POPULISM IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION – FROM FRAGMENTATION TO RADICALIZATION IN TIMES OF CRISES. THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract. Populism in public communication has revived during the global economic and political crises. It is embedded in both right wing and left wing political ideologies. During the pandemic of Covid-19 the populist discourses have been tightly intertwined with rumors and conspiracy theories. This paper outlines the possibilities of populism to create and generate "otherness" by distancing and even stigmatizing all the "different" who do not support its discourses. Thus, populism often generates hate speech that leads to the radicalization of social and political groups in times of crisis. One of the main hypotheses of this paper is that populism in Eastern Europe and especially in Bulgaria is supported by cultural reasons. The analysis shows that societies and groups that had been under authoritarian regimes are more prone to believe in populist theories and may show a lack of trust in official institutions and authorities, including in the media.
Keywords: populist discourses; political fragmentation; hate speech

Populism, Social Crisis and Public Communication

Populism has already been studied for several decades in the social sciences. As early as in the 70-s of the 20th century Candido Mendes outlined the persistent polarization between populists and anti-populists in political life and the need to transcend the populists' tendencies in society (Mendes 1977). Since then populism has been studied in relation to political parties and judicial systems. Juan Roch argues that populism has most often been understood as a stable feature that configures solid political identities (Roch 2024). On the basis of discourse analysis the researcher defines populism as an interactive and communicative process and claims that a theoretical analysis of the context is crucial for identifying accurately the processes that give rise to the discourse of populism. Ingrit Melani and Mirela Alhasani study populism in the contextual frame of Eurosceptic movements on the European continent. Populist discourses that favor Euro separatism proliferate both in left-wing and right-wing political ideologies (Melani, Alhasani 2023). In studying two cases: the first one from the right-wing political party Fidesz in

Hungary, and the second one from the left-wing political party Podemos in Spain, Melani and Alhasani confirm the hypothesis that left-wing populism focuses on socio-economic purposes, while the right-wing discourse is based on socio-cultural factors (Melani, Alhasani 2023). Similarly, other scholars focus on Brexit and state that the strong Euroscepticism is not only a result of the populist discourses prevalent in UK among conservative politicians but surprisingly becomes an important component of the neoliberalism too (Ward, Ward 2023). Thus, the studies show that populism is always context-bound and context-related. Moreover, it is on the rise in situations of political, economic or health crises. It can predominate in both right and left wing political parties and its discourses are often based on perceiving "threats" from enemies or from other political parties.

Some scholars nowadays associate populism with economic processes too. On the basis of factual data from different countries Benczes and Szabó conclude that populism is an economically costly endeavour, expressed in terms of an actual drop in GDP (Benczes, Szabó 2023). Thus, there are proofs that populism may not only influence the political, social and cultural life of a country but it can have strong effects on economic wellbeing. Although populism might have been associated by some authors with expression of humanitarianism (Alexandrakis 2019), the majority of the scholars relate the populist ideologies to some forms of authoritarianism (Tang 2016; Walgrave 2016; Barosso 2022). Thus, on the basis of the research done it can be concluded that the mimicry is a typical feature of populism. It can be found in both right wing and left wing ideologies but despite their different arguments its most important aim is to claim power and control over the population.

This paper states that populist discourses are always context-related and based. In such a way, it can be observed that populism resurfaces in society in times of crises. In order to achieve power politicians, relate their ideology to present-day acute problems. Thus, during the pandemic of COVID-19 populism has become tightly intertwined with conspiracy theories and rumors. Allport and Portman define rumors as specific propositions for belief, passed from person to person without clear standards of evidence being present (Allport, Portman 1946). Similarly, Rosnow claims that rumors are unconfirmed hypothesis to explain uncertain situations (Rosnow 1991). While rumors may exist in times of peace and prosperity, they become dominant in conditions of wars, economic, political and social crises. During the pandemic of COVID-19 they have become also a basic element of the populist ideologies in Eastern Europe. The uncertainty turns out to be one of the main reasons for rumors to be sustained in society for a long time.

A rumor may be partly true or totally false. While there may be some reliability and plausibility in rumors, researchers put the accent on the fact that most often the truth in them is distorted or exaggerated. Very rare are rumors that turn out to be 100% true. In the social sciences rumors are often linked to misperception

too. The latter is defined as a belief in evidently or demonstrably wrong facts. Conspiracy theories, as well as rumors, arise in moments when there is an emergent need for understanding. Having clear, even though wrong, explanations for events and phenomena, turns out to be more important for individuals and societies than sustaining uncertainty in looking for the truth.

If after the two World Wars rumors and conspiracy theories have been spread by word of mouth, from person to person, and sometimes even with the help of the official media, after the 90s of the 20th century rumors become inseparable part of the online social networking. This is why Kapferer as early as in the beginning of the 90s puts the accent on the mobilization of communities by means of rumors (Kapferer 1992). Other scholars, too, claim that the evolution of rumors is from person to person, to rumor chains and finally to rumor communities (Edy, Rasley-Baird 1916). The Internet and the social networks provide nowadays the possibility for everyone to equally participate in the process of communication and to actively express their opinions or to share the opinions of others. In such a way, varieties of social groups can be created, including such that maintain rumors and spread conspiracy theories. In other words, the phenomenon of spreading rumors is nowadays closely linked to the development of technologies. Contemporary populism is both context related and is inseparable from the media. In its discourses facts often intermingle with rumors and conspiracy theories, creating in such a way the necessity to mobilize communities against perceived enemies and threats. Thus populist discourses contribute to the deepening of the social conflicts and divisions in society. An example of this process in political and public communication is populism in Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian context of populism

Pedro Adao e Silva, a Portuguese journalist, has published his opinion on some political processes in Portugal in *Publico,* the most read and prestigious newspaper in the country. The paper is entitled: *Pense na Bulgária. A Bulgária não é aqui* ("Think Bulgaria. Bulgaria is not here"). In it Silva discusses the possibility, if an agreement is not reached by the Portuguese parties, the country to move forward to preliminary elections. This scenario, according to the author, is undesirable because it will only marginally alter the parliamentary configuration in Portugal. In his political analysis Silva gives Bulgaria as an example of political fragmentation and instability that deepens the economic and political crisis in the poorest country of the EU (Silva 2024). At the time of the publishing of the paper (September 2024) Bulgaria is heading towards its 7th parliamentary elections in just 3 years. This is why Bulgaria is used by Silva as a metaphor of misunderstanding and disagreement provoked by political fragmentation. While there might be various social, economic and political reasons for this process, populism in the last years has played an important role

in distancing the political parties to the point where no dialogue between them has become possible.

This paper also claims that populism in Eastern Europe and particularly in Bulgaria has been underlined by cultural reasons too. The cultural approach to populism gives priority to cultural memories for individuals, societies or politicians. Thus, societies that have been under authoritative regimes are more susceptible to believe in conspiracy theories as part of populist discourses and may show lack of trust in official authorities. Such is the case of the post communist countries, and particularly of Bulgaria and Romania, that during the pandemic of COVID-19 have had the lowest number of vaccinations in the European Union. According to the data of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Bulgaria only about 30% of the population has been vaccinated during the pandemic and in the European Union the country has the highest excess deaths associated with COVID-19 in the period 2021 – 2022 (WHO 2023).

One important reason for this fact is the belief in conspiracy theories that has been supported by populist politicians and by some political parties, such as *Vazrazhdane*. From the very beginning the founders of this party refuse to define themselves as right-wing or left-wing politicians. They embrace elements of both right and left ideologies sometimes controversially blending them and changing quickly their opinions according to the context. During the war in Ukraine they are known to support Russia and the authoritative regime of Putin. All this is a proof that *Vazrazhdane* is a populist party that aims to base its influence on populist discourses, such as "patriotism", "nationalism", "love to the country" and perceived dangers and threats to the country from the West. During the pandemic of COVID-19 the conspiracy theories have become inseparable part of its political discourses, as well as of the discourses of other small non-popular parties. In fact, *Vazrazhdane* gained popularity during the pandemic of COVID-19 when political protests against the green certificates and the vaccines were organized by it. This is an evidence that rumors are embedded in political discourses and aim to provoke social tensions in achieving political goals (Fig. 1).

However, it is not just one or two parties that have embraced populist ideas. Leftist populist discourses have been activated during the municipality elections in the year 2023 too. The candidate supported by the Bulgarian socialist party has based her speeches on the promise to fight for "the workers", "the ordinary people" and the "small people", which in fact is a rhetoric from the socialist past. Thus, populism in Bulgaria is based and supported by cultural argumentations and collective memories from the historical past. Simultaneously, memories from the political past have been used in two diametrically different ways by populist parties. In some discourses the events from the historical past are perceived as a persistent threat. Other discourses, however, cherish nostalgia to the socialist time and invoke all the memories that rely to "honorable and fair life for the small people".

Figure 1. Political posters with conspiracy theories in the center of Sofia
Photo: Author, June 2024

In the Eastern European countries there is a high level of distrust in the state and the official institutions. This is due to the collective experiences from the times of socialism when propaganda and misinformation had been widely used by the socialist states. This is one of the reasons why such societies are nowadays highly susceptible to rumors and conspiracy theories. This specificity of the social attitudes has been skillfully used by some political parties. By spreading conspiracy theories during the pandemic they have increased their supporters. In such a way, they enhance the cultural memories of censorship in the authoritarian past. Knapp identifies this type of rumor as a "wedge-driving rumor" (Knapp 1944). Its aim is to cope with feelings of being threatened by others. Based on the political past many Bulgarians suppose that they have been ill-informed or even cheated. Thus, rumors become a means or a tool to manage high level of anxiety and uncertainty. Simultaneously, by underlining some cultural arguments they become more plausible and relevant to the perceiver too. Exactly the perceived threat to the country and to the people has been used by some Bulgarian politicians as a means to attain more popularity and to aggressively oppose the population to the 'ruling elites".

However, the other political approach to invoke "the good memories from the socialist past" is also oriented to cultural argumentation and to relying on the experiences from the socialist times. This means that collective memory, as a social psychological phenomenon, has a great importance in Bulgarian political life and public communication.

Populism: Freedom of Speech or Hate Speech?

Although the freedom of speech seems to be an outdated topic, it has gained new importance in the post-pandemic world where rumors, conspiracy theories and false news have become an inseparable part of the virtual space of the social networks. According to some of the most prestigious global studies, Bulgaria, together with other former socialist countries, occupies one of the last places in the rankings of democracy and freedom of speech in Europe. The world organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) introduced in 2002 the World Press Freedom Index, which is determined by several criteria: pluralism, media independence, media environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency and quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information (RSF 2024). In the official report of the RSF in 2024, Bulgaria has made improvement and is ranked 59th out of 180 countries. In comparison in 2021 it was ranked 112th out of 180 countries. Although the data shows good progress of the country, it still has to catch up with other European states, such as Norway, Finland or Portugal. Simultaneously, although the rankings of the Reporters without borders may show the current situation of the freedom of speech in the press, they cannot and should not be applied to the other media or the other forms of speech, such as the digital social media, or the live social protests, etc.

In the post-totalitarian countries, and especially in Bulgaria, there is a real paradox: while some of the traditional press might be under the strong pressure of business interests or political parties, in the social media, in the opposite, there is no censorship and even no regulation of speech. The latter phenomenon has both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, in the social media individuals can openly speak out what they sincerely and truly think. On the other hand, rumors and fake news proliferate and become part of the everyday life and of political discourses.

In this relation a report of the Pew Research Center (PRC) underlines the difficulties with which the Eastern European societies adapt to the traditional European values and norms, such as individualism, freedom of speech, and acceptance of minority groups, especially ethnic, religious, cultural and sexual communities (PRC 2018). Thus, freedom of speech emerges as a complex and socially significant problem that affects all areas of the mediatized postmodern society – from the political systems and the legal regulation of society, to the economy, media and entertainment industries, media pedagogy and education.

A democratic culture is defined as the one in which individuals have the opportunity to actively participate in the decision-making processes concerning the social communities. However, the in-depth scientific research in this problem should also dwell on the value models in different societies as a basic prerequisite for the presence or absence of freedom of speech. Social and cultural values are responsible for the formation of different models of democracy in the postmodern

world, and at the same time point to the main challenges to the freedom of speech in specific regions and countries. The World Values Studies (WVS) and the European Values Studies (EVS) examine the attitudes of the Europeans and of the citizens of over 180 countries in the world. On the basis of these studies Inglehard and Welzel outline several types of values: traditional values, secular-rational values, survival values and values of self-expression (Inglehard, Welzel 2015). The model of traditional values emphasizes on the importance of religion, authority and family, as well as on the relationships between parents and children. Societies built on secular values are diametrically opposite to the traditional ones. They focus on the rights of individuals, such as divorce, abortion and even euthanasia (Inglehard, Welzel 2015). The third model of self-expression gives priority to the protection of the environment and the rights of minority groups. The fourth model of survival puts the accent on the economic and physical survival. It is also associated with ethnocentrism, low trust in institutions and a low level of tolerance in society (Inglehard, Welzel 2015). In constantly being in survival mode Bulgaria exhibits most of the features of the survival model. In the political discourses in the country low trust in institutions is combined with distrust in the official media, disrespect for authorities and stigmatization of political opponents and cultural others.

Paradoxically this process is emphasized by the digitalization of the media. The social media has contributed to the fragmentation of society and to the formation of various and diverse communities by affiliation and interests. On the one hand, this includes the ability of ethnic, religious, cultural and sexual minorities to assert their rights and to openly demonstrate their views and attitudes. On the other hand, there are exactly the opposite processes too: nationalist, racist and xenophobic groups and discourses can easily be created and maintained in the social media. Moreover, because of the digitalized communication these groups have the ability to quickly organize themselves for protests, attacks and even crimes.

Some populist politicians have been active on the social media. Both during political protests and on the social media their discourses have been full of rumors, conspiracy theories, discrimination of minorities and hate speech. Simultaneously these discourses have been self-reflected by them as "freedom of speech".

After a political protest against the green certificates in 2021 a poster that affirms conspiracy theories and spreads hatred and threats have stayed more than a month in the center of the capital, in front of the Parliament. The journalist from the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) Dobrina Cheshmedzhieva has called the municipality to ask why the poster had not been removed from the scene. The answer received is that everybody has the freedom to express their opinion and that the municipality cannot remove the poster because this is a freedom of speech.

This particular case and other similar cases raise a number of questions: can the expression of hatred, violence and intolerance be allowed in society in the form of freedom of speech? Should the state authorities tolerate rumors and conspiracy

theories, especially when they endanger the health of individuals? These questions also prove that in the post-totalitarian countries, such as Bulgaria, there is hardly any balance in society or in the media: from the pressure exercised on some journalists and reporters in the traditional press and media when they speak the truth, to the lack of any regulation of the digital media where fake news and conspiracy theories have proliferated and have thus formed the public opinion.

Thus, democracy in the digital media is a twofold process: on the one hand, the digital and social media create various opportunities for participation of citizens in the democratic decision-making; on the other hand, they can become a fertile ground for negative phenomena and a platform for spreading fake news, rumors, conspiracy theories, aggression and intolerance in society. This fact also underlines the importance of media laws, media regulation and media education in the postmodern world.

Conclusions

Populism has been on the rise in conditions of global political, economic and health crises. Thus, it is always context-bound and relates to present-day acute social problems. Its discourses often rely on rumors and conspiracy theories to create perceived threats against which there is a necessity to mobilize people. In such a way, populist discourses contribute to the fragmentation of society and to the radicalization of public opinions where no dialogue can be established. The social consensus is totally lost. The case of Bulgaria is an example of this process. The specificity of the populism in Bulgaria consists in the significant value that is given to the cultural memories from the historical past. For the Bulgarians the importance of the historical past is deeply rooted in the value systems. However, the populist discourses of the collective memories are presented in two diametrically different ways. On the one hand, the cultural memories from the past can be relied and compared to present-day situations perceived as "threats". On the other hand, collective memories can underline nostalgia to the socialist times. In both the approaches, however, historical memories are used for distancing from and opposing to the "ruling elites" and for creating images of dangerous enemies. Discrimination of cultural minorities and hate speech have also become part of the populist discourses. The latter have often been presented by populist politicians as "truths" and "freedom of speech". This fact underlines the problems of the civil society in Bulgaria and the importance of media education and media regulation in the post-totalitarian countries. Moreover, this also means that a social debate on the freedom of speech is still needed in the country.

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