



**Antony Todorov**

## National populism versus democracy

Populist movements are a threat not because they raise the issue of direct democracy, but because they advocate nationalist mobilisation based on xenophobia, writes Antony Todorov. Given the failure of the leftist projects of the twentieth century, it is telling that far-right populism is more anti-democratic in the new democracies of central and eastern Europe than in western Europe. Is populism identical to the crisis of democracy or rather a symptom of it?

The "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: to define populism and its main forms; to identify the new forms of populism in the contemporary world; and to analyse the risks posed by populism today.

Populism has long been a subject of study for political scientists. Historically, it is associated with phenomena that emerged in various parts of the world at various moments: the Populist Party in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the Russian *Narodniki* in the same period; and the *völkisch* ideology of nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Populism had numerous manifestations in the twentieth century too, for example 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 leftism of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela to the far-right populists in Europe (Haider in Austria, Le Pen in France or Siderov in Bulgaria). Given that that these phenomena are so heterogeneous in their genealogy and historical context, the 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, Evelina Ivanova 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 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. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 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 "intermediary bodies" (the aristocracy in Europe, political associations in America) that 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, populism is a strategy that seeks to eliminate intermediary institutions, while at the same time clearing the way not only for direct contact between the elite and 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, populist leaders in history have often 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 legal matters. On the other hand, it is wrong to associate direct democracy with populism only — in some polities, 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 sense of injustice. This is the most problematic aspect of the definition as it implies that any political programme that formulates demands for justice may be defined as populist. Is every political platform that criticises social injustice and questions social inequality necessarily populist?

In a text devoted to populism, Emil Assemirov 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 that 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 populist. One of the main reasons for this is that populism draws on anti-elitist attitudes and a rhetoric based on the understanding of the nation as organic community, in which people and state are an organic entity. Even though populism originated as an anti-elitist, leftwing gesture of criticism of the status quo, it is also used by rightwing parties. Populism's recipe for success is that it appeals to people with ready, widespread ideas instead

of proposing something radically new.<sup>2</sup>

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, the strategy is readily used by rightwing parties too, when they want to win quick popular support.

### Populism as 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 arouses suspicions of manipulation or plain lying. Julian Popov seems right in arguing that "accusations of populism have become the new populism".<sup>3</sup> Moreover, all political actors resort to populist rhetoric, especially during election campaigns. As Borislav Georgiev notes: "Populism seems to be the only real thing in our political reality. While every politician and every political organisation accuses their opponent of populism, I think all of them are more or less populist, especially during election campaigns."<sup>4</sup>

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), declared that:

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.<sup>5</sup>

In this case, those who are most susceptible to populist rhetoric are the poor and those who have no particular expectations of politics and thus are inclined to follow whoever provides the more persuasive promises.

Populist appeals are also regarded as short sighted, ultimately futile, and 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 Bulgarian foreign minister at the time, Solomon Passy, declared that:

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, Christ felt a 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.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis that populism fails to understand that true common interests can be grasped only by the few is common in critiques 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 believe they are masters of the truth and suspect the people of an inability to understand anything and a susceptibility to simple emotions. This logic is based on a deep-rooted suspicion of the elect (the professionals in politics) and an arrogance and contempt for "ordinary people" (the non-professionals in politics).

Another accusation of populism draws on the thesis that populism is a refuge for the losers of transition (those who have lost their social status, material wellbeing, old illusions, and so on). Vladimir Shopov writes the following:

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 "losers" of 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.<sup>7</sup>

The understanding of populism is based on the dichotomy of popular and unpopular, on what is acceptable and unacceptable to the general public. Economic policy typically lacks popularity; here, many economists hold the thesis that unpopular measures are critical for economic recovery. The metaphor used here is that of "therapy" (shock therapy, price shock), where short-term pain or suffering is justified by a positive long-term outcome. Once the ailment has been correctly diagnosed, the policy adopted is represented as necessary therapy. The problem with this, however, is that the diagnosis is made by the professionals but the therapy must be endured by society at large. 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 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.<sup>8</sup>

To recap: What does the strategy of discredit political opponents label as populism? First, deception, making promises that cannot be fulfilled. Second, offering refuge to the losers in the transition, those who are susceptible to emotion and irrational behaviour. Third, the rejection of unpopular, tough measures and the refusal or reluctance to undergo effective "therapy".

In fact, all those qualifications clearly identify two sides in society. On the one hand there are the professionals, the politicians, the elite, who understand things; on the other, there are the people, 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 long-term social projects that can mobilise public support for political institutions and ensure the 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. 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 in which the political is reduced to the technical.<sup>9</sup>

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 — populism is found not only in post-communist countries or countries in transition. At the same time, this definition 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", one that is bound to lead to equal satisfaction among its members, itself borders on populism. It is obvious that no social transformation can produce only winners and that ultimately no society can be conflict-free.<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, the thesis that populism means rejection of unpopular measures 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 irrational and 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 a different notion of 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. The definition of populism as the irrational rejection of the economically effective is based on an understanding of the political that equates or simply replaces government with management. This is a fashionable thesis usually supported by neo-liberal economists who prefer the term "governance" to the traditional term "politics".

### **Populism: Symptom of the crisis of democracy**

It is more the case that populism today is a symptom of the crisis of contemporary representative democracies, rather than the crisis itself. In

democratic regimes, populism is manifested as often diverse and contradictory strategies of questioning the foundations of modern democracy. In non-democratic regimes, it becomes a substitute for democracy. In the former, populism fits into the legitimate order of political pluralism — it is one of the many political solutions whose legitimacy is based on pluralism. If modern democracy is understood as a regime in which there is no 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, unlike the elite, which despite its diversity is united on one point: that of ignoring the true interests of the people.

In the second case, 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, the policy and especially the rhetoric of opposition against the "rich North", in other words the USA and its monopolies on the economy, information and politics, qualifies such strategies as populist. Yet regardless of whether or not the accusations of populism are legitimate, the phenomenon is symptomatic of a crisis in representative democracy, which seems no longer capable of responding to 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, which is why its manifestation precisely in the old democracies of western Europe and the USA is most telling. French political scientist Pascal Perrineau has made the following analysis of the roots of contemporary populism:

In 1930, Sigmund Freud demonstrated how civilisation's "discontents" gave rise to lethal ideologies in Europe. European civilisation, like every civilisation based on suppression of impulse, seemed to be overcome by a profound sense of discontent and anxiety and no longer to be capable of suppressing the subconscious urge for aggression and even 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" has affected not only the religious sphere but all representative systems that have a bearing on the development of collective notions and, consequently, of political ideologies. The 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 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". In the countries where "consociational democracy" has become a system — *Proporz* in Austria, *la concordance* in Switzerland, "pillarisation" (*Verzuiling*) and *partitocratie* 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 remain the only true opponents.<sup>11</sup>

I have taken the liberty of quoting Pascal Perrineau so extensively because I think he diagnoses the problem of 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 that 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 far-right populism is 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 poorly structured and organised than in western Europe, the radical Right in central and eastern Europe is ideologically often more "hard-line" and more openly anti-democratic. Likewise, it is 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 belongs to the ideological references of a large number of political actors in these countries and that historical fascism is strongly discredited.<sup>12</sup>

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

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 with 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 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.<sup>13</sup>

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*, Perrineau identifies several main symptoms of the crisis of democracy: decreasing voter turnout, declining political participation, a deteriorating image of the political class and political organisations, and a withdrawal into the private sphere<sup>14</sup> 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 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 rightwing technocrats after the Second World War and their counterparts, leftwing advocates of self-government, who were both equally captive to the belief that society can be governed without the mediation of representative institutions.

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 guideline and basis for political debate;
- Weakening of social polarity in contemporary Western societies and the strengthening of the position 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", writes Perrineau.<sup>15</sup> 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, causing mass suspicion that things are ultimately decided "in secret" and "somewhere else". The latter has given rise to a 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 related to Marxism, the collapse of the communist bloc, 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 that rejects classical forms of engagement with political parties and movements.<sup>16</sup>

Zbigniew Brzezinski also 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 the prerequisites for the success of populist strategies:

For the first time, people across the world have awakened politically and are becoming unusually active. They can be easily mobilised as they often share radical postulates. Note that the recent riots in Nepal, Bolivia, Kyrgyzstan, Africa and elsewhere have a very similar basis: populism, radicalism and a sense of deep social injustice. And that is what is new. People see how the other part of the world lives [...]. 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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 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."<sup>19</sup>

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. On the other hand, the procedure of elections, as Aristotle shows, was common practice in ancient oligarchies where a political elite sought, often through demagoguery, the support of the people.

Does this mean then that contemporary democracies, which are regimes of representative government where the main procedure is that of elections, are more like oligarchies than classical democracies? This question inevitably leads to one of the main theses 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.

### Populism versus democracy

If we assume that populism and 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 leftwing strategy; that the Right is much more oriented towards the elite, therefore populism is rare in rightwing rhetoric. If populism is identified only as a form of leftwing rhetoric, then it will not really be dangerous for democracy, since its demands are 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 endanger democracy not because they raise the issue of direct democracy (this is not their main demand), but because they advocate 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 and would not have made much sense. Even now, nationalism and patriotism often overlap in the minds and hearts of many people. Yet we must be aware of the differences — as a result 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 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.<sup>21</sup>

Lukacs also argues that the main opponent of liberalism is populism rather than socialism with 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 leftwing or rightwing, social or conservative. Contemporary populism is actually rooted in the disappearance of important political distinctions, and especially the distinctions between left and right. 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 reactionary. Often the confusion arises precisely from our tendency to associate reactionaryism with conservatism. Neither is our populism progressivist. It seems that progressivist national populism can exist primarily on American or generally on Protestant soil."<sup>22</sup> I think that the last proposition is especially exaggerated, lumping together as it does 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 among both 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 "leftwing" or "rightwing" by its critics.

Ivan Krastev has spoken of the new populism as being both leftwing and rightwing, 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.<sup>23</sup>

Krastev's conclusion is unexpected as he initially refers to the populist Right 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 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 party leader Volen] Siderov offers 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 eastern European populists. Thus, Volen Siderov has produced a convertible populist-nationalist and xenophobic cocktail.<sup>24</sup>

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 its potential political basis and possible alliances. It is also important to identify the circles where it is unacceptable on principle. That is why misidentifying national populism as a leftwing 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 elites.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Ivanova, "Populizum i legitimnost", *Politicheski Izsledvania*, 1994, no. 2. Ivanova quotes E. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*, London: Heinemann 1956, 98–104; Worsley, "The Concept of Populism", in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1969, 220.

<sup>2</sup> E. Assemirov (Tepavicharov), "Populizmut", 2007. <http://assemirov.hit.bg/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> J. Popov, 2007. <http://planet.capital.bg/julian.php>

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