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Populism from the Perspective of the Strategic Approach: A Case Study of Boyko Borisov's Strategy After the Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria on 4/04/2021

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Abstract: The article conducts a case study from the theoretical perspective of the strategic approach towards populism during the period of the political crisis in Bulgaria between April 16 and May 11, 2021. The text analyses how the leader of the political party GERB ('Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria'), Boyko Borisov, used a typically populist mobilising strategy, combined with a wide range of manipulative discourse techniques, to provoke and deepen the crisis. He aimed to prove that the parties which supported the protests in 2020 were consolidated only around the idea of displacing GERB, and were unable to unite around a common government formula. Borisov's desire to come back to power is at the basis of his populist strategy, which tries to suggest that during his rule there was order and stability in the country, while only later came a period of chaos and crises. This strategy is accompanied by a clear outline of the 'image of the enemy' on three different levels. Firstly, several specific individuals are mentioned, who do not have a plan for action after the displacement of GERB. They are (supposedly) unable to rule the country, pushing it instead towards elections and towards provisional government appointed by Rumen Radev. Secondly, this personalisation turns into the prerequisite for building a collective image of the immorality of the elite. At the same time, this anti-elitism is combined with an opposition of 'the people versus the elite'. Thirdly, the image of the enemy is seen as embodied in certain political parties.

Keywords: Boyko Borisov, Political Crisis in Bulgaria, Populism, Populist Strategy, Populist Discourse, Case Study

Introduction

One of the most modern and widespread methodological approaches regards populism as a strategy for political mobilisation. During the last few years this school of thought has developed extremely fast, focusing its empirical research mainly on the

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processes that go on in the Latin-American countries.[2] The present article, however, looks into a stage of the political crisis in Bulgaria which started in 2021, conducting a case study from the theoretical perspective of the strategic approach. The text discusses how the leader of the political party GERB, Boyko Borisov, used a typical populist mobilisation strategy, combined with a wide range of manipulative discourse techniques to provoke and deepen the crisis. Therefore, our focus of attention in the theoretical overview and in the empirical part will be directed not towards the organisational model of the populist mobilisation, but towards the relationship between the strategy and the populist leader's discourse. But before we go on to the essential analysis in detail, we have to place the research problem within a chronological frame and the overall political context.

The date April16, 2021 is fixed as the beginning of the first political crisis, since that is when GERB's parliamentary group disrupted the plenary session at which the financial minister, Kiril Ananiev, was supposed to have a hearing. The end of the *first stage* of the crisis developing between April 16 and December 13 falls upon May 11, when President Rumen Radev dismissed the National Assembly, appointed a provisional government, and set a date for extraordinary general elections on July 11. The end of the crisis comes on December 13, 2021, with the election of Kiril Petkov's government.

The main engine of the crisis was Slavi Trifonov, a famous showman and TV host. His shows became popular for their satire of the political elite and for offering a cultural product that satisfied a mass audience without high aesthetic and critical requirements. Trifonov's long presence on screen allowed him to influence public opinion, as he directly addresses the audience with a wide range of populist political messages. Later, he left the big private broadcaster BTV, created his own cable channel, and founded the 'There is such a Nation' party (local abbreviation: ITN), which took an active part in the 2020 protests, which we will mention in a moment. The leader of ITN boycotted the efforts to form a government after two consecutive parliamentary votes in 2021. Although the structure of the political representation in Parliament made it possible for him to form a considerable majority for the support of a cabinet with the ITN mandate, Trifonov undertook a series of actions to cause extraordinary general elections. One of his main messages, which gave him a considerable lead in the pre-election campaign was that he would 'peel off' GERB from the

[2] Among the more important texts we could mention Robert Barr's monograph on Latin-American populism (Barr 2017), as well as those by Carlos de la Torre (Torre 2000); the wide-scope research by Steven Levitsky into the political evolution of Juan Peron's Party of Justice (Levitsky 2003); and several articles dealing with the organisational models of the populist mobilisation in the Latin-American countries (Roberts 2006; Torre 2013; Tella 1997; Weyland 2021; etc.).

government of the country and would not enter into a coalition with the three 'parties of the *status quo*' – GERB, DPS (literally, 'Movement for Rights and Freedom') and BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party). At the same time, he changed his attacks to target the 'parties of protest' and gradually started to recognise them as part of the political *status quo* . This classic destructive populist strategy proved effective during the peak of electoral mobilisation on July 11, 2021, but its later radicalisation led to considerable shrinking of electoral support of ITN.

However, we will focus our attention on the populist strategy of Boyko Borisov, who, as a leader of GERB, played an active role as a catalyst of the crisis. Borisov became famous to the general public in the period after November 10, 1989, when the communist dictator Todor Zhivkov was ousted from power. Initially he was a bodyguard of Zhivkov and later of the former Bulgarian tsar Simeon II, who lived in exile in Madrid until his first return to the homeland in 1996. Simeon II entered politics, creating his National Movement Simeon II (local abbreviation: NDSV), which won the parliamentary elections of June 17, 2001, became prime minister, adopted the ordinary citizen's surname Saxe-Coburggotski derived from the dynasty he descends from, and appointed Borisov as secretary-general of the Interior Ministry. During the reign of Saxe-Coburggotski's government, major rivalry began between the mobster groups in Bulgaria and many ostentatious murders took place. Borisov then began to do PR for himself by visiting the crime scenes and, in the presence of selected journalists, accusing the judicial system of inaction. In fact, this is when he built his own political charisma. In 2007, Boyko Borisov founded the 'Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria' party (local abbreviation: GERB). With a brief interruption between 2013 and 2014, he was Prime Minister of Bulgaria from 2009 until the elections in April 2021. In 2020, mass public protests broke out demanding his resignation and the resignation of the Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev, considered susceptible to his political influence. In the end, the protests failed and in July 2020, there was an incident where police turned violent and bloodily beat protesting students in the square in front of the Council of Ministers building. After the parliamentary elections of April 4, 2021, under Boyko Borisov's ideological and political leadership, GERB implemented a whole series of techniques for parliamentary sabotage, which led to blocking the work of the National Assembly and a permanent dysfunction of this legislative body. He aimed to prove that the parties which supported the protests of 2020 were consolidated only around the idea of displacing GERB from power and were unable to unite around a common government formula. Borisov's desire to return to power lies at the basis of his populist strategy, which tries to suggest that during the time of his governance there was stability and order in the country, while only later came a period of chaos and crisis. Precisely this monotonous single-type strategy, which combines a strictly defined set of discursive and mobilisation techniques, has become a major factor in deepening

the political crisis in Bulgaria. Between April 4, 2021, and October 27, 2024, parliamentary elections were held seven times due to the inability of the parliamentary parties to elect a regular government. This article examines Boyko Borisov's populist strategy at the initial stage of the political crisis. Focus is set precisely on Borisov because he has established himself as the populist leader with the highest mobilisation potential in the conditions of a permanent crisis of legitimacy of the political system, as well as of a continuous transformation and fragmentation of the party system. His strategy did not change during the subsequent stages of the crisis. The chronological period is therefore defined for representational purposes.

Theoretical Frame

Populism is a difficult concept to define; there is conceptual ambiguity about it. One of the most coherent and logically consistent classifications of methodological approaches to its study has been made by Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, who assume that there are three approaches to the study of populism – as an ideology, as a discursive style, and as a strategy of political mobilisation (Bonikowski & Gidron s.a., 17). The two scholars offer summary definitions of the nature of populism in terms of each approach: populism as an ideology is 'a set of interrelated ideas about the nature of politics and society'; as a discursive style it is 'a way of making claims about politics; characteristics of discourse'; as a political strategy it is 'a form of mobilisation and organisation' (Bonikowski & Gidron s.a., 17). The ideological approach is already quite outdated and is criticised in the overwhelming majority of research. But so as not to stray from our topic, we will only consider the strategic and discursive approaches here in order to then outline the relationship between them.

Discursive approach

We begin with the discursive approach, since its emergence preceded that of the strategic one and the older school had its undeniable influence on the development of the more modern one. Its essence can be seen most clearly in the authoritative and widely cited article by Margaret Canovan 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of Democracy'. According to Canovan, populism is 'an appeal to the people against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of society' (Canovan 1999, 3). The 'appeal to the people' is in fact an 'appeal to recognised authority', and has three aspects. Firstly, the nation is presented as a unified whole with common interests, and as an opposite to the parties and the factions that divide it. Secondly, this is an appeal to the nation as a homogeneous ethnic group which is opposed to foreigners and immigrants. Thirdly, the appeal is directed at the nation as a group consisting of ordinary individuals whose interests are disregarded by the privileged and corrupt elite (Canovan 1999, 4–5).

Strategic approach

If we summarise the dominant trends and fluctuations in the scholarly literature presented in the bibliography, we could derive the following main characteristics of the strategic approach in the context of populist mobilisations in Latin American countries:

First, the relationship between the leader and his followers is personalistic, and the mobilisation mechanism itself usually proceeds in a vertical direction. In a sense, Argentine Peronism represents an exception to the rule, as it combines personalistic leadership with horizontal mobilisation.

Second, populist parties build centralised vertical organisational structures. A classic example in this respect is the case of Venezuela, where Hugo Chavez combined the dominant role of his sole leadership with a vertical model of party organisation. Here again, Peronism emerges as the great exception to the rule, but what is peculiar about the model imposed by Juan Perón is the combination between the vertical form of personalist leadership dominance and the horizontal party organisational structure.

Third, populism emerges in the context of a deepening crisis of representation, coupled with a low degree of institutionalisation of party systems.

Fourth, personalist populist leaders make appeals addressed to the people and directed against the political elites and parties of the *status quo*. In this way, they politicise the public discontent caused by unfulfilled economic and social expectations, reinforce polarisation, and use the crisis situations that arise to realise their main goal of taking power and ruling. Populist appeals erode citizens' trust in the political system and transform it into personal trust in a personalistic leader. Through his direct non-institutionalised relationship with the people, he gains support and expands his electoral influence.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to make precise bibliographical references for the four characteristics, as they reflect general trends in the literature, but not particular conceptions of the individual authors, and there is interweaving between the characteristics. For example, Kurt Weyland focuses on personalist leadership and the vertical flow model of populist mobilisation. On the other hand, Weyland sees the strategic approach as a radical alternative to the ideological and discursive approaches. The author argues that in populist strategy, unlike discourse, the main focus falls not on what populists say, but on what they do in order to get power and hold it for as long as possible (Weyland 2017, 77–102). Thus, it is this fourth characteristic that points us to the problem of the relation between strategy and discourse.

Interconnections between the two

The fuzzy boundaries between the strategic and discursive approaches can be seen in many authors' work. Robert Jansen considers that populist mobilisation is a 'sustained political project combining people's mobilisation and populist rhetoric' (Jansen 2011, 82). According to him, the rhetoric serves the purpose of imposing and legitimising populist principles and actions, and it represents the nation as a unified whole (Jansen 2011, 83–85).

Paul Kenny does not deny that to achieve their goals populist leaders have to use a certain language, style, or rhetoric, but this matter is not of primary importance to him. The attractiveness of the appeals to the people, despite their wide diversity, does not transform populist movements into bureaucratic or programme ones in Weber's terms (Kenny 2021, 11). According to Kenny, the ideological polyvalency of the populist parties, expressed in the fact that they situate themselves along the whole range of the political spectrum (left, right, and centre) shows that the organisational form takes priority over ideology, and the populist leaders seek the support of a sociologically heterogeneous base (Kenny 2021, 2).

In a review article dedicated to the school dealing with the populist strategy, Robert Barr lists several definitions[3], which indicate some degree of syncretism between the two approaches. Along with the references to Canovan, Jansen, and Kenny, the definitions mentioned below create the impression of theoretical confusion and cast doubt on the one-sidedness of Weyland's viewpoint. Carlos de la Torre's theses are the exact opposite of Weyland's conception. They combine the strategic and what Torre himself calls the 'discursive-ideological' approach. On the one hand, populism is interpreted as a Manichean discourse, presenting politics as a dualistic opposition between the people and the oligarchy; and on the other (hand), it is a strategy for vertical political mobilisation, entering into a confrontation with the requests of certain political movements (Torre 2017, 195–198). Torre states that populism is a combination of discursive and mobilisation techniques, between the strong rhetorical appeals to the people and the actions taken by the leader on their behalf (Torre 2000 xi–xii). For Mayorga, populism is a pattern of politics in which 'a charismatic leader exploits an ideological discourse of defending the poor and excluded, through which he garners electoral support and democratically legitimises the quest for and exercise of power' (Barr 2018, 46); for Lemman, it is a 'verticalist and personalist

[3] Since there is no possibility to check the quotations from the secondary sources, our reference will be based on Barr's text; except for Carlos de la Torre's article, which is taken from a primary source.

leadership style and rhetoric, with followers from all social classes' (Barr 2018, 47). Gennaro, Leece and Moreli note that political outsiders tend to use populist rhetoric to mobilise certain electoral segments, but this (in its turn) leads to de-mobilisation of their hardcore supporters. According to them, there is also a discursive component in addition to the strategic one, which contributes to the mobilisation; while the anti-elite appeals based on the cleavage 'people versus elite' only work in favour of the populists, because they address those voters who are disappointed with the politicians and are dissatisfied with their own economic status (Gennaro et al. 2021, 1).

The quotations above suggest that political speaking is never a random and isolated phenomenon – instead it always results in some kind of political action. Consequently, the boundary between the discursive and the mobilisation techniques is hard to define. Moreover, the assumption that the personalist leader seeks the support of the masses and addresses his followers with the claim that he is the only authentic exponent and defender of their interests is widely accepted in the academic literature. Rather, this is the common denominator of all the different approaches.

Quite the opposite stance is taken by such scholars as Takis S. Pappas, who draws attention to the wide variety of elements for analysis of populism ('political movement', 'ideology or belief', 'discursive model', 'political strategy', 'type of representation', 'specific political style'), which makes it hard to find a working definition with a high enough level of conceptualisation (Pappas 2016, 9).

Despite all the diversity of the authors' perspectives, the conclusion is that there is a synergy between strategic and discursive approaches, that a populist strategy cannot be successful without relying on discursive manipulative techniques as an engine of political mobilisation.

Methodology

At first, it is necessary to justify the relevance of the chosen theoretical framework to the methodology of the empirical study: Boyko Borisov won five of the seven early parliamentary elections with a significant lead over the other political forces, and hence his mobilisation strategy was successful. At the same time, a factor in this success was the use of a wide range of discursive manipulative techniques through which Borisov formally communicates with politicians, sharpening his confrontational tone towards them, while in reality he is attracting the support of his voters, as these confrontational messages are rather addressed to them. Precisely here is situated the paradoxical nature of the GERB leader's populist strategy as an intersection between conflict and dialogue. This strategy is also representative of the way the leaders of the

other parties speak – they confront each other and thus carry out the 'dialogue' with their supporters. This is why there is such a prolonged political crisis in Bulgaria.

The aim of this article is to conduct a case study within the already outlined chronological frame, which will examine Boyko Borisov's strategy, with the perspective of verifying the relation between the theoretical and the empirical. The text is based to a great extent on the general methodology, elaborated on in the third chapter of my monograph. There the hypothesis was proven that in the case of Bulgaria, not only does populism arise when there is a crisis in the legitimacy of the political system, but it could also provoke such a crisis through a deliberate infringement of the institutional rules (Zhdrebev 2020, 213–272). The development of the political crisis that started in 2021 not only confirms once again the credibility of this hypothesis, but even raises it to the status of a thesis. That is why the current article does not formulate a hypothesis. The analysis in the empirical section emphasises two basic elements: in the first place is the populist strategy itself, as initiated by its leader; we have to bear in mind that this strategy is the key factor for the beginning and development of the crisis. Secondly and equally important is the discursive element, which is an integral part of the strategy, and on the level of political propaganda is the basic factor for its practical realisation. These two elements cannot be structurally separated from each other, since they are organically interrelated, so they are examined as a whole.

The empirical research of the above-mentioned relationship is conducted on the basis of selected media quotations from Boyko Borisov's public appearances. Since he is not in the habit of giving interviews, broadcasting instead live streams through Facebook containing his long speeches at party activists' meetings (not stenographed), our article cites only some extracts from his monologues, which are published in the two media mentioned below. These excerpts are given in the Notes underneath, so that the reader can follow the available data by indicators during the analysis of the populist discourse, all populist discursive categories being framed in italics. The categories are not grouped by indicators, because the excerpts used are not only fragmentary, but also full of populist content, and in this way Borisov's train of thought risks being additionally fragmented if such grouping occurs.

The analysis uses the system of indicators developed in the monograph from 2020, based on a wide-scale review of academic literature: negation/rejection of the elite, opposition 'people versus elite', unification of the people's will, anti-partisanship, importance of the personality/charisma, heightened social expectations, creating the 'image of the enemy', xenophobia, rejection of intermediary institutions, as well as rejecting institutions as an instrument in making legitimate decisions (Zhdrebev 2020, 95). This system of indicators is an innovative contribution that can be applied

in every other empirical research of populism. A central place in the research of the strategy is taken by the indicators of the importance of the personality/charisma, and of the rejection of intermediary institutions; while in the research of the discourse all the other indicators are discussed, except for xenophobia (as Boyko Borisov is not a xenophobe, treats representatives of all ethnicities and nations with respect, has not made a single xenophobic statement). In the monograph, a qualitative content analysis of the populist discourse of party leaders was conducted using a data registration map of manipulative discursive techniques on the ten indicators. In all charts about Borisov, in the column 'xenophobia', the field was left blank (Zhdrebev 2020, 320–322).

The materials for the empirical study are taken from two electronic media – Mediapool and Sega (literally 'Nowadays'). Mediapool is one of the biggest news sites, which presents in thorough detail the main info stream, while at the same time outlining the prior history, context, and interconnections between the current news and the political events that precede it; however, less attention is given to commentaries and analyses. Sega, on the other hand, presents the news in a more succinct manner, but it has quite a good daily analytical comments section. On the narrow and highly dependent media market in Bulgaria there are newspapers such as *Trud* and *24 Hours*, which are close to GERB but formally claim to be independent. They regularly place in their electronic editions the full recordings from YouTube of the aforementioned meetings of Boyko Borisov. However, the textual content of the information materials about these meetings is extremely laconic. And there are several media outlets whose editorial policy is to publish very brief news items that are practically unusable for the purposes of this article. This is the other reason for choosing Mediapool and Sega, as the quotations written in the news text there are of considerably greater length.

Borisov's Populist Strategy in the First Stage of the Political Crisis (16/04–11/05/2021)

The balance of forces in the National Assembly after the April 4th elections placed GERB in a state of isolation. The party tried to prove that there was no real alternative to its political government's achievements, although it was ready to participate in some kind of 'experts' Cabinet, without its leader being Prime Minister (Mediapool 2/04/2021). Boyko Borisov developed a discursive strategy consisting of three basic elements: firstly, according to him, the country was faced with a political and health crisis, and he was seeking all possible ways out of it. Secondly, his enemies wished to displace him from power, united only by their hatred towards him, since they did not have any common political programme priorities that would help them form a government. Thirdly, he considered that he had a wealth of political experience and,

unlike the politicians from the other parties, he is a responsible person, appearing in the role of mediator with a plan of how to deal with the crisis, as well as the necessary professional experience and expertise.

In the last days of his term in office as Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov did not deviate from the strategy he had used during his whole stay in power – a strategy that combined the violation of institutional rules with the creation of an 'image of the enemy'.

The actual onset of the crisis is considered to be April 16, when the National Assembly obliged the resigned but still acting prime minister to attend a parliamentary hearing. Boyko Borisov, however, took leave, sending Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev instead. GERB also prevented the hearing of the financial minister Kiril Ananiev by banging on the desks in the plenary hall. The disruption of parliamentary procedure went further (Mediapool 16/04/2021b). We do not need to go into detail here about some well-known instances, which indicated the development of a deliberate strategy for parliamentary sabotage. Later, Boyko Borisov described the intended hearing as an attempt on the part of the national representatives/MPs to 'hold a People's Tribunal over him' (Mediapool 18/04/2021; Sega 18/04/2021a). At the very beginning of the crisis one can notice the manifestation of the essence of the GERB leader's populist strategy. The constitutional procedure does not exempt the resigned PM (Prime Minister) and his ministers from their obligations to take part in the parliamentary control and to perform their functions until a new Cabinet is chosen. Borisov's manipulative interpretation is based on the suggestion that the prerogatives of the legislative body were being substituted with those of the People's Tribunal – a repressive institution that has left dark traces in Bulgarian history. The aim is to place ordinary institutional logic into the sphere of the extraordinary. Boyko Borisov was trying to get ahead of events and to radicalise the situation, creating a sense of instability and chaos. This was the aim of the provoked disturbances. Thus, responsibility is to be transferred onto the new 'people in power' even before he himself (BB) has left office. GERB's behavior during the parliamentary session is part of a greater pattern, based on the use of similar strategic moves. We will give additional examples of techniques directed at deepening the above-mentioned sense of chaos and instability, including in our analysis the period between the elections and the onset of the crisis.

Firstly, in order to highlight the incapacity of ITN, DB ('Democratic Bulgaria'), and IMV (literally 'Rise up! Mobsters out!') to form a coalition, Borisov offers 'to lend them 10 of his MPs on demand', who will back them up and will guarantee them a parliamentary majority. The other alternative is 'more chaos to be created', so the

parties that would reject this proposal are '*irresponsible*'[4]. This technique presupposes that the combination of the anti-institutional and the discursive elements will lead to a discrepancy between the meaning carried by the public message and the intended practical result. The offer of '10 MPs on demand' goes against any coalition logic, is not based on any political principles, and cannot guarantee stability, because such support would seem too insecure if not bound by the fulfilment of specific political program engagements. It is a manifestation of demagoguery and cannot be rationalised outside the context of the opposition 'us versus them'. The pattern is simple: 'us' refers to those able to take responsibility, to guarantee stability, to rule, to restore order. Those referred to as 'them' are the exact opposite of 'us' – in this case 'they' are '*irresponsible*', 'have the unfulfilled desire for more new elections', ' are unable to rule', and 'will plunge the country into *chaos*.' And it is exactly to 'them' – this composite image built up of the above-mentioned list of features – that Borisov addresses his unconventional suggestion. It cannot be accepted the way it is formulated – as an offer from the '*responsible*' to the *'irresponsible'* ones. The initial subtext creates a contradiction between form and content. The form is manifested on a discourse level – willingness for support is declared, aiming to provide order and stability. The content is a demonstration of the strategy for deepening the political crisis; the way this offer is made, together with the political evaluations that accompany it, shows that Borisov's aim is not to help form a government, but to achieve exactly the opposite of what he declares. This is a typical example of demagoguery, demonstrating how the discourse serves as a means towards the realisation of the strategy.

Secondly, in order to prevent the *'chaos'*, GERB shows willingness to put up another candidate for prime minister, different from Boyko Borisov. The dichotomy concerning 'stability' is between constructiveness and destructiveness, between order and chaos; it can be seen in the public statements and actions of other popular GERB party figures (Mediapool 14/04/2021b). This technique is quite similar to the previous one. In the foreground is again the opposition 'us versus them', reflecting both sides of the dichotomy. The new emphasis is on the leader's charisma. He is irreplaceable, and his party cannot be ignored since it is the key to finding a way out of the crisis. And yet, Borisov steps back, gives up his claim to the premiership, gives

[4] 'We bore the responsibility until the elections. From now on it's my fellow politician Slavi Trifonov's turn *to take on his responsibility*, since he has over half a million voters'; 'They shouldn't *desert* or *excuse themselves* with the lack of enough votes. If they're so much in need, I can offer them 10 of my MPs to back them up on demand. For me it's important that there is a stable government in the country...New elections are not a viable solution.' 'We owe it to our voters to suggest some variant to rule the country. I see *blatant irresponsibility* within the other political parties...'. 'All anti-GERB parties have a chance to form a large majority in Parliament. If they don't do it, this would mean *they wish to create chaos in the country*, and that shows they're *unable to rule*' (Mediapool 7/04/2021a; Sega 7/04/2021).

over the post to another figure that could attract additional support. Instability is presented as an alternative to the failure of the first consultative mandate. In view of the unwillingness of the other political parties to back up a government suggested by GERB, the idea to compromise over the nomination could not contribute to lasting political stability. This idea, however, was the only one that defined GERB's vision on how to form a stable government. The underlying message is that 'we' want stability and are taking a big step back in order to achieve this, while 'they' are pushing the country towards '*chaos*' and '*crisis*'. This suggestion is manipulative because it is based on an initially wrong thesis for finding a way out of the critical situation, since GERB is trying to present itself as part of the solution, while in fact it is part of the problem.

Thirdly, Boyko Borisov gives up his seat in Parliament and his immunity and uses this as a method to define the 'image of the enemy' and to idealise his own image (Mediapool 8/04/2021c). This event, however, is more interesting in that it causes institutional dysfunction. The former member of CIK (literally 'Central Election Commission'), Tsvetozar Tomov, thinks that Borisov's decision is illegitimate. The rules stipulate that he should first swear an oath as a member of parliament, and after that submit his resignation from the institution he was chosen for. According to Tomov, Borisov forces CIK to make yet another illegitimate decision that would 'legalise an election fraud' (Mediapool 8/04/2021b). The civil organisation BOETZ (literally 'Fighter') challenged this resolution at the Supreme Administrative Court, giving the following arguments to the press: 'Borisov acted in the same illegitimate way as Peevski[5] did in the European elections – he asked to be removed from the list of candidates after the elections had already taken place and he had been chosen. He has the right to do this, but only before the institution he was elected for (i.e., Parliament). ...Borisov and all the rest have the right to give up their seats in the National Assembly – before Parliament, and after they have already sworn an oath as MPs. Then, however, they have to give up their administrative posts as well – Prime Minister, Mayor, Provincial Governor, etc. – because they cannot take both positions after their election was announced' (Mediapool 10/04/2021b). We agree with these two opinions, which state that Borisov violates institutional rules, taking into account their accordance with the constitutional text. According to Article 72 from the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (*Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*, promulgated in the State Gazette (SG), No. 56, of 13/07/1991):

> (1) A Member's prerogatives shall expire before the expiry of his term of office upon any of the following occurrences:

[5] Delyan Peevski is an MP from DPS ('Movement for Rights and Freedom'), a political oligarch with enormous influence over the judicial system, and a media magnate.

1. resignation presented before the National Assembly;
2. entry into force of a final sentence imposing imprisonment for an intentional criminal offence, or if the enforcement of the imprisonment sentence has not been suspended;
3. establishment of ineligibility or incompatibility;
4. death.

(2) Cases referred to in items 1 and 2 shall require a resolution of the National Assembly; cases referred to in item 3 shall require a ruling by the Constitutional Court.

Consequently, in view of the already stated hypotheses, for his prerogatives to expire before the expiry of his term of office as an MP, Boyko Borisov has to officially submit his resignation because in this case that is the only actual pre-condition according to Article 72, paragraph 1 of the Bulgarian Constitution. Article 76, paragraph 2 obliges the national representatives to swear an oath at their inauguration (*Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*, promulgated in the State Gazette (SG), No. 56, of 13/07/1991). In no way can Borisov submit his resignation before being inaugurated, and so, by filing his request to CIK ('Central Election Commission'), he is urging the Commission to make an unconstitutional resolution. In this respect Tomov's statement that this decision is just illegitimate is not the whole truth – it goes directly against the stipulations of the Constitution in the first place. This precedent is the first one in a series of violations against the above-mentioned constitutional texts.

Finally, Boyko Borisov refused to put up for voting in a plenary session a Cabinet of Ministers with the first mandate because, if the other parliamentary groups are 'sly and mean enough', they might back it up.[6] All this is a combination of contradictory arguments *ad hominem* and *reductio ad absurdum*. Let us say it again: according to Borisov, going for a provisional government would mean 'cowardice and irresponsibility'; only a Cabinet formed by GERB could stop the 'chaos' in the country; and it needs the votes of the other parliamentary groups; however, if they are 'sly and mean', they might support it. This tautology illustrates the logical nonsense through which Borisov in practice makes the situation absurd. On the one hand, GERB's

[6] 'They will hold us for 4 years and torment us as they please. They could make you stay there from 9 am until as late as they want, every single day; they can't make *me* stay there, however.' 'I'm addressing all those who say they won't make a coalition: If you go on to form a provisional government, that would mean you are irresponsible and cowardly' (Sega 20/04/2021).

wish to form a government cannot be realised, and, on the other, GERB refrains from proposing a Cabinet for fear of it being approved.

The quotations below are from an event in Sofiamed Infirmary, where the hospitalised Borisov announced the members of his Cabinet. This event was broadcast live on Facebook, which meant they were seeking a direct connection with the electorate without the mediation of the mass media. Borisov demonstrated his neglect of the institutional significance of this specific political act by using some totally inappropriate language.[7] The journalist Nikolai Ivanov thinks that 'Borisov completely devalues the premiership position, and by not appearing in front of the national representatives again disregards Parliament.' This is a confrontational strategy, aiming to highlight the impossibility of any constructive interaction (Ivanov 21/04/2021). Nikolai Ivanov clearly outlined Borisov's attitude towards the institutions of the executive and legislative power as a whole, towards himself as a resigned PM, towards the ministers and the national representatives. Undoubtedly, thanks to him the current situation verges on the absurd, and his statements concerning his opponents are full of *ad hominem* arguments. As mentioned before, Boyko Borisov often accuses the other parties of behaving irresponsibly. At the same time, in his public appearance described above, he did not demonstrate any willingness to take on political responsibility and to put an end to the crisis. This performance of the GERB leader casts doubt on his sincere intentions to take any relevant institutional approach towards finding an effective formula for a future Cabinet.

We must conclude, therefore, that for Borisov it is not so important that his messages are consistent – they could be constructive or destructive, logically justified, or contradictory. What is more important is that the discourse serves his strategy effectively – a strategy which, at this initial stage, is not yet oriented towards gaining and exercising power, but rather towards accentuating the other parties' inability to offer a real alternative for the state government. A key factor in this process is the positioning of the 'enemy' on this political scale, and inventing a number of confrontational techniques, which will be discussed below.

As in his previous years in politics, Borisov builds up 'the image of the enemy' on three separate levels. The first one is personal: particular individuals are named who do not have an action plan after GERB's displacement from power; they are unable to rule, and so are pushing the country towards elections and towards Rumen Radev's provisional government. Furthermore, this personification becomes a precursor to constructing a collective image of the amorality of the elite. This anti-establishment attitude is meanwhile combined with the opposition of 'the people against

[7] 'I'm limping, but my mind is sound.' 'Faster, please, 'cos my legs are bleeding' (Mediapool 20/04/2021b).

the elite'. And finally, 'the image of the enemy' is embodied in certain political parties. These three elements can hardly be separated from each other, since in most cases they build up the overall frame of the discursive construction[8]. We could continue to list numerous quotations that prove the manifestation of this typical trend. We will return to it further on in our exposition, but we have to specify at the very beginning the essence of Borisov's messages as part of his populist strategy. The motif of 'amorality' is present in various forms: The elite is corruptible and easily bought off and is unable to live up to the expectations of the discontented citizens. DB ('Yes, Bulgaria') and Hristo Ivanov are blamed for their lack of integrity, their political ambitions to seize power, and acting in cooperation with their main political rival DPS ('Movement for Rights and Freedom') (Mediapool 18/04/2021; Sega 18/04/2021).

The aim of all manipulative techniques used by GERB is to suggest to the public that all the party's opponents are power-thirsty, incompetent, incapacitated, and unable to rule. Boyko Borisov presents himself as the only real alternative for state governance.[9] There is a lot of data to prove that statement. Under these circumstances we are faced with a methodological challenge – the dilemma is whether our analysis should end here, or whether we should get bogged down in an endless list of identical examples. Either of these options would break the structure of our exposition; therefore we shall try to reduce the examples to a number which would allow us to present the discursive strategy as a whole, avoiding redundant repetition.

Typical examples of constructing' the image of the enemy' on all three levels can be found in different commentaries by Boyko Borisov on the actions of the President.[10] According to the GERB leader's interpretation, Rumen Radev collaborates with the other political forces using illicit methods – 'lies, manipulation, blackmail...' (Mediapool, 14/04/2021b). Borisov contrasts his own image to the image of those be-

[8] 'I admire young people, who are rebels and are always dissatisfied, because they want their life to be better and better. But I'm truly sorry that they were used by the paid protestors so that the old faces could get again in Parliament, or drive cars at the expense of the state' (Mediapool 15/04/2021b). About the return of the unsuccessful mandate to form government: 'If none of the parties supports us, we'll return the mandate. And if they don't form a government with their 165 national representatives, this would mean they're cowards, chickens!' (Sega 21/04/2021).

[9] 'Is there anyone more experienced than me?' 'I'm fed up with always having to take the responsibility myself' (Mediapool 6/04/2021).

[10] 'Our voters want *me*, but I've always believed that "Union is Strength". It's not right for me to act like Radev – to divide the nation, because that's exactly what he's doing' (Mediapool 14/04/2021a).

longing to the elite – he works towards uniting the nation and urges the other parties to behave 'responsibly'; while the President divides the nation and aims to plunge the country into 'chaos' by calling extraordinary general elections and appointing a provisional government. The parties 'don't have the right to desert' from their responsibility (Mediapool 14/04/2021a). Here we can see a complex combination of several indicators of populism: firstly, the defamation war is waged on the politicians, so they are identified as 'the image of the enemy'. Secondly, the results of the elections are interpreted as the common will of the people. Thirdly, the leader identifies himself with this common will and justifies with it the opposition 'the people versus the elite'. In this way, the people's will legitimises Borisov's behavior as morally appropriate and condemns the amorality of the elite. Moreover, this common will is related to the charisma of the leader; the people's vote is the factor which makes Borisov believe that he is recognised as the only possible prime minister, and which urges him to give up this post voluntarily so as to facilitate the reaching of an agreement between the parties. Another aspect is Borisov's disregard of the institutions as an instrument for taking legitimate decisions, since the regular parliamentary procedure of accepting the government's resignation is treated as an act of 'personal revenge" of 'spite' and 'vendetta' (Sega, 18/04/2021a). Then comes the indicator of anti-partisanship, which in this case is manifested through the discursive category 'avoidance of responsibility' and is closely connected with outlining 'the image of the enemy', since it goes against the common will of the people, defined as part of the whole structure of the message. In other words, according to this structure, while the people want Borisov for a prime minister, the parties do not support him, they ignore the common will and are irresponsible; by contrast, GERB's leader is ready to compromise because he is responsible. This strategy is oriented not towards overcoming the political crisis, but rather towards mobilising the electorate; the messages are acceptable for them, but not for the representatives of the other political parties.

The tendencies outlined above in the discourse and strategy of Boyko Borisov remain constant till the end of the first stage in the development of the political crisis. The conclusions drawn are similar and there is no need to repeat them. Therefore, we will conclude the current passage with two key moments, which are chronologically connected with the end of the first stage of the crisis. They concern Borisov's reactions after the failure of ITN's consultative mandate to form a government, as well as his last day of premiership before the appointment of the provisional government.

When Trifonov returned the mandate, Borisov angrily remarked, 'Why can't they rule with a majority of 165 MPs?'[11] This quotation shows the consistency of the populist messages and could serve as an illustrative example supporting a big part of our previous conclusions. Let us summarise: GERB's heterogeneous parliamentary opposition is presented as a monolithic structure, which is trying to plunge the country into chaos, is afraid to take up political responsibility for the future government, enters into underhand dealings with the President, has no well-prepared experts, and cannot form a cabinet. What Borisov is trying to suggest is that he and his party are the only alternative: each of the discursive categories used to outline 'the image of the enemy' has its direct opposite on the abstract level of the proposed alternative solutions – the chaos is transformed into order; against the coward stands the sensible man; the accusatory claims of avoidance of responsibility and lack of knowledgeable experts are based on the grounds of GERB's twelve-year experience in political government, which provided it with the necessary expertise.

The picture outlined in Boyko Borisov's statement on his last working day as Prime Minister is identical to the one we examined in the previous example. The additional nuances supplement the content with populist discursive categories, but that does not change the meaningful essence of our theses.[12] The following parallels could be made between the two quotations, thus producing a kind of inner dialogue between these two public monologues: 'the easiest thing is to organise protests' (Mediapool 11/05/2021), but on the other hand, 'the person who stands and lets people throw eggs at him is the sensible one' (Mediapool 26/04/2021; Sega 26/04/2021). The heterogeneous majority of 165 MPs is ascribed the characteristics of a homogenous entity. There is also the recurrent motif of the lack of expertise in contrast to GERB's

[11] 'Todor Jivkov himself had never had such support. I was eager to see their experts and ministers... Nobody forces them to avoid responsibility. To be cowards. That's what I call "a political coward". Someone who stands before the people and lets them throw eggs at him is not a coward – he is a sensible man. A coward is the one who, having the support of 165 MPs, says that they're not enough and that he needs 240 (the total number of MPs in the Bulgarian Parliament)... Slavi Trifonov lied to the people and now he will waste two more months for the country playing his tricks... Or they're playing some game with Radev in order to keep the country in a state of chaos' (Mediapool 26/04/2021a; Sega 26/04/2021).

[12] GERB's leader combines the unification of the people's will with a conflicting discourse, which finds its expression in the form of an appeal for humbleness: 'If the people's votes are similar, this time we shouldn't be in a state of extreme hostility to each other. God said, "Love thine enemy!" Be humble, let's be constructive. Nothing so extraordinary has happened; we worked till the very last day; the others also showed what they can do in parliament. If the outcome of the elections is the same, are we going again to discuss who we can do it with and who we can't? This will be detrimental for the country' (Mediapool 11/05/2021).

large working experience. The phrase '...we worked till the very last day, the others also showed what they can do in parliament' (Mediapool 11/05/2021) is in direct semantic correlation with the following fragment from a previous statement: 'Why can't they rule with 165 MPs?' (Mediapool 26/04/2021; Sega 26/04/2021). While in the first quotation the extraordinary general elections plunge the country into 'chaos', in the second they will be 'detrimental' for it. The message is clear and consistent, and it confirms the conclusion that Boyko Borisov's strategic aim is to come back to power, and the instrument for its achievement is the populist discourse. The main emphasis in it is placed on outlining 'the image of the enemy', with the help of a number of similar manipulative techniques.

Conclusion

Boyko Borisov's populist strategy in the initial period of the development of the political crisis has several classical features because GERB's leader is pursuing his main aim to take over again the executive power in the country. The article has illustrated in an empirical way the correlation between the strategy and the discourse. From the empirical examples provided at the end of the analysis, it is clear that this is not a strategy that aims to benefit from political dialogue: on the contrary, it builds on radical confrontation to destroy dialogue, to deepen the crisis, to cause institutional dysfunction, to cause an erosion of the entire political system, and thus to lead to a situation in which Boyko Borisov's party will gain an electoral and strategic advantage that will allow it to prevail over the other parties, to control the entire state power, and to regain the position of political hegemon. Borisov finds 'the image of the enemy' in each of GERB's opponents – the parties of the 2020 protest, their leaders, the President, and the ministers from the provisional governments. The discourse is confrontational and radically polarising – everything achieved by GERB is constructive, positive, brings order and stability; every action taken by the opponents of GERB and of Borisov himself is destructive, negative, creates chaos and instability. If we have to give a general summary, we could say that Boyko Borisov's populist discourse is constructed around the dichotomies 'order–chaos' and 'stability–devastation'; while the use of manipulative techniques, also based on the same dichotomies, is part of his winning strategy, which, in the row of extraordinary general elections accompanying the development of the crisis, helped the party leader to realise a whole series of successful populist mobilisations. This strategy is in its turn profoundly anti-institutional and anti-pluralistic because the personalist populist leader presents himself and his party as the only legitimate political alternative (which is above all rules, all institutions, all other political formations), and in this way it rejects all options for parliamentary collaboration to overcome the crisis.

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