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IN THE ABSENCE OF ANTAGONISM? RETHINKING EASTERN EUROPEAN POPULISM IN THE EARLY 2000s

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Abstract
This article argues that a close analysis of the early 2000s allegedly populist parties in post-communist Europe allows us to better understand their novelty at the time, what they brought to party politics, and to better explain the dynamic of politics in the region. The central argument is that there were pivotal parties that held a universalist and community-seeking orientation. The article analyzes three electorally successful parties in Eastern Europe, the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) in Bulgaria, Jaunais Laiks (JL) in Latvia, and Res Publica (ResP), and uses interviews with party representatives, secondary literature, additional documents and published interviews. The findings indicate that these parties share the common vision of a restored community after a decade of social, economic, and political turmoil. Their message of social harmony was rooted in a decade of partisan politics and multi-party system that enhanced competitive views.

Keywords: populism, restored community, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia

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Introduction

When the post-communist democracies entered their second decade as multi-party polities in the early 2000s, a new type of political parties emerged. Parties with a message targeting governmental corruption and political practices were created in Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, and Estonia. On the surface, they could appear to be populist in the sense of addressing a flawed political system while promising a better future to the public. Stepping forward as a reaction to mainstream parties that were found wanting, they managed to gain a large following at the time, which spurred some of them immediately into governmental power. Ucen (2007) identified this new party trend as "centrist populist", while Millard (2004) coined the term "liberal populist" (to pinpoint the National Movement Simeon II in Bulgaria). Picking up the concept of centrist-populism, Pop-Eleches (2010) referred to these parties under the broader umbrella of unorthodox parties in the region, claiming them to be "non-ideological, anti-political formations" carried by prominent leaders not bound by ideological constraints. Their novelty implied a substantial shift from the earlier extremist parties of the first- and second-generation elections of the 1990s, parties that had embraced various forms of xenophobia, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

Whereas admittedly infused with certain elements of anti-establishment rhetoric and vague promises of a better world, the populist label that has been used to describe them has, in an unfortunate way, contributed to obscuring rather than illuminating the pivotal role that these parties played in actually reducing rather than increasing polarization and the less sound political practices that marked the 1990s. Bridging the gap between the often antagonistic 1990s and the growingly cooperative 2000s in many of the countries where they appeared, these parties helped to reconstruct a political culture based more on community and less on polarization and particularism. In this way, they contributed to mitigating some of the societal wounds that the turbulent transformations had brought about, and steered their countries into less of polarization (Koroleva & Rangule 2006). In countries that did not have parties that acted as political bridge-builders, most notably Hungary and Poland, political life has instead developed in continually polarizing directions. The neglect of properly understanding the nature of these third-generation parties and the significant roles they played is, as a whole, the result of the stereotypical categorization of East European politics as immature. Manifested in the simplistic classifications of populist and unorthodox, this has come at a high price. It has affected the scholarly ability to make sense of their great appeal at the time, as well as to make sense of the evolution of post-communist party politics in which they played an essential role.

This article argues that to correctly understand the evolution of party politics in post-communist Europe, there is a need to revisit the important period of the early 2000s in an effort to rethink the alleged populism of these parties so as to more adequately address their novelty at the time and what they brought to post-communist party politics. The central argument here is that these pivotal parties held a universalist and community-seeking orientation in contrast to the conflict-oriented worldview that is the *sine qua non* of populism. In order to substantiate this empirical argument, the article analyzes the three most successful parties in Eastern Europe from an electoral point of view of the time, the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) in Bulgaria, Jaunais Laiks (New Era or JL) in Latvia, and Res Publica (ResP) in Estonia. Hence, these parties, appearing on the political scene in and around the early 2000s, constitute the best representatives of the significantly new tendency of universalism argued for on these pages. Interviews with party representatives, secondary literature, additional documents and published interviews are combined in an effort to assess the messages of these parties.

The article is organized as follows. First, the literature on populism is discussed by emphasizing its conceptual aspects, ending in an analytical framework developed for the purpose of application to the empirical section. Next, the methods and materials are presented and the case studies and the selection of parties are discussed in more detail. The empirical section, in which the NDSV, JL, and ResP and their major messages and primary ideas are analyzed, is followed by the concluding section, where the broader implications of the study are established.

The Antagonistic World of Populism

In the presence of a rapidly changing political landscape in Europe and the United States, populism has become one of the most used concepts in political analysis both in academia and general discourse. Populism in the literature is a volatile, emotional, and even shifting term, which has taken on many meanings over the years, and its elusive character is pointed out by Gherghina et al. (2013) who recently devoted an entire book to the concept. Even if it is clear that populism thus has been used in ways that are vague or contradictory, that is not satisfactory from an analytical perspective. We cannot be content with what, for example, Sandru (2013, p. 57) calls its "anexactitude", and especially since to label a party (or a leader or movement) as populist is not similar to categorizing it analytically as liberal, conservative, or socialist. Populism comes with negative connotations.

Therefore, it is promising that recent years have seen a development in the direction of a definitional consensus (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015). According to a growing number of authors, the degree to which a politician is considered populist can be determined by how much he or she builds a narrative of ´the good people and the evil elites´. Populism is thus not to be understood as a dichotomous classification, but one of scale (Rooduijn & Akkerman 2015; Rooduijn et al. 2014). Albertazzi and McDonell (2007) likewise emphasize that populism can be found both at the far-right and the far-left. It is the element of radicalism in the messages and their style that merits the populist label. Radicalism can also be understood as fundamentalism, and Mudde (2004) distinguishes between populism, elitism, and pluralism, where both elitism (explicitly articulating the need for the people to be led) and pluralism, where heterogeneity and diverse interests are considered as the backbone of society, constitute the opposite of populism.

Although acknowledging that populism is a less refined and comprehensive ideology than, for example, socialism and liberalism, Mudde as well as Rooduijn and Akkerman call it a "thin-centered ideology," it is still one that clearly builds on a predetermined worldview of antagonism as the essence of political relations, in contrast to a pragmatic view of harmony (Hawkins et al. 2012). Mudde puts the antagonistic character of populism into focus, defining it as an ideology. In his classic definition populism is: "a [thin-centered] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004, p. 543, italics in original). The opposition between the pure people and the elite is likewise emphasized by Gherghina and Soare (2013) as generally a major feature of many parties and movements classified as populists. They however also note the notoriously evasive nature of the concept of populism as such.

The label of populism also appeared early on in research on parties emerging in post-communist Europe, since an unspoken point of departure has often been that these new democratic polities showed traits of being immature, even primitive. With its negative connotations of oversimplification, populism thus lay close at hand. Ucen, Pop-Eleches, and Millard's research on unorthodox parties, 'liberal populists,' and the particular 'centrist-populists' that appeared around 2000 in a number of post-communist states, are prominent examples of this tendency. In their formulation, populism is used to characterize parties that aim at targeting corruption and misconduct in the government and public institutions (Ucen, 2007, p. 54).

What makes them populists in the eyes of these authors is their moralistic, anti-establishment focus, their appeals to 'common sense' that indirectly allude to a perception of the 'good' people. Jones (2007) in a similar manner defines European populism, in which he includes Berlusconi, the Kaczynski twins in Poland, and Simeon II, as a "rejection of the cartel-like power of entrenched political elites" (p. 38). Rupnik (2007), another prominent scholar on Eastern Europe, defines contemporary populist movements as anti-liberal and as rejecting constitutionalism but nevertheless embracing popular legitimacy. Bugaric (2008), in a similar vein, finds the emerging Central and East European populism as being opposed to liberalism and the rule of law, hostile to elites, favoring direct democracy as an outflow of the people´s voice: "Malinov (2007), however claims that populism is not an ideology, it is neither left nor right, and it is not a sign of political immaturity (p. 71). It is instead a way of political thinking. For Gherghina and Soare (2013), populism in post-communist Eastern Europe, has often been associated with the loss of social equality, and lost solidarity, and they exemplify with the *League of Polish Families*, *Ataka* in Bulgaria, and *Jobbik* in Hungary (2013).

From this brief description of the research on post-communist populism, it becomes clear that Ucen, Pop-Eleches, Millard, and Jones tend to define populism in a way that makes it appear to be disturbingly similar to its counterpart, which is what Carothers calls "consensus-oriented liberal centrism" (2007, p. 113). In doing so, the concept of populism becomes more or less superfluous. Rupnik (2007), Bugaric (2008), and Malinov(2007) instead point to populism as deviant from a broadly understood liberalism, and a typical trait of populism is that direct democracy is embraced as opposed to representative democracy. Exactly what, in their understanding, anti-liberalism is supposed to represent is not clear, but it might refer to liberalism as cosmopolitan values that include gender equality and LGBT rights, openness to diversity, and friendliness to immigrants.

What should one draw out from the previous literature and attempts to define populism when it comes to furthering the understanding of third-generation parties and party politics in post-communist Europe? Following Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde (2012, p. 7), populism is here regarded as a way of seeing the world manifested in messages "through subtle cues of language and diffuse attributes of text, such as tone and metaphor, rather than any specific lexicon or an overt statement of where the speaker stands on an issue." In other words, it is important to detect if, for example, an 'anti-establishment' statement is articulated in an aggressive context or in an attempt of

constructive criticism, or whether references to 'the people' or 'the nation' are formulated in an attempt to polarize and put the speaker in contradiction to the elite or as 'neutral' categories of a common ground. When the content criteria of populism are considered, we suggest that three elements, distilled from the discussion on previous literature above, are the founding elements that make populism an analytically distinctive concept that is of political relevance to the post-communist political landscape.

Firstly, the polarization of society articulated in antagonistic terms, most often between the people and the elites but also extended to the majority of the people and selected minorities, should be present. The main message of populist movements or parties is one of animosity, often articulated in aggressive language. Populists share a worldview of antagonism, without which a party could not rightfully be classified as populist even though it may share some other common features, such as a preoccupation with corruption or renouncement of party politics and interest articulation. These are perceptions that, in the wake of the distraught 1990s in the post-communist countries, were widespread, and therefore it is only in combination with antagonism that such perceptions should be considered as candidates to being populist. This is particularly important to acknowledge since the (in fact often warranted) critique of political elites for corruption or inefficiency could be part of party message, however without the underlying antagonist worldview that is distinctive of populism.

Secondly, in order to distinguish parties or political actors as populists, an anti-liberal outlook in terms of denouncing constitutionalism (embracing popular, majority rule) should be present, as has been pointed out in scholarly literature. A disregard for the rule of law rests on a view of the people as supreme and pure and whose voice should not be overruled by unnecessarily restrictive and counteracting institutions or constitutional practices. An anti-institutional orientation is thus added to the conflict-oriented worldview.

Finally, there is fundamentalist approach in populism that rules out ambivalence, contradiction, and uncertainty. Such fundamentalism often, in theory at least, rejects compromise, coalition, and gradualism as tools for political governing, instead opting for 'grand' and swift solutions as the answers to societal problems. Perceptions breathing fundamentalism, and unwillingness for compromise and coalition, should be present if parties are to be labelled populist.

The combination of antagonism, anti-institutionalism, and fundamentalism is the definition of full-scale populism advocated here. All three traits, rather than being associated with leadership style, organization, or strategy, focus on the basic outlooks and ideas of the party and the messages articulated as a consequence of these ideas. In the empirical part of the article it is therefore primarily the messages of the three parties singled out for analysis that are presented and analyzed, with particular attention to the three dimensions pointed out above.

Methods and Data

The empirical section is based on a case study analysis of three of the new parties emerging in post-communist Europe before the third round of democratic elections at the beginning of the 2000s, namely the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) in Bulgaria, New Era (JL) in Latvia, and Res Publica (ResP) in Estonia. These were selected following a "most similar case" design; they all appeared in proportional party and presidential rather than parliamentary systems, and in an unprecedented way managed to secure great electoral victories in their first elections, parachuting them directly into governmental power. That makes them among the most successful new parties ever, and they have—for that reason—gained scholarly attention as populists, which makes them fruitful subjects to revisit in light of newer research on the concept adopted here.

They are considered as part of a larger group of parties that also appeared in Lithuania and Slovakia around ten years after the breakup of the Soviet Union propelled by a second generation of politicians. They are furthermore parties that, through their presence and victory, contributed to the evolution of party politics and political culture in these post-communist countries in the beneficial directions of decreased bipolar antagonism (Bulgaria), a lessening of the official acceptance of private-interest government (Latvia), and a further strengthening of the rule of law (Estonia). During the 1990s, the Bulgarian UDF party and BSP combated each other bitterly over issues of economic system and regime (Huber & Inglehart 1995). Conflicts were based on different assessments of the communist regime and its decades of often repressive rule, as well as on diverging views regarding the direction of social and economic change. The level of antagonism between the combatants alarmed observers both internally and internationally. A third party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), popularly labeled 'the Turkish Party' since it mostly caters to the large Turkish community, was also founded at the beginning of the transition, and made Bulgaria into a two-and-a-half party system during the 1990s.

The NDSV's entrance into Bulgarian politics brought an end to the bipolar antagonism. The previous political structure was further broken up by the entrance of other new parties to parliament in the following elections in 2005, including the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (which broke off from the 'liberal' UDF/ODS); the Bulgarian National Union (BNS), a party with agrarian tendencies; and the xenophobic Ataka Party (Christova, 2010; Genov, 2010).

Whereas political corruption has continued to plague Latvian politics up until today, the rise and subsequent influence of JL in 2002 paved the way for public criticism of this state of affairs that has since been part of Latvian political life. Parties and personalities emerging later on the scene, such as the then Latvian president Zatler´s party and the 'technocratic' prime minister Valdis Dombrovskis, who successfully led Latvia through the devastating economic crisis that hit the country in 2009, have carried the example of JL further, thereby contributing to publicly exposing a light version of oligarchic rule with privately sponsored parties. This, in turn, has put much more pressure on the upholding of integrity among the Latvian political elites.

In Estonia, party politics started to become less polarized in the late 1990s as ethnic voting declined. The rise of ResP did, however, mark a shift in the political culture towards more of an emphasis on the public character of the state, which moved the country´s politics further away from particularized interest government (Sikk, 2005).

The sources of this study are elite interviews conducted by the authors with leading persons of all three parties, combined with secondary literature, newspaper articles, and published interviews. We strove to include key actors as identified by the literature and by other actors in what could be called a snowball selection. All of the respondents were thus intimately familiar with the messages and general ideas behind the parties. In the case of the NDSV, several people in the team that founded the party, or who acted as its major faces to the outside world, were interviewed, complemented by published interviews with the founder and party leader, Simeon. In the case of JL, our respondents are the most prominent person and party leader, Einars Repse, and one of his closest associates and cofounder. For ResP, the party leader Juhan Parts is one of the respondents, together again with some of the cofounders and leading figures. There are naturally a number of caveats when relying on elite interviews, not least in terms of their trustworthiness.

The respondents may have rationalized the party messages and their background as the interviews have been made some years after the successful elections, or they may simply wish to hide narrowly egoistic interests behind noble self-sacrificing arguments. However, on most of the issues discussed, there is firstly quite limited reasons to withhold the truth and, secondly, even if the truth is sometimes somewhat twisted, it is still of interest to learn how they wanted to be perceived by voters. All the interviews were made in English, not using a translator. Since no one of the respondents was a native English-speaker, their answers – and the quotations – reflect that. There are grammatical errors, and sometimes use of incorrect terms or words. We have striven to keep the quotations verbatim, and only a few times has some grammatical corrections been done. These have, however, never changed the content in any way. At the center of attention are the messages and the content—the ideas—that the parties articulated when they appeared on the political scene in the early 2000s. Therefore, documented speeches and manifestos have also been used.

The NDSV

The NDSV was founded in April 2001 by Simeon of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Simeon, son of the former tsar Boris III, returned to Bulgaria from exile in Spain in 2001 with the outright ambition of winning the elections and becoming prime minister. Whereas Simeon himself had little political experience, he was generally respected as a vital part of Bulgaria's historical legacy and as a symbol of a new tendency, a break with the previous decade's political struggles between the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, the former Communist Party) and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF, the right-wing). Moreover, Simeon carried a traditional authority embodied in a speech on April 6 2001 and a monarchic legacy, but also the legitimacy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (Christova 2010). In a famous founding statement marking the commencement of the electoral campaign, Simeon delivered a promise to reshape Bulgaria in 800 days, making it into a more prosperous country for all to live in. This speech, which represents the major message by the movement of Simeon, certainly included a critique of how the economic and social realities had developed in Bulgaria, and as seen below, Simeon here pointed to how some politicians had enriched themselves simultaneously:

> I do not ignore certain achievements in the foreign policy of Bulgaria, or some positive tendencies in economic development during l999 and until the fall of 2000. However, above all is the grief and growing anger of many people. It is neither morally nor politically acceptable that, by European standards of living, the majority of Bulgarian people, including those residents in the countryside

> and small towns, are in misery, while some politicians live in inexplicable opulence; that thousands of our daughters and sons are leaving Bulgaria, forced away by the lack of opportunity; that near half of the voters see no reason or party for which to vote (Address of King Simeon to the Nation, 2001).

However, the tone is not aggressive but rather sorrowful, and even though there is a juxtaposition of a suffering people and politicians living in opulence, the people are not framed in an archaically 'pure' or essentialist manner. Simeon does not use the concept of an elite and it is explicitly stated in the speech that "political figures or parties are not the Movement's target, because I confront no one."

Three major goals are articulated: to enhance the standard of living for Bulgarians through economic reforms that will bring in foreign investment in line with European standards and to "[abandon] the political partisanship and [*unify*] the Bulgarian nation along historical ideals and values that have preserved its glory for all its 1300-year history." (italics added). Thirdly, in this famous manifesto Simeon called for the return of integrity and morale which, if urgently introduced into political life, would aid in the fight against the corruption that was Bulgaria´s worst enemy. It should be noted, that there is an explicit reference to polarizing partisanship and how community and unification were needed.

Simeon's team was put together so as to reflect both the party´s integrative ambitions, by including a number of women and younger persons, and the wish to distance itself from the antagonistic politics of the 90s. Thus, professionals of different specialties, often with experience from abroad but with no previous engagement in politics, were brought into the campaign and subsequent government (Peeva 2001). However, and in the general vision of looking for consolidation and unification, previous politicians were not in any way excluded from the movement. "Of course, I will also invite individuals who have been involved in politics for their skills and experience, fully realizing that the political storm has spared no one's reputation," as Simeon formulated it when addressing the public on April 6 (Address of King Simeon to the Nation, 2001).

Simeon´s team was "a team of young lawyers and economists, a popular singer, an actress as well as (what else) a magician" concluded Kate Connolly in *The Guardian* (Sept. 20, 2001, also see Ghodsee 2001), in a manner typical of reports of the unorthodox elements of Simeon's team. Ognian Gerdijkov, a member of parliament who became head of the legal team in the early days of

the party, claims that Simeon "managed to attract new faces, new persons that were previously not tempted by politics, but at the same time professionally respected and recognized, people who had solid experience from abroad" (Interview Gerdijkov 2008).

The NDSV positioned itself as a center-liberal political force in the middle of the political spectrum, highly pragmatic and inclined to compromise. There is agreement that what the Bulgarian voters were looking for at the time of the 2001 elections was change, and particularly a change in political style: less confrontation and more pragmatism. "Bulgaria needed a change at that time (…). A change in public life, honesty in government and political parties, the situation before was really not yet market economy or democracy" (Interview Petkanov 2008).

In an interview made before the elections, Simeon (2005) reflects upon the challenges that faced the new government:

> *What was the most serious obstacle you had to overcome and what presented the biggest difficulty?* Simeon: Maybe breathing life back into the economy so things could move as normal and trust could be established. At the same time, we were maintaining the Currency Board, i.e. taking into account the IMF and the World Bank which were monitoring us and, in a good way, 'restraining' us in our desire to lead an even more active welfare policy. Finding the balance between the two, because both bring benefits—due to the IMF we currently have no inflation, our currency is stable and the general parameters are also very positive—but at the same time we had no option, within this term of office, to materialize all our ambitions in the social sphere.

The NDSV wanted to appear as a modern party that did not dwell on antagonism but "offer[ed] instead the opportunity for broad compromise and cooperation" (Sygkelos 2010, p. 35); Simeon thus cultivated the image of a "unifier of the nation" (Christova 2010, p. 224). Indeed, the combination of a patriotic Bulgarian outlook and the emphasis on further European integration has been pointed out as a major vision in the messages articulated by the party and its leader. The NDSV was, claims Sygkelos, "identified with the national path" (Sygkelos 2010, p. 26). The NDSV was proud that, in contrast to, for example, the BSP (the successor of the Communist Party), it did not even have a core electorate: "our party was open, liberal and everyone could participate" (Interview Tonev, 2008).

Far and foremost, the party´s discourse focused on national unity and on overcoming the harsh polarization that characterized the country in the 1990s:

"In this way, the Bulgarian nation was conceived of as a collectivity. It could be argued that the image of Bulgarian society conceived of as a broad kin group, made up of its own people regardless of political affiliation or ethnic origin, had been informed by Sakskoburggotski´s royalist paternalism" (Sygkelos 2010, p. 29).

What the NDSV aspired for was a new political culture in Bulgaria, which would render the country more respect in Europe and elsewhere (Harper 2003, p. 337). The 'Europeanness' of the new party was highlighted. Simeon was thus not just a populist Messiah promising change in 800 days, but more importantly he was perceived as a gateway for Bulgaria to transform itself into the 'normal,' modern European country that it aspired to be given the country´s EU candidacy (Interview Tonev, 2008; interview Petkanov, 2008).

JL

New Era (JL) was founded in February 2002 by the former director of the Bank of Latvia , Einars Repse, a person in his 40s who had an impeccable reputation as director. Repse himself was not trained as an economist but as a mathematician and physicist. According to most analysts, JL's success is a result of Repse's personal reputation and qualities (Davies & Ozolins 2004; Ikstens 2002, p. 1013; 2003, p. 1007). For him, much as in the case with the NDSV, prior political experience among his team was perceived as a liability rather than an asset, since the party was preoccupied primarily with the high-level corruption of the political elites. Therefore, mostly people without political party backgrounds were actively recruited as potential candidates (Interview Slakteris, 2003; interview Karins, 2008; also see Davies & Ozolins 2004, p. 836; Ozolins, 2002).

What particularly dominated JL's campaign, at least in terms of the media, was the fight against political (and administrative) corruption. Ethics, honesty, openness/transparency, and professionalism/competence were its main slogans (Ikstens 2002, p. 1013). This is not surprising, given the context of a rapidly deregulated economy, as Karins points out:

> In the years 1991-2002, our economy went from the state controlled to the market system. In a lot of overtly corrupt deals, politicians gave themselves goodies. I remember there was a building in the center of town being privatized and a newspaper article showed that those who got the apartments were all well-known politicians and their families. They gave state assets to themselves and that made people very angry (Interview Karins, 2008).

Einars Repse, when still director of the Bank of Latvia, demonstrated severe apprehension about state capture practices. This was due to mistakes in the privatization processes, the fact that the privatization agency was not independent, and that political reforms were not carried out as swiftly as they were in Estonia (Interview Repse, 2000). Krisjanis Karins, one of the cofounders of the party, says that he himself: "joined because [Repse] said that he wanted to form a party that (1): was not based on business interests; and (2): would take into account that the rule of law needed to be strengthened and the playing field for businesses needed to be cleaned up" (Interview, 2008).

When reflecting on the founding of the party in 2004, Repse pointed out that a major reason to do so was the level of corruption. It is also clear that he regarded most other parties, which were sponsored by businesses and banks, as part of the problem:

> *Is it specific parties that you are thinking of that contributed to this high-level corruption or what are the roots of it*? Repse: Well, yes. But unfortunately, I have to mention almost all parties that have been in power during the last years of post-Soviet times. I do not want to blame my country, and I do not want to say that the problems that Latvia are experiencing are more pronounced or heavy than in other post-communist countries. They most probably are the same or even better than in some cases (…). But corruption is a problem in most post-communist states and democracies and we have to tackle this problem. It should not have to be hidden, it should be spoken about and worked out (Interview Repse, 2004).

Whereas Repse does use phrases such as 'the country,' this is an analysis that is still phrased in a reflective rather than aggressive tone. The recurrent references to 'corruption,' which likewise could be part of a more antagonistic populist language, are here used in a much more matter-of-fact manner, simply pointing out that this is the major problem facing Latvia while situating it in the general context of post-communism. According to Kristian Karins, "corruption was the issue" for JL (Interview Karins, 2008). The party leader Einars Repse says, "I simply responded to the call which was also my internal call to try to stand up against the corrupt governmental system" (Interview Repse, 2004).

Reflecting upon the party´s inability to actually change the system, Repse, two years after the election victory of 2002, refers to the necessity of bringing into the government coalition representatives of the 'old' system due to the proportional form of government:

> So we had to make a coalition with some parties which had been present in previous governments and, quite honestly, did not have a good reputation. Not all of them, and to different degrees, but we were the only new party who put our goals and main aims as the fight against corruption. So we had to make a coalition. In words, of course, all my partners agreed that yes, we need an honest public administration, we need transparency. In words, in words, but in deeds they had a different schedule which manifested itself later (Interview Repse, 2004).

The JL's party program, at the time of its inception, is admittedly not very precise, filled as it is with rather vague statements of a generally positive nature. However, even so, there is an abundance of proclamations pointing to a desire to highlight harmony rather than populist animosity and to strive for the necessary state of community without a parallel process of exclusion. "We will promote pluralism, tolerance, solidarity and the strengthening of society. We will give support against all discrimination and inequality, and between women and men," as stated in the party´s program from 2001.

In an article appearing at the time of the elections in 2002, the political analyst Ozolins noted that JL resembles the other center-right parties but enjoys more credibility in the economic sphere due to Einars Repse´s reputation. However, that "is not what has gained most of the attention. The party has been trying to persuade voters that it is truly a party that will be responsible to the voters and that will work for the national interest." In order to substantiate that promise, JL's leaders in the pre-election campaign held a special church service where they solemnly promised that they would work in the interest of the nation (Ozolins, 2002). To use the church in such a way signals an aspiration to community-building and inclusion as well as the party leaders' sense for political drama. JL's electoral platform and party program were similar in substance, and major societal groups—farmers, pensioners, families with children, business people, doctors, teachers, but with the notable exception of the Russian minority—were promised improvements.

ResP

Turning to ResP, the party founders also perceived the lack of party political experience as an asset when recruiting leading candidates as did the NDSV and JL. When being transformed into a party in December 2001, very few members—including top officials—had experience in party politics (Pettai 2004; Taagepera 2004). However, even if they represented a new force in Estonian party politics, ResP originated from a liberal-conservative political club that had already been established in 1989. The club had continued to operate throughout the 1990s when some of the leading figures decided that the time

had come to take the club into politics. "In the year 2000, some very good companions from the RP and I just raised the question, 'what is going to happen next? Are we going to continue our activity as an intellectual, academic club for people interested in politics or are we going to do something bigger?'" recalls one of the founders, Ken-Marti Vaher (Interview Vaher, 2007).

ResP was a party that deliberately evoked a youthful image, building on its past as a youth discussion club and founded by a number of young men wanting to embody a new generation in political life and change politics into a more inclusive and participatory activity. Vaher, general secretary of the organization in 2001, describes the launch of the party as quite a risky project:

> Other politicians and many authorities in society thought that this is a crazy idea. Politicians were saying to us, 'come on, you are making some kind of a joke, young men and women, in the ages of 25 to 30, starting a new party, come on, our market is already set, the political market is already set, you have no room here' (Interview Vaher, 2007).

The name itself is related to the concept of public spirit or public interest, presupposing that there exists a general public that has to be revived and served. "The very name of 'Res Publica,'" writes Taagepera, "hints at public interest, the *intéret generale* neglected by the existing particularistic parties" (2006, p. 85). The 'general interest' referred to here could, on a superficial glance, be confused with the '*volonte generale*' that Mudde (2004) refers to as essential to populism. However, 'general interest' should be interpreted as a focus on the necessary communal goals of public affairs and not only private or partisan interests. This is a classic vision of a government ethos and has nothing to do with opposing the people´s voice, the people´s will, to an allegedly hostile elite. ResP stressed its ambition to be a party for all people in Estonia. "There are no unimportant life spheres for us. The new party is open to anyone regardless of income, social position, or residence" (*The Baltic Times*, November 22, 2001).

The state auditor, a youngish-looking Juhan Parts, was recruited to be party leader. In a vein similar to Simeon and, in particular, Einars Repse, Juhan Parts's persona and position were perceived as above and beyond partisanship and particular interests. This was decisive in making him the perfect embodiment of ResP's messages, claims one of the founders. "We needed a strong person with the same image as our party: anti-corruption, transparency, against (…) money. It was a very rational choice that Parts was the best choice at that time" (Interview Veskimägi, 2007).

The ResP founders describe the party as right-of-center, a liberal party with a conservative social conscience, characterized by compassionate conservatism:

> We used it (compassionate conservatism) as a slogan, the basic concept was that today all center parties have a social policy, but at that time right-of-center parties were denying social issues in the way that they dealt with economic issues and personal liberties and we believed in the concept of a peoples' party model. A modern party should also answer to all the diversity of social problems. This was our main line, so to speak (Interview Reinsalu, 2007).

Thus, ResP emphasized in it messages that liberal economy had to be combined with active social policies. Rein Taagepera, former presidential candidate and a prominent public person in Estonia, acted as advisor and 'grey eminence' (a sort of founder in the background) to the party founders. In his view, the growingly 'oligarchic' tendencies in Estonia repelled the young from going into politics or voting, and the party system had run into a dead end. The old parties had become, if not corrupt, then at least followers of the iron law of the oligarchs, so that there was no internal democracy prevailing (Interview Taagepera, 2007).

Worries ran high at the time that there was a growing intertwining of political parties and business in Estonia (a similar concern as in Latvia). "If politics represent the economic interests of concrete Estonian entrepreneurs and this kind of pushing for a better environment for business interest in the EU and with other countries then everything is OK. But if the political parties represent the concrete interests of two, three, four persons, it is very bad for the overall economic climate" (Interview Parts, 2007). Estonia was going through a political period of "big scandals in the air, privatization, railway, the Narva power plant, scandals related to the Prime Minister, Mart Laar's funding scandal, a turbulent political environment. People wanted something new, I think," explains the party's founder Veskimägi (Interview Veskimägi, 2007).

A driving force behind starting the party was thus clearly discontent with the existing system, embodied by the 'old politicians' and the linkages between politics and business. But the party was not a protest party, it was directing itself towards longer-term goals, for example changing society to a direction in which education and consequentially professional competence should become more pronounced in contrast to the empty promises of populism, as the party leader Parts emphasizes: "We had to be against social populism. What does that mean? To promise all kinds of social benefits for everybody, bigger salaries

for the teachers, nurses, employers, etc. That always happens" (Interview Parts, 2007). Vaher also emphasizes: "Our rivals were trying to say this is a protest project. But that was not our idea. As I said, we tried to fulfill a long-term vision" (Interview Vaher, 2007).

In the case of ResP, the party program speaks of a party engaged in a distinct attempt to reach out to society as a whole. The preparation of the party program was also carried out in a participatory manner, in a process of deliberation where "over 3 to 400 people were involved; we held several program seminars, discussion groups and we made them public, it was all done at the end of 2001 and at the beginning of 2002 and we publicly announced different subjects and tried to gather ideas and what were specialists' requirements and also different kinds of suggestions" (Interview Vaher, 2007). ResP was a party that accepted compromise as the lifeblood of politics. This becomes clear in the words of Party Leader Juhan Parts: "If you are going into government, you have to make compromises. You have to share responsibility with your opponents and the voters" (Interview Parts, 2007.

Summing up, the party's goals, fueled by new blood and a new 'generation,' were clearly highly prioritized, as was the perception that ethics in political life had to be strengthened and that politics had to be infused with higher levels of specialist competence (similar to the visions of the NDSV and JL). ResP embraced political compromise and never challenged democratic institutions in favor of the direct voice of the people.

Discussion

The NDSV, JL, and ResP are part of a broader group of what has previously been labeled 'center-populist,' 'liberal populist,' and 'unorthodox' parties. This categorization is questioned in this article based on the ambitions of these parties to position themselves as makers, not breakers, of the states that they aspired to lead. Particularly the former central bank director Einars Repse and the former king Simeon were seen as being above and beyond partisan politics and appeared as credible in their roles as unifiers able to create a new, less polarized and corrupt community out of the nation. ResP, in contrast, was more of a collective political project, growing out of an association for political debate that had already been founded in 1989. The party leader, head of the State Audit Agency Juhan Parts, was recruited late in the process, a younger public official with a technocratic appearance. However, the choice of this technocratic image was deliberate, as it portrayed the two things ResP wanted to communicate: a nonpartisan and integrity-oriented profile. As with the other two party leaders, Juhan Parts's previous position as a longtime bystander

rather than participant in the political game rendered him beneficial political capital at the time. Hence, all three party leaders could appear as principally untainted by the political life of the 1990s, which allowed them to instead bring to the fore nonpartisan expertise linked to economics and business.

Returning to the three analytical tools identified in the theoretical section by which to assess the degree of populism within a party – antagonism, anti-institutionalism, and fundamentalism – Table 1 summarizes how these parties fared in these areas. None of the parties bear any traces of approaching the electorate with antagonistically formulated slogans about 'the pure people' and 'the evil elite(s)' or by using uncivil language. All three parties, as we have seen, were united in their emphasis on social harmony, unity, and of being parties in service of the public spirit and an inclusive society. Their points of departure, remarkably similar to one another, come through in each case as a concern for the country and its future. This led them all to criticize the present political culture in a manner that could be interpreted as populist but which contains no actual traces of anti-institutionalism or antagonism. Such criticism was moreover never done in the populist manner of opposing 'the people' with 'the elite,' and furthermore was based on observations and analysis that pointed to severe problems involving the intertwining of business and politics at the time.

Table 1: The Populist Traits of the NDSV, JL and ResP

Trait/Party	NDSV (Bulgaria)	JL (Latvia)	ResP Estonia)
Antagonism	No, explicitly puts forward the need to work with "old" elites.	No, critical but points to the need for coalition.	No, inclusive approach even if critical towards older parties,
Anti-institutionalism	No, emphasizes constitutionalism.	No, aims at strengthening political institutions.	No, aims at strengthening political institutions.
Fundamentalism	No, emphasizes pragmatism.	To some extent, but underline nuances.	No, underlines compromise.

This universalist vision, e.g. not singling out certain groups but embracing society as a whole, bears interesting resemblance to parties that emerged during the troubled inter-war period in Europe, which was struggling with the

alienation that had come with industrialization and urbanization. Propagating for a politics of inclusive 'people´s homes' and the restoration of a lost community, parties such as the Social Democrats but also the National-Socialists and Fascists attracted many followers. "With economic collapse and social chaos threatening much of Europe, publics began to renew their demands for the stability, community, and social protection that modern capitalist societies seemed unable to provide," writes Berman in an analysis of early 20th century Europe (2006, p. 5). In post-communist polities, the early 2000s was a period where a similar social uprooted-ness was manifest among populations, which brought forward parties that tried to promote community.

The NDSV, JL, and ResP did not expose anti-institutionalist attitudes in their outlooks in the populist manner of opposing failing state institutions, such as the parliament or the government, or promoting a the direct voice of the people. On the contrary, Simeon explicitly referred to the constitutionalism of Bulgaria, Mr. Repse explicitly declared that he wanted to reform the existing system, as did Mr. Parts, the latter two being manifestations of these same institutions as central bank director and state auditor. If anything, they wanted to strengthen the existing institutions and make them work more efficiently and in the interest of the public. ResP and JL were the parties that out of the three most prominently propagated the rule of law and the need of a more law-abiding but also rule-governed society. Their critique of corruption should be interpreted in those terms rather than as antagonistically opposing the people to the elites. While the NDSV in particular embraced a rhetoric in which Simeon was pictured almost as a savior of the suffering Bulgarian people— a rhetoric easily adaptable also to populist content—this was not tied to anti-systemic ambitions.

In terms of fundamentalism, all three parties positioned themselves as center-right and/or liberal-conservative, and, the NDSV, JL, and ResP all campaigned on an economically liberal agenda, stressing the need for tax cuts among other things, as well as EU and NATO membership. They appear as highly pragmatic rather than fundamentalist, with JL the most fundamentalist and with more practiced principles of integrity than the others (which also may have made JL more sustainably popular). The NDSV articulated its ambition as searching for compromise and cooperation in a modern European way, as did ResP, and all three governed in coalitions with other parties and regarded the process as part of representative democracy. Nowhere is it possible to find traces of an unwillingness to compromise, which would signal a populist worldview of 'easy solutions'; on the contrary, Simeon openly articulated the party's willingness to work with both new and old elites, and Einars Repse, even while wishing for a

majority, clearly realized and endorsed the need for coalition work in a political system such as in Latvia.

Summing up, the analysis has shown that in terms of the three dimensions used to depict populism, none indicate that is it correct to define the NDSV, JL, or ResP as populists. These parties were fully non-populist. In Bulgaria, it was instead the 2005 elections that saw the first Bulgarian populist party, Ataka, led by Volen Siderov, gain parliamentary representation on a program based on anti-Semitism and anti-establishment ideas while attacking Turks and Roma, Bulgarian minorities, and also articulating an outright hostility to the EU (Ghodsee, 2008). Ataka exposed both a deeply entrenched conflict-oriented worldview and "was the first party to attack parliamentary democracy from within" (Christova, 2010, p. 225). The contrast to the pragmatic and unifying NDSV could not be starker.

Further supporting our interpretation of the Latvian JL as a thoroughly non-populist party is an article that appeared recently in which an evaluation of the degree of populism based on an analysis of Latvian party manifestos is carried out. Balcere (2014) finds that for JL the percentage is 0.00 in the 2002 elections. Based on a qualitative content analysis that captures the combined people-centeredness and anti-establishment elements that this article also regards as the core message of populism, she finds that populism in Latvia generally has been embraced by new but electorally unsuccessful parties. The nonstarter of populism in Latvia is supported by Jakobson et al. (2012, p. 58) who claim that "populism tends to be rather modestly represented in the party manifestos as well as in the media." In Estonia, in a similar vein, populism has not taken root (Jakobson et al. 2012, p. 72).

Conclusions

The successful breakthrough of new parties in some of the post-communist polities in the early 2000s was not propelled by populist messages of antagonism, anti-institutionalism, and simplified fundamentalism. Whereas previous literature on post-communist party politics, directly or indirectly, has led us to believe that the NDSV, JL, and ResP represented yet another type of East European populism, this article has shown that what they brought to the political table was a much desired and much needed vision of a restored community after a decade of social, economic, and political turmoil. At a time when partisan politics and a multi-party system had been in place for about ten years in post-communist Europe, fertile soil had been created for parties with a message of social harmony to appear on the scene. They thereby represented a

significant trend with substantial implications for future developments in the post-communist polities in case, a trend which has gone mainly unnoticed.

The thoughtless and routine use of the concept of populism, with its highly negative connotations similar to the use in other contexts of negatively imprinted concepts such as 'failed state' or 'corruption,' has thus helped to obscure a reality that is actually much more complex and nuanced than these labels lead us to believe. In the case of post-communist democracies, the use of the concepts of populism have to a large extent been born out of prejudice that these newly enfranchised voters were much more immature than their counterparts in the old democracies, easily falling prey to simplification and strong-armed leaders, whereas the parties were cynically acting manipulators. In advanced western democracies, where populism today is being used all the more frequently in classifying a variance of parties of a "non-established" character, populism definitely runs the risk of being emptied of the analytical strength that is particularly needed when parties that actually do combine the dangerous cocktail of antagonism, anti-institutionalism, and fundamentalism, are threatening civilized political life.

The parties revisited in this article did not strive to further polarize their societies, to challenge democratic institutions, or to promote outlooks colored in black and white. Instead, they contributed to strengthening the state and probably halted growing polarization by insisting on the legitimacy of *public* and not only particular interests, however shying away from the populist concept of the people´s will. While causally difficult to prove since we are discussing contra-factual developments, party politics in the countries where these early bridge-builders appeared has developed in a manner which is, relatively speaking, more benevolent than in Hungary, Poland, or even Slovenia. The latter countries did not experience similarly troublesome political party struggles in the 1990s, and consequentially did not bring forward bridge-builders of the type portrayed here in the early 2000s. However, the conflicts buried under a seemingly growing consensus have instead burst later and with severe consequences for constitutional and liberal democratic practices.

In Latvia and in Estonia populism has not gained much ground over the 25 years that have passed since democratic elections were first held in 1992 and 1993. This makes these small Baltic countries unique in a European-wide landscape of far-right and far-left populists holding parliamentary and even governmental representation in almost every country. In Bulgaria, populism entered the parliamentary scene with Ataka in 2005, as discussed above, but the

universalist tradition introduced by the NDSV continued in the form of, for example, GERB, who entered parliament in 2009.

What these developments generally could tell us, is that highly polarized party politics, however dangerous, can give rise also to influential political counter-responses. Embracing inclusion and community, such counter-responses, as we saw in Eastern Europe, could well contribute to reinforce civilized political culture, providing a vaccine against the majority of voters being led on by real populists. In the times experienced in the west right now, this should come as an insight that should make for some inspiration.

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