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LILIA RAYCHEVA*, DOBRINKA PEICHEVA**

*St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria
**Neophyte Rilski South-West University of Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
lraycheva@yahoo.com, peichevad@gmail.com

Populism in Bulgaria Between Politicization of Media and Mediatization of Politics[1]

Abstract. Populism as a political position and rhetorical style is nowadays an object of comprehensive research and multi-faceted social discussions. The strong critical attitude of populists towards the *status quo*, towards what they regard as the chimera of democracy, is generally intertwined with the function of the media as a corrective factor with regard to government authorities. The development of mankind in the present is characterized by transformation trends in technological, economic, and social spheres. These trends impact the political environment as well. The challenges of the economic crisis, as well as the migration processes are strengthening the position of Euro-skeptics and revitalize the development of populism.

The present text is focused on the developments of political populism in Bulgaria. The political environment in the country is characterized by almost permanent merge of political entities, which gradually escalates the use of populist approaches, styles and rhetoric. Research attention to this political phenomenon is determined by the success of some newly formed populist parties during the new century, gradually winning considerable numbers of seats in the parliament.

The use of populist phraseology is evident among all political parties in the country, whether left- or right-oriented. Bulgarian political actors of a populist trend – including political leaders and parties – have mixed, oftentimes changing, characteristics. This populist phraseology is transmitted to audiences mainly through the media. It has to be noted that the dynamics of the pre-election campaigns during the period of democratization since 1989 has been developing alongside demonopolization, liberalization and transformation of the media system. Deregulation of the radio and TV broadcasting sector dragged on, giving way to the development of two mutually bound processes – politicization of the media and mediatization of politics. The paper is structured in three methodologically interconnected parts, presenting: an overview of the process of politicization of the media and mediatization of politics in Bulgaria; an analysis of the political populist trends in the country; a discussion on the connections between populism and the media.

Keywords: media; political populism; mediatization; politicization; content analysis of elections; Bulgaria

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Introduction

New information technologies are enhancing the communication process of identifying and setting the public agenda. Today, changes in society are catalyzed by the opportunities provided by the blogosphere and the social networks, and by mobile electronic connections. Mediatized mobile communications have proven to be emblematic for mediatized society [Peicheva 2003]. The international stratification in communication development seems to be, to paraphrase Zbigniew Brzezinski, "out of the control" of competing strategies, including social, cultural, political, economic, technological, demographic, and ecological strategies [Petev 2001, p. 112].

This fundamentally new situation of social disintegration and shortage of social synergy is a nourishing environment for the revival of populism, primarily by non-systemic political parties. Though it has one of the leading world economies, the European Union is still feeling the sting of the economic crisis. Long-term unemployment is rising, and the pressure coming from the entry of more than a million migrants into Europe in just one year is strengthening the position of Euro-skeptics and populists.

Populism as a political position and rhetorical style has been the object of comprehensive research and multi-faceted social discussions. The strong critical attitude of populists towards the *status quo*, towards what they regard as the chimera of democracy, is generally intertwined with the function of the media to be a corrective factor with regard to government authorities.

The prevailing approach to populism is perceived as a threat to democracy. However, it is also viewed as an expression of democratic shortcomings. Positioned between the people and the elite, the nourishing element of the performances of the populist actors is the media. In contemporary times, when audiences have transformed from passive consumers to active participants in the creation of media products, the significance of the political communication strategies has unprecedentedly risen.

Research attention in Bulgaria has started to be focused on populism recently, but it is increasing in terms of the engagement of scholars and the expansion of the range of study. This interest was determined by the successes of newly formed populist parties during the new century – parties of the harder or softer variants – which succeeded in periodically winning considerable numbers of places in national parliaments. The methodological challenges brought due to the multiplicity concepts and the lack of clear categorical indicators makes it difficult to fit the phenomenon in the traditional political system. Practically, almost all political formations and political actors use populist strategies, especially in pre-election times. That is why it is extremely difficult to perceive an entire political party or a political leader a populist.

The specificity of research on populism derives from the specific techniques and approaches used by populists. Among Bulgarian researchers, there is still no unanimity on populism and its specificity. Yet this does not mean that there is no agreement that it involves "playing the role of the ordinary people".

Georgi Karasimeonov denotes three features of populism: emergence, organizational form and political practices. He points out that populism arises from mass discontent provoked by the crisis of the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Organizationally, the populist movement is formed around charismatic leaders and is built around centralized structures. As a political practice, populism is generally aggressive, sometimes violent, ignoring established democratic rules, a plebiscite-oriented, opportunistic and demagogic [Karasimeonov 2008].

Svetoslav Malinov [2007] defines populism as a form of political thought and speech, as a set of rhetorical figures and techniques, possessing a single leading characteristic: constant appeal and reference to the collective image of the "people". This characteristic is complemented by features such as "offering what people want to be offered", "brilliant promises", "identifying oneself with, and speaking in the name of the people"; "labeling", etc., in the context of the seven propaganda techniques defined in the US in 1937 [*How…* 1937].

Daniel Smilov stresses on three aspects of the concept of populism: "At times it is used to describe the process of backsliding from the achievements of liberal democracy made before the accession to the EU. At other times, it refers to the emergence and growth of nationalist or radical right-wing parties. Almost all of the Bulgarian scholars agree with Cas Mudde that populism is an ideology that places the people in opposition to the corrupt political elite" [2008, p. 26].

The conceptual schemes of Margaret Canovan [1981] and Cas Mudde [2007] have been used as keys to understanding and explaining the phenomenon, as well as to defining populism in Bulgaria. Scholars have accepted Mudde's idea that "even if populism as an *ideology* is viewed as a basic threat, in fact the basic threat in Europe today is populism as a *style*" [Mudde 2007, p. 115].

Atanas Jdrebev defines populism as a way of political thinking, speaking, and action inherent in modern politics, which has the following characteristics:

- anti-elitism – criticism of the dominant political elites as corrupt and their opposition to the ordinary people;
- anti-partyism – opposing traditional parties as separating the people and hindering the materialization of its common will;
- anti-institutional – denying the role of political institutions as a tool for making legitimate political decisions, representing the common will of the people;
- anti-democracy – non-compliance with the principles of representative democracy and their systemic undermining;
- anti-constitutionalism – opposing the principles of constitutional order;
- anti-pluralism – rejection of the principles of political pluralism and their opposition to the general will of the people;
- demagogy – populists speak what people want to hear;
- lack of a core of values, collaboration of populism with left and right ideologies;
- manipulating public dissatisfaction in situations of unsatisfied social and political demands;

- emergence of crisis in the legitimacy of the political system;
- plebiscitary direction – populists insist on frequent referendums;
- a charismatic leader who catalyses populist mobilization;
- rejecting the role of the institutions as mediators between the populist leader and the people;
- using the resources of media democracy for direct and immediate communication between the leader and the people;
- opposition of ethnic minorities, immigrants and foreigners [Jdrebev 2016].

Bulgarian researchers stress on the moral overtone of the phenomenon, related to categories such as truth, lie, manipulation, honesty, decency, sincerity, etc. They have debated whether populism is good or bad, whether or not it is a threat to democratic processes, etc. [Malinov 2007; Karasimeonov 2008; Smilov 2008; Kabakchieva 2009; Badzhakov 2010; Krastev 2007; Krasteva 2013; Jdrebev 2016, etc.].

There is no consensus in academic circles regarding the types of populism present in society. In resting upon the four types of types of populism (*complete*, *excluding*, *anti-elitist*, and *empty populism*) outlined by Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave [2006], and on the indicators for them, it may be concluded that these types exist in Bulgaria, although they have not been classified in the terminology used by these two authors.

Nearly all parties in Bulgaria have displayed some populist manners and have flirted, to a greater or lesser degree, with the people, speculating on popular expectations and hopes.

Populism in Bulgaria is visible in several variants of classification:

- classical, social, specifically "pro-European" populism;
- hard vs. soft populism;
- right-wing vs. left-wing populism.

Classical populism coincides with the European, mostly xenophobic populism of the 1930s; *social populism*, considered to be left-oriented, is associated primarily with the old left-wing parties and the newly formed leftward-inclined parties; while the *specific "pro-European"* populism is ascribed to newly formed parties with a liberal orientation.

Hard populism has restructured itself in recent years to become a mixture of nationalist and extremist elements, with an accent on *othering*.

The *soft* version of populism encompasses general appeals to people, catch-all politics and demagogic discourses.

The elements of *left* and *right* populism are hybrid in nature. In reality, populism in Bulgaria is neither left nor right, because some of the outstanding parties falling under this category combine extreme left and extreme right practices along with hate speech.

The discrepancy between economic expectations and reality, between political expectations and concrete policies, etc., as well as the presence of contrary evaluations of the transition to democratic society and market economy are the grounds of the varieties of populism in Bulgaria and of the difficulty of building a relevant conceptual

framework for the phenomenon. It is not accidental that the most malicious manifestations of populist political actors, including in the media, have been organized after Bulgaria's accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures and are a result of disappointment in the effects of this new situation.

Ana Krasteva, referring to the comparative study of populism in Central and Eastern Europe made by Jacques Rupnik [2007, p. 130] and of the three main features he defines, has concluded that Bulgarian populism is a typical example of post-communist East European populism, and is highly imitative. "Extremism is not a spontaneous internal attitude but is a learned political game" [Krasteva 2013, p. 11].

The goal of the present text is to examine the current developments of political populism in Bulgaria. The authors of this paper have undertaken a thorough research on the populist political developments in Bulgaria. As members of the COST Action IS 1308: *Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics*, the authors have correlated with the goals of a broader research, conducted in the participating 31 countries [COST 2014].

Politicization of the media and mediatization of politics

The dynamics of the pre-election campaigns during the period of democratization since 1989 has been developing alongside demonopolization, liberalization and transformation of the media system. Deregulation of the radio and TV broadcasting sector dragged on, giving way to the development of two mutually bound processes – politicization of the media and mediatization of politics.

In spite of the fact that Bulgaria has taken considerable steps towards democratization, the political system faces an immense challenge owing to its unclear identity, both at conceptual and at representative level. The long years of one-party dominance were replaced by an ever-growing host of new political parties, unions and organizations, which constantly split, regrouped and entered into coalitions, especially on the eve of upcoming elections. The breakdown of the bipolar model (socialists vs. democrats) with the aid of some newly formed structures of leadership, has failed to bring sustainability to the political system which is weighed down by difficult economic and social tasks. Gradually, the situation of social disintegration and shortage of social synergy has become a good environment for the revival of populism, primarily by non-systemic political parties.

On the other hand, politicians fail to carry out the necessary reforms that would meet the European commitment of the country and the expectations of the people. Even the unique Bulgarian ethnic model, formed after long years of effort on the part of all ethnic groups and not by the contemporary parties and politicians, has been put to abusive purposes. The ever deeper gap between rulers and society has proved a grave obstacle for the trust and entrepreneurship of citizens. The absence of

distinct program platforms encourages inter-party migration and erodes the foundations of political pluralism and decreasing election participation: from 90.79% in the first round of elections for the Grand National Assembly in 1990, to 28.6% in the first elections for the European Parliament in Bulgaria in 2007, and further down to 20.22% for the First National Referendum in 2013 [Central Election Commission 2015]. Slowly but steadily, Bulgarian electors have refused to yield to the instruments of political, survey and media propaganda, have rejected joining the process of social imitation, and have acquired a position of active passiveness. As a result, the efforts of state regulation fail to effectively overcome self-regulation that can be traced back to the dawn of democratic changes achieved at the National Round Table, back in 1990. A telling example is the *Code of Conduct for Election Campaigns* which forbids the offering, demanding, giving out, or promising any monetary amounts, or any other advantage for the elector's signature in support of, or for nomination of a candidate, or for voting in favour of any political party, movement or an independent candidate (National Round Table 1990). The observance of this self-regulatory norm has proved unattainable for participants in the country's elections and thus, years later, it had to be legally decreed that the purchase and sale of votes is a criminal offence. However, this statement repeated as a must after every piece of political advertising has failed to rid the country of the problem [Raycheva 2017].

Political pluralism and the varied media environment in Bulgaria continue to experience constant difficulties. The still-in-the-make civil society fails to assist the creation of a stable public basis for professional journalism. According to the *World Press Freedom Index 2017*, Bulgaria has dropped down to 109th place (out of 180 countries), which shows that freedom of speech and independent journalism is still a convertible phraseology for most of the media outlets and for many non-government organizations disbursing the funds of European and Transatlantic institutions [Reporters 2017].

Data provided by the National Statistical Institute vividly show the media trends in more than a quarter of a century since the start of the transition period. Currently, the number of print media amounts to 295 newspapers (55 dailies) with a total annual circulation of 315,712,000, and 668 magazines and bulletins, with an annual circulation of 27,831,000 [NSI 2015]. In 2015, there were 337 radio stations and 187 television channels operating on national, regional and local level terrestrially, via cable or via satellite, and listed in the public register of the Council for Electronic Media [Council 2015].

For more than a quarter of a century, political, economic and social upheavals have significantly impacted the development of the mass media system in Bulgaria towards quick and flexible reactions to the social processes. The major significance of television was manifested in several critical situations during the years, including: the TV attack against President Petar Mladenov in 1990 that compelled him to resign; the resignation of the BSP Government headed by Andrey Lukanov in 1990; the mass media war launched by the UDF Government of Filip Dimitrov, which led to its toppling in 1992; the exit of the Government of Lyuben Berov (under the

Movement for Rights and Freedom mandate) in 1994; the withdrawal of the BSP Government of Zhan Videnov in 1996; the siege of the House of the National Assembly in the situation of governmental crisis in 1997, which led to radical power shift; the forced restructuring of the UDF Government of Ivan Kostov in 1999, due to corruption allegations; the attacks that brought about ministerial replacements in the Simeon II Government in 2005 and in the three-party coalition (Coalition for Bulgaria, Movement for Rights and Freedoms and National Movement Simeon II) of Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev; the constant corrective activism with respect to the government of Boyko Borisov (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) and the wide coverage of the social protests which led to the earlier resignation of Borisov's government in 2013; the coverage of the pressure of continuous social protests against the government of Plamen Oresharski (Coalition for Bulgaria), which also led to its premature resignation in 2014 [Raycheva 2013].

The country still lacks a stable foundation on which to test the maturity and professionalism of the media as regards providing voters the opportunity for informed choice under the conditions of representative democracy. The media are pushed away from democratic values and are involved in the spiral of obscure political and corporative interests. As a result, although considerable progress has been made regarding the audiovisual quality of the political advertising products, the media system still fails to fulfil its major purpose in pre-election periods – to inform society impartially and on an equal footing about the participants in the political race and their platforms.

Conceptualizing of populism in Bulgaria

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 open to the parameters of pluralism or independence [Raycheva and Petev 2003].

Populist political actors

Bulgarian political actors, including 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-oriented.

The factors favorable to the emergence and rise of populism in the country can be divided into *internal* and *external*.

The *external* factors are related to *globalization and the adherence of Bulgaria to the EU and NATO*, while the *internal* ones are connected with social, ideological and political structuring.

The social factors that open the way for, and support populism are, on the one hand, people's disappointment in the transition to market economy and democratic forms of government, as well as in the inability of the elites to work for the public interest and to build a well-functioning state, and, on the other hand, in the anti-minority attitudes of some Bulgarian citizens. "Bulgarian society is in a populist situation", concludes Petya Kabakchieva [2008, p. 3].

The ideological factors are related to the effacement of relevant dividing lines. "Policies draw closer together, the distinctions between left and right fade, the strong mobilization resources are nationalism and (anti)Europeanism" [Smilov 2008, p. 26].

The political factors are also related to dissolving of differentiations. The political clash "is not between left and right, reformers and conservatives, the clash is between the elites having growing suspicions about democracy, and the angry society having increasingly anti-liberal attitudes. The left-wing party BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) is moving towards a centrist position, defends the Red oligarchs more than it does the poor and the middle class. Thus, the extreme left space remains unoccupied and the party *Ataka* settles in it, as well as other nationalist formations appealing for nationalization" [Krastev 2007, p. 112].

In Bulgaria, complete populism, involving reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism and exclusion of outgroups [Jagers and Walgrave 2006], is called "hard" populism. It flourished after 2005, when the former journalist and leader of the newly formed party *Ataka*, Volen Siderov, succeeded in winning twenty seats for his party in the parliamentary elections. After 2005, members of *Ataka* have always been present in the National Assembly, and more recently, in the European Parliament as well. 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.

Other small parties are also part of "hard" populism in Bulgaria, including the nationalist party Bulgarian National Union, the Bulgarian National Radical Party, and, primarily present online, the Warriors of Tangra Movement and the party National Resistance, etc.

According to the indicators of populism, parties that might be classified in the range of more limited 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 IMRO (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement), headed by Krasimir Karakachanov; these parties are currently part of the ruling coalition. They are nationalist parties that are more or less opposed to the minority groups, Roma, Turks, etc.

Falling under the category of *excluding populism*, with its typical anti-elitism and appeals to the common people, is Nikolay Barekov's pro-EU party Bulgaria With-

out Censorship, which was widely publicized when formed early in 2014. In recent months, however, it has completely broken apart. Its leader Barekov, formerly a popular TV anchorman, 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. This is a typical case of populism based on unscrupulously "playing the role of the ordinary people", making "brilliant promises", and using the media for political purposes, turning them into political PR institutions. However, Barekov was later denounced by people from his own party in the 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; his parliamentary group now carries the name Bulgarian Democratic Centre.

Falling under the category of *empty populism*, with its reference and appeals to the ordinary people, is the political activity of the former Bulgarian tsar Simeon II. In 2001, he became prime minister of Bulgaria, having won votes 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) is precisely falling in the category 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 has used a technique never applied before him in Bulgarian politics: "the technique of non-speech" [Krasteva 2013; Malinov 2007]. His political style and conduct towards others are based on respect and compromise. Specific for him is the style of *catch-all politics*. Thus, the former tsar included ministers of different party affiliations in his government, and during his second mandate, he entered into coalition with the former Communists of the BSP, whose opponent he initially was.

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), also falls in the category of "soft" populism. His style is very particular. He displays a certain amount of eclecticism, making references to the common people, yet also tending to discredit opponents.

Eclecticism and aggressiveness is common to the verbal style of all "excluding" populists and to those with anti-elitist views.

Charisma is the common feature of populist leaders, which distinguishes them from other party leaders and explains the high election results their parties have achieved at various times. Charismatic leaders present themselves, and are perceived, as father figures, who personify the messages of the respective party. The political plan of Simeon II in 2001 to try to "Europeanize" Bulgaria within 800 calendar days was a personalized plan, as is Volen Siderov's plan to de-colonize Bulgaria from Europe. Attraction, not repulsion, is the symbolic resource of Simeon II underlying his charisma; to the opposite, Siderov's charisma is based on aggressiveness and negation.

Today, the populist stage of the 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 party NFSB, and IMRO, is also represented in the Parliament and is part of the ruling coalition. A new political party – Will, led by Vesselin Mareshki, with comparatively populist stance has entered the Parliament. The NMSS, renamed National Movement Stability and Progress since 2008, is waning and is not represented in the Parliament. Support for Bulgaria Without Censorship has already extinguished.

The media and populism

The historical roots, the deteriorating social-economic situation, the ideological assumptions, and the financial dependence of certain media groups on concrete parties, are all especially important factors for the intense growth of populism in the political life of the country.

Thus, the media-related origin of the political formation *Ataka* is typical for populist leadership and style of politics. The high viewing rates for Volen Siderov's ten-minute show entitled *Ataka*, broadcast on TV SKAT since 2003, is connected with the appearance of the eponymous political party and the position it won in politics in 2005. It is believed that the growth of this party and its membership was due to this political broadcast. Contributing to success was likewise its national daily party newspaper, also called *Ataka*. Later on, the appearance of TV Alfa in 2011, after Siderov broke his relations with TV SKAT, 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 viewers and readers of these nationally disseminated media.

Similarly, the emergence of the populist political party Bulgaria Without Censorship, created in 2014 by the journalist Nikolay Barekov, was accompanied by opinion poll results furnished by concrete survey agencies, in combination with the support of TV 7, of which Barekov had been the executive director before undertaking a political career.

Other media have also contributed to the expansion of populism. Some non-governmental organizations, marketing agencies and associations have also promoted interest constructing this mediatized reality [Peicheva 2011].

"From the very start of the changes, especially after the democratic forces came to power and soon fell in 1992, the media have sent suggestive messages that »they are all scoundrels«, »politics is a dirty business«, »the parties are corrupt«, »parliament is nothing but palaver«. Populist attitudes and frenzies were purposely being fomented by the media" [Badzhakov 2010, p. 132].

With regard to fomenting populist hate speech and constructing the "image of the enemy", some national media have evidently played a role in stimulating popu-

list processes by serving as a platform for plainly racist and misanthropic populist vocabulary [Spasov 2014].

In developing dynamically, the media also create a variety of forms used for political presentation. Populism is expanding in entertainment television as well, thereby leading some theorists to announce the start of a new populist practice based on the electronic media – show populism [Kabakchieva 2009, p. 1].

Hardly any political leader fails to be present in the new media, including blogs, social networks, sites of political parties, online television. Theoretical and empirical analyses particularly emphasize the impact of populists on the online sphere. However, the activities of Internet trolls in online discussion forums that aimed basically at provoking the user, has not yet become a topic of researchers [Raycheva 2013].

Conclusions

The contradictions in the existing terminology, the national specifics of theorizing on populism, and the practices of the Bulgarian political leaders bring to the fore several sets of discussion topics.

Firstly, the identification of anti-elitism and its manifestations. Is it true that the negative attitude towards those labeled as "elite" – including politicians, corporation members, bankers, oligarchs, businesspersons, etc. – is an expression of populism, as some European researchers claim, or does it rather represent a general denial of their elite quality? Is it not true that there is a widespread strong disapproval of the drastic dividing lines – in terms of wealth, power, governance – between them and other significant people, such as scientists, poets, artists, musicians, dramatists, medics, teachers, engineers, journalists, etc. (who, in the traditional perception of people, represent the authentic elites)? Is not the dubious and corrupt behavior of a considerable part of those who are labeled "elite" a strong justification for the growing dislike towards such people throughout the world? That is why the answers to these questions should be sought upon making corrections in the interpretation of this public intolerance as a form of populism. The deepening dividing lines can hardly be easily accounted for only in terms of populism. Such an understanding rather appears to be a subtle way to disregard the existing contradictions by placing them in a different framework of explanation. Elite status should generally be accompanied by intellect, creativity, spirituality, respect, upholding of principles, honesty, etc. Are these characteristics typical for the elite under consideration?

Secondly, it is also a debatable question whether nationalism, racism, and xenophobia should be placed within the framework of populism. These are separate political ideologies and prejudices, and their self-reliance can hardly be questioned. The fact that they are applied in the rhetoric and programs of political leaders and parties can hardly change their specific nature.

Thirdly, the characteristic features of propaganda are "poured" into terminology relevant to populism. In our times, nearly all the above-mentioned seven propaganda techniques defined as far back as 1937 have been placed in the international research framework regarding populism. In this sense, the classification of populism into different types seems an artificial approach, given that the phenomenon manifests itself in a mixture of critique, specific ideologies, stereotypes, insinuations, etc.

This discussion comes in response to the practical activities of political leaders and to the restless attempts at conceptualizing the phenomenon of populism. Although the multi-faceted approaches of the Bulgarian scholars to the matter, there is no consensus in the academic circles 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 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.

The results of the content analysis and the existing ambiguity in the conceptual framework support the standpoint that populism can be adequately identified in cases where speculation occurs with the unrealistic expectations of people, when politicians irresponsibly speak in the name of the people, or when they irresponsibly make promises.

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