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Framing Political Populism in Contemporary Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

The development of mankind in the present is characterized by transformation trends in the technological, economic, and social spheres. These trends impact the political environment as well. The challenges of the economic crisis, the migration processes revitalize the development of populism. The present paper is focused on political populism and its dimensions in Bulgaria. The political environment in the country is characterized by almost permanent merge of political entities, which gradually escalates the use of populist approaches, styles and rhetoric. The paper is structured in three methodologically interconnected parts, which respectively present: an overview of the process of politicization of the media and the mediatization of politics; a comparative study of the dimensions of populism in Bulgaria; a discussion on the connection between populism and the media, including a content analysis study conducted during the local elections of 2015.

Keywords: political populism, mediatization, media, politics



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1. Introduction

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

Research attention in Bulgaria has started to be focused on populism recently, but is increasing in terms of the engagement of scholars and the expansion of the range of study. This interest was determined by the successes of newly formed populist parties during the new century – parties of the harder or softer variants – which succeeded in periodically winning considerable numbers of places in national parliaments.

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

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

Daniel Smilov (2008, p. 26) suggests three aspects of the concept of populism: “At times it is used to describe the process of backsliding from the achievements of liberal democracy made before the accession to the EU. At other times, it refers to the growth of nationalist or radical right-wing parties. Almost everyone agrees with Cas Mudde that this is an ideology that places the people in opposition to the corrupt political elite.”

The conceptual schemes of Margaret Canovan (1981) and Cas Mudde (2007) have been used as keys to understanding and explaining the phenomenon and defining populism in Bulgaria. Scholars have emphasized Mudde’s idea that “even if populism as an *ideology* is viewed as a basic threat, in fact the basic threat in Europe today is populism as a *style*” (Mudde 2007, p. 115).

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

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

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

Populism in Bulgaria is visible in several variants of classification:

- Classical, social, specifically “pro-European” populism;
- Hard vs. soft populism;
- Right-wing vs. left-wing populism.

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

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

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

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

The discrepancy between economic expectations and reality, between political expectations and concrete policies, etc., as well as the presence of contrary evaluations of the transition to democratic society and market economy are the grounds of the varieties of populism in Bulgaria and of the difficulty of building a relevant conceptual framework for the phenomenon. It is not accidental that the most malicious manifestations of populist political actors, including in the media, have been organized after Bulgaria's accession in the Euro-Atlantic structures and are a result of disappointment in the effects of this new situation.

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

The goal of the present text is to examine the current developments of political populism in Bulgaria. It correlates with the goals of a broader research, conducted in 31 countries by COST IS 1308 Action: **Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics**

The article is structured in three methodologically interconnected parts, which respectively present: an overview of the process of politicization of the media and the mediatization of politics; a comparative study of the dimensions of populism in Bulgaria; a discussion on the connection between populism and the media, including a content analysis study conducted during the local elections in 2015.

2. Politicization of Media and Mediatization of Politics

Today changes in society are catalyzed by the opportunities provided by the blogosphere and the social networks, and by mobile electronic connections. Mediatized mobile communications have proven to be emblematic for mediatized society (Peicheva 2003).

The rapid developments of ICT facilitate significant transformations in contemporary media ecosystem. The essential consequences of media convergence are connected with the status-quo of the new media hybrid products. Some of their applications contribute to the erosion of the media ecosystem, ex. these media products which contain combination of non-truths and half-truths, intolerant language, etc. in traditional and new media formats, thus contaminating media atmosphere.

In the contemporary communication environment political pluralism in Bulgaria experiences persistent difficulties. The still-in-the-make civil society fails to assist the creation of a stable public basis for professional journalism. According to the *World Press Freedom Index 2016*, Bulgaria has dropped down to 113th place (out of 180 countries), which shows that freedom of speech and independent journalism is still a convertible phraseology for most of the media outlets and for many non-government organizations disbursing the funds of European and Transatlantic institutions (Reporters 2016).

Data provided by the National Statistical Institute vividly show the trends in the media in the quarter of a century since the start of the transition period. Currently the number of print media amounts to 295

newspapers (55 dailies) with a total annual circulation of 315 712 000, and 668 magazines and bulletins, with an annual circulation of 27 831 000 (NSI 2015). In 2015, there were 337 radio stations and 187 television channels operating on national, regional and local level terrestrially, via cable or via satellite, and listed in the public register of the Council for Electronic Media (Council 2015).

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

For more than a quarter of a century, political, economic and social upheavals have significantly impacted the development of the mass media system in Bulgaria towards quick and flexible reactions to the social processes. The major significance of television was manifested in several critical situations during the years, including: the TV attack against President Petar Mladenov in 1990 that compelled him to resign; the resignation of the *BSP* Government headed by Andrey Lukanov in 1990; the mass media war launched by the *UDF* Government of Filip Dimitrov, which led to its toppling in 1992; the exit of the Government of Lyuben Berov (under the *Movement for Rights and Freedom* mandate) in 1994; the withdrawal of the *BSP* Government of Zhan Videnov in 1996; the siege of the House of the National Assembly in the situation of governmental crisis in 1997, which led to radical power shift; the forced restructuring of the *UDF* Government of Ivan Kostov in 1999, due to corruption allegations; the attacks that brought about ministerial replacements in the Simeon II Government in 2005 and in the three-party coalition (*Coalition for Bulgaria, Movement for Rights and Freedoms* and *National Movement Simeon II*) of Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev; the constant corrective activism with respect to the government of Boyko Borisov (*Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria*) and the wide coverage of the social protests which led to the earlier resignation of Borisov's government in 2013; the coverage of the pressure of continuous social protests against the government of Plamen Oresharski (*Coalition for Bulgaria*), which also led to its premature resignation in 2014 (Raycheva 2016).

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

3. Conceptualizing Populism in Bulgaria

In spite of the fact that a considerable step towards democratization has been made after 1989, the political system, due to its non-clarified identity, both at conceptual and at representative level, faces an immense challenge with respect to keeping of appearances.

The long years of one-party dominance were replaced by an ever-cropping host of new political parties, unions and organizations, which have been constantly splitting, regrouping, and entering into coalitions, especially on the eve of forthcoming elections. The breaking down of the bipolar model through some newly formed leader-type structures has failed to bring about sustainability to the political system, which is weighed down by heavy economic and social problems. The model of democracy on the make in Bulgaria delegated the difficult tasks of transition to the political elite and eliminated the broad participation

of the people in the process of transformation. Although superficially heterogeneous, the political and the media environment (especially in pre-election times) is still not open to the parameters of pluralism or independence (Raycheva, Petev 2003).

3.1 Populist political actors

Bulgarian political actors, including leaders and parties, that fall under the category of populism have mixed features.

The use of populist phraseology is evident among all political parties in the country, whether left or right-oriented. Bulgarian political actors of a populist trend – including political leaders and parties – have mixed, oftentimes changing, characteristics.

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

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

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

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

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

In Bulgaria, complete populism, involving reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism and exclusion of outgroups (Jagers, Walgrave 2006), is called "hard" populism. It flourished after 2005, when the former journalist and leader of the newly formed party Ataka, Volen Siderov, succeeded in winning twenty seats for his party in the parliamentary elections. After 2005, members of Ataka have always been present in the National Assembly, and more recently, in the European Parliament as well. The ideology of the party tends to combine extremist right-wing with extreme left-wing ideas, and has evolved towards an anti-EU and anti-NATO stance. Its leader Siderov is a typical example of a very aggressive style combined with eclectic elements: he raises extreme left slogans referring to nationalization, but also spreads ethnic hostility and anti-elite feelings; recently he has been making anti-migrant and anti-globalist statements.

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

According to the indicators of populism, parties that might be classified in the range of more limited populism are the Patriotic Front coalition, headed by Valeri Simeonov, who is also the president of the political party National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and IMRO (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement), headed by Krasimir Karakachanov; these

parties are currently part of the ruling coalition. They are nationalist parties that are more or less opposed to the minority groups, Roma, Turks, etc.

Falling under the category of *excluding populism*, with its typical anti-elitism and appeals to the common people, is Nikolay Barekov's pro-EU party Bulgaria without Censorship, which was widely publicized when formed early in 2014. In recent months, however, it has completely broken apart. Its leader Barekov, formerly a popular TV anchorman, is a salient example of a mixed type of political populism. He combines right-wing ideology with leftist slogans referring to protecting the interests of the poor. This is a typical case of populism based on unscrupulously "playing the role of the ordinary people", making "brilliant promises", and using the media for political purposes, turning them into political PR institutions. However, Barekov was later denounced by people from his own party in Parliament as being dependent on corporations. At present, he is a member of the European Parliament but has been abandoned by nearly all members of the Bulgaria without Censorship coalition; his parliamentary group now carries the name Bulgarian Democratic Centre.

Falling under the category of *empty populism*, with its reference and appeals to the ordinary people, is the political activity of the former Bulgarian tsar Simeon II. In 2001, he became prime minister of Bulgaria, having won votes in the parliamentary elections through his populist phraseology. Simeon II and the party established in 2001 and named after him, the National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSS) is precisely falling in the category of "pro-European" populism that may be defined as "soft" populism as well. Simeon II has a specific style of communication marked by moderation in speech, a certain show of modesty and benevolence. These traits were part of his charisma. He has used a technique never applied before him in Bulgarian politics: "the technique of non-speech" (Krasteva 2013, Malinov 2007). His political style and conduct towards others are based on respect and compromise. Specific for him is the style of *catch-all politics*. Thus the former tsar included ministers of different party affiliations in his government, and during his second mandate, he entered into coalition with the former Communists of the BSP, whose opponent he initially was.

The present Bulgarian prime-minister Boyko Borisov, who also held a previous mandate (2009-2013), also falls in the category of "soft" populism. His is a very particular style. He displays a certain amount of eclecticism, making references to the common people, yet also tending to discredit opponents.

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

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

Today, the populist stage of parliament is held mainly by Volen Siderov, though support for his party Ataka has decreased. The Patriotic Front coalition, made up of the political party NFSB, and IMRO, is also represented in Parliament and is part of the ruling coalition. The NMSS, renamed National Movement Stability and Progress since 2008, is waning and is not represented in Parliament. Support for Bulgaria without Censorship has strongly declined.

3.2 Media and Populism

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

Thus, the media-related origin of the political formation called Ataka is typical for populist leadership and style of politics. The high viewing rates for Volen Siderov's ten-minute show entitled "Ataka", broadcast on TV SKAT since 2003, is connected with the appearance of the eponymous political party and the position it won in politics in 2005. It is believed that the growth of this party and its membership was due to this political broadcast. Contributing to success was likewise its national daily party newspaper, also called "Ataka". Later on, the appearance of TV Alfa in 2011, after Siderov broke his relations with TV SKAT, contributed to the continuing support for Ataka and its leader over the years. The party would hardly have won enough votes to send its representatives to the parliament if its populist slogans had not reached the viewers and readers of these nationally disseminated media.

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

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

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

With regard to fomenting populist hate speech and constructing the "image of the enemy", some national media have evidently played a role in stimulating populist processes by serving as a platform for plainly racist and misanthropic populist vocabulary (Spasov 2014).

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

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

4. Specifics of the dimensions of political populism in the media

In order to verify the characteristic features of the *hard populism* in Bulgaria, described as a mixture of nationalist and discriminatory elements that emphasizes "othering" and combines this with hate speech, and of *soft populism*, which comprises general appeals to people, catch-all politics and demagogic discourses, a content analysis study was conducted on the topic of "Populist dimensions of pre-election political reality – local elections 2015". The study was developed within the Scientific Seminar on Media and Education and the Laboratory of Sociology of Assoc. Prof. DSc Dobrinka Peicheva at the Neofit Rilski Southwest University, Blagoevgrad.

4.1 Method

The content analysis was focused on pre-election communication units disseminated through the channels of the public television broadcaster – the Bulgarian National Television BNT1, BNT2 and BNT Svyat [World] (25.09 – 23.10. 2015). The choice of public television was based on the existence of an official *Agreement on coverage of the pre-election campaign for conducting elections for mayors and municipal councilors, concluded between BNT and the authorized representatives of parties, coalitions of parties, and initiative committees* (BNT, 2015). The main already existing and newly created information and discussion programs to be studied were specified beforehand in the Agreement: *The Voices of Bulgaria, The Day Begins. More from the Day, Referendum, Panorama. Local Time*, etc.

The content analysis was effectuated by means of a specially designed registration card including thematic categories and traits for observation and registration. The study goal was to identify populist elements in the campaign image of the basic parliamentary represented and functioning parties and coalitions in Bulgaria.

The political forces to be studied were the currently active parties and coalitions represented in the Parliament: the coalition Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABR), the political party Ataka, the coalition Bulgarian Socialist Party – Left Bulgaria (BSP-LV), the political party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB), the political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the coalition Patriotic Front, and the coalition Reformist Bloc.

4.2 Results

The pre-election campaign of BNT was positioned mostly in the primetime and after – over 55%, but covered, in smaller portions, also other temporal segments as well: 16.30-19.00 h. – 19,9%; 7.30-9.00 h. - 19%; and 12-13 h. - 3%.

52,6% of the communication units were concentrated in the TV program *The Voices of Bulgaria*. They provided the voters with information consisting primarily in reporting on pre-election events held during the day in different settlements of the country. The communication units, related to political debates about the present and future of local government, in which populist appeals were most salient were concentrated mainly in the information and discussion TV programs *The Day Begins, More from the Day, Referendum, Panorama*, etc.

Hard populism was observed and measured in several category groups.

Nationalist ideas, in different variations, were found to be prevalently typical for the representatives of the party Ataka (44%), but occurred to a high degree among representatives of the coalition Patriotic Front as well (42,8%).

Hostility towards others, as another dimension of hard populism, related to ethnic groups, refugees, the elite, etc., was also typical for the party Ataka. The share of this party (28,6%) was higher than the shares of all other political forces.

Intolerance towards political parties, representatives of government institutions, ethnic and minority groups, etc., also had high rates in the activities of Ataka. A relatively high degree of intolerance was displayed also by the Patriotic Front coalition.

Confrontation as an attitude towards political opponents, in contrast with willingness to conduct dialogue, was likewise most strongly displayed by the political party Ataka with 71,5%, compared with a total of 20,4% for all other parties.

Elements of extremism were most strongly present in the style of political conduct. The results of the political party Ataka were generally highest in the ranking with respect to this trait, followed by the representatives of the Patriotic Front coalition. Although the prevalent behavior of the Patriotic Front coalition was not aggressive, its indicators were nearly twice higher than the total of the other parties, excluding Ataka.

Table 1. Style of conduct of parties displaying “hard populism”

Style of conduct	Ataka (%)	Patriotic Front (%)	Total for other Parties (%)
Emphatic aggressiveness	7,7	21,4	12,5
Partial aggressiveness	15,4	14,3	14,5
Emphatic tolerance	7,7	12,3	16,6
Partial tolerance	17,5	9,2	12,5
Neutrality	44	35,7	18,8

Aggression demonstrated by extreme populist parties is targeted primarily at the migrants, ethnic minorities and political opponents.

The soft form of populism was observed among all parties.

The ranking regarding *reliance on the people*, as one of the dimensions of soft populism, was headed by the political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) with 30%, followed by the then ruling Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB), with 28,9% and the coalition Reformist Bloc, with 26,3%.

Flirting with the people was registered foremost among the coalition Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABR), with 22%, followed by CEDB, with 18,9 %, and MRF, with 18 %.

Identifying with the people was most typical for the ABR coalition, with 31%, followed by the Patriotic Front coalition, with c 23,5 %.

The use of colloquial style of speech had the highest values among CEDB – 27,9 %, while demonstration of *dependence on the people* was highest among the Reformist Bloc – 31,6 %.

Brilliant promises were also observed in the registered pre-election populism of nearly all political forces, with the following priorities in the political promises:

- *Anti-corruption environment*. The highest values were observed in the promises of the Patriotic Front coalition - 31,2% and the political party Ataka - 21,4%.

- *Asking the people on issues* was promised to the greatest degree by the Reformist Bloc coalition – 26,9%, the political party CEDB – 20 % and the Patriotic Front coalition - 20%.

- *Transparency of the future governance* had the relatively lowest value in the ranking of promises. The highest – 20 %, in this dimension gained the representatives of the Reformist Bloc coalition, followed by the coalition ABR, the coalition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) – Left Bulgaria, and the political party Ataka. Regarding transparency, the representatives of MRF had a negligible value – 1. 6%.

Table 2. Indicators of soft populism (in percentage)

	ABR	Ataka	BSP-LB	MRF	CEDB	Patriotic Front	Reformists Block
Reliance on the people	15,4	25,4	24,1	30	28,9	11,7	26,3
Flirting with the people	22	16,6	10,3	18	18,9	17,7	
Identifying with the people	31	15,4	15,5	20	4,4	23,5	10,5
Using colloquial style of speech	15,4	7,1	13,8		27,9	17,7	7,9
Displaying dependence on the people	7,7	7,1	15,5	16		17,7	31,6
Recalling the failure of those who have forgotten the people	8,5	23	12	4	2,2	11,7	10,5
Other			1,7	4	4,4		
Lack of populist behavior		5,4	7,1	8	13,3		13,2
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

All the listed promises had highest values among the coalition ABR – 44% and the political party Ataka – 35,7%, while other promises besides the listed ones were registered among the political parties MRF - 34,7%, CEDB - 24,4% and the coalition BSP-Left Bulgaria – 18,8%.

Table 3. Indicators of brilliant promises (in percentage)

	ABR	Ataka	BSP-LB	MRF	CRDB	Patriotic Front	Reformists Block
Anti-corruption environment	7,7	21,4	12,5	15,4		31,2	14,3
Transparent governance	15,4	14,3	14,5	1,6	11,1	6,7	20
Consultation with the people	7,7	12,3	16,6	3,9	20	20	26,9
Practical orientations	17,5	9,2	12,5	11,6	24,4	26,7	15,4
All of these	44	35,7	18,8	3,9	9	7,7	17
None of these	7,7	7,1	6,3	28,9	11,1	7,7	
Other...			18,8	34,7	24,4		6,4
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The extreme forms of *hard* populism with all of their dimensions were displayed primarily by the political party Ataka and by the Patriotic Front coalition.

As for *soft* populism, it was present in all of the examined political forces.

The public political conduct of the candidates or of the leaders supporting them display the whole labeled variety of populism in Bulgarian practices.

5. Conclusion

The contradictions in the existing terminology, the national specifics of theorizing on populism, the practices of the Bulgarian political leaders, and the results of the content analysis of the political electoral campaign in the local elections of 2015 bring to the fore several sets of discussion topics.

Firstly, the identification of anti-elitism and its manifestations.

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

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

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

This discussion comes in response to the practical activities of political leaders and to the restless attempts at conceptualizing the phenomenon of populism.

Media convergence that facilitates hybrid media products and makes hybridization the rule rather than the exception in journalism practices revealed the processes of media erosion. Media convergence and the changed patterns of media practices are accompanied by a disruption of the media ecosystem.

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

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