

Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia: From Rhetorical Trap to Discursive Asset*

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Abstract

Since 2009, Macedonia has experienced the two largest waves of progressive civic activism in post-socialist times. In the 2009–2012 period, smaller groups of citizens rallied around issues as different as protection of public spaces, police brutality, rising prices of electricity, etc. Yet, it was not before the larger student mobilizations took place in 2014 that the social space significantly opened up with a number of social groups protesting the increasingly authoritarian rule of the illiberal incumbents. In this paper, we investigate and compare the discursive strategies of the social movements (SM) in the two periods, especially the shift from 'anti-populist rhetorical trap' from the first period to the broader appeals for solidarity and a construction of equivalences which characterized the second period. In so doing, we hypothesize and demonstrate that the relative success in the second period can be accounted for in terms of the more inclusive discourse which helped SM avoid the 'anti-populist trap', thus challenging illiberal populism with progressive and (formally) populist discourse. Theoretically, the analysis goes back and forth between two approaches to studying populism: the dominant theory which sees populism as democratic illiberalism and Laclau's theory of hegemony that sees populism as a formal political logic with no predetermined ideological content.

Keywords: Macedonia; populism; social movements; anti-populist rhetorical trap

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1. Introduction

Since 2009, Macedonia has experienced the two largest waves of progressive civic activism in post-socialist times. In the 2009–2012 period, smaller groups of citizens rallied around issues as different as protection of public spaces, police brutality, rising prices of electricity,

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and abortion law legislation. Yet, it was not before the larger student mobilizations took place in 2014 that the social space opened up significantly, with a number of social groups protesting the increasingly authoritarian rule of the conservative incumbents.

In this paper, we investigate and compare the discursive strategies of the social movements (SM) in the two periods. In the first period, the narratives of SM and the way in which they framed their action were much too focused on their initial particular demands. This prevented broader appeals and solidarity with wider dissatisfaction in society, because they were afraid of being 'politicized' due to accusations of their partisanship and authenticity, or the mobilization of countering groups. This discursive strategy is what we call the 'anti-populist rhetorical trap'. In the second period, protest movements experimented with broader appeals to 'the people' based on strong anti-establishment ethos managing to mobilize larger, heterogeneous groups of disaffected citizens. We call this second discursive strategy progressive populist discourse.

The main empirical puzzle we try to address is why, given similar circumstances, the social movements in the first period failed to succeed in mobilizing a substantial number of citizens, which in the second period it surely did. We hypothesize that the relative success in the second period can be accounted for in terms of the more inclusive, populist discourse which helped SM avoid the 'anti-populist trap' based on the belief that the only legitimate politics is the politics of difference. Furthermore, we hypothesize that protest movements in Macedonia are not exclusively focused on particular and concrete demands that can be satisfied by the institutions in a non-antagonistic way, but rather centred on redefining the meaning of the key signifiers of society such as 'democracy', 'politics', 'participation', etc.

Methodologically, the paper is based on discourse analysis of the narratives of SM as well as the media framing of their activities. Theoretically, we largely draw on political discourse theory, which will allow us to define both the ideology of the government and the discourse of the social movements as formally populist.

2. Populism and anti-populism in Macedonia: historical context

The focus of this study is one case of government-civil society interaction, whose traits may be seen in many other Central and Eastern European transitional democracies. Unlike Western Europe, where the term 'populism' is almost exclusively used to describe right wing extremist political parties and movements, in CEE it also depicts some of the illiberal tendencies in both new EU Member States such as Poland, Hungary, or Bulgaria, as well as in candidate countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, and, as the case shows, Macedonia. In all of these countries, what may be observed is a negative tendency by populist leaders and parties towards critical segments of civil society, engaging many discursive practices aimed at representing oppositional activists as the 'people's' Other, i.e. its enemy. The answer of civil society and social movements, in turn, is a plethora of discursive adaptations, some of which we shall outline in the following pages.

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

Gruevski's populism essentially challenged the precarious liberal hegemony established during transition. The policy content of the transition consensus of political actors in Macedonia followed the trend in other democratizing post-communist European countries. Rupnik noted (2007: 19) that the tenets of the elite-led and top-down consensus were the primacy of the constitutional order and the need for economic liberalization; the first, a presupposed establishment of politically 'neutral' liberal institutions, and the second one a large-scale privatization and the integration of the economy into the world market. The underlying assumption – and this is the case for Macedonia as well – was that the reforms would be legitimated in a widely democratic and popular fashion. Contrary to democratic theory, the absence of strong intermediary actors, such as trade unions or a powerful civil society in general, facilitated the smooth implementation of painful reforms. In Central and Eastern Europe, according to Rupnik and Zielonka (2013), it was the economic benefits of liberalization and the fact that the winners outnumbered the losers that legitimized the hegemony of the new order and kept liberal democracy stable.

This outcome was not the case in Macedonia, however, considering that both the turmoil and war sanctions in the region brought a higher unemployment rate than under socialism. Consequently, this was detrimental for the living standards of (not only) Macedonian citizens. Anyway, the country was, in line with transition dogma, praised by many observers as a regional leader in many respects, such as progress in privatization and economic reform as well as in avoiding major turmoil. Since they could not distribute economic benefits, the post-communist elites sought legitimacy elsewhere. Much of the success of the liberal hegemony can be accounted for in terms of the lack of security felt by the citizens of Macedonia due to the wars in the region and the unstable international position of the new state. This sense of crisis enabled the elites to legitimize non-popular decisions, such as the large scale privatization, as well as the compromise with Greece on the name issue in 1995. Citizens were presented with little alternative, as war, turmoil, chaos and instability were said to be the alternative to any painful decision made. When the post-communist elite lost the parliamentary election in 1998, a non-communist government seized power for the first time in the history of Macedonia's statehood. Though known as a populist leader whose party VMRO-DPMNE articulated the grievances of the losers in both transition and in socialism in the 1990s, Prime minister Ljubcho Georgievski's reign was characterized – up until the outburst of the inter-ethnic conflict in 2001 – by a political moderation, depoliticization of the issues he once contested and upgraded practices of corruption. In the 1990s he

promised revision of what was seen by many as fraudulent privatization. However, once in power, his government privatized the most successful companies that remained under state ownership. The transition consensus seemed to be cemented.

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

It was in this year that a strong grassroots democratic mobilization appeared against the proposed Law on Territorial Organization, a piece of legislation that was seen by the majority of ethnic Macedonians as favouring the interests of Albanians. VMRO-DPMNE actively supported the initiative and their role was instrumental in collecting the number of signatures needed to call a referendum against the law. The government, a great part of the liberal civil society and the media actively boycotted the referendum with the slogan 'Some questions don't deserve an answer' depicting the choice as a choice between European future and nationalistic isolationism. To the dismay of the majority of ethnic Macedonians, these developments were supported by the international community. They were also rewarding in terms of foreign policy – the US recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name just a few days before the referendum as an incentive to keep voters out of the polls. As an additional reward, Macedonia was the first country in the region to be granted candidate status for EU membership in 2005, and the country seemed to be well on the track to becoming a stable liberal democracy.

The success of the government to implement a policy, such as the Law on Territorial Organization, which lacked clear democratic legitimacy came at a price. The common interpretation of this situation is that the 'failed' referendum was instigated by VMRO-DPMNE, who mobilized exclusively the ethnic Macedonians by appealing to their nationalist sentiments. This explanation is partially valid, yet by characterizing the referendum in such a way we are not doing justice to the plethora of legitimate grievances that were expressed by the voters. It is true that the referendum was initiated by the nationalistic organization of the Macedonian diaspora, the World Macedonian Congress. Yet, it is also true that even nationalists framed their argument in such a way that the Framework Agreement was not put into question, but rather they claimed that the law was not prepared in accordance to the best European practices that presuppose democratic consultation. On the top of that, the challenge didn't come exclusively from nationalists. A group of intellectuals and distinguished public figures who were usually associated with their liberal worldviews founded the platform Civic Movement for Macedonia (Gragjansko Dvizenje za Makedonija) which

rallied against the law, claiming that the legislation was not prepared in democratic manner. Finally, over 30 municipalities announced they would organize local referenda against the law. To sum up, though nationalism and the ethnic Macedonian fear of Albanian secessionism can explain the intensity of the mobilization, the mobilization can also be seen as an outlet for the expression of a myriad of legitimate concerns. This eventually turned into resentment against the values of the elite. There was an accumulation of contradictions that the liberal elite said were not worth considering and decided to ignore.

This, in turn, signalled that 'the people' had lost its patience. The concerns over security that made citizens prone to accept painful decisions and believe that some distant European future would compensate for current hardships have lost their resonance. The actors who have instrumentally used this discourse to legitimize painful decisions have likewise lost their moral credibility to rule, to be real representatives of the people. The referendum 'failed', however a new populist majority was born that has dominated national politics ever since.

Prior to coming to power, Gruevski didn't merely play the nationalist card; he also challenged many of the orthodoxies of transition that were perceived as having inflicted injustices on ordinary people and contributed to the sense of identity crisis. Mr Gruevski promised his government would cease dealing with the frustrating ethnic issues (IFIMES 2013). There was yet another rise in unemployment after 2002 and the explanation of the predicament was framed with moralistic rather than economic arguments – the social-democratic and liberal elite was blamed for taking advantage of privatization in the 1990s and destroying the factories which served as symbols of worker identity under socialism. Gruevski won the hearts of underdogs by promising that once in power he would review the privatization process (Ananiev 2013). *'What we got from them [SDSM] is a record-level unemployment and poverty, and yet they are still trying to conceal the real state of affairs by deploying some abstract ideas about stability, security and European perspectives.'* This excerpt from a column written by Gruevski just before the elections in 2006 exemplifies the whole political strategy which aimed to portray him as having a completely antithetical habitus than his opponents. His party's manifesto was called 'Rebirth in 100 Steps' and was supposed to offer concrete projects instead of 'abstract ideas', to portray his approach as technocratic instead of political, and to show his concern with the real problems of the people instead of with the dirty business of political compromise.

All of the grievances and resentments were gradually combined in a new ideology of the people; an assemblage of different ideologies brought together by the hegemonic projects of the populist movement. This authoritarian populist ideology which combines a set of disparate and logically and ideologically incoherent elements created new cleavages in society, while at the same time it prevented the reproduction of others, i.e. it showed other or existing cleavages to be invalid or irrelevant. It is reminiscent of Connolly's 'resonance machine': what the hegemonic political alliance involves cannot be reduced to a shared doctrine, but what we need to look at is the affinities of sensibility, the shared affective ethos of different actors that are part of the people (Connolly 2008: 53). The price the country had to pay for allowing 'the people' to reclaim its place in politics was rather high: Macedonia in 2015 is a genuine competitive authoritarian regime. Apart from the lack of a level playing field for political competition, social and political pluralism are jeopardized as well by the strict

and monolithic regimes of truth the government imposes on society. Instead of democratic consolidation, Macedonia got a consolidated hybrid regime.

3. Theoretical insights and definitions

As noted by Canovan, (1999: 7) the most common theorization aimed at explaining populism's hazy relation to democracy starts with the account that democracy as we know it today is actually liberal democracy, whereas the danger of populism is related to it being fundamentally illiberal. Canovan's remark resonates with the hegemonic vision of liberal democracy today, according to which the proper functioning of democracy requires liberal tenets such as a free market, a government limited by a complex system of checks and balances and constitutional protection of individual (and collective) rights, as well as democratic principles such as free and fair elections. Historically, as Chantal Mouffe (2005: 52) acknowledges, liberalism and democracy represented separate traditions whose reconciliation is contingent on and characteristic of the specific historical context of the West, as a result of which '*liberalism was democratized and democracy was liberalized*'.

Populism, according to this kind of explanation, is pretty much the same as the democratic component of liberal democracy. It is reminiscent of illiberal democracy as it was famously described by Fareed Zakaria (1997) two decades ago. A great deal of the argument explaining the rise of populism in Eastern, Central and Southeast Europe rests on this theory. Krastev and Smilov's (2008: 7) account of the rise of populism is paradigmatic for this way of thinking – they identify the following common characteristics of the populisms in the region: *a)* they appeal to the people as a whole as opposed to the corrupt and impotent political elites; *b)* they oppose the core idea of liberal democracy – that the political majority should be limited in important ways by constitutional constraints; *c)* populism questions some of the tenets of the liberal consensus and its taboos. Elsewhere Krastev (2006: 60) reiterates that populism in new European democracies is anti-liberal but not anti-democratic: by giving voice to the underdogs who were never interested in participating in politics, populism is instrumental in challenging the perception of the transition regimes as democracies without choices. This perception was fostered by the successful EU accession which was conditioned by policy consensus about empowering liberal institutions such as the courts and independent central banks, and the improvement of the quality of institutional performance. Thus, the ever growing appeal of populism is capturing the major political trend, i.e. the rise of democratic illiberalism resulting from the rising tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism and reflecting the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions in culture politics and economics (Krastev, Smilov 2008).

Is this way of theorizing and explaining the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans a plausible one? Our answer is mixed. We should certainly give well-deserved credit to this way of analysing populism as analytically convenient and possessing significant explanatory power, yet we need to be aware of its blind spots and instrumental uses in political struggles. It is certainly instructive in providing a snapshot of the current situation, a synchronic picture of the consequences of populist politics revealing

how the liberal tenets of democracy are under attack. However, not all populisms are illiberal in the same sense as the ones in Eastern Europe. Reducing the rise of populism to a result of a simple tension between liberalism and democracy neglects the diachronic, historical and contextually rich dimensions of the rise of populism in the region. We still need the concept of populism because it captures something the concept of authoritarianism doesn't – that is the popular backing that illiberal regimes enjoy which cannot be reduced to coercion, but results from the roles that ideology, cultural hegemony and consent play in keeping illiberal regimes relatively stable.

This is why we believe we might be analytically and theoretically better off if we shift the focus from substantive to more formal definitions of populism. This shift is visible in the work of Cas Mudde (2004: 543), who sees populism as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* of the people'. Yet, the formal turn is most visible in political discourse theory's neo-Gramscian account of populism as developed by Ernesto Laclau (1979/2011; 2005a; 2005b).

In contrasting his concept of populism to other approaches, Laclau (2005a: 33) claims that what is actually at stake in populism is the constitutive character of the discursive practice: the people is not a pre-existing category, but is formed in the political process. Populism is no longer a transparent medium through which pre-existing identities can be expressed, but rather a performative and articulatory category that constitutes the identity of the actors involved in it. As such, populism is a political logic. But how can political logics be understood, and how can we make sense of them? As opposed to what can we make sense of it? Laclau (2005b: 117) describes social logic as 'involving a rarefied system of statements – that is to say, a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are representable while others are excluded'. On the other hand, political logics are situated at the limits of discourse, or at the point where the contingent nature of discourses and identities is revealed. Political logics are associated with the institution of the social, but become blurred as social logics sediment through time. As Glynos and Howarth suggest (2007: 144), '*political logics thus provide a conceptual vocabulary to show how these limits are constituted, transformed, and absorbed*'.

For Laclau, the basic unit of analysis in the study of populist identities is social demand. People address different types of legitimate demands to the system. Insofar as demands are absorbed, or ignored, or – as in the case of authoritarian regimes – discredited in their isolation or separation from other demands, we can say that the political logic of difference predominates in the discursive space. However, when a certain number of demands are not satisfied they can start developing certain solidarity, and we can say that the political logic of equivalence is in effect. This is especially the case in the context which Gramsci called an organic crisis – a situation in which people abandon their roles and contest the practices they are engaged in, and, eventually becoming part of a chain of equivalence. The logics of difference and equivalence correspond to the syntagmatic/associative axes in Saussurean linguistics. The logic of difference articulates elements combining them into a sequence, the logic of equivalence is about substituting elements. The logic of difference as a way of organizing social life is the ideal of welfare states and post-democracy and presupposes that each

demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way (Laclau 2005a: 38). The logic of equivalence, on the other hand, '*reduces the number of positions that can be combined in a discourse, leading to a paratactical division of the political space that simplifies political struggle into an antagonism between 'us' and 'them', good and evil*' (Stavrakakis 2005: 234).

The logic of equivalence is what Laclau associates with populism – a set of groups, identities, individuals, demands, which despite their differences, become a 'raw material' out of which hegemonic political projects attempt to articulate a new identity that will challenge the status quo. This helps us understand why referents of the signifier 'the people' are contingent and basically dependent on what has been articulated in a chain of equivalences. It also helps us understand why populist phenomena can have different social bases and why populism is not inherently illiberal. The same logic goes for the construction of the enemy of the people – it can include elements as different as the domestic political and intellectual elites, migrants, or international actors such as the Troika or the EU. How is populism different from phenomena such as nationalism, fascism, nativism? What if the people is constructed in racial or ethnic terms and defined not so much against the elites, but intended to scapegoat migrants, refugees, Muslims? Are we – from the point of view of Laclau – still dealing with populism? Laclau's answer would be affirmative, and this is one of the theoretical pitfalls of defining populism in a strictly formal way. Recent additions to the literature by discourse theorists acknowledge the disadvantages of the purely formal approach, suggesting that in determining whether a discourse is populist the position and the meaning of the signifier the people as well as its relation with other signifiers needs to be taken into consideration (Stavrakakis et al. 2014: 20–21). Accordingly, most of the types of populisms in Western Europe with their strong emphasis on xenophobia and race should not be considered populist movements but instead as nationalist.

Defining populism this way has many analytical merits the most important of them being that the ideological content articulated by populism is of secondary importance as long as the ideology/discourse tends to symbolically divide society in two camps by discursively constructing the people. Secondly, the people as a central signifier in the discourse is not a sociological category that simply describes a certain pre-existing existing social reality, but rather a performative one – the very categories are being constructed within the particular discourse through naming. Most importantly it helps to characterize the practices of our protagonists – both the illiberal and authoritarian government and the progressive social movements which contest its authority – as (proto)populist and formally equal. Finally, it accounts for why, in hegemonic struggles, the most important political battle is fought over the (re)definition of signifiers, such as democracy (in our case) or civil society.

4. The protest movements

The following section outlines some of the protest movements which we – for both heuristic and normative reasons – have labelled as the 'first wave progressive' movements which were mobilized against the current VMRO-DPMNE administration. This analysis by no means aims to proclaim that these were the only protest movements or progressive movements in

Macedonia's history as an independent country, but our analysis is focused merely on the 2009–2015 period. The main reason, however, to concentrate on progressive social movements is indeed, the perceived understanding that these are not populist, i.e. that only right wing protest can be populist. In addition, we believe such examples to be very important today, considering the current democratic backlash in the wider CEE region. We consider these movements to be progressive because they are a reaction to right-wing populism and neoliberalism.

The first analysed protest event is the so called 'First Architectonic Uprising', initiated by several non-formal student groups that organized a series of events in opposition to the Governmental plans to reconstruct the city centre and build a church at the main square in Skopje. The contentious events took place on 28 March, 2009. Actually, at that time the contours of 'Skopje 2014' emerged in the public, although the project was not explicitly announced as a large-scale construction venture, but rather implied the erection of several buildings in the downtown area. Most impressionable among the new buildings announced was the construction (revival) of the Church 'Ss. Constantine and Elena' on the central square in Skopje. As soon as they learned about these intentions, a group of students from the Faculty of Architecture in Skopje, accompanied by more experienced activists, started discussing the need for public reaction against the church construction on the designated place. They believed that the proposed construction works were unsuitable and illogical for that public space, they were contrary to the square's purpose, did not allow air circulation, and might present a safety threat (Marusic 2012).

These events were preceded by a public debate at the Cultural Centre 'Tocka' on the church construction. Key-note speakers at this event included Trifun Kostovski, who at that time was the City Mayor and was openly against the church construction; however, the public debate was forcefully disrupted by people wearing religious insignia. After FAB (the First Archi-Brigade) revealed its plans on the social networks, they were joined and supported by the debate organizers. They planned to hold a peaceful protest on 28 March 2009 under the motto 'Don't rape Skopje!'. This protest event, which overlapped with political campaigning for the forthcoming local and presidential elections, was interrupted by a counter-protest of, again, people with religious insignia, followed by violent exchanges between the groups (BalkanInsight 2009).

The second protest movement was a series of mass protests against police brutality that were at that time seen as the most massive civil society protests ever organized in Macedonia. The protests were triggered by a tragic event – the murder of Martin Neskovski, a 22-year-old activist of the ruling party – on the night between the 5th and 6th of June 2011, in the midst of celebrations for VMRO-DPMNE's electoral victory held on the main square in Skopje. In a matter of hours, social networks were flooded with information about a boy being battered by a Ministry of Interior member, although the event was not recorded in the official newsletter issued by the police in Skopje. Initial reports indicated that the boy fell ill and died shortly thereafter, only 2 days later (7 June, 2011). The police admitted that the young man had suffered serious injuries inflicted by a member of the special police task force 'Tiger' (Deutsche Welle Macedonia 2012).

The story was already public and was picked up by the media, together with the deceased's actual name, and young people started gathering at 6 p.m. every day to protest

against attempts to cover up this affair. Later, protesters expanded their demands and included an explicit motion of resignation for Minister of Interior Gordana Jankulovska, the establishment of full accountability among MoI members, disbanding the police task force 'Alpha', as well as increased civil oversight for MoI's actions. With variable intensity, the protests were organized and lasted until the end of summer (Gadzovska Spasovska 2011).

The third protest movement emerged in response to increased electricity and heating prices; it was called AMAN.¹ The first round of protests was held on 14 August 2012 in Skopje, followed by a second round one week later. Soon afterwards, protests were organized in other towns nationwide: Bitola, Kumanovo, Prilep and Tetovo. These protests were organized around the initial demand to reduce electricity and district heating prices to 2008 rates, to re-introduce cheap electricity tariffs, to retract the engaged capacity charge set at 33 % of the electricity bill, to immediately withdraw the new District Heating Rulebook and to reduce oil derivative prices so as to reflect the standard of living in the country (AMAN 2012).

These protests were organized once a week, on Tuesdays, and had different procession routes. According to movement members and participants, their activities were insufficiently covered by the mass media. For that purpose, they organized a gathering in front of the Public Broadcasting Service's building, because the broadcaster had not covered their activities. This protest had a particular motto: 'If they won't come to us, we'll come to them', and used banners with the slogans: 'Enough with the silence', 'No justice, no peace', etc. The protests culminated in February 2013 with the collection of more than 13,000 signatures endorsing the proposed amendments to the Energy Law. The motion presented in the Parliament was expressly denied by the ruling majority. Counter-protests for AMAN were organized under the motto 'Expensive Privatization' expressing dissatisfaction with the 2006 unbundling and privatization of the Electricity Distribution Company (by the previous, Social-Democratic Government) (AMAN 2012).

It was against this dominant illiberal and populist background that these protest movements developed very specific narratives centred on what we call the 'anti-populist rhetorical trap'. Our understanding of the 'anti-populist rhetorical trap' comes from our characterization of the specific anti-populist discourse in Macedonia that we outlined in the beginning of the paper. Traditionally, allegations of populism defined as a broad, but vague appeal to the masses aimed at challenging the status quo were levelled against the authoritarian elite. If the domination of this elite was now to be contested, for whatever reason, the last thing challengers would do was to use its weapons: divisive and vague political rhetoric. The repertoire of rhetorical devices available to challengers was thus significantly affected.

The elite and the loyal intellectuals of the regime took this self-imposed trap into consideration in organizing their practices of denigrating the protests. Roughly, all of the movements were met with suspicion, with their 'authenticity' constantly disputed by the incumbent political party and its media mouthpieces, which in a genuine populist style portrayed any protest as instructed by opposed political elites (Nikolovski 2013). As a result, in framing their actions, these protest movements reacted by spending too much time and energy claiming their 'non-political nature' in a reaction to the language of their populist adversaries. Consequently, they developed a **language of particularism**, hesitating to make broader appeals of solidarity with other social demands and tended to stick solely to their initial demands in an obvious attempt to avoid being placed in a 'political context'

(Nikolovski 2013). In Laclau's (2005b) terms, what these movements failed to do was to extend the chain of equivalences, which are a necessary prerequisite for forming broader social and political identities.

What helped sustain this practice was not only the discursive dimension of the dominant populist logic: the regime didn't hesitate to instigate and even organize **counter-protests**, in an obvious attempt to intimidate the activists and increase the level of political cynicism. The counter-protests have become a distinctive practice of Macedonian contentious politics in the VMRO-DPMNE era, and it is through this practice that 'the people' is enacted and performed. These practices, of course, would have been much more difficult to sustain to this extent, had the merger of the state and the ruling party not been so symbiotic – public servants are often mobilized to perform the people.

Although outnumbered by counter-protestors and despite the fact that they were physically attacked, the countering group, the protestors in the First Architectonic Uprising, were portrayed by the officials and the media as violent provocateurs. The following passage is a citation of the call for counter-protest, publicly voiced by a popular TV host just the night before the protest:

Tomorrow at 12:00 p.m., on the square in Skopje, a gang of gay people and atheists will most likely attempt to spread infamies, under the pretence of caring for city architecture, and will oppose the church construction. Therefore, I and my family will participate in counter-protests organized an hour earlier at 11:00, to express our support for having the church built on the square. (Ignatova 2009)

The passage shows that, what was announced as a protest against the construction of any kind of building at the city square and justified as a defence of a public space against the privatization of the public space, was framed in religious and moralistic terms and packed in an emotionally fuelled appeal to defend the purity of ordinary people against the agenda of liberals. In the aftermath of the violent events, Gordana Jankulovska, the Minister of Interior, issued a statement broadcasted in all media wherein she said that religious followers were provoked by demonstrators opposing the church construction. This immediately implied that the latter were to blame, i.e. they were the actual bullies and provocateurs. A similar explanation was offered by Prime Minister Gruevski, who said that the protests were the doing of Miroslav Grcev, a famous architect and member of the SDSM. Finally, the presence of long-time activists associated with the Foundation Open Society Macedonia, who were commonly called *sorosoids* and portrayed as notorious foreign-financed traitors, was additionally used as arguments by both the media and the incumbent that the protest was 'politicized' and not authentic (Ignatova 2009).

The reaction of the protestors, on the other hand, was threefold. Firstly, they dismissed the 'politization' and 'non-authenticity' allegations by claiming that their protest was neither political nor politicized. Secondly, as witnessed by field researchers, they blamed experienced human rights and democracy activists, who are usually seen as the 'usual suspects' in all protests in Macedonia, for 'politicizing' the rather 'non-political' protest of professional architects. Finally, as stated by one of the interviewed participants, the protestors were bothered by the way media critical to the government reported on the contentious event. He

claimed that A1 TV, the most influential media outlet at the time, framed the contentious event too much in terms of human rights discourse, despite the fact that it was – reportedly – only about opposing the construction of building at the square (Nikolovski 2013).

This sort of blame-game, a scenario of populist labelling and time-consuming reaction to these labels, was the dominant political logic of protest movements in Macedonia up until 2014. We argue that this was a consequence of the very fact that protest movements **internalized the language of their populist political opponents** by insisting on the ‘non-politization’ discourse. In doing so, they weren’t aware that, when populist authorities claim that a certain protest is politicized, they actually mean that it was instigated by the alienated elites that are opposed to the people, not because the facts on the ground offered evidence to justify such a claim, but because of the fact that in populist discourses society is represented as if it is divided in two camps – the people (which is, of course, represented by certain movement, leader, political party) and the elites. In populist discourse, both the people and the elites are not sociological and descriptive categories but rather performative categories which can be expressed in a rather elastic way. In Macedonia, the alienated elites are – of course – embodied by opposition political parties as well as activists and intellectuals labelled as *sorosoids*. Needless to say, any other autonomous demand – such as the demands of the architecture students – can be labelled as such in order to sustain the main social division and fit it into the dominant political logic. Clearly, in Macedonia’s populist discourse, politics is believed to belong only to political parties, whereas other actors, such as protest movements, which are deemed to be par excellence political, are in mature liberal democracies, supposed to be apolitical.

What populist leaders usually do is reinforce the feeling that politics is a dirty business that is run by a handful of individual, professional politicians at the detriment of ordinary people. In doing so, they usually place themselves symbolically and discursively outside the dirty business of politics – populists are not representative of special interests and have a special relation with the people which is not polluted by the institutional constraints of modern politics. In the case of the analysed protest movements, the dominant populist discourse managed to impose the belief that the protestors’ demands had nothing to do with the everyday political sentiments of ordinary people, but were rather part of politics as usual, part of the political struggle between political parties, in which proclaimed autonomous actors are as a matter of fact just the puppets of established political elites. And politics, as the dirty business of political parties, is something that needs to be denounced and denigrated. Far from intending to create an image that conservative civil society can exist as a counterpart to civil society associated with liberalism, human rights and progressivism, the counter-protests are instigated to strengthen the political cynicism of citizens. In other words, the aim is to show that all political parties are equal in their misuse of civic initiatives and that no autonomous demands are possible in society.

In such a discourse, the meaning of key liberal signifiers such as civil society is disputed and much different than in mature liberal democracies. The way illiberal populism managed to alter the meaning of these concepts has pretty much influenced the identity and the appeals of Macedonian protest movements (Petkovski 2014b). It is in this kind of symbolic constellation that protesting against police brutality and calling on high-ranked officials to resign can be perfectly combined with claims of the ‘non-politicized’ nature of

their demands. According to the testimony of one of the interviewed protestors from the AMAN movement during the marches, many of the protestors were hesitant to protest in front of the seats of the Government and the National Assembly because they feared that the protests would be 'politicized' (Nikolovski 2013).

Paradoxically, the claims of 'non-politization' made by the protest movements can be understood as a rhetorical tool for promoting pluralism and reclaiming the politics of difference, as opposed to the imposed equivalence of populists. In this sense, they are aimed at renormalizing the more liberal and pluralistic context in which many of the activists were politically socialized. Yet, apart from being 'mere rhetoric', this narrative had negative implications, such as the focus on particular demands. The fact that the protest movements were much too focused on their particular initial demands (in an attempt to avoid being politicized) prevented them from developing a wider awareness of equivalence with demands of other dissatisfied groups in society. The anti-populist rhetorical trap eventually backfired, which is visible in the fact that no firmer political subjectivity emerged from these protests with rather great potential, such as sustained movement campaigns or more concrete organizations to serve as actors in the formal political arena.

5. Reinventing politics: the discourse of the Student Plenum

It was not before the end of 2014 and the outburst of several protests that social movements in Macedonia managed to reinvent their narratives, making them more suitable for more massive mobilizations articulating broader arrays of dissatisfied voices. Towards the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, at least three more important protest movements emerged: the student movement against the new law on higher education, the 'I Love GTC' (Go Sakam GTC) action to save the current look of the oldest shopping centre in Skopje, and the protests of precarious and contract workers against new taxes levied on them.

The most important of these movements, both in terms of political strategy and the number of participants, was the student movement. The protests started in November 2014 as a reaction to the government's intentions to introduce external, state exams at university. On 10th December 2014, thousands of university and secondary students, citizens and supporters took to the streets in several towns/cities in Macedonia and clearly expressed their 'No' to the governmental plan to introduce external tests. Realistic estimates place over 10,000 protestors at the march in Skopje (0.5% of the total Macedonian population of 2 million), which in fact is the greatest non-partisan, civil society and cross-ethnic mobilization in modern Macedonian history (Marusic 2014). Just a day before the event, Abdulaqim Ademi, the Minister of Education, announced the government's '*determination to introduce a mechanism for controlling the quality of education*' despite the growing dissent coming from the student movement, civil society groups and the partisan opposition over the preceding few weeks. The protestors rallied with slogans and banners in both the Macedonian and Albanian languages which stated 'University is the voice of freedom!', 'No justice, no peace!', 'Autonomy!' and etc. Some banners explicitly ridiculed the pro-governmental media and implicitly criticized the lack of media freedom in the country (Petkovski 2014a).

Just a few days after, PM Nikola Gruevski, the otherwise intransigent populist leader, offered concessions to the students that were seen by them as unprincipled or as a Trojan horse. It was a response to Gruevski's offer that the students decided to occupy several faculties at two of the biggest universities in the country. The occupation lasted until PM Gruevski withdrew the piece of legislation promising wide public consultation prior to adopting the new law (Studentski Plenum 2015a).

Against all odds, the first protest caught the government and its powerful populist media mouthpiece off guard. Both the government and media were unprepared to respond with counter-protests and media assaults at the protestors, tactics – as we saw above – regularly used by the incumbents to silence all forms of opposition no matter how small. Initially, the protest was simply ignored even by the pro-governmental media outlets which are located on the very route of the march. Only on the 20th of November, 2014, following the intense social media campaign ridiculing the ignorance of the authorities, did Prime-Minister Gruevski comment on the demands of the students. Appropriating the language typically used by his civil society opponents, Mr. Gruevski reassured the students that no final decision would be made before a wider public debate and consultation session took place, thus affirming that the students had the right to protest and to express their opinion. He also made a promise to the students that the new legislation would not be applicable to students currently enrolled in universities, but only to the future generations. In contrast, his media backers relied on well-established propaganda techniques. In their commentaries and reports, photos from the protest were posted and the faces of individual protesters allegedly belonging to the opposition parties and the scapegoated *sorosoids* – civil society groups associated with the infamous *Foundation Open Society Macedonia*, were marked with red rings. The purpose was straightforward – to discredit the protests by alluding to their politicized nature and denying their authenticity (Petkovski 2014a).

In the following days, conditions for the rise of a more extensive movement were gradually created. Subjecting the propaganda to mockery and ironic comments, many students and supporters changed their Facebook profile pictures and marked themselves with the notorious red rings. 'I think, therefore I am marked' became the slogan around which the symbolic protest was condensed. The so-called Student Plenum – the informal core group of protesting students with rather different, but mainly leftist worldviews – which organized the symbolic production of the movement, very prudently articulated its political demands, calling upon wider social solidarity. The Student Plenum took advantage of Mr. Gruevski's indecent promise to apply the tests only to future generations and invited high school students to stand up for their rights (Petkovski 2014a).

It was both the dominant populist political logic as well as the usual 'anti-populist rhetorical trap' that were challenged by the symbolic production of the Student Plenum. Unlike the fascination with the particularism of previous protests movements, the Student plenum understood that solidarity with other groups is one of the preconditions for wider and more sustainable mobilizations. In other words, they engaged in a symbolic struggle over the redefinition of some of the key signifiers in a democratic society such as 'politics' (which is seen in Macedonia as a realm belonging exclusively to political parties), 'democracy' (which in the dominant populist discourse is considered to be a matter of exclusively majoritarian preferences), 'civil society' (which is supposed to be 'apolitical' according to dominant

frames in society), etc. The meticulously formulated narrative of the student movement which emphasizes its political and cross-political-party character (not the *non-political*, as various protest leaders had in the past) demonstrated that times of political immaturity of Macedonian protest movements were long gone.

This can be well discerned if we analyse a short document called 'Stop Discrediting Us – We are Politicized but not Particized' drafted by the Student Plenum, as a response to the 'politization' allegations voiced by the incumbent elites and their media mouthpieces. The following passage is instructive of this narrative – instead of being caught off guard when blamed for being politicized, as movements had in the past, the Student Plenum turned this logic upside-down:

Having in mind that there have been many attempts (by the media, structures and individuals) to discredit the activity of the Student Plenum by reference to its alleged political background, we would like to look at two things. First, politicization is not equivalent to partization – the march is *de facto* a political act (man is a political being, functioning in society), but not partisan. Do you really think party politics is the only thing that instigates legitimate social engagement? (Studentski Plenum 2015b)

The more the authorities turned a blind eye to their demands and the more their media mouthpieces labelled the students as instructed, the more the student movement developed awareness about the equivalence of their demands with the demands of other protesting groups. The emergence of the student movement coincided with the emergence of several other protest movements. Precarious and contract workers took to the Skopje streets on several occasions, in opposition to the plans of the Government to impose higher taxes on honoraria (Nova 2015). Simultaneously, there was a strong grassroots mobilization of citizens against the plans of the Government to continue with the Skopje 2014 project. This project was initially supposed to give the city a facelift, but later turned out to be a gigantic neoclassical and baroque beautification project that has caused much controversy. The protest movement 'I love GTC' was organized against the idea of the authorities to refurbish the open shopping mall (GTC), which is the last piece of postmodern architecture in the city centre. The Student Plenum clearly endorsed the agendas of these protest movement, calling for solidarity with their demands and claiming that they were all part of the same struggle or, in terms of discourse theory, the same chain of equivalences, which is – formally put – a populist one.

A survey of the participants in the student protests showed that 40% had also participated in the 'I love GTC' protests, while 36% of students took part in the contract workers protests. Another 15% of the respondents also took part in the protests against police brutality in 2011. Asked about how they see the future of the student movement, almost half of the respondents claimed it should either 'start dealing with other, more general topics, such as freedom, social justice and democracy in Macedonia, because only through tackling these issues, the problems of students would be solved' or that it 'should be a political movement that tackles all societal problems and to join forces with all other social movements sharing similar objectives' (Babunski et al. forthcoming).²

It is through the trajectory of the narrative of the Student Plenum that the way populist discourses develop can be discerned. Beginning as a normal, issue-based movement

focused on one demand, the SP was met with practices of denigration such as ignorance, labelling and media attacks. Instead of acting defensively by denying allegations of politization, the movement got involved in a democratic and discursive struggle to reclaim politics and redefine the meaning of the dominant signifiers produced to keep a status quo. At a certain point, a feeling of solidarity emerged with other movements and their demands. Despite their differences, they were all against the status quo and had the same enemy. Of course, tensions always exist within a wider movement, but the logic of equivalence was prevalent. The biggest challenge to Gruevski's illiberal populism came from the formally populist, but substantively liberal, and progressive movement.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at one example of populist government in CEE, how it dealt with challenges from social movements, and how, consequently, social movements adapted their discourses to this stimuli. It is by no means an exhaustive field of research, but readers can notice many similarities with other countries in the region which face similar hardships of illiberal democracy.

We sought to examine how progressive protest movements in Macedonia acted within a setting of governmentally imposed 'anti-populist rhetorical trap'. We analysed the evolution of the discourse of protest movements from a narrative focused on particular demands to a more inclusive framing of their actions which certainly represents a step towards creating the conditions of possibility for the rise of broader political identities. We saw how the three initial movements – the First Architectonic Uprising, the anti-police brutality protests, and the AMAN initiative – internalized the language favoured by the governing party when it came to non-partisan social engagement. In this setting, every social engagement outside of party politics was deemed inauthentic and unworthy. In turn, the movements reacted by insisting on their non-politization and particularistic demands.

The student protests, however, successfully managed to escape this trap. By labelling themselves as political, yet not partisan, they reclaimed politics and engaged in a symbolic struggle over the redefinition of some of the key signifiers in society such as 'politics' (which is seen in Macedonia as a realm belonging exclusively to political parties), 'democracy' (which in the dominant populist discourse is considered to be a matter of exclusively majoritarian preferences), and 'civil society' (which is supposed to be 'apolitical' according to dominant frames in society). In addition, they developed a wider solidarity, a chain of equivalence with other social movements, all united against the authoritarian regime. As such, they showed that even in the context of hybrid, competitive authoritarian regimes such as Macedonia, radically democratic and inclusive social movements can open up the political space, encouraging citizens to join democratic struggles. Politics, now, according to the activists, belongs to all citizens, not just to political parties. Civil society is no longer equated with technocratic and apolitical NGOs, but is a space open to the contestation of many social actors, both formal and informal, which experiment with participatory democracy. Finally, democracy is not just about election and majoritarian preference, as illiberal

populists believe it is, but it is equally about direct participation, challenging authorities and as such should be practiced on a daily basis.

Footnotes:

1. Roughly, *aman* in Macedonian means 'it's enough'. Interestingly, the word is *turcicism* – it is of Ottoman origin.
2. Forthcoming. The data comes from an online survey that the authors conducted in March 2015, but which has not been published yet.

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