

# Debating Populism vs Democracy in the Bulgarian Media Ecosystem

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**Abstract:** Transformation processes in the technological, economic, and social spheres characterize the contemporary developments of mankind. These transformations impact the political environment and the media ecosystem as well. The challenges of the economic crisis, as well as the migration processes strengthen the positions of Euro-skeptics and revitalize the development of populism. Populism as a political concept and rhetorical style is nowadays an object of multi-faceted social discussions. The strong critical attitude of populists towards the status quo is generally intertwined with the function of the media as a corrective factor of government authorities. The paper is focused on the developments of political populism in Bulgaria and their media reflections and it includes the results of in-depth interviews conducted with Bulgarian politicians and journalists with regard to their perception of populism. The aim has been to compare the opinions of the interviewees on five key areas: their understanding of the concept of populism; the perceived consequences of populism for the country and for democracy; the reasons for the popularity of populist leaders and parties; the issues most related to the rise of populism and whether the media are supportive, critical or behave in a populist manner.

**Keywords:** media ecosystem, political populism, mediatization, politicization, Bulgaria.

## Introduction

The contemporary transformations processes in the technological, economic, and social spheres also impact the political environment and the media ecosystem. The challenges of the economic crisis, as well as the migration processes are strengthening the positions of Euro-skeptics and revitalize the development of populism.

Populism as a political position and rhetorical style has been the object of comprehensive research and multi-faceted social discussions. The prevailing approach to populism is as to a threat to democracy. However, it is also viewed as an expression of democratic shortcomings. Positioned between the people and the elite, the nourishing elements of the performances of populist actors are the media. Today changes in society are catalyzed not only by the functioning of traditional media, such as press, radio and television, but also by the opportunities of the blogosphere and social networks, as well as of mobile electronic connections.

There is no consensus in academic circles regarding the types of populism present in society. In resting upon the four types of populism (*complete*, *excluding*, *anti-elitist*, and *empty populism*) outlined by Jagers & Walgrave (2007) [1], it may be concluded that these types exist in Bulgaria, although they have not been classified in the terminology used by these two authors. The conceptual schemes of Margaret Canovan (1981) [2] and Cas Mudde (2007) [3] have also been used as key in understanding and explaining the phenomenon, as well as in defining populism in the country. Following the reasoning of Jacques Rupnik [4], it may be concluded that Bulgarian populism is a typical example of post-communist East European populism, and is highly imitative.

As part of a study undertaken by the member-countries of the COST Action IS 1308: *Populist political communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics* (2014-2018) [5] qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with Bulgarian politicians and journalists to provide an insight into their perception of populism. The main objective was to discern how politicians from different types of political parties and journalists from different types of media perceive the implications of populism.

The discrepancy between economic perspectives and reality, between political expectations and concrete policies, as well as the presence of controversial evaluations of the transition to democratic society and market economy are the grounds of the varieties of political populism in Bulgaria and of the difficulty of building a relevant conceptual framework for the phenomenon. It is not accidental that the most significant manifestations of populist political actors, including those in the media, have been organized after Bulgaria's accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures and as a result of people's disappointment in the effects of this accession.

### **Politicization of media and mediatization of politics**

The model of democracy on the make in Bulgaria delegated the difficult tasks of transition to the political elite and eliminated the broad participation of the people in the process of transformation. Although superficially heterogeneous, the political and the media environment (especially in pre-election times) is still not fully open to pluralism and independence. Bulgarian political actors (leaders and parties), that fall under the category of populism, have mixed, oftentimes changing, features. The use of populist phraseology is evident among all political parties in the country, whether left or right-orientated.

In Bulgaria, *complete populism*, involving reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism and exclusion of outgroups (Jagers, Walgrave 2006) [6], is called "hard" populism. It flourished after 2005, when the former journalist and leader of the newly formed political party *Ataka* (Attack), Volen Siderov, succeeded in winning twenty seats for his party in the Parliamentary elections. Thereafter, members of *Ataka* have regularly been elected in the National Assembly, and more recently, in the European Parliament as well. Contributing to this success was likewise its national daily party newspaper, also called *Ataka*. Later on, the launching of Alfa TV in 2011, contributed to the continuing support for *Ataka* and its leader over the years. The party would hardly have won enough votes to send its representatives to the Parliament if its populist slogans had not reached the audience of these nationally disseminated media. The ideology of the party tends to combine extremist right-wing with extreme left-wing ideas, and has evolved towards an anti-EU and anti-NATO stance. Its leader Siderov is a typical example of a very aggressive style combined with eclectic elements: he raises extreme left slogans referring to nationalization, but also spreads ethnic hostility and anti-elite feelings; recently he has been making anti-migrant and anti-globalist statements.

According to the indicators of populism of Jagers and Walgrave, political parties that might be classified in the range of more limited *complete populism* are the *Patriotic Front coalition*, headed by Valeri Simeonov - who is also the president of the political party *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB)*, and the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO)*, headed by Krasimir Karakachanov; these parties are currently part of the ruling coalition. They are nationalist political parties that are more or less opposed to minority groups such as Roma, Turks, etc.

The president of the political party *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB)* Valeri Simeonov – also emerged from media – being the owner of SKAT TV.

Other small political parties are also part of “hard” populism in Bulgaria, including the nationalist party *Bulgarian National Union*, the *Bulgarian National Radical Party*, the *Warriors of Tangra Movement*, the *National Resistance* party, etc.

Falling under the category of *excluding populism*, with its typical anti-elitism and appeals to the common people, was Nikolay Barekov’s pro-EU party *Bulgaria without Censorship*, formed in early 2014. Afterwards, however, it has completely broken apart. Its leader Barekov, formerly a popular TV anchorman and executive director of TV 7, is a salient example of a *mixed type* of political populism. He combines right-wing ideology with leftist slogans referring to protecting the interests of the poor. However, Barekov was later denounced by people from his own party in Parliament as being dependent on corporations. At present, he is a member of the *European Parliament* but has been abandoned by nearly all members of the *Bulgaria without Censorship coalition*, which now carries the name *Bulgarian Democratic Centre*.

Some other media, non-governmental organizations and marketing agencies have also contributed to the expansion of populism.

With regard to fomenting populist hate speech and constructing the “image of the enemy”, some national media have evidently played a role in stimulating populist processes by serving as a platform for plainly racist and misanthropic populist vocabulary. Populism is expanding in entertainment television as well, thus establishing new populist practices in the electronic media – show populism [7]. Hardly any political leader fails to be present in the online media, including blogs, social networks, sites of political parties, online television.

Eclecticism and aggressiveness are common to the verbal style of all “excluding” populists and to those with anti-elitist views.

Falling under the category of *empty populism*, with its reference and appeals to the ordinary people, was the political activity of the former Bulgarian tsar Simeon II. In 2001 he became prime minister, having won the majority in the parliamentary elections through his populist phraseology. Simeon II and the party established in 2001 and named after him, the *National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSS)* can be regarded as representative of “pro-European” populism that may be defined as “soft” populism as well. Simeon II has a specific style of communication marked by moderation in speech, a certain show of modesty and benevolence. These traits were part of his charisma. He used a technique never applied before him in Bulgarian politics: “the technique of non-speech” (Krasteva 2013) [8]. His political style and conduct towards others were based on respect and compromise. The style of *catch-all politics* was specific to him.

The present Bulgarian prime-minister Boyko Borisov of the centre-right political party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB)*, who also held two previous mandates (2009-2013 and 2014-2017), falls in the category of “soft” populism as well. His is a very particular style. He displays a certain amount of eclecticism, making references to the common people, yet also tending to discredit opponents.

Today, the populist space of Parliament is held mainly by Volen Siderov, though support for his party *Ataka* has decreased. This party joined The *Patriotic Front coalition*, made up of the political parties *NFSB* and *IMRO*. It is also represented in the Parliament and is part of the ruling coalition. A new political party – *Will*, led by Vesselin Mareshki, with a comparatively populist stance has entered the Parliament.

### **Comparative study on the insight of perception of populism**

In order to address the concept of political populism and its potential implications through the views of politicians and journalists a comparative study has been undertaken in 2017 by some of the member-countries of the COST Action *IS 1308*.

The aim of the in-depth interviews has been to compare the opinions of the interviewees on five key areas, such as: their understanding of the concept of populism; the perceived consequences of populism for the country and for democracy; the reasons for the popularity of populist leaders and parties; the issues most related to the rise of populism and whether the media are supportive, critical or behave in a populist manner.

The interviews were conducted with four politicians and four journalists from each of the European countries participating in the study. The comparative analysis of this collective work will be presented in two forthcoming publications of the Action.

The political parties included in the study were: Political party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* (centre-right), Coalition *Patriotic Front* (centrist), Political party *Will* (centrist), Coalition *Bulgarian Socialist Party - for Bulgaria* (centre-left). All the interviewees were MPs in the current Parliament.

The participating journalists were: an anchorman (centrist) from the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) – a public service broadcaster (PSB); a member (centre-left) of the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) - the national regulatory broadcasting program authority; a journalist (centre-right) from a popular weekly newspaper *Gallery* and a blogger (right) – also a former active journalist with a diverse political orientation.

With regard to the first question about **what they understand by populism** all of the interviewees stated that populism often has contradictory meanings. The most commonly pointed issues were connected with: deceitful rhetoric; vain promises; law-and-order; economic failures; nationalism and immigration; exploitation of emotions as fear, anxiety and resentment, etc. According to a politician from the centrist Coalition *Patriotic Front* populism was connected with the rising right-wing wave of resistance against the globalized world and multiculturalism. According to the representative of the centre-left Coalition *Bulgarian Socialist Party-for Bulgaria* populism was giving easy but wrong answers to difficult questions. All of the journalists named the former Bulgarian tzar Simeon Saxe Coburg Gotha – prime minister (2001-2005) as an example of national populist actor. Some of the interviewees added Volen Siderov (Political party *Ataka*), Valeri Simeonov (Coalition *Patriotic Front*), and the current prime-minister Boyko Borisov (Political party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria*).

In general, there is no clear pattern and a dividing line between what the interviewees perceive as populism.

To the second question about **what the consequences of populism are** the majority of the interviewees answered that the effects of populism were negative. However, a positive perception of the impact of populism on democracy was also pointed out. The representative of the centrist *Will* stated that populism was part of democracy, but its growth made democratic political systems unproductive. The interviewee from the centre-right *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* claimed that a much greater danger in Europe comes from neo-liberalism than from populism. For the former EMP and current MP of the Coalition *Bulgarian Socialist Party-for Bulgaria* populism always limits the possibility of undertaking serious reforms which require sacrifices on the part of citizens. For the blogger (right) populism had positive consequences by breaking down the bi-polar political model in Bulgaria. Although the centrist journalist from the PSB demonstrated a negative attitude to populism, he stated that “it is even worse to stigmatize populism”. For both the interviewee (centre-right) from the popular newspaper and (centre-left) from the regulatory authority “populism has killed the will for political and social action in Bulgaria. Politics has completely lost its meaning”.

The most commonly mentioned effects in all of the answers are associated with the political system, the quality and resilience of democracy, and of democratic institutions.

Disillusionment and disappointment with mainstream political actors, neglected voters, and unresolved real problems were some of the most important reasons for the interviewees to explain their answers to the third question about **the popularity of populist leaders and parties**. In addition, people's disappointment, according to some of them, was directed towards the European Union as well. The interviewees pointed out that populists tend to say everything that the people want to hear, which makes them popular and engaging. The interviewee from the popular newspaper added that the populists appeal directly to people's instincts. The centrist MP referred to the low level of political and economic culture, anomie, erosion of morals, and corruption in the society.

Asked whether the personal characteristics of particular political actors played a role in populism's popularity, all of the journalists considered that they did not, contrary to the opinions of the politicians who described populists as amiable.

Poverty, social inequalities, unemployment, low wages, injustice, as well as corruption were among the important themes, raised by the interviewees, answering the fourth question about **the social issues most related to the rise of populism**. Immigration and the ethnic debate in some of the answers, especially in those of the centre-right and centrist interviewees were linked to a debate about the participation of the country in the European Union. The anchorman from the PSB added the catastrophic demographic problem and the unresolved integration of the Roma people.

Generally, media were widely perceived by the interviewees as supportive of populism according to the answers of the fifth question whether **the media outlets support or criticize populism**. Furthermore, to some degree, they were also perceived as the creators of populism and populist messages. Among the primary reasons for media support for populist policies pointed out by all the interviewed journalists was the merge between the media ownership and political actors, as well as the deficiency of strong journalist standards and media market. The interviewees from the regulatory authority, from the popular newspaper, and the blogger stated that "populism would not exist without the intermediary function of the media". The impression of the centre-right politician was that the most popular Bulgarian media were neoliberal rather than populist.

The process of mediatization of politics and the politicization of media has become a nourishing ground for the rise of populism (see Raycheva & Peicheva 2017) [9].

## **Conclusion**

The results of the conducted interviews have provided an important insight into politicians' and media professionals' perceptions of populism. Although all the interviewees were in general aware of the specifics of populism, their perception of populism differed. For that reason the consequences of populism to the nation and to democracy in the views of the interviewees – both politicians and journalists, were ambivalent – some stressed on the negative impact, others pointed out the positive features.

In terms of the reasons for the popularity of populists almost all of the interviewees pointed out that there were a number of demand and supply side factors such as immigration and economic hardship that were nourishing for populists to capitalize on. According to the interviewees the spread of populism in Europe and in the country is not linked to the politicians' personal characteristics, and particularly to charisma. The malfunctioning of established democratic institutions, including mainstream political parties, in addressing people's problems and in producing convincing discourses and solutions, were pointed among the main reasons behind the rise of populism.

Reflecting on the role of both mainstream and social media, some important issues were stressed upon, such as: instrumentalization and commercialization of the media, as well as the deficiencies of professional standards. The media were not perceived as neutral bystanders.

Summarising we can say that there is no consensus in the academic circles, neither among politicians or journalists regarding the essence and the types of populism present in society – whether it can be viewed as an ideology, a distinct political movement or a rhetorical style, used by all political formations. Thus, there is not enough evidence of whether populism has to be applied only to certain political parties and their leaders and whether their activities can be considered as a threat or as a corrective to democracy.

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### **Notes:**

Boyko Borisov – Head of the political party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* (CEDB). Prime-minister (2009-2013), (2014-2017), and since 2017  
Krassimir Karakachanov – Head of *IMRO*, Minister of Defense since 2017.  
Valeri Simeonov – Head of *NFSB*, Vice-Premiere since 2017.  
Volen Siderov – Head of *Ataka*, Head of the Parliamentary Group of the Patriotic Front since 2017

Nikolay Barekov – Head of the political party *Bulgaria without Censorship*, EMP since 2015.

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha - Head of the National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSS), Prime-minister (2001-2005)

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