Populism from Below in the Balkans

Introduction

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Introduction: Populism from below in the Balkans

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Introduction

The last several years have witnessed a so-called “political earthquake”1 of populist successes in consolidated democracies throughout Europe. Populist movements and parties have manifested themselves most markedly through right-wing agendas including opposition to modernization, globalization, regional integration, immigration, appeals to working class fears of social decline, and resentment of elites. Consequently an entire body of literature has examined the basic tenets of populism, populist strategies and rhetoric, determinants of its success, and its effects on people, parties, and polities.2 Much of the social research on the issue however, both historical and contemporary, has been excessively focused on populism among elites and institutions. By applying a relatively narrow methodological approach, most of the existing literature is leaving the agency of individuals and social groups and their representation largely unproblematized. In this special edition, we thus attempt to draw attention to an issue generally overlooked by researchers: populism from below.3

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Introduction: Populism from below in the Balkans

The special issue is a selection of research papers presented at the workshop “The Sources of Populism in the Balkans” organized by the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Zagreb in Marija Bistrica, Croatia in late 2014. The rationale of the workshop was to explore the socio-economic concerns of social groups usually associated with populism and extremism. Rather than assuming that these social groups (e.g. “transition losers”, veterans, refugees, the poor and unemployed, etc.) are easily or automatically mobilized to join nationalist groups or support populist parties, it sought to illuminate the fears and grievances of these groups and how they can or do not respond to populist politics. The workshop’s rationale followed the assumption that the “common sense” categories and claims made in the public sphere regarding these aforementioned social groups may not have a strong empirical basis and can be at odds with what researchers actually encounter in the field.

This special issue aims to present some of the workshop’s results and thus seeks to make a contribution by challenging the assumed link between these groups and their representatives (elected or self-appointed, political, activist or scholarly). In the introduction, we set out to revisit the theoretical debates prevalent at the workshop and to offer an empirical outline of the special issue. Below, we first document the rise of populism across Europe and in the Western Balkans in particular. We lay out the basic features of populism, as well as the current state of the literature and most relevant debates. Next, we overview the literature on what are known to be the sources of populism, including both theoretical and empirical studies on these sources, and well as the effects or “why should we care” about the rise of populist movements. Finally, we lay out the contribution of this special issue and the individual articles, highlighting the need to pay more empirical attention to social groups typically associated with populist movements.

Theoretical approaches towards populism

Defining populism is an almost impossible task. Labeled “easier to recognize than to define”⁴ and “you know it when you see it”,⁵ it has been used in a multitude of ways: as an ideology, pathological form, political movement, discursive style, political strategy, or simply, a way of imagining the world.⁶ As an ideology, it has been defined as “thin-centered”⁷ and as such combinable with other ideologies such as socialism or nationalism,⁸ while dividing society into two groups: the people vs. the elite; whereas politics are expected to be an expression of the will of the people.⁹ As a political strategy, it rests upon the personalistic leader who relies upon and bases his/her rule on a power

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⁵ Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 483.
⁶ See Gidron and Bonikowski, Varieties of Populism, 5-14.
⁸ Taguieff, Political Science Confronts Populism, 43.
capability over large numbers of people. As a discursive style, it is unrelated to ideology: a form of political expression, in Kazin’s terms, “a language used by those who claim to speak for the majority […] who work hard and love their country.” Due to the ambiguity, absence of core values and chameleonic features, it is more helpful to define the distinguishing features or ideal-types of populism or populist politics. Drawing from the vast literature on populism and the various ideal-types proposed by scholars of populism, we define the following distinguishing features:

1. Animosity towards elites and representative politics; and specifically the relationship and communication between “the elite” and “the people”
2. Idealization of “the people” and an idealized “heartland”
3. Absence of an ideological center and core values; “empty heart”
4. Charismatic leadership combined with demagogy and opportunism; “cheap talk”
5. A sense of acute crisis or threat to the particular group, or to society in general.

First, populists reject the “cartel-like power of entrenched political elites”, those responsible for the status quo – for loss of national sovereignty, the threat of immigrants, slow material benefits of reforms, etc. In particular, political elites are seen as corrupting the link between leaders and supporters, and placing their interests above the interests of the people. In addition to the elite not belonging in this relationship, marginal groups and “undeserving minorities” also do not belong, such as racial minorities and Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. The relationship between “the elite” and “the people” is also envisioned differently. Instead of institutions mediating representative democracy through complex processes, or the horizontal guarantees of constitutionalism, populists would have a “direct and unmediated” relationship between the people and the leader, wherein the leader reaches voters directly and provides a perceived way of by-passing non-working intermediary institutions and organizations. This populist incentive to “cut out the middleman” and eliminate the need for parties to act as intermediaries between citizens and politicians has also been called “direct representative democracy”, highlighting the critical distinction between “the leader correctly

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12 Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 276.
16 Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 485.
discerns what we think”, and not “the leader automatically gets it right because he is like us”.19

Second, the idealized conception of the community populists serve includes two parts: the so-called heartland, and as a derivative consequence of being committed to a heartland, an idealized notion of “the people”. Taggart argues that the heartland is retrospectively constructed from the past: “a past-derived vision projected onto the present as that which has been lost. [...] The essence of the heartland is that it is the good life but that, unlike utopias, it is a life that has already been lived and so shown to be feasible. It assumes or asserts that there was a good life before the corruptions and distortions of the present.”20 As an extension of the heartland, the “people” are seen as pure, authentic, and free of internal conflict.21 Though they frequently refer to certain class segment, for instance,22 they do not necessarily refer to any existing group of people: people in the populist propaganda are neither real nor all-inclusive, but are a mythical and constructed sub-set of the population, as with the nation for nationalists.23 Populists claim to speak in the name of the “oppressed people”; and emancipate them by making them aware of their oppression – people’s common sense (consciousness of the people) is the basis of all good. Within the people, there cannot be a legitimate opposition, as there is only the people and illegitimate intruders; and there is only one proper common good for the authentic people.24

Third, populism lacks a coherent agenda, or core values; the so-called “empty heart” of populism, which are both its weakness and potential ubiquity.25 Because populism is pitted against elites and institutions, and these vary, the nature of populism varies as well; the attributes of the context mirror into the form populism will take. Indeed, this is also why populism can swing ideologically from the left to the right. Populist goals are more procedural and less programmatic: “a change of who is in power, however power in wielded, and for whom”,26 and as such, populist politicians tend to focus attention on concrete issues without worrying about whether they present a coherent program. In this sense, they are moralistic rather than pragmatic.27 Since the emphasis is on some moral common good, which supposedly clearly stems from common sense and thus a clear policy solution, populism is often associated with over-simplification of policy challenges.28

Associated with this chameleonic nature of populism, populist movements typically involve charismatic leadership based on demagogy, opportunism, and

19 Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 486.
20 Taggart, Populism and Representative Politics, 274.
21 Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 485-8.
23 Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist, 546.
24 Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 489.
25 Taggart, Populism and Representative Politics, 269-70.
26 Jones, Populism in Europe, 38.
28 Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 486.
“cheap talk”. This combines two main features: anti-intellectualism: people know what they want better than distant elites; and hyper-personalization of the movement through a charismatic leader.\textsuperscript{29} Leaders rely on the potency of their charisma to secure voters and support, solidifying their positions with basic party elements and clientelism.\textsuperscript{30} As traditional political parties are absent as an intermediary, they have lower transaction costs for promoting their own interests through electoral and other political means.\textsuperscript{31} The leader then engages in demagogy, opportunism, and “cheap talk”: opportunistic discourse and policies (like lowering taxes before elections), “highly emotional and simplistic discourse that is directed at the ‘gut feelings’ of the people”, and promises of resolving modern political problems with simple solutions.\textsuperscript{32}

Finally, there is an explicit need for crisis, rendering populist movements most likely to mobilize in times of rapid social, economic, or cultural change or crisis.\textsuperscript{33} The crisis, which usually originates from a sense of moral decay, spreads into a critique of politics, justifying the conversion of ordinary reluctantly-political citizens into politicians as well as allowing populists to inject urgency and importance into their message.\textsuperscript{34}

**Identifying the sources of populism**

When examining the sources of populism, the proposed explanations are vast, as reviewed below. Conclusions differ on whether the authors see populism as a symptom of problems (such as a declining economic situation, increased immigration, etc.), whether populism is seen as a part of the problem, or as an outcome of a particular political climate.\textsuperscript{35} The sources of the rise in populism in general are broadly attributed to social inequality and perceived failure of current political administrations in curing the ailments of the country,\textsuperscript{36} and generally come down to a similar narrative: people are discontent with the current political and economic situation, support and trust in democratic governments, old mainstream parties, and general trust in democratic institutions decreases, leading to a proliferation of smaller parties and open space for new generations of populist politicians.\textsuperscript{37} However, disentangling all of the sources – the socio-economic context, institutional preconditions, as well as individual predisposition, is a harder task.

Institutionally, opportunities for entrepreneurship in politics are now greater than they were previously and political parties are organizationally weaker

\textsuperscript{29} Taguieff, Political Science Confronts Populism, 33.
\textsuperscript{30} Weyland, Clarifying a Contested Concept, 14.
\textsuperscript{31} Gurov, Boris and Emilia Zankina. 2013. Populism and the Construction of Political Charisma. Problems of Post-Communism 60(1), 3-17, 3.
\textsuperscript{32} Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist, 543.
\textsuperscript{34} Taggart, Populism and Representative Politics, 275.
\textsuperscript{35} Gurov and Zankina, Populism and the Construction of Political Charisma, 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Bissell, The Rise of Leftist Populism, 78.
\textsuperscript{37} Ropp, The strategic implications, 8.
and less in control over their electorate: old/traditional political parties no longer seem relevant, civic engagement is lower than in previous decades, and there is less of a cost for voters to change their allegiance from one election to the next, using their vote as a message to the political class as a whole. In turn, populists take advantage of this weak attachment to parties and can mobilize voters more easily given the right opportunity. The increased dissatisfaction with politics is amplified by right wing level discourse at the elite level.

The main question here becomes why masses would support populist parties in general, and radical populist parties (RPPs) in particular, and who are the people most likely to vote for populist parties? While links have been established between low socio-economic status and support for RPPs, as well as a higher likelihood the voters are male than female, Müller concludes that “there is no clear-cut class or social base for populism”. Some RPP voters tend to be authoritarian in nature, preferring an ordered society, and in general hold more nativist/exclusive nationalist views. They are generally dissatisfied with politics in general, strongly Eurosceptic, and against immigration and EU integration. In this sense, the decision to vote for radical populist parties is not simply a “protest vote” – it is based on agreement with the (perceived) politics of the party and represents a rational decision to support a party ideologically close to one’s own viewpoints on politics.

Implicit in our worry about the sources of populism is the assumption that populism is indeed something to worry about. Many recent studies have provided insights on the determinants of success of populist politicians, the determinants of success or failure of populist parties, as well as the demonstrated or predicted effect of populist politics on everyday people, on parties, and the polity. Conclusions of these studies have ranged from alarmist warnings that populists threaten a possibility of collapse of European party systems and present a fundamental challenge to European democracy to less

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38 Jones, Populism in Europe, 40-2.
40 Müller, The People Must Be Extracted, 485.
43 Van der Brug et al, Why some anti-immigrant parties fail and others succeed.
44 Rooduijn, Matthijs. 2015. The Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe. European View 14, 3-11, 6.
46 Jones, Populism in Europe, 38.
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concern given the nature and inherent pitfalls of populist parties. On the complacency end of the spectrum, studies emphasize the limited potential of populist mobilization: its fragmentary, self-limiting, reluctantly political and anti-establishment nature, make it episodic at best and with limited potential; while on the alarmist end of the spectrum, electoral success is not considered as important as the danger of populist parties to set the tone of the debate, forcing mainstream parties to adopt or internalize parts of the populist agenda. Below, we briefly review each of these.

One of the biggest concerns is populist parties’ effect on people, namely that they shift the gravitational center of public opinion to the right, increasing the salience of issues such as immigration, crime, corruption, and European integration and fundamentally altering the opinions of the mainstream populace on these issues, as well as in their satisfaction with representative democracy and trust in political institutions. As Mudde points out, research has shown both sides of the coin: that populist radical right parties do have an effect on people’s attitudes towards these issues at the mass level, as well as that there is no significant effect. The results, in part, depend on timing (as opinions poll demonstrate the volatility of public opinion on these issues), the issue at hand (immigration vs. European integration), the types of parties (racist parties, radical right-wing parties, etc.), and of course, the type of data at hand. As mentioned above, while we certainly do see an increase in the position of these issues even by mainstream parties, the question remains as to whether opposition to immigration and European integration and decreasing trust in democratic institutions occurred already before and independent of the rise of populism, or whether it is happening as its effect. Overall, it seems that the most worrisome effect of populist parties, at least radical populist parties, given the increase in tabloidization of political discourse, is a shift in political discourse favorable to them and their policies.

In addition to their effect on public opinion, populist parties are posited to have a lasting effect on the nature of domestic politics. Mickenberg points out that nature of a representative government – a “government of the people, by the people, for the people” is not at stake per se, however at stake is the concept of “people”: populist parties define who belongs to “the people”, which is defined as an ethnically homogenous group. Research has shown that as an effect of competition with populist parties, mainstream parties have also adopted parts discourse into their agendas – the so-called populist Zeitgeist or “populist

50 Mudde, Three decades of populist radical right parties, 6-7.
contamination of mainstream political discourse” and adoption of “soft populism” in mainstream parties.\textsuperscript{54} In terms of their capability to affect actual policies, while some authors claim that reaching only 10-20% of voters is sufficient to have a major impact,\textsuperscript{55} others cite this modest electoral support populist parties are able to garner – with around 10% of the electorate, few make it into government, and even fewer are able to make coalitions once in government, so that their direct policy affect is rare.\textsuperscript{56} However, concerns still exist that populist parties are able to transform into effective governing parties if needed, especially given their convergence with mainstream parties on socio-cultural policies. Jones additionally warns that populists disrupt orderly competition between left and right, as they shift the debate from ideological to procedural, leading to a situation that replacing established political parties becomes the main mechanism for capturing votes.\textsuperscript{57} In addition, the fact that populists risk slowing down any improvements to economic performance, as these changes sometimes require a long process of structural adjustment, and as such, volatility in power can obstruct reforms. This also leads to a situation where politicians prefer quicker palliative measures that give quick illusions of better performance, over choosing long-term reform efforts, which can have devastating outcomes.

Despite these concerns, research has pointed to the very inherent nature of populist politics as their imminent pitfall – their very characteristics, as reviewed above, are what ultimately precludes them from influencing broader change. A populist movement’s need for crisis and reluctance to be political, for instance, makes it difficult to sustain over a long period of time. Its reliance on charismatic leadership functions in the same way: populist leaders have short-term momentum, but the movement’s “shelf-life” is frequently limited to those of its leader.\textsuperscript{58} Because of their anti-establishment and oppositional nature, they rarely make to national government, and even when they do, they lose power relatively quickly, or factionalize; if in a ruling coalition in government, they cannot remain anti-establishment, so they tend to splinter once in government.\textsuperscript{59} Additionally, once in power, they have to come up with solutions as well as new concerns for the future, so their support fades quickly while they are in office.\textsuperscript{60} Finally, scholars have pointed out that any kind of large populist “movement” across Europe is unlikely to happen; not only because populism spans the left-right ideology spectrum, and support for its issues (Euroscepticism, anti-globalization, etc.) remains largely in the fringes, but also, as they are focused on their specific “heartland”, they are very specific to their context, which limits their capacity to integrate these various elements.\textsuperscript{61} Despite sharing some characteristics, populist parties can have diametrically opposing positions on attitudes towards homosexuality or foreign policy, for

\textsuperscript{54} Mudde, \textit{The Populist Zeitgeist}, 546; Mudde, \textit{Three decades of populist radical right parties}, 9.
\textsuperscript{55} Jones, \textit{Populism in Europe}, 41.
\textsuperscript{57} Jones, \textit{Populism in Europe}, 38.
\textsuperscript{58} Taggart, \textit{Populism and Representative Politics}, 276.
\textsuperscript{59} Mudde, \textit{Three decades of populist radical right parties}, 14.
\textsuperscript{60} Jones, \textit{Populism in Europe}, 43.
\textsuperscript{61} Taggart, \textit{Populism and Representative Politics}, 275.
instance, making it difficult to successfully collaborate with other populist parties at the international level.\textsuperscript{62}

**Studying Populism in the Balkans**

In general, when approaching the study of populism, most research thus far has focused on Western Europe. Pirro in particular argues that many of the most relevant hypotheses about populist parties actually do not apply to the Central and East European context.\textsuperscript{63} In Southeastern Europe, the historical legacy of Communism, in addition to the EU accession and its lengthy process, have all impacted the nature of populism, and in this sense, even within the region, the origins and traditions of populist parties and movements before, during and post-Communism are unique. Today’s post-communist context, where many countries of Southeastern Europe are still waiting for the promised and long-awaited rewards of capitalism and democracy, has provided populist parties and movements a reservoir of discontent to tap into.\textsuperscript{64} In addition, the EU accession process has impacted the nature of populism and its rise across the region, and many researchers see this process itself as having acted as a sort of “pressure cooker” to populist temptations that were previously held at bay, even during poor socio-economic conditions.\textsuperscript{65} “The European Union and the external constraints that it imposed on the accession countries contributed to the perception of the transition regimes as “democracies without choices”, and thus fueled the current backlash against consensual politics”, as expressed by Krastev.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, even without the harsh conditionality measures, EU politics present “a sitting duck” for populist parties who distrust complexity and “mystification”,\textsuperscript{67} which EU conditionality has additionally exaggerated, warranting additional attention to the peculiarity of the Western Balkans in particular. Interestingly, scholarship has thus far widely ignored the varieties of contemporary populism in the Balkans, both “from above” and “from below”.\textsuperscript{68}

While there are a number of notable exceptions focusing on Romania and Bulgaria, the Western Balkans in particular have not received much scholarly attention. The existing scholarship has also predominantly followed the established methodological routes

\textsuperscript{62} Roodujin, The Rise of the Populist Radical Right, 5.
\textsuperscript{63} Pirro, Andrea. 2014. Digging into the breeding ground: insights into the electoral performance of populist radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe. East European Politics 30(2), 246-70.
\textsuperscript{68} Brubaker et al, Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity, 13.
identifying populism as a “top-down” phenomenon perpetuated by political elites.\textsuperscript{69}

Finally, most scholarly attention has been paid to the rise of the radical right – the so-called “verrechtsing” (right turn) of European politics – as “the most successful party family in postwar Western Europe”.\textsuperscript{70} This is unsurprising, as populist radical right parties have not only increased in popularity, but are increasingly becoming official political players in their respective national governments. However, populist movements can be radical and rightist, but can also be found among greens and grassroots movements or even encompass a variety of political ideologies, and can appeal to many different things. Recent decades have particularly witnessed a shift to leftist populism, though literature is sparser on the rise of populist movements with a leftist ideology. For instance, in Latin America, whereas 20 years ago, over 60% of presidents were from right or right-center parties, currently around 70% of have presidents from left or center-left parties.\textsuperscript{71} An additional geographical region that, for similar reasons, has recently attracted attention from scholars focusing on radical left and left-wing contexts of populism is Southern Europe, in particular Spain and Greece.\textsuperscript{72} The focus on these cases has initiated a reassessment of the existing differentiation of populisms along the lines of “soft” and “hard” populism dependent on whether they are compatible with liberal political thought, as well as between “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” populisms.\textsuperscript{73} These distinctions have often been made on the basis of geographical settings, rather than being based on an analysis of particularities and thus lead to the generalized view of “inclusionary” populism in South America vis-à-vis an “exclusionary” populism in Europe, as criticized by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis.\textsuperscript{74} The cases of Spain and Greece illustrate this need for rethinking, but also the need to expand the theoretical debate on

\textsuperscript{70} Mudde, Cas and Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America. Government and Opposition, 48(2), 147–74. 
populism with a perspective from below by introducing social, populist and protest movements. Recent scholarship has thus increasingly utilized the Essex School of discourse studies for the analysis of left-wing populism and populist movements. Following the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the formation of political identities, there has been a growing understanding in defining populism as a discursive and political logic that considers society divided into the “the people” and “the elite”. The broadening of the concept of populism can be epitomized by Laclau’s definition, who described it as the “hegemonic political articulation of demands”.

In this special issue, we aim to fill these lacunas in the literature, in three ways: by including populist movements of left as well as right ideology; geographically focusing on the particular context of the Western Balkans as well as one contribution on Bulgaria. Further, the special issue attempts to broaden the theoretical concept of populism through its analysis from below thereby illustrating the manifold manifestations of populist mobilization that exist in parallel to populist parties, etc. A particular focus of the special issue is thereby laid on the question of popular culture, a social field usually neglected in the study of populism.

Specifically in the Western Balkans, the study of contemporary populism is predominantly located within the context of the authoritarian turn that has happened in the region over the last decade. The debates, which largely focus on the backsliding of already fragile democratic levels, refer the concept of populism and authoritarianism as symbiotic and as one of the great dangers for the region’s democracy and stability. In that sense populism is identified as a popular strategy to exercise and secure political domination. In particular the regime of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, of Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia, the politics of Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, or Albin Kurti in Kosovo have attracted international attention with scholars classifying their form of leadership culture from illiberal democracy to authoritarianism. A regional specificity can be identified in the combination of populist politics with nepotism, corruption and clientelism, which are used along other political mechanisms (media control, repression of civil society sectors, etc.) to legitimize power. As mentioned previously, existent scholarship has thus far largely neglected to analyze these phenomena through the theoretical lenses of “populism”. This is where our special issue aims to narrow the existent scholarly knowledge gap.


76 Laclau, The Populist Reason, xi.


The special issue is opened by Bilge Yabanci’s paper on populism and anti-establishment in Kosovo. The author approaches the peculiar ideological mix of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, a leftist-nationalist party that has become a major political player over the last several years, relying on a mix of radical political demands and popular support that did not shy away from violent protest. She investigates the local dynamics and consequences of widespread discontent in Kosovo through the analytical framework of populism as an essentially anti-establishment political style. By focusing on the case of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, Yabanci sets out to answer two related questions: the unique populist style of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, and the complex reasons behind its electoral breakthrough and continuing support among various social groups. She argues that Lëvizja Vetëvendosje successfully melds a populist political style, leftist/social democratic agenda and contentious politics as a means to disperse its message. The second part of Yabanci’s article offers arguments to explain the party’s appeal such focusing on structural factors (electoral availability and party system), societal dynamics (political and economic dissatisfaction) and its agency (internal organization, cohesion and leadership).

Yabanci’s paper is followed by two contributions that seek to employ a similar methodological tool set and approach the concept of populism from a more theoretical perspective. The first contribution is Ljupcho Petkovski’s analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ in Macedonia’s illiberal discourse. Petkovski’s article dissects the authoritarian populist reign of VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia since 2006 and takes it as a case study for his theoretical debate. Illustrating pitfalls within populism scholarship that identify populist politics predominantly as democratic illiberalism, Petkovski argues that this approach should be complemented by discourse theory. In order to explain the durability of Gruvski’s reign, Petkovski utilizes Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony”, which facilitates the understanding of the specificity of the regime’s populism. Petkovski explores the discursive process of changing the political imagination of the majority of ethnic Macedonians to create the concept of “the people”. He argues that this allows the regime to reclaim its place in history by providing channels for material, symbolic and emotional incorporation amongst social classes that were traditionally excluded from society. The notion of “the people” in populist discourse is further explored by Georgi Medarov. He takes Krastev’s proposition of associating populism with “democratic illiberalism” in order to explore whether there can be an opposite articulation: “liberal populism”. Medarov situates his research in the relationship between liberal anti-populist experts and populist discourses in the case of the Bulgarian social protests from 2013. Situating the Bulgarian protests in a global context, Medarov argues that despite the fact that the Bulgarian protests could be put into the wider frame of populism and “post-politics”, it cannot explain the peculiar entanglement between liberal and populist discourses. The contribution subsequently investigates the various and conflictual discourses within the Bulgarian protest movements, their reliance on populist discourses, as well as of the way liberal intellectuals interpreted, reacted to, and shaped those movements.

79 Krastev, The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus.
The final two papers attempt to shift the discussion of populism in the Balkans from the realm of institutional politics into the realm of mainstream media and popular culture. Both take contemporary Serbia as a case study for their argument. Irena Šentevska explores the output of one specific genre of the music industry – “ethno pop”, as a vocal source of right-wing populism in Serbia. Discussing the phenomenon of pop-cultural “ethno activism” as a distinct populist strategy, Šentevska zooms into the case of the charity campaign Podignimo Stupove. The article argues that the “subgenre” of “ethno pop”, which exploits religious imagery, can be identified as a vehicle of communication of populist political concepts. The charity campaign that was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the XII century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras thus represents a key to understanding the changes in currently prevailing populist strategies of institutional politics in Serbia, as well as the wider social “infrastructure” that supports them. In a similar methodological vein, Astrea Pejović and Jovana Papović focus on the question of the potential of popular culture to become an agent of leftist populist politics in contemporary Serbia. The authors observe the hip-hop collective “The Bombs of the Nineties” whose music tackles the topics from recent history, and who subvert the fashion style of the 1990s “Dizel” subculture, which is often connected to the Serbian nationalism and war profiteering. The paper analyses the relations “The Bombs of the Nineties” create between their practices, class warfare and leftist discourses, aiming to show the potentials and threats those relations introduce. Following Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of populism, Pejović and Jovana Papović argue that “The Bombs of the Nineties” could represent a solid populist political agent because they attempt to reveal and draw attention to the “unfulfilled demands” of disempowered Serbian youth.

As proposed earlier in the introduction, this special issue aims not only at extending our knowledge of the regional specificities of populist politics and movements, but also to broaden the usage of the term “populism” by exploring the phenomenon in usually neglected social settings, such as popular culture. It covers the geographic area of the Western Balkans accompanied by one contribution focusing on Bulgaria. The collection aims to represent a contribution to the empirical scholarship of populism in Europe, but also an attempt to engage in theoretical and methodological debate about how to approach the phenomenon from below. The special issue ultimately contributes to the thriving populism literature through a novel empirical scope as well as the literature on Southeast Europe through a focus on the local agency, voter preferences and the party systems.

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Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo: A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje

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Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo:
A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje

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Few studies have systematically examined the rising political and social unrest in the Balkans. This paper investigates the local dynamics and consequences of widespread anti-establishment discontent in Kosovo through the analytical framework of populism. By focusing on the case of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV), the paper sets out to consider two related questions: the unique populist style of the LVV and the complex reasons behind its electoral breakthrough and continuing support among various groups. Based on a qualitative documentary analysis of the party programme, manifesto, party publications, speeches of the leadership and interviews, the paper finds that the LVV successfully melds a populist political style, leftist/social democratic agenda and contentious politics as a means to disperse its message. The second part of the article offers three arguments to explain its appeal: structural factors (electoral availability and party system), societal dynamics (political and economic dissatisfaction) and the agency of the LVV (internal organisation, cohesion and leadership). The article contributes to the thriving literature on populism through a novel empirical scope, and to the literature on Southeast Europe through a focus on local agency, voter preferences and party system.

Keywords: Kosovo, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, populism, anti-establishment parties, social movements

Introduction
Scholarly research on Southeast Europe has long been dominated by an almost exclusive focus on ethnic tension, EU integration and democratic transition. Given the European Union’s (EU) commitment to an eventual enlargement towards the region, state-building and political conditionality have been subject to extensive analysis¹, while domestic political developments and social dynamics in the region, as well as the agency of political actors remained under-researched until recently.

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While identity politics and ethnic tensions still occupy an important place, countries in Southeast Europe face several social, political and economic challenges. On the one hand, governing parties’ increasing authoritarian attempts in monopolising power and undermining the rule of law and media freedom constitute a major predicament for democratisation. The EU accession prospect, linked to stabilisation logic and short-term incentives, has seemingly achieved little to tackle the new semi-democratic regimes in the region. On the other hand, there are promising bottom-up social movements not particularly driven by EU incentives or the accession prospect. Demonstrations, strike actions and riots have recently become a part of the political culture of the region. These movements may finally provide alternative forms of representation and political claims-making by creating solidarity against the corrupt patronage networks of governing elites. Under these circumstances, populism in many different forms is on the rise in Southeast Europe.

These developments challenge the ethnicised conception of state-building and the international community’s perception of Southeast Europe. Paying closer attention to local and regional dynamics of protest, socio-political developments and mobilisation is crucial to examine the recent political and social unrest in the region, which the outside-in approaches dominating the literature cannot address. This paper aims to investigate populism in Southeast Europe by looking at an under-researched case: Kosovo’s Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV, Self-determination Movement). It focuses on its unique ideological stance, which embraces a populist style and a leftist/social democratic agenda, and the reasons behind its widespread appeal among diverse groups (e.g. the unemployed, youth, educated, war veterans).

The paper first seeks to contribute to the thriving literature on populism, which remains an ambiguous but a lavishly-used concept. The ambiguity of populism is mostly attributable to its nature as a political style with few core themes and many forms. Moreover, populist movements and political parties still suffer from limited empirical research beyond European populist radical right parties and the Latin American leader-centric populist movements. The analysis of the LVV’s left-leaning populism offers a novel empirical inquiry to the populism literature. The paper shows that populism can also become a pervasive and appealing political style without a far right ideology and without an all-powerful leader. It can appeal to a significant part of the electorate.

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where the party system is weak, the state’s legitimacy is contested and social discontent is high.

Second, the paper also offers an alternative analysis of uneasy relations between citizens, political actors and international players in the region by seeking an answer to the question of why populist and anti-establishment politics have been on the rise in Southeast Europe. Research on party politics in Southeast Europe has been analysed through a focus on far right parties rather than populism per se. This study demonstrates that the analytical framework of populism could bring to the fore local agency, voter preferences and the party system. Populism can offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the persistent problems of state- and nation-building compared to the top-down analyses in the literature.

Kosovo is singled-out as a case study because populism has a favourable political opportunity structure to flourish within the complicated political dynamics of a supervised state. Although the country has been mostly stabilised since 1999 and a civic conception of citizenship has been promoted by the international community for years; nation, identity and ethnicity are still highly politicised and contested in Kosovo. Moreover, Kosovo is the poorest economy in the region with the highest youth unemployment (around 55%) and its economy relies heavily on international aid and imports. A Western European-style party system (traditional left-right axis) and a democratic tradition is absent. What is more, for more than a decade, the country was under international supervision (1999-2008 UNMIK and 2008-2012 ICO/EULEX) that was locally challenged as unaccountable and top-down.

After its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has become dependent on the continuation of international presence, especially the EU, not only because the EU is the biggest donor, but also Kosovo’s clientelist and corrupted political class and weak state institutions have little interest in promoting the rule of law and civic participation. On the other hand, the continuation of international presence in Kosovo symbolises the contested statehood and international hegemony as well as the ‘unaccountable and untouchable’ alliance between international actors and Kosovo’s political elite that has disenfranchised and disengaged citizens from political participation and

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representation. These circumstances has contributed to the society-wide dissatisfaction with existing institutions and elected politicians.

The first part of the paper is devoted to the conceptual framework of populism. The second section provides an in-depth analysis of Vetëvendosje’s ideology and its political agenda, based on qualitative documentary analysis of the party programme, manifesto and party publications, such as newsletters, published since 2010. Press statements and the parliamentary addresses of the LVV deputies, especially the party leader Albin Kurti, were also consulted. Personal interviews with Kurti and party activists conducted in May 2011 in Prishtina during a fieldwork visit are also used to corroborate other sources. The final part turns to analyse three main factors explaining the transformation of the LVV from a youth resistance movement to a successful political party in the Kosovo Assembly, with a real potential to become the main opposition party in the future.

**Populism**

Populism is a thin-centred ideology that promotes a few core ideas, but remains as a highly-context sensitive political style. As a thin-centred ideology, populism has four core characteristics: (i) it has a people-centric worldview which draws on the idea of the sovereignty of ‘the people’ against ‘the privileged’ elites, (ii) it emerges as a part of representative democracy, but capitalises on the criticism of its current weaknesses, (iii) it embraces a heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting set of ideologies which is very much defined by the context within which it develops, (iv) it is likely that it gains support among the segments of the society who feel disenfranchised or unrepresented by the existing parties/politicians.

The central and most defining feature of populism is its depiction of an antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’ or ‘the elites’ (politicians, intellectuals, judiciary, business, international organisations). While ‘the people’ are perceived as virtuous, elites are portrayed as corrupt, self-interested and alienated from the people. Populists put this dichotomy at the heart of their political struggle, and they usually discuss other problems such as economic growth, rule of law, and socio-economic problems in healthcare, pensions, urban development, and so on through the narrative of ‘corrupt elites’ who seize the control of the government, bureaucracy and justice to promote their own interests against the interests of ‘the people’. For populism, “it is the people directly -its majority- that legitimise institutions with no other mediation than their actual will.”

Depiction of society through a relentless antagonism between ‘the people’ and the elites gives populist politics an essentially anti-establishment character. As discussed by Canovan, populism promotes “some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people.” Usually, populist movements seek to dismiss the elected politicians as selfish, incompetent and unrepresentative and against the interests of the people. Populist parties and politicians depict themselves as outsiders, as ‘reluctant politicians’ and emphasise their movement-type nature.

However, populism is not consistent and clear in defining who belongs to the people. When populists refer to ‘the people’, they refer to a homogenous group, a constructed ‘heartland’ which is unitary and untainted by class, ethnic and religious divisions. Populists are hostile towards pluralistic definitions that would damage the unity of the heartland. It is not only the corrupt elites who are outsiders, but also the groups that highlight their distinction from the majority and harm the unity of the people, such as ethnic and religious minorities.

In multi-ethnic countries where there is an ethno-national cleavage, populist parties are likely to adopt an exclusionary attitude towards minority groups in order to promote an “organic view of the people as an ethically and culturally homogenous totality.” As a result, populists oppose liberal democracy, pluralism and protection of individual and group rights.

When constructing an antagonism between the people and the elites, populism usually relies heavily on symbolic strategies and performative acts to deliver its message to the masses. The standard repertoire of populist actors includes accusations based on inferences; generalisations and stereotypes; metaphors to define the ruling class, contenders or minorities; undiplomatic, aggressive, confrontational and polarising use of popular language when responding to criticism, and victimisation rhetoric when referring to ‘us’.

“Elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations and [...] opinion polls” are used to gain and sustain support. Finally, populist leaders usually rely on personalistic and face-to-face relationship with the followers through mass rallies and demonstrations.

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Second, populism does not necessarily harbour extremist ideologies with an aim to destroy the democratic system. On the contrary, as Canovan argues, populism has always been a ‘perennial possibility’ of representative democracies: “Populists see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media”23. Populist movements and parties criticise the system from within through a different interpretation of democracy (unity over plurality, direct democracy over deliberation and checks and balances), rather than striving to destroy the democratic order. For instance, populist actors usually deny that their motivation in opposing constitutional rights and guarantees for minorities is driven by undemocratic ideas. By contrast, they promote a majoritarian approach to democracy as the ideal type of governance, claiming that ‘privileges’ granted to minorities would harm the unity and harmony of the society. Liberal democracy and pluralism are perceived against the sovereignty and equality of the people.

Therefore, it is misleading to use populism synonymously with the extreme right, although the latter often employs a populist style.24 Yet, populism cannot be considered necessarily beneficial for representative democracies. Empirical evidence suggests that it can both undermine pluralism by ‘contaminating’ the mainstream parties’ style25 and promote it by extending political participation to underprivileged groups.26 As Urbinati aptly states, “populism does not hold an autonomous conceptual identity, and both its character and its claims are parasitic to democratic theory. It can, however, serve to highlight the fact that democracy is not a simple and uncontroversial term either.”27

Third, populism is not a fully-fledged ideology with a universal and uniform content. As a thin-centred ideology, it characterises a style of politics that is compatible with other political ideologies (conservative, progressive or revolutionary) and economic programme (state-planned or neoliberal) and with diverse social bases and regimes.28 In Europe the extreme right-wing variant of populism with a focus on anti-immigration and Eurosceptic discourse has been prevalent since 1980s.29 In the US, populist parties have displayed ideological

23 Canovan, Trust the People!, 2.
24 See Stojarović, The Far Right in the Balkans, for a region specific study of how populism and far right have utilised together.
27 Urbinati, Democracy and Populism, 116.
varieties from agrarian roots to conservative movements. In Latin America, the recent populist parties have adopted a leftist outlook. As Panizza claims, all ideological positions can share populism as “a flexible mode of persuasion to redefine the people and their adversaries.”

Finally, populism capitalises on the citizens’ dissatisfaction with the established parties and the political system. The endurance and success of populist movements within a specific context is much determined by the two-way dynamic relationship between the populist actors who convey anti-establishment messages and the public, who receive, evaluate, accept or reject these messages. The existing research shows that these parties usually attract voters who display a resilient dissatisfaction with the established parties or elected politicians.

To summarise, populism is based on the centrality of “the notion of sovereign people as an actor in an antagonistic relation with the established order.” It “claims an unbounded supremacy of the “will of the people” over institutions and over the social strata that do not identify with the dominant group [...] its aim is that of blurring any mediation between leadership and the people so as to bypass indirect forms of politics. In this way a populist democracy ends up putting the demos above the laws.” Populist movements, actors and parties share a common trait of being anti-establishment and anti-status quo. In this sense, it is independent of any particular relationship with democracy and ideological (left-right) affinity on its own. In this sense, populist parties exist within representative democracies and they do not seek an alternative to democracy; but they object to liberal democracy and its pluralist values and promote plebiscitary politics.

Otherwise, populism is highly contingent on the political and social context within which it emerges and develops. It can embrace diverse and sometimes ideologically contradictory economic and social policies. In other words, the type and the degree of populism that a movement or party adopt are dependent on the political and social structures. This chameleonic characteristic makes populism a concept that can easily travel across time and regions as well as across political ideologies and contributes to the ubiquity of populism.

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36 Panizza, Populism and the Mirror of Democracy, 3.

37 Urbinati, Democracy and Populism, 119.

38 Mudde, Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe, 151.

39 Taggart, Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe.
**Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) from a Movement to a Political Party**

The LVV’s roots date back to the activities of the Kosovo Action Network (KAN) established in 1997 to organise mass student protests against the Serb oppression in Kosovo. Under the leadership of Albin Kurti, the LVV was formed in 2005 as a movement for self-determination. Kurti was an activist among the political ranks of the KAN and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The turning point for the movement was the anti-UNMIK protests organised on the fifth anniversary of the mission. Thanks to these protests, the LVV gained widespread public recognition. In the following years, it transformed itself into an anti-UNMIK movement fiercely criticising the ‘undemocratic’ and ‘technocratic’ practices of the international mission in Kosovo. Between 2005 and 2008, the LVV claimed that final status negotiations restricted the universal and unconditional self-determination right of Kosovo Albanians by making this right subject to Serbia’s consent. The movement carried out ‘Jo negotiata, Vetëvendosje!’ (No Negotiations, Self-Determination) campaign against the Vienna status negotiations through which it increased its prominence throughout Kosovo. Since then, the LVV has progressively enlarged its Kosovo-wide mobilisation through local offices, publications and radio broadcasting and crystallised a clear anti-establishment stance. The failure of the Vienna negotiations to generate an internationally recognised independence provided another cause for the LVV to continue its ‘anti-hegemonic’ and pro-independence ideological consolidation.

Lëvizja Vetëvendosje defines itself as “a political movement organised according to the principles of civic activism and public inclusion in political decision-making and faithful to the founding principles of democracy, by which state sovereignty derives from the people and belongs only to them.” Its mobilisation as a movement has always involved street protests, demonstrations and public shows. These actions initially targeted the UNMIK, but turned increasingly against the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) after the declaration of independence in 2008. The movement perceives the EU mission as a continuation of the UNMIK’s ‘unaccountable’ and ‘undemocratic’ governance over Kosovo under a new guise.

The year 2010 became the latest turning point in the organisational and ideological evolution of the LVV. It decided to register for the general elections as a ‘citizens’ initiative’ and participated in the 2010, 2013 and 2014 general elections. 

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44 This was an intentional choice to highlight LVV’s disapproval of political parties and parliamentary politics and to reject accusations that the movement was becoming a part of Kosovo’s establishment. Previously, LVV had also refused to register as a civil society organisation to distinguish itself from numerous NGOs dominating Kosovo’s civil society landscape, because the majority of these NGOs receive financial and technical support from international donors. Strazzari, Francesco and Ervjola Selenica. 2013. *Nationalism and Civil Society Organisations in Post-Independence Kosovo*, in *Civil Society and Transitions in the Western Balkans*, edited by Bojicic-
and local elections. The campaign for the general elections was focused on opposition to international presence and the Kosovo-Serbia normalisation talks, demand for ‘unconditional independence’ as well as anti-establishment and anti-elite themes. The message of the party resounded with a particular segment of the Kosovo electorate; and the movement gained 12.69% of votes and 14 seats within the 120-seat Kosovo Assembly. To the surprise of many international and local commentators, the LVV became the third largest group in the Assembly after the two oldest and most powerful political parties: Democratic Party of Kosovo-PDK (previously led by then Prime Minister and a former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander and the current President Hashim Thaçi) and the Democratic League of Kosovo-LDK (established by the revered resistance leader and the first President Ibrahim Rugova). In 2014, the LVV increased its vote share to 13.59% (16 seats), again coming third after the PDK and LDK. The 2013 local elections also brought rewarding results for the party. The LVV candidate Shpend Ahmeti won 51.8% in the second round of voting in Prishtina, the capital city that had always been ruled by a mayor form the LDK since the first local elections.

Populism, Anti-establishment Politics and the Ideology of Vetëvendosje

The departure point of the LVV’s populist style is its hostility to Kosovo politics and politicians on the one hand, and to the international actors that have had executive power over Kosovo on the other. These actors determine the LVV’s anti-establishment stance and are placed at the heart of its political struggle. The party argues that decisions about Kosovo and its people are made by a number of elected politicians in the government who act according to their own interests and their allegiance to international actors in Kosovo rather than Kosovo people. In this view, the government is both ‘illegal and illegitimate,’ running Kosovo as a ‘party-state.’ They are illegal because, instead of receiving approval from the people, they employ electoral fraud, clientelism and support from international actors to stay in power. They are illegitimate because they are corrupt and fail to represent people’s interests. In line with populism’s distrust of all ‘elites’, the LVV also perceives the judiciary, police, opposition parties, and local and international NGOs active in Kosovo as a part of the widespread scandals, nepotism, corruption and partisan decision-making.

As a response, the LVV promotes two remedies to end the monopoly of these elites over social and political issues. First, it encourages people as citizens to engage in politics actively, attending demonstrations and protests against the

Dzelilovic, Vesna / Ker-Lindsay, James and Denisa Kostovicova. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 117-34.
government and the international community in order to promote direct
government and the international community in order to promote direct
engagement of people in politics, since the elected representatives cannot be
trusted. In words of Vetëvendosje, ‘active and responsible citizenry’ -as opposed
to patient and passive citizenry- would hold the small clique of governing elites
accountable for their corrupted activities. In line with the populist political style, the LVV's main method of political mobilisation is public demonstrations against the government or international actors. These protests usually employ extraordinary tactics, such as blocking the entrances of the Assembly to prevent deputies from other parties entering into the parliament when voting on a law that the LVV opposes takes place; throwing red paint or piles of garbage at the facilities of the EULEX and the government buildings; destroying the property of the UNMIK and EULEX, and lately throwing tear gas canisters at the Assembly to disrupt its sessions. The protest scenes are usually dominated by the symbols of Albania and the KLA, instead of state symbols of Kosovo.

The crucial point to note here is that Vetëvendosje does not define politics as
the representation of citizens in the parliament. The political arena is not
limited to the representative institutions; it is the place where people can
directly claim rights and express demands, specifically the streets. In a similar
fashion, the party leadership responds to domestic and international criticisms about the method of its protests claiming that demonstrations are a democratic civic right to express disillusionment with ruling elites. The LVV as a populist movement and political party is suspicious of representative democracy as weak and open to manipulation by the elites, especially as practiced in Kosovo. In an interview, Kurti summarised the party’s stance on representative democracy clearly:

“We think that representative democracy is not enough; direct participatory
democracy ensures a more vibrant society. Representative democracy is
illegitimate; it creates alienation and limits choice. The problematising of
the issue was the initial face of our movement.”

Secondly, as a remedy for the monopoly of the current political elites, the party promotes more power for the parliament over the executive. On this issue, Kurti stated in his addressing of the Kosovo Assembly that:

“this [the Assembly] is our place, the place where we bring the voice of the
citizens, the trust of the citizens, the interests of the citizens, and the will of
the citizens, and we will continuously act in accordance with this.”

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51 Vardari-Kesler, Politics of Protest in Supervised Statehood; Schwander-Sievers, Democritos through Defiance.
As Kurti’s statement implies, the LVV’s suspicion of politicians and political parties obliged Vetëvendosje to represent itself as ‘a messenger’ of the citizens. For this reason, the party defines itself as a ‘citizens’ initiative’ to differentiate from a traditional political party, and considers parliamentary representation as one of (not the main) the means to engage in politics. In fact, the LVV found itself in need to justify the decision to seek parliamentary representation in order to preserve its ‘anti-establishment’ and ‘outsider’ character:

“Levizja Vetëvendosje remains a political movement, representing all of Kosovo’s society and people and the Albanian nation. It aims at building a state of Kosovo, establishing a democratic system, implementing justice and developing our economy. Above all, we are a unifying movement and not a fractional political party.”

The decision to enter into parliamentary politics was rationalised as an attempt to ‘infiltrate’ into the system to transform it:

“Besides its current methods of action and demonstration, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje will add another, participation in the elections. This is in order to fulfill our objective as quickly as possible. This change of strategy is not a replacement for our methods of action, but an addition to them. This is an additional method for the same concept and goal […] The will of the people must be expressed everywhere and all the time […] In Kosovo the will of a few has overtaken the general will because this will of the few has in its hands the state’s institutions. This has to change.”

Moreover, Vetëvendosje seeks to delegitimise and replace any type of foreign presence in Kosovo. It perceives the international community as an unaccountable and patronising occupier that help the current political leaders stay in power. The party criticises the international presence also as an ineffective and technocratic power that dictates laws and regulations from above, shaping the daily life of people without being held accountable for their ‘mismanagement’ and ‘irresponsible’ practices. Vetëvendosje deputy Alma Lama’s remarks below on the EU mission exemplify the perceived illegitimacy of foreign state-building in Kosovo:

“After the declaration of independence, in practice, the UN was replaced by the EU and UNMIK by EULEX. However, this replacement was not a change of approach and purpose, and there was no paradigm shift. […] European officials have cooperated and talked about fighting corruption so much and so long with precisely the most corrupt people in the country who have usurped government and state management functions.”

The LVV’s populist stance closely shapes its policies and attitudes towards the Serb minority. Vetëvendosje opposes the ongoing Kosovo-Serbia talks.

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56 Schwander-Sievers, *Democratisation through Defiance?*.
Accordingly, the 2013 Brussels Agreement was the previous Prime Minister Thaçi’s personal agreement aiming to create a Serbian statelet inside Kosovo similar to Republika Srpska, in return for further empowering his clientelist and criminal group of politicians with the help of the EU. In this view, the government conspires against people in violation of the constitution by taking a part in the coalition between the EU and Serbia to “realise the serbianization of cultural heritage located in Kosovo” and “accommodating Serbia's interests to the maximum inside Kosovo”.

The party’s stance towards citizenship, national identity and minorities is also in line with its populist style. The LVV perceives the current ethno-national divisions as the fault of the international community that promoted ethnic dichotomy since 1999. It claims that ethnicity has turned into a stigma for people because “instead of rights of the people, they [the international community] talk about needs of the communities.”

Despite the criticism of the international community for promoting ethnic divisions in Kosovo, a closer reading of its programme and other party documents reveals that the LVV promotes a defensive Albanian nationalism. Currently, the Constitution of Kosovo avoids any ethno-national references and defines the country as “a state of its citizens” exercising its “authority based on the respect for human rights and freedoms” (Kosovo Constitution Art 1.2). The neutrality in the Kosovo Constitution towards the ethnic and national identities aims to encourage the integration of Kosovo Serbs and other minorities into a dominantly Albanian country. Contrarily, the LVV is profoundly intolerant of the multi-ethnic character of Kosovo and defines the state through the perspective of the majority. The party programme states that the party “is committed to the constitutional definition of Kosovo as a state of Albanians and all citizens of Kosovo […] [and] returning the national Albanian symbols to the state of Kosovo.” Moreover, the party discards the constitutional principle (Art. 1.3) that forbids Kosovo’s unification with any other state as a violation of the right to self-determination. The party aims to change these constitutive principles in favour of unification with Albania through a referendum.

As a result, the political and cultural rights granted to the minority communities, such as decentralisation, are fiercely rejected as ‘another colonial imposition’. According to Kurti, decentralisation has enforced a division of Kosovo along institutional, political and social lines. As an alternative, the party promotes an ambiguous policy of ‘dialogue with Serbs of Kosovo as

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64 Visoka, International Governance and Local Resistance in Kosovo.
65 Kurti, JISB Interview, 92.
citizens of our Republic’. However, it fails to outline the details of this alternative policy towards Serbs to integrate them into the independent Kosovo state. In practice, the party’s exclusionary discourse blaming Serbia and Serbs for Kosovo’s historical and current problems and the inconsistent policy objectives are far from establishing a dialogue with Kosovo Serbs. For instance, the party program states commitment to “affirming the national culture as the majority Albanian” while promoting “maximum cultural autonomy of national minorities”. However, the party often dismisses the cultural autonomy principle in relation to Kosovo Serbs. The autonomy guaranteed to the Serb Orthodox church is considered as an opportunity for Belgrade to control Kosovo. It is against the political integration of minorities through local autonomy, reserved seats, and the right of Serbian municipalities to choose their own local rulers and cooperate with Serbia. In contrast, the party promotes special relations with Albania. While it claims to defend civic citizenship, party documents praise the KLA and veterans, urges the right to return and the right to vote for Albanian war refugees, while opposing the same right for the Serb refugees.

It is important to note that the inconsistencies and double-standards towards Kosovo Serbs in the party documents and discourse are disguised or softened through defending constitutional and legal equality for all Kosovo citizens including “national, religious, cultural and racial minority groups”. In line with populism’s promotion of a majoritarian approach to democracy, the LVV contends that in an ideal democracy, the will and rights of the majority should be prioritised. Rights and responsibilities should be proportionate to the size of the communities, regardless of the potential injustices that a minority community might face. This is also the reason for embracing direct democracy which ensures that every active and responsible citizen’s vote is equal. The LVV leadership’s letter addressing the Quint Ambassadors on the occasion of the end of official supervision of Kosovo aptly summarises the LVV’s majoritarian logic:

“The Ahtisaari Plan “established territorial autonomy for the 5% Serb minority in Kosovo, over approximately 20% of our territory. […] This Plan has sought to transform Kosovo’s identity by imposing its definition of us as a ‘multi-ethnic society’ without our consent, and by denying the reality that over the 90 per cent of our population is Albanian.”

In this sense, Vetëvendosje’s approach towards identity and nation is different from the far-right extremism that is also widespread in the Balkans region. Vetëvendosje does not openly promote internal homogenisation of population through assimilation, ethnic cleansing or forced migration. Although the party claims that it rejects seeing Kosovo through the prism of ethnicity, in line with populism’s core features of homogeneous people and majoritarianism, it asserts

67 Author’s interview with Kurti.
68 Vetëvendosje Party Programme.
69 Kurti, JISB Interview.
70 Vetëvendosje Party Programme.
71 Vetëvendosje Party Programme.
Albanian political and cultural domination in Kosovo, while praising direct democracy.

In short, the analysis of party documents and speeches of the prominent members of the LVV shows that Vetëvendosje’s ideological and political mobilisation is built upon a populist style: (i) an anti-establishment position and instrumental use of ‘the mainstream parliamentary politics’, (ii) hostility towards the government and the international community expressed through protests and the use of symbolism referring to memories and legacies of the Albanian resistance (iii) a contradictory stance towards the minorities shaped by Albanian nationalism. These issues combine the definitive elements of a populist style. Yet, Vetëvendosje’s populism is by and large shaped by the contextual circumstances. The ethnic conflict and disputed national identities in Kosovo as well as Kosovo’s contested statehood after the declaration of independence have defined who is a part of the virtuous and homogeneous people and where the arena for political struggle stands. In order to understand the contextual factors that shaped its ideology and political agenda, the next section turns to analyse the factors that explain the LVV’s societal support.

Explaining the Success of Vetëvendosje
Despite the party’s inconsistent policy proposals and double-standards in relation to minorities and its suspicion of representative democracy, Vetëvendosje has secured a stable group of supporters from different segments of society. Vetëvendosje’s anti-EULEX and pro-independence narrative have articulated a diverse group of supporters including student activists, Albanian nationalists and war veterans. This section discusses three main factors that have contributed to the success of Vetëvendosje’s political mobilisation since 2005 and its recent electoral gains.

Structural Factors: Party System and Electoral Availability
Structural factors have played an important role in the LVV’s unexpected support among the electorate. Electoral availability refers to whether the traditional socio-economic and political cleavages shape the electorate’s voting decision.74 Accordingly, if a considerable part of the electorate has strong ideological party allegiance, there is little chance for a newly established party to gain success in electoral competition. In Kosovo, party allegiance is usually defined through clan-based family structures of the Albanian society, where loyalty provides individuals with access to services and socio-political benefits due to widespread nepotism and clientelism. Moreover, party leaders are very important figures, and the parties’ electoral strongholds are usually the hometowns of the party leaders.75 In general, voters make their electoral decisions based on ethnic affiliations rather than on the socio-economic pledges of parties.76 These factors contribute to the lack of strong ideological allegiance

76 Stojarová and Emerson, Party Politics in the Western Balkans.
to the existing political parties and to the dissatisfaction of groups outside the close-knit patronage networks.

What is more, Kosovo’s party system exemplifies a highly fragmented electoral competition. Every election witnesses the establishment of new parties or splits within older parties. Following the first elections in 2001, all Albanian parties formed a grand coalition. Contrarily, in 2004, the competition, if not hostility, dating back to the resistance years, between the two main parties - the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) - shaped the main electoral cleavage in Kosovo dividing the electorate was divided into two main camps (LDK 45.42% and PDK 25.85%), with many small parties ranging between 8% and 1% of total votes. The 2007 elections once again witnessed a complete restructuring of the party system. After the death of Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of LDK, and the indictment of the leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), a revered former-KLA commander and then Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj at The Hague, the PDK, under the leadership of Hashim Thaçi, has become the most powerful party in the Assembly (34.3%).

Another factor that has contributed to the electoral appeal of the LVV is the electoral system of Kosovo, which has a low threshold (5%) and reserved seats for the minority communities. This system makes a single-party government virtually impossible. Usually, the biggest party largest has to establish a coalition with smaller Albanian parties and the minority list. The situation has created a perception among the electorate that all established parties are ‘the same’ in terms of ideology, creating apathy towards politicians and parties. This situation provides the LVV with a favourable opportunity as an ‘outsider’, criticising the establishment and the elites to capitalise on the disenfranchised and resentful electorate.

Societal Factors: Political and Economic Dissatisfaction
Besides the structural factors that have contributed to the electoral appeal of the LVV in the last two general elections and the latest municipal elections, society-wide dissatisfaction with the current political and economic outlook of Kosovo is a major reason making the LVV an alternative to the established

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77 Election results were taken from IFES Election Guide and Reports of the OSCE Election Monitoring Programme.
political players. According to a recent UNDP Public Pulse Report,\textsuperscript{79} an overwhelming majority of Kosovo citizens (74\%) is either ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’ with the political direction of the country. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, the low level of political satisfaction is a general trend in Kosovo.\textsuperscript{80}

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\text{Nov.-10} & \text{Jun.-11} & \text{Nov.-11} & \text{Apr.-12} & \text{Oct.-12} & \text{Apr.-13} & \text{Apr.-14} & \text{Nov.-14} & \text{Mar.-15} \\
\text{Healthcare} & 47.9\% & 40.7\% & 49.8\% & 43.3\% & 51.6\% & 50.4\% & 40.4\% & 56.2\% & 52.6\% \\
\text{Kosovo Electric Corporation} & 52.4\% & 47.9\% & 61.2\% & 47.8\% & 53.8\% & 48.8\% & 24.4\% & 39.1\% & 44.7\% \\
\text{Courts} & 49.7\% & 41.6\% & 55.6\% & 44.5\% & 47.5\% & 56.4\% & 32.2\% & 42.1\% & 42.9\% \\
\text{Customs} & 45.1\% & 42.3\% & 53.7\% & 43.2\% & 49.9\% & 58.9\% & 22.5\% & 33.4\% & 38.7\% \\
\text{Central Institutions} & 47.5\% & 41.4\% & 43.3\% & 39.5\% & 35.7\% & 46.1\% & 24.0\% & 37.5\% & 38.5\% \\
\text{Privatisation Agency of Kosovo} & 52.0\% & 40.5\% & 51.9\% & 49.4\% & 46.4\% & 48.7\% & 24.6\% & 34.8\% & 37.1\% \\
\text{Municipalities} & 32.9\% & 30.4\% & 31.9\% & 30.1\% & 32.2\% & 38.9\% & 20.6\% & 33.2\% & 33.8\% \\
\text{EULEX Police} & 22.9\% & 26.2\% & 27.1\% & 28.3\% & 28.7\% & 38.3\% & 11.1\% & 16.5\% & 32.2\%
\end{array}
\]

\textbf{Table 1 - Political Satisfaction}  
Source: UNDP Public Pulse 9, 2015

Economic discontent is also very high: about 80\% of the Kosovo Albanians are ‘very dissatisfied’ or ‘dissatisfied’ with Kosovo’s current economic direction, 52\% of the population considers unemployment as the main problem in Kosovo. Political institutions suffer from a reputation crisis which has turned into a legitimacy crisis, due to feeble democratic performance of the government.\textsuperscript{81} There is a high perception of large scale corruption within public institutions including the healthcare system (52\%), courts (43\%), the central government (38\%) and municipalities (34\%) (Table 2).


\textsuperscript{80} Except for the brief period between April 2013 and April 2014, during which Kosovo and Serbia reached the first political agreement and Kosovo started formal negotiations for Stabilisation and Association Agreement, political dissatisfaction is very high.

\textsuperscript{81} Yabanci, \textit{The EU’s Democratization and State-Building Agenda in Kosovo}. 
Moreover, only a minority of the population believes that the Assembly properly monitors the government (21%). Only 13% of respondents believe that the judicial system is independent of political influence and 12% agrees that the government works according to the priorities of the people. These figures demonstrate the overall citizen dissatisfaction with political parties, democratic institutions and the elected politicians. More importantly, a significant proportion of Kosovo Albanians (52%) do not believe that their vote can change the current situation implying also distrust and apathy towards representative democracy. As citizens do not believe in the impact of their electoral choice on changing the corrupt system, the LVV’s criticism of the representative democracy voices the concerns of a significant part of the electorate.

Furthermore, the LVV has gained reputation through its alternative socio-economic pledges. Stojarova argues that political parties in Kosovo “talk about success and wealth of Kosovo in the future, and integration into the EU”, but fail to outline a roadmap for realising the objectives stated in their programmes. Mainstream political parties in Kosovo did not come into existence with a clear ideology. Their agendas were built on two main pillars: ethnic nationalism and independence. The two main parties, Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), attract voters mostly because of their leaders’ historical role in the Kosovo conflict, rather than their differentiated ideology or policy propositions. Smaller parties, such as New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), share similar political and socio-economic programmes with the two main parties, emphasising economic development and integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Their socio-economic commitments are restricted to establishing a minimum wage and pensions, free education and textbooks for school children, improvements in public healthcare and social services for the disabled and elderly. Their programmes and electoral pledges are far from

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<td>Tax Administration of Kosovo</td>
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<td>Post and Telecom of Kosovo</td>
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<td>Banks</td>
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<td>International Organisations</td>
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<td>Kosovo Police</td>
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<td>11.5%</td>
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</table>

Table 2 Perceptions of corruption
Source: UNDP Public Pulse 9, 2015

84 Stojarová and Emerson, Party Politics in the Western Balkans, 163.
86 Xhemaj, Political Parties in Kosovo.
87 Xhemaj, Political Parties in Kosovo.
88 Stojarová and Emerson, Party Politics in the Western Balkans.
addressing discontent with the current economic and political situation, and aggregating citizens’ interests.

On the other hand, the LVV has developed an economic development and socio-economic reform agenda based on a social-democratic outlook. Compared to the established parties’ superficial socio-economic promises, Vetëvendosje details some specific economic objectives and the reasons for promoting them. First, it supports increased local production, a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, and social benefits for all. In order to achieve these goals, the party is against the privatisation of crucial sectors such as energy and telecommunications. Moreover, it supports state subsidies for enterprises, public investment and heavy taxation of higher income groups to increase domestic production and fight against poverty. Import-substitution is central to the party’s economic outlook in order to overcome dependency created by foreign aid and import-based consumerism. The party documents and representatives often mention the emancipation of women, a hardly addressed issue by Kosovo politicians. In contrast to the established parties, the LVV supports EU integration on the condition that all international supervision would leave the country and Kosovo would follow the same path offered to the rest of the candidate countries. Integration into the EU is ‘balanced’ through close relations with the Albanian diaspora and ethnic-Albanians living in the neighbouring countries.

None of the established parties have successfully developed an appealing political and socio-economic agenda to address the widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate, while Vetëvendosje promotes issues that have never been discussed or promoted by other parties. Considered together with the loose ideological affiliation and political apathy of unsatisfied voters, Vetëvendosje has filled an ideological and political gap in Kosovo’s fragmented party system by asserting itself as the only party that genuinely promotes an alternative political system and economy.

Party-related Factors: The Agency of Vetëvendosje

Besides contextual opportunities, Vetëvendosje’s success is also related to its concerted efforts resulting from factors internal to the party, such as the organisational structure, leadership and method of communication or framing when conveying its message to the electorate. Undeniably, the party relies on its experience as a youth movement. Young activists organised on the streets and campuses, as well as through social networks, act as recruiting and socialisation agents of the party and generate bonds of solidarity among the members. The wide network of party volunteers sustains loyalty through demonstrations, film screenings, lectures and active involvement in the decision-making and electoral campaigns.

80 Author’s interview with Kurti.
Moreover, Vetëvendosje’s organisation is more appealing for youth activists, especially compared to low intra-party democracy within other political parties. The leaders of political parties in Kosovo are the main decision-makers and their role cannot be challenged by the party members and committees.\footnote{Stojarová and Emerson, Party Politics in the Western Balkans; Center for Research and Policy Making. 2012. Internal Party Democracy in Kosovo. Policy Brief 20. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.} Compared to these leader-centric parties, internal debate about the objective and future direction of the LVV is encouraged as a way to handle intra-party problems and disagreements.\footnote{Vetëvendosje. 2010. Newsletter No 221 (accessed: 20. March 2016).} To give an example, when deciding whether the movement should participate in the elections for the first time, the LVV had an extended period of intra-party deliberations where the party activists’ opinions were heard for five months and the decision was finally taken by the representatives from local offices, secretariats and committees.\footnote{Vetëvendosje. 2013. Newsletter No. 379. 1. November 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016).} Often, party representatives, deputies and heads of committees assume a public spokesman role for the party besides the leader.

Moreover, contrary to Kosovo’s ‘strong leader, weak party’ tradition, Albin Kurti stepped down as the leader of the party in early 2015. In his open letter to activists and citizens, he stated that he quit as the party leader to intensify and renew his involvement with the party’s base activists and local organisations.\footnote{Kurti, Albin. 2015. Lëter E Hapur E Albin Kurtit Drejtuar Aktivistëve Dhe Qytetarëve. Vetëvendosje, 21. January 2015 (accessed: 20. March 2016).} Kurti’s decision has sent an important message to the electorate that the LVV takes its power from its social movement-type organisation and its supporters, not from the leader. The voluntary change in the party leadership has also strengthened the pledge of the party as an anti-establishment and outsider actor. For the first time in Kosovo, a party leader quit voluntarily with a claim to better serve the goals and ideology of the party.

Furthermore, the party’s noticeable rhetorical style, typical of populist symbolism, also contributes to its visibility among the Kosovo electorate. The dichotomy between ‘us’, the victimised and disenfranchised citizens, versus ‘them’, the corrupt and divisive ruling elite and political parties, dominates almost all party documents.\footnote{This dichotomy is best exemplified in Kurti’s first election rally speech in Pristina. See Vetëvendosje. 2015. Newsletter No 379. 1. November 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016).} The party programme and manifesto are strongly-worded documents with a conversational style asking questions through an emotional style:

quote
“The UNMIK administration of Kosovo is a non-democratic regime. What else can happen with a system when the essence of its mission is the denial of people’s will? [...] By becoming a cog in UNMIK’s machine, [Kosovo institutions/politicians] are not rightful representatives of the people’s interest, because the fundamental interest of the people is the realization of its will. [...] We do not need pseudo-institutions because they mean we have no right to decide for ourselves. Depriving people of being the source of sovereignty will result in an increase of rebellion, the generation of crises and new wars.”\footnote{Vetëvendosje Movement’s Manifesto.} 
endquote
The leadership also uses accusatory discourse towards foreign missions and politicians, using words like ‘traitors’, ‘shameful’, ‘deceitful’ and ‘corrupted’, and highly symbolic public performance. The party documents adopt a polarising language typical of the populist style, clearly dividing the society between ‘them’, the corrupt elites collaborating with Serbia and the international missions and hijacking people’s sovereignty, and ‘us’, the virtuous people and the source of legitimacy:

“Kosovo is sick of corruption, of the lack of democracy, stealing, violation of votes and civic rights, yet they lecture us about our international image, about how we appear externally, that supposedly our parliament functions and we are dealing with a popular majority. There is nothing further from the truth than this. We all know what is happening in Kosovo. We all know about the thieving, corruption and what happens in the Kosovo Assembly.”

The international and domestic criticism against the party is often dismissed through a defensive language using statements such as ‘malicious slander’, ‘unacceptable’, ‘biased’ and ‘childish’. The party’s defensive discourse has contributed to its non-conforming image:

“They told us we would change, yet we didn’t get rich, maintaining instead the coherence of our discourse and fidelity to our method. We did not deviate, we are not tired and we will not stop. Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE! is open for all those who want movement.”

Besides the rhetorical style, the street activism of Vetëvendosje has increased interest in the party as Kosovo’s public sphere has become an active site for social movements in recent years. Corruption scandals, including EULEX staff, have triggered various cycles of demonstrations, strikes and riots. Vetëvendosje has asserted itself as the main propagator of this bottom-up activism to bring political action to the public sphere through these protests. On several occasions the party declared solidarity with protesters, called for participation and mobilised activists and further demonstrations.

Even the criticism of the government and international actors have been utilised by the party leadership to convey the LVV’s message to the public directly. Systematic arrest and imprisonment of the activists has become a publicised campaign for the LVV to challenge the government, to de-mythicise the praised democratisation and Europeanisation process, and to reveal the EULEX’s lack of accountability. For many activists and supporters of the LVV,

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the choice is defined as ‘being bystanders of the unaccountable and unknown relationship of the government and the EU’ or ‘taking the matters into hands through street actions’.\footnote{Author’s personal interview with party activists and Albin Kurti, May 2011, Pristina.}

Without its active leadership and organisational capabilities, Vetëvendosje would not be able to turn Kosovo’s political scene into a favourable context for electoral success. Thanks to its organisational network as a loose movement that is supported by young activists, its intra-party deliberation forums providing a sense of common responsibility to members and the emotional, defensive, visible and persuasive discursive style, Vetëvendosje has actively capitalised on the favourable political and structural opportunities. The LVV’s action-oriented social movement character, combined with a clear populist style, gives a sense of empowerment and action to its supporters vis-à-vis the disenfranchisement that Kosovo’s political system offers.

**Conclusion**
Populism and populist parties have attracted extensive academic and journalistic attention in recent years. The theoretical advances in the research on populism are nevertheless based on a disproportionate empirical focus on the radical right variants of populist parties or the leaders of populist movements. This paper argued that populism is a highly context-sensitive phenomenon; therefore, research on populism beyond the usual cases of populist mobilisation would offer much-needed novel empirical findings in the literature to help us understand different types and characteristics of populism, as well as the reasons behind the success or failure of populist parties.

This paper’s approach towards populism is based on two arguments. First, populism is not a full ideology but a thin-centred one that revolves around core anti-establishment concepts: the homogenous people as the source of sovereignty and direct or majoritarian democracy. Otherwise, contextual factors determine how these core concepts are defined and how they are utilised for social and political action. Secondly, unlike the common usage of the term within the European context, populism should not be used with a necessarily pejorative understanding so as not to limit our understanding to a specific type of populism (right wing or leader-centric).

In the empirical part, the paper offered an analysis of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje within the framework of Kosovo’s socio-political and economic context. First, it analysed the ideological mobilisation of the party as an example of a populist style. The analysis of the LVV’s programme, manifesto, party documents such as newsletters, as well as the articles and speeches by the party leadership, showed that the LVV displays the core characteristics of a populist movement/party: hostility to elites and the establishment, including international missions in Kosovo, and people-centrism that determines the party’s stance against representative democracy and minority communities, especially Serbs. The LVV’s insistence on remaining as a movement and its emphasis on solidarity and unification among the people through active
engagement in contentious politics also demonstrate that populism is the defining political style of the party. This populist style has also allowed the LVV to convey its social, political and economic outlook to the Kosovo electorate through simple and direct messages.

The second part of the paper offered three main reasons for the rise of Vetëvendosje from a youth movement to a powerful and credible opposition party: the availability of the electorate, widespread political and social unrest, and the agency of Vetëvendosje in communicating with the disenfranchised electorate and dispersing its message through contentious politics. Its political style accommodates some inconsistent claims, especially towards minorities. However, Vetëvendosje's criticism of Kosovo's political circles and institutions often provide a correct depiction of the current problems of Kosovo, and brought together a diverse group of voters sharing a similar dissatisfaction with political institutions and rulers. Deep ethnic division, weak institutions that have failed to connect with citizens, international supervision responsible for making and implementing policies without citizen participation and the traumatic experience of the lack of recognised statehood have contributed to the appeal of the LVV's protest and anti-establishment discourse and actions.

Vetëvendosje's increasing popularity is related to the fact that its commitment to change the system (not only the elected leaders) resounds widely with the society's view of local politicians, international state-building and democratisation. Political leaders are not trusted by the ordinary citizens. Moreover, the international mission failed to bring corruption and clientelist structures at the top of Kosovo politics under control. As a result, the LVV's criticism of the government and the international community through a unique anti-establishment perspective has successfully addressed the frustration of the Kosovo Albanian electorate.

The analysis has also suggested that the electoral success of the LVV cannot be fully explained by analysing institutional variables, because Kosovo's political scene is pervaded by nepotism, clientelism and leader-centric political parties that favour mostly the LDK and PDK. The role of Vetëvendosje's agency in translating the opportunities into success is undeniable. The internal organisation and cohesion, leadership, campaigning, left-leaning programmatic orientation as well as the creation of a public sphere through protests are decisive to explain its support. Given that many people do not believe that voting is the principal way to hold politicians and institutions accountable, the LVV's popularity comes from the power of a social movement.

Overall, the ideology, discourse, success and endurance of the LVV are shaped by political context, the electorate's readiness to accept a switch away from the established politics, and the organisational capabilities of such parties. In the future, the endurance of Vetëvendosje will be much determined by the electorate's choice which is, in turn, shaped by Kosovo's political and economic circumstances in the future. Vetëvendosje might find it difficult to sustain or increase its electoral appeal, if the rival parties start to generate alternative policies for the electorate regarding the economic and political issues that the LVV currently capitalises on. For the moment, competitors struggle to generate
novel policies to address citizens’ demands, while international pressure and undemocratic and corrupt governance create more societal resentment. As long as Vetëvendosje melds a populist style with bottom-up mobilisation, it will continue to appeal to a considerable proportion of Kosovo’s people. In the future, the LVV example might even inspire other populist movements and political actors in the region as undemocratic practices and monopolisation of power by elected governments as well as economic hurdles has created a similar dissatisfaction with political institutions and incumbents.

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Bilge Yabancı

Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo: A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje


Interviews
Albin Kurti, Prishtina, May 2011.
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Research Article

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Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing ‘the People’ in Macedonia’s illiberal discourse

Ljupcho Petkovski*

This paper is a theoretically driven case study of the authoritarian populist reign of VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia since 2006. At the beginning, I assess the strengths and identify the pitfalls of the dominant approach to studying populism that sees populist politics as democratic illiberalism. Then I argue that this approach should be complemented with a discourse theoretical methodology that renders us more sensitive to the diachronic dimensions of the rise of Gruevski’s populism and its origins. The crucial concept I use to account for the durability of Gruvski’s reign is hegemony, which helps us to understand two important aspects of his populism. The specificity of his populism is in managing to change the political imagination of the majority of ethnic Macedonians, to create ‘the people’ and allow it to reclaim its place in history by providing channels for material, symbolic and emotional incorporation into the system of social classes that were traditionally excluded from society. This ‘democratic’ move came at a price: the nascent liberal and institutional channels for political participation in Macedonia’s young democracy were dismissed and new subalternity created. In demonstrating my findings, the paper includes a historical perspective of how the conditions allowing the rise of populism in Macedonia were created, as well as a discourse analysis of five paradigmatic speeches given by Gruevski.

Keywords: populism, Macedonia, hegemony, illiberalism, discourse theory, authoritarianism

Introduction

Since Nikola Gruevski was elected Prime Minister in Macedonia in 2006, the rule of his party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), has been described as populist for various reasons: fostering practices of clientelism, promoting new policies of redistribution, disregarding the constitution and the liberal checks-and-balances and being driven in their political actions by citizens’ expectations according to the opinion polls.

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In 2015, Zoran Zaev, the leader of Macedonia’s opposition, exposed the authoritarian practices of Gruevski’s regime to the domestic and international public by releasing a series of wiretapped conversations between officials from Gruevski’s camp revealing (or rather confirming existing accusations of) widespread corruption, illegal influence on the judiciary, pressures on the media, etc. These revelations resulted in a deep political crisis and a series of contentious political events, with the outcome of the crisis still unknown. Zaev was indicted for violence against state officials, with a group of his collaborators being detained and charged for a number of crimes including espionage. The wiretaps fanned the flames of existing discontent and protest cycles, resulting in a politics of containment by the regime and an EU-brokered deal between the regime and the opposition that envisaged the resignation of Gruevski before the early elections that were supposed to be held in April 2016. Gruevski resigned in January, but the elections were postponed until June 2016. In March 2016, many of Gruevski’s closest and most loyal collaborators were already under investigation (some even detained) by the Special Public Prosecutor’s Office, an institution that was established as part of the EU-brokered deal. In a move that shocked the public and triggered yet another series of protests, counter protests and even violence, Gjorgje Ivanov, the President of Macedonia and a close ally of Gruevski, decided to pardon all politicians facing charges.

The characterization of the regime was confirmed by the content of the wiretapped conversations capturing the authoritarian nature of Gruevski’s reign, but eventually blurred the specificity of what was populist in his rule. These confusions and normatively imbued characterizations of populism are not reducible to their use in everyday parlance, but are also part of theoretical debates.

This paper thus has theoretical and practical goals, and is structured in such a way that allows both theoretical and empirical challenges to be addressed. It aims to answer two sets of questions related to the specificity of populism and the origins of populism in Macedonia. Firstly, what is the specific feature that makes certain politicians, ideologies or discourses populist? Which theoretical approach would be more rewarding in terms of capturing what is at stake in populist politics? Secondly, what were the conditions allowing for the rise of populism in Macedonia? Why did right-wing populist politics profit, and not more progressive ones, despite most of the grievances being socioeconomic issues which could have been articulated by leftist parties as well? How is the antagonism between the protagonists, the people and the elite construed by Gruevski in his political discourse, and what is the relation - in Macedonia’s case - between populism and democracy?

As a leitmotif of the theoretical discussion, I will argue that defining populism as an ontological category instead of being focused on its sociological and ontic dimensions, and being concentrated on both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of populism, can be analytically rewarding. In the second part, I will offer a historical perspective of the rise of populism in Macedonia arguing that the liberal successes in transition, paradoxically, created the conditions for the rise of populism that eventually hampered democratic consolidation,
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turning the country into a stable competitive authoritarian regime. Finally, this paper will present the results of a discourse analysis of Gruevski’s speeches which looks at how ‘the people’ and the hostile elite, as the central protagonists in populist narratives, are construed, invoked and negotiated in his political ideology.

Populism: Between Two-Strand Theory and Discourse Theory
As noted by Canovan, the most common theorization aimed at explaining populism’s hazy relation to democracy starts with the account that democracy as we know it is today is actually liberal democracy, whereas the danger of populism is related to it being fundamentally illiberal.¹ Canovan’s remark resonates with the hegemonic vision of liberal democracy today, according to which the proper functioning of democracy requires liberal tenets such as a free market, a government limited by a complex system of checks-and-balances and constitutional arrangements for the protection of individual (and collective) rights, as well as democratic principles such as free and fair elections. Historically, as Chantal Mouffe acknowledges, liberalism and democracy represented separate values, two different traditions whose reconciliation is contingent and characteristic for the specific historical context of the West, as a result of which liberalism was democratized and democracy was liberalized.²

From this perspective, the historical development of representative democracy can be interpreted in terms of tensions and temporary readjustments between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism, whose reconciliation is not stable. In this vein, the traumatic experience related to the rise of totalitarian regimes in liberal democratic settings in 20th century Europe can be seen as giving a boost to the prevalence of the so-called non-majoritarian principles and additional limitations to the expression of popular will, shrinking the space for politics and popular participation. It comes as no surprise that populist solutions are fascinating for an electorate tired of the complexity of contemporary government.³

Following this line of argument, the targets of populism, and the objects of its fascination, are predictable: political and intellectual elites, who are blamed for betraying the people. The liberal tenets whose ‘taken-for-grantedness’ in contemporary post-political societies is additionally enhanced by the multi-party consensus, the metaphor of “politics beyond left and right”, as well as the expansion of global markets and supra-national institutions, are thus challenged by populist appeal against liberal democracy, its culture and norms.⁴ Established power structures are not any more trustworthy, the argument goes, and a populist remedy should be put in place to cure the democratic malaise: the people should reclaim their sovereignty and solve their

⁴ Mouffe, The ‘End of Polities’.
problems according to their visions and interests with no intermediaries whatsoever, bypassing the frustrating complexities of liberal democracy.

A great deal of the literature explaining the rise of populism in Eastern and Central Europe rests on the two-strand theory. Much of the discussion is reminiscent of Zakaria’s *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy* in which he popularized the idea of ‘illiberal democracies’. 5 According to Zakaria, democracy and liberal-democracy are often deceivingly used as synonymous terms which are reflected in the widespread belief that if a country holds competitive, multiparty elections, we can call it democratic. Western democracy as we know it is much more about how (political and social) life is organized in-between elections. Thus, a democracy without constitutional liberalism is a dangerous combination as it can lead to the limitation of liberty, abuse of power, ethnic division and war.

The debate about the populist backlash in this region takes a similar direction by stressing the attack on the liberal component of the democratic regimes as the central issue in populism. Krastev and Smilov identify the following common characteristics of the populisms in the region: a) They appeal to the people as a whole as opposed to the corrupt and impotent political elites; b) they oppose the core idea of liberal democracy - that the political majority should be limited in important ways by constitutional constrains - populism is centred around the idea that the consent of the majority is the ultimate ground for legitimation in politics; c) populism challenges some of the tenets of the liberal consensus and its taboos.6

Elsewhere, Krastev reiterates that populism is not anti-democratic. By giving voice to the ‘underdogs’ who were never interested in participating in politics, populism is instrumental in challenging the perception of the transitional regimes as democracies without choice. This perception was fostered by successful EU accession, conditioned by policy consensus regarding the empowerment of liberal institutions such as courts, independent central banks and the improvement of the quality of institutional performance.7 As Rupnik and Zielonka have noticed, until recently the winners have outnumbered the losers of the transition in Central Europe, adding a supplementary boost to the liberal consensus which is now undermined.8 Accordingly, the ever growing appeal of populism is capturing major political trends, i.e. the rise of ‘democratic illiberalism’ resulting from the rising tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism and reflecting the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions.9

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However, reducing the rise of populism to the result of a simple tension between liberalism and democracy neglects the diachronic, historical and contextually rich dimensions of the rise of populism in the region. ‘Populism’ therefore captures how illiberal regimes enjoy popular backing which cannot be reduced to coercion, but results from the role of ideology and cultural hegemony.\textsuperscript{10} The analytical focus of political discourse theory sheds more light on this construction of populist identities. It identifies populism as a political logic and an ontological horizon which articulates manifest content and ideological material. This neo-Gramscian approach was developed by Ernesto Laclau and other scholars associated with the Essex School of Discourse Analysis.

- Political discourse theory draws heavily on post-structuralism and the linguistic turn in social sciences. Laclau asserts that the basic hypothesis of the notion of discourse as a type of analysis is focused not on facts but on their conditions of being and “the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field which pre-exists any factual immediacy.”\textsuperscript{11} Discourse theory is not actually a theory in a strict sense, but rather belongs to the field of political philosophy. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, operates at an ontic level, as it is expected to engage in an analysis of the research objects as defined by ontological presuppositions.\textsuperscript{12} The two defining features of discourse theory are the anti-essentialist ontology and the anti-foundationalist epistemology.

- In an attempt to contrast his concept of populism to those that see populist practices as an expression of the identities of social actors, Laclau claims that what is actually at stake is the constitutive character of the practice.\textsuperscript{13} Populism is not any longer a transparent medium through which pre-existing identities can be expressed, but rather a performative and articulatory category that constitutes the identity of the actors involved in it. As such, populism is a political logic.

- But how can we understand political logics? Laclau describes social logic as “involving a rarefied system of statements - that is to say, a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are representable while others are excluded.”\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, political logics are situated at the limits of discourse, or at the point at which the contingent nature of discourses and actors’ identities are revealed. Political logic is associated with the


institutions of the social, but becomes blurred as social logics permeate through. As Glynos and Howarth suggest, “political logics thus provide a conceptual vocabulary to show how these limits are constituted, transformed, and absorbed, and they do so by focusing on the way the logic of equivalence comes to predominate over the logic of difference, and vice versa.”

- For Laclau, the basic unit of analysis in the study of populist identities is the social demand. In his earlier accounts, Laclau used the concepts of moments and elements to characterize the basic units that are the subject of articulatory practices. Elements, as an analytical category, are characterized by their relative isolation and indecisive, floating nature. When they are captured, articulated or partially fixed by a certain structure, they become moments. By ‘articulation’, Laclau and Mouffe understand “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”

- If people’s demands, addressed to those who are seen to be in charge, are absorbed in their isolation, they are absorbed by the system differentially - they become moments. Sometimes, demands are even absorbed by clientelistic logic, or - as in authoritarian regimes - by co-optation. Demands can also not be satisfied but pre-emptively met with counter protests in order to question their legitimacy. Yet as long as they are dealt with in such a way that keeps them apart, in isolation from other demands, a certain political logic of difference operates.

- However, there are demands of different types that remain frustrated and start developing a relation of equivalence. What they have in common is the fact that they have been left aside. If this is the case and some kind of solidarity develops, what we see operating is the logic of equivalence. The logics of difference and equivalence correspond to the syntagmatic/associative axes in Saussurean linguistics. The logic of difference is a way of organizing social life, presupposing that each demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way. The logic of equivalence is about substituting elements. It “reduces the number of positions that can be combined in a discourse, leading to a paratactical division of the political space that simplifies political struggle into an antagonism between ‘us’ and ‘them’, good and evil.”

- Returning to the unsatisfied demands, what is actually at stake is the experience of dislocation, an encounter with the contingent character of social relations. Dislocation is “the moment when the subject’s mode of being is understood as disrupted” or “occasions when a subject is called upon to confront

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17 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 105-6.
19 Laclau, Populism: What’s in a Name?, 38.
the contingency of social relations more directly than at other times.”

There is no logical response to this experience: we know from psychoanalysis that different modalities of being can emerge in response to the experience of loss. There is a growing body of literature, drawing on Freud’s work, on the difference between mourning and melancholia, which attempts to use these concepts for the analysis of ideological responses to social dislocations. From a more positive point of view, dislocation opens up the possibility for new identifications and political action. In other words, as a number of grievances are expressed, hegemonic political projects try to articulate them, partially fix their meaning, and give them a sense of stability.

The negativity of the lack of experience is not a sufficient basis for the construction of a populist identity. The equivalential chain needs to be named, positivized. As the demands are emptying themselves of meaning in the process of articulation, it becomes possible for one or some of the elements of the chain to step up as a symbol representing the whole chain. In this process of the universalization of the unifying element, the particular demands are condensed around the symbol, which is called an empty signifier. The empty signifier serves as a surface for inscription for the elements of the equivalential chain. However, it remains internally split between its particular content and the universal function. Thus, popular identity is always operating in tension between autonomy and hegemony, at the interface between differential and equivalential logic. The empty signifier is not a transparent medium representing the particular demands’ lowest common denominator. It is not merely representing social content, but is a performative category sustaining identity. This emancipated signifier does not represent the signified, but rather constitutes it. Universality, in discourse theory, is not directly accessible, but always takes a proxy to embody it. This proxy is the empty signifier. It develops a logic of its own and assumes a hegemonic function:

“Equivalential relations would not go beyond a vague feeling of solidarity if they did not crystallize in a certain discursive identity which no longer represents democratic demands as equivalent, but the equivalential link as such. Although the link was originally ancillary to the demands, it now reacts over them and, through an inversion of the relationship, starts behaving as their ground.”

- This helps us understand why referents of the signifier ‘the people’ are contingent and basically depend on what has been articulated by the chain. It also helps us understand why populist phenomena can have different social bases and why populism is not inherently illiberal. Caiani and Della Porta

21 Glynos and Howarth, Logics of Critical Explanation, 110.
25 Laclau, Populist Reason, 94.
offer an illuminating analysis of how the people are depicted in the political narrative of far-right populists in Germany and Italy, and if we compare the passive, non-tolerant people of the far-right with the inclusionary, liberal and radically democratic interpellations of the left-wing populist movements from the European South we can discern the obvious differences.

- Political discourse theory’s intervention in the debate on populism is hence valuable for multiple reasons. First, it enriches our understanding of democracy as we know it and reveals the backdrops of ‘our’ (post-)democratic imaginaries. More importantly, it rehabilitates the roles emotions, passions and affectations play in sustaining our political identities. On a normative level, it has sent the message that progressive politics should reoccupy the terrain of radical politics that has been occupied by far-right populists in the West, or illiberal authoritarians as in the case of Macedonia.

### Populism in Macedonia

The use of the term ‘populism’ in Macedonia has exploded in the last decade, with the overall trend intensifying after 2006, when the conservative party VMRO-DPMNE, led by Nikola Gruevski, seized power. The term is used with a pejorative connotation and refers to two things. Firstly, it denotes popular measures that are much to the liking of voters, citizens or the people, but which bring about no progress in the long run. Secondly, and more importantly, the anti-populist discourse is used as a tool for the negative framing of any policy, political strategy or coalition that challenges the rather precarious liberal consensus that was created in the post-socialist transition period. Liberal commentators, politicians and analysts in Macedonia use populism not as a concrete object of analysis but rather as a category describing the constitutive outside of this consensus.

VMRO-DPMNE’s populism shares the basic structural characteristics of other populisms in post-socialist societies. It is defined by broad appeals to the people creating a symbolic cleavage between the people and the former communist-turned-social-democrat and liberal elite that has dominated political and social life since 1945. It also tends - in the name of the people who have suffered historical injustices - to dismantle liberal institutions and principles that are supposed to organize democratic political competition. In other words, despite enabling channels for the inclusion of once-neglected social sectors into political life, the losers in both transition and socialism, populism in Macedonia is fundamentally illiberal and authoritarian.

Despite certain similarities, three characteristics distinguish the rise of populism in Macedonia from other populisms in the region. Firstly, Macedonia is an ethnically divided society where a complex power-sharing institutional arrangement between Macedonians and Albanians organizes political life. Secondly, the rise of populism coincided with a large-scale nation-building project aimed at revising the historical imaginary of the Macedonian nation. Finally, the populist and nationalist project of VMRO-DPMNE is a strategic one, as it is aimed at creating symbolic capital for a new right-wing elite that
Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing ‘the People’ in Macedonia’s illiberal discourse

lacks a political historical tradition it can draw legitimacy from. In other words, it is the populism of the new ruling elite that can be described as a hegemonic and ideological project radically transforming the political and social fabric of Macedonia.

VMRO-DPMNE’s populism articulates the grievances of both the losers of transition and socialism against a common enemy: the values of the (post-) communist, pro-western elites that embraced the values of (neo)liberal ideology during transition. The elites to which the people are opposed consist of more than just the political establishment of the Social-Democratic Union (SDSM), the successor of the Communist Party. More importantly, it is antagonized by the values of what Althusser called the ideological state apparatuses of the nascent liberal-democratic state during the transition: the intellectual elite, the independent media as well as liberal and pro-western civil society organizations in general. These are presented in the populist discourse not as independent actors with new values, but as a united entity and a continuation of the socialist legacy. It was the frustration of various popular sectors with the continuous state of emergency, with the complexities and contradictions of transition which the political and intellectual elite symbolized, that created the conditions for the rise of populism in Macedonia after 2006. The various legitimate grievances people expressed were condensed around the myth-like demand for novelty, for a new type of politics. In a double move, Nikola Gruevski, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, not only portrayed his liberal opponents as corrupt and incompetent, but also stressed the discontinuity of his political project with his predecessor in the party, the former Prime Minister Ljubcho Georgievski. Capturing the popular imagination, Gruevski presented himself as a novel, modern political personality whose political identity had not been tainted by dirty transition politics.

The Transition Consensus and its Others
The policies of the consensus within political elites regarding transition in Macedonia did not differ radically from other democratizing post-communist European countries. As Rupnik notices, the tenets of the elite-led and top-down consensus were the primacy of the constitutional order and the need for economic liberalization. The first presupposed the establishment of politically ‘neutral’ liberal institutions; the second a large-scale privatization and integration of the economy to the global market. The backgrounded in this formula was the role of a wide democratic and popular legitimation of these reforms. Paradoxically, the weakening of intermediary actors such as trade unions and the lack of civil society organization facilitated the smooth implementation of painful reforms. In Central and Eastern Europe, according to Rupnik and Zielonka, it was the economic benefits from liberalization and the fact that the winners outnumbered the losers that legitimized the hegemony of the new order and kept liberal democracy stable.29

This was not entirely the case in Macedonia, as privatization was coupled with the turmoil of war in the region. This brought about higher unemployment rates than during Yugoslav socialism and resulted in falling living standards. Not being able to distribute economic benefits, the post-communist elites sought legitimacy elsewhere. Much of the success of the liberal hegemony can be accounted for in terms of a security crisis among the citizens of Macedonia due to the wars in the region and the precarious international position of the new state. Kiro Gligorov, the first post-communist President of the country, became famous for portraying the country as an “oasis of peace”, an embodiment of civilized European values in the Balkans, a region torn by war and barbarianism. This sense of crisis allowed the elites to legitimize non-popular decisions, both economic, such as large scale privatization, and political, such as the compromise with Greece regarding the country’s name in 1995. War, turmoil, chaos and instability were said to be the alternatives to any painful decision made. When the post-communist elite lost the parliamentary election in 1998, a nationalist government seized power for the first time in Macedonia’s history of statehood. Though known as a populist leader whose party, VMRO-DPMNE, articulated the grievances of the losers in both transition and socialism in the 1990s, Ljubcho Georgievski’s reign was characterized - until the outburst of inter-ethnic conflict in 2001 - by political moderation, the de-politicization of issues he once contested, and upgraded practices of corruption. In the 1990s, he promised the revision of what was seen by many as fraudulent privatization: however, once in power, his government further privatized precious economic assets that had remained in state ownership. The transition consensus seemed to be cemented.

Despite the fact that most of the dislocatory experiences that contributed to the widespread sentiment of an identity crisis during transition were related to economic grievances, the main challenge to the liberal consensus did not come from the ‘objective’ laws of economy. Rather, it was challenged by means of the most democratic tool available in politics - a referendum. After ousting VMRO-DPMNE from power at the parliamentary elections in 2002, the new SDSM government, led by the old leader Branko Crvenkovski, formed a coalition government with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a party whose core consisted of former Albanian guerrilla fighters, who decided to leave arms and pursue their political aims democratically. The most sensitive policy issue this government needed to tackle was the implementation of the Framework Agreement. The Agreement put an end to the inter-ethnic violence between the state and ethnic Albanians in 2001, and stipulated an adoption of a set of constitutional and legal arrangements which were implemented without significant resistance until 2004.

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It was in this year that a strong grassroots democratic mobilization appeared against the proposed Law on Territorial Organization, a piece of legislation that was seen by the majority of ethnic Macedonians as favouring the interests of Albanians. VMRO-DPMNE actively supported the initiative and their role was instrumental in collecting the number of signatures needed to call a referendum against the law. The government, a great part of the liberal civil society and the media actively boycotted the referendum with the slogan “Some questions don’t deserve an answer”, depicting the choice as between a European future and nationalistic isolationism.

Some ethnic Macedonian proponents defended the legislation because they genuinely believed in multiculturalism as a proper model for the future of the country. However, due to the general atmosphere of inter-ethnic mistrust, the new territorial arrangement was mainly framed as a sacrifice that needed to be made so that the country could finally become part of Europe. To the dismay of the majority of ethnic Macedonians, these developments were supported by the international community. They were also rewarding in terms of foreign policy. The US recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name just a few days before the referendum, as an incentive to keep voters away from the polls. As an additional reward, Macedonia was the first country in the region to be granted candidate status for EU membership in 2005 and seemed to be well on the track to becoming a stable liberal, multicultural democracy.

The success of the government in implementing a solution that lacked clear democratic legitimacy came at a price. According to the usual interpretation, the ‘failed’ referendum was instigated by VMRO-DPMNE mobilising the nationalistic sentiments of ethnic Macedonians. This explanation is partially valid, yet by characterizing the referendum in such a way, we are not doing justice to the plethora of legitimate grievances that were expressed by voters. Although the referendum was initiated by the nationalistic organization of the Macedonian diaspora, the World Macedonian Congress, it is also true that even nationalists framed their argument in such a way that the Framework Agreement was not put into question. Rather they claimed that the law was not prepared in accordance with the best European practices, which presuppose democratic consultation. On top of that, the challenge did not come exclusively from nationalists. A group of intellectuals and distinguished public figures usually associated with liberal worldviews founded the platform Civic Movement for Macedonia (Gragjansko Dvizenje za Makedonija), which rallied against the Law claiming that the legislation was not prepared in a democratic manner. Finally, over 30 municipalities announced they would organize local referenda against the Law. To sum up, though nationalism and the fear of ethnic Macedonians pertain to explaining the intensity of the mobilization, it can also be said that the mobilization was an outlet for the expression of a myriad of legitimate concerns, which eventually turned into resentment against the values of the ruling elite. There was an accumulation of contradictions that the liberal elite ignored and labeled as not worthy of consideration.

This, in turn, signaled that a large number of disenfranchised ethnic Macedonians lost their patience. Security concerns, that made the citizens prone to accept painful decisions and believe that the distant European future
will be compensation for their hardships, had lost their resonance. Furthermore, the actors who had used this narrative to legitimize painful decisions had lost their moral credibility to rule, to be ‘real’ representatives of the people. The referendum ‘failed’, however a new populist majority was born, which has dominated national politics ever since.

The key practices in Macedonian politics in the last decade are usually characterized as nationalist and authoritarian, and not necessarily populist. The fact that VMRO-DPMNE’s elite embarked on a project of national renaissance which included both symbolic dimensions, such as a revision of the historiography, and more ‘material’ ones such as ‘Skopje 2014’, the beautification project of Macedonia’s capital, legitimize these claims. However, it can be argued that the populist logic is once again crucial, although sometimes overdetermined by the logic of nationalism. What is at stake in Macedonia is not nation-building in a classic sense, the invention of myths that create the nation. Macedonian national identity, as it were, was already stable at the end of socialism. The majority of ethnic Macedonians were content with their history and myths. Yet, on the other hand, in unofficial discourses such as the family histories of many people, especially from subaltern classes, the official national narrative was challenged, and supplemented with additional, not publicly recognized subaltern myths about their national and political identities. This is why it is more correct to characterize the national renaissance as a project of the incorporation of subaltern myths whose function has been not only to express an alternative national identity, but also to constitute the subaltern identity of those oppressed by socialism, and later by the transition elites.\footnote{Atanasov, Petar. 2004. *Macedonian National Identity: Quantitative Differences Between Unitary and Subaltern National Myths and Narratives*. Discussion Paper 32, South East Europe Series. London: London School of Economics.}

The myths about the ancient glory of Macedonians, which were usually coupled with the narratives about the incredibly rich, radical political history of VMRO, have been immanent as counter-hegemonic myths opposed to the hegemony of the (post-)socialist and liberal elites. Their elevation in the public discourse of populist politicians and political practices as such symbolizes the return of the repressed, ‘the people’, in politics and history. As the analysis of Gruevski’s speeches below will demonstrate, nationalist elements are present, sometimes as more central, but most of the time as marginal elements of his populism. Their role is most often instrumental in antagonizing the socialist and liberal elites, and not in challenging the national others.

The last peculiarity of the context in which VMRO-DPMNE’s populism has emerged is related to the previous one. The intensity of VMRO-DPMNE’s hegemonic project can be accounted for in terms of the absence of political tradition and history on the part of the Macedonian political right. As a result, the political imagination of the people has always been deeply rooted in the cultural hegemony of the socialist and liberal elites. It was this hegemonic appeal, the symbolic capital accumulated through a long-lasting grip on power that made the liberal post-socialist elite easily associated with the tradition of...
statehood, as the only legitimate representative of the interests of the citizens. This symbolic resource, in turn, made it the only political actor worthy of trust in times of permanent crisis, dislocations and socio-economic transformation. It facilitated the legitimacy of the permanent state of transition, mitigating the dislocatory effects of the unprecedented and traumatic socio-economic transformation whereby the identities of many ordinary people were being threatened. It did not legitimate the elite and its dogma as being an economic provider of the needs of the citizens, because they obviously failed to improve the living standard of citizens, but as the only alternative with a proven record of statehood which can lead the people through the hardships of today into a ‘glorious’ European future.

Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE seem to have understood this ‘structural’ constraint to their rule. They realized that if the status quo is to be meaningfully challenged, it is not enough to capture the state, as his predecessor Georgievski tried to do in the 1998-2002 period, but the political imagination of its citizens must also be transformed. Even in this period, creating a new cultural and political hegemony was not the top priority of the ruling elites, although there were certain attempts that announced the project of creating a new cultural hegemony of the Macedonian political right. Thus, Gruevski’s populism can be seen as a solution to the lack of political and symbolic capital, the invention of a genuine political tradition by the virtue of combining subaltern and repressed traditions and counter-hegemonic myths into a more coherent ideological amalgam. Political elites need such symbolic resources from which to draw political legitimacy. To use a comparison from the region, though HDZ in Croatia and the conservative parties in Serbia were newcomers in the political competition after socialism, they were able to legitimize their appeals on the basis of the existence of radical and populist political traditions before socialism. This was not the case in Macedonia, and therefore such a tradition had to be invented.33

The Populist Resonance Machine and its Effect on Democracy

Prior to coming to power, Gruevski did not merely play the nationalist card, but challenged many of the orthodoxies of transition that were experienced as having inflicted injustices on the ordinary people and contributed to the sense of an identity crisis. There was yet another rise in unemployment after 2002, and the explanation of the predicament was framed with moralistic and not economic arguments. The social-democratic and liberal elites were blamed for taking advantage of privatization in the 1990s and destroying the factories, the symbol of the stability of the working identities in socialism. Gruevski won the hearts of the underdogs by promising that, once in power, he would review the privatization process.

“What we got from them [SDSM] is record-level unemployment and poverty, and yet they are still trying to conceal the real state of affairs by deploying some abstract ideas about stability, security and European perspectives.”

This excerpt from a column written by Gruevski just before the elections in 2006 is instructive of the whole political strategy, aimed at portraying him as having a completely opposite habitus than that of his opponents. The VMRO-DPMNE party manifesto was called “Rebirth in 100 Steps”, and was supposed to offer concrete projects instead of ‘abstract ideas’, to portray his approach as technocratic instead of political, concerned with the real problems of the people instead of with the dirty business of political compromise.

All of the grievances and resentments were gradually combined in a new ideology of the people, an assemblage of different ideologies brought together by the hegemonic projects of the populist movement. This authoritarian populist ideology that combined a set of disparate as well as logically and ideologically incoherent elements invented new cleavages in society, while repressing others. It is reminiscent of Connolly’s “resonance machine”: what the hegemonic political alliance involves cannot be reduced to a shared doctrine, but what should be looked at is the affinities of sensibility, the shared affective ethos of different actors that are part of the people. The effect of the resonance machine “is not well covered by terms such as ‘manipulation’ and ‘group-think’; for the messages in question already speak to the bellicose temper of those who receive them.”

VMRO-DPMNE’s ideology is ambivalent: neither left nor right when it comes to the economy, because it combines neoliberal dogma with an ever growing state which subsidizes a growing number of rent-seekers. It is democratic in the sense that it created channels for the material, symbolic and emotional incorporation of social classes that were traditionally excluded from society, but in so doing it deploys clientelistic mechanisms. It symbolically empowers the underdogs, but also creates the new popular identity by virtue of the exclusion of many marginalized communities, thus creating new types of subalternity. It allowed ‘the people’ to reclaim its place in history by dismissing the nascent liberal and institutional channels for political participation in Macedonia’s young democracy.

The identity of Gruevski’s people is sustained by an eternal production of cleavages and conflicts, by the invention of new dividing lines, which coalesce around the master division - the cleavage between ‘the people’ and the values of the transitional elite. The confrontational style of Gruevski reached its peak in 2009. When faced with the first serious opposition to his policies, he addressed the members of his party in a letter calling them to get engaged in a final battle:

“The time is ripe for us to begin the final battle against the remnants from the transition ... The time is ripe for the final battle against the politicians who left nothing but destruction and poverty... In the last couple of elections, they were defeated, but didn’t vanish.”

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Paradoxically, the production of cleavages went hand by hand with the denial of pluralism and the immanent existence of cleavages. Dissenting opinions were met with suspicion and the denial of their authenticity, accused of being instigated by ‘the elites’. In VMRO-DPMNE’s populist discourse, there is no such thing as authentic civic opposition, and any opposition is presented as a conspiracy against the people and its representatives as if it were controlled by the party opposition or foreign centres of power. The phenomenon of counter-protests was reactivated and upgraded by VMRO-DPMNE. Counter-protests against civil society initiatives are not used just to instill fear amongst dissenting voices, but to discredit them, to persuade the public that the political battle, after all, is completely dominated by the political parties, the one of the people and the one of the transitional elites.

Yet, none of these techniques would have been possible, had VMRO-DPMNE not succeeded in winning the battle at the level of hegemony. Many resources were therefore invested in cultural production and propaganda, in winning the minds and hearts of the constituents, in establishing a new hierarchy of values and tastes. New organic intellectuals appeared, challenging the values of the old intellectual elite. There was a tabloid-like political talk show whose principal aim was to discredit the old elite, accompanied with an immense production of historical documentaries reactivating many taboos from the past and giving new meaning to historical events at the detriment of the old interpretations. The basic principles of political correctness that contributed to political moderation in times of crisis came under increased attack from the organic intellectuals. The lustration process was furthermore misused and on the basis of dubious evidence many vocal critics of VMRO-DPMNE’s rule were lustrated in an attempt to discredit their credibility.

Far from being consolidated, Macedonia’s democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrated certain resilience to shocks. The price Macedonia had to pay for the entrance of ‘the people’ into politics is rather high, however. Nowadays the system can be characterized as what Levitsky famously called ‘competitive authoritarianism’. Democracy is reduced to holding frequent elections which only confirm the supremacy of the incumbents. There is no level playing field for political competition, as the elite holds considerable sway over the media, the constitutional court, the judiciary, and all important checks-and-balances mechanisms that are supposed to provide the rule of law. It holds even firmer grip on the production of consent. Macedonia is a country with political prisoners. The process of lustration was used to punish critics and to silence opposition. A paralyzing atmosphere of fear increases the cost of political participation for citizens not interpellated by the populist

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ideology, and instills immense levels of cynicism in citizens. Despite the wiretapping scandal in 2015, which revealed its corruption and misuse of office, the ‘people’s’ government still enjoys considerable support which cannot be explained merely by the level of control and coercion it exercises over society. The populist regime invested in coercion, but much more in consent and hegemony, propaganda and cultural production. It is the people’s government, after all. Many citizens, either because they are disinterested and cynical or genuinely interpellated by the populist ideology, do not see any problem in the non-democratic practices the populist government promotes. Who would oppose the people, even if they are wrong?

Who are “the People” in the speeches of Gruevski?
In this last section, through content and discourse analysis of six (6) speeches given by Gruevski, I attempt to answer two questions: who are ‘the People’ in his discourse? What are the key signifiers that are present in his political discourse?39

The first speech was given by Gruevski, in his capacity as prime minister, before the heads of departments in state administration appointed by the government. The second and third speeches were delivered in VMRO-DPMNE party press conferences. In these speeches, Gruevski presented his party’s views on the work of the Inquiry Committee on the events of December 24, 2012. These events instigated a political crisis after the President of the Assembly, who happens to be Gruevski’s party colleague and close ally, had journalists and opposition MPs forcibly removed from the parliament building by special police forces. The fourth speech was the New Year’s address to the nation, given by Gruevski in his capacity as prime minister. The fifth speech was the presentation of his party’s Accountability Report on the achievements and results of the Government in the period 2011-2014, and the sixth speech was delivered in the opening rally of the 2014 Presidential Election campaign.

Table 1: List of speeches

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Address by PM Nikola Gruevski at the promotion of the concept of Managerial Ethics, 2013</th>
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<tr>
<td>Press-conference: Let’s go to elections and let people can decide!, 2013</td>
<td>In the interest of the state, SDSM is free to sign any report it wants, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Year’s Address 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation of the Accountability Report 2011-2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>The speech of the prime minister in the opening rally of the Presidential Elections Campaign in Ohrid, 2014</td>
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Source: Author

In sum, the most frequently used word is the name of the country, Macedonia. It was followed by the term “the People”, and the figure would be much higher

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39 For the content analysis of the transcripts of the speeches, I used the text analysis software Nvivo. The analysis below represents a summary of an analytical paper, commissioned by an NGO-Infocentre from Skopje, a local media watch-dog organization, which I prepared in June 2014 (Petkovski 2014).
if we include the indefinite form “People”. In third place is “SDSM” (the acronym of the opposition Social Democratic Union).

Table 2: Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency of use</th>
<th>Percentage of Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the People</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDSM</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VMRO</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPMNE</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persons</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the state</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Government</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>projects</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

Table 3 presents the frequency of the terms “the People” and “citizens” in the speeches covered by this analysis. In the first speech, the term “(the) people” was not so frequently used by Gruevski, which is understandable in view of the fact that the overall tone of the speech was enlightening. Limited use was also noted in the fourth speech, which is more solemn and ceremonial in character and has a wider target audience. Quite to the contrary, Gruevski addresses the “citizens” more frequently in that speech, in which he appears in his capacity of prime minister once again. That was also the case in the fifth speech, which refers to the “citizens” far more frequently than to “the People”. These speeches privilege the logic of difference, a more pluralist syntagmatic discourse that combines the elements that make up society. The difference between ‘the people’ and ‘the citizens’ in the Macedonian context is quite important, as leftist and liberal activists and politicians by rule prefer the term ‘the citizens’ to ‘the people’.

Table 3: Frequency in specific speeches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>(the) Citizens</th>
<th>(the) People</th>
<th>People (as individuals)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address by PM Nikola Gruevski at the promotion of the concept of Managerial Ethics, 2013</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press-conference: Let’s go to elections and let people can decide!, 2013</td>
<td>0.39%</td>
<td>0.45%</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
<td>0.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the interest of the state, SDSM is free to sign any report it wants, 2013</td>
<td>0.69%</td>
<td>0.78%</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
<td>1.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the other three speeches (2nd, 3rd and 6th) Gruevski appears in his capacity as president of the ruling party. The use of the term “People” in these speeches is much more frequent, and they represent populist speeches. Two of the addresses were, in fact, party press-conferences in which Gruevski presented the positions of his party on the work of the Inquiry Committee, while the third was a speech given as his party’s campaign rally. In the press-conferences, Gruevski interpreted a traumatic event - the possibility for the Inquiry Committee to adopt a decision opposed to his party’s interpretation of the events that unfolded in the Parliament on December 24, 2012. The main line of his interpretation held that the incident was the consequence of a conspiracy to destabilize the state and bring the opposition to power through a coup d’etat. The report of the Inquiry Committee found, on the other hand, that the expulsion of the MPs and the members of the press from the Parliament building constituted a violation of the Constitution.

Gruevski used those speeches to reinterpret the meaning of the events, giving an authentic interpretation of a sort, invoking ‘the people’ as the final instance that makes any form of moral, legal or political judgment. Thus, Gruevski preemptively ‘intercepted’ the possibility that the meaning of the traumatic events might be challenged, which would have put into question his overall image, in which there is a strong cult of his infallibility, invincibility and uncompromising stance. Reflecting on the course of the negotiations in the Inquiry Committee and his meetings with the opposition leaders, after the Local Elections in which his party won a landslide victory, Gruevski noted:

“I reminded them [opposition leaders] that, three months after December 24 [the date when the contentious event happened], Local Elections were held in Macedonia. That before and during the campaign, their eternal leader [SDSM’s Branko Crvenkovski] offered just one thesis to the public and nothing else, and the thesis was that VMRO-DPMNE had violated the Constitution and the Law on December 24. I reminded him that we, in the first five or six days of the campaign, denied that and then stopped discussing that issue altogether, leaving it to the People to decide on its own and believing that the People had sufficient time to understand the situation.”

The quote demonstrates that Gruevski ties the result of the elections to the resolution of the dispute. In other words, the majority or, as he called it, “the People”, is portrayed as an arbiter in a legal dispute. The opposition, on the other hand, framed the dispute in legal terms because it claimed that the events constituted a violation of the Law and the Constitution. The next quote, from the same speech, proposes a ‘creative’ resolution for the dispute.
surrounding the findings of the Inquiry Committee and is an even better illustration of the populist rhetoric:

“We propose to endorse two versions of the legal qualifications in the report tomorrow. One that will be in line with the positions of VMRO-DPMNE and which shall state that it would be valid only if VMRO-DPMNE wins more votes than SDSM in the October 13 elections, and a second one that will contain the legal qualifications preferred by SDSM and which shall state that it would be valid only if SDSM wins more votes than VMRO-DPMNE in the October 13 early Elections... So, let the People decide what the truth is, and who it wants to lead the country in the coming years.”

Gruevski went one step further. He suggested that the majority should decide the valid legal qualifications. By reinterpreting democracy exclusively as a matter of majority preferences, populist leaders dislocate the whole order out of the institutions. The People are personified, understood as an organic whole - they “know”, “give trust”, “believe”, “do not make mistakes”, have “a voice” and “a will” and “give its confidence, which is difficult to earn”. “The People” are a source of power, and the Government and the cabinet are those who offer “opportunities” and “benefits” to the people, “respect its will” and “listen to the voice of the people”. The opponents, i.e. the “disoriented” and “utterly destructive” elites “lie”, “manipulate”, “betray” the People, “enter agreements behind the back of the people”, “oppose the acts” that provide benefits for the People, and does all this “led by personal interests”.

Another finding of the analysis of the six speeches is the high frequency of the adjective “new”. This is given in Table 4. Far from being accidental, I argue that the use of the signifier “new” in Gruevski’s speeches is a meaningful part of his political communication. ‘New’ is a kind of trope, a metaphor that captures the sense of lack and deficiency that needed to be filled and named by the empty signifiers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>No. of mentions</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address by PM Nikola Gruevski at the promotion of the concept of Managerial Ethics, 2013</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press-conference: Let’s go to elections and let people can decide!, 2013</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the interest of the state, SDSM is free to sign any report it wants, 2013</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Year’s Address 2013</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of the Accountability Report 2011-2014</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speech of the prime minister in the opening rally of the Presidential Elections Campaign in Ohrid, 2014</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author
As we saw in the previous section, frustrated by the long transition to a market economy and parliamentary democracy, the main demands of the majority of citizens of Macedonia were not “more democracy”, “more freedom”, “social justice”, “human rights” or “integration into the European Union”. To the contrary, and it is not just those who were disappointed with SDSM’s rule, but also the people who were dissatisfied with the reign of the current government, the main symbols of dissatisfaction floating in public discourse in Macedonia are demands for “new faces in politics”, “something new”, “young people”. Back in 2006, Gruevski came to symbolize novelty, a “new and modern politician-technocrat” who was expected to represent a radical break with the ‘old’.

On the other hand, at the time when the analysed speeches were given, Gruevski was not a new political figure. 2014 was his eighth year in office as Prime Minister. In addition, in 2014 there was a new leadership of SDSM that replaced Branko Crvenkovski, the long-standing SDSM leader and notorious symbol of all evil in populist discourse. In the general election campaign in 2014, SDSM’s new leader rallied with the slogan “Changes for a New Beginning”, in a clear attempt to demonstrate a break with the old party elite. In addition, the whole visual image of the party underwent a change, and many new candidates ran for members of parliament. The myth of the novelty of Gruevski was now challenged by new candidates for the quality of novelty. The most obvious pre-emptive method deployed by Gruevski was launching a very expensive smear campaign in the press against Zoran Zaev, a leader of SDSM and long-standing mayor of Strumica, a town in Southern Macedonia. The aim of the campaign was exactly to portray him a politician from the transition, as an old party apparatchik who is actually just a puppet of the old SDSM leadership, an elitist whose family made a fortune during the transition. As the analysis of the speeches demonstrates, on the part of Gruevski the struggle for the ‘new’ presupposed a shift toward more earthly novelties, concrete benefits for ‘the people’: “new projects”, “new factories”, “new opportunities”, “new jobs”, “new increases of welfare assistance”, “new machines”, “new roads”, etc. It comes as no surprise that in his speeches there is no such thing as “new freedoms”, “new rights”, “new democratic tools available to the citizens”. In fact, democracy was not mentioned once in the six analyzed speeches given by Gruevski.

In spite of the simplified language and symbols used in such speeches, it is not quite clear who the term “people” refers to, to which social layers and groups it applies. Does it cover all people, understood as all citizens, including their differences? Or, is the “People” an elastic category that refers to some sort of mythical body which, while not representing the plurality of the society in general, wants to present itself as a whole? The function of the unclear signifiers and symbols in the political communication is clear - they create order in the disorder, mobilize and provide the feeling of identity. In societies faced with shock, apathy and mistrust, the need for order is foremost and far more important than the ideological contents that could introduce that order. The weaker the institutions that need to provide continuity, predictability and stability, a social logic, the more primitive and poor will be the symbols of political and populist rhetoric, the more prevalent the political logics and populism will be.
In Gruevski’s speeches, society is represented as if only two subject positions in politics were legitimate, as if the social fabric was divided in two parts: us (“the People”) and them, the alienated and lost political and intellectual elite with its values. The mobilisation is not based on rational arguments, but on moralizing ones, aimed at the affective ethos of the audience. The meaning of “democracy” is different than in the normal, liberal-democratic view. It is quite understandable for the “People” to decide on legal qualifications - who is right and who is wrong in a given dispute. There are no too great sacrifices to be laid at the altar of the “People”.

Conclusion
This paper represents both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to the debate on populism in Southeast Europe in general and Macedonia in particular. It is focused on answering both theoretical questions regarding the specificity of populism and its relation to democracy as well as empirical puzzles related to the rise of populism in Macedonia after 2006. In addressing these puzzles, in the theoretical part of the paper I critically analyzed two approaches to studying populist politics. Although the two strand theory of democracy, which is a dominant approach to explaining populism in the Balkans, offers good analytical tools for describing the current state of affairs, it tends to turn a blind eye to the diachronic dimension, the historical conditions of possibility of the rise of populism, reducing populist politics to a simple contradiction between the principles of liberalism and democracy as two distinct traditions. This is why, I argue, it should be supplemented with political discourse theory’s formal account of populism which is much more elastic in terms of allowing us to account for the hazy relationship between populism and liberal democracy.

In the second part of the paper, I started with a brief historical perspective of the rise of populism in Macedonia, arguing that the liberal successes in transition, paradoxically, created the conditions for the rise of populism that eventually hampered democratic consolidation, turning the country into a stable competitive authoritarian regime. In doing so, and as opposed to the usual explanations of the rise of populism, I tried to argue that the stability of Macedonia’s authoritarian populism can be best understood in terms of the hegemony that Gruevski’s populist project managed to build on the ruins of the liberal consensus. Thereafter, I presented the findings of a discourse analysis of Gruevski’s speeches which looks at how ‘the people’ and the hostile elite, as the central protagonists in populist narratives, are construed, invoked and negotiated in his discourse, as well as what is at stake in the discursive struggle to appropriate the signifier ‘new’. Although in the case of Macedonia nationalism and populism go hand in hand, and authoritarianism is the best characterization of the political practices promoted by the regime, populism - understood as a discourse - is the only category that takes seriously the key role hegemony and ideology play in sustaining semi-authoritarian political regimes such as Gruevski’s.

Bibliography
Ljupcho Petkovski

Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing ‘the People’ in Macedonia’s illiberal discourse


When is Populism Acceptable?  
The Involvement of Intellectuals in the 
Bulgarian Summer Protests in 2013  
Research Article

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When is Populism Acceptable?  
The Involvement of Intellectuals in the  
Bulgarian Summer Protests in 2013  

Georgi Medarov

Populism is frequently understood as *democratic illiberalism*. Concrete policies that have been implemented by governing populist parties in Bulgaria, however, have been surprisingly liberal, at least in economic terms. This poses the question whether it is possible to have the opposite of *democratic illiberalism*, namely, *liberal populism*. This article investigates the *elective affinities* between liberal and populist discourses during the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013. This investigation is done with a strong focus on intellectuals' interpretations as their function is not merely reflective description, but is also formative and prescriptive of political identities. The main argument is that throughout the 2013 Summer protests there was visible tendency of articulation between populist and liberal discourses. They were populist both in the sense of “soft” populism, that is compatible with liberalism, as well as “exclusionary” of ethnic minorities and socially marginalized groups. The Summer protests constructed an identity of a minoritarian *subaltern elite*, united by its opposition to figures of *oligarchic elites*, *ethnic minorities* and *illiberal majorities*.

**Keywords**: populism, protests, Bulgaria, liberalism

**Introduction**

Political scientists often discuss the tensions between democratic national sovereignty, embedded in a notion of “the people”, on the one hand, and liberal constitutionalism, protecting individual rights, on the other. Starting from this supposition, Ivan Krastev\(^1\) associates populism with “*democratic illiberalism*.” The latter is not a desire to abolish democracy, but rather to radicalize it, disregarding liberal human rights, the rule of law and constitutionalism.

My main point of interest is whether, along with what Krastev called “*democratic illiberalism*”, the opposite articulation is possible: *liberal populism*. In particular, I will investigate the relationship between liberal anti-populist experts and populist discourses in the *case of the Bulgarian protests from 2013*. I argue that the complex interrelation between liberalism and populism must be sought in two directions:

*Firstly*, the figure of “populism” must be constantly reproduced in order for the liberal political identity to maintain its internal coherence via the construction of an *efficient enemy* (a *constitutive outside*). As spectral as it may be, this enemy is needed in order to maintain the course of the liberal reforms in a post-political, consensus-based context. *Secondly*, liberalism, in certain situations, can be articulated within wider *chains of equivalence* along with

polITICAL RATIONALITIES THAT COULD BE DUBBED AS “POPULIST” IN THE SENSE OF THEIR FORMAL RHETORICAL CHARACTERISTICS. AS I WILL SHOW, LIBERAL EXPERTS SOMETIMES MAKE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN “SOFT” AND “HARD” POPULISM. "SOFT" POPULISM, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIBERAL POLITICAL ACTIVISM, COULD BE AN ACCEPTABLE INSTRUMENT FOR RESTORING TRUST AND FURTHERING THE CONSOLIDATION OF LIBERAL REGIMES. IN SOME SITUATIONS, AT THE SAME TIME, AS IN THE CASE OF THE BULGARIAN SUMMER PROTESTS IN 2013, LIBERALISM MIGHT BE ARTICULATED ALONGSIDE POPULIST DISCOURSES THAT ARE HIGHLY EXCLUSIVE.

This second point necessitates an investigation of the specificities of each particular context and the differentiation between “soft” (compatible with liberalism) and “hard” (anti-liberal) populism, and that between “inclusionary” (“left-wing”) and “exclusionary” (“right-wing”) populism (Kaltwasser and Mudde). As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis show, the distinction between “exclusionary” and “inclusionary” populism should not be made solely on a geographical basis (inclusionary in Latin America, exclusionary in Europe), but ought to be based on a detailed analysis of each case, enabled by the application of a RIGOROUS THEORY OF POPULISM. IN THE CASE OF THE BULGARIAN 2013 SUMMER PROTESTS, AS I WILL DEMONSTRATE, ARTICULATION BETWEEN “SOFT”, IN THE SENSE OF ACCEPTABLE FROM A LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE, AND RIGHT-WING EXCLUSIONARY POPULISM IS ALSO POSSIBLE.

Populism, as has often been noted, is an elusive concept. Cas Mudde defines populism as a “thin-centred ideology”, considering society as being separated into two opposing camps - “the people” versus “the elite”. Due to its minimalist form, Mudde argues, populism can be “easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies”. Margaret Canovan proposes a “structural” approach, defining populism as “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society”. As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis argue, such minimalist interpretation has been made most forcefully in Laclau’s approach that understands populism as “a political/discursive logic that considers society ultimately separated between two groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.”

Ernesto Laclau’s theory is part of the Essex discursive approach to the formation of political identities. He conceptualizes political identification as an

articulation of differential demands into a chain of equivalence. The chain is itself chained to a master demand (or an empty signifier) which is concrete but simultaneously open enough that it can serve as a general demand within which different, more specific, demands may recognize themselves. The empty signifier marks the limits of the political subject by pointing towards a shared external enemy which is negatively constituting the political subject by lending homogenizing negative unity from outside to otherwise internal heterogeneities.

The analytical tools of the Essex school have one key advantage. The fact that it is a purely formal approach allows researchers to understand political identities not as a pre-given metaphysical essence without history, but as a contextual heterogeneous patchwork, configured, sometimes out of incommensurable parts, in political practice. This will allow me to go beyond a certain impasse in the literature on populism that tends to see it as inherently majoritarian and thus opposed to constitutionalism. The signifier “people”, however, does not have a substance, its content is contested and redrawn in practice. This formalist perspective will allow me to analyse the affinities between liberalism and populism in the involvement of intellectuals in the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013. I also rely on a critical interpretation of the work of two of the most prominent Bulgarian liberal experts on populism — Ivan Krastev and Daniel Smilov. Firstly, because of the strength and clarity of their approaches, which are compatible with Laclau's framework; secondly, due to their support for the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013.

At the end of 2013, students occupied the main building of Sofia University for two months. The occupation triggered a wave of occupations at other universities throughout Bulgaria. Students called for a new political order “in the interest of the people” against “the self-referential elite”. They rejected all political parties and prided themselves on their horizontal organization. Ivaylo Dinev, the charismatic leader of the occupation, was inspired by radical left thinkers such as Yasuo Kobayashi, who was in Sofia at the time and met with the students. Dinev published a book, where he describes the occupation as “a student republic”, an “Event” (in the sense of Alain Badiou) against the “corrupt elite”. In his publications Dinev insisted that the occupation was part of what he sees as global protest against neo-liberal capitalism.

During the occupation the students invited their professors for solidarity teachings. One of the first to answer the call was Daniel Smilov. Smilov spoke about populism, which he defined as a “minimalist ideology”, posing a Manichean distinction between “the people” and “the corrupt elite”. The second feature of populism, Smilov argued, is “organizational simplicity”, lack of formal structures, rejection of parties, and horizontalism. He said his topic of choice

12 This trend could be observed in dVersia, a new magazine co-edited by Ivaylo Dinev, the first issue of which was entitled The Battles Against Austerity and was published on the 9th of May 2015, available here.
might be seen as “a bit abstract”, but it is “key to know the general framework” of the “concrete problems” and hence unravel what he called the “essential challenge ... we are facing”, namely populism.¹³

What are the tactical considerations and theoretical presuppositions enabling a mainstream anti-populist expert to recognize a horizontalist movement which opposes “corrupt elites”, calls for “moralization” of politics in “the interest of the people” and defies all political parties - in other words, a movement bearing such a stark resemblance with the formal characteristics of Smilov’s very own definition of populism - as an ally against populism? What enables the articulation between liberal anti-populist expertise and political populism?

In order to elaborate my thesis, I will first juxtapose the Bulgarian 2013 protests with contemporaneous global protests. Ivan Krastev associates both the rise of populism and the shift “from politics to protest” with the crisis of political representation. But despite the fact that the Bulgarian protests could be put into the wider frame of post-politics, this understanding alone cannot explain the peculiar entanglement between liberal and populist discourses. What is needed is a deeper investigation of the various conflicting discourses within the Bulgarian protest movements, their reliance on populist discourses, and the way liberal intellectuals interpreted, reacted to, and shaped those movements. In the last section, I pay particular attention to Smilov’s understanding of populism, as well as to its embeddedness in his political activism.

The global protests, populism and the post-political condition

In the past few years, mass protests have shaken countries as diverse as Israel, Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, the US, Bosnia, Spain, Macedonia, Thailand, Venezuela, Russia, Greece and Brazil, to list a few. Many tried to find a common logic within these diverse social eruptions. New technologies, social media, austerity, the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism and representative democracy, social inequalities and the rise of a new middle class have been among the most frequently mentioned factors.

What intellectuals find as homogeneous in such heterogeneous movements and contexts tends to reflect their political position. Is it capitalism or its crony worldly forms? Is it representative democracy or solely the mainstream parties? Is it corruption and lack of transparency or inequalities and austerity? Answering those questions has political effects as it constitutes peculiar political subjectivities and prescribes courses of action. The latter may span from calls for more transparency to revolutionary manifestos. By trying to define the recent protest waves, intellectuals construct the object of their interest; they assemble a unified identity out of incommensurable practices, ideologies, contexts, and social groups.

The BBC journalist Paul Mason, for example, finds a number of shared factors behind the new protest wave, among which he lists innovation in telecommunications, discontent with austerity, mobilization of large parts of excluded and marginalized populations against police brutality and the inability to cover basic needs. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Francis Fukuyama wrote that “the rise of a new global middle class” leads to the new protest movements. He claims that since the middle class are “the ones who pay taxes, they have a direct interest in making government accountable.” Richard Seymour, in an article for the Guardian, attacked Fukuyama and asserted that “the working class” also plays a leading role. According to Seymour, “[e]ven in Bulgaria’s complex uprising against austerity, privatization and corruption, the threat of labour action makes a difference.”

Radical left intellectuals like David Graeber, Naomi Klein and Slavoj Zizek perceive the movements as an ally against neo-liberal capitalism, inequality and representative democracy. Conservatives and liberals, on the other hand, are more prone to identify “[m]iddle-class people [who] want not just security for their families but choices and opportunities for themselves”, as Francis Fukuyama stated.

Ivan Krastev explains the shift from electoral politics to street protests by asserting that “voters no longer see elections as vehicles for mandating change, and governments no longer see them as effective sources of the ability to govern.” For Krastev “elections are machines for the production of collective dreams.” To be able to “capture popular imagination” elections need to produce a *sense* of high stakes. Nevertheless, Krastev explains, those stakes should not be *too* high. For elections to effectively reproduce liberal regimes, they have to offer a sense of “drama”, to be emotionally engaging, but, at the same time, not to provide potential for a radical change.

Krastev argues that liberal regimes are now over-constitutionalized and “governments are powerless to tame the vagaries of the global market.” In his interpretation, the current crisis of representation is due to the fact that voters can change politicians, but cannot change policies. In this post-political situation, the main political antagonism is not between left and right, but...

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19 Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted*,
21 In fact, Krastev here is close with the critical interpretations of the shift towards post-democracy (Colin Crouch), the transition to technocratic, post-adversarial consensus-based politics (Chantal Mouffe), the rise of populism (Ernesto Laclau), and the concomitant liberal-elitist (“anti-populist”) fears of democracy (Ranciere). Cf. Katsambekis, Giorgos. 2014. *The Place of the People in Post-Democracy. Researching Antipopulism and Post-Democracy in Crisis-Ridden Greece*. *Postdata* 19(2).
between “the bottom and the top”. According to Krastev, this post-political situation is also connected with the “death of the grand ideological narratives and the hegemony of the ‘third way.’”

The post-political situation is a fertile ground for both protests and for populism. Krastev holds that populism “is no longer merely a feature of certain parties or other political actors”, but “the new condition of the political in Europe”, where political conflict is displaced towards “a clash” between “elites that are becoming ever more suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming ever more hostile to liberalism.” According to Krastev, the “tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism” are not an aberration, but “lie at the very heart of democratic politics”, thus there is a need “for a return to politics.”

Populism, however, does not have an autonomous discourse, but, according to Krastev, has to be understood as popular democratic appropriation of liberal signifiers such as anti-corruption and transparency. Constant accusations of corruption give the impression that the entire political elite is corrupt. The unconditional trust in transparency can be transformed into a conspiracy theory, as Krastev argues - nothing could be more suspicious than the promise of an unconditional transparency.

**Soft and hard populism**

Krastev warns against the dangers of anti-populism by arguing that populism might be an effective tool for restoring trust in liberal democratic institutions. In his argument Bulgaria offers a positive example. When the exiled heir of the Bulgarian monarchy, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, won the elections in 2001 with his National Movement Simeon II (Nacionalno Dvizhenie Simeon Vtori, NMSII) on a populist mandate, according to Krastev, he “contributed to the success of the reform process and to the consolidation of Bulgarian democracy.” In other words, populism might contribute to entrenching the course of liberal reforms. Here populism becomes a question of political tactics. The crucial distinction here is the one between acceptable and unacceptable populism from a liberal perspective.

In a common policy paper, Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev distinguish between “soft” (compatible with liberal reforms) and “hard” (anti-liberal)
populism. According to them, populism does not have to be seen as a “leftist revolt of the masses”, because “most of the populist parties are de facto neoliberal in economic terms.” Krastev and Smilov give the examples of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za Europejsko Razvitie na Bulgaria, GERB), currently the main center-right party in Bulgaria, and NMSII. They hold that populists’ calls for redistribution “usually mean that certain corrupt elites should be punished.” That is to say this “redistribution”:

“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.”

The adoption of political tactics based on the distinction between “soft” and “hard” populism might prove tricky due to the ambiguity of the notion of “corruption”. As Ivan Krastev explains in an interview, accepting “the [populist] perspective of your adversary means you have already lost.” In the same interview he explains that:

“For liberals corruption was a result from too big government and they called for rapid privatization and a small government. For the majority the problem was with the unrestrained powers of the market. [...] For liberals the struggle against corruption was a chance to legitimate capitalism. But the conspiratorially-minded majority saw in the struggle against corruption a chance to denounce capitalism without risking to be accused of communism and other infectious diseases. The anti-corruption imagination of the society expressed its dialectics. [...] Liberals fell in their own trap.”

“Corruption” does not posses internal meaning: it is anchored only in political struggle. If populism, along with its anti-corruption rhetoric, becomes an unavoidable characteristic of national politics, then, from the perspective of liberal political activism, one has to adapt to the new situation. Therefore the ability to distinguish between “soft”, acceptable from a liberal perspective, and “hard” populism becomes decisive for the effective management of discontent. As I will show in the discussion on the Bulgarian 2013 Summer protests, such “soft” populism may be compatible with liberal reforms, but it can be exclusionary, at the same time.

Protests and (“soft”) populism might both be an instrument for the consolidation of liberalism. The transition from politics to protest, Krastev argues, does not offer an alternative to liberal capitalism. He writes “protests are revolts against the elites, but the protesters [...] leave it to those same elites

33 Smilinov and Krastev, The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe [italic mine].
35 Krastev, Intervyu s Ivan Krastev.
36 Krastev, Intervyu s Ivan Krastev.
to decide what will happen next.” Krastev asserts protests, similar to elections, “serve to keep revolution, with its message of a radically different future, at an unbridgeable distance.”

If protests, as well as other democratic mechanisms like elections, are reduced to mere tools for the reproduction of liberalism, what remains beyond our perspective are both the specificities of each articulation between populist discourses and protest mobilizations, and the radically different outcomes. In Bulgaria the 2014 post-protest caretaker government was headed by Georgi Bliznashki - one of the leading activist intellectuals. After the elections, a broad coalition was formed between the extreme right (Patriotic Front - Patrioticen Front, PF), the liberals and the conservatives (Reform Bloc - Reformatorski Blok, RB), the center-right (GERB) and a smaller center-left party (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival - Alternativa za Bulgarsko Vazrazhdane, ABV).

**Bulgarian Summer Protests**

In 2013, Bulgaria fell into a deep political crisis. Mass protests against the so-called “stability” regime (the deficit had been cut from 4% in 2010 to 1% in 2012) toppled the center-right government in February 2013. The movement was triggered by electricity price hikes, and it protested against foreign-owned privatized electricity distribution companies. According to a 2013 EU report, 85% of households’ income goes for basic necessities such as utilities. The protest movement was not limited to Sofia, but spread throughout Bulgaria, most importantly to Varna. During the protests a wave of public self-immolations started, which continued into 2015. Plamen Goranov, who died as a result of a protest self-immolation, became among the most recognized faces of the movement. The February protesters soon abandoned their initial economic demands and called for the abolition of political representation and political parties, organized “citizen assemblies”, prided themselves for their “internet-like” structures, and initiated grassroots constitution drafting.

Government officials and liberal political commentators sounded the alarm that the movement constituted a “populist danger” to democracy. The Wall Street Journal wrote that:

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37 Krastev, From Politics to Protest, 17.
38 Krastev, From Politics to Protest.
39 Krastev, From Politics to Protest.
44 Andre Andreev and Martin Marinos created a short documentary film about the life of Plamen Goranov. The film is titled “Plamen”.
“... the departure of Mr. Djankov [the financial minister of the center-right government that collapsed in February because after the protests], the government’s most high-profile technocrat, likely foreshadows a shift toward more-populist economic policies ahead of national elections set for July, analysts said.”

“Djankov was the figure who symbolized fiscal and financial discipline. The whole economic policy was based on these priorities,” said Daniel Smilov.45

What such positions fail to take note of is how the February protesters took advantage of key liberal signifiers (“anti-corruption”, “anti-monopoly”, “civil society”) to form popular chains of equivalence. Liberal signifiers are not the privileged object of elites, but disperse and lend themselves to popular appropriations. For instance, the liberal understanding of corruption could be appropriated in an anti-liberal political identity formation to argue that liberal democracy itself is “corrupt”. In February 2013 these appropriations resulted in marches for the nationalization of energy providers under the banners of opposition to monopoly, transparency, the free market and anti-corruption. Protesters hijacked the chief signifiers of “the Transition from Totalitarianism to Democracy”, using them against their former users - the political elite, technocrats and NGO experts. What was challenged was not liberal empty signifiers, but their representatives. In this presentist movement,46 signifiers such as “civil society” and “the people” were mobilized as a weapon against political mediation (parties), economic mediation (electricity distribution companies), and civil society mediation (NGOs), and for the formation of a populist political subject calling for “all power to the civil society.”47

A new government was formed in May 2013 by the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Socialisticheska Partia, BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Liberties (Dvizhenie za Prava I Svobodi, DPS), a nominally liberal party, supported by parts of the Turkish and to some extent by the Roma minority. The new self-proclaimed technocratic government was also backed by the extreme right Ataka.48

Protests erupted again in June, this time over the controversial appointment of a media mogul as the head of national security. The second protest wave was mostly limited to Sofia, but continued for much longer. Even though numbers dwindled in time, the protests were very persistent and the movement continued into 2014. Because the initial eruption was in June, the movement

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came to be known as the Summer protests, as opposed to the Winter (February) ones.

Some of the most vocal Summer protesters were liberal activists and intellectuals who had used to support the United Democratic Forces, a wide anti-communist coalition from the 1990s that formed a government between 1997 and 2001, but since then has collapsed into smaller parties. There were calls for “European values”, “morality in politics” and a “genuine break” with the Communist past. Some protesters tried to revive 1990s anti-communism, however, this time imbued with new meanings. The 1990s anti-communism was an anti-elitist project, attacking the privileges of the old regime (with clearly populist slogans such as “power to the people” and “down with the red bourgeoisie”). The new anti-communism was explicitly exclusionary and directed against the figure of the undifferentiated masses. Protesters deployed language that cast them 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.

The political subject of the Summer protests, in other words, was a kind of a subaltern elite, imagined as being subjected to a double oppression - by the masses and by the oligarchs. I would like to stress that I do not take those discourses as depicting pre-existing social reality, but as constitutive of this very reality. Categories such as “middle class” do not have a pre-given substance, but are performatively created, thus include/exclude a wide range of social positions.

The Summer protests did not question budget cuts, but asked for more austerity and called the government “populist” for its promises to relax austerity. For example, in the first press briefing organized by the “antigovernment press agency” Noresharski, Georgi Ganev was invited to critique the governmental promises to relax fiscal discipline. Ganev is an economic expert, working for the Center for Liberal Strategies, who is known for his firm “low taxes - low public spending” positions. Fiscal discipline alone, however, was not the sole reason protesters stood for austerity. For instance, in one of the protesters’ call outs, published by Noresharski, we read that there is “a plan of the mafia and various foreign interests to usurp and enslave Bulgaria”, because of increased budget spending and alleged future tax increases. Furthermore, according to the same call out, “all patriotic forces should unite”, because the Movement for Rights and Liberties is not part of the “Bulgarian society”, as it is supported by “mostly Turks, Gypsies and fake votes from polling stations in Turkey.”

51 Importantly, the government did not initiate any serious policy reforms that would challenge austerity (e.g. progressive tax reform, expansion of welfare or to question the currency board). Instead the new government pushed for further privatization of public services.
Protesters self-identified explicitly in opposition to the “losers of transition”, claiming that they “march for moral values, not for welfare”. They were not simply pro-EU, but even asked “Europe” to “save us” from “our politicians”. Demands were not about “illiberal democratic” sovereignty, but rather for “rule of law”, “honest technocrats” and rigorous application of EU regulations. At the same time protesters excluded disagreement with their aims as supposedly not coming from the “Bulgarian people” and used extreme antagonistic terms to depict their opponents, presenting them as “paid provocateurs”, “foreign spies”, “immoral homosexuals” or “ungrateful ethnic minorities.”

We could label the movement “populist”, due to its formal rhetorical characteristics, namely based on a “discursive logic that considers society ultimately separated between two groups, “the people” and “the elite”, as in Laclau’s approach. This populism could be dubbed as “soft” - compatible with liberal reforms and austerity. Its use of “the people”, however, was explicitly exclusionary and directed against “the poor”, the “lower classes”. Thus, the protests constituted their identity not solely vis-a-vis the new ruling coalition and its supporters, but in opposition to the February protesters who were performatively described as “poor”, “uneducated”, “manipulated”, even “ugly”, sometimes with strong racializing language. The efficiency of these categories was facilitated by the fact that pro-BSP activists and intellectuals also used and produced them for opposite ends - to legitimate the government in the name of the “silent majority”. The latter does not mean the government marked a break with austerity, in fact, it continued to present itself within the post-political frame of liberal technocratic governance.

Even though both February and Summer protests used key liberal signifiers to articulate a wide popular subject (e.g. “civil society” or the “people” against the “corrupt elites”) and in that sense could be dubbed “populist” on that very formal level, there are key differences. The February protests articulated a radical call for inclusionary and total politicization of all aspects of social life (from nationalization of private companies to abolishing party and expert mediation of political life). The Summer protests demanded exactly the opposite: their call against corruption started as indignation at the “excessive” politicization of the economy by political elites, the lack of “rule of law” and of clear distinctions between economic and political power. More importantly, the Summer protests did not question expert production and distribution of governmental knowledge. They were explicitly supported by private and public research institutes, universities, but also by private industrial chambers. What they questioned was the so-called zadrulisie (literally “the thing behind the curtain”), a notion capturing the perceived and actual entanglement of political and economic powers, cast in the conspiracy frame of a shadowy elite trying to derail the country from its European path. The conspiratorial frame was also used by supporters of the BSP-DPS government, but for opposite ends. The supporters of the government projected the conspiratorial frame onto the

protesters, presenting them as paid and manipulated, sometimes with strong anti-American and even anti-Semitic undertones.

The renowned Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov wrote that the Summer protesters were “beautiful” and “able”, working and paying their bills, and opposed them to the February protests. Nikolai Staikov, a journalist and an entrepreneur, wrote that he refused to see protesters as average, but as “normal and independent people, who can earn a living without the state, but the state can hardly survive without them.” Similar discourses were distributed in mainstream liberal media, such as Dnevnik and Capital, from the first days of the protests. The genealogy of those discourses can be traced to reflections on the February protests that were already taking place at that time. Some intellectuals have talked about “a mongoloid horde, which knows only how to plunder, but can neither sow, nor plow”, and thus “takes us back to the cave.”

Tsvetozar Tomov, a Bulgarian sociologist who supported the protests, claimed there was a clash between two camps: between those who defend “development” and those who stand for “backwardness”. All political parties, according to him, are “mutants of the ex-communist party”, “blocking the possibility of a normally functioning democratic political system”. We are in a “cold civil war, which may become warm”. The first camp is pro-European, the second - “nostalgic”. The first wants the state not to interfere with their “economic entrepreneurship” and stands for “prosperity”. The second camp, Tomov says, desires the state to “guarantee their existence, to give them security, order, peace, bread”. Tomov associates the first camp with liberalism and the second with social democracy. He claims liberalism “is not a universal principle”, but it is a required condition for the “normalization” of the state, because currently “it is a total mutant”. In other words, Tomov manages to hold together an antagonistic view of society, separated into two opposing camps, with a liberal political stance. Liberalism, however, here is not a form of administrative governance of difference, but a side in a “cold civil war.”

Georgi Ganev, had similar interpretations. For him the 2013 Summer protest was a conflict between two camps. On the one hand, the unproductive oligarchy, which provides welfare for the poor (“proletarians” in Ganev’s terms) and the poor, who provide votes. On the other side is the rise of the productive “bourgeoisie”, in his terms, which is rising to break the oligarchic-proletarian alliance.

The idea of the illegitimacy of the exchange between welfare, provided by elites, and majoritarian-democratic support by citizens, is illustrative of the tensions between liberalism and democracy in the exclusionary populist discourses of the Bulgarian Summer protests. Regardless of the radically antagonistic way of framing political identities, this position remains
suspicious of democracy, but not of liberalism. These discourses might be interpreted as what Daniel Smilov calls “soft” populism, but are at the same time exclusionary and anti-democratic.

A sociological study of the attitudes towards democracy and representation among mid-level party activists conducted in Bulgaria in 2013 demonstrates a similar trend. Most mid-level party activists interviewed express strong doubts regarding universal suffrage and some even ponder on the possibilities of its limitation. A party activist from the Reform Bloc (RB), suggests that “decisions do not have to be popular, but correct”. Another activist from the same party declares his sympathy with the British Empire, because at its peak, according to him, “suffrage was limited to those who pay taxes and have property.”

The positions of the RB activists are fundamental, because theirs is a coalition formed from liberal, conservative and center-right parties as a response to the protests. More importantly, the RB was supported by a number of liberal intellectuals. Ivan Krastev, for example, said RB is the “natural political representation of the protest.” I am not suggesting all liberal RB supporters express exclusionary attitudes. There were vocal critiques of those attitudes from influential liberal intellectuals who supported RB. What I am claiming is that the exclusionary discourses are strongly present both in the party, as well as in the Summer protest movement in general. They enabled the multiple affinities between liberalism and exclusionary populism. Furthermore, these exclusionary discourses cannot be abstracted from the fact that Petar Moskov became the most popular minister in the government elected in 2014. The Health Minister Petar Moskov, part of the Reform Bloc, became famous for his racist slurs. He attempted to limit emergency health-care in poor Roma neighborhoods, called the Bulgarian Roma “animals”, and compared the pro-minority Movement for Rights and Liberties to a “tumor” that “just needs to be cut.”

It is not possible to dismiss Moskov’s statement as representative of some radical conservative trend that could be clearly differentiated from other liberal and/or center-right positions within the coalition for a number of reasons. Firstly, Moskov was defended by a declaration from RB, in which they wrote that he was “bold enough to speak the truth and to impose order.” Secondly, in his Facebook profile, where Moskov originally published the anti-Roma statement, he wrote he is against “political correctness”, claimed the government should treat Bulgarian Roma collectively, as a “population”, and, at the same time, he identified himself as a “liberally-minded person” (liberálno-nastroen chovek) and suggested his opponents want “to go directly in

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64 In Bulgarian the word population is used only for animals and not for humans.
Thirdly, what unites the coalition is the idea that they will be able to secure the liberal course of the reforms (hence the name).

It is important to take into account that the exclusionary populist strand in the RB disillusioned some liberal activists and intellectuals, who asserted the coalition misrepresents the protests. For instance, Emil Cohen, a prominent human rights activist, wrote that Moskov’s statement marks a “metamorphosis” in the coalition, marking a shift from its earlier anti-communism into racism and xenophobia that are “bordering on fascism”. In Cohen’s argument, RB betrayed the Summer protests, which he defines as a “rebellion of the middle class.” In an article with the title “Reformers Über Alles”, Svetla Encheva, another influential human rights activist, expressed similar disappointment with Moskov, whose ideas concerning liberal reforms in healthcare she initially supported. This is, nevertheless, not the position of all liberal activists and intellectuals, and many continued to support the Bloc, such as Georgi Ganev and others who work for the Center for Liberal Strategies and remained in the RB’s “citizen council”. This does not mean they share anti-Roma ideas, but that in the protest movement, and its political articulations, there are elective affinities between right-wing exclusionary populist and liberal reformist discourses.

It is also not possible to sustain a clear distinction between a liberal-elitist intellectual’s interpretation of the protests and the protesters as such. This is because it is impossible to explain when one stops being an activist and becomes an intellectual. Furthermore, the question is also why protesting citizens recognize themselves in publicly visible representations of the protests (in TV, newspapers, etc.). The distinction between pure protesters and their political and/or intellectual (mis)representation is especially difficult to sustain for a protest movement that was widely supported by activist-intellectuals (think-tank experts and members of “citizen councils” of political parties).

Another illustrative example is Edvin Sugarev, a famous anti-communist dissident and an activist-poet, who went on a hunger strike in solidarity with the Summer protests. After the protests he announced he will form an anti-Roma party, but eventually he supported the coalition that was elected in 2014.

Ivan Krastev shows that, in populist rhetoric, “elites and Roma are twins: neither is like ‘us’; both steal and rob from the honest majority; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners - Brussels in particular.” In this case he speaks strictly of majoritarian (but exclusionary) anti-liberal populism, however, as I have shown, the discourses of key intellectual-activists were explicitly minoritarian and liberal. Some tended to use elites and ethnic minorities interchangeably, while adopting racist language. The popularity of homophobic, racist and other exclusionary slogans in the Summer protests in Bulgaria led James Dawson to write that “the key

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problem with Bulgarian civic activism is not that liberal ideas are absent, but that they are almost uniformly conflated with illiberal ideas that hinder and are ultimately liable to trump progressive aims.\textsuperscript{69}

When is populism acceptable from a liberal perspective?
Daniel Smilov defines modern liberal democracy as a tension between “constitutionalism and democracy.”\textsuperscript{70} On the one extreme, he claims, is the Rousseauist “general will”, willing to “sacrifice constitutionalism”, and, on the other pole, the Hobbesian “limitation of democracy in defence of certain rights.”\textsuperscript{71} “Populism” is understood as “democratic majorities” unwilling to comply with external constitutional limitations.\textsuperscript{72} Smilov also posits “superconstitutionalism” or “deep constitutionalism”\textsuperscript{73}: notions denoting current processes of de-politicization (hence limiting the possibility of democratic control) of more and more social spheres. Smilov includes here what he calls “quasi-constitutionalism,” namely non-formalized and non-legal external and consensus-based (liberal) “informal conventions” limiting democratic governance.\textsuperscript{74} These are effects, he claims, of constitutionalization in Eastern Europe after 1989 having been “too successful”. In the case of Bulgaria Smilov lists the following: EU and NATO membership; the currency board (that pegs BGN to the EUR) and fiscal austerity; the rapprochement of previously opposed political programs in the sphere of economic and social policy; the liberal consensus between all parties; the displacement of political competition into the sphere of identity politics, nationalism and the moral integrity of politicians. All this estranges the voter from the main parties and thus constitutes a populist “situation”. It means that all parties are now exposed to the “threat of populism” and have to be alert and curb it when needed. “Populism” here does not denote a concrete subject, but a spectral enmity, required to maintain the consistency of the identity of mainstream political parties that had succumbed to the liberal consensus. But if all parties are seen as populist, the point is, as I have already explained, to differentiate between “soft” and “hard.”\textsuperscript{75} The “soft” are compatible with liberal reforms, and the “hard” are not.

\textsuperscript{71} Smilov, Daniel. \textit{The Rule of Law.}
\textsuperscript{72} In this sense populism is not understood as external to democracy but as its internal pathology, cf. Taggart, Paul. 2002. \textit{Populism and the Pathology of Representative Democracy, in Democracies and the Populist Challenge, edited by Mény, Yves and Y. Surel Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave.} 62-100.
What this also means is that the occasional references to a formal and discursive definition of populism, such as horizontalism and/or Manichean friend-enemy distinctions (like “the people versus the elite”) give way to more substantial definitions, based on the rejection and/or affirmation of very specific liberal policies such as the currency board (that technically makes Bulgaria part of the eurozone without voting rights), NATO and EU membership, fiscal austerity and so on. In other words, any political movement, disregarding its formal rhetoric (be it populist, technocratic or otherwise), can be integrated within a wider anti-populist chain of equivalence vis-à-vis the “dangers to constitutionalism” and “quasi-constitutionalism”. Such a position introduces a strong normative moment in the definition of populism that seems to become much more important than formal characteristics. The formalism of populism is purely a tactical question where content and normative claims are key. As Smilov explains, one can recognize populism in an instant if a political actor proposes raising wages to the average European level, the creation of a million jobs or the restoration of socialist-era industrial powers.\(^76\)

Moreover, even though Smilov argues that “contemporary democracy” has to “balance” between both extremes, his political interventions tend to be on the “constitutionalist” side.\(^77\) In some cases, Smilov defends “soft” populism, but only if it does not problematize liberal constitutionalism. For example, in an article published before the 2014 National parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, Smilov explains that despite the fact that the center-right GERB is “populist”, and might be dangerous, it is also acceptable.\(^78\) He defined GERB as a “moderate” populist party because it stood for austerity during its 2009-2013 term in office. Smilov also explained that, along with its “dangers”, populism should not be seen in an exclusively negative light, as it is also “a successful technology for the mobilization of votes and for the organization of a political party”.

Smilov’s aforementioned tactical move towards the student occupation is just the most obvious of a number of such moves made by liberal intellectuals and activists at that time, and cannot be seen as hypocritical and/or as the result of a misunderstanding.\(^79\) The case is the same as with their activism during the


\(^{79}\) By saying all this I do not assert that liberal intellectuals interpellated the student occupation in the symbolic universe of the pre-existing Summer protests I have outlined. Instead, both “sides” were engaged in a struggle over the monopoly of key floating signifiers and the delineation of political lines of conflict, mutually reinforcing each other but sometimes going in different directions. In other words, students inserted themselves within the symbolic order of the Summer protests, for instance, by using their conspiratorial language, but were not entirely subjected to it and instead engaged in a symbolic production of their own. This problematic, however, lies outside the scope of the current article.
Summer protests, or with their rapprochement towards “soft” populism. It is entirely consistent with the definition of populism, not so much as “minimalist ideology”, horizontalism, or formal discursive characteristics, such as in Laclau’s approach, or as in any rigorous theory of populism, but as a tactical instrument in a political struggle. The concomitant acceptance of both populist and anti-populist discourses becomes intelligible if political discourse is assessed mainly from the perspective of its capacity to reinforce liberal governance. This, as I have explained, may include “soft”, from a liberal perspective, but also exclusionary right-wing populist discourses.

Conclusion
Liberalism and populism in the Bulgarian Summer protests were connected in two ways. Firstly, the figure of populism has to be constantly reproduced as a danger to liberalism, in order to stabilize the liberal course of the reforms in a consensus-based post-political conjuncture. Secondly, populist political subjectivities, as understood within a formal discursive approach (“the people versus the elites”, etc.), may be articulated within wider liberal chains of equivalence in support of the rule of law (against the corrupt elites), technocratic governance (against political parties), and so on. The distinction, from a liberal perspective, between “soft” and “hard” populism here is formative. “Soft”, in the sense of compatible with liberal governance, populism may also be exclusionary, as I have demonstrated. The exclusionary identities (articulated vis-a-vis minorities, “the lower classes”, allegedly manipulated by the shadow elite of Zadkulisie) cannot be separated from the formation of the current pro-austerity government between the Reform Bloc, the center-right GERB and the far-right Patriotic Front. Otherwise, how would it be possible for Daniel Smilov, after the early elections on the 5th of October 2014, to claim that the “ideologically purest and most feasible option is a coalition government between GERB, the Reform Bloc and the Patriotic Front.”80 One of the two parties from the PF called, in their political program, for the internment of the Bulgarian Roma in camps outside cities.

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Bibliography


When is Populism Acceptable?  
The Involvement of Intellectuals in the Bulgarian Summer Protests in 2013

On Populist Pop Culture: *Ethno* as the Contemporary Political Ideology in Serbia

Research Article

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On Populist Pop Culture: ethno as the contemporary political ideology in Serbia

Irena Šentevska

This study attempts to shift the debate of the contemporary facets of populist ideologies from the realm of institutional politics to the realm of everyday life, popular culture, media and “invented traditions”. My intention is to demonstrate how these realms generate new sources and voices of populism, often downplayed in the academic debates on the subject. The paper stems from comprehensive research on discourses of identity (re)construction in post-Yugoslav Serbia as communicated in pop-cultural media forms (specifically, music videos of all genres), in which I used a sample of 4733 music videos produced between 1980 and 2010 (and later). In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the case of the charity campaign Podignimo Stupove and its music video output. The campaign was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the 12th century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras, a site of utmost historical significance and value for the national culture. Against the background of institutional changes that markedly redefined the place of religion in Serbian post-socialist society, the music videos discussed in this paper provide a valuable insight into the combined musical, textual and visual language of communication of some longstanding notions associated with “Serbian populism”.

Keywords: populism, pop culture, ethno, music video, Podignimo Stupove

Introduction

“To each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds” was Peter Wiles’ earnest remark in the 1969 volume Populism (Nature of Human Society).1 Adopting a broad definition of populism as “an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depict as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice”,2 this paper attempts to shift the debate of the contemporary facets of populist ideologies from the realm of institutional politics to the realm of

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everyday life, popular culture, media and “invented traditions”. My intention is to demonstrate how the mechanisms of interaction and synergy of these realms produce new sources and voices of populism, often downplayed in the academic debates on the subject.

The starting points for this study are two discussions by Serbian scholars, sociologist Nebojša Popov and anthropologist and linguist Ivan Čolović. In his study Serbian Populism: from a marginal to the dominant phenomenon Popov attempts to trace the common grounds and elements of continuity between two paradigmatic populist movements / ideologies – one observed as “marginal”, personified by Dimitrije Ljotić before and during the Second World War, and the other observed as “dominant” and epitomized by the political career of Slobodan Milošević. The other starting point is Čolović’s discussion of “ethno” as the new political ideology of Serbia in the post-Milošević period. Čolović traces the elements of this ideology in the discourses surrounding the elusive genre of popular music broadly termed as “ethno” and closely associated with the contemporary notions of “world music”.

As a researcher of visual culture, I am particularly interested in visual strategies of communication of ideological messages. In this paper I am focusing on a specific and markedly under-researched media form in Serbia – music video - in an attempt to identify the paradigmatic strategies of (visual) communication of ‘Serbness’ (conceived as belonging to a homogeneous and exclusive ethnic identity) in this media form. It is important to note at the very beginning the difference between the conventions of visual representations in music videos and general conventions associated with specific music genres. In other words, it is important to note that the subject of study in this paper is not music, performers and their genre affiliations, but visual communication in music videos. This paper stems from a comprehensive PhD research on discourses of identity (re)construction of post-Yugoslav Serbia as communicated in popular music videos of all genres, where I used a sample of 4733 videos mainly produced from 1980 to 2010. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the case of the charity campaign Podignimo Stupove – specifically, on its music video output. This campaign was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the 12th century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras. Music videos produced under the auspices of this campaign and largely sponsored by the Serbian Orthodox church distinctly exploit religious imagery. Due to the longevity of the campaign (which is an interesting phenomenon in itself in the Serbian context) and marking the main religious holidays,
Christmas and Easter, they have become both a regular feature in the “secular” calendar and an instance of newly-invented traditions. In this paper they are identified as a particularly interesting vehicle of communication both of “Serbian populism” (as discussed by N. Popov) and “ethno ideology” (as discussed by I. Čolović).

The many lives of “Serbian populism” and “ethno” as a political ideology

In his comprehensive discussion of “Serbian populism” Nebojša Popov admits that the very notion of “populism” is problematic as it may be associated with a variety of (often dissonant) concepts, for example: moralism, mystical links between the leader and the people, isolationism, nostalgia for the past, glorification of power, anti-individualism, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, anti-militarism and “anti-establishment” sentiment.9 For the purposes of this discussion, we shall focus on those longstanding aspects of “Serbian populism” which may be (still) communicated in contemporary pop-cultural media forms - in this case, music videos:

1. Populism is usually conceived as an expression of the “organic whole” of the people, a mythical image (as such) unfounded in reality; its ultimate consequence is “biological nationalism”;10
2. “Serbian populism” was effectively informed by the historical experiences of the Central European and Russian/Soviet realms, which resulted in populist concepts of pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox (Christian) collectivism;11
3. A common characteristic of populist movements across Europe is a “revolutionary reaction” (Ernst Nolte) to the individualization and detraditionalization of the society; hence the fear of emancipatory changes and hate of their proponents;12
4. National salvation demands a return to religious traditions, isolationism, and charismatic leadership - in a word, anti-modernism;13
5. “Individualistic thought gave birth to democracy, capitalism, Marxism and Bolshevism, materialism and atheism” (Dimitrije Ljotić); the countermeasure is holy war with its codex of honor and sacrifice;14
6. “In the small nations, only the nation can be great. In the small nations the utmost moral duty is subordination of the individuals to the community, the people, the state. A Serb is a man who is not a man unless he is a Serb” (Dobrica Ćosić);15
7. Backwardness and underdevelopment are conceived as “intellectual capital”;16
8. The “legend of Kosovo” combines pagan, Christian and lay motifs and, as such, provokes both action and reflection, both shooting and singing.17

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9 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 62.
10 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 63, 75.
11 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 65.
12 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 66-7.
13 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 67.
14 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 75.
15 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 93.
16 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 99.
Political transition in former Yugoslavia was followed by a recomposition of ethnic imagery and representations of nationhood, as the socialist regime was not succeeded by the “rule of democracy”, but the new order pursuing the interests of the ethno-national majority. The dissolution of Yugoslavia meant that the historical project of Serbia as the Piedmont of South-East Europe came to an end: the interests of the nation and the state became one. Return to the pre-socialist traditions also includes an understanding that Serbia is rather a nation than a state and that its authority does not exceed the matters of “Serbhood”. However, this all happens in a state “with a sizeable population with non-Serb ethnic backgrounds.”

Lacking minimal consensus on the common social (ethical) values, Serbia becomes a battlefield for competing champions of the national cause who seek mass support for their often elusive agendas: one of the most picturesque weapons in this war is popular culture shaped by tribal nationalism dressed in folk costumes. After the year 2000, the political elites currently in power embarked upon a search for a new tradition and ideal ancestors dissociated from the remnants of the “communist” history. They were found in the mythical rural landscapes of pre-modern Serbia, uncontaminated by “foreign” influences and communist “corruption”, where everything preceding this “historic demise” tends to be rendered in idyllic hues.

According to Ivan Čolović, since the middle 1990s ethno music in Serbia has been marketed as a new genre of popular music with folkloric roots which fortuitously evades the negative connotations of turbo-folk (as the overwhelming contemporary “folk” genre, notoriously lacking “artistic value” and, furthermore, being “spoiled” with foreign influences). This music is perceived as “national in spirit and modern in form”, and even “politically correct from the standpoint of democratic standards, as it partakes in the process of intercultural dialogs”. What is here at play, Čolović argues, is the same formula which (even since the mid-1990s) was concocted by the proponents of “good nationalism” while putting forth a political project named Third Serbia - a society that would circumvent the extremes of both the radical nationalists and radical anti-nationalists (NGO activists, human rights advocates etc.) For this author, ethno is the key to understanding the major elements of ideology or “political faith” of the current Serbian elites. Namely, in the very core of the (globally present) commonplace “stories” about ethnic

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11 Popov, Iskušavanje slobode, 171.
22 Čolović, Etno, 5-6.
music, lies the quest for authenticity of music, culture and the human being residing in the ethnic identity. Even the familiar notion of “crossovers” of music cultures and styles in the ethno / world music discourse discloses a deep-seated faith in ethnic communities as distinct and autochthonous entities. It implies that in the “greatest depth” of every human being lies a single allegiance that means something: a “truth”, “essence”, never to be changed in the course of one’s lifetime. Accordingly, even the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia conceives culture “as a closed, homogeneous, determining entity, proscribing that between other closed, homogeneous, determining cultures one (the national) is the most important and most desirable”. Thus, the only matrix of identification that the Constitution is able to recognize translates the question of belonging (or not) to the ethno-national majority into the question of loyalty to the political structure regulated by this act.

**Video Ruritania**

When the “urban-rural” opposition is observed from the perspective of contrasts and conflicts between traditional and modern cultures, in the debates characteristic for the post-socialist Balkans the village is typically attributed with the symbolism of “healthy” (unspoiled) life, grounded in national traditions and folklore. For generations of urban elites in Serbia (with more or less outspoken attachment to a rural family background), the peasants traditionally embody “culture”, conceived as the repository of national genius. It is extremely difficult for them to downplay the peasantry because this undermines their traditional position of spokesmen, if not wholesale inventors of the Volksgeist. The “usual suspect” for the crime of abandoning the pastoral life of ancestral past is the generation of “urban peasants” (peasants-industrial workers) - the so-called “centaurs of the Yugoslav economy”. Their guilt is furthermore attributed to “communism” and its degradation of the religious (spiritual) life of the nation. Along the lines of romanticist legacy of Serbian nationalism, intellectuals have often dismissed these “mongrels” as “riders of the cultural apocalypse”. As a consequence, this ideology has effectively obliterated the contemporary expressions of folk culture.

Against the background of the post-Yugoslav re-composition of national and ethnic identities, contemporary variations of “ethno” culture (music, cuisine, architecture, tourism etc.) and their accompanying visual imagery constitute powerful contemporary channels of communicating the national. In the current cultural discourses, “ethno” is associated with the actualization and revitalization of the national tradition, its re-branding, re-packaging, and use of modern technologies in such processes. As for ethno music, it is considered as a viable contemporary cultural expression only if it is somehow detached from the realm of traditional folk music, techniques and instruments, which otherwise ensnares both the producers and consumers of this music in a rural

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culture that has ceased to exist. Accordingly, the visualization of ethno music in the form of promotional videos implies a search for visual aesthetics that most effectively communicates the concept of “living tradition”. This transmission demands a modern visual language, created in the city and addressing the urban population. For this population, fascination with the rural ancestral culture assumes a form of “reflexive nostalgia” for experiences that were, in fact, never lived through. 28

On the other hand, setting ethno performers with a rural background (for instance, the frula virtuoso Bora Dugić) in “high-cultural” (for instance, gallery) spaces suggests an attempt to inscribe these folk maestros in the realm of the official Hochkultur. 29 Continuity in attempts to introduce Serbian folkloric elements into the realm of high (national) culture discloses a longue durée historical process whereby aspects of popular culture claim a position and status of (previously non-existing) “elite” culture in accordance with the (Western) European standards. In “self-colonized” societies, 30 each generation creates new cultural forms, imported from the West and crossbred with the existing (traditional) patterns. In Serbia, this process displays clear continuity in the domain of mass media and popular culture, as I attempt to demonstrate using examples from contemporary music video production.

In my journey through the “video Ruritania”, 31 the imaginary and idealized Serbia with an ancestral rural past, I have identified several distinctive formulas of its communication in promotional music videos and TV programs, falling into two basic categories (regardless of the shifting genre affiliations of the performers):

1. Emblems of national traditions blend with the contemporary signifiers of modernity and mass-mediated culture in arbitrary encounters and “crossovers”;  
2. The mythical “ethno country” is conceived as a depository of emblems of national purity, authenticity and difference from the Others (e.g. other Balkan or ex-Yugoslav nationalities).

The first mode of representation communicates the notions of “Serbness” against a contemporary mishmash of indiscriminately crossbred local and global influences. It is safe to refer to it as turbo-folk aesthetics of national self-representation, which heavily exploit (often at the same time), for example: the Dionysian imagery of the music festival in Guča, representational formulas familiar from Emir Kusturica’s films, “quotes” from Hollywood, hip-hop imagery, Latino or Turkish soaps, reality shows, documentaries, mockumentaries and travelogues. This, loosely conceived communication of “Serbness” basically aims to entertain the “nation” with humorous contrasting

29 See for instance, Bora Dugić’s number Ja sam mala (album Između sna i jave, 2002) produced for the program Zvuci Balkana of the public broadcaster RTS. (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).  
of “ethno” signifiers (music, dance, costumes, food, architecture…) with modern gadgets and lifestyles. According to this formula, for instance, turbo-folk / dance stars of the 1990s (like Ivan Gavrilović and Baki B3) might be singing about “hot nights in the discotheque” dressed in “museum” folk costumes. Or the turbo-folk MC DJ Krmak might be singing about narco-agriculture and cocaine addiction accompanied by an ensemble of “ethno” back vocalists.

The second mode is a distinct representational formula wherein performers assuming the roles of the “voices of Serbness” appear in gentrified ethno villages, often real tourist locations like Stanišići or Galetovo sokače. Ethno villages are both physical and mental constructs of the “new” (post-Yugoslav), urban Serbia, detached from the harsh realities of village life and exclusively concerned with the aestheticization of the rural national past. Ethno villages thus acquire Potemkinian attributes: they serve as backdrops for performers who voice nostalgia over pastoral times long gone, or even comment on the plights of contemporary Serbs (for instance, in the now independent Republic of Kosovo). Ethno villages may also serve as backdrops for inter-ethnic musical exchanges and cooperation. The stars might be wearing modern urban clothes, driving expensive modern cars, but in the videos they often interact with extras dressed in “museum” folk costumes - as a rule, young and beautiful men and women wearing heavy make-up.

This formula is adopted in many videos of urban pop singers (like Željko Joksimović or Zdravko Čolić) who may often find themselves in gentrified rural environments, for instance, under a spell of a beautiful village girl or at a rural wedding. In such cases the emphasis shifts from communication of the national towards the romantic plots and idealizations of the rural. This representational formula is occasionally used to spotlight some regional specificities (for instance, of Vojvodina). Here the heavy use of folk costumes and ethnographic detail highlights the cultural complexity and multiethnic life of the region.

At times, a music video may become a fictional cinematic recreation of historical events (e.g. the bitter struggle of Serbian hajduk against Ottoman rule) which again mainly communicate “the national cause.” In a variation of the second basic model, performers with different music backgrounds and stylistic affiliations appear in “real” monasteries, churches and cultural

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33 This telling performance of their duet Sex mašina at the studio of TV Kopernikus has, unfortunately, not survived on the Youtube.
34 DJ Krmak. Cijelo selo šmrče bijelo. (Youtube access: 2016).
36 See, for, instance, Lepa Lukić. Balada o majci (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).
37 See the duet of the Serbian folk diva Vera Matović and Montenegrin-Serbian bard (gusle player) Milomir Miljanac. Izbeglica. (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).
38 See the video Tamburasi, the result of collaboration between the Serbian music ensemble Legende and Bosniak folk star Halid Bešlić (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).
monuments preserved from the past, in order to communicate current messages (of national homogenization, patriotism and loyalty, spirituality etc.), or simply to wish a happy Christmas or Easter to the Orthodox community. It is within this (recently invented) tradition that we can situate the music video output of the campaign Podignimo Stupove - Let's Raise the Tracts (of St. George).

Raising the Tracts of Saint George
The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Ras claims a specific position in the geography of the Serbian medieval state with its symbolic presence in the contemporary national culture. Located in the vicinity of today’s city of Novi Pazar, in the Raška region at the south of Serbia (Sandžak), the monastery was erected in 1171 as an endowment of the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja, founder of the Serbian medieval dynasty of the Nemanides (Nemanjić). It was named after the church dedicated to St. George and its two flanking towers, high pillars (in old Slavic languages - stolp, stub). Stefan Nemanja allegedly built this church to commemorate his gratitude to St. George for freeing him from dungeon-caves, where he was imprisoned by his brothers. Lead by the Grand Prince (Veliki Župan) Tihomir, Stefan Nemanja’s elder brother, they “attempted to restrain his overly independence”. According to some historical sources Nemanja was imprisoned in 1165, and seized power in 1166, and according to others he was captured in 1167 and released in 1168. In his gratitude to St. George Stefan Nemanja dedicated the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi to the warrior saint. The construction was completed in 1171, and the church was decorated four years later. This monastery was a favored destination of another member of the Nemanjić dynasty, the last Serbian ruler based in Ras, King Stefan Dragutin (1253-1316) who chose Đurđevi Stupovi for his place of burial.

Frescoes from this monastery have a particular value for Serbian medieval art, as they were painted in the best traditions of the Komnenos style. The most impressive among them is the depiction of St. George on a horse, located above the main entrance to the church. After the Second World War, the first protective conservation works of the monastery were carried out in 1947. The site was subjected to more systematic archeological and architectural research (conducted by the National Museum in Belgrade) in the early 1960s. The works were resumed in 1968 by The Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation.

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43 See, for instance, the video of the vocal duet Pirz, Molitva (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).
44 On the relationships between the toponyms “Ras” and “Raška” for the Serbian medieval history see Kalić, Jovanka. 1977. Ras u srednjem veku: pravci istraživanja. Nosopazarski zbornik (1), 55-61.
46 For a comprehensive bibliography on Đurđevi Stupovi (which includes the historical sources, monographs, other publications, research on medieval art, history, conservation-restoration works, architecture, painted decorations, applied arts, manuscripts and books) see Melcer, Bojana. 2004. Manastir Đurđevi Stupovi u Rasu: bibliografija. Niš: Centar za crkvene studije / Ras: Manastir Đurđevi Stupovi.
Kraljevo (Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture Kraljevo). They included research, conservation and restoration works that intensified between 1971 and 1982, and were conducted as part of a larger project of restoration of medieval sites in the region of Stari Ras. Beside the monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi, Raška valley, often referred to as the “cradle” or “embryo” of the eponymous Serbian medieval state, contains the monuments Petrova crkva, Kapela kralja Dragutina and the famed monastery of Sopočani, including the remnants of the Serbian medieval capitals Ras, Jeleč and Deževa - all scattered around the town of Novi Pazar. The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi has been on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 1979. It was also included in the Transromanica Cultural Route, which promotes the common Romanesque heritage of twelve regions in Europe, from Tâmega and Sousa in Portugal to Alba Iulia in Romania.

The famed monastery was abandoned in 1689, during a military campaign in the Ottoman-Habsburg wars. The monks, headed by their archimandrite, lead Serbian refugees to exile in Pécs, and subsequently the monastery was burnt by the Ottomans. In 1722 they began to extract and use its ancient stone for the construction of the nearby fortress of Novi Pazar. The wars of the 20th century only furthered the demolition: during the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman army used the monastery as a fortified military post and in 1912 it was heavily damaged in artillery strikes. The last major demolition ensued in 1941 when the stone from the monastery was quarried for construction works by the German army.

Nevertheless, in 1999, the year of NATO military intervention in what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in response to the Kosovo crisis, the Serbian Orthodox Eparchy of Raška and Prizren launched restoration works at the monastery, aided by the ministries of culture and religion of Republic of Serbia, and numerous corporate and private donors. When three monks from the monastery of Sopočani came in 2001, headed by the Father superior Petar (Ulemek), the monastery began a new life. The energetic abbot, often referred to as “a priest for the 21st century” and “cyber monk”, started his missionary work on behalf of the monastery with great enthusiasm.

The revival of monastic life at the ancient establishment started a far-reaching campaign which engaged many high-profile personalities from Serbia’s pop-

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48 For a wider perspective on the built heritage of the region of Stari Ras, see Čanak-Medić, Milka and Branislav Todić. 2013. Stari Ras sa Sopočanima. Novi Sad: Platoneum / Prizren: Eparhija Raško-Prizrenska, esp. 50-81.

49 For the biography of Father Petar and his early missionary work on behalf of the monastery (which included a trip to Australia), see his interview with Roknić, M. 2013. Kordun, zemlja bez ljudi. Vesti online, 25. August 2013 (accessed: 26. April 2015).

cultural and media sphere, in accordance with the remark made by the monastery’s hieromonk Gerasim: “Even in the times of the Nemanides, although Stefan Nemanja was the main ktitor (founder), the construction engaged the entire nation, everyone according to his capacities”.51 The first artists who made a contribution to the campaign were members of renowned Serbian choirs and opera singers who performed at the concert of spiritual music held in the Atrium of the National Museum in Belgrade. The singers were followed by painters who donated their works to the monastery, and icon-painters who contributed to a grand auction exhibition planned in Belgrade’s Gallery of Frescoes.

Before retiring to the monastery, hieromonk Gerasim was an active musician and athlete (soccer player). Hearing about the campaign, many of his friends and acquaintances decided to make a contribution. Among the athletes, soccer players on the national team,52 the volleyball representation, soccer clubs Partizan and Crvena zvezda, basketball players Bodiroga, Đorđević, Divac, Stojaković, Tomašević, Šćepanović and others took part. Pop musicians Đorđe Balašević, Ana Stanić and members of the bands Eyesburn, Darkwood Dub, Partibrejkers, Bajaga i Instruktori, Riblja čorba, and Van Gogh were joined by the actors Danilo Lazović, Nebojša Dugalić, and Nenad Jezdić. The theatre performance Vaskrsni Đurđevdan was broadcasted by RTS and Studio B. Hieromonk’s good contacts with media professionals greatly helped the public visibility of the campaign.

The music “department” of the campaign soon gained a form of independence in their efforts to maintain a continuity of production for the benefit of the monastery. Receiving a blessing of His Eminence Artemije the Bishop of Raška and Prizren, the Music Ensemble Stupovi continued its activities within the missionary campaign Obnovimo sebe - Podignimo Stupove (Let's revive ourselves – Let's raise the Tracts). The musicians are also members of the Society of Friends of the Monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Ras. Their work on behalf of the campaign is now conceived as a permanent activity. They participate in religious and secular cultural events, with a visible presence in Serbia’s contemporary cultural production.

An important part of the permanent activities of the campaign’s “music department” is video production. Music videos are an important means of animating the public for the causes of the campaign. By far the largest number of videos released is dedicated to marking (celebrating) the (Orthodox) Christian holidays, Christmas and Easter. The continuity and regularity of their production is somewhat of a curiosity in itself. Namely, cultural production in Serbia is strongly marked by a lack of opportunities for independent initiatives (those deprived of permanent funding by the state) to survive the harsh economic realities in the cultural sphere. The longevity of the campaign Podignimo Stupove makes it a rare instance of economic sustainability in the Serbian cultural context.

52 Among them, Mateja Kežman made the largest donation.
As we have already noted, Christmas and Easter music videos produced under the auspices of this campaign claim a special place in the typology developed in our discussion of “video Ruritania”. Concerning the fact that the Serbian media landscape had practically no previous experience with music videos (recurrently) associated with religious holidays, these videos have established a new “genre”, a distinct niche of the music video production. Apart from their overall novelty in the Serbian context, they have established a new language of communicating national identity identified with belonging to a religious community. I argue that this particular language qualifies them as powerful conduits of some longstanding aspects of “Serbian populism”.

From pop to populism... and back (to the monastery)
The language of communication of belonging to the ethno-national/religious community (in other words, the communication of “Serbness”) in music video output has evolved and transformed since the early stages of the campaign Podignimo Stupove. Below, we trace this evolution, using a selection of paradigmatic examples.

An early instance of this output was the Easter video Podignimo Stupove, which featured the music of Ljuba Ninković and lyrics of the “holy bishop Nikolaj”, Saborna vaskršnja pesma (Slava tebje gospodi). Ljuba Ninković, a prominent member of the Musical Ensemble Stupovi, is a veteran rock musician from the renowned Belgrade band S vremena na vreme. Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956) was bishop of Ohrid and of Žiča, and an influential Serbian theological writer. During the Second World War, he was detained as an honorable prisoner (Ehrenhäftling) of Dachau. After the war, he chose not to return to socialist Yugoslavia and spent the rest of his life in exile in Europe and the United States. For his missionary work, he was considered an Apostle and Missionary of the New Continent and has been enlisted as an American Saint.

The early version of this video brought together several pop-cultural “traditions” - notably the “tradition” of charity videos in the Band Aid style (Do They Know It’s Christmas, 1984) which had its counterpart in socialist Yugoslavia, and the “tradition” of exalted children singing in the style of the Belgrade’s choir Kolibri. One innovation in this video comes from the fact that the children who took part (along with notable musicians, actors and soccer player Mateja Kežman) held in their hands an icon of the Mother of God.

In other charity videos, the Music Ensemble Stupovi had many opportunities to leave the music studio and perform outdoors. The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi

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53 Mostly active during the 1970s, this band is considered among the pioneers of the Serbian acoustic rock scene who incorporated folk music elements into rock music.

54 One example of an ironic approach to this “tradition” is Sasha Baron Cohen’s charity video for the film Brüno (2009), which assembled such notable celebrity-activists as Bono Vox, Sting, Elton John, Slash (ex-Guns N’ Roses) or Snoop Dogg, all for the cause of promoting LGBT rights (and Brüno himself).

55 Namely, when Yu Rock Misija released the video Za milion godina (1985), making a contribution to the international campaign against poverty in Ethiopia, launched by the rock musicians Bob Geldof and Midge Ure. Ljuba Ninković was also a contributor to this project.
naturally became a stage and backdrop for many acts that soon abandoned the minimalism of Band Aid style for more lavish imagery employing captivating folk costumes and medieval imagery. Accordingly, the “Band Aid Easter video” was released again, in its second, much more elaborate version. This time the dramaturgy was considerably different. The dramatic opening of the video shows a documentary segment with stark images from war-affected areas in the 1990s: however, the columns of refugees which appear here are unambiguously identified as “Serbian”. The song (and the video) then rapidly changes tone: in a live-action segment the popular actor Nenad Jezdić leads a column of Serbian refugees from some “distant past”. Then the video goes as follows: Monastery Đurđevi Stupovi. Landscape. Flowers and a butterfly. A child (app. 2,5 years of age) dressed in white “ethno” costume. Nenad Jezdić seems upset. His horse bucks. Flags. Easter egg. The refugees enter the monastery. The monastery suddenly transforms into a fortress. Here we encounter another popular actor, Aleksandar Srećković Kubura, accompanied by many more children dressed in white. One girl sits with a white lamb in front of an icon with the image of Christ. She looks up and then exclaims the Paschal greeting ‘Hristos voskrese – radost donese’ (Christ is arisen - joy he has given). The background voices respond: Vaistinu! (Indeed he has!) End of video.

The activities of the campaign Podignimo Stupove are intensified during the major religious holidays. The music video “specials” re-focus the public attention from the importance of the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi and its revival, to the importance of the revival of the Serbian religious culture as such (especially in Belgrade). In another example, in the Easter video Radujte se (Rejoice) the action takes place around the Cathedral of Saint Sava (Hram Svetog Save) in downtown Belgrade. It is noteworthy to remind that Saint Sava, a Serbian prince and Orthodox monk, was born Rastko Nemanjić, as the youngest son of Stefan Nemanja, founder of the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi. In this video, a lovely girl dressed in a folk costume plays the traditional instrument gusle, and a lovely young man (also dressed in a folk costume) takes a position to perform by the monument to the “founding father” of post-Ottoman Serbia Karadorde Petrović (1768?-1817), in front of the Cathedral. Pop singer Sergej Ćetković is leading a children’s choir (everyone is wearing modern clothes). A priest is holding an icon and children venerate it with a kiss. People play guitars and frulas and knock Easter eggs. They send Easter SMS messages. There comes a motorbike. Veteran rocker Bora Đorđević gets off and makes the sign of the cross upon joining the mixed choir. Children are dancing the folk dance kolo. Actors Aleksandar Srećković Kubura and Nebojša Ilić greet each other with “traditional” three kisses. Someone plays a harmonica. Actors from the popular film Montevideo (2010) play soccer. In the

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56 For a discussion of the style of dress associated with “ethno” imagery, and the concept of “ethno boutique”, see Čolović, Etno, 113, 264. White costumes have a special place in this imagery because they whitewash the ethnic specificities and thus, ultimately, broaden the audience base for the performers. Compare, for instance, the Eurovision Song Contest entries of Greece in 1995, Ireland in 1996, Serbia and Montenegro in 2004, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2006 and Greece in 2010.

57 The filming location for this segment was the medieval fortress of Smederevo, on the opposite (north) side of Serbia.

58 This film recounts the events leading to the participation of the Yugoslavian national football team at the first FIFA World Cup in Montevideo in July 1930.
closing shot people raise a huge banner with the Easter acclamation *Rejoice!* *Christ Has Risen.*

In other Easter videos (e.g. *Hristos voskrese /radost donese/ or Pesma nedeljije*) urban images and the symbolism of modern life are intertwined with mythical landscapes and signifiers of a distant rural and/or heroic past. The same video might feature rock musicians (like Žika Jelić of *YU grupa* and Cane of the *Partibrejkers*) tapping Easter eggs on Belgrade’s messy rooftops, and blossoming orchards filled with children and choirs of pretty girls dressed in folk costumes. The Christmas video repertoire of the Music Ensemble Stupovi usually has children as the main protagonists: children enact scenes from the Bible in improvised costumes, get kisses from their mothers, form processions and sing in choirs or as back vocals, usually dressed in white. Accompanied by Ljuba Ninković and his popular actor-brother Boda Ninković, in the video for *Alphabet Song* (*Azbučna pesma*) released with the “blessing of His Holiness the Patriarch of Serbia” and undersigned by the Archbishopric of Belgrade-Karlovac, the children (all dressed in white) address the Lord and explicitly state what they love the most (besides the Cyrillic alphabet) - in the following order: the monastery of Gračanica (in Kosovo), other children and schoolchildren, the Gospels, life, health, truth, language, Kosovo and beauty etc.59 The song concludes with the lines “and everything else loved by the children of the world”.

“Ethno cosmopolitanism”, as voiced by the children in this video, joins the choir of praises to the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi coming from different sides of the Serbian cultural landscape. The symbolism of resurrection attached to the revival of its monastic life implies a symbolical beginning of the “overall spiritual revival of the Serbian people”60. Nevertheless, this revival happens while the Serbian shrines in Kosovo and Metohija are still under threat (from their un-Christian and un-Serbian enemies). In the words of the bishop of Raška and Prizren, Artemije Radosavljević: “This all happens in ‘ill times’ when... God allows evil to take a moment of triumph. ... When God wants and when He says so, the Serbian resurrection (Easter) will shine (again)”61.

The bishop wrote this in his introduction to the publication which marked the launch of the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* in 2002, issued, symbolically “na Vaskrsni Đurđevdan” (on Easter holiday of St. George). His words can also be read as a potentially “extreme” political statement: Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia’s holy lands, may be temporarily seized by the enemies, but when the time is right (when God says so) they will “resurrect” under the rightful (Serbian) authority. In the meantime, as good Christians, all we can do about it is sing and pray. The same message is conveyed by the song (and the video) (a

59 Azbuku Bože volim, Gračanicu i decu, dake i evanđelje, život i zdravlje, istinu i jezik, Kosovo, lepotu.
spin-off project of the campaign *Podignimo stupove* *Hajde Jano* by Asim Sarvan. On this occasion, Sarvan, the other prominent member of the band *S vremena na vreme*, changed the lyrics of the popular traditional song *Hajde Jano kuću da prodamo* into *Hajde Jano kuću da ne damo*, arguing (in a subtle and non-aggressive manner) against the Albanian dominance (authority) over Kosovo. The video released in 2008 was supported by the Serbian ministry for Kosovo and Metohija.⁶²

The release of one of the latest Easter videos of the campaign (2014) titled *O Isuse, slatki Spasitelju* (*Oh, Jesus, sweet Savior*) was widely reported in the media. For instance, Belgrade’s tabloid *Kurir* (21 April 2014) listed in detail the filming locations (the elementary school “Jelica Milovanović” in Sopot, the Belgrade churches Ružica, Vaznesenjska, Sv. Apostola Petra i Pavla, Sv. Jovana Vladimira, the church in Veliko Selo, the monasteries of Vavedenje, Rakovica, and Slanci in and around Belgrade, and the secular spaces of Skadarlija, Milošev konak and the home of the family Mojsilović). The lyrics again combined several poems written by the bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Members of the Music Ensemble Stupovi were joined by the Folklore Ensemble Prelo and frula soloist Milinko Ivanović Crni with his frula accompaniment called *Frulaši Svetog Nikole Srpskog*. In the *Kurir* feature, one of the protagonists in the video, the young actress Brankica Sebastijanović, wished a Happy Easter to all Orthodox Christians. On his part, the composer and music producer Andrej Andrejević explained:

> “This song, like the previous spiritual songs of the Music Ensemble Stupovi, aims to impart the word of Christ to us, sanctify in Grace our souls and fill them with joy. Saint Nikolaj the Serb (Saint Nikolaj Velimirović of Ohrid and Žiča) advised the Christians to sing spiritual songs and psalms at their gatherings. There is a sublime force in singing, because spiritual songs comfort and bring people together.”⁶³

Accordingly, composed of celebrities and anonymous faces, “high-cultural” and pop-cultural figures, institutional and grassroots agencies, joined and supported by media professionals, the heterogeneous choir assembled by the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* openly advocates singing in unison. Their song is a hymn to the resurrection of the Serbian national identity, after the ice age of “communist” brotherhood and unity with other South Slavic nationalities, and the general marginalization of the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁶⁴ As we have seen, this song is composed not only of musical and lyrical references to the Serbian medieval (religious) past and pre-modern cultural traditions, but also of lavish visual imagery which brings together the ancient and the new, and

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⁶² Another spin-off video of the campaign, *Ne od ovoj sveta* of the vocal duoct Pirg, is conceived as a “road movie” depicting a humanitarian tour of the deprived Serbian communities in Kosovo and Metohija. For a recent discussion of the national mythologies (Serbian and Albanian) attached to the Kosovo problem, see Topić, Goran / Nakarada, Radmila and Mirjana Vasović. (eds.). 2015. *Etnički stereotipi i nacionalni mitovi kao prepreke pomirenju u srpsko-albanskim odnosima*. Belgrade: Fakultet političkih nauka.


obliterates the existing social inequalities and conflicts. It may even bring together “the soccer players of Partizan and Crvena zvezda who appeared in the video (Hristos Voskrese) rubbing shoulders”. This imagery invites the members of the ethno-national/religious majority (and only them) to assume their places in the imaginary ethnic community of “equals before God”.

Some of the messages conveyed by this hymn belong to the longstanding traditions of “Serbian populism”. It addresses the community perceived as an “organic whole”- Serbs by religious affiliation and upbringing (where being a “Serb” is the primary identification of an individual, which takes precedence over all other notions of belonging). “In the small nations, only the nation can be great.”(Dobrica Ćosić). This nationalism is “cultural”, rather than “biological”, but still has the nation as its main point of identification (and loyalty). The theme of joint efforts of different segments of the society for the sake of a common cause (raising the Tracts of St. George) resonates with collectivism not uncommon for the “communist” period (as well). The symbolical revival often associated with this campaign may be discussed as a form of reaction to both the individualization and detraditionalization of the contemporary society, especially its rejected legacies of socialist Yugoslavia. As signifiers of the present, modern gadgets and “foreign imports” (mobile phones, motorbikes, leather jackets and so on) are welcome as long as they do not disrupt the image of an ideal and homogeneous ethnic community and its core values (defense of the nation, its material and immaterial treasures, the codex of honor and sacrifice for a common cause, subordination of the individual to the community etc.). The idealized images of “video Ruritania” resonate with the notions of backwardness and underdevelopment as “cultural value” (as we have seen, even as “intellectual capital”). The “legend of Kosovo” is invoked (again) in aestheticized images that provoke both action and reflection, both shooting and singing, to return to Nebojša Popov’s discussion of the *longue durée* facets of “Serbian populism”. The peculiarity of “invented traditions” (like Christmas and Easter music videos in post-socialist Serbia) is that the continuity with historical past that they recall is largely factitious. They confirm (again) that “selective use of the images from the past usually legitimizes the existing social order”.

“Few monasteries have been reconstructed with such pomp as Đurđevi Stupovi”. As we have seen, the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* has brought together (very) different segments of the Serbian society - from anonymous individual donors to institutional and corporate ones; from public figures from the realms of pop music, visual arts, opera, film, theatre, television and sports to the top-ranking church officials; from the national public broadcaster (RTS) to the Serbian Orthodox Church; from national institutions of heritage

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66 Again, in the words of Dobrica Ćosić: “a Serb is a man who is not a man unless he is a Serb”.

67 Mateja Kežman (Slovenian by origin) was not “born a Serb” (neither were Emir Kusturica, Fahreta Jahić Lepa Brena and other major public figures and celebrities, but their formal adoption of (Serbian) Orthodox Christianity secures their symbolical position (and privileges) of “true Serbs”.


70 Čanović and Lučić, *Manastir*. 
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protection to UNESCO; from local authorities to state ministries; from reporters to advertisers; from tourists to pilgrims, from schoolchildren to academics etc. Even the music video output of this elaborate campaign must be observed against the background of the overall “revival” of the institutional roles of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the post-socialist period. This revival comprises the symbolic and ritual associations with (both left- and right-wing) political parties; systematic efforts to introduce religious instruction into the previously secular school curricula or to increase the presence of the Church at the universities; rise of the media visibility of the Church officials and institutions; religion-inspired campaigning against the LGBT rights, rights of abortion or human rights in general; blessings and general support to the “holy warriors” for the national cause; penetration into the military and police forces; advocacy of ethnophilia (svetosavlje) and theodemocracy (sabornost); lack of self-reflection and critical discussion of the role of the Church in the war and criminal activities associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, its economic and political system. The list goes on.

Conclusion
This study was an attempt to approach the often loose and inconsistently defined (even contested) concept of populism from the perspective of the presence and circulation of ideas associated with “Serbian populism” in a specific segment of the popular music industry in the country, organized around the charity campaign Podignimo Stupove - namely, its music video output. The prolific activities of this campaign have spanned 13 years (2002-2015) and are still ongoing, the longevity of the campaign being a phenomenon in itself in the Serbian context. It is now established as a permanent feature both in the airplay of the public broadcaster (Radio Television Serbia) and the religious calendar. As such, it provides valuable material for discussion of the ways in which popular culture may be used to communicate the dominant narratives of identity, belonging, and (in the last instance) loyalty to the (both “imagined” and real) ethno-national community. Popular culture studies (all too often neglected in the Balkan academic context) offer, if not a key to understanding, then a fresh perspective on observing the changes in communication of the longstanding notions associated with “Serbian populism”.

The music videos discussed in this study give us an ample insight into the combined musical, textual and visual language of the communication of ideology. What makes them particularly interesting for a discussion of the contemporary aspects of populist ideologies is their mode of addressing “the people”, perceived as a homogeneous ethno-religious community - as it were, a pre-modern political formation. Their strands of populism run in two opposite directions: on the one hand, using the support and material infrastructure of the institutional system (the Church, state ministries, the system of heritage protection, the media, tourist industry etc.) to promote their cause, they

71 On the problematic aspects of this revival, see Blagojević, Mirko. 2009. Revitalizacija religije i religioznosti u Srbiji: stvarnost ili mit?. Filozofija i društvo 2, 97-117; The bibliography on this subject is vast and shall not be further referenced in this paper.
73 Some notable exceptions include the critical reflections by Mirko Đorđević and Pavle Rak.
legitimize that system. On the other hand, addressing the “higher instances” (God himself) and shifting the sphere of identification / loyalty from the “earthly” to the “heavenly” domains might also work towards deligitimizing the institutional elites currently in power. Namely, the revival of religious life in the post-socialist states in the Balkans also means the restoration of the belief in the “eternal” and pre-political, in the modern sense of the term “political”. In other words, belief and trust in God might also connote and resonate with distrust in democracy and the modern political system personified by the leading political figures of the day.

Generally speaking, aestheticized images of golden ages of the past that never were raise many questions regarding their true purpose in contemporary Serbian society: namely, does this society actually live in the present? Are the actions of the current elites and “the people” motivated by real-life concerns or the imagery of this “glorious past”? Does this uncritical attachment to the past imply that this society is, so to speak, future-blind? Or is this masquerade designed merely to distract the subjects of an irresponsible state from the reality of their present social downfall and degradation? In the words of the historian Dubravka Stojanović: do such societies indeed produce “more history than they are capable of consuming”?74 This article perhaps raises more questions than it hopes to answer. However, it may serve as a fine illustration of how populist political arguments may be served to the “people” in colorful Christmas or Easter wrappings. This imagery replaces the visions of a “communist” bright future with the visions of a “God loving” glorious past (in the times generally less interested in future). They all serve the same purpose – as ideological anaesthetic for the misery of the present.

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The Potential of Popular Culture for the Creation of Left Populism in Serbia: The Case of the Hip-Hop Collective “The Bombs of the Nineties”

Research Article

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The Potential of Popular Culture for the Creation of Left Populism in Serbia: The Case of the Hip-Hop Collective “The Bombs of the Nineties”

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The focus of this article is to highlight the potential of popular culture to become an agent of leftist populist politics in contemporary Serbia. The authors observe the hip-hop collective “The Bombs of the Nineties”, whose music tackles topics from recent history, and who subvert the fashion style of the 1990s “Dizel” subculture, which is often connected to Serbian nationalism and war profiteering. The paper analyses the relationships “The Bombs of the Nineties” create between their practices, class warfare and leftist discourses, aiming to show the potentials and threats those relationships introduce. Following Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of populism as a “hegemonic political articulation of demands”, we assume that “The Bombs of the Nineties” could represent a solid populist political agent in that they attempt to reveal and draw attention to the “unfulfilled demands” of disempowered Serbian youth. On the other hand, the counter-intuitive merge of ideologies they operate, and the limited impact of their strategies on the official politics could be an obstacle to the expansion of their message.

Keywords: Left populism, Youth, Transitional Serbia, Popular culture, “Dizel” Movement.

Introduction

The term “populism” is often used in political discourse as an attribute for political strategies that aim to mobilise the general population around a common issue. Used as a derogatory term or a devaluing tool, populism tends to cast away political opponents outside the scope of the honourable political practice. Observing the resurgence in the usage of this term since the nineties, Margaret Canovan notices that “the populist movements that have in the past decade burst into mainstream politics in Western democracies are usually treated as pathological symptoms requiring sociological explanation.”

- Still, post-Marxist political theorist Ernesto Laclau did not perceive populism as a social pathology, but rather introduced a perspective on

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* Jovana Papović and Astrea Pejović are social anthropologists and documentary filmmakers. The focus of their research is the post-socialist transitional state in the Balkans. The crossing points of their research include the intersection of political and cultural practices in the Balkans, specifically youth cultures and activism, popular music and the transgenerational cultural capital of Serbian citizens.

populism as an inherent instrument of modern politics. Laclau considered populism to be an inevitable discursive form for constructing the pluralist political landscape. Given that the leftist populist endeavours often gathered around informal civic movements, this paper tries to locate left politics in Serbia outside of the traditional political sphere. Under “left”, we consider political parties and movements that are engaged in defending equality, criticism of the social order and the desire for greater social justice. Following Ernesto Laclau’s definition of populism as a form of the articulation of “unfulfilled demands” and drawing on ethnographic research on the Serbian leftist hip-hop collective “The Bombs of the Nineties”, this paper argues that left populist speech in Serbia could be traced outside the traditional political practice, in the field of popular culture. By analysing the practices and discourses of the hip-hop collective “The Bombs of the Nineties” and the audience’s reception, the paper discusses the potential and limitations of popular culture as a field for the articulation of left populism.

**Politics-as-populism, populism-as-politics**

Since the recent global economic crises and the reinforcement of nationalism across the Western world, an overall populist tilt in the landscape of legitimate politics has emerged. This was accompanied by an increase in the vote share of so-called “populist” parties. Although the phenomenon seems to be growing and is of interest to more and more academics, there is still no truly coherent and consistent theory that would help us to define “populism” unanimously. One dominant understanding of populism even thought that the term should be used as a plural, as Jean-Pierre Rioux suggests - a political movement led by a charismatic leader and characterised by a systematic critique of the elites and a constant reference to the people. Some scholars, such as Cas Mudde, argue that populism is an integral part of representative democracy and that we live in a “populist zeitgeist.” Others, such as Benjamin Arditi, assert that we have to accept “that populism is a recurrent feature of modern politics, one that appears both in democratic and undemocratic variants, and that this recurrence refers to key themes of the populist discourse.”

We could divide research in populism into three groups: one which views it as a strategy, another which defines it as a style or a discourse, and finally a third which takes it as a “thin-centred ideology.” The third option seems to be the most useful for analysis as it, unlike the others, allows for observation of the phenomenon in any ideological framework, and permits cross interpretation in different political contexts. Indeed, as Cas Mudde says:

“Though populism is a distinct ideology, it does not possess ‘the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency’ as, for example, socialism or

7 Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist.
liberalism. Populism is only a ‘thin-centred ideology’, exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts’ [...] as a thin-centred ideology, populism can be easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies, including communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism.”

Understood as a thin-centred ideology, populism imposes itself as a “practical-political ideology”, both a “technical-idiomatic tool” that accompanies the rise to power and a method of speech that helps to keep it. In this context one might ask what the common denominator to such a heterogeneous set of phenomena would be. Following Mudde, we could point out that: “the core concept of populism is obviously ‘the people’; in a sense, even the concept of ‘the elite’ takes its identity from it (being its opposite, its nemesis).” Hence populism would appear within the context of the people’s discontent directed towards elites, which are perceived to be holding a monopoly of power, wealth and culture. Populism is therefore “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupted elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.”

In the book On Populist Reason, Ernesto Laclau attempts to find an ontological foundation for all of the phenomena interpreted as populist. Unlike the majority of theorists of populism, Laclau offers a challenging angle, in which populism becomes one of the preconditions of “thinking politics”; the rejection of populism becomes a rejection of the political “tout court.”

Laclau’s first ascertainment is the ambiguity of populist referents. If populism does not have a stable referent, Laclau argues, it is precisely because it articulates a large number of “unfulfilled demands” in the context of “an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others)” which creates an “equivalential relation” between them. For Laclau the unity of the concept resides in the hegemonic political articulation of demands.

“There is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings which crystallize in some symbols quite independently of the forms of their political articulation, and it is their presence we intuitively perceive when we call a discourse or a mobilization ‘populistic’.”

It’s only when the system is not able or refuses to incorporate the “unfulfilled demands”, that a “chain of equivalence” is created between them. The “chain of equivalence” creates the second sine qua non dimension of populism: “the need for an internal frontier”, and an antagonistic frontier between the State, (the

9 Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist.
11 Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist.
12 Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist.
14 Laclau, On Populist Reason, 73.
15 Laclau, On Populist Reason, 123.
common denominator of the dominant, the oligarchy, and the corrupted elite) on one side, and the “people” on the other.

Furthermore, Laclau develops the figure of “the precipitator of the equivalential link: popular identity as such.” The particular antagonistic figure of “the people” has a duty to crystallize the demands as an “empty signifier, which becomes intentionally poorer, for it has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous.” For Laclau, the task of the left is to constitute “a people” in the same way that far-right parties do - to symbolically build a popular unity and to assemble a certain number of social demands around specific symbols.

**Populism in the Serbian context**

- Populism is not alien to the contemporary Serbian political context. Many historians believe populism has been present and exploited as a mechanism of power in Serbian politics since the formation of the modern state in the 19th century, and they use the term pejoratively. Vladimir Pavličević argues that “populism represents, from Karadorde to Slobodan Milošević, a recurrent technique of governance, which in practice has not been successfully replaced by instruments that provide the development of liberal democracy model.”

Dubravka Stojanović, a historian known for her criticism of the Serbian relationship to other Yugoslav nations, follows this interpretation by emphasising the populist nature of Serbian politics: “Serbia wanted to impose its populist model on other Yugoslav nations which led to a conflict with other nations and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991.”

- However, the literature on populism in Serbia rarely analysed the democratic successors of Slobodan Milošević’s regime as populist. This only changed once the Radical Party split, when a number of members left to found the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka SNS), which came to power in 2012. The party’s leader, Aleksandar Vučić, used the overall discontent in Serbia to gain power. Having been openly nationalist in 1990s and early 2000s, Vučić now moderated his rhetoric, alleging to speak on behalf of “the people”.

- Commenting on Serbian populism, Pavličević argues that it should be considered the main obstacle to the democratization of the society. Again, populism is in this sense understood as a social peril connected to far-right ideology: conservatism and antimodernism. Harkening back to Laclau, where could we trace left-wing populist practices in contemporary Serbian politics?

Serbian public discourse is generally hostile towards left ideologies, and activists are often diminished and sometimes demonized in the media. One of the reasons for this could partly be rooted in Slobodan Milošević’s left
positioning in the nineties. Milošević’s regime legitimised itself through nationalism, while maintaining, at the same time, continuity with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia through the new state’s name (Federal Republic Yugoslavia, consisting of Serbia and Montenegro). As anthropologist Stef Jansen noticed, Milošević remained in power “due to heterogeneous discourse consisting of vague allusions to some aspects of Serbian nationalism parallel to some aspects of Yugoslav socialism which were until then considered as incompatible.” After the October 5 revolution, the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, kept its socialist rhetoric but never openly distanced itself from Milošević. Furthermore, the SPS supported liberal economic policies in various governments that it helped form.

Another reason for the marginality of the left ideology in Serbia can be found in the relationship between the democratically elected governments and the working class issues. In his study on left social movements in the post-2000 Serbia, historian Petar Atanacković disappointedly remarks that the working class (which should be a traditional nurturer of left ideas) is atomized and disoriented as a result of the systematic redirection of the workers’ dissatisfaction from social to various national issues carried out by the authorities. Arguing that the working class is confused, seduced by nationalism and the perks of individualising capitalist forces, the sociologist Mladen Lazić also does not see a potential for the mobilization of this group, finding it too heterogeneous.

The sporadic initiatives that address social issues from a left perspective are mainly gathered around marginal or informal groups and non-governmental organizations, mostly active within student organizations, feminist organisations, and LGBT and cultural activism. Some of those left-wing organizations formed the Left Summit of Serbia, “a wide radical left network that strives to interconnect them around a set of political principles focused on worker and democratic control, reindustrialisation, anti-fascism, and the struggle for equality.” Miloš Baković Jadžić, co-founder of the leftist organization Centre for Politics of Emancipation and a member of the Left Summit estimates that the current political climate is still not suitable for the creation of a solid left-wing party. Croatian left-wing theoreticians and activists Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks argue that there has been a recent

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22 The following organizations are Levi Samit Srbije: PARISS, Udruženje akcioniara Vršačkih, Vinograda, Gradansko sindikalni front, Solidarnost, ROZA - Udruženje za radna prava žena, Centar za politike emancipacije, Marks 21, Gerusija, Kontekst kolektiv, Obruč, Forum Roma Srbije, STRIKE, Društveni centar “Oktobar”, Zrenjaninski socijalni Forum, Zelenom omladina Srbije, Žindok, Centar za kvar studije.
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rebirth of left politics in the region, especially amongst the youth (students and activists), but that these movements still have difficulties communicating with “the people.”

Furthermore, these left initiatives are cautious in using the word “people”, but rather opt for “workers” when talking about “the people”. The authors question if this attempt to avoid the term serves the purpose of not being discredited by their political opponents as populist. The signifier “the people” is thus left empty by the left initiatives, which gives the current regime an opportunity to manipulate and choreograph it at their will. Regarding the historical background and current political context, it seems that in the near future left-wing ideologies have rather slim chances of penetrating the mainstream Serbian politics.

“People’s popular culture”

Taken that left-wing ideologies fail to address “the people” within political discourses in Serbia, the potential for its articulation could be traced in popular culture. Popular culture has been perceived as a tool for the deception of the people since the first critiques emerged, most prominently from the early Frankfurt school of thought. Nevertheless, since the establishment of Cultural Studies as a discipline in the 1960s, popular culture has been acknowledged as a fruitful field for the articulation of politics.

Cultural Studies focuses on finding modes of resistance inside popular culture, which are perceived as a hegemonic field of the dominant classes. Stuart Hall stated that “[i]n the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.” Hall considered that containment and resistance are always in a dialectical relationship. On the one hand, he perceived popular culture as a marker for the people’s practices that creates the culture from the bottom, while on the other hand, he recognizes a “commercial” definition of popular culture as a cultural content created by cultural industry and consumed by a large number of people. Hall believed that “just as there is no fixed content to the category of ‘popular culture’, so there is no fixed subject attached to it - ‘the people.’” Furthermore, he asserted that “other forces” have certain interests in defining “the people and [calls] for a construction of a culture that is “genuinely popular” as a counterpoint to the power’s construction of people as “an effective populist force, saying ‘Yes’ to power.”

Cultural Studies has always perceived popular culture as a field that is inherently embedded in politics, especially when it comes to youth cultures and youth political practices. Even though the persistence on the interpellation of popular culture and politics produced an amount of criticism regarding the

27 Hall, Notes on Deconstructing the Popular, 239.
28 Hall, Notes on Deconstructing the Popular, 239.
discipline’s cultural reductionism, popular cultural practice proved the right of the scholars of Cultural Studies on numerous occasions. Although literature, film and television were mainly analysed for their political potential, music has always been present as the articulator of political meanings. Music was already recognised as a politically sensitive social practice by Plato, who wrote in the Republic to “beware of change to a strange form of music as endangering the whole. For never are the tropes of music changed without the greatest political laws being changed, as Damon says, and I am persuaded” (424c). Today, with the growing debates around youth’s apoliticity (to understand in Ranciere’s sense) and the search for new political practices, music has been increasingly recognized as an alternative field in which youth claims politics. Drawing on Colin Hay’s definition of politics as “a combination of identifiable alternatives, over which actors can have an effect and upon which they can reflect within a social setting”, Street et al. believe that this definition introduces the idea that “politics occurs in realms outside of the formally designated political domain, but is distinguished from those activities that are private or devoid of social interaction, or are attributable to ‘fate’ and/or beyond human agency.”

Simon Frith argues that popular music is an important element in the creation of cultural and political identities. He believes that unlike the general understanding of music as a reflection of the people or the audience, the issue is:

> “how it [music] produces them [people, audience], how it creates and constructs an experience - a musical experience, an aesthetic experience - the way can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and collective identity. [...] Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind [...].”

Firth asserts that identity is mobile, that it is a process and that “[m]usic seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective.” He believes that social groups only get to know themselves “as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn’t a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them.” On a similar account, Peter Wicke argues that “music evolved into an extraordinary medium of cultural communication, one of the fundaments of societal production of individuality and subjectivity [...] ‘youth’ [read young people] began to define itself peculiarly through music.”

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32 Frith, Music and Identity, 110.
33 Firth, Music and Identity, 111.
Finally, John Street observes that “music has been a site of political expression for centuries, whether as a part of the folk tradition or of the classical canon.”\(^{35}\) He also adds that music that articulates politics is not exclusive for subgenres and marginal music but is present in the mainstream as well. By analysing different acts and performances, Street also depicts the importance of musicians as agents of social and political struggles. Wicke also notices that “until today, pop music has been the least censored branch within the cultural realm”\(^{36}\), which makes it a suitable and relatively “emptied space” for the shift of political struggle. Street emphasizes that music is a more affordable medium than film or television, which means that “music is well adapted to reflecting or responding to reality, and that certain styles of music-making are disposed to take advantage of this potential.”\(^{37}\) Nevertheless, it is far from true that all produced music is political, even though it is always a product of a certain socio-political context. A question remains as to why certain socio-political contexts trigger more political music than the others.

“*The Bombs of the Nineties*” - Case Study

While researching the articulation of politics in popular culture, one hip-hop collective with a highly provocative name in a Serbian context, “The Bombs of the Nineties” (*Bombé devedesetih*), especially attracted our attention. The group is highly heterogeneous in terms of age, as the members' age stretches from 17 to 30 years. Also, the collective consists of both women and men with different family and education backgrounds. Some of them come from a middle class milieu and live in the centre of Belgrade; others come from Belgrade working class suburbs such as Borča, while some of them are originally from outside of Belgrade and grew up in peasant families. The group revolves around three charismatic figures, but has twenty additional members - rappers, producers, friends and supporters - who make up “The Bombs of the Nineties”. The members initially met via social networks where they shared their musical taste, ideas and ideology. Social networks are also their key channel of promotion and communication with the audience. Although new on Serbian hip-hop scene (they have been active since 2014), “The Bombs of the Nineties” are well connected with other underground hip-hop artists and they represent an important actor, promoting a new hip-hop subgenre - “trap”. We followed the group during one year in a participant observation fieldwork, from September 2014 to May 2015. We assisted at some of their gatherings, concerts, song recordings, and video shootings, and followed some of them during their student activism undertakings. We also used film as part of our methodology as visual representation is very important in their expression and practices. We also conducted five semi-structured interviews with the three founding members of “The Bombs of the Nineties”: Daki BD, Mimi Mercedez and Gudroslav, as well as many more informal interviews with the other group members. We first encountered Daki BD as he was the author of two blogs, one about hip-hop and urban culture, “Vraćanje na pravo” (A return to the right

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At the point when we met Daki BD, we were co-writing a paper on the revival of a nineties Serbian subculture, “Dizel”. Daki BD appeared as an interesting interlocutor as he was one of the few actors of the “Dizel” revival to articulate the subculture through a theoretical axis: he was at the time a philosophy student, and one of the few to publish on the subject. Belonging both to the world of academia and hip-hop, Daki BD represented a kind of bridge between two worlds for us as researchers. Our shared interest in urban culture and the development of “Dizel” subculture allowed us to build trust with him, and he introduced us to the rest of the group. By following “The Bombs of the Nineties”, we were concentrating on the synchronization of their political discourse with their practices. Our research concentrated on the political dimension of their public activities.

What was striking for us, as researchers of the revival of the “Dizel” subculture, was the unique appropriation of the “Dizel” symbols within “The Bombs of the Nineties” collective. Their appropriation of “Dizel”, which is colloquially considered as a negative heritage of the nineties in Serbia, assigned emancipatory potential to this subculture. Observing this as a counter-hegemonic practice, we were intrigued that this reinterpretation did not come from the intellectual or academic discourses but from a youth group. Such an initiative led us to presume that the contemporary youth generation born and bred after the disintegration of Yugoslavia holds a potential to deconstruct cultural dichotomies constructed around popular music and “Dizel” subculture.

Practices

“The Bombs of the Nineties” is a hip-hop collective consisting of solo acts. It serves as a sort of a mutual label for the performers, which encircles them in a politically and ideologically cohesive group with enough space to showcase their artistic individuality.

Each member is characterized by a personal rap-style and plays a clear role in the collective. Daki BD is the oldest member - born in 1985, he is considered by the group as its ideological mentor. Mimi Mercedez (1992) is the only female rapper of the group and the most popular member. She sometimes works as a stripper, and the performance of her identity could be positioned inside the lipstick feminism or “Raunch culture” that advocates the empowerment of women by deliberate body practices, ostentatious dressing and behaviour, assuming provocative sexual attitudes in order to fight established gender roles. Concerning the highly patriarchal Serbian context, the rhymes of Mimi

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Mercedez include: “Everybody wonders whether our nation is decaying because of the likes of me; or is it the decaying nation which creates the likes of me” (Da li zemlja propada zbog ovakvih kao ja, ili zemlja propala stvara ovakve kao ja), could be understood as an empowering message, as she underlines the ambiguity between the subject and the object of the domination. This play with ambiguity could be linked to the process of self-empowerment. Empowerment here should be seen as a process that seeks social transformation based on “the construction of critical awareness and on a consideration of the structural conditions of domination. The main challenge is therefore to facilitate awareness to develop ‘subjectivities of resistance’, ‘radical subjectivity’ and to work on both the identities of the subjects and social positions of all kinds.”

Gudroslav (1993) is the youngest founding member whose name is a play on words with traditional Serbian names, which end with a suffix - slav that could mean both both celebration and of Slavic origin. Gudroslav (gudro - from gudra, colloquial for drugs) could both mean the “one who celebrates drugs” or a “Slav on drugs”. Gudroslav is the most dedicated and the most recognized rapper by both fans and the members of “The Bombs of the Nineties”. The other members often seek Gudroslav for advice during the recording sessions and the data from our participant observation period marked him off as a sort of a music catalyst of the group. It was he who organized the first solo concert in the Belgrade club “Drugstore” on 20 February 2015. The other members of the collective performed on this concert as supporting acts, which introduced the collective to the wider audience in Belgrade for the first time.

“The Bombs of the Nineties” record their songs in improvised studios; their videos are made with limited or no funding and are directed and filmed by their friends. Their promotion is exclusively made through social networks and we can measure the increase of their visibility in correlation with the number of their fans on Facebook and YouTube views. At the beginning of our research the collective did not have an independent page but at the time of writing in March 2016 they have 4120 followers. The less popular individual members of the collective have between 2000 to the 25 000 followers gathered by Mimi Mercedez. At the very beginning of our research, Mimi Mercedez had around 8 000 followers on Facebook, meaning that she has almost tripled her fan base in the last two years.

Discourse

Hip-hop is a music genre that has always had a social and political dimension, as is also the case in Serbia. On one hand, one of the most popular hip hop collectives, “Beogradski Sindikat” (Belgrade Syndicate), uses hip-hop to promote conservative values, while on the other hand the rapper Marcelo

43 Bacqué, Marie-Hélène and Carole Biewener. 2015. L’Empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice?. Paris: La Découverte, 146 [translated by the authors].
46 This collective is prominent because of their open critique of corruption in Serbian politics and politicians. Their critique mostly addresses the Democratic Party, perceived as corrupt and nepotistic. Nevertheless, Belgrade Syndicate is also known by its ambiguous political engagement with the far right movement Srpske Dveri, which has recently become a party. After the party was
openly supports pro-European politics and the values advocated by liberal democratic parties. “The Bombs of the Nineties” also openly speak about their political agendas through their music, arguing that entertainment is a good way to share thoughts with the audience. Therefore, Gudroslav stated: “We want to transmit a political message to our public through entertainment,” and Mimi Mercedez jumped in by saying: “My most entertaining song is also my most political one. (...) The goal of this collective, especially Daki’s and mine, is to reassess the relationship people have towards politics.”

The main issue around which “The Bombs of the Nineties” articulate their politics is class warfare. As heirs of the working class, they consider themselves the biggest losers of the democratic transition in Serbia - “the non-working class”. Using hip-hop, they promote the idea that the unemployed and disempowered youth from Serbia and the region can and should create a critical mass together. Aiming to position themselves as the leaders of the (sub)urban youth, they claim that their music is a tool that could oppose the right-wing discourse that prevails in the hip-hop scene and the media, but also among Serbian youth in general.

Furthermore, they refuse to enter the labour market since they identify labour in “neoliberal capitalist” conditions as exploitation. They promote hedonism and leisure as “the best tool for fighting the neoliberal capitalism”. In another interview Daki BD stated: “Having fun is the only thing we can do to oppose this system in which we don’t have any opportunities.” Daki BD describes the social cleavages of the Serbian society in a rather Manichean way; for him there is the elite on one side and the “people” on the other. The three leaders of the group insist on the political implications of their practice: “We want to talk to youth from the lower classes, to those guys from the blocks that are just fighting every day, and we want to talk about their life, and to use their words and sounds to do so.” The group also insists on a commitment: “We reject the politics of victimization, we want to empower the youth of the working class and to do so we have to insist on the weapons we have. We want to have fun, to party and to listen to the music of the youth, hip-hop, techno and turbo-folk - the music of the lower classes. This is a committed political act, this is our way to defy capitalism.”

formed, one of the Belgrade Syndicate’s leaders, Boško Ćirković-Škabo stated that now he “finally has someone to vote for”, which became the party’s slogan during the parliamentary elections in 2012, during the Talk show on Prva television, “Veče sa Ivanom Ivanovićem” (available here). Nevertheless Boško Ćirković, denied publicly being involved in any manner with the party Dveri. Members of the Belgrade Syndicate also took part in the “Family walk” (Porodična šetnja) organised by Dveri in October 2010, as a counter protest against the organisation of the Gay pride in Belgrade.

47 Gudroslav, personal communication, 04. February 2015.
48 Mimi Mercedez, personal communication, 04. February 2015.
49 Daki DB often makes references to the youth that live in Belgrade suburbs as the “Neo-Dizels” or the “Babies of the nineties”, and he calls them the successors of the working class, considering himself, a child of two factory workers who lost their jobs living in (sub)urban neighbourhood Borča, to be a perfect representative of the generation (even if he is older then the group he is refereeing to). Daki DB, personal communication, 28. February 2015. See also, Teorija iz Teretane. 2012. Nasilni subjekt: nepoželjni višak radničke klase (assessed: 16. May 2016).
50 Daki DB, personal communication, 04. February 2015.
51 Mimi Mercedez, personal communication, 11. September 2014.
52 Daki DB, personal communication, 04. February 2015.
The construction of collective identity
Following Laclau’s concept of the “equivalency chain” and “unfulfilled demands”, we should see how the demands of “The Bombs of the Nineties” participate in the construction of a collective identity from a populist perspective. In this sense we could spot two main constitutive agents of “the people”: the disempowered working class on the one side, and youth as the “biggest transitional losers” on the other.

In order to position their practices and discourse in a global context, “The Bombs of the Nineties” use the figure of the subjugated, disempowered post-colonial subject, immigrants and ghetto citizens who are socially marginalized and relegated to poverty as their main referents; to articulate their position, they use hip-hop as an empowering voice. They perceive popular culture as a more open and fruitful field for transmission of political ideologies than engagement in a political movement or protesting, and at the same time, far more inclusive than party politics. They see hip-hop, its political origins and its popularity among various social groups as the natural method for the articulation of their “unfulfilled demands”. For them, the potential of hip-hop for social mobilization is endorsed by the fact that it manages to hold the “voices of the oppressed” despite its commercial success and global expansion.

“The Bombs of the Nineties” aim to reach Serbian youth by invoking local references as well. For this reason, they also listen to and promote Turbo-folk music and make covers and mash-ups of this genre with their own music. By listening and perpetuating this genre, which often polarizes Serbian society, ‘The Bombs of the Nineties’ on the one hand intend to provoke the Serbian cultural elite, and, on the other, want to get closer to the taste and everyday practices of the working class.

53 We noticed a lot of references to African football players and Black power members in the songs of the collective. They refer to these historical characters or sportsmen as “heroes” and “brothers”. Mimi Mercedez’s song, (feat Daki BD) named by the Senegalese football player Diafra Sakho, is the most unequivocal example of this statement. “They like my dark side - Mimi Ghana/They say you’re cute as Daki’s speech impediment/Bombs of the nineties, a diamond mine /The tradition of workers and crazy immigrants /They didn’t know enough, did they - Mali, Sierra Leone/…/The ambition is not small on the way to Senegal/The global problem, the Balkans and West Africa/…/ A chain around my neck, I’m looking for a plot in Dedinje/I’m shining to give solar energy to my brothers in Africa/West Africa, there we were born/Senegalese coast, Patrick Vieira/Diafra Sakho, Mamadou Sakho/My name is Diafra, my name isn’t Darko/My biggest brother, Diafra Sakho.” Available here.

54 Besides hip-hop, Daki BD was involved in student revolts during the blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, in 2010. The students’ demands remain unfulfilled, and, referring to this experience, Daki BD stated, “I think that hip-hop is a much better way to send a message to people and communicate with a wider audience”, Daki BD, personal communication, 28. February 2015; see also Teorija iz teretane. 2013. Hip-hop kao lokalno glasilo srpske radničke klase (in collaboration with Goran Musić and Predrag Vukčević) (accessed: 16. May 2016).

explains the essence of life. It’s how we combine two worlds that are parts of our culture and we support maximally the unification of these genres.\textsuperscript{56}

The second constitutive agent of “the people” in “The Bombs of the Nineties” practices, central to their engagement, is the concept of the “Youth”, which is prominently “crystallized”, in Laclau’s term, through the collective’s defiant name. The name could, on one hand, be understood as a provocation as it is a direct reference to the warfare of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the name is much more complex than the first association may reveal. Beyond the war symbolism, the reference to the nineties is also generational. Using this name, they refer to their peers who have known nothing but war, economic sanctions, poverty and failed economic transition. They use this generational reference to build the new identity of the Serbian youngster [the bombs] and create a version of a mythology of the “subject that is empowered by a hostile environment.”\textsuperscript{57} In this sense, “The Bombs of the Nineties” subvert historic references and purposely intimidate the public, reminding them of the wars in the nineties, by drawing attention to its living consequences.\textsuperscript{58} They intend to remind the public of the constant reproduction of social outcasts among the youth population, which is a product of the official political neglect of the youth.\textsuperscript{59}

Accordingly, one of the most prominent responses of the collective to the neglected social position of the youth is their insistence on the revival of the nineties “Dizel” subculture.\textsuperscript{60} In the beginning of the nineties, “Dizel” was a movement centred on a group of criminals connected to the informal economy during the war in Yugoslavia. “Dizels” (Dizelaši) used the social disorder caused by the wars to gain capital and promote violence. Their fashion style involved sports garments by luxurious high-end fashion brands, thick golden chains and most prominently, Nike “Air-Max” sneakers. “Dizel” style represented a degradation of good taste for the Serbian cultural elite, while

\textsuperscript{58} “Using Dizel dress code is an intentional provocation” Mimi Mercedez, personal communication, 11. September 2014; “When someone declares himself as a Dizel, that means that he is on his way to becoming politically conscious.” Daki BD, personal communication, 11. September 2014.
\textsuperscript{59} The increasing youth unemployment forced the young population to turn to precarious labour and the grey market. At the very beginning of the World Economic Crisis, in June 2008, the International Labour Organization presented the following facts: “Over 40% of young workers [in the Western Balkans] are in temporary jobs, while approximately 44% are estimated as engaged in informal employment with no employment contract or social security coverage. Furthermore, the number of young workers who have become discouraged in their search for a job, but who are available and willing to work, amounts to 5.6 per cent of the total youth population, which could add an estimated 10 per cent to the ILO youth unemployment rate for the sub-region” in International Labour Office Geneva. 2008. Background paper for the Informal Meeting of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs during the International Labour Conference Geneva, 12. June 2008. (accessed: 10. October 2014).
\textsuperscript{60} From 2009, a revival of nineties music and fashion occurred in Serbia. This revival was part of a global phenomenon, yet it evoked many repressed memories and was highly criticized in the media and public discourses. The peak of the revival took place in October 2011 with a music festival called “I love the Nineties”. This particular event triggered a public debate marking the youth that participated in the revival as nationalist, hooligans, with bad taste etc. See Papović, Jovana and Astrea Pejović. 2013. „Dizel”-Revival in Serbien. Wiederkehr einer Subkultur der 1990er Jahre. \textit{Osteuropa} 11-12, 97-104; Papović and Pejović, Revival Without Nostalgia.
their attitudes intimidated citizens. The collapse of the state economy established “Dizels” as the most successful and powerful individuals, who became role models for the youth that were growing up in an impoverished society. After the end of the economic embargo in 1995, fashion elements from the “Dizel” movement became available on the Serbian market and the youth started to imitate their “heroes” in numbers. The small-scale movement, exclusive for a warfare elite, from this point on became a youth subculture. Through the appropriation of the “Dizel”, “The Bombs of the Nineties” embody the identity of the contemporary Serbian youth, whose social position is at the same time the consequence of the bombs from the nineties and a ticking bomb. Serbian Cultural Studies lack a thorough analysis of the condemnation of “Dizel” in dominant and popular discourses. Furthermore, the hooligan football supporters, whose fashion statement is close to the “Dizel’s”, additionally enhance the perpetuation of the negative imagery associated with “Dizel”. From the position that interprets “Dizel” as a negative heritage of the nineties, “The Bombs of the Nineties” could be easily portrayed as the promoters of Serbian nationalism and as hooligans.

In contrast to popular opinion, “The Bombs of the Nineties” embrace “Dizel” as a stigmatized youth movement and build their counter-hegemonic practices from there. We could understand their use of “Dizel” as a “grounded aesthetic”, in Paul Willis’s terms. For Willis, popular culture allows for an immense number of meanings and reinterpretations depending on the context in which a particular popular culture is produced and consumed. Willis comes up with the “grounded aesthetic” as a notion in order to “identify the particular dynamic of symbolic activity and transformation in concrete named situations.”61 “The Bombs of the Nineties” identify “Dizel” as the embodiment of cultural hegemony, and from there they construct a neo-“Dizel” persona. In Willis’ terms, their practices could be defined as a “process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings.”62 In this way, “The Bombs of the Nineties” glorify the African anti-colonial struggle and the fact that there are certain academic initiatives reading post-socialist transformation in parallel to the post-colonial one.63 Although the prefix “post” is debatable, we could perceive the appropriation of “Dizel” in the practices of “The Bombs of the Nineties” as the “ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture - language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis - that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities.”64

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62 Willis, “Symbolic Creativity”, 244.
Reading the “The Bombs of the Nineties” in this sense, we may easily understand their music and politics as populist, as they attempt to reveal and draw attention to the “unfulfilled” demands, in Laclau’s terms, of the contemporary Serbian youth. Unlike the new left organizations, as stated above, this hip-hop collective openly refers to the category of “the people” in order to unite and guide the agency of the audience and the followers. But we could also say that the manner in which they combine Marxist and leftist references with references to the ethnic wars of the nineties can be confusing or misleading, and as such the ideological nature of their commitment could be criticized or (mis)interpreted differently.

And now what? Limits of music as an articulator of left populism

Taking into account music’s potential to convey politically sensitive meanings and the potential of popular culture to articulate left wing populism or to create new political identities, we have to consider what happens once the audience receives the message: how is it understood and reinterpreted? The main problem in thinking about the transmission of political knowledge and meanings through popular culture or music lies, as Anneke Meyer argues, in the analytical potential of the terminology “audiences”, “consumers”, “messages” and “effects”. She draws attention to this issue following Ann Gray's analysis of debates regarding audience research that states that this terminology “implies a one-way model of communication in which texts are active producers of messages and consumers are passive recipients.”

“Texts and consumers, as well as their inter-relationships, are more complex”, Meyer continues, as they “both reflect and generate certain representations; they create and reproduce culture.” This position stems from Cultural Studies’ body of knowledge, which has been arguing for cultural consumption as the production of meanings. Street, Inthorn and Scott assert: “popular culture serves not only as a source of political knowledge, but also as a source of political morality.” Accordingly, we should ask how the consumption of the “The Bombs of the Nineties” music participates in the construction of the political identities of their audience and how it influences the understanding of Serbian recent history. Even though we would need to undertake ethnographic research of the audience in order to answer these questions precisely, we may theoretically reflect on the limitations and the potential threats carried by “The Bombs of the Nineties”, their music, style and subversion of the nineties symbols.

This collective introduced a rather provocative discourse to Serbian popular culture. They deliberately employ symbols from the nineties, singing about unemployment, poverty and late transition to adulthood in order to try to connect the youth’s current disadvantaged social position in Serbia with the unresolved social and cultural traumas of the nineties. Even more, by appropriating symbols that invoke painful memories, “The Bombs of the Nineties” accuse the Serbian cultural elites of constructing “Dizel” as an “inner

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66 Mayer, Investigating Cultural Consumers, 72.
67 Street / Sanna and Scott, Playing at Politics?, 339.
other”, the symbol of the downfall of civic values and growing nationalism. Also, the specific position that Mimi Mercedez holds in this rap collective challenges Serbian culture’s deeply rooted patriarchy by promoting female liberation, freedom to exploit her body as she pleases and women’s empowerment. Unlike turbo-folk singers, whose acting is perceived in academic discourse as contrary to patriarchal norms, even if is more inattentive than conscious, Mimi Mercedez’s act is completely intentional: she is openly talking about her aspirations to reach “young girls” in order to empower them.

Nevertheless, we have to consider how contingent the understanding of the “The Bombs of the Nineties”, their name, music and style is on the audience's knowledge of recent history and understanding of Serbian politics? A reading of historian Dubravka Stojanović’s study of Serbian history schoolbooks shows that the schooling system in Serbia provides confusion regarding the knowledge of recent history, Slobodan Milošević’s politics, the wars in the nineties and the role of Serbia in these events. Stojanović aims to prove that the biggest confusion in the schoolbooks comes from the ambiguous definitions of political ideologies and political events from the nineties, which misleads pupils.

“The Bombs of the Nineties” tend to understand the “Dizel” subculture as a “people’s” culture and try to reinterpret it in a left perspective. Still, Dubravka Stojanović shows that the ambiguous historical knowledge of nineties politics provides a deep confusion regarding the left-right, socialism-nationalism political divisions in Serbia. Taking the historical school books published after 2000, she argues that 5O October, the day when Milošević was overthrown, is represented as the day “when communism fell, even though Slobodan Milošević did not go to war in the name of the working class and their rights, but in the name of the nation and the coveted borders.” If young people are taught in school in such a confusing manner, “The Bombs of the Nineties” could produce even deeper confusion. Also, beyond their intentions, they could be (mis)understood and confused for glorifiers of Milošević’s politics and the wars.

It seems, however, that “The Bombs of the Nineties” has started to reach the intellectual elite in their political mediation. Again, it is Mimi Mercedez who has been gaining the most attention. The playwright and public intellectual Biljana Srbljanović has started to support Mimi on her social network profiles despite fitting into the group that the “Bombs” criticize. Similarly, an organization which works in the field of creative industry, Rentakultura, invited Mimi Mercedez to their open talk about the position of young artists and the creative class in Serbia. Also, the Slovenian intellectual and leftist activist, Anita Tolić, recognized Mimi Mercedez as the voice of the generation, stating that Mimi’s music “brilliantly reflects the state of affairs in which her country has found itself. It is a state which creates “the likes of her” (especially...

69 Stojanović, Ulje na vodi, 132.
70 Stojanović, Ulje na vodi, 131.
71 Rentakultura: Available here.
women in the re-patriarchal zed [sic] society), the lost generation, the underprivileged class, robbed of the legal, traditional ways of getting by and, ultimately, their future.”

From this intellectual feedback it seems that “The Bombs of the Nineties” subversion is recognized and encouraged by the educated audience, yet the conundrum for future research remains: how does the youth appropriate this hybrid ideology?

Furthermore, by dressing as “Dizel” from the nineties, “The Bombs of the Nineties” try to reach right-wing youth who sympathize with the original movement, attempting to awaken class consciousness within this marginalized group imbued with nationalist ideas. They use hip-hop as a popular speech in order to reach them, yet one could question how clear the message is. The advantage they have in this communicational process is that most of the members of the collective also come from working class neighbourhoods, as do the vast majority of the youth in question. In this perspective, we should emphasize that they share similar lived experiences, which enable them to reach this population more easily. Still, the question remains how effective a small hip-hop collective could be against an ideological machinery that has been thoroughly working on the dispersion of nationalism for decades.

A recent research project named “Myplace · Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement”, conducted by sociologists Hilary Pilkington and Garry Pollock, shows that “young people feel remote from a perceived political elite and demonstrate high aggregate levels of populist beliefs that will make mainstream parties uncomfortable.”

Even though “The Bombs of the Nineties” populist strategies have an evidently limited impact on official politics, the collective is undeniably imposing as an innovative and subversive political group, and their practice introduces a new form of political speech and practices into the Serbian political spectrum.

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The Potential of Popular Culture for the Creation of Left Populism in Serbia: The Case of the Hip-Hop Collective “The Bombs of the Nineties”


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Local Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Election Analysis

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Local Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction
Local elections for municipal and city councils and municipal and city mayors were held in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on 2. October 2016. These were the sixth local elections since the Dayton Peace Agreement. There was generally not much expectation for significant change in BiH politics, and the elections were seen as a test on to what extent the major political parties are familiar with citizens' concerns, especially at the local level. A change in the Electoral Law a few months ahead of the elections had increased the importance of party structures and party leaders in determining the allocation of seats among candidates from party lists, while decreasing the influence of voters. Coupled with an electoral system that favors small parties, this could potentially result in further fragmentation of the party system. During the electoral campaign, a popular referendum on a disputed national holiday in Republika Srpska (RS), scheduled one week before the local elections, overshadowed any local issues both in RS and in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). That said, these elections continued the established dynamic of intra-ethnic competition in BiH where parties compete for voters within the ethnic group they represent. Although independent candidates and non-ethnic parties achieved respectable results, these were not enough to bring about meaningful change.

Change in the Electoral Law
The Electoral Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina is adopted at the state level and applies to all lower levels of government. It regulates a broad spectrum of issues, including bodies that oversee the elections, electoral lists and candidates, campaigning, campaign financing and media conduct. In particular, it regulates the rules for translating votes into seats for all elective institutions in BiH at the state, entity, cantonal and municipal levels. There are additional clauses for elections in Brčko District and the City of Mostar. Prior to the elections, there was an urgent need to change the Electoral Law to take into account the establishment of a new municipality in RS (Stanari), and, more importantly, to change clauses regulating local elections in Mostar. The last local elections in Mostar were held in 2008 under provisions imposed by the Office of the High Representative (OHR) four years earlier.

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Constitutional Court of BiH declared these articles void in 2010 as they violated citizens’ rights to equal representation. No local elections have been held since in Mostar, a fact which itself created problems regarding democratic legitimacy. Although the issue of Mostar was the main driving force behind the changes, no agreement between Bosniak and Croat representatives from the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica BiH, HDZ BiH) was reached in time. Pressed by the deadline of the upcoming local elections, the invalid clauses remained unchanged and, as in preceding years, no local elections were held in the city.

The major adopted change was the manner in which seats are allocated within party lists. Elections in BiH are held under an open-list proportional representation electoral system with a 3% threshold. The Sainte-Laguë method is used for distributing seats among parties that pass the threshold, giving preference to smaller parties. In previous elections, seats were allocated to candidates on a party list who received at least 5% of the vote for that party, with remaining seats going to candidates from the top of the list. This quota was increased to 10% for municipal councils and 20% for all other elected legislative bodies. This was in itself a small change, but it was enough to affect the allocation of seats within a party, giving much more relevance to the position of a candidate on the party list. The change will become highly relevant in future elections for the BiH, FBiH, and RS parliaments, starting in 2018. It will impact party cohesion, promote party loyalty, and significantly increase the importance of party leaders. The drive for more centralized decision-making within major political parties coupled with a low electoral threshold and a seat allocation formula that favors smaller parties could result in increased defection, splinters, and further division of the already fragmented party system. The 2016 local elections already saw a larger number of independent candidates who had previously been members of one of the major parties. Many independent and small-party candidates were elected in 2016 as council representatives and mayors.

The Electoral Campaign and Referendum in Republika Srpska
The electoral campaign was dominated by issues more relevant for politics at the state or entity level than for municipalities. Most prominent was the referendum in RS on the entity’s disputed national holiday. As a reaction to the Constitutional Court of BiH’s decision to declare the Day of RS holiday unconstitutional, the institutions of RS, directed by Milorad Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, SNSD), initiated a popular referendum to challenge and nullify the verdict. The timing of the referendum was deliberately set to coincide with the local election campaign. This set the scene for a spiral of increasing national homogenization among Serbs, calls for unity, and a disregard for everyday politics. The campaign was dominated by continuous propaganda stressing RS autonomy and statehood, with little mention of concrete local issues. All Serb political parties were compelled to openly support the referendum and the SNSD lead on the issue. There was no possibility of remaining neutral, abstaining or

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opposing the referendum and its predetermined outcome. To do so would be considered treason to RS in the eyes of the public. Although primarily intended to weaken the opposition in RS, the referendum had an impact on the election campaign in FBiH. Bosniak and non-ethnic parties saw it as a threat to the very fabric of the country and openly campaigned against it. This resolute stance further strengthened Serb party unity. Croat parties observed the referendum with keen interest as an experiment in non-consensual politics that could be repeated in future. The referendum was held on 25. September, with overwhelming support in favor of keeping the disputed holiday and a turnout over 50%.

A campaign monitoring analysis by the Sarajevo-based Center for Election Studies confirmed the disruptive effects of the RS referendum on the electoral campaign. It found that only half of campaign messages were focused on locally relevant topics, and less than a third were backed up by concrete measures. Issues of local development, employment opportunities and youth featured most prominently among relevant topics. In sum, the campaign itself was uninspired, with parties offering little innovation and repeating iterations of previous electoral catchphrases. All parties campaigned selectively and only in municipalities where they expected some electoral support, and only three parties stood their candidates in more than half of BiH's municipalities.

**Election Results**

The party system of BiH is structured into multiple ethnically defined subsystems. We can identify a Croat, Serb, Bosniak, and non-ethnic subsystem whereby the latter two overlap to some degree. There are several layers of interaction between political parties representing the same or different ethnic groups, but the subsystems represent relatively stable categories. Independent of any policy issues, all electoral competition is intra-ethnic with virtually no contest for votes across ethnic cleavages. Each subsystem extends from the state level down to municipalities and features ruling and opposition parties, albeit with negligible political distinction between them. For the 2016 local elections 372 political parties, candidate lists, and independent candidates competed in 141 municipalities and cities, and in Brčko District. The elections for municipal councils featured over 30,000 candidates running for 3,136 council seats. Most seats were won by major political parties, notably two Bosniak parties: SDA, and the Union for a Better Future of BiH (Savez za bolju budućnost BiH, SBB); two Serb parties: SNSD, and the Serb Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS); the HDZ BIH; and the non-ethnic Social

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6 Elections were held for 74 municipal councils in FBiH and 57 in RS; four city councils in FBiH (Bihać, Tuzla, Zenica, and Široki Brijeg), and six city councils in RS (Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Doboj, Prnjavor, Trebinje, and Zvornik); 131 municipal mayors and 10 city mayors; and the Brčko District Assembly.
7 Out of this number, 31 seats are in the Brčko District Assembly, and 26 seats are national minority seats. The elections in Stolac were canceled, making the total of seats awarded 3,119.
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Democratic Party of BiH (Socijaldemokratska partija BiH, SDP), 8 Preliminary results were available within one to two days, except for a few close races, where recounts were required. The elections were, for the most part, fair and orderly, except for several major incidents in Stolac municipality. Voting here was stopped after violence at polling stations and at the local election council involving Bosniak candidates and Croat election officials. The elections in Stolac were canceled pending an investigation into the skirmish and allegations of electoral fraud. The Central Election Commission announced the final results of the elections on 1 November 2016, excluding Stolac municipality. 9 The election results confirm the dominance of the major parties, but also point towards a fragmentation of the electoral system at the local level.

In council elections, the major parties managed to win slightly over two thirds of the overall number of seats, but retained a majority in almost all municipal and city councils (Table 1). The SDA, SNSD, and HDZ BiH together have a majority in over three quarters of the municipalities in BiH. The opposition parties in FBiH and RS, especially the SDS, performed very weakly. Only few councils obtained an absolute majority, most notably the HDZ BiH dominated councils, and some form of coalition government is required in most places. In some municipalities, party fragmentation within the council is extensive. For example, in the municipality of Rudo, the 17 council seats will be divided among 11 political parties with no party gaining more than 3 representatives. In Brčko District, almost the only municipality in BiH where all major political parties compete, the 31 Assembly seats will be divided among 12 parties and an independent candidate, including representatives from all major parties.

Table 1: Municipal/City Council seats by political party 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Total number of Municipal/City Council seats</th>
<th>Number of municipalities/cities with a majority in the Council</th>
<th>Number of municipalities/cities with absolute majority in the Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SDA (with coalition partners)</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNSD</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDZ BiH (with coalition partners)</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS (with coalition partners)</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent candidates</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent lists</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parties</td>
<td>1,220</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,119</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Central Election Commission BiH (7 November 2016); author’s calculations.

8 Other relevant parties included the non-ethnic Democratic Front (Demokratska fronta, DF) and two Serb parties: the Party of Democratic Progress (Partija demokratskog progres, PDP), and the Democratic People’s Alliance (Demokratski narodni savez, DNS).

Although comparison between local and state level elections is difficult and fraught with many issues, contrasting cumulative votes for each of the major parties and their coalition partners illustrates key trends. The elections for the BiH Parliament include cumulative votes from RS, FBiH, and Brčko District, while votes in the municipal elections include all municipalities in BiH and Brčko district with the exception of Mostar and Stolac (Table 2). Since most parties formed changing pre-electoral coalitions in at least some municipalities, these figures are presented separately. While voter turnout remained stable compared to 2014, all major parties with the exception of SDP and smaller Serb coalition parties lost votes. The biggest loser by far was the SDS, which barely retained its position as the second-strongest Serb party. The party leadership was unable to respond to the referendum in a way that would not undermine its political agenda while still opposing Dodik and the SNSD. Unwilling or unable to focus on everyday local issues, SDS candidates were defeated across RS.

The non-ethnic DF is another clear loser. A recently formed party, the DF could not rely on an established network of local supporters and candidates, even though it projected itself as the new left-wing option aiming to replace the SDP. With low quality candidates on the party ticket, the DF undermined its position as a serious alternative. The SBB lost support due to a pre-electoral coalition with the SDA. The long time arch-rivals compete on a similar platform for the same Bosniak voters, and the SBB lost out to its larger and more organized coalition partner. The strong results from small parties may be attributed to local dynamics, a greater number of independent candidates and lists, as well as prominent defections from the major parties. Also worth noting is the electoral strategy of the HDZ, which formed a coalitions with a varying list of Croat parties in 16 municipalities, in addition to running alone in 50 more, which greatly increased its results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Number of votes Parliamentary elections 2014</th>
<th>Percentage of votes Parliamentary elections 2014</th>
<th>Cumulative number of votes local elections 2016 (coalition votes included)</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of votes local elections 2016 (coalition votes included)</th>
<th>Change 2014-16 in % (coalition votes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>305,394</td>
<td>18.73</td>
<td>296,162 (306,626)*</td>
<td>17.93 (18.57)</td>
<td>-0.80 (-0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNSD</td>
<td>255,024</td>
<td>15.64</td>
<td>205,352</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>-3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDZ BiH</td>
<td>123,022</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>76,564 (114,779)</td>
<td>4.64 (6.95)</td>
<td>-2.90 (-0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>211,562</td>
<td>12.97</td>
<td>111,785 (133,712)</td>
<td>6.77 (8.10)</td>
<td>-6.20 (-4.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP</td>
<td>108,501</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>122,548</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>+0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elections for local mayors mirror the results for council elections to a certain degree (Table 3). The elections are conducted under a first-past-the-post voting system that favors large parties and increases competition between ruling and opposition parties. While results for council elections were not overwhelmingly in favor of the SNSD, it openly defeated the SDS in the mayoral races and successfully captured most mayoral positions in BiH. The electoral system increased the number of coalitions in which parties filed joint candidates in many municipalities, most notably SDA and SBB. The SDA-led coalition managed to win most mayoral positions in Sarajevo’s municipalities, but lost in other large cities to independent candidates. The party leadership attempted to gloss over this fact by declaring their victory in a Sarajevo municipality worth ten municipalities elsewhere.\(^\text{10}\) Another notable loss for SDA was the mayor of Srebrenica, where a Serb candidate won after a vote recount and many years of Bosniak mayors. Evident support for independent candidates and those from other parties did not result in more mayoral positions, solely due to the majoritarian electoral system. The election of Fikret Abdić, a convicted war criminal, as mayor in his hometown municipality of Velika Kladuša received much attention and is an alarming signal of a systemic failure to reflect on the war and its aftermath in BiH. As in all previous elections, these too were gendered towards male politicians. A very small percentage of candidates and even fewer elected officials were female. On a positive note, there are now more female municipal mayors than previously, with six in total: one in FBiH and five in RS.

Table 3: Municipal Mayor positions won by political party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Number of Municipal Mayor positions 2012</th>
<th>Number of Municipal Mayor positions 2016</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNSD</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>+7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDZ BiH</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent candidates</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parties</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>+4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Central Election Commission BiH (7. November 2016); author’s calculations. Note: all parties ran as part of a coalition for mayoral elections 2016 in some or all municipalities, mostly notably SDA with SBB, and SDS with PDP and others.

More of the same to come?
The 2016 local elections would be considered unremarkable were it not for the disruptive force of the RS referendum. Political debate during the electoral campaign was undermined by a resort to ethno-populist politics, constant ethnic squabbles, and total neglect of the problems of everyday life in BiH. The politics of identity trumped the politics of good governance and rule of law. Following the referendum and elections, international actors sought to reaffirm an atmosphere of normalcy by praising the regularity of the electoral process and highlighting the Euro-Atlantic perspective of BiH, while expressing concern for the referendum’s implications as a threat to the rule of law and the stability of the country. The full impact of the referendum is still uncertain, but this could provide a blueprint for ethnic bargaining and political campaigning in BiH for years to come.

The issue of Stolac raised concerns regarding adherence to democratic values and the integrity of the electoral process. It will prove to be a crucial test for the ability of BiH institutions, especially the Central Election Commission, to handle violent disruption to elections. Stolac is especially relevant since two ethnic groups are pitted against each other, with state institutions already being accused of favoritism. So far, the Central Election Commission has initiated an investigation into the incident in Stolac, mentioning candidates and election officials from both ethnic groups. A date for new elections in this municipality has not yet been set.

The winners of the elections are clearly the ruling parties in RS, foremost SNSD, which gained a number of local mayors, but also DNS, which increased its overall vote share significantly. The SDP managed to stabilize its decline and remain the primary non-ethnic party, while the dominance of HDZ BiH showed that there is currently no rival Croat party in BiH. The urbanite Our Party (Naša stranka, NS) was a surprise winner, becoming the main opposition party in Sarajevo and other cities on a social liberal platform. The clear loser of the elections is the SDS, which lost both a significant number of council seats.
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and many mayoral positions. Its coalition partners were not affected as severely, and especially the PDP managed to retain its support. The DF is another loser that did not manage to profile itself with a coherent party platform, respectable candidates, and consistent polices; similarly the SBB, which suffered minor losses. While support for the SDA remained stable, it effectively lost ground as many former party members defected and ran on independent tickets.

The issue of independent candidates and further party system fragmentation will need to be monitored closely. The full effects of the change to the Electoral Law will not become apparent for another few electoral cycles. If the current trends towards greater centralization within the major political parties continue, and no changes are made to the electoral system, there could result a very large number of defections and splinter parties. With so many political parties gaining representation in parliaments in BiH, the country could become almost ungovernable.

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