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NATIONAL POPULISM VERSUS DEMOCRACY

The phenomenon of new populism has been the subject of many studies and analyses in recent years. Despite the great variety of approaches, their purpose may be summed up as follows: defining populism and its main forms, identifying the new forms of populism in the contemporary world, and analysing the specific risks posed by populism today.

Populism has long been a subject of study for political scientists. Its origins can be traced back in history. Historically, populism is associated with specific phenomena that emerged in different parts of the world: the Populist Party in the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Russian Narodniki in the same period as well as the *völkisch* ideology of nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Populism had numerous manifestations in the twentieth century as well, such as agrarianism in Europe in the interwar period, the populist rhetoric of the fascists in Italy and the Nazis in Germany or Peronism in Argentina after the Second World War. In its contemporary forms, populism ranges from the left-wing Hugo Chavez in Venezuela to the right-wing and far-right populists in Europe (Heider in Austria, Le Pen in France or Siderov in Bulgaria). Considering that these phenomena are so heterogeneous in their genealogy and historical context, the theoretical question is: To what extent can we find a common framework and structure allowing us to define populism?

In one of the first studies on the subject in Bulgarian in the post-communist period, *Populism and Legitimacy*, Evelina Ivanova (Ivanova 1994) notes the following:

A theoretical attempt at one possible ideal-typical construction of populism would identify several leading principles. Edward Shils, a scholar of North American populist movements, points out the primacy of the will of the people over any other principle, over the principles of traditional institutions and over the will of any social stratum, and the desire for a 'direct' relationship between the people and the ruling elite, unmediated by institutions. Worsley adds the forms of 'popular participation', including pseudo-participation.¹ Populism often presupposes (propagates and requires) extreme forms of democracy, and provides convenient means of legitimating political positions, actions and techniques through 'the people'. It represents the ideal goal of establishing direct contact with the popular masses

through different forms of direct democracy. It defines itself as an attempt to guarantee justice at transitional moments when habitual relations are called into question and people have the feeling they are losing control over events.

This extensive definition contains several elements that need to be commented on. Above all, populism is defined as a strategy that gives priority to the need for direct contact between the elite and the people, without the mediation of institutions. This undoubtedly implies that populist strategies question one of the main characteristics of modern democracy, or at least of modern democracy as defined by Tocqueville. Tocqueville speaks of the 'intermediate bodies' (the aristocracy in Europe, political associations in America) which serve as a mediator between the citizens and the government, ultimately keeping the power of the executive within acceptable limits and preventing it from becoming tyrannical. In this definition, then, populism is a strategy that seeks to eliminate intermediate institutions, while at the same time clearing the way not only for direct contact of the elite with the people but also for removing all constraints on the powers of the executive.

Secondly, this definition identifies direct democracy as an element of populist strategies. In reality, quite a few populist leaders in history have resorted to plebiscites, primarily for the purpose of overcoming resistance from parliament. While such strategies have succeeded in many cases, they have often ended in some form of mobocracy in which the mob rules directly, without any constraints, on any matter, including in court cases. On the other hand, it is wrong to associate direct democracy with populism only – in some polities, as for example Switzerland, referendums are a powerful tool for limiting the powers of political parties and for exercising pressure on their leaders, especially if they fail to meet popular expectations. That is why what is at fault is not direct democracy per se but, rather, its use for authoritarian purposes. Finally, this definition of populism highlights the link between populism and popular aspirations for justice or the feeling of injustice. This is the most problematic aspect of the definition as it implies that any political programme which formulates demands for justice may be defined as an unacceptable populist strategy. Is every political platform that criticises social injustice and questions social inequality necessarily populist?

In a text devoted to populism, Emil Assemirov (Assemirov 2007) notes the following:

Generally speaking, anyone who tries to destroy the consensus established among the elites and to speak from the position of 'the popular masses' is condemned as a populist... It is commonly assumed that political parties which are exponents of collectivist ideologies are necessarily also exponents of populist ideas and rhetoric. But political practice in many countries shows that even parties advocating ideologies of individual representation can be and often are such. One of the serious reasons for this is that populism uses anti-elitist attitudes and a rhetoric based on the understanding of the organic national community in which people

and state are an organic entity. Even though populism originated as an anti-elitist, left-wing gesture of criticism of the status quo, it is used by right-wing parties as well. The populist's recipe for success is that he appeals to people with ready, widespread ideas instead of proposing something radically new.

Assemirov qualifies populism through its anti-elitist rhetoric which questions the consensus among elites and therefore appears to be genetically leftist. On the other hand, however, this is a strategy readily used by right-wing parties as well, when they want to win quick popular support.

1. Populism as a Label

Today populism is a label used to discredit political opponents. The term has negative connotations in contemporary political discourse. Populism is something to be avoided because it is shameful, vulgar, and raises suspicion of unacceptable manipulation or just plain lying. Julian Popov seems right in arguing that 'accusations of populism have become the new populism' (Popov 2007). On the other hand, accusations of populism are only part of political rhetoric as all political actors resort to populist rhetoric, especially during election campaigns. As Borislav Georgiev (Georgiev 2007) notes: 'Populism seems to be the only real thing in our political reality. While every politician, every political organisation accuses their opponent of populism, I think all of them are more or less populist, especially during election campaigns.'

The functional value of accusations of populism is not limited only to discrediting one's political opponent. The populist label also aims at asserting one's political self-identity to the detriment of the opponent by suggesting that 'we're different, we don't do what they do'. This applies to the cases when accusations of populism are accusations of making promises that cannot be fulfilled. Martin Dimitrov, a member of the leadership of the opposition Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), declares the following in an interview for the *Standart* daily (8 February 2007):

The [ruling] coalition [made up of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, MRF, and the Simeon II National Movement, SSNM] is choked with cheap populism. We want a no-confidence vote because people are dissatisfied. What the BSP is doing is pure populism because of the coming elections in spring. The Socialists and the Cabinet as a whole came to power with many promises to the elderly. But those promises have not been fulfilled and the voters are dissatisfied. (Dimitrov 2007)

In this case those who are most susceptible to populist rhetoric are the poor, those who do not have particular expectations of politics and are inclined to follow anyone who is more persuasive in their promises.

Populist appeals are also regarded as short-sighted, ultimately futile, susceptible to changing circumstances – the very opposite of a strategic vision that benefits all. In a lecture at the Atlantic Club in April 2003, the then foreign

minister Solomon Passy declared the following:

It is obvious I'm not the first to find – at that, to my cost – that what is just is not always popular and what is popular is not always just. Two thousand years before me the Saviour felt similar pain, saying 'And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not' (John 8:45). If we look at the etymology of the word 'popular' we will see that the vast human masses are inclined to fall for populist appeals. But they rarely lead to the right solution, a solution that is of common benefit even if in the longer term. Here I can only repeat the words of a great mathematician, René Descartes, who says that it is highly improbable that the truth will be revealed simultaneously to many people. It is more natural that the truth will be grasped only by few. (Passy 2003)

The thesis that populist appeals imply a failure to understand the deep essence of things and that only a select few (the elite) can grasp the true common interests is part of the notions of populism. But it follows the same logic as the logic of all populist appeals, that of the existence of an insurmountable gap between the elites and the people. Elites think they are masters of the truth, suspecting the people that it cannot understand anything and is susceptible to easy emotions. This logic is basically the same because it is based, on the one hand, on deep-rooted suspicion of the elect (the professionals in politics), and on the other, on arrogance and contempt for 'ordinary people' (the non-professionals in politics).

Another dimension of the accusations of populism is the thesis that populism is a refuge for the losers in the transition (those who have lost social status, public prestige, material well-being, old illusions, and so on). In a text on populism, Vladimir Shopov writes the following in his blog:

In recent weeks, the thesis that the only remaining electoral resource in this country is that of populism is being strongly revived in Bulgarian public discourse. All other groups of preferences have either fallen apart (those of 'right-wing' voters) or are beginning to fall apart (those of the neo- and post-communist electorate). The only long-lasting formation is that of the amorphous mass of the 'losers' in the transition, the frustrated, the angry. It is they who will remain the source of the chaotic energy of populist expectations which, alone, are capable of propelling someone to the political throne. The only remaining task is to find a chain armour for this populism. (Shopov 2007)

The understanding of populism is based on the dichotomy of popular and unpopular, acceptable and unacceptable for the general public. The latter applies mainly to economic policy, where the thesis of the need to take unpopular but critical for economic recovery measures is supported by many economists. The metaphor used here is that of 'therapy' (shock therapy, price shock), where the need to endure short-term pain or suffering is justified with a strategic long-term positive outcome (as is the case with most therapies). Here the chosen policy is represented as successful therapy after the problem has been correctly

diagnosed. The problem, however, is that the diagnosis is made by the professionals (politicians, economists) but the therapy must be endured by society at large (the public, which often cannot understand what's the point). As Evelina Ivanova notes:

In Bulgaria, phenomena whose political causes and character have nothing to do with populism are often labelled as such. One of the most flagrant examples of this failure to understand basic political phenomena was the labelling of the restoration of the tripartite commission in 1993 as 'populism' even though the commission was restored to improve the efficiency and legitimacy of the Prof. Berov government. Without this commission, the government would not have been able to go ahead with the several drastic price rises that were unavoidable at the time. (Ivanova 1994)

To generalise, what does this strategy to discredit political opponents label as populism? In the first place, deception, making promises that cannot be fulfilled. Secondly, a refuge for the losers in the transition, susceptibility to emotion, irrational behaviour. Thirdly, rejection of unpopular, tough measures, refusal to undergo effective 'therapy' and reluctance to take the risks of that.

In fact, all those qualifications use one and the same strategy of clear identification of two sides in society: that of the professionals, the politicians, the elite which understands things, and that of the people, of the mass public, or ordinary people who don't. The thesis that populism means making promises which cannot be fulfilled presupposes that there is an authority which is always capable of determining what can and what cannot be fulfilled, and that this knowledge is not accessible to all. The authority in question is usually represented by the 'experts' but 'the people' does not realise this. Unfulfillable promises are often qualified as 'utopias' – impossible dreams of something attractive but unattainable on principle. Here, however, one is justified in asking whether politics is conceivable at all without 'ideals', i.e. without accepting the need for formulating grand, long-term social projects that can mobilise public support for political institutions and ensure legitimacy of the political system. In fact, utopias are often easily dismissed as both erroneous and harmful, most often with calls for greater 'realism'. That is probably why the labelling of leftist projects as populist simply because they succeed in mobilising public energy and support is a common practice and, to a large extent, a dominant strategy for denouncing populism. Utopias, however, have been a powerful source of social imagination since the Renaissance and without them politics would probably turn into a simple management technique – 'management of things', in which the political is reduced to the technical (Châtelet, Duhamel, Pisier 1998: 173–179).

On the other hand, the thesis that populism is a refuge for the losers in the post-communist transition limits the scope of the term because populism is found not only in post-communist countries or countries in transition. At the

same time, this qualification of populism is based on the assumption that all individuals stand to gain – to one extent or another, sooner or later – from social transformations which are regarded unquestionably as positive. Such an understanding of a ‘society of equal opportunities’ that is bound to lead to equal satisfaction borders on populism which, on the other hand, criticises this selfsame understanding. It is obvious that no social transformation can produce winners only and that ultimately no society can be conflict-free.²

Thirdly, the thesis that populism means rejection of unpopular measures which are represented as unavoidable therapy is based on the assumption that in economics, more than in any other sphere, management decisions must be taken for granted, and that questioning them is unreasonable and is the result of ignorance – just as only ignorance could make someone refuse a necessary therapy. Here we see the same division between the competent elite and the incompetent people but from a different angle – that of management and politics. In the world of politics, there is no decision that can satisfy everybody. The *raison d’être* of politics is institutionalised decision-making, where it is known in advance that universal satisfaction is impossible. In this sense, politics cannot be equated with management because it is based on an entirely different type of rationality and above all on effectiveness. The politically effective strives to avoid major conflicts and is always aware of the need to keep social peace. That is why what is politically effective is not necessarily economically effective. But the above understanding of populism as irrational rejection of the economically effective is based on an understanding of the political that equates or simply replaces the latter with management. In essence, this is a fashionable thesis usually supported by neo-liberal economists who prefer to use the term ‘governance’ instead of the traditional term ‘politics’.

2. Populism: A Symptom of a Crisis of Democracy

Populism today is more a symptom of crisis than the other name of the crisis of contemporary representative democracies. That is because in democratic regimes populism is manifested as often diverse and contradictory strategies of questioning the foundations of modern democracy, and in non-democratic regimes as a substitute for democracy. In the first case, populism fits into the legitimate order of political pluralism – it is one of the possible political programmes, one of the many political solutions whose legitimacy is based on pluralism. If modern democracy is understood as a political regime in which there isn’t a one and only truth, party, philosophy or religion, then all kinds of strategies are admissible on principle, including strategies that question democracy. In such a context, populism presents itself as a political platform expressing the true will of the people as opposed to the elite which, despite its diversity, is united on one point: that of ignoring the true interests of the people.

The second case is more specific because here populism presents itself as or claims to be a manifestation of democracy. But here there is a big risk

of lumping together, indiscriminately and uncritically, political strategies that recognise the common interest and expectations of the general public (the people) and frankly populist strategies whose sole purpose is legitimation through popular action. Not all political movements, especially in countries in Latin America, Africa or Asia, which appeal to the people and oppose the glaring social inequality that the majority regard as unjust, are populist. Often, however, owing to the policy and especially to the rhetoric of opposition against the 'rich North', the USA and its economic, information and political monopolies, such strategies are readily qualified as populist. But regardless of whether the accusations of populism are legitimate or not, the phenomenon is symptomatic of a crisis in representative democracy which seems no longer capable of responding to the new social expectations.

In fact, populism is a phenomenon of modern democracy, and not of non-democratic regimes where it is only a substitute for democracy. Populism is an expression of a crisis in representative democracy, and that is why its manifestation precisely in the old democracies of Western Europe and the USA is most telling. In his academic lecture at New Bulgarian University on the occasion of his award of the title of Doctor Honoris Causa, French political scientist Pascal Perrineau made the following analysis of the roots of contemporary populism:

In 1930 Sigmund Freud demonstrated how civilisation's 'discontents'³ gave rise to lethal ideologies in Europe. European civilisation, based as every civilisation on suppression of impulse, seemed to be overcome by a profound sense of discontent and anxiety and no longer capable of suppressing the subconscious urge for aggression and even for death. Seventy years later, the analysis made by the father of psychoanalysis is still valid. To this psychological explanation one must also add a sociological one, which is rooted in the profound discontent of our time. It is at the same time economic, socio-cultural and political... And finally, the last element of the crisis of the contemporary world that fuels the development of the radical right: democratic discontent. In his brilliant political history of the region, Marcel Gauchet proves that 'the disenchantment of the world'⁴ has affected not only the religious sphere but all representative systems, considering the development of collective notions and, consequently, of political ideologies. This destruction of comprehensive notions that claim to know and control events has led to a loss of political bearings and a deep crisis of political representation. This crisis has gripped all of Europe, but the deeper frustration in some countries is due to the fact that political representation is failing to shape the differences, the new and complex divisions across societies. This discontent seems to culminate in the political systems, where political conflict has lost meaning, where left and right sometimes create the impression of reaching consensus in essence, where the main political formations divide the remains of power among themselves in quasi-institutional consensus. This system occasionally goes too far and is institutionalised in the form of what Arend Lijphart calls 'consociational democracy'.⁵ In the countries where 'consociational democracy' has become a system – *Proporz* in Austria, *la concordance* in Switzerland, 'pillarisation' (*Verzuiling*) and *partito-*

tocratie in Belgium and the Netherlands – the radical right and/or populists have room to capitalise on discontents and opposition against the status quo. When citizens say, ‘Society is changing but the system of distribution of power and of the elite remains unchangeable’, populists and other ‘anti-’ of the sort remain the only true opponents. (Perrineau 2003)

I have taken the liberty of quoting Pascal Perrineau so extensively because I think he diagnoses the problem with contemporary populism very clearly: this is a populism which rejects democratic consensus and looks for an ‘alternative at any cost’ that can represent the growing frustrations in democratic societies. It is most often a far-right populism which thrives in the context of a crisis of the old leftist projects and, therefore, of the old far-left strategies. It is also telling that the manifestations of far-right populism are much more vehement and anti-democratic in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. As Perrineau notes:

While it is often more badly structured and organised than in Western Europe, the radical right of Central and Eastern Europe is ideologically often ‘harder-line’ and more openly anti-democratic and it is likewise a symptom of the many-sided crisis in the process of democracy: transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic regimes, transition from socialist economies to capitalist market economies, and transition from industrialisation to post-industrialisation. This clears the way for the development of a radical right, but its political space is relatively limited owing to the fact that nationalism is part of the ideological references of a large number of political actors in these countries and historical fascism is strongly discredited there.⁶ (Perrineau 2003)

The phenomenon of new populism as a symptom of the crisis of liberal (modern, representative) democracy is also discussed by Daniel Smilov in the *Dnevnik* daily:

At first glance it is strange that it is at this very point in time, when many of the countries in the region have received their certificate of maturity by their admission to NATO and the EU, that a populist wave whose main feature is the questioning of liberal democracy and its main values – tolerance towards the Others and minorities, protection of the rights of the individual, priority on the market principle in the economy – is rising in them. The rapid disintegration of the liberal consensus of the transition (a consensus reached late in Bulgaria) is no doubt a symptom of a crisis of liberal democracy. But as is often the case in this part of the world, this is above all a crisis of misunderstanding and confusion. (Smilov 2006)

While here we find the familiar thesis of ‘the people’s confusion or failure to understand’, what is more important is that populism is viewed as a symptom of the crisis of representative liberal democracy. Moreover, it is viewed as a crisis that has affected both the old democracies and, paradoxically, the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.

In a recently published book, *La politique en France et en Europe*, Pascal

Perrineau identifies several main symptoms of the crisis of democracy: rising abstention rates in elections, declining political participation, deteriorating image of the political class and political organisations, withdrawal into private life (Perrineau, Rouban 2007: 15–20). While these phenomena are found everywhere, they are much stronger in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Of course, as Perrineau also notes, there has long been talk of a crisis of representative democracy. The examples of the increasingly fascist radical right in the inter-war period and its contempt for the complex mechanisms and institutions of democracy (Germany, Italy, Spain), as well as of the radical left in the late 1960s and its reliance not on political representation but on direct action often leading to terrorism, are well known. Also well known are the leanings of right-wing technocrats after the Second World War and their counterparts, left-wing advocates of self-government, both equally captive to the belief that society can be governed without the mediation of representative institutions.

But in addition to symptoms, there is no doubt that the crisis of representative democracy has deeper causes. On the one hand, Perrineau notes, it has political causes. The more important ones include the following:

- Selfish individualism which drives citizens away from the classical forms of collective action;
- Weakening of the old division between left and right, which long served as a political guidepost and basis for political debate;
- Weakening of the social polarity in contemporary Western societies, strengthening of the positions of the ‘middle class’ which is becoming a majority even in the category of hired workers;
- Disintegration of the old ties between political parties and territorial communities as a result of globalisation and urbanisation.

‘This shift of the territorial, social and ideological substrata of democratic representation is causing deep democratic discontent’ (Perrineau, Rouban 2007: 25).

The economic and social causes of the crisis are important as well. Among them are the effects of globalisation, which greatly limit the capacity of national governments to cope with the problems of their own polities and cause mass suspicion that things are ultimately decided ‘in secret’ and ‘somewhere else’. The latter has caused a new deep division between the better educated and more open to Europe and globalisation, and the less educated who are concerned above all with the national and are often suspicious of anything ‘foreign’.

Last but not least are the cultural causes, including the crisis of grand messianic ideologies like those related to Marxism, the collapse of the communist bloc, and the growing disenchantment with grand projects and disengagement of large sections of the public from politics. The latter is sometimes transformed into what Pippa Norris calls ‘cognitive mobilisation’ or politicisation rejecting the classical forms of engagement with political parties and movements⁷ (see

Perrineau, Rouban 2007: 30–31).

In a May 2006 interview for the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, too, makes the connection between democracy and populism. In his view, the development of the media and of political awareness, no doubt a democratic process, creates prerequisites for the success of populist strategies:

For the first time today people across the world have awakened politically and are becoming unusually active. They can be easily mobilised as they often share precisely radical postulates. Note that the recent riots in Nepal, Bolivia, Kyrgyzia, Africa and elsewhere have a very similar basis: populism, radicalism and a sense of deep social injustice. And that is what's new. People see how the other part of the world lives and want to live the way the others do in the rich countries. And they can see it thanks to the growing access to the mass media, especially to television and the Internet. This fever for news leads, unfortunately, to extremes and sometimes to bloodshed. (Brzezinski 2006)

Brzezinski's thesis is not very different from Tocqueville's thesis about the tyranny of the majority as a phenomenon of modern democracy, as a phenomenon that is inevitably concomitant with, and to some extent part of, any democratisation process. The democratic idea is based on the power of the people as exercised by the majority. This inevitably generates the effect of the majority and the danger of its tyranny (Tocqueville 1979: 257–272).

Actually, the big question is perhaps less what the deep causes are of the new wave of populism in many parts of the world than whether populism is an inherent and, in a sense, unavoidable feature of contemporary representative democracy. Paradoxically, representative government as a form of democracy established in the last two hundred years is opposed to the classical democracy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought. While today modern democracy is defined as representative, the political regime of representative government has little in common with ancient democracy, especially when it comes to the leading principles of the political equality of citizens. In his seminal study on representative government, Bernard Manin (Manin 1995: 19) points out the difference: 'Representative government does not assign any institutional role to the assembled people. That is its most obvious difference from democracy in the ancient polis.' Manin cites mainly Madison and Sieyès to show how the difference between representative government and democracy was viewed in the eighteenth century.

In today's view, the main difference between ancient and modern democracy is that the former is direct and the latter representative. It is also assumed that direct democracy, as represented mainly by referendums and plebiscites, continues to exist, even if in more limited form. But actually there is another, arguably more important difference between the two models of democracy. Manin points out that most of the positions in the ancient Athenian democracy were assigned by lot. This procedure, he notes, is now regarded as strange and

is never used to appoint officials in contemporary democracies. Drawing lots to assign the political positions in Athens had a very strong democratic rationale: this procedure was premised on the assumption that every full-fledged citizen, whoever he might be, was politically competent. Such an understanding of citizens is not found in any contemporary democracy today. On the contrary, contemporary democracy is representative, meaning that citizens choose and empower their representatives mainly through the procedure of elections (personal, direct and by secret ballot). On the other hand, the procedure of elections, as Aristotle shows, was a common practice in ancient oligarchies where a political elite sought, often through demagoguery, the support of the people (Manin 1996: 43).

Does this mean then that contemporary democracy, which is a regime of representative government where the main procedure is that of elections, is more like oligarchies than classical democracies? This question inevitably leads to one of the main thesis of today's populist movements, according to which popular sovereignty has been usurped by an unnamed but always existing oligarchy. On the other hand, the thesis that contemporary representative democracies are a *sui generis* symbiosis of democratic and oligarchic elements is supported by some theoreticians. In his landmark book *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Dahl argues that representation was not invented by democrats but developed instead as a medieval institution of monarchical and aristocratic government (Dahl 2006: 45). Modern democracy is not directly descended from ancient democracy as a newer form or variant of the latter, but emerged as a result of the long process of establishment and democratisation of representative government. Along with the main modern democratic attribute – elections, which inevitably presuppose demagoguery and therefore populism as well.

3. Populism Versus Democracy

If we assume that populism (we well as demagoguery) are concomitant with every regime of representative democracy, then we should not be surprised that nowadays populism is on the rise. But on the other hand, contemporary populism questions fundamental principles of modern democracy, using democratic procedures and practices (general elections, freedom of speech). This is the political paradox today.

It will remain an unexplained paradox if we assume that as a rhetoric referring to the common people and acting on their behalf populism is mostly a left-wing strategy; that the right is much more oriented towards the elite, therefore populism is rare in right-wing rhetoric. If populism is identified only as a form of left-wing rhetoric, then it will not really be dangerous for democracy. Because its demands, then, will be limited only to more frequent direct consultation with the people and consideration of public opinion. In essence, such an understanding of populism will reduce it to demands for direct democracy, which are nothing new.

The problem is that today's populist movements are dangerous for democracy not because they raise the issue of direct democracy (this is not their main demand) but because they use nationalist mobilisation based on the distrust or even rejection of foreigners. Today's populism is mainly national populism. Its sources are much more nationalist and therefore radical-conservative and radical-right than folkish or 'philanthropic'. Contemporary populist movements do not simply question the political status quo – they are anti-system, questioning the very foundations of pluralist democracy while using its procedures and practices.

The link between populism, nationalism and patriotism is of interest to many contemporary scholars. In his provocative book *Democracy and Populism*, John Lukacs claims the following:

One hundred and fifty years ago a distinction between nationalism and patriotism would have been laboured, it would have not made much sense. Even now nationalism and patriotism often overlap within the minds and hearts of many people. Yet we must be aware of the differences – because of the phenomenon of populism which, unlike old-fashioned patriotism, is inseparable from the myth of a people. Populism is folkish, patriotism is not. One can be a patriot and cosmopolitan (certainly culturally so). But a populist is inevitably a nationalist of sorts. Patriotism is less racist than is populism. A patriot will not exclude a person of another nationality from a community where they have lived side by side and whom he has known for many years; but a populist will always be suspicious of someone who does not seem to belong to his tribe.

A patriot is not necessarily a conservative; he may even be a liberal – of sorts, though not an abstract one. In the twentieth century a nationalist could hardly be a liberal. (Lukacs 2005: 72)

Lukacs also argues that the main opponent of liberalism is populism rather than socialism and its progressive idea of state intervention in the economy, education and social work. It is precisely nationalism that takes the ground from under liberalism, undermining its appeal. Thus, Lukacs defines the danger of populism as an anti-liberal, right-nationalist strategy.

In fact, populism cannot be defined either as left-wing or right-wing, social or conservative. Contemporary populism is actually rooted in the disappearance of until now important political distinctions, and especially the distinctions between left and right. In an interview for the *Sega* daily (7 March 2006), Kalin Yanakiev points out that 'the true niche of populism in Bulgaria is the destruction of the bipolar political model'. According to Yanakiev, contemporary populism is above all national populism, and the latter 'nowadays is not conservative even though it is reactive. Often the confusion arises precisely from our tendency to associate reactivism with conservatism. Neither is our populism progressist. It seems that progressist national populism can exist primarily on American or generally on Protestant soil' (Yanakiev 2006). I think that the last proposition is especially exaggerated as it lumps together nineteenth-century

liberal populism and national populism, including in its American variants.

The proposition that national populism is rooted in the disappearance of political differences and distinctions is especially interesting. If this is taken to mean more than the disappearance of the acute political confrontation typical of the first years of the post-communist transition (and of all radical revolutionary transformations), then we can indeed conclude that populism represents itself as a strategy which opposes the dominant consensus, both among the left and the right. Nowadays populism defines itself as a denunciation of the status quo seen as consensus between the right and the left. Populism is qualified as 'left-wing' or 'right-wing' by its critics.

In an interview for the *24 Chassa* daily (26 October 2006), Ivan Krastev speaks of the new populism as being both left-wing and right-wing, arguing that

[W]hat makes the populist right wing popular is not the condemnation of the time before 1989 but of the time between 1989 and 2005. Their main message is that nothing has changed ... that the only party that has never lost elections in the last decade is the mafia born of the old regime. From this point of view, we don't need to ask ourselves where the new opposition against the present status quo will come from – it will come from the left, from the grassroots and from the provinces. (Krastev 2006)

Krastev's conclusion is unexpected as he initially refers to the populist right wing and then goes on to say that the opposition against the status quo will come from the left. This uncertainty in identifying populism, at least in the Bulgarian case, comes from the attempts to place the responsibility for the phenomenon either on the left or on the right, depending on one's preferences.

Zhivko Georgiev offers another interpretation of populism in Bulgaria:

What increases Ataka's appeal on the political 'market' is the declining appeal of the other parties. At present 'the right' is in crisis, the BSP is turning right, and the left flank is vacant... A huge niche has opened up and if you are ambitious you will be very stupid if you don't 'put' your ideas in it. [Ataka leader Volen] Siderov is offering a political product for which he has drawn considerably on nationalist European populism. The know-how has come from Europe and Russia. Slavophile, Orthodox, anti-Semitic ideas (in Russian xenophobic style) have been imported and are found in Ataka's ideology. Something has been taken from Le Pen, from the other East European populists. Thus, Volen Siderov has produced a convertible populist-nationalist and xenophobic cocktail. (Georgiev 2005)

Here national populism is unambiguously qualified as a radical-right strategy.

Correct political identification of national populism is important as it will allow us to identify both the potential political grounds it can step on and the possible hidden alliances it can achieve. It is also important to identify the circles where it is unacceptable on principle. That is why misidentifying national

populism as a left-wing strategy, on the basis only of its people-oriented rhetoric, can create more problems than those it can solve.

Radical-right populism, such as national populism, is in essence a revenge of the oligarchic elements of modern representative governments against the democratic elements. That is why some – certainly not the only – possible solutions involve developing more forms of direct democracy and of citizen participation to limit the powers of the omnipotent political élites.

NOTES

- ¹ Ivanova quotes Shils, E. 1956. *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*. London: Heinemann, pp. 98–104; Worsley, P. 1969. 'The Concept of Populism', in Ionescu G. and E. Gellner (eds.) 1969. *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 220.
- ² See International Colloquium on Conflicts, Trust, Democracy, conducted at New Bulgarian University in 2004 (Krasteva, Todorov 2005).
- ³ Here Perrineau cites Freud, S. 1995. *Le malaise dans la culture*. Paris: Coll. Quadrige, PUF (English title: *Civilization and Its Discontents*; first published in German: Wien, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930).
- ⁴ Perrineau cites Gauchet, M. 1985. *Le désenchantement du monde, Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris: NRF, Gallimard.
- ⁵ Perrineau cites Lijphart, A. and J. T. Hottinger. 1997. 'Les démocraties consociatives', *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 4, No. 3, 1997, pp. 529–697.
- ⁶ Perrineau cites Minkenberg, M. 2002. 'The Radical Right in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations', *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 2002, p. 335–362.
- ⁷ Quoted from Norris, P. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford University Press.

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