

## **Liberating the Bulgarian political environment: ‘We Continue the Change’ and the populism of democracy in Bulgaria**

Kristiyana Atanasova\*

Dr Rashid Gabdulhakov\*\*

### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the successful presentation of the newest-at-the-time political formation *We Continue the Change* during the 2021 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, held in the midst of one of the largest legitimacy crises in the democratic history of the country. The main research question explored by this study inquires into the driving factors behind the success of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev’s political project *We Continue the Change*. In doing so, the study identifies dominant themes within the discourse of change that was utilized by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev in the pre-election campaign. The analysis illustrates how the two political leaders managed to build up their charisma and establish themselves as reliable leaders during their mandate in the caretaker government. This article makes a scientific contribution through an exploration of a populist success story in Bulgarian politics and spotlights broader political processes in post-communist Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** populism, We Continue the Change, Bulgaria, GERB, legitimacy crisis

### **Introduction**

Populism has become the new condition of the political realms in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Krastev, 2008 in Mesežnikov et al., 2008; Petrović et al. 2022; Szelewa, 2020). In their article Petrović et al. (2022) point that “[b]y the end of 2020, more than half of the 11 post-communist European Union (EU) member states were ruled by populist prime ministers” (p.268). The authors further distinguish between two types – radical right populist party leaders (*Fidesz* in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and SDS in Slovenia) and centrist populist party leaders (GERB in Bulgaria, OL’ANO in Slovakia, and ANO in Czech Republic). On the one hand, their analysis outlines that the party leaders and party manifestos of the radical right populist parties tend to be more nationalist, history-oriented, Eurosceptic, and critical of the Western values. While on the other hand, populist leaders of the centrist populist parties came to politics following their careers as entrepreneurs and mostly put their focus not

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\* Independent Researcher, [kristiyana\\_atanasova@yahoo.bg](mailto:kristiyana_atanasova@yahoo.bg)

\*\* Assistant Professor, Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, the Netherlands.  
[r.f.gabdulhakov@rug.nl](mailto:r.f.gabdulhakov@rug.nl) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0266-8381>

so much on the history of the communist past but rather on anti-corruption appeals and “promises of managing the state more effectively” (Petrović et al., p. 268).

Considering the rather recent history of populism in Bulgaria, since the country began its transition to democracy, it can be suggested that populism as a tool has been quickly and successfully instrumentalized by politicians at the highest levels of the Bulgarian government, leading at least in part, to Bulgaria having a populist prime minister in power for twelve years (Krasteva, 2013; Zhdrebev, 2016). Yet populism also weakened the status of democracy as people have become discouraged from putting their trust in the hands of mainstream political parties (Angelova, 2022), which reflected in the voting turnout in elections, with a steady decrease from 50,61% in April 2021 to 40,69% in April 2023 (Cik, 2021; Cik, 2023).

There is an ongoing academic debate about the effect that populism has on democracy (Lang, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Pasquino, 2008; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Vittori, 2021). A definition of democracy by Schumpeter (1962) proposes that “[t]he democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (cited in Pasquino, 2008, p. 17).

With regards to the effect that populism has on democracy, by making a distinction between “populism in opposition” and “populism in government”, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) argue that “populism in opposition” can prove as a corrective to the quality of democracy since issues that were previously neglected by the establishment are put on the political agenda by populist leaders, while populism in government can pose a significant threat to the democratic checks and balances. In response to ‘populism in opposition Kaltwasser (2013) argues that populist forces can be quite analytical of the constitutional framework and when they suspect that it is working in favor of the elite “they are prone to promote constitutional amendments or reforms with the aim of developing new institutions which are able to enact popular will” (p. 12).

On the other hand, while there is common ground between democracy and populism in the face of the strong root in “the people”, populism might result in a negative impact on the democratic framework because the followers of populist leaders grant them a massive amount of trust that can be abused at a later stage (Pasquino, 2008). Furthermore, the populist movement requires hostility that is “directed against particular enemies” (Pasquino, 2008, p. 28) and the presence of hostility prevents collaboration and the management of conflicts. As a global phenomenon, populism has been increasingly studied in the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the U.S. presidential elections in 2016, and Latin American politics (Grigera, 2017; Gusterson, 2017; Hawkins, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Roberts, 2006;

Rooduijn, 2019). However, the case of populism in CEE countries such as Bulgaria has been underrepresented in the academic field - a gap that the current article aims to fill.

Populism in Bulgarian politics has had a preeminent role since the beginning of the democratic transition after 1989 (Cristova, 2011). There are three waves of populism that occurred after 1989 in Bulgaria. The first one was marked by the return of the ex-tsar Simeon II and the founding of his party National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV). After winning the 2001 parliamentary elections, the party managed to make substantial reforms in the face of signing of the accession treaty to NATO and the beginning of negotiations for joining the EU. However, the former leader Simeon II also made grand promises to the people such as that he would manage to solve the country's biggest issues in 800 days. Falling short on that promise resulted in the loss of a significant number of voters in the 2005 election round (Cristova, 2011).

Nevertheless, other political actors acknowledged the electoral potential of using populist appeals and new parties began to arise (Smilov, 2008 in Mesežnikov et al., 2008). Two of the most prominent at the time were the right-wing party Ataka [The Attack] and later Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), both being centered on the charisma of their leaders (De Waele & Cholova, 2014; Ghodsee, 2008). Although both parties were leader-centered, the platform on which Ataka rallied was rather more extreme as it propagated xenophobic and anti-Semitic appeals (Ghodsee, 2008).

In contrast, the party GERB managed to attract voters by relying on the charisma of its leader Boyko Borisov (Zankina & Gurov, 2013). In the twelve-year governing of Boyko Borisov his communication style can be considered plebiscitarian, in large because his personal election campaigns were led from the back seat of his car where he frequently exposed in video his conversations with other politicians from his cabinet talking about how they will solve the country's most pressing issues. Most often, these conversations occurred while he was on his way to a village or a small town where he frequently gave speeches to the workers at the local factories. During these speeches, the former Prime Minister spoke to the people in an informal manner. On occasions, he was also heard saying phrases such as "You are stupid, and I am stupid and that is why we get along" (Paunovski, 2020). However, many agree that during the twelve-year GERB government, the country faced the highest degree of corruption related to election procedures and distribution of state positions and this eventually led to the unleashing of the piled-up societal discontent, resulting in six months of protests in 2020.

Considering that populism is the main, if not the only tool used by the Bulgarian politicians to attract electoral support, the number of studies on populism in Bulgaria is unjustifiably limited and outdated. This article makes a scientific contribution through an exploration of one of the most recent populist

success stories. Namely, the triumph of the newly established party We Continue the Change and its two leaders Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev in the parliamentary elections of 14 November 2021. Furthermore, the case of a political coalition winning the elections after only two months of its formation is a precedent in Bulgarian politics that lacks sufficient scholarly and empirical enquiry and reflection.

Populist appeals used by the Bulgarian parties have been evident since the transition to democracy amid the Fall of Communism. Since democracy was a new concept for the new democratic power to grasp, it can be assumed that parties quickly realized that it was the promise of providing freedom to the people that was enough to win the elections. However, after the disappointment of the people with the transition to market economy, the inability of the newly established democratic institutions to build a well-functioning state (Raycheva & Peicheva, 2017) and the frequency of government changes during the first few years of the transition, the Bulgarian society was dissatisfied with the prospects facing the country such as inflation, organized crime and corruption (Zankina & Gurov, 2013). This social and political instability can be assumed to have provided the conduit to the entry of populist leaders.

In its pursuit of bridging the literature on populism in the CEE region, this paper inquires into how a populist strategy used by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev led to the success of their political project We Continue the Change. The paper also explores the dominant themes within the discourse of change utilized by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev.

Finally, this paper contributes to the literature on populism in post-communist countries by exploring how democracy is used to attract supporters of the populist agenda.

## **Literature Review**

In recent years populism has attracted considerable interest among scholars due to its manifestation and implication in the political realms of countries all over the world. More so, scholars such as Mudde (2004) have called the current political environment a “populist *Zeitgeist*” due to the permeable nature of the phenomenon, its use by political parties and leaders on both sides of the political spectrum, and its impact on liberal democracies. Moreover, the multifaceted nature of the term ‘populism’ as well as its analytical and normative vagueness have created difficulties in defining it in concrete terms (Cristova, 2011; Laclau, 2018; Lang, 2005). Thus, one of the main academic challenges to defining it lies in the understanding of how it is intertwined with culture and context, and how this, in turn, affects political change (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). To arrive at a

systematic understanding of populism, it is important to distinguish among three general conceptual approaches.

### *Populism as an ideology*

The first conceptualization of populism sees it as a thin-centered ideology that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). However, as an ideology, it does not suggest that it is one constructed of comprehensive ideas that are rooted in political theory. Rather, it is a thin-centered ideology that makes use of loosely interrelated ideas that are heavily dependent on interpretation and therefore, difficult to be scrutinized (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013).

Populism is comprised of a restricted core constituting ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, that can be attached to a broader range of political concepts and thus, it can be easily combined with hard ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, or communism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 2018; Mudde, 2004). The guiding principle is the emphasis on the antagonistic relationship between the people who serve as the underdog against the corrupt elites by whom they have been constantly oppressed. The approach to populism as a thin-centered ideology has been especially relevant among scholars focusing on European right-wing populist parties such as The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), Vlaams Blok in Belgium (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and Ataka in Bulgaria (De Waele & Cholova, 2014).

Scholars unanimously agree that the main building block of populism is the antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). However, the term ‘the people’ can be considered as a rather empty term which might not mean more than “a rhetorical tool that does not truly refer to any existing group of people” (Mudde 2004, p. 545). Therefore, Taggart (2000) introduced an alternative term, the one of ‘the heartland’ which suggests that the people in the populist propaganda are an ‘imagined community’, rather than legitimate constituents within a nation.

At the same time, it is often more clear who is the ‘enemy’ of populists. In most cases within liberal democratic systems, populists exhibit anti-party sentiments by arguing that “political parties corrupt the link between leaders and supporters” (Mudde 2004, p. 546). Although, this mostly holds true for their appeals against established parties. According to Mudde (2004), populist parties claim to be a new kind of party that represents the real people and not the elites’ interests. And this perception of their power positions them forward as being the defenders of the people who have the power to deny the elites their entitlement. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that it is often the case when populist

parties enter the parliament, they tend to fall within the lines of the establishment (Minogue in Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Wiles in Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Laclau 2018; Smilov & Krastev 2008 in Mesežnikov et al., 2008)).

### *Populism as a discursive style*

The second conceptualization of populism explores it as a discursive style that builds upon the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Mudde (2004) begins to define populism by separating its very nature into two dominant frames. Within the first frame, populism refers to the intuitive nature of people and thus, politicians, to explain serious and complex events and occurrences by making use of a highly emotional and simplistic discourse. Instead of taking a rational and serious stance on certain issues, the populist discourse “is directed at the ‘gut feelings’ of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 542). Along these lines, Laclau (2018) presents the argument that populism simplifies the political reality “by replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy” (p. 25).

Within the second frame, populism is practiced as a quick and promising weapon against serious political and social grievances and has a ‘catch-all’ nature aimed at mobilizing a large part of the electorate (Mudde, 2004). Using the Bulgarian case as an example, the rise of populism in the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, during the election campaign of the ex-monarch Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, he made a strong statement that his government could solve some of the country’s major problems such as attracting foreign investors, fighting corruption, and raising the living standards of the common Bulgarians in only eight hundred days. This promise came at a time when people were disillusioned by the governments that came to rule during the first years of the country’s transition to democracy and proved to be a successful strategy as his party National Movement for Stability and Progress (NDSV) won the elections in 2001 by majority (Cristova, 2011; Zankina & Gurov, 2013).

Thus, it can be argued that populist discourse differs from ideology as ideology on the one hand is related to a coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that need complex articulation to be put into practice (Hawkins, 2009) while populist discourse on the other, is evocative, actionable and omissive (Poblete, 2015) and it is practiced selectively and strategically and thus, it is difficult to be scrutinized (Kazin, 1995). Therefore, studying populist discourse allows more flexibility in comparison to studying it as an ideology since it moves away from the binarity of whether a party is populist or not to the degree of whether “a party has more populist characteristics or fewer” (Haughton 2009 cited in Gidron & Bonikowski 2014, p. 9).

*Populism as a political strategy*

According to Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. (2019), by building upon the narrative of the deprived by the elite people, populist discourse feeds on grievances of the part of the population “that considers themselves victims of an institutional system” (p. 20). And since in any society this part promises to be large enough, the simplistic yet powerful emotional language deployed by populist leaders can serve as the catalyst of mass mobilizations. Within the populist discourse, for the people to be represented they need to be juxtaposed with their enemy be it the Establishment, the elites, the bankers, or the immigrants. This antagonistic relationship is emphasized to exhaustion by populist leaders since exclusion and the feeling of deprivation on behalf of ‘the people’ are at the very foundation of populist discourse. However, the people that are constructed within the populist rhetoric are not ‘pre-existing reality’ but instead, they are yet to be molded and framed. Along these lines, Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. (2019) argue that for the antagonistic relationship to be discursive, there is a need for authentic policy, and this policy is precisely the one that constructs the people as the permanent majority taking back popular sovereignty in their own hands.

To better explain the degree of influence of the populist strategy, the social identity theory can be used to understand the psychological processes that are enacted by populist leaders (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Social identity theory emerged around the attempt to explain the complex intergroup processes in social identity formation (Hogg 2016). According to Tajfel (1972), the definition of social identity lies in “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292, cited in Hogg 2016, p. 6). Besides giving individuals a sense of belonging and providing them with a shared identity, social identities are critical in the evaluation of the distinctiveness between the in-group from relevant outgroups (Hogg, 2016). Therefore, intergroup relations have an integrative role in the formation of the social identity theory that falls under the frame of a wider theory referred to as the ‘social identity theory of intergroup relations’ (Tajfel & Turner, 2001).

As social identity refers to one’s definition and evaluation of the concept of the self, it is also closely related to the perception of how one will be thought of and treated by others. Therefore, a main concern within intergroup relations is the positive distinctiveness and clear differentiation of one’s own group in comparison to relevant out-groups (Hogg 2016). The identity management strategies undertaken by groups depend on the subjective belief structures which represent group members’ beliefs “about the nature of the relationship between their group and a specific out-group” (Hogg 2016, p. 7). These

beliefs generally focus on status, stability, permeability, cognitive alternatives, social mobility, and social change.

Based on permeability, according to Tajfel and Turner (2001), the value system of social mobility refers to the “general assumption that the society in which the individuals live is a flexible and permeable one” (p. 35) and whenever individuals are not satisfied with the membership conditions of the social groups they reside in, there is a possibility to move to another group that suits them better or climb up the social ladder. However, in reality, group boundaries can very rarely be crossed and for those who try, there lies the threat of becoming social outcasts. Often as part of a political strategy, the dominant groups propagate the ideology of social mobility in order to sustain their power and prevent collective action on behalf of underrepresented minorities (Hogg, 2016).

Contrary to social mobility, the belief system of social change can be considered as the driver of social movements and protests since it rests on the “recognition that permeability is actually low; that intergroup boundaries are in fact hard and difficult to cross” (Hogg, 2016, p. 7; Tajfel & Turner, 2001). According to Tajfel & Turner (2001), members of low-status groups acknowledge that it is impossible for them “to invest themselves in an unsatisfactory, underprivileged, or stigmatized group membership” (p.35). Thus, they engage in behaviors that are aimed at increasing the value of their group and avoid upward “comparison with higher status groups and instead engage in (lateral or downward) comparisons with other groups lower in the social pecking order” (Hogg 2016, p. 7).

Therefore, the combination of societal discontent, unsatisfactory group membership, and carefully crafted rhetoric such as the one used in populist discourse, can serve as a powerful tool for the populist political strategy because it is constructed upon the natural presence of intergroup conflict and the intuitive division between ‘us’ the in-group and ‘them’ the out-group.

Another important concept within social identity theory that is also used by a strategy on its own, is the concept of social identity framing which has a key role in the study of populism (Busby et al., 2019; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Spruyt et al., 2016). It emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between the ordinary people who have been deprived in various ways as the in-group and the elites who stripped the people of their rights as the out-group (Bos et al., 2020; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). One of the most emphasized matters in populist rhetoric are the anti-elitist and anti-immigrant discussions. By exploring the effects of populist identity framing, through conducting a multi-country study Bos et al. (2020) found that anti-elitist populist identity frames that actively employ out-group cues such as blaming the elites for future economic losses have a more persuasive effect on voters than political messages and journalistic output that do not identify a specific ‘enemy’.



The results of the study indicate a very important aspect of populist communication. According to Bos et al. (2020), it is precisely the use of populist rhetoric that makes possible “the priming of anti-elitist identity considerations that voters are more likely to agree with and be engaged by” (p. 20) and thus, be mobilized in taking political actions.

By focusing on measuring the people’s populist attitudes and the factors inciting them, Elchardus & Spruyt (2016) argue that the political choices of citizens are based on one’s own personal experiences, grievances and “the evaluation of the state of society and the probable impact of one’s political choices on that state are likely to be influenced of conceptions of justice” (p. 115). Although these conceptions might be formed individually, they are highly influenced and reinforced by the social groups one belongs in.

Therefore, whether one will be persuaded by populist messages related to certain economic vulnerabilities will not depend on the vulnerabilities themselves but rather, on their interpretation by the social groups one identifies with, through the feelings of relative deprivation. As well, it will depend on how this relative deprivation is then acknowledged and crafted in the populist communication strategy (Bos et al., 2020; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). It is precisely the feelings of relative deprivation that enable certain social groups to believe that society is naturally divided between the deprived people and the depriving elite and thus be aroused by populist ideas (Bos et al., 2020; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 2001).

### *Charismatic leadership*

The concept of charismatic leadership generally refers to “the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership” (Weber, 1992 cited in Mudde & Kaltwasse, 2014, p. 383). However, Favero (2022) criticizes the common academic approach to focus on charisma solely from the perspective of the followers and argues that this might lead to missing important insights into the populist leaders’ performance and the values they hold. In other words, he argues for the necessity to explore charismatic leadership from the supply side as this raises the question of whether populists themselves “believe in the idealist values of their charismatic qualities or if they are just well versed in making the followers believe in them” (p. 1).

Eatwell (2018) moves on to identify the characteristics of charismatic leaders. First, he characterizes charismatic leaders as missionaries who are on a quest to save the suffering nation. Accordingly, they employ rhetoric through which they aim to present themselves and certain aspects of their lives “as part of a grander narrative about their mission” (Eatwell, 2018, p. 255 ). The second characteristic is

the confidence and personal presence that charismatic leaders exhibit. However, this can also be seen as manufactured charisma as it entails the use of PR and communication specialists who craft a strategy for the media appearance of charismatic leaders. Next comes the portrayal of charismatic leaders as ordinary citizens who are part of the people, also referred to as the strategy of symbiotic hierarchy and can be outlined by the emphasis on the status that charismatic leaders had before entering into politics. For instance, Eatwell (2018) refers to Margaret Thatcher who “made great play of coming from a shopkeeper background and initially stressed her status as a housewife” (p. 256). The final characteristic is in the face of Manichean demonization where the straightforward juxtaposition of the in-group versus the out-group, the ‘pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elites’ comes into play (Eatwell, 2018; Mudde, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 2001).

### **Populism in Bulgaria**

The academic debate on populism in Bulgaria has mainly focused on three subsequent waves of populism. In this regard, Bulgarian scholars are unanimous that the political environment in Bulgaria has been extremely conducive to the populist phenomenon mainly due to the legitimacy crisis of the Bulgarian government and the instability of the democratic institutions (Zhdrebev, 2016; Karasimeonov, 2008; Smilov, 2008; Cristova, 2011; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; De Waele & Cholova, 2014). The Bulgarian case can serve as a clear example to the ‘populist challenge’ (Lang, 2005) as populism has been thriving since the end of the transition to democracy with considerable variability in communication strategies of the populist leaders.

During Bulgaria’s tumultuous transition to democracy, a prominent two-party system emerged. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) represented the left, while the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) embodied the right. Complementing these major parties was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), advocating for the Turkish minority and acting as a balancer between the two opposing parties (Cristova, 2011; Zankina & Gurov, 2013). Both BSP and SDS leveraged rhetoric emphasizing popular sovereignty and victim narratives, albeit with differing ideological underpinnings, reflecting the diverse societal tensions of post-communist Bulgaria (Cristova, 2011).

Subsequently, the advent of populist leaders marked three distinctive waves of populism in Bulgarian politics (Smilov, 2008; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; De Waele & Cholova, 2014). The first wave saw the emergence of the National Movement Simeon the Second, led by exiled Tsar Simeon II. His unexpected return and subsequent electoral victory galvanized significant support, shaking the established political order (Zankina & Gurov, 2013). After winning the elections, the NDSV

government managed to make some of the most substantial reforms for the Bulgarian state at the time, such as signing the accession treaty to NATO and beginning the negotiations for the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union (De Waele & Cholova, 2014). However, Simeon II made bold promises, the boldest of which was that he could manage to resolve some of the most pressing issues faced by the country, such as corruption and organized crime, within 800 days. After winning the elections, NDSV was up against a complex restructuring and slowly became institutionalized. Once NDSV stepped into office, some of their promises were quickly abandoned and their policies became congruent with those of the previous government (De Waele & Cholova 2014; Smilov, 2008). Despite their initial promises of reform, the pragmatic realities of governance exposed the limitations of populist approaches, leading to a decline in public confidence (Smilov, 2008).

The second wave witnessed the rise of Ataka, a radical party under the leadership of Volen Siderov. The party capitalized on anti-establishment sentiment and xenophobic rhetoric, targeting minority groups, and exploiting societal fears (Krasteva, 2013; Ghodsee, 2008; Smilov, 2008). This wave demonstrated the potency of populism in mobilizing disaffected segments of society, albeit through divisive and exclusionary means (Krasteva, 2013; Smilov, 2008).

The third wave of populism introduced Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, led by Boyko Borisov. Borisov's anti-corruption platform and tough-on-crime stance resonated with disillusioned voters, propelling GERB to electoral success (De Waele & Cholova, 2014; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; Smilov, 2008). Being labeled as a true populist party, GERB's main resource is the charisma of its leader Boyko Borisov which compromises the party's lack of ideological coherence and established party structure (De Waele & Cholova, 2014; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; Smilov, 2008). Bulgarian scholars are unanimous that a major premise to the political success of Borisov was his carefully crafted media strategy and communication style (De Waele & Cholova, 2014; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; Smilov, 2008). He provided simple solutions to painful societal issues and "as a former fireman and bodyguard, he constructed a protective image of a tough law-and-order politician not shying from drastic measures" (Cristova, 2011, p. 226). His charismatic leadership and direct communication style epitomized yet another facet of populism, characterized by a personalized and anti-establishment appeal (De Waele & Cholova, 2014; Zankina & Gurov, 2013; Smilov, 2008).

In essence, Bulgaria's experience with populism underscores the intricate interplay between historical context, communication strategies, and the populist phenomenon. As scholars continue to analyze these waves of populism, the Bulgarian case serves as a compelling illustration of the multifaceted nature of populist movements and their enduring impact on democratic governance.

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection*

To ensure methodological rigor and diversify the array of data sources, the present study utilizes the online news media platform Dnevnik.bg which aggregates videos from a spectrum of other media outlets, including interview excerpts from national television broadcasts and live events shared on the Facebook page of 'We Continue the Change'. The designated time frame for data collection was May 12, 2021 to November 14, 2021, strategically focusing on Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev's positions as Minister of the Economy and Minister of Finances respectively, and their decision to form the political project 'We Continue the Change' leading up to the electoral proceedings on November 14, 2021.

Several types of public appearances were analyzed including briefings, conferences, and interviews. With regards to the analysis of interviews, while it was acknowledged that it is the reporter who navigates the thematic focus, the chronology of their public appearances was considered to have an overarching importance and this also compromises the limited availability of broadcasted events that were uploaded on the news media website. The selection process was carried out by using the built-in filtering option in Dnevnik.bg that allows for the search of outputs for the selected time frame, which resulted in the selection of a total of 15 videos that were later transformed into textual artifacts.

### *Data analysis*

The Literature review outlined three main conceptualizations of populism – as an ideology, as a discursive style and as a political strategy. Deriving from the matrix presented by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), this article focuses on the last two conceptualizations of populism since the ideological conceptualization is not applicable to the case of 'We Continue the Change'.

Thematic analysis was considered as an appropriate method that fits the objective of the study and one of the most influential works on this type of analysis is the method paper of Braun and Clarke (2006). In its essence, thematic analysis is described as a method that identifies, analyses, and reports patterns of themes across a dataset. However, in comparison to other qualitative methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or discourse analysis, thematic analysis is considered more flexible in terms of theoretical limitations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, Braun & Clarke (2021) advise the use of TA when “the analytic interest is on how personal experiences are located within wider socio-cultural contexts” (p.5).

On the one hand, the choice of conducting thematic analysis was in accordance with (Braun & Clarke, 2021) recommendation regarding the number of documents on which they advise for the use of TA when the sample is larger than N=10. On the other hand, what was considered of the highest importance is the focus of thematic analysis on the socio-cultural context, which is exactly what this paper emphasizes. The political and social instability that followed the corruption scandals during the GERB government in 2020 along with other pressing social and political issues that have built up over time, all led to the demise of the twelve years of ruling of the GERB government. Therefore, the main assumption is that it is precisely the socio-cultural context in the midst of which 'We Continue the Change' was founded that allowed for the party's success in the parliamentary elections on November 14, 2021.

### *Thematic analysis framework*

This section details the thematic analysis process employed in this study, drawing upon the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

#### **1. Familiarization and Initial Coding**

The analysis commenced with an iterative and recursive process of familiarization with the data set. This entailed intensive reading and re-reading of all the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. During this familiarization phase, the initial conceptualization of the study, including the selection of themes and epistemological stance, was informed by the emerging data. Braun and Clarke (2006) differentiate between two thematic levels: semantic/explicit and latent/interpretative. Given the study's theoretical foundation in populism and social identity theory, a focus on the latent/interpretative level was deemed more appropriate. This approach delves deeper to theorize the case of "We Continue the Change" by considering the socio-cultural context, rather than simply describing surface-level themes. Furthermore, the analysis adopted a constructionist framework, aligning with the understanding that meanings and experiences are socially produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). This framework centers on theorizing the "sociocultural contexts and structural conditions" that shape individual accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

Following the emergence of broad patterns within the data, an open coding process was conducted. This involved systematically assigning codes to data segments across the entire dataset. To address a common critique raised by Braun and Clarke (2006) regarding the loss of context in early coding stages, an inclusive approach was adopted, resulting in the generation of approximately 50 initial codes. By the conclusion of this phase, these codes were organized and categorized into five broad thematic topics.

## ***2. Re-coding and Thematic Map Development***

The third stage involved re-coding the dataset against the five identified topics. This process entailed revisiting the data and refining the codes to ensure alignment with the established themes. Subsequently, the re-coded data was utilized to construct a preliminary thematic map, providing a visual representation of the identified themes and their interrelationships.

## ***3. Selective Coding and Theme Refinement***

The final round of coding, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), had a dual focus. First, a focused (selective) coding approach was adopted. Here, all coded extracts related to a specific theme were collated to assess the theme's internal coherence and consistency. Second, a similar process was applied at the level of the entire dataset. Data extracts for each theme were brought together to evaluate the theme's validity in relation to the entire data corpus.

Following this selective coding process, and subsequent refinement of candidate themes, two main themes were identified. The first theme, "Fixing up the leakages in the system," was further broken down into two sub-themes: "The main faucets of power" and "Standing up against the status quo hegemony". The second main theme, "Drivers of the change," was similarly broken down into the sub-themes: "Dedication to the task" and "The new values to uphold". This thematic structure aligns with one of the initial assumptions during data collection, which posited a chronological transformation in the discourse. Therefore, the decision to collect data in a chronological order rather than through a random sample was validated, as it facilitated the discernment of chronological transformations in discourse—a key assumption upheld during data collection.

## **Findings**

### *Theme 1: Fixing up the leakages in the system*

The aim of this theme is to provide a coherent account of the political issues that were of relevance at the time and the solution of which displayed Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev as reliable and devoted individuals whose purpose is to take Bulgaria out of 'the 30 years of transition' and into the democratic era. The duration of the caretaker government was approximately three months. During this period, Kiril Petkov was the Minister of Economy and Asen Vasilev was the Minister of Finance. Their position in these two key executive administrations provided them with a steady ground on which they could build their political charisma and later establish and promote their political project 'We Continue the Change'.

### *Sub-theme 1: The main faucets of power*

This sub-theme makes use of the lingo that is commonly adopted by politicians and parties of the protest that are actively participating in the discourse of the change that began to form during the six months of anti-government protests in 2020. Considered the main faucets of power and of importance to this analysis are the state financial institution Bulgarian Development Bank and the State Consolidation Company, both of which are one hundred percent state-owned. The main issues related to these two institutions, which were indicated by the analysis concern corruption, abuse of power, and dubious practices concerning public procurements.

As the acting Minister of Economy from 12 May 2021 until 16 September 2021, Kiril Petkov had a somewhat aggressive approach of interfering with the operations carried out by the executive officers of the Bulgarian Development Bank. During his first week in the caretaker cabinet, he unraveled that the bank had granted financing amounting to BGN 946 million to eight companies. Although Mr. Petkov is only a caretaker expert Minister whose task is not to take an active part in politics, the leitmotif of his statements points to deep-stated corruption within the Bulgarian Development Bank. In the meantime, instead of directly facing political figures from the status quo parties that he suspects, he masks his attacks by identifying the Supervisory board of the bank as the ‘enemy’.

Therefore, shifting the focus from the political to the practical which is in the face of two members of the Supervisory Board whose abuse of power included the approval of loans amounting to nearly BGN 1 billion without any accountability to the bank Principal, in that case, the Minister of Economy. The use of strong phrases such as ‘these are the taxpayers' money’, ‘this is the bank of the taxpayers’, ‘my money and all of the taxpayers' money’ are juxtaposed to the illustration of the Supervisory Board as people ‘who are most likely to have outside influence that is guiding them on what to do’ and who had forgotten about their duty to protect the public interest. This emotional use of language is then utilized to construct the board as ‘the villain’ who is taking away what is rightfully owned by the people. Nevertheless, it can also be understood as a concealed attack on the status quo parties and their political leaders because allegedly they influenced the appointing of the supervisory board positions.

In this game of morality, the analysis identified another aspect that is of importance to Kiril Petkov namely, nepotism in the public administration. Positions are distributed internally among people with connections, and in the case of the bank’s board, the two board members had gained their experience from the Public Enterprises and Control Agency, or in his words ‘not from big banks across Europe, not from other development banks, not even from commercial banks, but from the Privatization Agency’.

Moving forward to the second ‘enemy’ that was constructed, the State Consolidation Company was identified as another underwater stone put by the previous status quo administrations and the main issue here is related to the lack of transparency. However, as being one of the most influential state holdings, the lack of accountability does raise other important issues such as the company’s neglect of public procurement procedures for upscale state projects.

Since Bulgaria had been accepted to the European Union, some of the most prominent scandals both on the national and regional levels were related to the lack of transparency and the significant abuse of funds concerning public procurement procedures. In many cases, previous governments were either placing an offer for the execution of public procurements where only one candidate applied, or the candidate companies who won the procurement were always the same and it was a public secret that they were ‘close to the power’. However, in a large part of the cases, the public procurement procedure was entirely avoided. In the case concerning the State Consolidation Company, according to an investigation carried out by Kiril Petkov ‘BGN 182 million are being paid to contractors without public procurement’.

#### *Sub-theme 2: Standing up against the status quo hegemony*

Moving on from identifying the leakages in the system and the main faucets of power, this sub-theme will explore how the two political leaders intended to stand up against the status-quo parties. In this sub-theme, the ambitious approach further evolves as the time of the pre-election campaign is also intersected. This allows for the observation of the statements of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev and the fact that they become bolder because not only practical administrative assignments are tackled but also, they started to bring up the topic of the influence of GERB, DPS and ITN. The main highlights within this sub-theme are the need for reforms, the need for transparency, and the effectiveness of the public administration.

Here, the narrative of the ‘taxpayer’s money’ continues to evolve but with concrete and measurable steps that the Ministry of Economy has taken under the leadership of Kiril Petkov. Furthermore, by using the pronoun ‘we’, he is appealing to the society at large to take back their sovereignty since the Bulgarian Development Bank is the bank of the taxpayers. The way that he introduces the actions that have been undertaken by himself personally, presents him as a benevolent leader who is doing everything in his power to put an end to the corrupt practices, but it is the responsibility of the society to continue what he started.

Moreover, I’ll be introducing a new Statute for the Bulgarian Development Bank which limits the bank from being able to give more than BGN 5 million credits.



Furthermore, by showing modesty but at the same time strength in his quest for reforms, and by taking firm actions against the current board, he is presenting himself as an honest and reliable leader who is not afraid to shift the layers of power.

This calls me to do something that is not common in the banking practice, but I simply do not have a choice. As of today, right after this interview, I will issue my order for the dismissal of the two Supervisory Board members.

However, since his agenda is not limited only to the bank, other institutions such as the State Consolidation Company were also put under scrutiny. The previous sub-theme explored the lack of transparency with regards to the management of this company and transparency is one of the main values that Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev are striving for. Furthermore, he constantly justifies his actions by underlining their importance and making note on numerous occasions that the caretaker government will only be governing for three months and he aims at making fast and sustainable reforms.

Therefore, Petkov's next objective is to assign a transparency committee and to design a new website of the State Consolidation Company where citizens can access a special 'transparency' section where they can check the relevant procedures, procurements, and projects. Although, after checking the website of the Company, a special 'transparency' section was not found, it does appear that the website has become active in the summer of 2021.

Another aspect that is considered important and is related to both the reforms that the Ministry of Economics is undertaking is Mr. Petkov's attempt at gaining allies in the public administration. At all societal levels in Bulgaria, it is widely perceived that the administration is ineffective. However, in order for him to succeed as a leader, he frequently praises the effectiveness of the administrative units related to the Ministry of Economy and thus, points out to and undermines the ineffectiveness of the previous governments.

Acknowledging that the reforms he has introduced are really shifting the layers of power that have been formed in the past twelve years by the GERB government, frequently enough, Mr. Petkov makes an address in his statements that these actions might create tension among some of the 'backstage power holders'. Here, he also starts to directly refer to status quo parties such as GERB and DPS. He admits that the alleged attacks against him coming from representatives of these parties are precisely what motivates him and keeps him 'moving forward in the right direction' because apparently, his team is touching upon someone's interests.

However, with regards to the ‘coordinated attacks’ against Mr. Petkov, it can be argued that he strategically puts himself in the role of the victim with the aim of him being perceived as an honest and honorable man juxtaposed to the villains who do not care about governing the country but only about denigrating him. In his words, ‘it is very unpleasant for one to have to protect oneself from dawn till dusk, to have to protect the national interest and the national cause which are of the highest importance’.

Moving on to the pre-election campaign, after We Continue the Change was established, Kiril Petkov began to actively scrutinize some of the ‘status-quo guidelines’ of governing the country. On multiple occasions he made it apparent that his party will use an ‘honesty filter’ on the people who will run on the district election lists and the society can be sure that there will be no ‘backstage power agreements’ on behalf of We Continue the Change.

Unfortunately for these investors, they should know that our door is closed for them. In our party, unfortunately, they won’t have [influence]. Each and every one of them who wants to fund us, unfortunately, we will not accept.

Therefore, claiming that honesty is another central value to the two leaders that directly collides with the previous governments’ values thereby, masking an ideological attack against status quo parties. Furthermore, the state instability provoked by the numerous corruption scandals related to questionable public procurement procedures, the abuse of power on behalf of state officials and the public scandals around the ex-Prime Minister Boyko Borissov suggest that the overuse of the word ‘unfortunately’ three times in one sentence may be another well-crafted strategy that aims to redirect people’s attention back to the discontent that brought the state to three-rounds of elections in 2021 and to the possibility that We Continue the Change might be the savior who will take the country out of the crisis.

### *Theme 2: Drivers of the change*

After laying out the foundation and identifying the main faucets of power and thus, constructing the enemy in the face of the supervisory board of the Bulgarian Development Bank, this theme is focused on Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilevs attempts at constructing the drivers needed in order to make a real change in the Bulgarian politics. And the most substantive factor needed for the change is honesty. Furthermore, the guiding ethical and moral principles of the two political leaders are overemphasized in light of their stance on the issues that were identified in the previous theme.

#### *Sub-theme 1: Dedication to the task*

The sub-theme ‘Dedication to the task’ mainly revolves around the devotion of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev to ‘fix up’ the system after laying out the foundations, as indicated by the previous theme. The analysis begins with a quote that is precisely aimed to underline the self-sacrifice that is at the bottom of the leaders’ dedication to the Bulgarian nation and aims at instigating a feeling of collective commitment to a higher purpose.

When I accepted the position, I knew there would be a price and I was ready to pay that price ... But what drives me is the joy I will feel if one day our children don’t see politics as a dirty job.

The narrative in this sub-theme is highly optimistic in that it underlines the two leaders’ openness to the people. Moreover, the notion that the public administration ‘is actually quite effective’ is further reiterated. Although here the focus on the effectiveness of the administration is used to further emphasize the strength of their leadership. However, the center of attention in the sub-theme is the focus on the main value that the two MPs adhere to, honesty, as well as to the image of the people as their new shareholders.

The changing of the Supervisory Board of the Bulgarian Development Bank and the reforms they made in the State Consolidation Company were the most substantial reforms upon which both politicians managed to establish their legitimacy as well as their charisma. However, another important actor comes forward in this sub-theme - President Rumen Radev. As this was his caretaker government, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev highly enjoyed his support. On one occasion Kiril Petkov even mentions a conversation he had with Rumen Radev in which the latter told him ‘Kiril, I think Bulgaria would have been much more prosperous if only we had more Ministers like you’.

Further supporting the image of a responsible leader who takes up the responsibility of improving the system in order to be of service entirely to the people, Mr. Petkov ‘instructs’ his team to work ‘on Saturday and Sunday and to not have a break in the next 60 days minimum’ and that ‘the doors of the Ministry of Economy are open even during the weekends’. Here, the word ‘minimum’ raises a point that might be of interest. Even though he refers to the maximum duration of the caretaker Ministry of Economy, he refers to it as ‘minimum’ which could suggest that he might have had aspirations to continue his political career even after the caretaker government is replaced by a regular one. Although, up until the very moment before the start of the pre-election campaign, both Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev did not give any indications that they wanted to run for the elections and continue their political careers in a regular government.

On the contrary, both of them have outlined on many occasions that their priority does not depend on how much time they have left in the government, but on what policies they can push through that will result in a benefit to the people. This could also be a strategic decision, as they want to distance themselves from the status quo parties who, according to popular belief, do not want to let go of the shackles of power. What may be of interest here is the fact that they are beginning to suggest that a change is on the way. Most importantly, they are the ones who bear the responsibility for bringing about this change.

Moving back to the focus on ‘the people’ and the construction of his legitimacy, Mr. Petkov sees it as his duty not only to unmask all the hidden interests behind institutions such as the aforementioned, but to also establish a ground based on trust for the innovations he wants to push forward. He repeatedly accentuates that the actions he is undertaking are solely in service of the people – the new shareholders.

I want to make this deal as if we are making it with our own private capital since my new shareholders are the taxpayers.

In doing so, he strategically manages to position himself as one of the people, since he treats the taxpayers’ money just as considerately as he would invest his own private funds. He supports this by mentioning on another occasion related to future investments that he is doing due diligence as he would for his own company. Therefore, he manages to establish his credibility by making the assertion that he is trustworthy and considerate. In addition, he repeatedly praises the people by personally addressing them instead of portraying an image of himself as a distanced politician.

After *We Continue the Change* was officially introduced, Mr. Petkov began to capitalize on the trust that he had built during his time in the caretaker government. Within this period, the narrative of empowerment starts to develop in a large part of the interviews and speeches that were analyzed. After he proved himself as legitimate, noble, and brave, Kiril Petkov started to directly appeal to the people that they should know by now that they can trust him.

We believe that the people with whom we are continuing the change will have personal access to us [...] So, just have faith in us [...] We are brave enough; we have the team, and we will continue doing this.

More so, he is masking an argument that people can take back their sovereignty but most importantly, they can use them as a tool to accomplish that. The main emphasis here is on the personal qualities both politicians have that make them stand out as being honest and trustworthy, and the most important of which is that they ‘are not afraid’. Therefore, suggesting that the establishment is to be feared and

this is the reason why in the past no one could defend the nation from the backstage political interests that have allegedly corrupted the country.

*Sub-theme 2: The new values to uphold*

The two politicians' core principles are this subtheme's primary topic. They place particular emphasis on the education of their team which will be the stepping stone to the improvement of the public administration. Of high value to them is also the expertise of the people that will be given cabinet positions instead of the nepotism that ruled previous administrations, and transparency over backstage negotiations.

Motivated by their business experience on the global market, both Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev emphasize the importance of the role of business, the export potential of Bulgarian companies, and foreign investments that will further the country's prosperity by increasing the GDP. With their stepping into the caretaker office, they began working on the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability after the Covid-19 crisis. Under this Recovery Plan, the government aimed to ease the process for credit application of SMEs who have been affected by the health crisis by working alongside commercial banks. Here the notion of partnership between the government and the business is also inferred.

The appeal to 'the people' is further emphasized in this sub-theme however, the constituents of the people are not the taxpayers but the industry and business. Both Petkov and Vasilev are Harvard graduates with experience in the Canadian, American, South African, and European markets. As a result, they indicate having the know-how that they want to implement in their policies. For instance, Kiril Petkov shows high optimism that under his leadership and following the reforms in the Bulgarian Development Bank, there is a chance that Bulgaria might be positioned on the global market as the founder of game-changing innovation. More specifically, he challenges people to begin thinking about such a possibility by asking 'What if we dream a little and the next Skype is created from one of our initiatives?' Here, he connects this goal to the changes being made to the Bulgarian Development Bank's supervisory board and the new loan system.

The idea about the importance of state officials' expertise and education becomes prevalent in their interviews. Since both Petkov and Vasilev received an Ivy League education, they emphasize that in order for the institutions to work and be effective and efficient, the supervisory board members who have years of experience in the Privatization Agency must be replaced with well-educated people with experience in the global market. To show that as a leader he is ahead of events, Kiril Petkov is also introducing the right people for this position. As in the previous sub-theme, by referring to their

candidates' education, they are trying to gain the favor of the younger, educated and business-oriented group of the electorate.

And I hope that with the new supervisory board, since today I proposed two people who I consider to be unique as they have graduated from MIT, finances at Wharton, worked for McKinsey & Company, worked for other big companies all over the world, now we have the chance to come up with a new strategy for this bank.

As the elections were nearing, the two politicians became more confident in their statements and began discussing their plans for forming the future coalition government. In order to appeal to the people, they emphasize on multiple occasions that the government should be coalitional in order for each one of the voters to have the opportunity to vote for a protest party of their choice.

As a last example of their reliance on expertise, this sub-theme identified the trust they have in the expertise of health professionals with regard to the low Covid-19 vaccination rate. Since a sizable portion of the Bulgarian population is opposed to these vaccinations, both leaders steered clear of vaccination appeals in order to maintain the support of the electorate. In this case however, Mr. Petkov is highlighting his prior experience as a former owner of a biotechnological laboratory in order to incite a sense of trust that he knows and understands this matter and has contacts to the most renowned professionals in the field.

Here, the two politicians continue to build up their credibility by capitalizing on the dubious practices of the status quo parties in the previous government that they unraveled. As honesty and transparency are being constantly highlighted as the new values that everyone should uphold, Petkov and Vasilev are giving the status quo parties 'such criteria that are nearly impossible to fulfil'. The context for these criteria is the decision that future coalition negotiations led by We Continue the Change will only happen if GERB and DPS acknowledge what they have done wrong in the past and work toward fixing it. Here, it can be argued that there is a direct attack on DPS through ironizing them and reminding the people about two major scandals that happened in 2021, the Magnitsky Act<sup>1</sup> in which one of their most controversial MP Delyan Peevski was included and the Pandora Papers where his name was mentioned in relation to multiple offshore accounts that he owns. Therefore, once again providing a clear example of the juxtaposition between 'the status quo' and 'the change'.

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<sup>1</sup> The Global Magnitsky Act allows the executive branch of the United States to impose visa bans and targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of significant corruption anywhere in the world.

In comparison, the attitude toward GERB is rather milder, stating that We Continue the Change will not close the door for negotiations and that they are on good terms with some representatives of GERB. Nonetheless, Mr. Petkov and Mr. Vasilev are saying that such negotiations cannot happen unless ‘they purge from the sins of their past’. This statement has a rather biblical connotation and portrays We Continue the Change as forgiving and pure as opposed to the sinners that have done so much ‘damage to the country’ but can still find their way of absolution.

## **Discussion**

As a highly contested concept, scholars from various academic fields have not come to a consensus about the precise definition of the global phenomenon of populism. Indeed, due to the fluid nature of this global phenomenon, scholars have offered three main conceptualizations of populism. Populism as a thin-centered ideology (Laclau, 2018; Mudde, 2004), as a discursive strategy (Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., 2019; Poblete, 2015), and as a political strategy (Busby et al., 2019; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).

One of the most widely acceptable definitions of the term has been provided by Mudde (2004). According to him, populism can be defined as “an 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 *volonte generale* (general will) of the people” (p. 543). This definition has been the building block of a voluminous number of studies on populism since it manages to capture the essence of the phenomenon. Namely, the antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

In an effort to further define the term, Lang (2005) proposes that populism can be studied in a wider context and makes a distinction between "hard" and "soft" varieties of populism. The two leaders of the political party We Continue the Change, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, have shown in their interviews, speeches, and other public appearances that their appeals have a catch-all nature, tend to be contained rather than aggressive, while being highly optimistic. The milder rhetoric suggests that they strategically emphasized on other features such as their education, adherence to the democratic institutions, abiding the law, and standing up against the hegemonic rule of mainstream parties. According to Lang (2005), fighting corruption and nepotism, the catch-all rhetoric, and reliance on the leaders’ charisma are all characteristics of soft populism and the analysis showed that these characteristics are all present in the appeals of the two political leaders of We Continue the Change.

To understand how the populist political strategy is crafted and implemented, it is important to take account of the underlying psychological factors that activate the creation of social identity formation

and framing. According to Hogg (2016), social identities are critical for people in order to delimit themselves and their social environment as the in-group from relevant outgroups. The two political leaders strategically make use of the honesty criteria that they have set not only for themselves but also for those who will become part of the change. Therefore, delimiting the in-group as one composed of honest and reliable people in opposition to the out-group consisting of the corrupt supervisory board of the Bulgarian Development Bank and mainstream parties such as GERB and DPS who have let the nation down.

With regards to identity formation, Mr. Petkov and Mr. Vasilev carefully point to the ideology of social change which contends that people acknowledge that intergroup boundaries are hard to cross and therefore, engage in behaviors aimed at increasing the value of their own social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Thus, the ideology of social change is considered to be the main driver of protests and social movements (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 2001). After the six-month period of protests in 2020, the process of social change had begun, however, it was not until We Continue the Change who presented themselves as the literal embodiment of the change, that the process had unfolded completely.

The two political leaders were able to capitalize on the success of the parties of the protest such as Democratic Bulgaria and ITN. However, what separated them from the other parties was the fact that they had the opportunity to establish their legitimacy with the actions they took during their mandate in the caretaker government which gave them the leverage to construct their own repertoire of change. Furthermore, corresponding to the findings of Bos et al. (2020) and to the study of Elchardus & Spruyt (2016), the creation of a negative identity frame of the elite by unmasking the corrupt practices, further increased the leaders' popularity among the so-called 'critical mass' of people who had returned back to Bulgaria in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis and were highly motivated to fight for democratic values.

Eatwell (2018) outlines three characteristics of charismatic leaders that became evident in the analysis. The first one relates to their representation of themselves as missionaries on a quest to save the nation. This characteristic was highly present in the analysis, and it mainly related to Mr. Petkov's appeals to the people to act as guardians of his deeds. Moreover, by mentioning in several of his interviews that the Ministry of the Economy is open 24/7 and his administration will not take a break for the entire mandate of the caretaker government, suggests that working for the well-being of the country and progressing the change is his sole purpose. The second characteristic outlined by Eatwell (2018) is the strategy of symbiotic hierarchy which entails the portrayal of charismatic leaders as ordinary citizens. The application of this strategy is particularly visible through the mentioning of their previous business



experience and that they were also taxpayers before taking their positions in the caretaker cabinet. The third characteristic of charismatic leaders relates to the constant juxtaposition of the in-group, consisting of honest and well-educated people versus the out-group that is in the face of those who corrupted the country.

Arriving back to the various conceptualizations of populism, the main argument of this article relates to the strategic implementation of populism in the political and communication strategy of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev. Girdon and Bonikowski (2013) state that in order for populism to be studied as a political strategy, a particular emphasis should be put on the political organization of the parties and their leaders' relationship to other political actors. For instance, during the election campaign, Mr. Petkov frequently stated that both him and Mr. Vasilev are on good terms with representatives of other parties such as GERB and ITN and that this is a precondition for successful negotiations on policy changes. But also, aims at creating a sense of stability for the electorate that a government will be formed, in order to address the voter fatigue after the two previous unsuccessful rounds of election.

Therefore, all of the factors investigated in the two dominant themes that are related to the various characteristics of populism constituted the political communication strategy of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, can be argued to have contributed to the success of We Continue the Change on the parliamentary elections held on November 14, 2021.

## **Conclusion**

The main research question that guided the present study asked, 'In what way did the political communication strategy of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev lead to the success of their political project We Continue the Change on the parliamentary elections on November 14, 2021?'. According to the results of the analysis, their political communication strategy rested on vilifying the supervisory board of the Bulgarian Development Bank and the State Consolidation Company and the battles they fought with them since the beginning of their term in the caretaker government. The construction of the enemy in the face of the supervisory boards of the two institutions was later used as a building block for their pre-election campaign.

The two sub-research questions asked, 'What were the dominant themes within the discourse of the change that was utilized by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev?' and 'How were the dominant themes aligned to facilitate the success of 'We Continue the Change'? The first theme "Fixing up the leakages in the system" allowed the two political leaders to be portrayed as saviors of the people from the corrupt practices of the previous GERB governments. Although their repertoire at this early stage of their cabinet positions was not directly focused on attacking mainstream parties such as GERB or the

DPS, this can be considered a strategic decision since they were relatively unknown to the electorate at the time of appointing the caretaker cabinet. Therefore, to directly attack well-founded mainstream parties at this early stage would not have been a winning strategy because of the unevenness of the power scales. Nevertheless, identifying institutions that were portrayed as corrupt and hinted that they became such during the twelve-year GERB ruling, allowed Mr. Petkov and Mr. Vasilev to gain leverage on which they could build up their political communication repertoire that was strategically aligned to the already ongoing discourse of the change.

The second theme “Drivers of the change” followed the manner in which the two leaders began capitalizing on their success after changing the board structures at the Bulgarian Development Bank and the State Consolidation Company. Furthermore, here it can be argued that they became bolder in their statements against the status quo parties by directly outlining how We Continue the Change will differ substantially from how other parties govern the country and how they will end nepotism in the public administration and start relying on expertise and education. Furthermore, within this theme, they began directly addressing the electorate by insisting that We Continue the Change is trustworthy and fearless after proving that they are not afraid to shift the layers of power.

The method of thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate to allow the collection and qualitative analysis of a large part of the recorded public appearances of the two political figures. Used in the context of this study, it mainly aimed at exploring the underlying meanings and motivations of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev and thus, collated them with the relevant literature on populism. Therefore, this analysis also aimed at addressing an issue raised by Favero (2022) that populism should be explored from the supply side in order to test whether populist leaders actually believe in the values they propagate.

Indeed, populism has become the new condition of the political realms in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Krastev, 2008 in Mesežnikov et al., 2008; Petrović, Raos & Fila, 2022; Szelewa, 2020). And while the governing parties in Bulgaria have largely fallen in the centrist populist party line, Eurosceptical radical right populist parties, such as Vazrazhdane (Revival) started to gain momentum in the country. Therefore, future research might focus on the overall instability in Bulgarian politics by using populism as only one component, but rather shift the focus on the Eastern versus Western political orientation of the political parties in the Bulgarian government and how this reflects on the societal attitudes since such orientation has had a significant historical representation in the Bulgarian politics and the construction of policies.

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