of populism, what defines populism is not its radicalism or extremism, but its specific form of justification of political action: the strict adherence to and reflection of the will of „the people” understood as an identifiable homogeneous whole. The Central European experience shows that the dividing line between the “soft” and “hard” versions of populism is fluid: there is a tendency of populists to radicalise before elections, and to „soften” afterwards, especially if they are represented in parliament, and/or are part of governing coalitions. This tendency could be reversed in some cases, however, as the experience of the Kaczynski brothers in Poland suggests.
Secondly, the paper has argued that new populism is not a temporary post-EU accession phenomenon. There are more lasting constraints on politics and other general conditions, which contribute to the rise of populists. The traditional liberal-democratic parties lose their privileged place, and face increasingly tough electoral competition from new comers. This is partly explained by the diminishing value of the two main resources of these parties: the socio-economic ideologies of the „left” and „right”, and the stable and disciplined party organisation. On the one hand, globalisation limits dramatically the discretion of national governments in the socio-economic field; on the other hand, the development of new media and means of communication lowers the value of party discipline and hierarchical organisation for the purposes of electoral mobilisation. As a result of this, politics moves more and more from the socio-economic field, into the fields of identity, personal integrity and media (virtual) representation. These processes give an edge to populist new comers as compared to established „programmatic” parties. Although the Bulgarian case is somewhat extreme in terms of the strength and the number of populist newcomers, such pressures exist elsewhere in the region as well, and it depends on electoral and constitutional rules whether these pressures lead to creation of new populist players (like in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia) or in the mainstreaming of populist themes by „establishes parties” (as the Hungarian case suggests).