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

Research Article

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

As a leitmotif of the theoretical discussion, I will argue that defining populism as an ontological category instead of being focused on its sociological and ontic dimensions, and being concentrated on both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of populism, can be analytically rewarding. In the second part, I will offer a historical perspective of the rise of populism in Macedonia arguing that the liberal successes in transition, paradoxically, created the conditions for the rise of populism that eventually hampered democratic consolidation,

turning the country into a stable competitive authoritarian regime. Finally, this paper will present the results of a discourse analysis of Gruevski's speeches which looks at how 'the people' and the hostile elite, as the central protagonists in populist narratives, are construed, invoked and negotiated in his political ideology.

Populism: Between Two-Strand Theory and Discourse Theory

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

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

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

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[1] Canovan, Margaret. 1999. Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47(1), 2-16.

[2] Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism*, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,* edited by Panizza, Francisco. London and New York: Verso, 50-71.

[3] Pinelli, Cesare. 2011. The Populist Challenge to Constitutional Democracy. *European Constitutional Law Review* 7, 5-16.

[4] Mouffe, *The 'End of Politics'*.

problems according to their visions and interests with no intermediaries whatsoever, bypassing the frustrating complexities of liberal democracy.

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

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

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

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[5] Zakaria, Fareed. 1997. The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs* 76(6), 22-43.

[6] Krastev, Ivan and Daniel Smilov. 2008. *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe*, in *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe,* edited by Mesežnikov, Grigorij / Gyárfášová, Oľga and Daniel Smilov. Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 7-12.

[7] Krastev, Ivan. 2007. The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus. *Journal of Democracy* 18(4), 56-63.

[8] Rupnik, Jacques and Jan Zielonka. 2013. Introduction: The State of Democracy 20 Years on: Domestic and External Factors. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 27(1), 3-25.

[9] Krastev and Smilov, *The Rise of Populism*, 8.

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

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

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

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

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[10] For the concept of hegemony see: Gramsci, Antonio. 1971/1999. *Selection From the Prison Notebooks*. London: ElecBook; Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London and New York: Verso; Thomas, Peter D. 2009. *The Gramscian Moment*. Haymarket Books.

[11] Laclau, Ernesto. 2007. *Discourse*; in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, edited by Goodin E. Robert / Pettit, Philip and Thomas W. Pogge. Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 541-47.

[12] Howarth, David. 2005. *Applying Discourse Theory: the Method of Articulation*, in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance,* edited by Howarth, David and Jacob Torfing. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 315-50.

[13] Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. Populism: *What's in a Name?*, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,* edited by Panizza, Francisco. London and New York: Verso, 32-49.

[14] Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *Populist Reason.* London and New York: Verso, 115.

institution of the social, but becomes blurred as social logics permeate through. As Glynos and Howarth suggest, "political logics thus provide a conceptual vocabulary to show how these limits are constituted, transformed, and absorbed, and they do so by focusing on the way the logic of equivalence comes to predominate over the logic of difference, and vice versa."[15]

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• For Laclau, the basic unit of analysis in the study of populist identities is the social demand. In his earlier accounts, Laclau used the concepts of moments and elements to characterize the basic units that are the subject of articulatory practices.[16] Elements, as an analytical category, are characterized by their relative isolation and indecisive, floating nature. When they are captured, articulated or partially fixed by a certain structure, they become moments. By 'articulation', Laclau and Mouffe understand "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice."[17]

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

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• However, there are demands of different types that remain frustrated and start developing a relation of equivalence. What they have in common is the fact that they have been left aside. If this is the case and some kind of solidarity develops, what we see operating is the logic of equivalence. The logics of difference and equivalence correspond to the syntagmatic/associative axes in Saussurean linguistics.[18] The logic of difference is a way of organizing social life, presupposing that each demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way.[19] The logic of equivalence is about substituting elements. It "reduces the number of positions that can be combined in a discourse, leading to a paratactical division of the political space that simplifies political struggle into an antagonism between 'us' and 'them', good and evil." [20]

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

[15] Glynos, Jason and David Howarth. 2007. *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 144.

[16] Laclau, Ernesto. 1979. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism. Fascism. Populism.* London: NLB.

[17] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105-6.

[18] Howarth, David. (ed.). 2015. *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique*. London and New York: Routledge.

[19] Laclau, *Populism: What's in a Name?*, 38.

[20] Stavrakakis, Yannis. 2005. *Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece*, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,* edited by Panizza, Francisco. London and New York: Verso, 225-49.

the contingency of social relations more directly than at other times."[21] There is no logical response to this experience: we know from psychoanalysis that different modalities of being can emerge in response to the experience of loss. There is a growing body of literature, drawing on Freud's work,[22] on the difference between mourning and melancholia, which attempts to use these concepts for the analysis of ideological responses to social dislocations.[23] From a more positive point of view, dislocation opens up the possibility for new identifications and political action.[24] In other words, as a number of grievances are expressed, hegemonic political projects try to articulate them, partially fix their meaning, and give them a sense of stability.

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

> "*Equivalential relations would not go beyond a vague feeling of solidarity if they did not crystallize in a certain discursive identity which no longer represents democratic demands as equivalent, but the equivalential link as such. Although the link was originally ancillary to the demands, it now reacts over them and, through an inversion of the relationship, starts behaving as their ground.*"[25]

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•   This helps us understand why referents of the signifier 'the people' are contingent and basically depend on what has been articulated by the chain. It also helps us understand why populist phenomena can have different social bases and why populism is not inherently illiberal. Caiani and Della Porta[26]

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[21] Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, 110.

[22] Freud, Sigmund. 2005. *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. London: Penguin Books.

[23] See more in Butler, J. 2006. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso; Crociani-Windland, Lita and Paul Hoggett. 2012. Politics and Affect. *Subjectivity* 5(2), 161-79; Voutyras, Savvas. 2016. The Radicalisation Which is not One: Contentious Politics Against the Backdrop of the Greek Crisis. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24(2), 223-39.

[24] Laclau, Ernesto. 1990. *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time*. London and New York: Verso.

[25] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 94.

[26] Caiani, Manuela and Donatella Della Porta. 2011. The Elitist Populism of the Extreme Right: A Frame Analysis of Extreme Right Wing Discourses in Italy and Germany. *Acta Politica* 46(2), 180-202.

offer an illuminating analysis of how the people are depicted in the political narrative of far-right populists in Germany and Italy, and if we compare the passive, non-tolerant people of the far-right with the inclusionary, liberal and radically democratic interpellations of the left-wing populist movements from the European South we can discern the obvious differences.

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

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

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

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

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

VMRO-DPMNE's populism articulates the grievances of both the losers of transition and socialism against a common enemy: the values of the (post-) communist, pro-western elites that embraced the values of (neo)liberal ideology during transition. The elites to which the people are opposed consist of more than just the political establishment of the Social-Democratic Union (SDSM), the successor of the Communist Party. More importantly, it is antagonized by the values of what Althusser[27] called the ideological state apparatuses of the nascent liberal-democratic state during the transition: the intellectual elite, the independent media as well as liberal and pro-western civil society organizations in general. These are presented in the populist discourse not as independent actors with new values, but as a united entity and a continuation of the socialist legacy. It was the frustration of various popular sectors with the continuous state of emergency, with the complexities and contradictions of transition which the political and intellectual elite symbolized, that created the conditions for the rise of populism in Macedonia after 2006. The various legitimate grievances people expressed were condensed around the myth-like demand for novelty, for a new type of politics. In a double move, Nikola Gruevski, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, not only portrayed his liberal opponents as corrupt and incompetent, but also stressed the discontinuity of his political project with his predecessor in the party, the former Prime Minister Ljubcho Georgievski. Capturing the popular imagination, Gruevski presented himself as a novel, modern political personality whose political identity had not been tainted by dirty transition politics.

The Transition Consensus and its Others

The policies of the consensus within political elites regarding transition in Macedonia did not differ radically from other democratizing post-communist European countries. As Rupnik notices, the tenets of the elite-led and top-down consensus were the primacy of the constitutional order and the need for economic liberalization. [28] The first presupposed the establishment of politically 'neutral' liberal institutions; the second a large-scale privatization and integration of the economy to the global market. The backgrounded in this formula was the role of a wide democratic and popular legitimation of these reforms. Paradoxically, the weakening of intermediary actors such as trade unions and the lack of civil society organization facilitated the smooth implementation of painful reforms. In Central and Eastern Europe, according to Rupnik and Zielonka, it was the economic benefits from liberalization and the fact that the winners outnumbered the losers that legitimized the hegemony of the new order and kept liberal democracy stable.[29]

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[27] Althusser, Louis. 1971/2008. *On Ideology*. London and New York. Verso.
[28] Rupnik, Jacques. 2007. Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash. *Journal of Democracy* 18(4), 17-27.
[29] Rupnik and Zielonka, *The State of Democracy*, 11.

This was not entirely the case in Macedonia, as privatization was coupled with the turmoil of war in the region. This brought about higher unemployment rates than during Yugoslav socialism and resulted in falling living standards. Not being able to distribute economic benefits, the post-communist elites sought legitimacy elsewhere. Much of the success of the liberal hegemony can be accounted for in terms of a security crisis among the citizens of Macedonia due to the wars in the region and the precarious international position of the new state. Kiro Gligorov, the first post-communist President of the country, became famous for portraying the country as an "oasis of peace", an embodiment of civilized European values in the Balkans, a region torn by war and barbarianism.[30] This sense of crisis allowed the elites to legitimize non-popular decisions, both economic, such as large scale privatization, and political, such as the compromise with Greece regarding the country's name in 1995. War, turmoil, chaos and instability were said to be the alternatives to any painful decision made. When the post-communist elite lost the parliamentary election in 1998, a nationalist government seized power for the first time in Macedonia's history of statehood. Though known as a populist leader whose party, VMRO-DPMNE, articulated the grievances of the losers in both transition and socialism in the 1990s, Ljubcho Georgievski's reign was characterized - until the outburst of inter-ethnic conflict in 2001 - by political moderation, the de-politization of issues he once contested, and upgraded practices of corruption. In the 1990s, he promised the revision of what was seen by many as fraudulent privatization: however, once in power, his government further privatized precious economic assets that had remained in state ownership. The transition consensus seemed to be cemented.

Despite the fact that most of the dislocatory experiences that contributed to the widespread sentiment of an identity crisis during transition were related to economic grievances, the main challenge to the liberal consensus did not come from the 'objective' laws of economy. Rather, it was challenged by means of the most democratic tool available in politics - a referendum. After ousting VMRO-DPMNE from power at the parliamentary elections in 2002, the new SDSM government, led by the old leader Branko Crvenkovski, formed a coalition government with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a party whose core consisted of former Albanian guerrilla fighters, who decided to leave arms and pursue their political aims democratically.[31] The most sensitive policy issue this government needed to tackle was the implementation of the Framework Agreement. The Agreement put an end to the inter-ethnic violence between the state and ethnic Albanians in 2001, and stipulated an adoption of a set of constitutional and legal arrangements which were implemented without significant resistance until 2004.

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[30] Balalovska, Kristina. 2004. Between 'the Balkans' and 'Europe': A Study of the Contemporary Transformation of Macedonian Identity. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 12(2), 193-214.
[31] For more on the conflict in Macedonia and the Ohrid Framework Agreement, see: Daskalovski, Zhidas and Marija Ristevska. (eds.). 2011. *One Decade after the Ohrid Framework Agreement: Lessons (to be) Learned from the Macedonian Experience.* Skopje: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Center for Research and Policy Making.

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

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

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

This, in turn, signaled that a large number of disenfranchised ethnic Macedonians lost their patience. Security concerns, that made the citizens prone to accept painful decisions and believe that the distant European future

will be compensation for their hardships, had lost their resonance. Furthermore, the actors who had used this narrative to legitimize painful decisions had lost their moral credibility to rule, to be 'real' representatives of the people. The referendum 'failed', however a new populist majority was born, which has dominated national politics ever since.

The key practices in Macedonian politics in the last decade are usually characterized as nationalist and authoritarian, and not necessarily populist. The fact that VMRO-DPMNE's elite embarked on a project of national renaissance which included both symbolic dimensions, such as a revision of the historiography, and more 'material' ones such as 'Skopje 2014', the beautification project of Macedonia's capital, legitimize these claims. However, it can be argued that the populist logic is once again crucial, although sometimes overdetermined by the logic of nationalism. What is at stake in Macedonia is not nation-building in a classic sense, the invention of myths that create the nation. Macedonian national identity, as it were, was already stable at the end of socialism. The majority of ethnic Macedonians were content with their history and myths. Yet, on the other hand, in unofficial discourses such as the family histories of many people, especially from subaltern classes, the official national narrative was challenged, and supplemented with additional, not publicly recognized subaltern myths about their national and political identities. This is why it is more correct to characterize the national renaissance as a project of the incorporation of subaltern myths whose function has been not only to express an alternative national identity, but also to constitute the subaltern identity of those oppressed by socialism, and later by the transition elites.[32] The myths about the ancient glory of Macedonians, which were usually coupled with the narratives about the incredibly rich, radical political history of VMRO, have been immanent as counter-hegemonic myths opposed to the hegemony of the (post-)socialist and liberal elites. Their elevation in the public discourse of populist politicians and political practices as such symbolizes the return of the repressed, 'the people', in politics and history. As the analysis of Gruevski's speeches bellow will demonstrate, nationalist elements are present, sometimes as more central, but most of the time as marginal elements of his populism. Their role is most often instrumental in antagonizing the socialist and liberal elites, and not in challenging the national others.

The last peculiarity of the context in which VMRO-DPMNE's populism has emerged is related to the previous one. The intensity of VMRO-DPMNE's hegemonic project can be accounted for in terms of the absence of political tradition and history on the part of the Macedonian political right. As a result, the political imagination of the people has always been deeply rooted in the cultural hegemony of the socialist and liberal elites. It was this hegemonic appeal, the symbolic capital accumulated through a long-lasting grip on power that made the liberal post-socialist elite easily associated with the tradition of

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[32] Atanasov, Petar. 2004. *Macedonian National Identity: Quantitative Differences Between Unitary and Subaltern National Myths and Narratives*. Discussion Paper 32, South East Europe Series. London: London School of Economics.

statehood, as the only legitimate representative of the interests of the citizens. This symbolic resource, in turn, made it the only political actor worthy of trust in times of permanent crisis, dislocations and socio-economic transformation. It facilitated the legitimacy of the permanent state of transition, mitigating the dislocatory effects of the unprecedented and traumatic socio-economic transformation whereby the identities of many ordinary people were being threatened. It did not legitimize the elite and its dogma as being an economic provider of the needs of the citizens, because they obviously failed to improve the living standard of citizens, but as the only alternative with a proven record of statehood which can lead the people through the hardships of today into a 'glorious' European future.

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

The Populist Resonance Machine and its Effect on Democracy

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

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

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[33] Marinov, Tchavdar. 2010. Historiographical Revisionism and Re-Articulation of Memory in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. *Sociétés politiques comparées* 25, 1-19.

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

All of the grievances and resentments were gradually combined in a new ideology of the people, an assemblage of different ideologies brought together by the hegemonic projects of the populist movement. This authoritarian populist ideology that combined a set of disparate as well as logically and ideologically incoherent elements invented new cleavages in society, while repressing others. It is reminiscent of Connolly's "resonance machine": what the hegemonic political alliance involves cannot be reduced to a shared doctrine, but what should be looked at is the affinities of sensibility, the shared affective ethos of different actors that are part of the people. The effect of the resonance machine "is not well covered by terms such as 'manipulation' and 'group-think'; for the messages in question already speak to the bellicose temper of those who receive them."[34]

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

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

> "*The time is ripe for us to begin the final battle against the remnants from the transition … The time is ripe for the final battle against the politicians who left nothing but destruction and poverty… In the last couple of elections, they were defeated, but didn't vanish!*" [35]

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[34] Connolly, William E. 2008. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 53.
[35] N.N. 2009. Gruevski plashi so predvremeni izbori. *Nova Makedonija*, 19. November 2009 (accessed: 07. June 2016).

Paradoxically, the production of cleavages went hand by hand with the denial of pluralism and the immanent existence of cleavages. Dissenting opinions were met with suspicion and the denial of their authenticity, accused of being instigated by 'the elites'. In VMRO-DPMNE's populist discourse, there is no such thing as authentic civic opposition, and any opposition is presented as a conspiracy against the people and its representatives as if it were controlled by the party opposition or foreign centres of power.[36] The phenomenon of counter-protests was reactivated and upgraded by VMRO-DPMNE. Counter-protests against civil society initiatives are not used just to instill fear amongst dissenting voices, but to discredit them, to persuade the public that the political battle, after all, is completely dominated by the political parties, the one of the people and the one of the transitional elites.[37]

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

Far from being consolidated, Macedonia's democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrated certain resilience to shocks. The price Macedonia had to pay for the entrance of 'the people' into politics is rather high, however. Nowadays the system can be characterized as what Levitsky famously called 'competitive authoritarianism'. Democracy is reduced to holding frequent elections which only confirm the supremacy of the incumbents. There is no level playing field for political competition, as the elite holds considerable sway over the media, the constitutional court, the judiciary, and all important checks-and-balances mechanisms that are supposed to provide the rule of law.[38] It holds even firmer grip on the production of consent. Macedonia is a country with political prisoners. The process of lustration was used to punish critics and to silence opposition. A paralyzing atmosphere of fear increases the cost of political participation for citizens not interpellated by the populist

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[36] Marichikj, Bojan and Ljupcho Petkovski. 2014. *The Political Culture, Europeanization and Fears in Macedonia: 2014 Report from the Survey Research "Eurometer"*. Skopje: MCET

[37] On counter protests see more in: Nikolovski, Dimitar. 2013. *Traitors, Hirelings and Sandwich-Protesters: Civil Activism in the Macedonian Public Discourse*. Skopje: Foundation Open Society Macedonia/Macedonian Centre for European Training; Nikolovski, Dimitar and Petkovski Ljupcho. 2016. Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia: From Rhetorical Trap to Discursive Asset. *Czech Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

[38] Frckoski, Ljubomir Danailov. 2012. Authoritarian Populism in Transitional Democracies of Western Balkans. *South-East European Journal of Political Science* 2(1) (accessed: 07. June 2016).

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

Who are "the People" in the speeches of Gruevski?

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

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

Table 1: List of speeches

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

Source: Author

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

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[39] For the content analysis of the transcripts of the speeches, I used the text analysis software Nvivo. The analysis below represents a summary of an analytical paper, commissioned by an NGO-Infocentre from Skopje, a local media watch-dog organization, which I prepared in June 2014 (Petkovski 2014).

if we include the indefinite form "People". In third place is "SDSM" (the acronym of the opposition Social Democratic Union).

Table 2: Frequency

Word	Frequency of use	Percentage of Use
Macedonia	102	0,62
the People	48	0,29
SDSM	48	0,29
new	45	0,27
citizens	38	0,23
VMRO	34	0,21
DPMNE	31	0,19
persons	29	0,17
the state	28	0,17
others	28	0,17
part	27	0,16
work	27	0,16
the Government	26	0,16
our	26	0,16
citizens	25	0,15
projects	25	0,15

Source: Author

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

Table 3: Frequency in specific speeches

Speech	(the) Citizens	(the) People	People (as individuals)	Total
Address by PM Nikola Gruevski at the promotion of the concept of Managerial Ethics, 2013	0.5%	0.06	0.2%	0.76%
Press-conference: Let's go to elections and let people can decide!, 2013	0.39%	0.45%	0.04%	0.88%
In the interest of the state, SDSM is free to sign any report it wants, 2013	0.69%	0.78%	0.07%	1.53%

New Year's Address 2013	0.21%	0.03%	0.2%	0.44%
Presentation of the Accountability Report 2011-2014	0.53%	0.22%	0.02%	0.77%
The speech of the prime minister in the opening rally of the Presidential Elections Campaign in Ohrid, 2014	0.51%	1.14%	0.26%	1.92%

Source: Author

In the other three speeches (2nd, 3rd and 6th) Gruevski appears in his capacity as president of the ruling party. The use of the term "People" in these speeches is much more frequent, and they represent populist speeches. Two of the addresses were, in fact, party press-conferences in which Gruevski presented the positions of his party on the work of the Inquiry Committee, while the third was a speech given as his party's campaign rally. In the press-conferences, Gruevski interpreted a traumatic event - the possibility for the Inquiry Committee to adopt a decision opposed to his party's interpretation of the events that unfolded in the Parliament on December 24, 2012. The main line of his interpretation held that the incident was the consequence of a conspiracy to destabilize the state and bring the opposition to power through a *coup d'état*. The report of the Inquiry Committee found, on the other hand, that the expulsion of the MPs and the members of the press from the Parliament building constituted a violation of the Constitution.

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

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

The quote demonstrates that Gruevski ties the result of the elections to the resolution of the dispute. In other words, the majority or, as he called it, "the People", is portrayed as an arbiter in a legal dispute. The opposition, on the other hand, framed the dispute in legal terms because it claimed that the events constituted a violation of the Law and the Constitution. The next quote, from the same speech, proposes a 'creative' resolution for the dispute

surrounding the findings of the Inquiry Committee and is an even better illustration of the populist rhetoric:

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

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

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

Table 4: Frequency of the use of the adjective "new"

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

Source: Author

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

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

In spite of the simplified language and symbols used in such speeches, it is not quite clear who the term "people" refers to, to which social layers and groups it applies. Does it cover all people, understood as all citizens, including their differences? Or, is the "People" an elastic category that refers to some sort of mythical body which, while not representing the plurality of the society in general, wants to present itself as a whole? The function of the unclear signifiers and symbols in the political communication is clear - they create order in the disorder, mobilize and provide the feeling of identity. In societies faced with shock, apathy and mistrust, the need for order is foremost and far more important than the ideological contents that could introduce that order. The weaker the institutions that need to provide continuity, predictability and stability, a social logic, the more primitive and poor will be the symbols of political and populist rhetoric, the more prevalent the political logics and populism will be.

In Gruevski's speeches, society is represented as if only two subject positions in politics were legitimate, as if the social fabric was divided in two parts: us ("the People") and them, the alienated and lost political and intellectual elite with its values. The mobilisation is not based on rational arguments, but on moralizing ones, aimed at the affective ethos of the audience. The meaning of "democracy" is different than in the normal, liberal-democratic view. It is quite understandable for the "People" to decide on legal qualifications - who is right and who is wrong in a given dispute. There are no too great sacrifices to be laid at the altar of the "People".

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

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

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