Populism, Voters and Cleavages in Bulgarian Politics*

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Abstract

The growing success of populist parties from across the political spectrum in Europe calls for an examination of the link between populist parties and voters and the new (if new indeed) cleavages that such parties exploit. Scholars have pointed to the erosion of traditional cleavages as one reason for the success of populist parties. Such analysis fits well with the established democracies of Europe but has little application in the East European context. Traditional cleavages have taken root in few places in Eastern Europe before communist takeover and became even less relevant following four and a half decades of communist rule. With the fall of communist regimes across Eastern Europe, the only meaningful division within society was that of anti-communists and supporters of the old regime. Similarly, concepts of Left and Right had (and to a great extend continue to have) little relevance in the East European context where the Left came to be dominated by former communist parties and the Right engulfed an ideologically incoherent opposition. The stronger the former communists were (such as in Bulgaria and Romania) the more fragmented the Right was, as it was the only available space for political competition. The present paper aims to examine voter support for populist parties in Bulgaria and analyze on the cleavages that those parties exploit or create. Thus, the paper examines the impact of populist parties on the political landscape in terms of the changes that those parties result in in voter behavior and cleavage formation. The paper utilizes exit-poll surveys, focusing on voter demographic profiles and the mobility of the vote. The findings indicate that populist parties are most successful in mobilizing non-voters when they first appear, but that their support quickly wanes afterwards. At the same time, there is voter mobility from one populist party to a newer populist party, which makes for a prolong trend of populist politics.

Keywords: voters; populism; cleavages; Eastern Europe; Bulgaria

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1. Introduction

In a recent study examining scholarship on populism, Pappas (2015) identifies several challenges and shortcomings of current and previous scholarship. One of his critiques points to the neglect by scholars of micro-mechanisms utilized by populist parties and movements, such as charismatic leadership, symbolic framing, political polarization, patronage politics,

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and social mobilization. This article aims to explore one of those mechanisms, namely voter mobilization, as well as voter characteristics. Rather than asking how parties mobilize voters, I explore whether populist parties in Bulgaria mobilize voters in the first place and who those voters are. Though modest in its objective, the article aims to shift the focus from what populism is to what it rests upon and move from an emphasis on leaders and elites to that of voters and supporters. If we indeed accept Takki's minimalist definition of populism as 'democratic illiberalism', the context in which populist parties operate is procedural democracy. In other words, populist parties need to attract voters and win elections. Thus, voters constitute a major part of the phenomenon. The article proceeds as follows: first, I examine research on populism and cleavages, then I examine cleavages and political dynamics in Bulgaria, last I examine voter data, including demographic characteristics, mobility of the vote, and voter attitudes.

2. Populism and cleavages East and West

The rising Euroscepticism and the growing success of both right- and left-wing radical parties in Europe calls for greater emphasis on participants as opposed to leaders in examining the link between populist parties and voters and the new cleavages that such parties exploit. Scholars have pointed to the weakened links between parties and voters (Jones 2007) and the erosion of traditional cleavages (Bornschier 2010) as key reasons for what Mudde terms the populist *zeitgeist* (2004). Jones argues that political parties have become weaker both organizationally and in their control over the electorate, and 'while the emergence of populists is often a sudden, dramatic event, the weakening of political parties has progressed slowly across time.' (Jones 2007: 41). Bornschier (2010) in turn argues that right-wing populism is a result of the evolution of the class cleavage into a state-market cleavage and the religious cleavage into a new cultural cleavage, as well as the dominance of the cultural cleavage over the state-market cleavage. Economic preferences play no role in the mobilization of the populist right; it is the new cultural cleavage pitting traditionalist-communitarian values against universalistic-individualistic values that mobilizes voters. In this new cultural conflict, right-wing populists defend traditional norms over abstract universalistic principles, arguing that multicultural society destroys the 'organically grown' national community by diluting traditional norms. Furthermore, majority decisions (the people) stand above supranational bodies (the EU) and universalistic principles. Unlike racism, such cultural differentialism is hard to discard, attracting voters with an ever-broader demographic profile. It is not the marginalized and unemployed that are attracted, Bornschier argues, the working class has become the core clientele of right wing populist parties (Bornschier 2010: 26).

Other scholarship questions the link between populist parties and the erosion of traditional cleavages. In examining the impact of right-wing populist parties on European voters, Mudde (2013) disagrees that such parties change voters' issue positions and priorities by shifting the gravitational center of public opinion to the right. While the salience of 'populist radical right issues', such as immigration, crime, corruption and European integration,

has increased, this is hardly due to right-wing populism. The public attitudes of many Europeans, Mudde argues, were already in line with the basic tenets of the populist radical right ideology (even if in a more moderate form) (Mudde 2013: 7). Schmitter, in turn, puts the emphasis back on the leader by defining populism as a political movement that draws its support across or with disregard for the cleavages that are embodied in existing political formations, by focusing on its leader who claims to be able to resolve a package of issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded (Schmitter 2007: 6). Hence, the success of populist movements depends primarily on the qualities of the leader and his/her charisma.

The debate on populist parties and cleavages is even more complicated in the East European context. As Deegan-Krause (2007) points out, the first challenge is to establish whether any form of cleavage exists in the region. With the exception of the ethnic cleavage which (where applicable) exhibits all three elements of a cleavage as defined by Bartolini and Mair (1990), other lines of opposition in Eastern Europe represent issue divides but not full cleavages.

Several factors can help explain the lack of full cleavages in Eastern Europe. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I will list some of the most obvious ones. First is the historical background of the region and the different nature and timing of the 'critical junctures' responsible for the traditional cleavages, i.e. national and industrial revolutions took place later and at different times. Hence, traditional cleavages as defined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have taken root in few places in Eastern Europe before communist takeover and became even less relevant following four and a half decades of communist rule. Second is the weak grounding of political parties. With the exception of former communist parties, few parties in Eastern Europe enjoy a strong and durable social base. Lipset (2000) blames this particularity on the lack of institutionalized class conflict in Eastern Europe. Recent studies also corroborate this argument, finding little evidence of class cleavages in Eastern Europe (Gijsberts, Nieuwbeerta 2000; Zielinski 2002). Third, voters are often unable to translate their policy preferences into party preferences (Gijsberts, Nieuwbeerta 2000), which may be due both to political and economic instability and the type of political culture. Such arguments notwithstanding, patterns do emerge and there is a degree of regularity and consistency in the behavior of East European voters.

Two of the most widely acknowledged opposition lines in Eastern Europe are the regime divide (Kitschelt et al. 1999) and the winner-loser divide (Tucker et al. 2002; Stanley 2011; Karasimeonov 2010). The regime divide (also termed ideological or communist-anti-communist divide) was particularly dominant in the early years of the transition. The winner-loser divide (also termed transition or economic divide) became dominant when political and economic change began to take effect. Deegan-Krause (2007) further identifies a cultural divide (fundamentalism-liberalism) and a nationalism issue divide (viewing minority rights in the context of national security and sovereignty) in addition to the authoritarianism-democracy and the economic divides. Mudde (2003) argues for a dominant center-periphery divide that uniquely combines cultural and economic divides. The periphery, for example, includes rural areas but also urban wastelands, a legacy of communist production.

Scholarship has further focused on the role of agency in cleavage formation, a question of particular importance in transitioning societies. In his study of the Hungarian par-

ty Fidesz, Enyedi (2005) has examined the degree to which parties can influence cleavage formation by restructuring relations within the party system and creating new associations between party preferences, socio-structural categories and attitudes. He argues that cleavages result 'from the interplay between three factors: political entrepreneurs, the prepolitical preferences and structures of a society (the raw material political entrepreneurs work with), and the constraining institutional structure' (Enyedi 2005: 700). Deegan-Krause (2006) similarly argues that elites have the ability to uniquely combine issue dimensions into over-arching divides or cleavages. Such arguments have been widely acknowledged in elite theory which argues that the actions of elites are far more consequential in determining political outcomes, particularly in transitioning societies (Higley, Burton 1989). If indeed elites are capable of shaping party systems and even preventing social structure from manifesting itself in politics, as Bornschier (2009: 7) argues, different elite configurations are expected to yield different transition outcomes, including different party systems and division lines. Hence, we cannot expect to observe uniform cleavages and divides across East European countries. Zielinski, for example, argues that party coalition formation in the early years of the transition was crucial for determining outcome. By contract, in Western party systems where cleavages are 'frozen', party coalition formation is far less consequential (Zielinski 2002).

Few studies touch upon the question of cleavages and populist parties in Eastern Europe. Mudde (2003), for example, expects EU membership to deepen the center-periphery divide and result in a 'populist center-periphery cleavage'. In his view, 'EU membership decreases the political costs of Euroscepticism, as the EU can be now criticized without the risk of having to pay the ultimate penalty (i.e., being turned down for membership)' (Mudde 2003: 7). Consequently, political parties are more likely to exploit existing Eurosceptic sentiments. Indeed, such a scenario is confirmed by the case of the Bulgarian Ataka – a nationalist and populist party, exhibiting both extreme left and extreme right views and being starkly anti-EU. Kavalski (2004), in turn, argues that EU membership is likely to strengthen the elite-mass cleavage, as the values promoted by the EU in elite policy-making remain abstract concepts rather than tangible points of reference for the majority of citizens. Consequently, a clash between the accession priorities and macroeconomic stability emphasized by the elites and the rising insecurity and decline in economic well-being for the majority of citizens is inevitable. Kanev and Hristova-Valtcheva (2016) argue for lack of political polarization on EU agenda issues and low salience of EU-related issues. In another study, Smilov (2008) views populism as an attempt to transcend the established cleavages and divisions among 'mainstream' political parties, such as the 'left v. right', or the 'ex–communists v. transition democrats'. He argues that the success of the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) in the 2001 Bulgarian elections is due to the ability of NDSV to appeal to the people as whole, sidetracking existing cleavages and divides. It is exactly this ideological 'minimalism' that allows such parties to reach across division lines and attract a different group of voters. Other scholars argue for a populist mobilization (Jansen 2011) and the ability of populist parties to mobilize previously apathetic and passive citizens (Schmitter 2007).

3. Cleavages and political dynamics in Bulgaria following the collapse of communism

Among the countries of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria was known as the most trusted Soviet ally (twice applying to become the USSR's sixteenth republic) and the country that most closely replicated the Soviet model of one-party rule, centrally-planned economy, nationalization of property, collectivization of agriculture, and control over cultural and social life. Bulgaria was also the country with the longest-standing communist dictator, Todor Zhivkov, who held power for 35 years and until the very end of communist rule. Furthermore, Bulgaria experienced a very weak, belated, and poorly organized dissident movement that did not pose serious challenges to the regime.

Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that Bulgaria emerged from communist rule with a very strong *nomenklatura* elite and a weak and poorly organized opposition. Bulgaria was one of the two countries where the former communist party, renamed the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), won the first democratic elections. Bulgaria was also the only country to start the transition with a constitutional assembly whose main task was the drafting of a new constitution – a process that took a lot of time and energy away from more immediate concerns and one that was dominated by the former communists who held a majority in the first democratically elected parliament.

Politics in the 1990s was characterized by a power struggle between the former communists (BSP) and the democratic opposition (the Union of Democratic Forces – UDF), with outcomes often being determined by a third actor – the ethnic Turkish Party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which would strategically ally with one side or the other, often determining political outcomes (Zankina 2010). This 'regularized' switch of power was combined with unprecedented economic decline and great political instability that resulted in nine governments in the first seven years of the transition and a banking and financial crisis coupled with a hyperinflation of over 300% in 1996. Lack of effective lustration policies further solidified the position of the former *nomenklatura*, deprived the population from knowing the truth and coming to terms with the past, and fed various conspiracy theories about the role of the former secret service.[1] In addition, the lack of open access to the secret service files made it possible for numerous *kompromat*, which would pop up throughout the years, especially around election times.

The bipolar political model, as Bulgarian scholars (Karasimeonov 1998; Spirova 2007; Kanev, Hristova-Valtcheva 2016) and politicians refer to this period, rested upon the main divide within society at the time – that between former communists and anti-communists. Traditional labels of Left and Right had little applicability in the Bulgarian context, where the Left came to be dominated by the former communist party, hence symbolizing the status-quo and the old regime. The Right, in turn, was the only available ideological space for party competition. In the first years it was represented by an umbrella organization, the UDF, which consisted of an ideological mish-mash – from a green party to a republican party, with anti-communism being the only unifying element. This ideological incongruence, coupled with the domination of the Left by the former communists, would eventually lead to a complete disintegration of the Right in the following decade, with numerous in-

ternal splits, regroupings and new actors, all of whom competing to the Right. Aside from the BSP, which relied on its communist-era structures, parties were of the elite type, having little grounding in society – they hardly represented voter preferences and did not enjoy large membership. Party organizations were weak with no stable internal procedures either for recruitment or nomination of candidates. Given the political instability, government policy in that period changed direction with every new government and switched back and forth between the de-communization agenda and the shock therapy of the UDF and BSP's gradualism approach, and forgive and forget rhetoric. The result was low trust in political parties and mass disillusionment both with the BSP and the UDF.

After a decade of political instability and economic hardship, Bulgarians were overcome by transition fatigue, disillusioned with politicians, and impatient with the democratic process. They were looking for a savior. It was at this moment that the former king, Simeon II of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha made his precipitous appearance (Gurov, Zankina 2013). Exiled by the newly established communist regime in 1946 at the age of nine, Simeon ultimately settled in Spain, becoming the symbol of the lost monarchy and Bulgaria's brief pre-communist experience with democracy. He returned to Bulgaria in 2001, several months before the parliamentary elections, to form a party in his name (NDSV) that scored an unexpected victory with 43% of the votes and proceeded to head a coalition government. His return to Bulgarian politics abruptly did away with the bipolar political model, marking the birth of populism in post-communist Bulgarian politics and legitimizing the personalist party model. Following Simeon's unprecedented success, many parties and leaders adopted the populist/personalist formula. This led to a fragmented and unstable party system marked by internal divisions, regroupings and political nomadism. The nationalist ATAKA (Attack) party made it to parliament in 2005, and in 2009, replicating Simeon's success, the recently-formed populist GERB won the elections. NDSV and GERB represent a new brand of populism rather different from the radical right-wing populism witnessed across Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. This brand of 'soft populism', as Smilov and Krastev (2008) term it, utilizes a more moderate and distinctly pro-EU (though still clearly populist) rhetoric that appeals to the mainstream voters. Hence, NDSV and GERB enjoyed much broader support which allowed them to win elections and form governments.

This trend of new parties riding on big promises had an effect on voting behavior as well. Voters became less mature in their choices, continuously looking for the next savior, and less patient with government performance, ousting incumbent governments and frequently switching party affiliations. The 2008 global economic crisis has also led to increased nationalist sentiments and rising Euroscepticism, increasing the number of nationalist parties (two such political formations were represented in the 2014 parliament) and deepening the nationalist-EU divide.

3.1. Political engagement

Political engagement during communism was forced and regimented. Following the collapse of communism and the end of political repression, political participation reached its peak. The first free elections registered voter activity of over 90%. There were frequent demonstrations, marches, and strikes, gathering people in the thousands. Opposition parties

were building a membership body, whereas the former communist party experienced a sharp drop in membership, as a large portion of its members reverted to the opposition. The excitement gradually subsided as subsequent governments failed to bring about economic reform and assure political stability. Disillusionment turned into apathy, leading to a constant decrease in voter turnout, reaching a record low of 48.66% in the 2014 elections (see table 1). Decreasing voter activity has been attributed to transition fatigue and disillusionment with corrupt politicians. It has also been a source of great concern, posing questions of democratic deficit, effect of vote buying, and the legitimacy of the political establishment.

Party membership is not common among Bulgarians. Before the collapse of communism, the Bulgarian Communist Party had a membership of 1 million from an 8 million population. The high number, however, was a function of the fact that the Party was the main avenue for professional development. Currently, party members of all parties combined number 350,000 and the membership of the former communists (BSP) has shrunk to under 150,000 members. The early opposition barely gathers 20,000 members today, whereas new parties such as GERB attract about 80,000 members.[2] Overall, parties have adopted a strategy of voter mobilization around elections, not relying as much on membership. Populist parties, such as the NDSV in 2001 and GERB in 2009, have managed to mobilize voters more effectively, resulting in a slight increase in voter activity. At the same time, the success of populist parties has been coupled with an increased share of undecided voters at the expense of a decrease of loyal supporters for any party. This has led to great political instability and the unpredictability of political processes, as with every new election a new populist party appears, attracting a portion of the undecided electorate.

Protest voting has been the norm in Bulgaria. Bulgarians do not vote governments in, they vote them out. For the 25 years of free elections, no single party has been able to win elections and form a government twice in a row. In addition, the electorate has become more and more fragmented, which has also resulted in a more fragmented parliament (8 political formations in the current parliament), greater difficulty in forming government coalitions, and, therefore, political instability.

Bulgarians do not have a culture of protest or at least not to the extent that the French, for example, have. There have been three waves of political protests since the fall of communism. The first wave followed the collapse of the communist regime. Those were the most massive and inspired protests, unleashing long-repressed political energy. The second wave of protests was triggered by the 1996 severe banking and financial crises and led to the resignation of the BSP government. These protests truly mark a breakpoint in Bulgarian politics. They put an end to inconsistent foreign and domestic policy by bringing about the first government to fulfill its 4-year mandate and decisively reoriented the country towards the Euro-Atlantic partnership. The last wave of protests was the longest, lasting almost uninterruptedly for two and a half years. It included anti- and pro-government protests, making political and economic demands. The global economic crisis and endemic corruption have been the main triggers of the protests. This last wave also showed a different culture of protesting and organizing. Protesters effectively used social networks to organize and invented creative ways of protest, including improvised performances and enactments, masks, symbols and more. The protests further evolved into a number of civil society organizations with genuine links to society.

Until the latest wave of protests, civil society organizing has been rather week. For over a decade, civil society organizations were financed externally and promoted an imported agenda. As a result, grassroots organizations were slow to emerge, leaving the third sector largely divorced from domestic constituencies and concerns. The latest wave of protests has had a very positive effect on grassroots organizing. Civil society organizations have reached deeper in society and have started to forward agendas dictated from below.

Increasing civil society mobilization, however, is coupled with an ever-decreasing voter turnout. This speaks of a wider gap between social strata and the various ways in which these strata engage politically, as well as of ever greater doubts about the ability of common people to influence political outcomes.

3.2. Cleavages

Before communist rule, some of the traditional cleavages, namely center-periphery and urban-rural divides, had taken root in Bulgaria. A strong agrarian party advocating agrarian populism served to solidify such divide, whereas the communist party was less successful in exploiting the class divide (Karasimeonov 1998). Following 45 years of communist rule, these historical cleavages were almost completely erased as testified to by the failure of the reconstituted agrarian party and social-democratic party to muster political support in the post-communist context.

Following the collapse of communism, the ideological divide of communists-anti-communists dominated the political landscape. The high polarization of both elites and voters along this line led to subsuming regional and socio-economic divides under the umbrella of the ideological clash (Karasimeonov 2010). The dominant ideological divide had specific geopolitical, cultural and socio-economic dimensions that resulted in diametrically opposed positions on specific policies: lustration or not, shock therapy vs. gradualism, restitution vs. mass privatization, Russia vs. West, etc. In addition to the ideological divide, an ethnic cleavage mobilized the ethnic Turkish minority but had little influence on the rest of the population.

The end of the bipolar political model and the rise of populism signaled a weakening of the ideological divide and the rise of an elite-mass or competence divide, a result of mass disillusionment with politics and politicians, which has several dimensions such as social justice and corruption. While the ideological divide remained relevant for many supporters of the former communist party, voters to the right were mostly focused on a debate over competence – the old corrupt elite vs. the new 'clean' savior embodied by the newest populist party and, with the latest protests, the party system vs. a form of party-less citizen democracy. A major reason for the weakening of the ideological divide among voters to the right is the fact that the main goals of the anti-communist camp were achieved, i.e. NATO and EU memberships. The right, in the face of UDF and its off-shoot parties, failed to articulate a new agenda thus allowing populist parties to capture its voters. The competence divide, however, has not become as dominant as the ideological divide once was. The emergence of the nationalist-EU divide and the resurfacing of the geopolitical divide have prevented the deepening of the competence divide. Hence, today we observe a more fragmented constellation of opposition lines with ever more fluid support for any of those lines.

4. Data, method and findings

This is exploratory research that aims to examine the success of populist parties in Bulgaria by looking at voter demographics, preferences, and behavior. The starting assumption is that populist parties mobilize non-voters and this is key to their success. The goal of the paper is to examine this assumption by utilizing exit poll data on the mobility of the vote, electoral data, and focus group research data. The paper further questions whether populist parties exploit new cleavages and divides, such as the competence divide, and whether supporters of populist parties differ in demographic character from supporters of mainstream parties.

Exit poll data and voter demographic data for 2001–2014 was obtained from Alpha Research, one of the largest and most reliable polling agencies in the country. Since the first major populist party in Bulgaria appeared shortly before the 2001 parliamentary elections, earlier data was not examined. In addition, focus group research was carried out by the author with two groups of ten people each divided into age cohorts. The goal of the focus group research is to examine differences in attitudes among young people born after the fall of communism and older people who were politically socialized under communism.

The data indicates that the 'soft' populists (NDSV and GERB) mobilize the largest percentage of previous non-voters, ranging from almost a quarter to over a half of previous non-voters. For example, in 2001 NDSV attracted 51.6% of the previous non-voters and in 2005 (when it fared much worse in the elections) – 23.8%. GERB, in turn, attracted 30.3% of the previous non-voters in the 2009 EU Parliament elections and 47.4% in the 2009 national parliamentary election.[3] In addition, voter turnout tends to rise in the elections won by the 'soft' populists, but subsides to previous levels in subsequent elections. Moreover, the 'soft' populists attract the largest number and percent of voters when they first appear, but their votes decrease with every subsequent election. This is particularly true of NDSV and to a lesser degree for GERB. In 2001, NDSV received over 2 million votes and by the 2014 election its support had shrunk to under 8,000 votes. GERB has managed to contain the loss of support from 1.7 million in 2009 to a little over a million in 2014. What may account for the virtual disappearance of NDSV and the relative success of GERB to maintain support beyond the initial victory is the different trajectory of party evolution. NDSV started as a party in office centered around its leader, without a party on the ground. GERB started in exactly the same way but took active steps to develop a party on the ground, with stable recruitment mechanisms and incentive structures. NDSV has failed to do so.

The second major pool for the 'soft' populists are right and center-right parties, as well as other populist parties. In 2001, for example, NDSV attracted 38.6% of UDF voters. In the 2009 EUP elections, GERB stole almost 20% of both UDF and NDSV voters, and in the 2009 national parliamentary elections 25.8% of NDSV voters and over 30% of voters of new and smaller populist parties such as Order, Law and Justice (OLJ). Yet, the 'soft' populists are also very successful with left voters. For example, in 2001 NDSV attracted 18% of the voters who supported the BSP in the previous election and 37% of those who supported the Euroleft (and BSP splinter party). In 2013, GERB attracted 7.2% of previous BSP voters.

There are no distinct patterns when it comes to the populist radical right Ataka or the smaller populist parties such as Order, Law and Justice (OLJ) or Bulgaria without Censor-

Table 1: Voter turnout at parliamentary elections

	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2014
% voted	90.6%	83.87%	75.23%	58.86%	**67.03%**	55.76%	**60.64%**	52.49%	48.66%
Total voted	6,333,334	5,694,842	5,264,614	4,291,258	**4,607,769**	3,747,793	**4,323,581**	3,632,953	3,500,585
NDSV	–	–	–	–	1,952,513 42.74%	725,314 19.88%	127,470 3.02%	57,611* 1.63%	7,917 0.24%
GERB	–	–	–	–	–	–	**1,678,641** **39.72%****	1,081,605 30.54%	1,072,491 32.67%
Ataka	–	–	–	–	–	296,848 8.14%	395,733 9.36%	258,481 7.30%	148,262 4.52%
OLJ	–	–	–	–	–	–	174,582 4.13%	59,145 1.67%	–
BBTs	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	186,938 5.69%

In bold: voter turnout results in years when populist parties won the elections and an increase in voter turnout compared to the previous election was observed.

* In coalition with the 'Freedom and Dignity' Party.

** Of the proportionate vote plus 26 of the 31 majoritarian seats.

Source: 2005–2014, Central Electoral commission. 1990–2001, IPU.

Table 2: Voter turnout at EU Parliament elections

	2007	2009	2014
% voted	28.6%	37.49%	35.84%
Total voted	1,937,696	2,576,434	2,361,943
NDSV	121,3986.27%	205,146 (7.96%)	20,487* (0.92%)
GERB	420,001 (21.68%)	627,693 (24.36%)	680,838 (30.4%)
Ataka	275,237 (14.20%)	308,052 (11.96%)	66,210 (2.96%)
BBTs Coal.	–	–	238,629 (10.66%)
OLJ	9,147 (0.47%)	120,280 (4.67%)	–

* In coalition

Source: Bulgarian Electoral Commission (www.cik.bg)

ship (BBTs), renamed Bulgarian Democratic Center (BBTs). In 2005, Ataka attracted 13% of non-voters, 20.5% of voters for small parties, and 10% of NDSV voters. OLJ and BBTs seem to rely primarily on swing voters and there are no clear patterns.

Data further shows almost no mobility of the ethnic vote and very little mobility of the left-wing vote. By contrast, there is a high rate of voter mobility to the center and the right. Thus, the ethnic divide is the only predictor of Turkish minority voting behavior. The ideological divide remains dominant for left-wing voters and defines voter preferences to the right to the extent that those voters do not vote for the BSP, but is otherwise a weak predictor for right-wing voter behavior.

A look at demographic data shows that populist parties tend to be more successful in attracting young voters. In 2009, GERB attracted almost half of the voters under 30 years old and almost half of those between 31–40 years old (demographic data not presented in the appendix). In 2001, NDSV attracted 38% of the voters under 30 and 40% of the voters aged 31–40. This may explain the high-rate of previous non-voters, but the question why other parties are not attracting young voters still remains. For example, in 2013 BSP attracted 44.9% of voters over 60 years old. NDSV also proved the most successful in attracting the unemployed in 2001 (40.1%), but this pattern is not consistent over time. Besides age, supporters of the 'soft' populists do not have distinct characteristics and tend to be evenly distributed across large cities, small cities, and villages, across occupations, and across gender. The populist radical right Ataka, however, shows a clear gender gap, with twice as many men among its supporters compared to women. Furthermore, Ataka attracts fewer voters with higher education. Such findings only confirm what we already know about populist radical right parties in the West, which by definition are *Männerparteien* that are predominantly led by, represented by, and supported by men (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2015).

Focus group research indicates sharp generational differences. In the older group I observe a highly polarized, even hostile, ideological divide between communists and anti-communists and a very well-pronounced authoritarianism-democracy divide (an argument also supported in Deegan-Krause 2007). Socio-economic divides seem to be less significant, but what is noticeable is a divide among voters and non-voters. The young group, by contrast, demonstrates no ideological divide nor an authoritarian-democracy divide. Young people seem to care little about politics but to have internalized democratic values. Some of them vote based on family background, but there is no divide among voters and non-voters as all participants in the group vote. The main focus for the young is the divide on competence. They get mobilized in order to oust the incompetent as indicated by their participation in protests and their practicing of protest voting.

5. Conclusions

This initial inquiry into the voter support for populist parties in Bulgaria and the link between those parties and new cleavages yielded several conclusions. 'Soft' populists are much more successful than radical right populists and their supporters have similar demographic profiles to that of supporters of mainstream parties. 'Soft' populists tend to produce a 'flash' effect, whereby they are most effective in mobilizing non-voters when they first appear. Yet, their support decreases with subsequent elections, even when they have managed to win those elections, as is the case with GERB in 2013 and 2014. At the same time, the decreasing electoral support for any individual populist party coupled with significant vote mobility from one populist party to another, usually newer, populist party indicate that although the success of any individual populist party is short-lived, there is a lasting populist trend. 'Soft' populists seem to disregard existing cleavages in society and aim to construct new opposition lines along which to mobilize voters. In that way they not only attract non-voters, but fragment support for mainstream parties rendering old divides irrelevant. In the Bulgarian

case, those new divides seem to be competence and performance on valence issues. Such findings confirm previous studies which argue that populists mobilize previously apathetic and passive citizens (Jansen 2011) and that Bulgarian populist parties reach across division lines (Smilov 2008). Data also shows the populist radical right in Bulgaria to exhibit similar characteristics in terms of voter support to its Western counterparts, relying mainly on male voters. These initial findings call for further and more rigorous examination of the stipulated competence divide, as well as a cross-country comparison with other cases of 'soft' populism.

Footnotes:

1. During its rule, the UDF put forward three lustration legislative proposals which were blocked by the Constitutional Court. As revealed by the secret service files, three of the constitutional court judges at the time were secret service 'agents' or in other words recruited and affiliated with the former state security services.
2. Trud. 2012. '350,00 Българи в партиите', [350,000 Bulgarians Party Members]. *Trud*. 12th November 2012 (http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1632304).
3. The second survey was conducted with regard to previous voting behavior on the EUP elections, which generally have a lower turnout rate.

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Appendix: Exit Poll Data, Alpha Research

Parliamentary elections 2001

Exit poll		How did you vote today?																	
		BSP (Coalition 'For Bulgaria'		UnDF		Coalition 'Gergyovden-IMRO'		Coalition 'BEL-BSDP, BAPU'		Coalition 'NDSV'		Coalition 'MRF'		Coalition 'Simeon II'		Coalition 'NO for King Simeon II'		Other	
		Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %
Who did you vote for in 1997?	No ans	17	9.00%	18	9.60%	7	3.70%	3	1.60%	108	57.40%	20	10.60%	10	5.30%	1	0.50%	4	2.10%
	UnDF	37	1.60%	1180	50.30%	86	3.70%	8	0.30%	**905**	**38.60%**	40	1.70%	53	2.30%	8	0.30%	30	1.30%
	BSP	742	71.60%	19	1.80%	18	1.70%	8	0.80%	186	18.00%	16	1.50%	15	1.40%	9	0.90%	23	2.20%
	Euroleft	14	14.00%	1	1.00%	4	4.00%	36	36.00%	37	**37.00%**	4	4.00%	2	2.00%	1	1.00%	1	1.00%
	BBB	13	12.60%	7	6.80%	9	8.70%	2	1.90%	61	59.20%			2	1.90%			9	8.70%
	UNS/MRF	2	0.50%	17	4.20%	2	0.50%	1	0.20%	38	9.50%	325	81.00%	7	1.70%	4	1.00%	5	1.20%
	Other	9	1.50%	8	1.30%	83	13.80%	1	0.20%	396	66.00%	7	1.20%	25	4.20%	12	2.00%	59	9.80%
	Didn't vote	50	6.60%	115	15.20%	60	7.90%	7	0.90%	390	**51.60%**	55	7.30%	28	3.70%	7	0.90%	44	5.80%
Total		884	16.00%	1365	24.70%	269	4.90%	66	1.20%	2121	38.30%	467	8.40%	142	2.60%	42	0.80%	175	3.20%

Parliamentary elections 2005

Exit Poll		BSP		NDSV		DSB		Euroroma		Coalition of the Rose		BPU		New Time		Ataka		MRF		UnDF		Other	
		Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %
Who did you vote for in 2001?	NDSV	533	16.10%	1725	52.20%	95	2.90%	20	0.60%	55	1.70%	159	4.80%	133	4.00%	**329**	10.00%	40	1.20%	96	2.90%	117	3.50%
	UnDF	72	3.90%	184	9.90%	500	26.90%	4	0.20%	13	0.70%	169	9.10%	39	2.10%	110	5.90%	28	1.50%	**689**	37.00%	52	2.80%
	BSP	2310	86.40%	74	2.80%	15	0.60%	7	0.30%	28	1.00%	38	1.40%	15	0.60%	96	3.60%	27	1.00%	16	0.60%	48	1.80%
	MRF	22	1.90%	16	1.40%	4	0.30%	17	1.50%	4	0.30%	3	0.30%	1	0.10%	4	0.30%	**1065**	91.40%	17	1.50%	12	1.00%
	Other	142	12.40%	81	7.10%	115	10.10%	29	2.50%	48	4.20%	193	16.90%	95	8.30%	235	20.50%	46	4.00%	38	3.30%	122	10.70%
	Didn't vote	354	21.00%	400	**23.80%**	78	4.60%	30	1.80%	23	1.40%	99	5.90%	87	5.20%	219	13.00%	222	13.20%	106	6.30%	66	3.90%
Total		3433	29.00%	2481	21.00%	807	6.80%	107	0.90%	171	1.40%	664	5.60%	370	3.10%	993	8.40%	1428	12.10%	962	8.10%	419	3.50%

EU Parliament elections 2009										
Exit poll	**How did you vote at the EU parliament elections in 2007?**									
	BSP	**GERB**	**MRF**	**ATAKA**	**NDSV**	**UDF**	**DSB**	**OLJ**	**Other**	**Didn't vote**
OLJ	2.9%	2.2%	0.1%	3.2%	3.7%	3.6%	1.8%	85.6%	3.5%	7.7%
LIDER	3.1%	4.2%	0.5%	1.6%	5.6%	3.6%	1.8%	1.8%	28.2%	9.8%
GERB	6.2%	84.9%	2.6%	6.9%	**19.9%**	**19.9%**	3.7%	0.9%	10.1%	**30.3%**
MRF	0.9%	0.4%	94.9%	0.4%	1.0%	0.7%	1.4%	0.9%	2.8%	9.6%
ATAKA	4.2%	2.4%	0.5%	82.1%	5.8%	2.0%	0.9%		4.7%	9.3%
BSP / Coalition for Bulgaria	76.0%	0.8%	0.8%	1.6%	2.1%	2.7%		0.9%	6.6%	10.3%
NDSV	1.8%	2.5%	0.1%	2.2%	57.2%	2.2%	0.9%	8.1%	6.0%	9.8%
Blue Coalition	0.7%	1.3%	0.1%	0.9%	2.3%	62.5%	84.9%		2.8%	6.7%
NAPRED	0.9%	0.7%	0.1%	0.3%	1.1%	1.1%	1.8%	1.8%	19.6%	2.8%
Other	3.4%	0.6%	0.2%	0.8%	1.3%	1.8%	2.8%		15.5%	3.7%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Parliamentary elections 2009										
Exit poll	**How did you vote at the EU parliament elections in June 2009?**									
	GERB	**BSP/ Coal.**	**MRF**	**ATAKA**	**NDSV**	**Blue Coal.**	**LIDER**	**OLJ**	**Other**	**Didn't vote**
OLJ	2.2%	1.0%	0.2%	2.2%	1.9%	1.3%	1.5%	74.0%	14.4%	5.7%
LIDER	1.2%	1.8%	0.3%	1.0%	2.8%	0.7%	72.4%	2.1%	2.7%	4.7%
GERB	92.7%	3.3%	1.8%	8.2%	**25.8%**	10.5%	16.7%	16.5%	21.2%	**47.4%**
MRF	0.3%	1.2%	95.6%	1.7%	1.6%		0.4%	0.4%	1.4%	8.3%
ATAKA	0.9%	0.7%	0.2%	84.6%	3.0%	0.9%	3.6%	1.7%	8.2%	8.0%
BSP / Coalition for Bulgaria	1.4%	90.0%	1.3%	1.2%	5.1%	0.5%	2.5%	1.2%	8.2%	14.6%
NDSV	0.3%	1.0%	0.2%	0.1%	55.7%	0.4%	0.4%	2.1%	3.4%	2.6%
Greens	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.7%	0.4%		0.4%	19.2%	1.2%
Blue Coalition	0.8%	0.7%	0.2%	0.6%	3.2%	81.7%	1.8%	1.2%	6.2%	6.2%
Other	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	3.6%	0.7%	0.4%	15.1%	1.3%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Parliamentary elections 2013

Exit poll		How did you vote today?											
		GERB	BSP/ Co.	MRF	ATAKA	NFSB	DBG	DSB/ BDF	IMRO/ BNM	LIDER	OLJ	NDSV/ CFD	UDF
		Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %
Who did you vote for in 2009?	No ans	16.0%	26.0%	17.1%	1.7%	5.5%	6.6%	3.3%	5.0%	3.3%	2.2%	3.9%	1.7%
	GERB	71.7%	7.2%	0.8%	4.9%	2.6%	3.0%	1.2%	1.7%	1.0%	1.0%	0.4%	0.9%
	BSP/Co.	1.7%	90.9%	0.7%	0.8%	1.5%	1.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.6%	0.3%	0.8%	0.2%
	MRF	1.5%	3.5%	87.3%	0.6%	0.2%	0.4%	0.7%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	3.5%	0.4%
	ATAKA	4.6%	4.1%	0.3%	74.5%	9.2%	1.2%	0.2%	2.6%	0.5%	0.9%	0.3%	0.3%
	Blue Co.	12.8%	7.7%	0.6%	1.9%	0.9%	4.5%	41.3%	1.5%	0.9%	0.6%	0.4%	23.2%
	OLJ	6.7%	12.8%	2.1%	3.1%	3.1%	2.6%	2.1%	1.0%	1.0%	51.8%	4.1%	2.6%
	Other	5.1%	9.9%	3.1%	2.3%	9.2%	15.8%	8.0%	7.9%	5.1%	1.3%	3.0%	2.0%
	Didn't vote	23.1%	3.8%	7.8%	12.3%	3.8%	6.8%	2.5%	3.7%	3.3%	3.6%	2.6%	1.8%
Total		16.00%	27.1%	10.1%	7.4%	3.1%	3.8%	3.5%	2.0%	1.4%	1.9%	1.3%	1.9%

Parliamentary Elections 2014

Exit poll		How did you vote today?								
		GERB	BSP	MRF	RB	PF	BBTz	ATAKA	ABV	Other
		Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %
Who did you vote for in the EU parliament elections in May 2014?	GERB	88%	1%	0%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%
	BSP	3%	76%	1%	1%	2%	3%	2%	8%	4%
	MRF	1%	2%	92%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	4%
	BBTz	4%	4%	1%	4%	6%	71%	2%	2%	6%
	RB	4%	1%	0%	85%	3%	1%	0%	0%	6%
	ABV	5%	7%	2%	1%	13%	4%	3%	43%	22%
	NFSB	4%	4%	0%	6%	50%	2%	1%	25%	8&
	ATAKA	6%	2%	0%	1%	5%	3%	77%	1%	5%