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Research Article

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The state for which people? The (not so) left populism of the Macedonian far-left party Levica

Ivo Bosilkov*

Assessing the political principles of the Macedonian far left party Levica (The Left) has been an elusive task for political commentators and scholars alike since its emergence in 2016. However, the importance of categorising the party has further increased after its success in the 2020 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia, marked by a series of controversial statements by its leader, Dimitar Apasiev. As many pundits interpreted the violent undertones of Apasiev's words as an indication of Levica's 'fascist' intentions, the focus has shifted away from its key feature: populism. While this article does not attempt to deny Levica's self-definition as a far-left party, it does scrutinise the party's claim to be a member of the 'left-populist' family of parties. Demonstrating the contradictions between official party communication and social media posts by its leader, the article concludes that Levica is in fact a valenced or polyvalent populist party, as it lacks the inclusivity principle common for left populists. Importantly, however, the article finds that Levica consistently utilises populism in all of its conceptualisations – as ideology, as strategy and as discursive style – a rare practice for populist political actors.

Keywords: populism, ideology, far left, North Macedonia

Introduction

On 16 July 2020, as the results of the snap parliamentary elections in North Macedonia were revealed, a short statement by one political leader overshadowed the narrow victory of the center-left Socialdemocratic Alliance of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM) over its right-wing rival VMRO-DPMNE. Dimitar Apasiev, the president of the far-left Levica (The Left) celebrated his party's ascension into the Parliament by tweeting "do not suck up to us now, we will still shoot all of you".¹ Although Levica only won one more MP aside from Apasiev, and the Socialdemocrats and VMRO became the frontrunners to form a government coalition, the controversial message stole the

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¹ Republika. 2020. [Prosecutors investigating Apasiev's "up against the wall" Facebook comment](#), 17 July 2020 (accessed: 10 August 2020).

headlines.² Many outlets and political commentators have interpreted its violent undertone as an indicator for the ‘fascist’ intentions and nature of Levica.³

Such an assessment might come as a surprise for those not familiar with the context, as fascist worldviews are normally a feature of far-right rather than far-left politics. Apasiev himself has often laughed off the allegations of his own ‘latent fascism’, claiming that his adversaries are intentionally confounding fascism with left-wing populism in order to manipulate the voters. Indeed, as recently as in 2019, Levica publically embraced a ‘left-wing populist’ identity after a series of profound changes within the party which facilitated the current shift towards personalisation and the abandonment of traditional socialist party characteristics. However, the complex political context of North Macedonia has afforded the articulation of a unique variety of populism by Levica: one which can be sharply distinguished from other left-wing populisms based on their theoretical foundations. Given Levica’s deviation from those foundations, as will be argued in this article, the party cannot be categorised as a left populist party.

Instead, this article claims that Levica’s populism is idiosyncratic and contingent: it draws inspiration from a wide range of sources, some notably from the far-right realm, but its adaptation to recent historical developments in the country and in the wider region has yielded a unique brand, which fluctuates between conceptualisations of populism as strategy, discourse and ideology. In that sense, despite the attempts to reconcile its declared core ideology with populist principles, Levica is a representative of what scholars of populism label a ‘valenced’ (or polyvalent) populism, while its perceived ‘fascism’ is a distorted form of left authoritarianism, rendered especially salient by the use of populist rhetoric.

In the next two sections I will first establish the overall framework of populism and its different conceptual interpretations, and then I will elaborate on the notable features and cases of left-wing populism. Following this, I will dedicate a section to presenting the case of Levica as a valenced populist party, backed by examples from Apasiev’s communication on social media. I will conclude with remarks about the novelty which Levica brings to the study of populism and populist parties.

Conceptualisations of populism

The most commonly accepted definition of populism considers it to be a thin-centred ideology which sees political reality as characterised by a moral conflict between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite.⁴ This conflict is underscored by three main features: the homogeneity of the two groups, their Manichean nature as inherently good and bad, and their struggle for sovereignty over a given polity. This defines populism as an ideology as highly moralistic and anti-pluralistic. In addition, populism as an ideology can be internalised by both

² Dimitrievska, Valentina. 2020. [Who hacked the website of North Macedonia’s state election commission on election day?](#) *Intellinews*, 19 July 2020 (accessed: 10 August 2020).

³ Deralla, Xhabir. 2020. [Questions to Apasiev about how he thinks to carry out the shooting.](#) *CivilToday*, 28 July 2020 (accessed: 10 August 2020).

⁴ Mudde, Cas. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4), 541-556.

political actors and voters. However, since it is thin-centred, scholars argue that it cannot stand alone, but instead needs to attach itself to a thick host ideology, which contains a complete set of instructions about how the world is and how it should be.⁵ Examples of such traditional ideologies are nationalism and socialism, which, when complemented by the features of populism, result in the right-wing and left-wing populisms that have recently surged across Europe.

Before analysing how these two ideologies are integrated in the populist framework, it should be noted that despite being the dominant interpretation of populism, the ideological one is not the only one. Populism can also be conceptualised as a discursive style and a form of political mobilisation.⁶ The first conceptualisation employs the communication paradigm, defining the populist phenomenon as a particular rhetorical style of political actors. This approach considers the performative repertoire which political actors use to establish the Manichean antagonism, especially in the context of a highly mediatised arena which turns political conflict into a public spectacle. According to populism scholars, the defining factor is not only the appeal to the people as naturally opposed to the elite, but also the construction of an ambient of threat, crisis and breakdown, as well as bad manners in their communicative activity: slang, swearing, and being generally colourful in their language, in animosity to the rigidity, rationality and diplomacy of conventional political actors.⁷

Ultimately, this conceptualisation focuses on the discursive expressions of populist actors, examining how the tropes, themes and ways of acting, especially in the media realm, constitutes not only the image of the actors, but that of the people itself as discursively constructed by the politicians. Since its aesthetic features are embedded in the content of political discourse, they belong to the domain of communication, to be analysed with its particular ontological scope and methodological tools. However, this conceptualisation also draws inspiration from the post-structuralist discourse theory of the Essex School (most notably Ernesto Laclau), which famously represents populism as a counter-hegemonic discourse that takes empty signifiers and fills them with different meanings in different contexts, with the final objective being to form an “equivalence chain” of various social grievances from different groups in society.⁸

Based on this theory, populism can be seen as a political logic which is articulated through a challenge to the status quo and contempt towards the establishment. This relates to the third conceptualisation as a political strategy, where populism is channelled through particular policy choices, organisational aspects and mobilisation tactics. The locus of this approach is the personalistic leader, who seeks or exercises power based on the unmediated and

⁵ Aslanidis, Paris. 2016. Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective. *Political Studies* 64(1), 88-104.

⁶ Gidron, Noam and Bart Bonikowski. 2013. Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

⁷ Moffitt, Benjamin and Simon Tormey. 2014. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies* 62, 381-397.

⁸ Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso

uninstitutionalised support from his large number of followers.⁹ Apart from its relationship with the masses, the populism-as-strategy approach focuses on the organisational hierarchy, where the tendency for personalisation marginalises the party's internal structures and transforms it into an enterprise synonymous with the (most often) charismatic leader.¹⁰

Populism as a feature of right- and left-wing politics

While the different meanings of the concept 'populism' are a matter of debate in academia, the distinction which is considered both most manifest and most relevant in the political arena is that between right-wing and left-wing populism, deriving from its ideational definition. The study of populism has become increasingly popular in the last decade, with the growing electoral successes of right-wing parties that have taken a populist turn. Interest in the 'populist radical right' culminated with Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump in the US elections in 2016, leading scholars to label the phenomenon pathological and a threat to democracy.¹¹ These assessments are based on right-wing populist parties' open hostility towards minorities, conceived as a foreign tissue in the harmonious organism that is 'the people'.¹² The perception of such harmony is based on a cultural conception of the heartland, where homogeneity can only be achieved through a nativist scope, and any form of cultural diversity threatens the nation's cohesion.¹³

Moreover, populism exacerbates the authoritarian impulses of right-wing ideology. The populist radical right frequently envisions the rule of law and separation of powers as an obstacle to the will of the people and is willing to not only question them, but also dismantle them, as in the case of Victor Orban's Hungary.¹⁴ The emphasis on threat facilitates the combination of cultural othering with the theme of security, as civilisationist narratives are driven by ethno-racial and religious sentiments painting immigrants as (black) criminals and (Muslim) terrorists.¹⁵ As such cultural contamination and realistic risk are a product of globalisation, the liberal executors of this project are the enemy of the people, and need to be defeated so that popular sovereignty can be reinstated again.

⁹ Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics* 34(1), 1-22.

¹⁰ It should also be noted that besides the three most common conceptualisations, another approach pioneered by Aslanidis considers populism to be neither ideology nor discourse, but instead a frame Aslanidis, *Is Populism an Ideology?...*

¹¹ Akkerman, Tjitske. 2003. Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology? *Acta Politica* 38, 147-159.

¹² Rydgren, Jens. 2005. Is Extreme Right-Wing Populism Contagious? Explaining the Emergence of a New Party Family. *European Journal of Political Research* 44, 413-437.

¹³ Betz, Hans-Georg. 2003. Xenophobia, Identity Politics, and Exclusionary Populism in Western Europe. *Socialist Register*, 193-210.

¹⁴ Bustikova, Lenka and Petra Guasti. 2017. The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe? *Politics and Governance* 5(4), 166-176.

¹⁵ Brubaker, Rogers. 2017. Between Nationalism and Civilizationalism. The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(8), 1191-1226.

Researchers define right-wing populism as exclusionary, as its tenets assume the horizontal delineation between in- and out-groups.¹⁶ In contrast to this, left-wing populism is inclusionary, focusing on vertical comparisons between political and especially economic elites (i.e. the oligarchy). In fact, the term itself was coined from the late 19th century People's Party in the United States, which was largely founded on socialist principles:¹⁷ as Ernesto Laclau has famously stated, "the highest forms of populism can only be socialist".¹⁸ Modern left-wing populism can be defined as the commitment to equality, internationalism and aspirations to fundamental transformation of capitalism, interwoven with a narrowing of Marxist class struggle into essentially two classes: the people and the elite, or the 99 percent versus the one percent.¹⁹

The populist left is inspired by the discursivist approach of Laclau and the Essex school, which establishes the framework of left-populist counter-hegemony through the process of unifying a chain of heterogeneous demands and the construction of a frontier between the unified demands of different ethnic, religious, gender and other identities (constituting a movement) against the neoliberal elite. Within this process, left populist politics is underscored by the opposition to consensus 'centrist' politics, embracing an agonistic vision of society that integrates organisational and stylistic aspects of conflict: participatory-plebiscitarian mass protest movements, and emotive, jargonistic language. This approach has been integrated in the operational practices of several political entities in Western Europe, most notably the Spanish Podemos, the Greek Syriza, and the French France Insoumise, but also some parties in Southeastern Europe.

The characteristics of left-wing populist parties in (Southeastern) Europe and the emergence of valenced populism

The emergence (and increased relevance) of these actors is seen by many as a product of growing inequality and establishment austerity policy, further amplified by the economic crisis of 2008. Importantly, Katsambekis and Kioupkoulis assert that the breakthrough of populist left parties is impossible to imagine without organic links to grassroots social movements.²⁰ This was the case with Syriza, which emerged as a left-wing coalition of diverse actors, mobilising resentments from the harsh economic measures imposed by the infamous Troika, called to address the Greek debt crisis. Podemos followed a similar path, emerging from the ranks of the Indignados demonstrations after the financial crisis, and building its structure upon the horizontalist principles of its uninstitutionalised predecessor. However, Podemos has frequently emphasised its transversality by rejecting the conventional left-right axis and

¹⁶ Reinemann, Carsten / Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Strömbäck, Jesper and Claes de Vreese. 2016. *Populist Political Communication. Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Toril / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Strömbäck, Jesper and Claes de Vreese. London: Routledge.

¹⁷ Jäger, Anton. 2018. [The Myth of "Populism"](#). *Jacobin*, 1 February 2018 (accessed: 7 August 2020).

¹⁸ Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On populist reason*. London: Verso

¹⁹ Katsambekis, Giorgos and Alexandros Kioupkoulis. 2019. *Introduction: The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, in *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, edited by Katsambekis, Giorgos and Alexandros Kioupkoulis. London: Routledge, 1-20.

²⁰ Katsambekis / Kioupkoulis, *Introduction...*, 27.

positioning itself as an anti-caste party while proposing anti-austerity and traditional left-wing policies.²¹

La France Insoumise was even more rigorous in its implementation of the principle of transversality and Laclauian populism, as it defined itself as a movement of the French people beyond class, gender, race or ethnicity, thus 'federating' the working and middle classes against the oligarchy, in a practical example of the equivalence chains of the Essex school. Creating a direct personal bond between its charismatic leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon and 'the people' constituted by the above inter-class break with Marxism, the party has recognised the "crucial role of emotions in constructing political identities".²²

Transcending these left populist parties are parties which also apply the social movement principles to the party arena, but draw their ideological repertoire from both the left and the right end of the spectrum, as well as from ideologically non-positioned issues like the fight against corruption or moral integrity.²³ Although some scholars label these parties polyvalent, I will use Zulianello's description of them as "valenced", as both label same phenomenon, most faithfully embodied in the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement). The M5S stretches the conceptualisation of populism as a thin ideology to the maximum, and combines post-materialist with nativist positions, becoming a relatively unique party on the European scene. Apart from the ideological discordance, the M5S incorporates 'new politics' together with populism, as well as radical ideas about democracy, which would deeply upset the status quo.²⁴

Left and valenced populism has recently also begun to advance in Southeastern Europe, with Croatia being the most fertile ground for this type of political actor. The anti-eviction activist group Živi Zid (Human Shield) transformed itself into a parliamentary party only three years after being launched, demonstrating once again the evolution of left populist parties from grassroots movements. However, Živi Zid explicitly refuses to identify itself as left or right, labeling its ideology 'humanist', which allows it to complement its dominantly egalitarian-progressive positions with a range of conservative policy proposals.²⁵ Such an appeal to 'common sense' is a trademark of populist parties, founding its home in an earlier iteration of Croatian populists of the non-right wing variety, such as Most (Bridge), defined as a "centrist anti-establishment party".²⁶ Beyond Croatia, the Serbian environmental movement-turned-party Ne Da(vi)mo

²¹ Ramiro, Luis and Raul Gomez. 2017. Radical-Left Populism during the Great Recession: Podemos and its Competition with the Established Radical Left. *Political Studies* 65(1), 108-126.

²² Marliere, Philippe. 2017. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Populist Gamble. *OpenDemocracy*, 27 October 2017 (accessed: 12 August 2020).

²³ Zulianello, Mattia. 2019. Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-the-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries. *Government and Opposition* 55, 327-347.

²⁴ Pirro, Andrea. 2018. The Polyvalent Populism of the 5 Star Movement. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 26(4), 443-458.

²⁵ Živi Zid. 2016. Politički program. www.zivizid.hr

²⁶ Šurina, Maja. 2018. Marijana Grbeša: Živi zid su populisti, Most je čudnovat, no u Hrvatskoj ipak nema desnog populizma [Human Shield are populists, Bridge are a curious case, but there is no right wing populism in Croatia], *Tportal.hr*, 29 April 2018 (accessed: 5 January 2021).

Beograd (Do not let Belgrade d(r)own) have also been classified as left populist:²⁷ however, this is more of an organisational and communicative feature than an ideological one, given the localised nature of NDMBGD and its focus on urbanisation and municipal policies.

The case of Levica: a comprehensive populist turn

Where can the Macedonian party Levica be located among these parties and within these principles? Long before becoming a parliamentary party in the 2020 elections and the successful campaign spearheaded by the textbook populist slogan “The state to the people”, the origins of the party were situated in civil society, namely the Occupy-style protest movement AMAN in 2012, the Movement Solidarnost (Solidarity) and the NGO Lenka. The party’s future leadership rose to prominence through the university ‘plenums’, the #Protestiram movement, and finally as part of the 2015 anti-government protests dubbed the ‘Colorful Revolution’. As the mass demonstrations came after the revelation of a series of corrupt and authoritarian practices by former prime minister Nikola Gruevski and his right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE, the context also galvanised progressive forces in the country beyond the established centre-left Socialdemocratic Alliance to exploit the window of opportunity and offer an alternative in the perceived crisis of representation. Despite the ultimate triumph of the Socialdemocrats, who skillfully turned the sentiment of the social movement to their favour, these leftist groups participating in the demonstrations in November 2015 eventually decided to form a party and compete in the electoral arena.²⁸

These developments follow the rise of Syriza; however, Levica would not stay united for long, as internal factions regarding ideology and strategy were already beginning to appear. Even before the elections in December 2016, a substantial part of its founders broke off from the party, citing a violation of the party’s statute by a group led by Dimitar Apasiev and veteran social justice activist Zdravko Saveski, in order to prevent the forming of an opposition front together with the Socialdemocrats against Gruevski.²⁹ According to Apasiev and Saveski, the rebels (comprised mostly of older trade unionists) organised an unsuccessful coup against the leadership, driven by discontent with the majority’s decision to construct the identity of an independent political subject; moreover they were supposedly bribed by Socialdemocrat promises of parliamentary seats.³⁰

Following the disappointment of the 2016 elections, where Levica did not obtain a parliament seat, additional defections of high profile exponents followed, contributing to the public image of a fractured organisation. Despite making a breakthrough in the local elections in 2017 and winning seats in two

²⁷ Spasojevic, Dušan. 2019. Riding the Wave of Distrust and Alienation. New Parties in Serbia after 2008. *Politics in Central Europe* 15(1), 139-162.

²⁸ Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. 2015. New Macedonia Party Aims for Left-Wing Revival. *Balkan Insight*, 17 November 2015 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

²⁹ Fokus. 2016. Frakcii vo Levica [Fractions in Levica], 8 December 2016 (accessed: 10 March 2021)

³⁰ Memeti, Bajram. 2016. Levica so vnatresna frakcija - Apasiev: Toa se obidi za raznebituvanje na partijata [Levica with internal factions - Apasiev: These are attempts to destroy the party]. *TV21*, 8 December 2016 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

municipality councils in the capital Skopje, the party was still mainly seen with skepticism by most left-leaning voters, who were eager to give the Socialdemocrats a chance to lift the country out of the political turmoil of the Gruevski era. Conceived as leaderless (or having multiple leaders), Levica had as its highest body a Presidium comprised of its most high-profile members, among them its current lone president Apasiev, who was there from the beginning. The rocky road from a plurality of presidents to a personalised leadership was marked by power struggles within the party and disagreements over its identity and public image, as tensions between the two remaining leaders – the self-described left patriot Apasiev and the eco-socialist libertarian Saveski – were beginning to increase.

These ideological tensions culminated in an open clash in the context of the Prespa agreement referendum deciding the name of the country in September 2018, as Apasiev pushed for a coalition with a number of far-right groups to boost the party's boycott campaign for the referendum.³¹ Although there was a general consensus within the party that boycotting the referendum (in order to prevent it from reaching its turnout threshold of 50 percent) is a legitimate strategy to oppose the name change, a large part of the membership was growing uncomfortable with Apasiev's increasingly passionate rhetoric on an issue that was perceived as more national than social. The final straw came at the presidential elections of 2019, where Apasiev was adamant that the party should endorse the right-wing opposition's presidential candidate against the ruling Socialdemocrats.³² After objecting to this proposal, Saveski and his group were expelled from the party by Apasiev's loyalists, who used a series of controversial legal and technical means to crown the university law professor as supreme leader of the party.³³

From then until the July 2020 elections, following Apasiev's vision, Levica followed a rapid evolution into a populist party, abandoning the classic mass party model (partially by necessity, due to its minimal remaining human resources), and transforming into a social media party. The development of a clear hierarchy, where Apasiev alone is at the summit, and his increased activity on social media, including opening a Twitter account in August 2019, are indicators of this evolution. This personalisation and direct addressing of the masses reveals the adoption of the populism-as-strategy conceptualisation. Yet this was only a precursor to the open self-identification as a populist party.³⁴ In December 2019, Levica held a congress where Apasiev stated:

“We should not run from the words present in the political spectrum, but analyse them, and if necessary, change their meaning. Such an example today is the word ‘populism’, which intellectual leftists fear as a boogeyman. For me, populism is not demagogy. It is not, as pejoratively represented by liberal theorists, ‘manipulating the people to achieve power’. Historically, if you analyse

³¹ Dominiononi, Irene. 2018. FYROM Referendum: Can a Group Without a Leader Convince People to Keep the Name?, *Euronews*, 28 September 2018 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

³² Republika. 2019. Levica endorses Siljanovska, 3 May 2019 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

³³ Republika. 2019. Small Left Wing Party Says SDSM and Government Officials are Trying to take it Over, Silence its Criticism, 18 February 2019 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

³⁴ Apasiev, Dimitar. 2019. Za novata populistichka levica [About the Populist left]. *Levica.mk*, 30 December 2020 (accessed: 13 August 2020).

*it, populism is immanent to the Political. There is no politics without populism!*³⁵

Thus defining his party as unequivocally populist, Apasiev added:

*“It is my position that it would be a sin to leave populism to the right. They will always beat us in elections that way, as the example shows with Jeremy Corbyn [in the United Kingdom elections]. We need to learn from our allies in the world, and therefore left populism must urgently call for a divorce from the apolitical stance of the so-called ‘new left’, which our former comrades stood for.”*³⁶

Entering 2020, Levica’s new identity was largely built on animosity towards its departed members, labeled ‘the NGO left’ and described as elitist, bureaucratic and faux intellectual. According to Apasiev, the language of these activists is understandable only to themselves, abstracted from reality and empty of substance, as their objective is to gain sympathy from the ‘Kale’ (a term referring to the location of the American embassy in North Macedonia and denoting foreign interference in the country’s sovereignty). This category (the NGO ‘sold out’ left) was one of the three enemies outlined by Apasiev in the speech. He designated the ‘anational’ Socialdemocrats as “the primary enemy, the class enemy, whose homes our mothers and sisters are cleaning.” This clearly indicates the ideological populist swerve of Levica in preparation for the upcoming 2020 elections, taking inspiration from the so-called ‘Pasokisation’ in Greece, where Syriza decimated the centre-left Pasok. However, it is the third enemy which caused the greatest controversy, both among the public and populism scholars seeking to identify Levica’s version of populism:

*“Our political enemy is the greater Albanian national-chauvinism, which too often is militant and extremely dangerous, working with full steam on the idea to create a greater [Albanian] state.”*³⁷

Founded as a radical leftist party, in its early years Levica vowed to be a supra-ethnic party, and represent all the different nationalities of North Macedonia, most notably the Albanians who make up for a quarter of the country’s population, and who have had a difficult history of hostility with the Macedonians, culminating with a short military conflict in 2001. In the context of Macedonian politics, parties are based on ethnicity, i.e. representing the Macedonians and the Albanians respectively. Levica’s early ambition was to break this tradition, and follow a socialist philosophy of internationalism by uniting the two ethnic groups on social issues. This is where the ideological discordance of the new Levica comes to the fore. Playing the ethnic card seemingly contradicts Apasiev’s claims of a left populism, which as shown above, is noted for its alliance building between different identities, and opposed exclusively to the establishment.

³⁵ Apasiev, *Za novata populistichka levica*.

³⁶ Apasiev, *Za novata populistichka levica*.

³⁷ Apasiev, *Za novata populistichka levica*.

The features of Levica's manifesto

By distancing itself from the above principle, Levica has followed the footsteps of the Five Star Movement's anti-immigrant message, therefore entering valenced populism territory. To further investigate this phenomenon, I began by conducting a brief content analysis of the party manifesto published on Levica's official website.³⁸ This analytical strategy serves to demonstrate whether an ideological inconsistency emerges due to the contradiction between the socialist worldview (emphasising class struggle), and populism (considering the people to be indivisible and homogenous, and opposed only to the elite). Moreover, based on the above insights from Apasiev's enemy definition, I specifically looked for articulations of 'dangerous others' (immigrants and ethnic minorities), as the distinctive feature of right wing populism which combined with the 'anti-elitist' articulations (hostility towards the political establishment and the oligarchy) generates the valenced populism fusion. In addition, the fundamental 'people centrism' of populism was also assessed. While there is no predefined threshold where the overlap of 'dangerous others' and 'anti-elitist' aspects, would constitute valenced populism, a presence of both would be an indication for it.

True to its denomination, the ten page manifesto is dominated by socialist terminology, mentioning the working class in 29 occasions, and capitalism/neoliberalism/corporations on 19 occasions. In addition, there are seven references to the term "social justice", six for "emancipation", six for "(anti)imperialism" and five for "solidarity". These references are spread over subsections covering left wing agendas such as progressive tax, free health and education, environmental protection and an anti-NATO stance. However, people-centrism is markedly interwoven into the content, as 15 references to "the people" (and its synonyms employed to represent society as a homogenous totality, such as "the citizens"³⁹), indicate a strong populist influence spread throughout the manifesto. This is complemented by the anti-elitist tone, where 12 negative references to the elite ("establishment", "big owners", "sellout politicians") appear. However, there are no mentions of horizontal "dangerous others", as the internationalist character of the party is still highlighted, as well as the aspiration to be a "supra-ethnic" party working for the deethnicisation and desegregation of society.

Qualitative analysis of Dimitar Apasiev's tweets during the electoral campaign. The findings from the manifesto are in line with the expectations, according to which Levica is ideologically a mix of a traditional and a populist (far) left party. However, far greater depth can be achieved through observing the (lack of) salience of the manifesto principles in everyday party communication, as well as the engagement with specific political issues (especially with regards to national/ethnic issues) on a daily basis, preferably in a contested period. For this purpose, given the personalisation of the party, I conducted a discourse analysis of a sample consisting of the tweets posted by president Apasiev in the electoral campaign from the period of 24 June to 12 July, aiming to show not only the conceptually flawed and inconsistent use of left populist tenets, but also the

³⁸ Levica. 2020. *Politichka Programa (Kratka agitaciska verzija) [Political Programme (Short Agitation Version)]*. Levica.mk (accessed: January 13 2021)

³⁹ Grbeša, Marijana and Betto Šalaj. 2017. Populism in Croatia: The Curious Case of The Bridge (Most). *Anali* 14(1), 7-20.

shifts between different conceptual uses of populism. Although the elections were held in a delicate and tense context, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, and served as an unofficial referendum for the Socialdemocrats' controversial foreign policy vis-à-vis Greece and Bulgaria, Levica hardly deviated from its previously established discursive norm. Instead, with its textbook populist contempt for political correctness and its embrace of commonsense 'patriotism', it capitalised on the decreasing support for the mainstream right-wing opposition VMRO-DPMNE, which had gained an image as overly meek and calculating with regards to national issues since the exile of Gruevski. Having rebranded itself as a populist party and incorporated populist traits in its manifesto (thus confirming the ideological-populist self-conceptualisation), and reorganised in terms of structure and policy, (confirming the embrace of populism-as-strategy), Levica's leader's tweets demonstrate how populism has also been incorporated as a political style.

Apasiev had 55 tweets in the period of the electoral campaign. Of these, 20 were retweets, of which 17 retweeted the official Levica party profile. Most of the Levica profile retweets signalled specific policy measures. Beginning with these retweets, which Apasiev handpicked from the Levica program, it can be observed that they are loosely divided in categories. The first category consists of classic left-wing economic measures, such as luxury tax and free healthcare. Another set of policy proposals also followed a socialist logic, yet were construed in the vein of Latin American left populists: retirement age at 60 and six-hour working days. These proposals demonstrate the simplification of complex policies with a left-wing angle, a common populist strategy, further reinforcing the populism-as-strategy approach.

Another set of Levica programme retweets emphasised the strong anti-elitist principles of the party: the abolition of travel expenses for parliamentarians and "clearing up the corrupt prosecutors". In the latter, the notorious ambiguity of populism can be observed, as how the clearing up will be executed is left to the reader's imagination. In addition, it emphasises the moral judgments towards the elite institutions, which are most often articulated by populist political actors through an emphasis on their corruption, in contrast to the purity of the people. In this category can also be placed the proposal to "de-sorosise" the civil sector, signifying a long ambition of putting a dent in the financing of local organisations by international liberal institutions, such as those of philanthropist George Soros (hence the name). Soros has been the target of populists' ire for a long time, and this famously anti-liberal feature of populism is channeled by Apasiev and Levica through their animosity to the liberal 'NGO network'.

The final category (and among the tweets posted in the final part of the campaign) – the flirtation with right-wing issues – is more clearly expressed, through the promises to abolish the "illegal" bilingualism of the state, and limiting the noise from religious institutions. Despite the absence of explicit mentions, both policies effectively target the Albanian Muslim minority, which has become a constant feature of Apasiev's public profile, and the main reason he has been accused of 'fascism' by Socialdemocrat exponents. These undertones are seen in his own tweet from 25 June stating: "*We opened the borders, so that Switzerland can vote - Government of the RNM (Republic of North Macedonia)*". The allusion made by this tweet is that the Covid-19 border closures were

intentionally (and maliciously) lifted to allow Macedonian citizens of Albanian ethnicity residing in Switzerland to return for the elections and vote. Such nationalist dog whistling is a frequent trope of right-wing populists, aimed to capture the imagination of right-leaning voters.

Apasiev's own tweets require hefty contextualisation. He does not engage in generalised, abstract discourses about ideology, visions of social change, or institutional projects. The ideological populism in his tweets is implicit, which is why the dichotomy of the people and the elite (as a common way of quantitatively assessing populist communication) is absent from all his tweets. Instead, in all of them he uses innuendos, clever rhetorical devices, idiosyncratic local expressions and elusive meanings in order to attack his opponents on a specific newsworthy topic of the moment. For example, a short tweet states "*Little Pavle, go SNIFF something. #ShutoEmRogato*". Using a diminutive form to belittle Pavle Bogoevski, a member of parliament from the Socialdemocrats who had previously criticised him on social media, he refers to a drugs scandal in which Bogoevski was allegedly involved. He uses a hashtag understandable to the politically highly sophisticated, which denotes participants in the Colorful Revolution such as the MP in question, labeled "losers" by Prime Minister (and Colorful Revolution leader) Zoran Zaev. The irony of Apasiev's words is self-evident.

It is therefore the style of Apasiev's tweets that attests to this application of the concept by Levica in communication practices. His scorching rhetoric, rejection of political correctness, jargonistic, often vulgar vocabulary and complete disregard of political etiquette is captured in a tweet from 26 June: "*Fucking dimwits, even one KICEEC put you on skates. Both government and opposition*". The term in capitals refers to the nickname of a lawyer in the centre of a corruption case involving many functionaries from both big parties. Apasiev insists on using the language of the common man, and despises the high level discourse of mainstream politicians, successfully presenting himself as a political outsider.

This is a trait which he shares with possibly the most famous populist in modern times, US president Donald Trump. The parallels with the Republican chief of state are evident in a tweet from 6 July: "*The duel with StojanChe, 2.5 times more watched than the duel Zajko vs Zmicko. Solution? #ThankYouToYouToo*". The tweet refers to a TV debate on a popular political show that Apasiev had with a Socialdemocrat politician, as he compares ratings with the duel of the two leaders of the two main parties, Zaev and Hristijan Mickovski. Apart from the Trumpian bragging about TV popularity, Apasiev uses popular derogatory nicknames instead of the names of the leaders, in a similar fashion to how Trump mocks his opponents ("crooked Hillary (Clinton)" or "lying Ted (Cruz)") or terms Beppe Grillo used about Italian establishment politicians.⁴⁰

Finally, Apasiev plays with the conspiratorial ideas, as he tweets on 7 July "*The fact that we are paranoid, doesn't mean they are not FOLLOWING us. #Atlantic*". The tweet comes as a reaction to new speculations on government wiretapping

⁴⁰ Tronconi, Filippo. 2016. *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*. London: Routledge.

and secret service files on political actors. Regardless of the truth of the claims, Apasiev fires up his followers by pointing to shady machinations of a secret service as an evil underground elite, akin to the Deep State Trump often refers to in his discourses.

Conclusion

Apasiev's social media activity, through its performative style, completes the appropriation of populism in all of its conceptualisations by Levica (ideology, strategy, and style). This represents a remarkable consistency, as in general, populist parties and actors are rarely known for picking one or two of these categories. For example, Podemos defines itself as a populist party, but beyond the dichotomy between the people and the caste, in recent times it has hardly used the stylistic elements that populism as a communication theory has systematised. Donald Trump employs the populist style and strategy, but has never accepted the label of populist in an ideological sense, instead sticking to the traditional right-wing worldview. Syriza had the populist mobilisation and policies of the strategy approach, but not the style or self-identification as a populist party.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise, comes closest to Levica and Apasiev, as he admits to adhering to Laclau and Mouffe's concept of left populism, while using the fiery style and structuring his movement on populist principles. Yet, unlike La France Insoumise, Levica has no grassroots social characteristics. Moreover, despite Melenchon's emphasis on left patriotism (which he calls republicanism), he has been careful not to construct horizontal divisions among French citizens based on group characteristics. This is not the case with Apasiev and Levica, who made a point of removing ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia from their vision of 'the people'. The similarities with the Five Star Movement's anti-immigrant positions are uncanny; yet, there is one major difference. The M5S is faithful to its sovereigntist principles, according to which immigrants are considered outsiders and Italian citizens come first.

According to Levica, the Albanians despite being natives in the country, have a similar status to immigrants: they are excluded from the Macedonian people. Such otherisation is grounded in long-standing far-right pseudoscientific narratives which claim Albanians' origins to be outside of Europe, and that they are culturally and civilisationally incompatible with the idea of the Macedonian nation state. While avoiding rendering these views explicit, the social media activity of Apasiev, as well as his declared 'enemies' at the 2019 party congress, indicate that Levica actively seeks to promote them. Due to this, Levica's populism is not inclusive, and therefore left, but valenced, resonating a distinct right-wing flavour, which its critics use to label the party fascist.

This is however a gross misconception. Levica's ideology is still largely far-left, as its policy orientations, however inconsistent, are still rooted in socialist ideals, as demonstrated by the analysis of the party manifesto. The rejection of identity politics, and the insistence on the principle of secularity, often translates into

perceived Islamophobia.⁴¹ However, this does not represent a precedent among some of the Left's many currents. After the splits which removed other leftist influences, the party came to be dominated by ideologues of Maoist and even Stalinist readings of socialism. Many of Levica's most radical left wing programmatic tenets are constructed in this spirit, such as revoking the recognition of the states of Israel and South Korea. Indeed, the left-wing brand of Levica is based on anti-imperialism and puts a disproportionate amount of focus on international affairs and geopolitics, seemingly often dabbling in authoritarianism.⁴² This is a major challenge for further research on the party, as authoritarianism is beyond the conceptual scope of this study, firmly situated in the scholarship of populism. However, Levica's authoritarian swerve, as demonstrated by the anti-Soros rhetoric and the strongman leadership of Apasiev, deserves more scholarly attention, especially if the party finds itself in power in the future, which given its current trajectory is certainly a possibility.

What can be contested from a theoretical point of view is Levica's branding as a left populist party. As argued and shown with examples, from a populism-as-ideology perspective Levica can be classified as a valenced/polyvalent populist party, and if it exhibits any tendency according to the ideological-populist spectrum, it is skewed towards populism of a right-wing nature. Moreover, it has also abandoned its grassroots origins in favour of a highly closed hierarchy, breaking with the populist left tradition. Finally, its defined enemy is not the oligarchy, but very specific elements of Macedonian society, evoking the 'new politics' paradigm, where anti-liberal and anti-globalist tendencies erode progressive positions. In this perspective, the far left converges with the far right (the infamous horseshoe theory).⁴³

Yet, the practical application of the other conceptualisations of populism dilutes even the conclusion that Levica is not 'left-populist', as populism in Levica's case is orthogonal based on these conceptualisations. The case of Levica hence remains a very curious iteration of populist parties, determined by a complex national political context, set to undergo further shocks in the future. Both this context and Levica should be closely followed by scholars, as the novelty afforded by the party in the study of populism is likely to grow in the future along with its power.

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⁴¹ Musliu, Afrodita. 2020. COVID-19 has Worsened Hate Speech in North Macedonia, *Balkan Insight*, 3 August 2020 (accessed: 14 August 2020).

⁴² In fact, members of the closest circle around Apasiev have informally suggested that the demonstrated anti-Albanianism stems from a common conspiracy theory that the Greater Albania project (which includes Macedonian territory) is promoted by the CIA and American imperialist interests in the region.

⁴³ Tkachenko, Kyrilo. 2018. How Right is the Left? *Eurozine*, 15 May 2018 (accessed: 14 August 2020)

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