# STYLES OF POLITICAL POPULISM: PLAIN LANGUAGES FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

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**Abstract**. The report draws attention to the lack of a single and exclusive populist style, as populism can manifest itself on both the left and the right political spectrum. The existence of more than one populist style is defended by arguing that in different sociocultural contexts meanings are produced by mobilizing a range of different stylistic resources. The styles of political populism are analyzed in the text as discourse practices in different contexts of interaction, i.e. Linguistic and contextual analysis is applied.

The paper examines the use of various stylistic resources in the core and periphery of stylistic fields. A distinction is made between styles of good manners and styles of bad manners. Each of these fields is filled with different stylistic devices of populist speaking, since the influence of the sociocultural context is essential in the selection of alternative semiotic resources.

*Keywords*: populist style; core; periphery; linguistic means; context

## Introduction

In the discussion on the essence of populism, it makes sense to note the emphasis on its linguistic nature. A number of authors note that "populism can be defined as: ideology, syndrome, movement, social phenomenon, strategy, and political style, but also sentiment and state of mind" (Battista 2023, p. 5). Populism is understood as "a political discourse, or a 'thin-centred ideology', representing politics and society as structured on the fundamental antagonistic relationship between 'the elite' and 'the people'" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 2). According to Mudde, populist ideology divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and "politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde 2004, cited in Battista 2023, p. 5). Therefore, it is a discourse of anti-system positions and identities and is accompanied by dynamic processes of stylization.

The article examines populism as a stylistic characteristic of speech behavior and adopts the definition of it "as a set of motivated choices among alternative

semiotic resources (linguistic/discursive, interactional and visual), which have social and cultural resonance" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 2).

Moffitt also sees populism as a collection of essentially (though not exclusively) political styles, defining them as "repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life" (Moffitt 2016, p. 38). The cited authors emphasize not ideological differences, but rather discursive and contextual differences, because populism can manifest itself on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, as well as advocate non-populist agendas. "It become clear, therefore, that, rather than concentrating on solely ideological distinctions, to gain a deeper insight into populism we need to understand politics as a dynamic process of producing socio-cultural meanings in concrete contexts of communication by means of mobilizing a range of semiotic resources" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 10). In the mediated media context, any content can be created and interpreted in a populist perspective through styling resources.

**Aspects in the presentation of populist styles**

The present text adopts the thesis expressed earlier by three researchers – that "There is no one single or exlusive populist 'style'; rather, populist styles are produced in distinct socio-cultural contexts […]" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 10). Therefore, populist styles are realized through different linguistic and stylistic means, depending on the influence of the sociocultural context on the choice of alternative semiotic resources.

In the analysis of Bulgarian political populism, I rely on the research of Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow, who indicate four aspects for presenting the styles of political populism:

1. Denotating practice – "Style refers to signifying and semiosis. Styles are adopted and performed in the use of discursive, interactional and visual semiotic resources and anchored in (socio-cultural) sign systems";

2. Embodied behaviors – "Style refers to contextualized repertoires of speaking and behaving through which identities and socio-cultural affiliations are claimed and communicated";

3. Interactional contexts – "Style is relational and dynamic. The meaning and values of particular styles are dependent on context and in contrast to other conventional styles (e.g., the populist style in contrast to technocratic style; unpolished or blunt talk in contrast to polished talk);

4. Hierarchies of moral/cultural capital – "The power of style is related to the way in which value hierarchies and/or moral assessments are invoked; how a particular style can be claimed to have more social 'capital' in a particular context (for example being more authentic and representing the 'real people' as opposed

to the elite, alienated style of the political establishment)" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 2).

In the present article, the observations are commented on through two of them: embodied behaviors and interactional contexts. In the tables with examples, the concept of discourse practices is used instead of embodied behavior as a more familiar concept in Bulgarian humanitarian studies.

### Methodological foundations of the research

Claims that populism is nothing more than a stylistic form in a vacuum of content are exaggerated. „Rather, acknowledging the ideological basis of populism as discourses that are predicated on the construction of an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, we stress the need for rigorous inter-disciplinary analysis in which close attention to style ad culturally meaningful deployment of discursive and semiotic resources plays a crucial role" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 10). Several methodological criteria are followed in the study of the populist style:

– a context-sensitive analytical procedure to establish how linguistic devices and concepts function in different and specific socio-cultural contexts;

– a qualitative approach to the mobilized stylistic resources – taking into account re-contextualization (the embedding of discursive practices in a new context);

– awareness that the populist style is flexible and dynamic in terms of its relationship with other political discourses and there is no definitive definition for it;

– taking into account the fact that the media significantly influences the transformation of linguistic resources, i.e. that in the modern situation there is the so-called "mediated populism" (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018).

### Linguistic and contextual analysis of political populist practices

In my previous publications (Eftimova 2017), I distinguished the peculiarities of the Brussels newspeak and populist speaking, but in view of the formulated thesis that there is no single populist style with clearly assigned linguistic and stylistic means, it is necessary to refine the look at the populist discourse as a mixture of different styles.

In connection with the present analysis, the need to introduce the concept of technocratic discourse and distinguish it from the Brussels newspeak becomes necessary. Clearly, there are commonalities between these discourse practices. Both involve the use of highly standardized, patterned and specialized/expert speech. The Brussels newspeak, however, reflects a specific variant, which is related to the politically correct expression, complying with the language policies and practices of the political administration of the European Union.

Technocratic discourse[1], which is expert language, is monologic and resembles a massive advertising campaign. Its messages are "axioms to rationalize seemingly

inevitable social and economic policy choices", it is a "jargon of authenticity" and "successfully combines the democratic-familiar with the exclusionary-technocratic through mass-mediated, repetitive normativity" (McKenna & Graham 2000, p. 29). Technocratic discourse maintains social control and societal passivity.

Clearly, populist discourse practices are in a complex dynamic that secures the attention of a wide audience. The two types of political discourse have a core, which includes a number of linguistic features (when determining the features of the technocratic discourse, I take into account the results of the research of McKenna & Graham 2020; Bertsou & Caramani 2020, and the features of the populist discourse are derived from the analyzes of Eftimova 2017:

TECHNOCRATIC DISCOURSE
(1) Use of nominal phrases that creates a sense of expert language:
– use of clichés;
– saturation with international vocabulary - *consensus vm. agreement, confrontation vm. collision, coordination vm. reconciliation*;
– expert vocabulary – *to process the project, low/high yield, service sector, growth of transnational corporations, increase in foreign direct investment flows*, etc.;
– abstract vocabulary – *normality*, etc.;
– the group of words with "diffuse" semantics – *certain, someone, known, respectively, urgently; globalization* etc.;
(2) Mantric words – *globalization, communication technologies, financial markets, trade liberalization*;
(3) Limited and metaphorical use of verbs, e.g. metaphors for increasing, intensifying, comparing, etc., as well as the use of passive voice: *companies are valued in the international market*;
(4) Lack of mention of a specific human action – people are spoken of in general terms;
(5) Circular explanation of concepts – trade liberalization is a result of globalization, but also a defense against the problems it causes.

POPULIST DISCOURSE
– invasion of slang and dialect vocabulary and lexical derivatives – *riddles (gatAnki / гатанки),* jarg. *ran away (ofeika / офейка)*, etc.;
– explicit expression of assessment – *sloppy (marljav / мърляв)*, etc.;
– non-observance of the language of political correctness – *an old woman (една стара жена)*;
– groups of words with "floating" connotations (sometimes positive, sometimes negative) such as *democracy (демокрация), tolerance (толерантност), gender (джендър)²*;

– power asymmetry in communication – *I gave three million, how much money did I give you (аз дадох три милиона, колко пари ти дадох)*;

– disparaging the opponent – diminutives: *boy (momchence / момченце), grandmother (babichki / бабички), face (lichice / личице), empty chair (празно столче)*; metonymies: *you will sell your vote for petrol, a kebab and a pill (нима ще продадете гласа си срещу <u>бензин, кебапче и хапче</u>); sick pigs (болни свине)*;

– lack of rhetorical flexibility – maintenance of unofficial registers and the shortened distance through addresses: *friend (приятелю), brothers and sisters (братя и сестри), people (народе)*;

– neologisms – word-formation: *zombation (zombacija / зомбация), vacationing (vacancuvane / ваканцуване)*, etc.;

– obscene words and expressions;

– intensive use as a political strategy of oral genres such as jokes, rumours, paraphrases of paremic expressions, etc.: *whoever pulls out a bunch, dies from a bunch* (*който пачки вади, от пачки умира – paraphrase of the folk maxim "He who draws a knife dies by a knife"*) (CEDB – Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria [3]);

– calls for retribution, for breaking the chains, for freedom;

– evangelical and national liberation appeals are renewed;

– patriotic rhetoric;

– use of hate speech understood as manipulative intentional repetitive speech behavior (*We will suggest a man or a woman, but certainly not gay (Ще предложим мъж или жена, но със сигурност няма да е гей); this long woman (тази дълга жена)* – the height of a public figure is discussed).

As alternative stylistic resources from the language are activated according to the features of the socio-cultural context, the inclusion of some linguistic means from the technocratic in the populist discourse is often observed. This fact creates conditions for the coexistence of different populist stylistic variants, in which sometimes incompatible linguistic strategies compete.

**Styles of populist discourse**

The main goal of the populist discourse is for the politician to shorten the distance with the voter, to be understandable and close with his speech; to inspire trust and the feeling that he is a man of the people. It is obvious that not only features of content but also of form are mobilized by political actors to build convincing constructions of social values and identity. The strategy of the populists is to create a sense of authenticity, closeness to *ordinary people[4]* against the powerful, privileged and distant elite. The concept of "ordinariness" as a discursively constructed phenomenon is associated with the concept of plain language (PL)[5], which is characterized by a limited set of linguistic means with a high frequency of use in everyday communication.

Populist talk is a particularly powerful strategy in conditions of eroded trust in the political class and institutions. For example, in the public appearances of political subjects, the mobilization of various linguistic resources on topics that provoke populist rhetoric is noted – e.g. dominance of crises and conflicts (Bossetta 2017), the totalitarian past, people's interests, etc.

**A. Populist style with core *technocratic discourse* and periphery *everyday language varieties* (figuratively speaking, a style of good manners)**

The attribution of technocratic speaking as a rhetorical strategy to populist political subjects is surprising, since most populists distance themselves from specialized terminology, from speech patterns and from normalized language. However, a main feature of populism is mimicry, the attack in which the linguistic arsenal of the opponent is used. Therefore, newer populist parties and their rhetorical strategies successfully dress messages in technocratic jargon and/ or simplified, colloquial language. The process of technocratization of populism is weak in Bulgaria, but there are representatives among the parties of the entire political spectrum.

At the core of the populist style are speech patterns from technocratic speaking or propaganda from the recent past that have not yet been forgotten.

**Table 1.** Core of Populist Good Manners Style:
Technocratic and Propaganda Strategies

| Current topics | Discourse practices |
|---|---|
| **People's interests** | Commonly rely on agenda-type translation calques: *solve people's problems, people's agenda is politicians' agenda; to stop progressive impoverishment, support of small animal breeders, processors, agricultural producers / дневен ред: да се решат проблемите на хората, дневният ред на хората да е дневен ред на политиците; да спре прогресивното обедняване, подкрепа на малките животновъди, преработватели, земеделски производители* (MRF – The Movement for Rights and Freedoms [6], Parliamentary elections 2023); *Here are our people. We must support them so that you have a guarantor for your interests* (The Left[7], Parliamentary Elections 2023). |
| **Economic crisis and inflation** | Dramatizing the crisis through metaphors: *growth and belt-tightening / растеж и затягане на коланите* (the Left); *preservation of the national currency – lev – as a means of preserving national identity / запазване на националната валута – лева – като средство за запазване на националната идентичност* ("Vazrazhdane"[8], Parliamentary elections 2023); <br> Dramatization of the crisis through hyperbole: *galloping inflation, monstrous debt / галопираща инфлация, чудовищен дълг* (CEDB, Parliamentary elections 2023); |

| The conflict *status quo – change* | *Otherwise, the status quo continues / Иначе статуквото про-дължава* (EuroLeft – Bulgarian Social Democracy[9], Parliamentary elections 2023); *general change vs the fake change / генерална промяна* вм. *фалшивата промяна* (CEDB, Parliamentary Elections 2023); *red line / червена линия* (WCC-DB); *the president is in a state of moral impeachment / президентът е в състояние на морален импийчмънт* |
|---|---|

However, a feature of this populist style is the increased emotionality, dramatization and colloquial language in order to declare anti-systemic positions and create sensationalism, which corresponds to the so-called "media populism" (Krämer 2014). They are on the periphery of the style field, as their frequency is more moderate.

**Table 2.** Periphery of Populist Good Manners Style:
slang and colloquial uses[10]

| Current topics | Discourse practices |
|---|---|
| **Corruption and manipulation of the electoral process** | The election process was manipulated and falsified: the boss (*шефът / shefat*) of the information center of the Central Election Commission traveled to America. on this occasion the ironic abbreviation *CIK FRIC / ЦИК ФРИК* (The allusion is to getting directions as to who the winner of the election is.) was created ("Vazrazh-dane", Parliamentary Elections 2023) |
| **Economic crisis** | Identification of the culprit and the opponent: *K. Petkov and A. Vassilev* <u>drained (източили / iztochili)</u> *the Bulgarians / К. Петков и А. Василев са* <u>източили</u> *българите* (CEDB); <u>grant-seeking</u> *NGOs / грантоядни НПО* (grantojadni - a neologism that is composed of the Bulgarian verb *eat* and the English noun *grant* to imply that NGOs opaquely absorb the money they receive from Europe and America) („Vazrazhdane", Parliamentary session – 26.04.2023); *As a right-wing conservative party, we are always obliged to have a* <u>fat</u> *in the state / Ние като дясна консервативна партия винаги сме длъж-ни да има* <u>мазнинка</u> *в държавата* (CEDB, 10.04.2024); *...to remain in the current office so that what they have* <u>crushed (nadrobili)</u>, *they can* <u>scrape (izsarbat)</u> *it off, fix it or, accordingly, take responsibility / да останат в сегашния кабинет, за да може това, което са* <u>надробили</u>, *да си го* <u>изсърбат</u>, *да си го поправят или съответ-но да си понесат отговорността* (CEDB, 10.04.2024) |
| **Denouncing and rejecting the totalitarian past** | *The Revival Process* (MRF, Parliamentary Elections 2023*); the simpleton of whistleblower Bulgaria to prevail; simple words from a simpleton, from a typical snitch; the coalition "Soros - denuncia-tion" / простащината на доносническа България да надделява; просташки изказвания от един простак, от един типичен доносник; коалицията „Сорос – донос"(„Soros – donos" – The implication is that the Soros Foundation does political bidding and provides classified information to foreign intelligence.)* („Vazrazh-dane", Parliamentary session – 26.04.2023) |

**Interactional contexts**

As can be seen from the examples in the tables, populist rhetoric protects the interests of the people, of the little man, in words. Often, people in positions are designated with slang words and expressions in order to belittle their role in the political process (eg the boss / шефът of the Central Election Commission – table 2). Although the opposition is usually between national and European values and interests, a number of political entities present European belonging as something normal, as something desired by the people. At the same time, there is pushback from the European institutions (grant-eating / грантоядни NGOs – table 1).

Rhetoric also develops around banal metaphors and colloquial words and expressions. They are part of the common language used by the mass audience. However, the verbal behavior of populist politicians is flexible. Not coincidentally, Bell's concept of 'audience design' is used to refer to the modification of speaking style according to the characteristics of the audience (Bell 1991). Populist politicians have the capacity to use the means of technocratic discourse, of political correctness in an ironic context. In some cases, the stylistic resources of the rhyme are used in the most recognizable schemes that remind children's rhymes[11]: CIK FRIC, Soros – donos (denunciation).

The representation of crises and conflicts relies on hyperbolic tropes to dramatize opposition and to mobilize opposing groups in society. The linguistic means by which opposing positions are defended are the same, and this is precisely what brings populist speaking closer to propaganda - well-known linguistic and stylistic means are used, but with different meanings or connotations.

**B. A populist style with a core *hate speech* and a periphery *moralizing register*[12] (figuratively speaking, a style of bad manners (Moffitt 2016)**

The style is all about eschewing political correctness, a preference for hate speech disguised as "saying what everyone thinks." Offensive qualifications in the style of bad manners are the result of (1) the mediatization of politics, which provokes the desire to attract attention by any means; (2) the merging of public and private space under the influence of social networks; (3) the misuse of the notion of freedom of speech as an opportunity to disregard any rules in public expression. Scandal becomes the essence of political life, and offensive speech becomes part of media folklore.

**Table 3.** Core of Populist Bad Manners Style: hate speech

| Current topics | Discourse practices |
| --- | --- |
| **Manifestations of linguistic sexism** | *Koceto Kasopishkov / Коцето Късопишков – a surname formed from the phrase "short dick"* (WCC – DB, Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *misguided people of non-traditional orientation to turn this place here into a cesspool, a disgrace, to serve for ridicule* |

| Manifestations of linguistic sexism | *and mockery; failed entities / сбъркани хора с нетрадиционна ориентация да превръщат това място тук в клоака, позорище, да служи за присмех и подигравки; пропаднали субекти* ("Vazrazhdane", Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *abe, baj huj / абе, бай хуй* – obscene appeal (DB, 2016); *zhenata na Kopejkata / жената на Копейката* – the Russian word for penny is used as a nickname (WCC – DB, Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *misunderstanding of a representative of the people, ragtag / недоразумение на народен представител, утайка* ("Vazrazhdane", Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *our candidate will be male or female but not gay / нашият кандидат ще е мъж или жена, но няма да е гей* (NSFB[13] - National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria); *M.Z. is a chick without tits / М.З. е пикла без цици* (CEDB) |
|---|---|
| Anti-European attitudes, rejection of political correctness | *Allegedly sick children of penniless mothers / Уж болни деца на кресливи майки* (NSFB); *children are protected from gender ideology, we don't want to be parent 1 and parent 2 / децата да са защитени от джендър идеологията, не искаме да сме родител 1 и родител 2* (BSP, Parliamentary elections 2023) |

**Table 4.** Periphery of Populist Bad Manners Style: moralizing register

| Current topics | Discourse practices |
|---|---|
| Comment on the opponent's behavior | *an honorable tone must be set here from this rostrum / тук от тази трибуна трябва да се задава тон почтен* ("Vazrazhdane", Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *Things are going on at a sloppy level, that's not how politics is done / Нещата минават на махленско ниво, така политика не се прави* (WCC-DB, Parliamentary session 26.04.2023 г.); *The bad thing is that people make more efforts to choose a terracotta than a leader of the state / Лошото е, че хората правят повече усилия за избор на теракот, отколкото на управник на държавата*; *in Bulgaria there are people who are not good enough for cabbage* (chep za zele) / *в България остават хората, които не стават за чеп за зеле* (BSP); *bad material, simple people / лош материал, прости хора* (CEDB) |

**Interactional contexts**

Hate speech is usually the core of most populist styles, as it propagates the myth that through it the truth is told. Political subjects use hate speech towards their opponents, while tending to make moral judgments over similar linguistic behavior. These judgments are formulated using acceptable and correct linguistic behavior (Table 4). Therefore, there is no surprise when someone from the rostrum of the National Assembly calls for a respectable tone (table 4) and at the same

time calls his opponent "ragtag" or "a mistaken person with an unconventional orientation" (table 3). Particularly well accepted in the Bulgarian cultural environment are expressions of linguistic sexism that discriminate, through obscene vocabulary or dysphemisms, against women or other groups according to their gender and sexual preferences. In the Bulgarian patriarchal hierarchy of cultural values, these manifestations are well accepted and are an invariable part of nationalist populism, calling for the preservation of traditional values and customary practices.

The discussion of the Istanbul Convention divided the political entities into two: the nationalist parties and others who support the Convention as an act of declaration of belonging to the European Union. In this context, the BSP declared an anti-European position towards the Convention, as well as started using the word *gender* in its various non-terminological meanings, manipulating its voters. It is curious that a party from the left political spectrum adopted populist slogans and positions of nationalist parties.

**Conclusion**

Populist styles are divided into two main types according to the linguistic resources in the core and periphery of the style field - styles of good manners and bad manners. Surprisingly, some political subjects put technocratic discourse at the core of their populist rhetoric, use metaphors and other banal stylistic devices that simulate authenticity, control and disempower the audience. On the other hand, populist styles of bad manners still prevail in Bulgarian society, through which populist politicians realize their public identity - frank and authentic, but also destructive. The claim of high morality is aimed at creating a sense of shared values between politicians and the common man.

**NOTES**
1. The ideological features of the technocratic discourse are: elitism (emphasis on expertise, criticism of orientation towards the people), anti-political (criticism of representative democracy), anti-pluralism (monolithic view of the world), scientific objectivity (positivist approach), solutions to crises (sense of urgency for expert crisis resolution) (Bertsou & Caramani 2020). The concept was used by Moffit to contrast the technocratic political style with the populist one (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018, p. 3).
2. A similar phenomenon is pointed out by Chudinov, Nakhimova, Nikiforova (2018), analyzing the names of political leaders in a precedential aspect. They note that some of these names in evaluative contexts are used in different modes – positive or negative (Chudinov, Nakhimova, Nikiforova 2018, p. 23).
3. Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB) is a centre-right, populist, conservative and pro-European political party in Bulgaria.

4. Fairclough believes that a crucial part of the success of Tony Blair's style is his ability to present a politician as a normal/ordinary person in terms of values and outlook (Fairclough 2000, pp. 7 – 8).

5. A more detailed definition of plain language as well as other language varieties close to it such as everyday language varieties, commonly used standard language, etc. in Leskelä, Mustajoki, Piehl 2022, p. 210.

6. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is a centrist political party in Bulgaria, defining itself as a liberal party and a member of the Liberal International.

7. "THE LEFT!" is a political association created to provide an opportunity for Bulgarian citizens to vote and participate in the formation of a clear political and management program, which aims to achieve social security and justice, stop the staggering impoverishment and preserve the parliamentary democracy.

8. "Vazrazhdane" is an ultra-nationalist political party in Bulgaria. The party defines itself as a patriotic formation.

9. Bulgarian Social Democracy (EuroLeft) is a Bulgarian social democratic party.

10. The words in brackets are slang or colloquial vocabulary.

11. A similar case in the political slogan I like Ike was commented on by Roman Jakobson (see Jakobson 1987, p. 70).

12. More about the moralizing register in Eftimova 2018.

13. National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) is a Bulgarian nationalist political party.

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