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Research Article

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When is Populism Acceptable? The Involvement of Intellectuals in the Bulgarian Summer Protests in 2013

Georgi Medarov*

Populism is frequently understood as *democratic illiberalism*. Concrete policies that have been implemented by governing populist parties in Bulgaria, however, have been surprisingly liberal, at least in economic terms. This poses the question whether it is possible to have the opposite of *democratic illiberalism*, namely, *liberal populism*. This article investigates the *elective affinities* between liberal and populist discourses during the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013. This investigation is done with a strong focus on intellectuals' interpretations as their function is not merely reflective description, but is also formative and prescriptive of political identities. The main argument is that throughout the 2013 Summer protests there was visible tendency of articulation between populist and liberal discourses. They were populist both in the sense of “soft” populism, that is compatible with liberalism, as well as “exclusionary” of ethnic minorities and socially marginalized groups. The Summer protests constructed an identity of a minoritarian *subaltern elite*, united by its opposition to figures of *oligarchic elites*, *ethnic minorities* and *illiberal majorities*.

Keywords: populism, protests, Bulgaria, liberalism

Introduction

Political scientists often discuss the tensions between democratic national sovereignty, embedded in a notion of “the people”, on the one hand, and liberal constitutionalism, protecting individual rights, on the other. Starting from this supposition, Ivan Krastev¹ associates populism with “democratic illiberalism.” The latter is not a desire to abolish democracy, but rather to radicalize it, disregarding liberal human rights, the rule of law and constitutionalism.

My main point of interest is whether, along with what Krastev called “democratic illiberalism”, the opposite articulation is possible: *liberal populism*. In particular, I will investigate the relationship between liberal anti-populist experts and populist discourses in the *case of the Bulgarian protests from 2013*. I argue that the complex interrelation between liberalism and populism must be sought in two directions:

Firstly, the figure of “populism” must be constantly reproduced in order for the liberal political identity to maintain its internal coherence via the construction of an *efficient enemy* (a *constitutive outside*). As spectral as it may be, this enemy is needed in order to maintain the course of the liberal reforms in a post-political, consensus-based context. *Secondly*, liberalism, in certain situations, can be articulated within wider *chains of equivalence* along with

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¹ Krastev, Ivan. 2007. The Populist Moment. *Critique & Humanism* 23, 103-8.

political rationalities that could be dubbed as “populist” in the sense of their *formal rhetorical characteristics*. As I will show, liberal experts sometimes make the distinction between “soft” and “hard” populism.² “Soft” populism, from the perspective of liberal political activism, could be an acceptable instrument for restoring trust and furthering the consolidation of liberal regimes. In some situations, at the same time, as in the case of the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013, liberalism might be articulated alongside populist discourses that are highly exclusive.

This second point necessitates an investigation of the specificities of each particular context and the differentiation between “soft” (compatible with liberalism) and “hard” (anti-liberal) populism, and that between “inclusionary” (“left-wing”) and “exclusionary” (“right-wing”) populism (Kaltwasser and Mudde).³ As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis show, the distinction between “exclusionary” and “inclusionary” populism should not be made solely on a geographical basis (inclusionary in Latin America, exclusionary in Europe), but ought to be based on a detailed analysis of each case, enabled by the application of a *rigorous theory of populism*.⁴ In the case of the Bulgarian 2013 Summer Protests, as I will demonstrate, articulation between “soft”, in the sense of acceptable from a liberal perspective, and right-wing exclusionary populism is also possible.

Populism, as has often been noted, is an elusive concept. Cas Mudde defines populism as a “thin-centred ideology”, considering society as being separated into two opposing camps - “the people” versus “the elite”. Due to its minimalist form, Mudde argues, populism can be “easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies”.⁵ Margaret Canovan proposes a “structural” approach, defining populism as “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society”.⁶ As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis argue, such minimalist interpretation has been made most forcefully in Laclau’s approach that understands populism as “a political/discursive logic that considers society ultimately separated between two groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite.’”⁷

Ernesto Laclau's theory is part of the Essex discursive approach to the formation of political identities.⁸ He conceptualizes political identification as an

² Smilov, Daniel and Ivan Krastev. 2008. *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper*, in *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Mesežnikov, Grigorij / Gyárfášová, Olga and Daniel Smilov. Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, 13-36.

³ Mudde, Cas and C. Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 147-74.

⁴ Stavrakakis, Yannis and G. Katsambekis. 2014. Left-Wing populism in the European Periphery: the Case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19(2), 119-42.

⁵ Mudde, Cas. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4), 541-63.

⁶ Canovan, Margaret. 1999. Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies*, XLVII, 2-16.

⁷ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, *Left-wing populism in the European periphery*.

⁸ Howarth, David / Norval, Aletta and Yannis Stavrakakis. (eds.). 2000. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Howarth, David and Jacob Torfing. (eds.). 2005. *Discourse Theory in European Politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave; Mouffe, Chantal. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso; Mouffe, Chantal. 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso; Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso; Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985.

articulation of differential *demands* into a *chain of equivalence*. The chain is itself chained to a master demand (or an *empty signifier*) which is concrete but simultaneously open enough that it can serve as a general demand within which different, more specific, demands may recognize themselves. The empty signifier marks the limits of the political subject by pointing towards a shared *external enemy* which is *negatively constituting the political subject by lending homogenizing negative unity from outside to otherwise internal heterogeneities*.

The analytical tools of the Essex school have one key advantage. The fact that it is a purely formal approach allows researchers to understand political identities not as a pre-given metaphysical essence without history, but as a contextual heterogeneous patchwork, configured, sometimes out of incommensurable parts, in political practice. This will allow me to go beyond a certain impasse in the literature on populism that tends to see it as inherently majoritarian and thus opposed to constitutionalism. The signifier “people”, however, does not have a substance, its content is contested and redrawn in practice. This formalist perspective will allow me to analyse the affinities between liberalism and populism in the involvement of intellectuals in the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013. I also rely on a critical interpretation of the work of two of the most prominent Bulgarian liberal experts on populism – Ivan Krastev and Daniel Smilov. Firstly, because of the strength and clarity of their approaches, which are compatible with Laclau's framework; secondly, due to their support for the Bulgarian Summer protests in 2013.

At the end of 2013, students occupied the main building of Sofia University for two months. The occupation triggered a wave of occupations at other universities throughout Bulgaria. Students called for a new political order “in the interest of the people” against “the self-referential elite”.⁹ They rejected all political parties and prided themselves on their horizontal organization. Ivaylo Dinev, the charismatic leader of the occupation, was inspired by radical left thinkers such as Yasuo Kobayashi, who was in Sofia at the time and met with the students.¹⁰ Dinev published a book, where he describes the occupation as “a student republic”, an “Event” (in the sense of Alain Badiou) against the “corrupt elite”.¹¹ In his publications Dinev insisted that the occupation was part of what he sees as global protest against neo-liberal capitalism.¹²

During the occupation the students invited their professors for solidarity teach-ins. One of the first to answer the call was Daniel Smilov. Smilov spoke about populism, which he defined as a “minimalist ideology”, posing a Manichean distinction between “the people” and “the corrupt elite”. The second feature of populism, Smilov argued, is “organizational simplicity”, lack of formal structures, rejection of parties, and horizontalism. He said his topic of choice

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. London: Verso; Laclau, Ernesto. (ed.). 1994. *The Making of the Political Identities*. London: Verso; Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *The Populist Reason*. London: Verso; Panizza, Francisco. 2005. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso.

⁹ Ranobudnite Studenti. 2013. *Declaration*. (accessed: 10. May 2015).

¹⁰ Yasuo Kobayashi. 2013. *Visiting #occupySU #occupy272*. *Youtube*, 02. November 2013 (accessed: 02. June 2016).

¹¹ Dinev, Ivaylo. 2014. *Nash red e*. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad.

¹² This trend could be observed in *dVersia*, a new magazine co-edited by Ivaylo Dinev, the first issue of which was entitled *The Battles Against Austerity* and was published on the 9th of May 2015, available [here](#).

might be seen as “a bit abstract”, but it is “key to know the general framework” of the “concrete problems” and hence unravel what he called the “essential challenge ... we are facing”, namely populism.¹³

What are the tactical considerations and theoretical presuppositions enabling a mainstream anti-populist expert to recognize a horizontalist movement which opposes “corrupt elites”, calls for “moralization” of politics in “the interest of the people” and defies all political parties - in other words, a movement bearing such a stark resemblance with the *formal* characteristics of Smilov’s very own definition of populism - as an ally against populism? What enables the articulation between liberal anti-populist expertise and political populism?

In order to elaborate my thesis, I will first juxtapose the Bulgarian 2013 protests with contemporaneous global protests. Ivan Krastev associates both the rise of populism and the shift “from politics to protest” with the crisis of political representation. But despite the fact that the Bulgarian protests could be put into the wider frame of post-politics, this understanding alone cannot explain the peculiar entanglement between liberal and populist discourses. What is needed is a deeper investigation of the various conflicting discourses within the Bulgarian protest movements, their reliance on populist discourses, and the way liberal intellectuals interpreted, reacted to, and shaped those movements. In the last section, I pay particular attention to Smilov’s understanding of populism, as well as to its embeddedness in his political activism.

The global protests, populism and the post-political condition

In the past few years, mass protests have shaken countries as diverse as Israel, Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, the US, Bosnia, Spain, Macedonia, Thailand, Venezuela, Russia, Greece and Brazil, to list a few. Many tried to find a common logic within these diverse social eruptions. New technologies, social media, austerity, the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism and representative democracy, social inequalities and the rise of a new middle class have been among the most frequently mentioned factors.

What intellectuals find as homogeneous in such heterogeneous movements and contexts tends to reflect their political position. Is it capitalism or its *crony* worldly forms? Is it representative democracy or solely the mainstream parties? Is it corruption and lack of transparency or inequalities and austerity? Answering those questions has political effects as it *constitutes peculiar political subjectivities and prescribes courses of action*. The latter may span from calls for more transparency to revolutionary manifestos. By trying to define the recent protest waves, intellectuals construct the object of their interest; they *assemble* a unified identity out of incommensurable practices, ideologies, contexts, and social groups.

¹³ Smilov, Daniel. 2013. *Vazhna e Ironiyata, za da ni Distantsira ot Zloto*. *Dnevnik*, 25. October 2013 (accessed: 10. May 2015).

The BBC journalist Paul Mason, for example, finds a number of shared factors behind the new protest wave, among which he lists innovation in telecommunications, discontent with austerity, mobilization of large parts of excluded and marginalized populations against police brutality and the inability to cover basic needs.¹⁴ In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Francis Fukuyama wrote that “the rise of a new global middle class” leads to the new protest movements. He claims that since the middle class are “the ones who pay taxes, they have a direct interest in making government accountable.”¹⁵ Richard Seymour, in an article for the *Guardian*, attacked Fukuyama and asserted that “the working class” also plays a leading role. According to Seymour, “[e]ven in Bulgaria’s complex uprising against austerity, privatization and corruption, the threat of labour action makes a difference.”¹⁶

Radical left intellectuals like David Graeber, Naomi Klein and Slavoj Žižek perceive the movements as an ally against neo-liberal capitalism, inequality and representative democracy. Conservatives and liberals, on the other hand, are more prone to identify “[m]iddle-class people [who] want not just security for their families but choices and opportunities for themselves”, as Francis Fukuyama stated.

Ivan Krastev explains the shift from electoral politics to street protests by asserting that “voters no longer see elections as vehicles for mandating change, and governments no longer see them as effective sources of the ability to govern.”¹⁷ For Krastev “elections are machines for the production of collective dreams.”¹⁸ To be able to “capture popular imagination” elections need to produce a *sense* of high stakes. Nevertheless, Krastev explains, those stakes should not be *too* high.¹⁹ For elections to effectively reproduce liberal regimes, they have to offer a sense of “drama”, to be emotionally engaging, but, at the same time, not to provide potential for a radical change.

Krastev argues that liberal regimes are now over-constitutionalized and “governments are powerless to tame the vagaries of the global market.”²⁰ In his interpretation, the current crisis of representation is due to the fact that voters can change politicians, but cannot change policies. In this post-political situation,²¹ the main political antagonism is not between left and right, but

¹⁴ Mason, Paul. 2013. *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*. London: Verso.

¹⁵ Fukuyama, Francis. 2013. [The Middle-Class Revolution](#). *The Wall Street Journal*, 28. June 2013 (accessed: 02. June 2016).

¹⁶ Seymour, Richard. 2013. [Workers Play a Big Role in These Global Middle-Class' Revolutions](#). *The Guardian*, 30. July 2013 (accessed: 02. June 2016).

¹⁷ Krastev, Ivan. 2014. From Politics to Protest. *Journal of Democracy* 25(4), 5-19, 12; Krastev, Ivan. 2014. *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹⁸ Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted*, 9.

¹⁹ Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted*.

²⁰ Krastev, Ivan. 2012. A Fraying Union. *Journal of Democracy* 23(4), 23-30, 29.

²¹ In fact, Krastev here is close with the critical interpretations of the shift towards post-democracy (Colin Crouch), the transition to technocratic, post-adversarial consensus-based politics (Chantal Mouffe), the rise of populism (Ernesto Laclau), and the concomitant liberal-elitist (“anti-populist”) fears of democracy (Ranciere). Cf. Katsambekis, Giorgos. 2014. The Place of the People in Post-Democracy. Researching Antipopulism and Post-Democracy in Crisis-Ridden Greece. *Postdata* 19(2).

between “the bottom and the top”.²² According to Krastev, this post-political situation is also connected with the “death of the grand ideological narratives and the hegemony of the ‘third way.’”²³

The post-political situation is a *fertile ground for both protests and for populism*. Krastev holds that populism “is no longer merely a feature of certain parties or other political actors”, but “the new condition of the political in Europe”, where political conflict is displaced towards “a clash” between “elites that are becoming ever more suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming ever more hostile to liberalism.”²⁴ According to Krastev, the “tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism”²⁵ are not an aberration, but “lie at the very heart of democratic politics”, thus there is a need “for a return to politics.”²⁶

Populism, however, does not have an autonomous discourse, but, according to Krastev, has to be understood as popular democratic appropriation of liberal signifiers such as anti-corruption and transparency. Constant accusations of corruption give the impression that the entire political elite is corrupt.²⁷ The unconditional trust in transparency can be transformed into a conspiracy theory, as Krastev argues²⁸ - nothing could be more suspicious than the promise of an unconditional transparency.

Soft and hard populism

Krastev warns against the dangers of anti-populism by arguing that populism might be an effective tool for restoring trust in liberal democratic institutions.²⁹ In his argument Bulgaria offers a positive example. When the exiled heir of the Bulgarian monarchy, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, won the elections in 2001 with his National Movement Simeon II (*Nacionalno Dvizhenie Simeon Vtori*, NMSII) on a populist mandate, according to Krastev, he “contributed to the success of the reform process and to the consolidation of Bulgarian democracy.”³⁰ In other words, populism might contribute to entrenching the course of liberal reforms. Here populism becomes a question of political tactics. The crucial distinction here is the one between acceptable and unacceptable populism from a liberal perspective.

In a common policy paper, Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev distinguish between “soft” (compatible with liberal reforms) and “hard” (anti-liberal)

²² Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*, 14.

²³ Krastev, Ivan. 2007. The Strange Death of Liberal Consensus. *Journal of Democracy* 18(4), 56-63, 62.

²⁴ Krastev, *The Strange Death of Liberal Consensus*, 63.

²⁵ Krastev, Ivan. 2010. Deepening Dissatisfaction. *Journal of Democracy* 21(1), 113-19, 118.

²⁶ Krastev, Ivan. 2002. The Balkans: Democracy Without Choices. *Journal of Democracy* 13(3), 39-53.

²⁷ Krastev, Ivan. 2006. *Intervyu s Ivan Krastev: Udarzhimiyat Vazhod na Novia Populizam. Politiki*, n.d. (accessed: 02. June 2016).

²⁸ Krastev, Ivan. 2013. *In Mistrust We Trust. Can Democracy Survive When We Don't Trust Our Leaders?* New York: TED Books.

²⁹ Krastev, *Deepening Dissatisfaction*, 118.

³⁰ Krastev, Ivan. 2008. *Two Cheers for Populism*. *Prospect*, 20. January 2008 (accessed: 02. June 2016).

populism.³¹ According to them, populism does not have to be seen as a “leftist revolt of the masses”, because “most of the populist parties are *de facto* neoliberal in economic terms.”³² Krastev and Smilov give the examples of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za Evropejsko Razvitie na Bulgaria*, GERB), currently the main center-right party in Bulgaria, and NMSII. They hold that populists’ calls for redistribution “usually mean that *certain* corrupt elites should be punished.”³³ That is to say this “redistribution”:

*“is translated not in economic policies but in “anticorruption” measures. There is no vision of different (say, social democratic) economic politics espoused by populists. In this sense, rather paradoxically, populism in Eastern Europe is anti-egalitarian and meritocratic: no surprise then that a former tsar was one of the first leaders of a populist force in the region. Central European populism is a longing for new elites.”*³⁴

The adoption of political tactics based on the distinction between “soft” and “hard” populism might prove tricky due to the ambiguity of the notion of “corruption”. As Ivan Krastev explains in an interview, accepting “the [populist] perspective of your adversary means you have already lost.”³⁵ In the same interview he explains that:

*“For liberals corruption was a result from too big government and they called for rapid privatization and a small government. For the majority the problem was with the unrestrained powers of the market. [...] For liberals the struggle against corruption was a chance to legitimate capitalism. But the conspiratorially-minded majority saw in the struggle against corruption a chance to denounce capitalism without risking to be accused of communism and other infectious diseases. The anti-corruption imagination of the society expressed its dialectics. [...] Liberals fell in their own trap.”*³⁶

“Corruption” does not possess internal meaning: it is anchored only in political struggle. If populism, along with its anti-corruption rhetoric, becomes an unavoidable characteristic of national politics, then, from the perspective of liberal political activism, one has to adapt to the new situation. Therefore the ability to distinguish between “soft”, acceptable from a liberal perspective, and “hard” populism becomes decisive for the effective management of discontent. As I will show in the discussion on the Bulgarian 2013 Summer protests, such “soft” populism may be compatible with liberal reforms, but it can be exclusionary, at the same time.

Protests and (“soft”) populism might both be an instrument for the consolidation of liberalism. The transition from politics to protest, Krastev argues, does not offer an alternative to liberal capitalism. He writes “protests are revolts against the elites, but the protesters [...] leave it to those same elites

³¹ Smilnov and Krastev, *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe*.

³² Smilnov and Krastev, *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe*.

³³ Smilnov and Krastev, *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe* [italic mine].

³⁴ Smilnov and Krastev, *The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe*.

³⁵ Krastev, *Intervyu s Ivan Krastev*.

³⁶ Krastev, *Intervyu s Ivan Krastev*.

to decide what will happen next.”³⁷ Protesters are “rebels without a cause” who need someone to represent them.³⁸ Krastev asserts protests, similar to elections, “serve to keep revolution, with its message of a radically different future, at an unbridgeable distance.”³⁹

If protests, as well as other democratic mechanisms like elections, are reduced to mere tools for the reproduction of liberalism, what remains beyond our perspective are both the specificities of each articulation between populist discourses and protest mobilizations, and the radically different outcomes. In Bulgaria the 2014 post-protest caretaker government was headed by Georgi Bliznashki - one of the leading activist intellectuals. After the elections, a broad coalition was formed between the extreme right (Patriotic Front - *Patriotichen Front*, PF), the liberals and the conservatives (Reform Bloc - *Reformatorski Blok*, RB), the center-right (GERB) and a smaller center-left party (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival - *Alternativa za Bulgarsko Vazrazhdane*, ABV).

Bulgarian Summer Protests

In 2013, Bulgaria fell into a deep political crisis. Mass protests against the so-called “stability” regime (the deficit had been cut from 4% in 2010 to 1% in 2012) toppled the center-right government in February 2013. The movement was triggered by electricity price hikes, and it protested against foreign-owned privatized electricity distribution companies. According to a 2013 EU report, 85% of households’ income goes for basic necessities such as utilities.⁴⁰ The protest movement was not limited to Sofia, but spread throughout Bulgaria, most importantly to Varna. During the protests a wave of public self-immolations started,⁴¹ which continued into 2015.⁴² Plamen Goranov,⁴³ who died as a result of a protest self-immolation, became among the most recognized faces of the movement.⁴⁴ The February protesters soon abandoned their initial economic demands and called for the abolition of political representation and political parties, organized “citizen assemblies”, prided themselves for their “internet-like” structures, and initiated grassroots constitution drafting.

Government officials and liberal political commentators sounded the alarm that the movement constituted a “populist danger” to democracy. The Wall Street Journal wrote that:

³⁷ Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*, 17.

³⁸ Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*.

³⁹ Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*.

⁴⁰ European Commission. 2013. EU Employment and Social Statistics, Quarterly Review. *EU*, March 2013 (accessed: 02. June 2016).

⁴¹ Tsoneva, Jana. 2013. Bulgarians in Flames: on the Current Wave of Self-Immolation. *Lefteast*, 27. March 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁴² N.N. 2015. Mazh se Samozapali i Pochina v Lyulin. *BTV*, 11. April 2015 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁴³ Siderov, Yavor. 2013. What a Terrible Time for Europe to Show Bulgaria the Cold Shoulder. *The Guardian*, 06. March 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁴⁴ Andre Andreev and Martin Marinos created a short documentary film about the life of Plamen Goranov. The film is titled “Plamen”.

“ ... the departure of Mr. Djankov [the financial minister of the center-right government that collapsed in February because after the protests], the government’s most high-profile technocrat, likely foreshadows a shift toward more-populist economic policies ahead of national elections set for July, analysts said.”

“Djankov was the figure who symbolized fiscal and financial discipline. The whole economic policy was based on these priorities,” said Daniel Smilov.”⁴⁵

What such positions fail to take note of is how the February protesters took advantage of key liberal signifiers (“anti-corruption”, “anti-monopoly”, “civil society”) to form *popular chains of equivalence*. Liberal signifiers are not the privileged object of elites, but disperse and lend themselves to popular appropriations. For instance, the liberal understanding of corruption could be appropriated in an anti-liberal political identity formation to argue that liberal democracy itself is “corrupt”. In February 2013 these appropriations resulted in marches for the nationalization of energy providers under the banners of opposition to monopoly, transparency, the free market and anti-corruption. Protesters hijacked the chief signifiers of “the Transition from Totalitarianism to Democracy”, using them against their former users - the political elite, technocrats and NGO experts. What was challenged was not liberal empty signifiers, but their representatives. In this *presentist movement*,⁴⁶ signifiers such as “civil society” and “the people” were mobilized as a weapon against political mediation (parties), economic mediation (electricity distribution companies), and civil society mediation (NGOs), and for the formation of a populist political subject calling for “all power to the civil society.”⁴⁷

A new government was formed in May 2013 by the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (*Bulgarska Socialisticheska Partia*, BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Liberties (*Dvizhenie za Prava I Svobodi*, DPS), a nominally liberal party, supported by parts of the Turkish and to some extent by the Roma minority. The new self-proclaimed technocratic government was also backed by the extreme right Ataka.⁴⁸

Protests erupted again in June, this time over the controversial appointment of a media mogul as the head of national security. The second protest wave was mostly limited to Sofia, but continued for much longer. Even though numbers dwindled in time, the protests were very persistent and the movement continued into 2014. Because the initial eruption was in June, the movement

⁴⁵ Parkinson, Joe. 2013. Protests Pressure Bulgarian Government. *The Wall Street Journal*, 19. February 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁴⁶ In the sense of “presentist democracy”, Lorey, Isabell. 2011. Non-Representationist, Presentist Democracy. *EIPCP*, October 2011 (accessed: 06. June 2016).

⁴⁷ Tsoneva, Jana. 2013. Real Power Directly to the People. *Lefteast*, 7. March 2013 (accessed 03. June 2016).

⁴⁸ Ataka’s discourse is also fruitful for the investigation of the affinities between liberalism and populism. It supported the pro-austerity GERB government in 2009, and its rhetoric fuses neoliberal and far-right exclusionary elements. Cf. Marinos, Martin. 2015. Anti-Neoliberal Neoliberalism: Post-Socialism and Bulgaria’s “Ataka” Party. *Journal for Global Sustainable Information Society* 13(2), 274-97; Novaković, Igor. 2010. “European” And “Extreme” Populists in the Same Row. *Western Balkans Security Observer* 17, 63-76.

came to be known as the Summer protests, as opposed to the Winter (February) ones.

Some of the most vocal Summer protesters were liberal activists and intellectuals who had used to support the United Democratic Forces, a wide anti-communist coalition from the 1990s that formed a government between 1997 and 2001, but since then has collapsed into smaller parties. There were calls for “European values”, “morality in politics” and a “genuine break” with the Communist past. Some protesters tried to revive 1990s anti-communism, however, this time imbued with new meanings.⁴⁹ The 1990s anti-communism was an anti-elitist project, attacking the privileges of the old regime (with clearly populist slogans such as “power to the people” and “down with the red bourgeoisie”). The new anti-communism was explicitly exclusionary and directed against the figure of the undifferentiated masses. Protesters deployed language that cast them as “the quality” against “the quantity” (of apathetic non-supporters of the protests), the “GDP generators” against the “parasites on welfare”, creators of value versus the faceless crowd, etc.

The political subject of the Summer protests, in other words, was a kind of a *subaltern elite*, imagined as being subjected to a *double oppression* - by the masses and by the oligarchs. I would like to stress that I do not take those discourses as depicting pre-existing social reality, but as constitutive of this very reality. Categories such as “middle class” do not have a pre-given substance, but are performatively created, thus include/exclude a wide range of social positions.⁵⁰

The Summer protests did not question budget cuts, but asked for more austerity and called the government “populist” for its promises to relax austerity.⁵¹ For example, in the first press briefing organized by the “antigovernment press agency” Noresharski, Georgi Ganev was invited to critique the governmental promises to relax fiscal discipline.⁵² Ganev is an economic expert, working for the Center for Liberal Strategies, who is known for his firm “low taxes - low public spending” positions. Fiscal discipline alone, however, was not the sole reason protesters stood for austerity. For instance, in one of the protesters’ call outs,⁵³ published by Noresharski, we read that there is “a plan of the mafia and various foreign interests to usurp and enslave Bulgaria”, because of increased budget spending and alleged future tax increases. Furthermore, according to the same call out, “all patriotic forces should unite”, because the Movement for Rights and Liberties is not part of the “Bulgarian society”, as it is supported by “mostly Turks, Gypsies and fake votes from polling stations in Turkey.”

⁴⁹ Tsoneva, Jana. 2014. Communism is Wrong. *Crisis and Critique* 1(1), 238-62.

⁵⁰ For such an interpretation of the “middle class” in the Summer protests in 2013 in Bulgaria see Nikolova, Madlen. 2014. The ‘Creative Class’ and the Reproduction of the Neoliberal Ideology in Bulgaria. *Youtube*, 07. May 2014 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵¹ Importantly, the government did not initiate any serious policy reforms that would challenge austerity (e.g. progressive tax reform, expansion of welfare or to question the currency board). Instead the new government pushed for further privatization of public services.

⁵² N. N. 2013. Georgi Ganev: Ne e neobhodima promyana v byudzheta, 400 mln. leva mogat da badat otradnati. *Noresharski*, 22. July 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵³ Paunov, Vesko. 2013. Kakav e Planat “Oresharski”. *Noresharski*, 15. November 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

Protesters self-identified explicitly in opposition to the “losers of transition”, claiming that they “march for moral values, not for welfare”. They were not simply pro-EU, but even asked “Europe” to “save us” from “our politicians”. Demands were not about “illiberal democratic” sovereignty, but rather for “rule of law”, “honest technocrats” and rigorous application of EU regulations. At the same time protesters excluded disagreement with their aims as supposedly not coming from the “Bulgarian people” and used extreme antagonistic terms to depict their opponents, presenting them as “paid provocateurs”, “foreign spies”, “immoral homosexuals” or “ungrateful ethnic minorities.”⁵⁴

We could label the movement “populist”, due to its *formal* rhetorical characteristics, namely based on a “discursive logic that considers society ultimately separated between two groups, “the people” and “the elite”, as in Laclau’s approach. This populism could be dubbed as “soft” - compatible with liberal reforms and austerity. Its use of “the people”, however, was explicitly *exclusionary* and directed against “the poor”, the “lower classes”. Thus, the protests constituted their identity not solely *vis-a-vis* the new ruling coalition and its supporters, but in opposition to the February protesters who were performatively described as “poor”, “uneducated”, “manipulated”, even “ugly”, sometimes with strong racializing language. The efficiency of these categories was facilitated by the fact that pro-BSP activists and intellectuals also used and produced them for opposite ends - to legitimate the government in the name of the “silent majority”. The latter does not mean the government marked a break with austerity, in fact, it continued to present itself within the post-political frame of liberal technocratic governance.⁵⁵

Even though both February and Summer protests used key liberal signifiers to articulate a wide popular subject (e.g. “civil society” or the “people” against the “corrupt elites”) and in that sense could be dubbed “populist” on that very *formal* level, there are key differences. The February protests articulated a radical call for *inclusionary and total politicization of all aspects of social life* (from nationalization of private companies to abolishing party and expert mediation of political life). The Summer protests demanded exactly the opposite: their call against corruption started as indignation at the “excessive” politicization of the economy by political elites, the lack of “rule of law” and of clear distinctions between economic and political power. More importantly, the Summer protests did not question expert production and distribution of governmental knowledge. They were explicitly supported by private and public research institutes, universities, but also by private industrial chambers. What they questioned was the so-called *zadkulisie* (literally “the thing behind the curtain”), a notion capturing the perceived and actual entanglement of political and economic powers, cast in the conspiracy frame of a shadowy elite trying to derail the country from its European path. The conspiratorial frame was also used by supporters of the BSP-DPS government, but for opposite ends. The supporters of the government projected the conspiratorial frame onto the

⁵⁴ Dawson, James. 2013. *An Inconvenient Challenge for Bulgarian Civil Society*. UCL, August 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵⁵ I take advantage of the detailed research of the role of intellectuals in identity formation during those protests undertaken by Nikolova, Madlen. 2014. *Sotsiyalna Kritika i Refleksivnost: Protestnite Mobilizatsii ot 2013 g. v Bulgaria*. BA-thesis. Sofia: University St. Kliment Ohridski.

protesters, presenting them as paid and manipulated, sometimes with strong anti-American and even anti-Semitic undertones.

The renowned Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov wrote that the Summer protesters were “beautiful” and “able”, working and paying their bills, and opposed them to the February protests.⁵⁶ Nikolai Staikov, a journalist and an entrepreneur, wrote that he refused to see protesters as average, but as “normal and independent people, who can earn a living without the state, but the state can hardly survive without them.”⁵⁷ Similar discourses were distributed in mainstream liberal media, such as *Dnevnik* and *Capital*, from the first days of the protests. The genealogy of those discourses can be traced to reflections on the February protests that were already taking place at that time. Some intellectuals have talked about “a mongoloid horde, which knows only how to plunder, but can neither sow, nor plow”, and thus “takes us back to the cave.”⁵⁸

Tsvetozar Tomov, a Bulgarian sociologist who supported the protests, claimed there was a clash between two camps: between those who defend “development” and those who stand for “backwardness”. All political parties, according to him, are “mutants of the ex-communist party”, “blocking the possibility of a normally functioning democratic political system”. We are in a “cold civil war, which may become warm”. The first camp is pro-European, the second - “nostalgic”. The first wants the state not to interfere with their “economic entrepreneurship” and stands for “prosperity”. The second camp, Tomov says, desires the state to “guarantee their existence, to give them security, order, peace, bread”. Tomov associates the first camp with liberalism and the second with social democracy. He claims liberalism “is not a universal principle”, but it is a required condition for the “normalization” of the state, because currently “it is a total mutant”. In other words, Tomov manages to hold together an antagonistic view of society, separated into two opposing camps, with a liberal political stance. Liberalism, however, here is not a form of administrative governance of difference, but a side in a “cold civil war.”⁵⁹ Georgi Ganev, had similar interpretations. For him the 2013 Summer protest was a conflict between two camps. On the one hand, the unproductive oligarchy, which provides welfare for the poor (“proletarians” in Ganev’s terms) and the poor, who provide votes. On the other side is the rise of the productive “bourgeoisie”, in his terms, which is rising to break the oligarchic-proletarian alliance.

The idea of the illegitimacy of the exchange between welfare, provided by elites, and majoritarian-democratic support by citizens, is illustrative of the tensions between liberalism and democracy in the exclusionary populist discourses of the Bulgarian Summer protests. Regardless of the radically antagonistic way of framing political identities, this position remains

⁵⁶ Gospodinov, Georgi. 2013. *Protestirashitvat Chovek e Krasiv*. *Dnevnik*, 18. June 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵⁷ Staikov, Nikolay. 2013. *Protest na Znaeshtite, Mozheshtite i Raboteshtite*. *Capital*, 17. June 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵⁸ Dobchev, Ivan. 2013. *Zhiveem vav Vremena na Permanenten Festival na Samodeynostta*. *Kultura*, 08. March 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁵⁹ Tomov, Tsvetozar. 2013. *Veche Sme v Studena Grazhdanska Voyna*. *Kultura*, 26. November 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

suspicious of democracy, but not of liberalism. These discourses might be interpreted as what Daniel Smilov calls “soft” populism, but are at the same time *exclusionary* and *anti-democratic*.

A sociological study of the attitudes towards democracy and representation among mid-level party activists conducted in Bulgaria in 2013 demonstrates a similar trend. Most mid-level party activists interviewed express strong doubts regarding universal suffrage and some even ponder on the possibilities of its limitation. A party activist from the Reform Bloc (RB), suggests that “decisions do not have to be popular, but correct”. Another activist from the same party declares his sympathy with the British Empire, because at its peak, according to him, “suffrage was limited to those who pay taxes and have property.”⁶⁰

The positions of the RB activists are fundamental, because theirs is a coalition formed from liberal, conservative and center-right parties as a response to the protests. More importantly, the RB was supported by a number of liberal intellectuals. Ivan Krastev, for example, said RB is the “natural political representation of the protest.”⁶¹ I am not suggesting *all* liberal RB supporters express exclusionary attitudes. There were vocal critiques of those attitudes from influential *liberal* intellectuals who supported RB. What I am claiming is that the exclusionary discourses are strongly present both in the party, as well as in the Summer protest movement in general. They enabled the multiple affinities between liberalism and exclusionary populism. Furthermore, these exclusionary discourses cannot be abstracted from the fact that Petar Moskov became the most popular minister in the government elected in 2014. The Health Minister Petar Moskov, part of the Reform Bloc, became famous for his racist slurs. He attempted to limit emergency health-care in poor Roma neighborhoods, called the Bulgarian Roma “animals”, and compared the pro-minority Movement for Rights and Liberties to a “tumor” that “just needs to be cut.”⁶²

It is not possible to dismiss Moskov’s statement as representative of some radical conservative trend that could be clearly differentiated from other liberal and/or center-right positions within the coalition for a number of reasons. Firstly, Moskov was defended by a declaration from RB, in which they wrote that he was “bold enough to speak the truth and to impose order.”⁶³ Secondly, in his Facebook profile, where Moskov originally published the anti-Roma statement, he wrote he is against “political correctness”, claimed the government should treat Bulgarian Roma collectively, as a “population”⁶⁴, and, at the same time, he identified himself as a “liberally-minded person” (*liberalno-nastroen chovek*) and suggested his opponents want “to go directly in

⁶⁰ Hristov, Todor and Deyan Deyanov. 2014. *Nepredstavenite: Nablyudenia varhu vsekidnevieto na predstavitelnata demokratiya*. Sofia: KOI., 23.

⁶¹ Stojnev, Veselin. 2013. (interview with Ivan Krastev) *Partiite vednaga da se dogovorqt za izbori. Trud*, 25. July 2013 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁶² N.N. 2015. *Zdravniyat Ministar: Gledam na Korporatsiyata DPS kato na Tumor. Clubz*, 24. January 2015 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁶³ N.N. 2014. *Moskov ne e ksenofob i fashist, a iska da vadvori red, se kazva v deklaratsiya na Reformatorite. Dnevnik*, 12. December 2014 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁶⁴ In Bulgarian the word population is used only for animals and not for humans.

communism.”⁶⁵ Thirdly, what unites the coalition is the idea that they will be able to secure the liberal course of the reforms (hence the name).

It is important to take into account that the exclusionary populist strand in the RB disillusioned some liberal activists and intellectuals, who asserted the coalition misrepresents the protests. For instance, Emil Cohen, a prominent human rights activist, wrote that Moskov's statement marks a “metamorphosis” in the coalition, marking a shift from its earlier anti-communism into racism and xenophobia that are “bordering on fascism”. In Cohen's argument, RB betrayed the Summer protests, which he defines as a “rebellion of the middle class.”⁶⁶ In an article with the title “Reformers Über Alles”,⁶⁷ Svetla Encheva, another influential human rights activist, expressed similar disappointment with Moskov, whose ideas concerning liberal reforms in healthcare she initially supported. This is, nevertheless, not the position of all liberal activists and intellectuals, and many continued to support the Bloc, such as Georgi Ganev and others who work for the Center for Liberal Strategies and remained in the RB's “citizen council”. This does not mean they share anti-Roma ideas, but that in the protest movement, and its political articulations, there are elective affinities between right-wing exclusionary populist and liberal reformist discourses.

It is also not possible to sustain a clear distinction between a liberal-elitist intellectual's interpretation of the protests and the protesters as such. This is because it is impossible to explain when one stops being an activist and becomes an intellectual. Furthermore, the question is also why protesting citizens recognize themselves in publicly visible representations of the protests (in TV, newspapers, etc.). The distinction between pure protesters and their political and/or intellectual (mis)representation is especially difficult to sustain for a protest movement that was widely supported by activist-intellectuals (think-tank experts and members of “citizen councils” of political parties).

Another illustrative example is Edvin Sugarev, a famous anti-communist dissident and an activist-poet, who went on a hunger strike in solidarity with the Summer protests. After the protests he announced he will form an anti-Roma party, but eventually he supported the coalition that was elected in 2014.

Ivan Krastev shows that, in populist rhetoric, “elites and Roma are twins: neither is like ‘us’; both steal and rob from the honest majority; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners - Brussels in particular.”⁶⁸ In this case he speaks strictly of majoritarian (but exclusionary) anti-liberal populism, however, as I have shown, the discourses of key intellectual-activists were explicitly minoritarian and liberal. Some tended to use elites and ethnic minorities interchangeably, while adopting racist language. The popularity of homophobic, racist and other exclusionary slogans in the Summer protests in Bulgaria led James Dawson to write that “the key

⁶⁵ Moskov, Petar. [Official Facebook profile](#). (accessed: 20. November 2015).

⁶⁶ Cohen, Emil. 2014. [Godinata na velikata metamorfoza](#). *Marginalia*, 18. December 2014 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁶⁷ Encheva, Svetla. 2014. [Reformatori uber alles](#). *Marginalia*, 08. December 2014 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁶⁸ Krastev, *The Populist Moment*.

problem with Bulgarian civic activism is not that liberal ideas are absent, but that they are almost uniformly conflated with illiberal ideas that hinder and are ultimately liable to trump progressive aims.”⁶⁹

When is populism acceptable from a liberal perspective?

Daniel Smilov defines modern liberal democracy as a tension between “constitutionalism and democracy.”⁷⁰ On the one extreme, he claims, is the Rousseauist “general will”, willing to “sacrifice constitutionalism”, and, on the other pole, the Hobbesian “limitation of democracy in defence of certain rights.”⁷¹ “Populism” is understood as “democratic majorities” unwilling to comply with external constitutional limitations.⁷² Smilov also posits “superconstitutionalism” or “deep constitutionalism”⁷³: notions denoting current processes of de-politicization (hence limiting the possibility of democratic control) of more and more social spheres. Smilov includes here what he calls “quasi-constitutionalism,” namely non-formalized and non-legal external and consensus-based (liberal) “informal conventions” limiting democratic governance.⁷⁴ These are effects, he claims, of constitutionalization in Eastern Europe after 1989 having been “too successful”. In the case of Bulgaria Smilov lists the following: EU and NATO membership; the currency board (that pegs BGN to the EUR) and fiscal austerity; the rapprochement of previously opposed political programs in the sphere of economic and social policy; the liberal consensus between all parties; the displacement of political competition into the sphere of identity politics, nationalism and the moral integrity of politicians. All this estranges the voter from the main parties and thus constitutes a populist “situation”. It means that all parties are now exposed to the “threat of populism” and have to be alert and curb it when needed. “Populism” here does not denote a concrete subject, but a spectral enmity, required to maintain the consistency of the identity of mainstream political parties that had succumbed to the liberal consensus. But if all parties are seen as populist, the point is, as I have already explained, to differentiate between “soft” and “hard.”⁷⁵ The “soft” are compatible with liberal reforms, and the “hard” are not.

⁶⁹ Dawson, James. 2014. *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 188.

⁷⁰ Smilov, Daniel. 2012. *The Rule of Law, Constitutionalism, and Democracy: Universal Ideals and Local Pathologies*, in *(Ne)stanaloto Pravovo Obshtestvo v Bulgaria*, edited by Hristov, Ivo. Sofia: CAS. 42-76.

⁷¹ Smilov, *The Rule of Law*.

⁷² In this sense populism is not understood as external to democracy but as its internal pathology, cf. Taggart, Paul. 2002. *Populism and the Pathology of Representative Democracy*, in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Mény, Yves and Y. Surel Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave. 62-100.

⁷³ Smilov, Daniel. 2010. *Bulgaria: The Discontents and Frustrations of a Newly Consolidated Democracy*, in *Democratization and the European Union: Comparing Central and Eastern European Post-communist Countries*, edited by Morlino, L. and W. Sadurski. London: Routledge.

⁷⁴ Smilov, Daniel. 2009. *Constitutionalism, Quasi-Constitutionalism, and Representative Democracy: The Case of Bulgaria*. Paper presented at the Social Foundations of Constitutions Workshop, Oxford, 26. March 2009.

⁷⁵ Smilov, Daniel. 2011. *Rule of Law and the Rise of Populism: A Case Study of Post-Accession Bulgaria*. CAS Working Paper Series No. 4/2011, 44-45.

What this also means is that the occasional references to a formal and discursive definition of populism, such as horizontalism and/or Manichean friend-enemy distinctions (like “the people versus the elite”) give way to more substantial definitions, based on the rejection and/or affirmation of very specific liberal policies such as the currency board (that technically makes Bulgaria part of the eurozone without voting rights), NATO and EU membership, fiscal austerity and so on. In other words, any political movement, disregarding its formal rhetoric (be it populist, technocratic or otherwise), can be integrated within a wider anti-populist *chain of equivalence vis-a-vis* the “dangers to constitutionalism” and “quasi-constitutionalism”. Such a position introduces a strong normative moment in the definition of populism that seems to become much more important than formal characteristics. The formalism of populism is purely a tactical question where content and normative claims are key. As Smilov explains, one can recognize populism in an instant if a political actor proposes raising wages to the average European level, the creation of a million jobs or the restoration of socialist-era industrial powers.⁷⁶

Moreover, even though Smilov argues that “contemporary democracy” has to “balance” between both extremes, his political interventions tend to be on the “constitutionalist” side.⁷⁷ In some cases, Smilov defends “soft” populism, but only if it does not problematize liberal constitutionalism. For example, in an article published before the 2014 National parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, Smilov explains that despite the fact that the center-right GERB is “populist”, and might be dangerous, it is also acceptable.⁷⁸ He defined GERB as a “moderate” populist party because it stood for austerity during its 2009-2013 term in office. Smilov also explained that, along with its “dangers”, populism should not be seen in an exclusively negative light, as it is also “a successful technology for the mobilization of votes and for the organization of a political party”.

Smilov’s aforementioned tactical move towards the student occupation is just the most obvious of a number of such moves made by liberal intellectuals and activists at that time, and cannot be seen as hypocritical and/or as the result of a misunderstanding.⁷⁹ The case is the same as with their activism during the

⁷⁶ N.N. 2014. *Da Kazvash Tova, Koeto Horata Iskat da Chuiat*. *DW*, 22. September 2014 (accessed: 03. June 2016).

⁷⁷ Some examples: Smilov, Daniel. 2006. *Valneniyata na Zubara*. *Dnevnik*, 14. November 2006 (accessed: 03. June 2016); Smilov, Daniel. 2006. *Populiyarno za Populizma*. *Sega*, 22. May 2006 (accessed: 03. June 2016), for a distinction between moderate and “extreme” populism. The former is used only against political opponents and shared by all political parties; the latter is dangerous because it tries to “change the rules of the game”. The example Smilov gives is populism in Latin America. Similar distinctions are made in his academic articles, Smilov, Daniel. 2007. *The Banality and Extremism of Populism: Analysis of Dangers*. *Critique & Humanism* 23, 161-64.

⁷⁸ Smilov, Daniel. 2014. *Populistka partiya li e GERB?* *Clubz*, 29. September 2014 (accessed 03. June 2016).

⁷⁹ By saying all this I do not assert that liberal intellectuals interpellated the student occupation in the symbolic universe of the pre-existing Summer protests I have outlined. Instead, both “sides” were engaged in a struggle over the monopoly of key floating signifiers and the delineation of political lines of conflict, mutually reinforcing each other but sometimes going in different directions. In other words, students inserted themselves within the symbolic order of the Summer protests, for instance, by using their conspiratorial language, but were *not entirely* subjected to it and instead engaged in a symbolic production of their own. This problematic, however, lies outside the scope of the current article.

Summer protests, or with their rapprochement towards “soft” populism. It is entirely consistent with the definition of populism, not so much as “minimalist ideology”, horizontalism, or formal discursive characteristics, such as in Laclau’s approach, or as in any rigorous theory of populism, but as a tactical instrument in a political struggle. The concomitant acceptance of *both* populist and anti-populist discourses becomes intelligible if political discourse is assessed mainly from the perspective of its capacity to reinforce liberal governance. This, as I have explained, may include “soft”, from a liberal perspective, but also exclusionary right-wing populist discourses.

Conclusion

Liberalism and populism in the Bulgarian Summer protests were connected in two ways. *Firstly*, the figure of populism has to be constantly reproduced as a danger to liberalism, in order to stabilize the liberal course of the reforms in a consensus-based post-political conjuncture. *Secondly*, populist political subjectivities, as understood within a formal discursive approach (“the people versus the elites”, etc.), may be articulated within wider liberal *chains of equivalence* in support of the rule of law (against the corrupt elites), technocratic governance (against political parties), and so on. The distinction, from a liberal perspective, between “soft” and “hard” populism here is formative. “Soft”, in the sense of compatible with liberal governance, populism may also be exclusionary, as I have demonstrated. The exclusionary identities (articulated *vis-a-vis* minorities, “the lower classes”, allegedly manipulated by the shadow elite of *Zadkulisie*) cannot be separated from the formation of the current pro-austerity government between the Reform Bloc, the center-right GERB and the far-right Patriotic Front. Otherwise, how would it be possible for Daniel Smilov, after the early elections on the 5th of October 2014, to claim that the “ideologically purest and most feasible option is a coalition government between GERB, the Reform Bloc and the Patriotic Front.”⁸⁰ One of the two parties from the PF called, in their political program, for the internment of the Bulgarian Roma in camps outside cities.

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