



Populism from Below in the Balkans

Introduction

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Introduction: Populism from below in the Balkans

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Introduction

The last several years have witnessed a so-called “political earthquake”¹ of populist successes in consolidated democracies throughout Europe. Populist movements and parties have manifested themselves most markedly through right-wing agendas including opposition to modernization, globalization, regional integration, immigration, appeals to working class fears of social decline, and resentment of elites. Consequently an entire body of literature has examined the basic tenets of populism, populist strategies and rhetoric, determinants of its success, and its effects on people, parties, and politics.² Much of the social research on the issue however, both historical and contemporary, has been excessively focused on populism among elites and institutions. By applying a relatively narrow methodological approach, most of the existing literature is leaving the agency of individuals and social groups and their representation largely unproblematized. In this special edition, we thus attempt to draw attention to an issue generally overlooked by researchers: populism *from below*.³

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¹ Parker, George / Stacey, Kiran / Carnegy, Hugh and James Fontanella-Khan. 2014. Ukip and Front National Lead Populist Earthquake. *Financial Times*, 26. May 2014 (accessed: 23. September 2016).

² Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What is Populism?*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press; Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Müller, Jan-Werner. 2014. The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People: Reflections on Populism. *Constellations* 21(4), 483-93; Gidron, Noam and Bart Bonikowski. 2013. *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*. Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series 13(0004). Cambridge, MA: Weatherhead Center for International Affairs; Canovan, Margaret. 2004. Populism for Political Theorists?. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3), 241-52; Taggart, Paul. 2004. Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3), 269-88.

³ Brubaker, Rogers / Feischmidt, Margit / Fox, Jon and Liana Grancea. 2006. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 13; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 95-113.

The special issue is a selection of research papers presented at the workshop “The Sources of Populism in the Balkans” organized by the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Zagreb in Marija Bistrica, Croatia in late 2014. The rationale of the workshop was to explore the socio-economic concerns of social groups usually associated with populism and extremism. Rather than assuming that these social groups (e.g. “transition losers”, veterans, refugees, the poor and unemployed, etc.) are easily or automatically mobilized to join nationalist groups or support populist parties, it sought to illuminate the fears and grievances of these groups and how they can or do not respond to populist politics. The workshop’s rationale followed the assumption that the “common sense” categories and claims made in the public sphere regarding these aforementioned social groups may not have a strong empirical basis and can be at odds with what researchers actually encounter in the field.

This special issue aims to present some of the workshop’s results and thus seeks to make a contribution by challenging the assumed link between these groups and their representatives (elected or self-appointed, political, activist or scholarly). In the introduction, we set out to revisit the theoretical debates prevalent at the workshop and to offer an empirical outline of the special issue. Below, we first document the rise of populism across Europe and in the Western Balkans in particular. We lay out the basic features of populism, as well as the current state of the literature and most relevant debates. Next, we overview the literature on what are known to be the *sources* of populism, including both theoretical and empirical studies on these sources, and well as the *effects* or “why should we care” about the rise of populist movements. Finally, we lay out the contribution of this special issue and the individual articles, highlighting the need to pay more empirical attention to social groups typically associated with populist movements.

Theoretical approaches towards populism

Defining populism is an almost impossible task. Labeled “easier to recognize than to define”⁴ and “you know it when you see it”,⁵ it has been used in a multitude of ways: as an ideology, pathological form, political movement, discursive style, political strategy, or simply, a way of imagining the world.⁶ As an ideology, it has been defined as “thin-centered”⁷ and as such combinable with other ideologies such as socialism or nationalism,⁸ while dividing society into two groups: the people vs. the elite; whereas politics are expected to be an expression of the will of the people.⁹ As a political strategy, it rests upon the personalistic leader who relies upon and bases his/her rule on a power capability over large numbers of people.¹⁰ As a discursive style, it is unrelated

⁴ Taguieff, Pierre-André. 1995. Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem. *Telos* 103, 9-43, 9.

⁵ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 483.

⁶ See Gidron and Bonikowski, *Varieties of Populism*, 5-14.

⁷ Freedon, Michael. 1998. Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?. *Political Studies* 46(4), 748-65, 750.

⁸ Taguieff, *Political Science Confronts Populism*, 43.

⁹ Mudde, Cass. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4), 541-63, 543-4.

¹⁰ Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics* 34(1), 1-22, 14.

to ideology: a form of political expression, in Kazin's terms, "a language used by those who claim to speak for the majority [...] who work hard and love their country".¹¹ Due to the ambiguity, absence of core values and chameleonic features,¹² it is more helpful to define the distinguishing features or ideal-types of populism or populist politics. Drawing from the vast literature on populism and the various ideal-types proposed by scholars of populism,¹³ we define the following distinguishing features:

1. Animosity towards elites and representative politics; and specifically the relationship and communication between "the elite" and "the people"
2. Idealization of "the people" and an idealized "heartland"
3. Absence of an ideological center and core values; "empty heart"
4. Charismatic leadership combined with demagoguery and opportunism; "cheap talk"
5. A sense of acute crisis or threat to the particular group, or to society in general.

First, populists reject the "cartel-like power of entrenched political elites",¹⁴ those responsible for the status quo – for loss of national sovereignty, the threat of immigrants, slow material benefits of reforms, etc. In particular, political elites are seen as corrupting the link between leaders and supporters, and placing their interests above the interests of the people.¹⁵ In addition to the elite not belonging in this relationship, marginal groups and "undeserving minorities" also do not belong, such as racial minorities and Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁶ The relationship between "the elite" and "the people" is also envisioned differently. Instead of institutions mediating representative democracy through complex processes, or the horizontal guarantees of constitutionalism, populists would have a "direct and unmediated" relationship between the people and the leader, wherein the leader reaches voters directly and provides a perceived way of by-passing non-working intermediary institutions and organizations.¹⁷ This populist incentive to "cut out the middleman" and eliminate the need for parties to act as intermediaries between citizens and politicians has also been called "direct representative democracy",¹⁸ highlighting the critical distinction between "the leader correctly discerns what we think", and not "the leader automatically gets it right because he is like us".¹⁹

¹¹ Kazin, Michael. 1998. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1.

¹² Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 276.

¹³ See Schneider, William. 1994. The New Populism. *Political Psychology* 15(4), 779-84; Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, 543-4; Linden, Ronald. 2008. The New Populism in Central and Southeastern Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism* 55(3), 3-6.

¹⁴ Jones, Erik. 2007. Populism in Europe. *SAIS Review* 27(1), 37-47, 28.

¹⁵ Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, 546.

¹⁶ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 485.

¹⁷ Weyland, Kurt. 1999. Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. *Comparative Politics* 31(4), 379-401, 381; Ropp, Steve C. 2005. *The Strategic Implications of the Rise of Populism in Europe and South America*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

¹⁸ See Urbinati, Nadia. 1998. Democracy and Populism. *Constellations* 5(1), 110-24.

¹⁹ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 486.

Second, the idealized conception of the community populists serve includes two parts: the so-called heartland, and as a derivative consequence of being committed to a heartland, an idealized notion of “the people”. Taggart argues that the heartland is retrospectively constructed from the past: “a past-derived vision projected onto the present as that which has been lost. [...] The essence of the heartland is that it is the good life but that, unlike utopias, it is a life that has already been lived and so shown to be feasible. It assumes or asserts that there was a good life before the corruptions and distortions of the present.”²⁰ As an extension of the heartland, the “people” are seen as pure, authentic, and free of internal conflict.²¹ Though they frequently refer to certain class segment, for instance,²² they do not necessarily refer to any existing group of people; people in the populist propaganda are neither real nor all-inclusive, but are a mythical and constructed sub-set of the population, as with the nation for nationalists.²³ Populists claim to speak in the name of the “oppressed people”; and emancipate them by making them aware of their oppression – people’s common sense (consciousness of the people) is the basis of all good. Within the people, there cannot be a legitimate opposition, as there is only the people and illegitimate intruders; and there is only one proper common good for the authentic people.²⁴

Third, populism lacks a coherent agenda, or core values; the so-called “empty heart” of populism, which are both its weakness and potential ubiquity.²⁵ Because populism is pitted against elites and institutions, and these vary, the nature of populism varies as well; the attributes of the context mirror into the form populism will take. Indeed, this is also why populism can swing ideologically from the left to the right. Populist goals are more procedural and less programmatic: “a change of who is in power, however power is wielded, and for whom”;²⁶ and as such, populist politicians tend to focus attention on concrete issues without worrying about whether they present a coherent program. In this sense, they are moralistic rather than pragmatic.²⁷ Since the emphasis is on some moral common good, which supposedly clearly stems from common sense and thus a clear policy solution, populism is often associated with over-simplification of policy challenges.²⁸

Associated with this chameleonic nature of populism, populist movements typically involve charismatic leadership based on demagoguery, opportunism, and “cheap talk”. This combines two main features: anti-intellectualism: people know what they want better than distant elites; and hyper-personalization of

²⁰ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 274.

²¹ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 485-8.

²² Worsley, Peter. 1993. *Populism*, in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, edited by Krieger, Joel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 730-1.

²³ Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, 546.

²⁴ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 489.

²⁵ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 269-70.

²⁶ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 38.

²⁷ Wiles, Peter. 1969. *A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism*, in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, edited by Ionescu, Ghita and Ernest Gellner. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 166-79, 167.

²⁸ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 486.

the movement through a charismatic leader.²⁹ Leaders rely on the potency of their charisma to secure voters and support, solidifying their positions with basic party elements and clientelism.³⁰ As traditional political parties are absent as an intermediary, they have lower transaction costs for promoting their own interests through electoral and other political means.³¹ The leader then engages in demagoguery, opportunism, and “cheap talk”: opportunistic discourse and policies (like lowering taxes before elections), “highly emotional and simplistic discourse that is directed at the ‘gut feelings’ of the people”, and promises of resolving modern political problems with simple solutions.³²

Finally, there is an explicit need for crisis, rendering populist movements most likely to mobilize in times of rapid social, economic, or cultural change or crisis.³³ The crisis, which usually originates from a sense of moral decay, spreads into a critique of politics, justifying the conversion of ordinary reluctantly-political citizens into politicians as well as allowing populists to inject urgency and importance into their message.³⁴

Identifying the sources of populism

When examining the sources of populism, the proposed explanations are vast, as reviewed below. Conclusions differ on whether the authors see populism as a symptom of problems (such as a declining economic situation, increased immigration, etc.), whether populism is seen as a part of the problem, or as an outcome of a particular political climate.³⁵ The sources of the rise in populism in general are broadly attributed to social inequality and perceived failure of current political administrations in curing the ailments of the country,³⁶ and generally come down to a similar narrative: people are discontent with the current political and economic situation, support and trust in democratic governments, old mainstream parties, and general trust in democratic institutions decreases, leading to a proliferation of smaller parties and open space for new generations of populist politicians.³⁷ However, disentangling all of the sources – the socio-economic context, institutional preconditions, as well as individual predisposition, is a harder task.

Institutionally, opportunities for entrepreneurship in politics are now greater than they were previously and political parties are organizationally weaker and less in control over their electorate: old/traditional political parties no longer seem relevant, civic engagement is lower than in previous decades, and there is less of a cost for voters to change their allegiance from one election to

²⁹ Taguieff, *Political Science Confronts Populism*, 33.

³⁰ Weyland, *Clarifying a Contested Concept*, 14.

³¹ Gurov, Boris and Emilia Zankina. 2013. Populism and the Construction of Political Charisma. *Problems of Post-Communism* 60(1), 3-17, 3.

³² Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, 543.

³³ Minkenberg, Michael. 2002. The Radical Right in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations. *East European Politics and Societies* 16(2), 335-62, 339.

³⁴ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 275.

³⁵ Gurov and Zankina, *Populism and the Construction of Political Charisma*, 3.

³⁶ Bissell, *The Rise of Leftist Populism*, 78.

³⁷ Ropp, *The strategic implications*, 8.

the next, using their vote as a message to the political class as a whole.³⁸ In turn, populists take advantage of this weak attachment to parties and can mobilize voters more easily given the right opportunity. The increased dissatisfaction with politics is amplified by right wing level discourse at the elite level.³⁹

The main question here becomes *why* masses would support populist parties in general, and radical populist parties (RPPs) in particular, and *who* are the people most likely to vote for populist parties? While links have been established between low socio-economic status and support for RPPs, as well as a higher likelihood the voters are male than female, Müller concludes that “there is no clear-cut class or social base for populism”.⁴⁰ Some RPP voters tend to be authoritarian in nature, preferring an ordered society, and in general hold more nativist/exclusive nationalist views.⁴¹ They are generally dissatisfied with politics in general,⁴² strongly Eurosceptic,⁴³ and against immigration and EU integration.⁴⁴ In this sense, the decision to vote for radical populist parties is not simply a “protest vote” – it is based on agreement with the (perceived) politics of the party and represents a rational decision to support a party ideologically close to one’s own viewpoints on politics.⁴⁵

Implicit in our worry about the sources of populism is the assumption that populism is indeed something to worry about. Many recent studies have provided insights on the determinants of success of populist *politicians*, the determinants of success or failure of populist *parties*,⁴⁶ as well as the demonstrated or predicted effect of populist politics on everyday people, on parties, and the polity. Conclusions of these studies have ranged from alarmist warnings that populists threaten a possibility of collapse of European party systems and present a fundamental challenge to European democracy⁴⁷ to less concern given the nature and inherent pitfalls of populist parties.⁴⁸ On the complacency end of the spectrum, studies emphasize the limited potential of

³⁸ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 40-2.

³⁹ Mudde, Cass. 2013. Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties in Western Europe: So What? *European Journal of Political Research* 52, 1-19.

⁴⁰ Müller, *The People Must Be Extracted*, 485.

⁴¹ Van der Brug, Wouter / Fennema, Meindert and Jean Tillie. 2005. Why Some Anti-immigrant Parties Fail and Others Succeed. *Comparative Political Studies* 38(5), 537-73.

⁴² Barr, Robert. 2009. Populists, Outsiders and Anti-establishment Politics. *Party Politics* 15(1), 29-48.

⁴³ Werts, Han, Peer Scheepers, and Marcel Lubbers. 2012. Euro-Scepticism and Radical Right-Wing Voting in Europe, 2002–2008: Social Cleavages, Socio-Political Attitudes and Contextual Characteristics Determining Voting for the Radical Right. *European Union Politics* 14(2), 183-205.

⁴⁴ Van der Brug / Meindert and Tillie, *Why Some Anti-Immigrant Parties Fail*.

⁴⁵ Roodujin, Matthijs. 2015. The Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe. *European View* 14, 3-11, 6.

⁴⁶ Mudde, Cass. 2016. *The Study of Populist Radical Right Parties: Towards a Fourth Wave*. C-Rex Working Paper Series 1. Oslo: Center for Research on Extremism, the Extreme Right, Hate Crime and Political Violence, University of Oslo; Golder, Matt. 2003. Explaining Variation in the Success of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe. *Comparative Political Studies* 36(4), 432-66; Van der Brug / Meindert and Tillie, *Why Some Anti-Immigrant Parties Fail*; Van Kessel, Stijn. 2011. Explaining the Electoral Performance of Populist Parties: The Netherlands as a Case Study. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 12(1), 68-88.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 38.

⁴⁸ Mudde, Cass. 2007. *The Populist Radical Right in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

populist mobilization: its fragmentary, self-limiting, reluctantly political and anti-establishment nature, make it episodic at best and with limited potential; while on the alarmist end of the spectrum, electoral success is not considered as important as the danger of populist parties to set the tone of the debate, forcing mainstream parties to adopt or internalize parts of the populist agenda. Below, we briefly review each of these.

One of the biggest concerns is populist parties' effect on people, namely that they shift the gravitational center of public opinion to the right,⁴⁹ increasing the salience of issues such as immigration, crime, corruption, and European integration and fundamentally altering the opinions of the mainstream populace on these issues, as well as in their satisfaction with representative democracy and trust in political institutions. As Mudde points out, research has shown both sides of the coin: that populist radical right parties do have an effect on people's attitudes towards these issues at the mass level, as well as that there is no significant effect.⁵⁰ The results, in part, depend on timing (as opinions poll demonstrate the volatility of public opinion on these issues), the issue at hand (immigration vs. European integration), the types of parties (racist parties, radical right-wing parties, etc.), and of course, the type of data at hand. As mentioned above, while we certainly do see an increase in the position of these issues even by mainstream parties,⁵¹ the question remains as to whether opposition to immigration and European integration and decreasing trust in democratic institutions occurred already before and independent of the rise of populism, or whether it is happening as its effect. Overall, it seems that the most worrisome effect of populist parties, at least radical populist parties, given the increase in tabloidization of political discourse, is a shift in political discourse favorable to them and their policies.

In addition to their effect on public opinion, populist parties are posited to have a lasting effect on the nature of domestic politics. Mickenberg points out that nature of a representative government – a “government of the people, by the people, for the people” is not at stake per se, however at stake is the concept of “people”⁵²: populist parties define who belongs to “the people”, which is defined as an ethnically homogenous group. Research has shown that as an effect of competition with populist parties, mainstream parties have also adopted parts discourse into their agendas⁵³ – the so-called populist *Zeitgeist* or “populist contamination of mainstream political discourse” and adoption of “soft populism” in mainstream parties.⁵⁴ In terms of their capability to affect actual policies, while some authors claim that reaching only 10-20% of voters is

⁴⁹ Westin, Charles. 2003. *Racism and the Political Right: European Perspectives*; in *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Merkl, Peter and Leonard Weinberg. Portland: Frank Cass, 93-120.

⁵⁰ Mudde, *Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties*, 6-7.

⁵¹ Szczerbiak, Aleks and Paul Taggart. 2008. *Introduction*, in *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, edited by Szczerbiak, Aleks and Paul Taggart, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-15.

⁵² Mickenberg, Michael. 2001. The Radical Right in Public Office: Agenda Setting and Policy Effects. *West European Politics* 24(4), 1-21, 21.

⁵³ Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. 2008. *Populism and the Media*, in *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, edited by Albertazzi, Daniele and Duncan McDonnell, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 49-67, 57.

⁵⁴ Mudde, *the Populist Zeitgeist*, 546; Mudde, *Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties*, 9.

sufficient to have a major impact,⁵⁵ others cite this modest electoral support populist parties are able to garner – with around 10% of the electorate, few make it into government, and even fewer are able to make coalitions once in government, so that their direct policy affect is rare.⁵⁶ However, concerns still exist that populist parties are able to transform into effective governing parties if needed, especially given their convergence with mainstream parties on socio-cultural policies. Jones additionally warns that populists disrupt orderly competition between left and right, as they shift the debate from ideological to procedural, leading to a situation that replacing established political parties becomes the main mechanism for capturing votes.⁵⁷ In addition, the fact that populists risk slowing down any improvements to economic performance, as these changes sometimes require a long process of structural adjustment, and as such, volatility in power can obstruct reforms. This also leads to a situation where politicians prefer quicker palliative measures that give quick illusions of better performance, over choosing long-term reform efforts, which can have devastating outcomes.

Despite these concerns, research has pointed to the very inherent nature of populist politics as their imminent pitfall – their very characteristics, as reviewed above, are what ultimately precludes them from influencing broader change. A populist movement's need for crisis and reluctance to be political, for instance, makes it difficult to sustain over a long period of time. Its reliance on charismatic leadership functions in the same way: populist leaders have short-term momentum, but the movement's "shelf-life" is frequently limited to those of its leader.⁵⁸ Because of their anti-establishment and oppositional nature, they rarely make to national government, and even when they do, they lose power relatively quickly, or factionalize; if in a ruling coalition in government, they cannot remain anti-establishment, so they tend to splinter once in government.⁵⁹ Additionally, once in power, they have to come up with solutions as well as new concerns for the future, so their support fades quickly while they are in office.⁶⁰ Finally, scholars have pointed out that any kind of large populist "movement" across Europe is unlikely to happen; not only because populism spans the left-right ideology spectrum, and support for its issues (Euroscepticism, anti-globalization, etc.) remains largely in the fringes, but also, as they are focused on their specific "heartland", they are very specific to their context, which limits their capacity to integrate these various elements.⁶¹ Despite sharing some characteristics, populist parties can have diametrically opposing positions on attitudes towards homosexuality or foreign policy, for instance, making it difficult to successfully collaborate with other populist parties at the international level.⁶²

⁵⁵ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 41.

⁵⁶ Mudde, *Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties*, 14; see also Heinisch, Reinhard. 2008. Right-Wing Populism in Austria: A Case for Comparison. *Problems of Post-Communism* 55(3), 40-56.

⁵⁷ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 38.

⁵⁸ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 276.

⁵⁹ Mudde, *Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties*, 14.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Populism in Europe*, 43.

⁶¹ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics*, 275.

⁶² Roodujin, *the Rise of the Populist Radical Right*, 5.

Studying Populism in the Balkans

In general, when approaching the study of populism, most research thus far has focused on Western Europe. Pirro in particular argues that many of the most relevant hypotheses about populist parties actually do not apply to the Central and East European context.⁶³ In Southeastern Europe, the historical legacy of Communism, in addition to the EU accession and its lengthy process, have all impacted the nature of populism, and in this sense, even within the region, the origins and traditions of populist parties and movements before, during and post-Communism are unique. Today's post-communist context, where many countries of Southeastern Europe are still waiting for the promised and long-awaited rewards of capitalism and democracy, has provided populist parties and movements a reservoir of discontent to tap into.⁶⁴ In addition, the EU accession process has impacted the nature of populism and its rise across the region, and many researchers see this process itself as having acted as a sort of "pressure cooker" to populist temptations that were previously held at bay, even during poor socio-economic conditions.⁶⁵ "The European Union and the external constraints that it imposed on the accession countries contributed to the perception of the transition regimes as "democracies without choices", and thus fueled the current backlash against consensual politics", as expressed by Krastev.⁶⁶ Indeed, even without the harsh conditionality measures, EU politics present "a sitting duck" for populist parties who distrust complexity and "mystification",⁶⁷ which EU conditionality has additionally exaggerated, warranting additional attention to the peculiarity of the Western Balkans in particular. Interestingly, scholarship has thus far widely ignored the varieties of contemporary populism in the Balkans, both "from above" and "from below".⁶⁸ While there are a number of notable exceptions focusing on Romania and Bulgaria, the Western Balkans in particular have not received much scholarly attention. The existing scholarship has also predominantly followed the established methodological routes identifying populism as a "top-down" phenomenon perpetuated by political elites.⁶⁹

⁶³ Pirro, Andrea. 2014. Digging Into the Breeding Ground: Insights Into the Electoral Performance of Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics* 30(2), 246-70.

⁶⁴ Williams, Christopher. 1999. *Problems of Transition and the Rise of the Radical Right*, in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, edited by Ramet, Sabrina. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 29-47 32-3; Pirro, *Digging Into the Breeding Ground*.

⁶⁵ Greskovits, Bela. 1995. Demagogic Populism in Eastern Europe?. *Telos* 102, 91-107; Pehe, Jiří. 2006. The Regional Context: is Central Europe a Basket Case?. *Transitions Online*, 6. October 1995.

⁶⁶ Krastev, Ivan. 2007. The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus. *Journal of Democracy* 18(4), 53-63; See also the recent reply to Krastev in the light of further illiberal challenges in the region: Dawson, James and Sean Hanley. 2016. What's Wrong with East-Central Europe? The Fading Mirage of the "Liberal Consensus". *Journal of Democracy* 27(1), 20-34; Medarov in this issue.

⁶⁷ Canovan, Margaret. 1999. Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47(1), 2-16.

⁶⁸ Brubaker / Margit / Jon and Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*, 13.

⁶⁹ Abromeit, John / Marotta, Garry / Chesterton, Bridget M and York Norman. eds. 2016. *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas. History and Recent Tendencies*. London: Bloomsbury, 51-105; Medarov, Georgi. 2015. *The transformations of Liberal Anti-Populism in Post-1989 Bulgaria*. POPULISMUS Working Paper No.2. Thessaloniki: Populismus. Popular Discourse and Democracy; Miscoiu, Sergiu. 2014. Balkan Populism. The Case of Bulgaria and Romania. *Southeastern Europe* 38(1), 1-24; Soare, Sorina. 2014. Hit by Populism: Democracy in Ruins?

Finally, most scholarly attention has been paid to the rise of the radical right – the so-called “verrechtsing” (right turn) of European politics – as “the most successful party family in postwar Western Europe”.⁷⁰ This is unsurprising, as populist radical right parties have not only increased in popularity, but are increasingly becoming official political players in their respective national governments. However, populist movements can be radical and rightist, but can also be found among greens and grassroots movements or even encompass a variety of political ideologies, and can appeal to many different things. Recent decades have particularly witnessed a shift to leftist populism, though literature is sparser on the rise of populist movements with a leftist ideology. For instance, in Latin America, whereas 20 years ago, over 60% of presidents were from right or right-center parties, currently around 70% of have presidents from left or center-left parties.⁷¹ An additional geographical region that, for similar reasons, has recently attracted attention from scholars focusing on radical left and left-wing contexts of populism is Southern Europe, in particular Spain and Greece.⁷² The focus on these cases has initiated a reassessment of the existing differentiation of populisms along the lines of “soft” and “hard” populism dependent on whether they are compatible with liberal political thought, as well as between “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” populisms.⁷³ These distinctions have often been made on the basis of geographical settings, rather than being based on an analysis of particularities and thus lead to the generalized view of “inclusionary” populism in South America vis-à-vis an “exclusionary” populism in Europe, as criticized by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis.⁷⁴ The cases of Spain and Greece illustrate this need for rethinking, but also the need to expand the theoretical debate on populism with a perspective *from below* by introducing social, populist and protest movements. Recent scholarship has thus increasingly utilized the Essex School of discourse studies for the analysis of left-wing populism and populist movements. Following the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the formation of political identities, there has been a growing understanding in defining populism as a discursive and political logic that considers society

Lessons from the Romanian Transition. *Southeastern Europe* 38(1), 25-55; Cholova, Blagovesta and Jean-Michel De Waele. Populism in Bulgaria. The Politics of Resentment. *Southeastern Europe* 38(1), 56-86; Bieber, Florian / Mehler, Daniela and Ksenija Petrović. eds. 2012. Populismus und Europaskeptizismus in Südosteuropa. *Südosteuropa* 60(2); Ghodsee, Kristen. 2008. Left Wing, Right Wing, Everything: Xenophobia, Neo-totalitarianism, and Populist Politics in Bulgaria. *Problems of Post-Communism* 55(3), 26-39;

⁷⁰ Mudde, *Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties*, 1.

⁷¹ Bissell, Jonathan. 2016. The Rise of Leftist Populism - A Challenge to Democracy? *Military Review* 96(1), 77-87; see also Stavrakakis, Yannis / Kioupkiolis, Alexandros / Katsambekis, Giorgios / Nikisianis, Nikos and Thomas Siomos. 2016. Contemporary Left-wing Populism in Latin America: Leadership, Horizontalism, and Postdemocracy in Chávez's Venezuela. *Latin American Politics and Society* 58(3), 51-76.

⁷² Katsambekis, Giorgios. 2016. Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power. *Constellations* 23(3), 391-403; Kioupkiolis, Alexandros. 2016. Podemos: the Ambiguous Promises of Left-Wing Populism in Contemporary Spain. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21(2), 99-120.

⁷³ Mudde, Cas and Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), 147-74.

⁷⁴ Stavrakakis, Yannis and Katsambekis, G. 2014. Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: the case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2), 119-42.

divided into the “the people” and “the elite”.⁷⁵ The broadening of the concept of populism can be epitomized by Laclau’s definition, who described it as the “hegemonic political articulation of demands”.⁷⁶

In this special issue, we aim to fill these lacunas in the literature, in three ways: by including populist movements of left as well as right ideology; geographically focusing on the particular context of the Western Balkans as well as one contribution on Bulgaria. Further, the special issue attempts to broaden the theoretical concept of populism through its analysis *from below* thereby illustrating the manifold manifestations of populist mobilization that exist in parallel to populist parties, etc. A particular focus of the special issue is thereby laid on the question of popular culture, a social field usually neglected in the study of populism.

Specifically in the Western Balkans, the study of contemporary populism is predominantly located within the context of the *authoritarian turn* that has happened in the region over the last decade. The debates, which largely focus on the backsliding of already fragile democratic levels, refer the concept of populism and authoritarianism as symbiotic and as one of the great dangers for the region’s democracy and stability.⁷⁷ In that sense populism is identified as a popular strategy to exercise and secure political domination. In particular the regime of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, of Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia, the politics of Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, or Albin Kurti in Kosovo have attracted international attention with scholars classifying their form of leadership culture from illiberal democracy to authoritarianism.⁷⁸ A regional specificity can be identified in the combination of populist politics with nepotism, corruption and clientelism, which are used along other political mechanisms (media control, repression of civil society sectors, etc.) to legitimize power. As mentioned previously, existent scholarship has thus far largely neglected to analyze these phenomena through the theoretical lenses of “populism”. This is where our special issue aims to narrow the existent scholarly knowledge gap.

The special issue is opened by Bilge Yabancı’s paper on populism and anti-establishment in Kosovo. The author approaches the peculiar ideological mix of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, a leftist-nationalist party that has become a major political player over the last several years, relying on a mix of radical political demands and popular support that did not shy away from violent protest. She investigates the local dynamics and consequences of widespread discontent in

⁷⁵ See Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *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; Mouffe, Chantal. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso; Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso.

⁷⁶ Laclau, *The Populist Reason*, xi.

⁷⁷ See Džihčić, Vedran / Segert, Dieter and Angela Wieser. 2012. The Crisis of Representative Democracy in the Post-Yugoslav Region. Discrepancies of Elite Policies and Citizens’ Expectations. *Southeastern Europe* 36(1), 87-110; Bieber, Florian and Irena Ristić. 2012. Constrained Democracy: The Consolidation of Democracy in Yugoslav Successor States. *Southeastern Europe* 36(3), 373-97; Frckoski, Ljubomir D. 2014. Authoritarian Populism in Transitional Countries of Western Balkans. *Iustinianus Primus Law Review* 5(2), 1-21.

⁷⁸ Sotiropoulos, Dimitri. 2015. *An Inventory of Misuses of Democracy in the Western Balkans*. ELIAMEP Working Paper No.70. Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy.

Kosovo through the analytical framework of populism as an essentially anti-establishment political style. By focusing on the case of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, Yabanci sets out to answer two related questions: the unique populist style of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, and the complex reasons behind its electoral breakthrough and continuing support among various social groups. She argues that Lëvizja Vetëvendosje successfully melds a populist political style, leftist/social democratic agenda and contentious politics as a means to disperse its message. The second part of Yabanci's article offers arguments to explain the party's appeal such focusing on structural factors (electoral availability and party system), societal dynamics (political and economic dissatisfaction) and its agency (internal organization, cohesion and leadership).

Yabanci's paper is followed by two contributions that seek to employ a similar methodological tool set and approach the concept of populism from a more theoretical perspective. The first contribution is Ljupcho Petkovski's analysis of the discursive construction of 'the people' in Macedonia's illiberal discourse. Petkovski's article dissects the authoritarian populist reign of VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia since 2006 and takes it as a case study for his theoretical debate. Illustrating pitfalls within populism scholarship that identify populist politics predominantly as democratic illiberalism, Petkovski argues that this approach should be complemented by discourse theory. In order to explain the durability of Gruvski's reign, Petkovski utilizes Gramsci's concept of "hegemony", which facilitates the understanding of the specificity of the regime's populism. Petkovski explores the discursive process of changing the political imagination of the majority of ethnic Macedonians to create the concept of "the people". He argues that this allows the regime to reclaim its place in history by providing channels for material, symbolic and emotional incorporation amongst social classes that were traditionally excluded from society. The notion of "the people" in populist discourse is further explored by Georgi Medarov. He takes Krastev's proposition of associating populism with "democratic illiberalism"⁷⁹ in order to explore whether there can be an opposite articulation: "liberal populism". Medarov situates his research in the relationship between liberal anti-populist experts and populist discourses in the case of the Bulgarian social protests from 2013. Situating the Bulgarian protests in a global context, Medarov argues that despite the fact that the Bulgarian protests could be put into the wider frame of populism and "post-politics", it cannot explain the peculiar entanglement between liberal and populist discourses. The contribution subsequently investigates the various and conflictual discourses within the Bulgarian protest movements, their reliance on populist discourses, as well as of the way liberal intellectuals interpreted, reacted to, and shaped those movements.

The final two papers attempt to shift the discussion of populism in the Balkans from the realm of institutional politics into the realm of mainstream media and popular culture. Both take contemporary Serbia as a case study for their argument. Irena Šentevska explores the output of one specific genre of the music industry – "ethno pop", as a vocal source of right-wing populism in Serbia. *Discussing the phenomenon of pop-cultural "ethno activism" as a*

⁷⁹ Krastev, *The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus*.

distinct populist strategy, Šentevska zooms into the case of the charity campaign *Podignimo Stupove*. The article argues that the “subgenre” of “ethno pop”, which exploits religious imagery, can be identified as a vehicle of communication of populist political concepts. The charity campaign that was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the XII century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras thus represents a key to understanding the changes in currently prevailing populist strategies of institutional politics in Serbia, as well as the wider social “infrastructure” that supports them. In a similar methodological vein, Astrea Pejović and Jovana Papović focus on the question of the potential of popular culture to become an agent of leftist populist politics in contemporary Serbia. The authors observe the hip-hop collective “The Bombs of the Nineties” whose music tackles the topics from recent history, and who subvert the fashion style of the 1990s “Dizel” subculture, which is often connected to the Serbian nationalism and war profiteering. The paper analyses the relations “The Bombs of the Nineties” create between their practices, class warfare and leftist discourses, aiming to show the potentials and threats those relations introduce. Following Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of populism, Pejović and Jovana Papović argue that “The Bombs of the Nineties” could represent a solid populist political agent because they attempt to reveal and draw attention to the “unfulfilled demands” of disempowered Serbian youth.

As proposed earlier in the introduction, this special issue aims not only at extending our knowledge of the regional specificities of populist politics and movements, but also to broaden the usage of the term “populism” by exploring the phenomenon in usually neglected social settings, such as popular culture. It covers the geographic area of the Western Balkans accompanied by one contribution focusing on Bulgaria. The collection aims to represent a contribution to the empirical scholarship of populism in Europe, but also an attempt to engage in theoretical and methodological debate about how to approach the phenomenon *from below*. The special issue ultimately contributes to the thriving populism literature through a novel empirical scope as well as the literature on Southeast Europe through a focus on the local agency, voter preferences and the party systems.

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