

Bulgaria: A Fertile Ground for Populism?

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Bulgaria: A Fertile Ground for Populism? Populism became a popular topic in the studies of Central and Eastern Europe after the emergence of new parties and movements, adopting a similar type of strategy and structure in the region over the last decade. This study aims at assessing populist formations in Bulgaria, a country where such parties have significant electoral success over the last decade. The main question to be answered is twofold: how can we analyze the populist parties in Bulgaria in a common framework and what are the reasons of their success. The first section addresses the theoretical question of definition and the state of the research both in Western and Eastern Europe, including the existing studies of Bulgarian case. The second one focuses on the populist parties in Bulgaria, assessing their specific features. The third section concentrates on the questions of populist parties' success, taking into account both electoral and party dimension. The last chapter presents the analysis and conclusions returning to the questions of the dynamics of the development of these parties and their decline, followed by the general conclusions.

Key words: populism, Bulgaria, newcomer parties, crisis of traditional parties

Bulharsko: úrodná pôda pre populizmus? Populizmus sa stal populárnou témou v štúdiách strednej a východnej Európy po vzniku nových strán a hnutí, prijatím podobného druhu stratégie a štruktúry v regióne za posledných desať rokov. Táto štúdia sa zameriava na posúdenie populistických formácií v Bulharsku, v krajine, kde tieto strany majú výrazný volebný úspech v poslednom desaťročí. Hlavnú otázku je potrebné zodpovedať z dvoch uhlov pohľadu: ako môžeme analyzovať populistické strany v Bulharsku v rámci spoločnej charakteristiky a aké sú dôvody ich úspechu. Prvá časť sa zaoberá teoretickou otázkou definície a stavu výskumu populizmu, rovnako v západnej a východnej Európe, vrátane existujúcich štúdií sledovaného bulharského modelu. Druhá sa zameriava na populistické strany v Bulharsku, posudzovanie ich špecifických vlastností. Tretia časť sa zameriava na úspech populistických strán, s prihliadnutím na volebný a stranícky rozmer. Posledná kapitola obsahuje analýzu a závery k otázkam dynamiky vývoja týchto strán a ich poklesu a všeobecné závery.

Kľúčové slová: populizmus, Bulharsko, nové strany, kríza tradičných strán

Introduction

Populism became a popular topic in the studies of Central and Eastern Europe after the emergence of new parties and movements, adopting a similar type of strategy and structure in the region over the last decade. The last legislative elections in Bulgaria in 2009 brought in power yet another newcomer party with clear populist discourse. How can we explain this phenomenon?

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This study aims at assessing the common features of populism in Bulgaria, a country where such parties have had significant electoral success over the last decade, and to account for this success. The main question to be answered is twofold: which are the populist parties in Bulgaria and what the reasons of their success are. In order to separate populist parties from other political actors who share only some of populism's characteristics, we will focus first on the definition adopting a common framework for our analysis. Afterwards, we will proceed to the assessment of data and the analysis of the Bulgarian case, as well as the reasons for populist parties' success in this country since 2001.

Our first section will address the theoretical question of definition and the state of the research in both Western and Eastern Europe, including the existing studies of the Bulgarian case. The next one will focus on the populist parties in Bulgaria, assessing their specific features. The third section will concentrate on the question of populist parties success, taking into account both electoral and party dimension. The last chapter will present the analysis and conclusions returning to the questions of the dynamics of the development of these parties and their decline, followed by the general conclusions.

1. Literature on populism

a. Definition

The definition of populism has been addressed in multiple studies in both Western and Eastern Europe, resuming in two main currents. Some of these studies have developed the idea that populism is a political style and as such it can be adopted by all political actors (Canovan 1981; 1999; Di Tella 1997; Mudde 2000; 2004; Taguieff 1998, Taggart 2000). Its main characteristics are: significant presence in the media, direct contact with the people and exclusive rhetoric towards political rivals. Some authors went further distinguishing democratic and radical populism (in terms of levels of anti-systemic discourse) (Mair 2002; Mény and Surel 2002). De Waele suggests including another aspect of this rhetoric: offering simple solutions to short-term problems without a coherent vision for the future (De Waele 2008).

Other current of the literature focuses on the political identity of those parties and elaborates a minimal definition, addressing the lack of clear ideology and the flexible catch-all character of those parties (Taggart 2000). These studies put forward the question of transgressing existing cleavages and the development of a specific rhetoric such as "us" versus "them" where "us" represents the people as a coherent and indivisible group and "them" relates to the governing elite- perceived as corrupt and incapable of solving concrete problems (Mudde 2004; 2007; Schelder 1997; Keman and Krouvel 2005).

First attempts in defining populism were based on specific area studies (for example on Latin America) and therefore tried to include also some features defining populist parties on economic policy level (the redistributive left-wing populism or later neo-liberalism) (Roberts 1995; 2006; Collier and Collier 1991; Weyland 1999; 2001; Skolkay 2000; Grosjean and Senik 2008). Most of this research was connected to specific examples and couldn't have a heuristic value outside the specific case-studies.

Very few attempts have been made in measuring populism since the definitional problems didn't allow an operationalization of its specific features. The few studies adopting such an approach confirmed some of the theoretical presuppositions and offered new insights concerning the dynamic of populist parties' development (Jagers and Walgrave 2006; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009).

Apart from these studies, most of the other articles, dealing with this subject are analysing theoretically the features of populism without explicitly referring to the sources or presenting the data. This lack of methodological clarity may cause some misunderstanding of the basis of analysis and account for different interpretations.

b. Factors, explaining populism's success in Eastern Europe and Bulgaria in particular

The research concentrated on Central and Eastern Europe has taken into account the above-mentioned features and focused mainly on the reasons of recent success of populist parties in the region, without really solving the question of definition. Some studies emphasise the failure of democracy to respond to the concerns of the majority of people, provoked by the globalisation and the European integration (Goetz 2000; 2002). Other authors put forward different factors, explaining the emergence of these parties: the weakening of democratic structures and the end of liberal consensus (Krastev 2007); the delegitimation of traditional political actors and institutions (Rupnik 2007); the high levels of corruption and clientelism (Tupy 2006; Smilov 2008), or the political culture and communist heritage (Strazay 2003; Tupy 2006; Markowski 2004) and the influence of the accession to the EU (Andreev 2009).

As it comes to the Bulgarian case, several elements have been underlined as possible factors explaining the rise of populism during the last decade. G. Karasimeonov and D. Smilov present the high level of corruption as the main reason the emergence of populist movements (Karasimeonov 2008; Smilov 2008). They both, as well as other scholars distinguish between two types of parties: radical populists (represented by the party Ataka) and democratic populists (including the party GERB and NDSV) (Todorov 2008; Malinov 2008). Another aspect, underlined by the analysts of Bulgarian case is the end

of liberal consensus in the country (Krastev 2007) and the negative effect the EU accession has had on traditional parties (Andreev 2009). Both arguments are pointing out the same process of amalgamation of political programmes of both left and right wing parties during the last stage of the democratic transition.

All these studies deal with the problem of the emergence and success of populist movements in Bulgaria during the last decade and point out different factors that might have played a role in this process. Nevertheless, their definitions of populism, as well as the parties they take into account, often vary. Some of them include traditional parties as they adopt populist style during a certain period of their development (Andreev 2009). Others include only the “true populist” parties, corresponding to common criteria and most of them newcomers on the political scene (Karasimeonov 2008).

The Bulgarian case is interesting because it represents a unique configuration of complete newcomers, populist parties without a clear ideological position and created shortly before the elections, which get a significant score and come in office, leaving all the traditional parties in opposition. This is the only country in Central and Eastern Europe that suffers such fluidity and where populist parties dominate the political space. The other example is Slovakia (Smer)², but the difference is that R. Fico is not a complete newcomer (he has been member of SDL before creating Smer) and Smer is rapidly stabilizing and elaborating a left-wing identity (in contrast with the populist parties in Bulgaria which cannot “survive” in opposition and decline after losing power).

That is why it is interesting to deal with the Bulgarian case as it represents a unique example of true “populist wave”, dominating the political space and represented by new, emerging parties on (almost) every election since 2001. Therefore, a clear definition of populism is necessary in order to distinguish the populist parties per se from the other formations (1) and to observe the dynamics of this phenomenon over time in order to explain the lack of stability of these parties and their success (2).

2. Methodological framework

Even though many of the characteristics of the populist parties are specific, they can also concern traditional parties who may adopt a populist rhetoric in order to compete with their populist rivals. That is why we need to draw a line

² Another party, considered as populist by the chosen criteria is the ANO party in Slovakia, but it has a less important share of votes (and public support) and therefore is not comparable with the mainstream populist parties in Bulgaria (obtaining around 40 %, compared to the 8 % obtained by ANO, that is why we don't include it in this example).

and choose a clear exclusive definition to prevent the analysis from concept stretching and overextending the possible range of parties, corresponding to the definition.

The model, presented by R. Barr includes three main aspects for measuring populism: the locus (outsiders versus insiders), the type of linkage (plebiscitarian or clientelistic) and the type of appeal (anti-establishment) (Barr 2009). The main criterion for classifying a party as populist stays the appeal based on a distinction between the elite and the people (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000; Weyland 2001). The other two aspects concern the position of the party in the political system: in terms of locus it could be either an outsider or a maverick- if the party is well integrated in the party system, it cannot have an anti-establishment discourse. The linkage with the electorate should be either plebiscitarian or clientelistic, which allows the leader to have direct contact with its electors and a greater control over the party, which hardly survives without him.

The three aspects, developed by R. Barr are quite useful because they offer a clear distinction between populist and traditional parties mobilizing a type of populist discourse only on a specific moment (usually while in opposition and during elections), but having a clear ideological profile. To summarize, we have a threefold typology that we can use to distinguish populist parties in Bulgaria.

Table 1

Aspect	Type
Appeal	People vs. Elite / establishment (“us” vs. “them”)
Locus	Outsiders/ mavericks
Linkage	Plebiscitarian/ clientelistic

3. Classification

As indicated above, the framework we chose to apply on our case study is the one elaborated by Robert Barr. If we apply his criteria, we identify three parties that enter in the definition in all three aspects (see below). Other parties, such as BSP, DPS and SDS (see below) do not enter in the definition, because even though they sometimes apply populist appeal (mainly during election’s campaign), they do not fit in the other two categories: they are all insiders (established parties having already been in office) and they have higher levels of institutionalization (developed local network and stable party structure) and therefore have electoral linkage and not plebiscitarian. That is why we do not need a systematic approach in order to exclude those parties, because they do not enter the framework by definition (no traditional party can be a newcomer

(or maverick) and none of them has a plebiscitarian linkage since they exist for a long time and have a developed structure of local and regional bodies with an institutionalized decision-making process). The typology of Robert Barr is suitable for analyzing the Bulgarian case, because populist movements correspond to his basic criteria: they are all newcomers (locus) on the political scene, without having almost any political background and they don't develop strong party structure, leaving the decision-making in the hands of the leader and developing plebiscitarian or clientelistic linkage with their voters (once they start the process of institutionalization (as NDSV- see below) and party-building, they transform into classical parties and sometimes this costs them a loss of electoral support). Therefore, this typology not only helps us to distinguish between populist parties and other movements (only using populist rhetoric occasionally) but it also underlines many of the important characteristics of these new parties.

If we apply this framework to Bulgarian parties we obtain three parties that enter in all three aspects of the definition: the National Movement Simeon the Second (now National Movement of stability and progress) NDSV, the radical right party Ataka and the Citizens for a European development of Bulgaria (GERB). All three of them are newcomers in the political system (see annex I) and they all have an "us versus them" appeal (see below), as well as plebiscitarian linkage, since they don't have any stable organization nor local structures, because they are newly created parties. We will examine the three parties separately in this section in order to present in detail their political history and the type of populism they express³.

4. Brief review of Bulgarian political scene 1989 – 2009

Before starting the analysis of populist parties in Bulgaria, let us examine briefly the development of the political system in Bulgaria after 1989. During the first decade (1990 – 2001) there were mainly three actors on the political scene- the post-communist successor party Bulgarian Socialist party (BSP), originating from the transformation of the Communist party after 1989; the right-wing Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), which gathered the anti-communist and opposition movements and the Movements of Rights and Freedoms (DPS), representing mainly the Turkish minority in the country.

After an initial period of political instability, the BSP-lead government collapses at the end of 1996 (after months of strikes and public protest manifestations, including a siege of the Parliament) and SDS comes in office

³ We don't include RZS party in our analysis because its electoral weight is quite marginal and the party proved to be short-lived.

becoming a unified party and no longer a coalition of small parties (see Annex I).

By the end of its term, several splits weaken the SDS and it fails to win the support of the dissatisfied electorate in 2001 elections, when the National Movement Simeon the Second-NDSV (being created shortly before the elections) comes in office after a significant electoral victory. Simeon II's movement makes a coalition with DPS (2001 – 2005) and leaves both traditional mainstream parties (BSP and SDS) in opposition. In 2005 elections, NDSV itself suffers a big loss of support and loses 2/3 of its electorate. On these elections all parties receive insufficient score to create a majority government (see Annex I) and after long negotiations, a coalition is formed between BSP, NDSV and DPS. The SDS splits in two before 2005 elections and runs with two separate parties: SDS and DSB (Democrats for a strong Bulgaria, around Ivan Kostov who leaves the SDS with some of his supporters). They receive poor results (see Annex I). The “surprise” of 2005 elections is the party Ataka (see below), a radical right party, gaining 8 % of the vote and becoming the fourth biggest party after BSP, NDSV and DPS. After the term of the “triple coalition” (BSP, NDSV and DPS), Citizens for an European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), another new party, created by Boyko Borissov in 2006, obtains a very good score and comes first at 2009 elections forming a majority government (benefiting from the parliamentary support of the other right-wing parties). We can describe this development of the party system as: “alternation without alternative” (De Waele 2003).

5. Populist parties in Bulgaria: main characteristics

The three parties identified as populists are all newcomers in Bulgarian politics, starting with the Movement of the former King Simeon II (NDSV) in the 2001 legislative elections, Ataka in 2005 legislative elections and the Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) in the 2007 European elections and further on. Two of them, NDSV and GERB, won a landslide victory when they first ran in Parliamentary elections (in 2001 and in 2009), coming close to 40 % of the seats in the Parliament, and formed the government (see below). Most of the literature refers to these two parties distinguishing the xenophobic party Ataka as anti-democratic and extremist, while both NDSV and GERB are not considered as extreme parties and position themselves rather in the political centre.

a) NDSV

The National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), later National Movement for Stability and Prosperity, was created by the ex-king Simeon the Second who turned back in Bulgaria in 2001. The huge popularity of Simeon II

and his ‘European style’ allowed him to gain rapidly people’s support and to win a landslide victory three months after the creation of his party⁴. Since he couldn’t obtain a sufficient score to form a majority government, he made a coalition with the DPS and after the end of its first term (2001 – 2005), it lost more than half of its electorate in 2005 (Annex I), but since no other party gained enough votes to form a government, NDSV participated in the large coalition (BSP, DPS and NDSV). This was the first time since 1989 when parties stayed in power for two consecutive terms.

The style and the type of appeal of Simeon II were very different from the ones of the other traditional parties on the Bulgarian political scene. The ex-king based his discourse on “unity” between all parties and beyond cleavages, a “positive” campaign and a “European” vision of Bulgaria. His party can be regarded as populist firstly because it claimed the defense of the ‘Bulgarian people’⁵ as indivisible group and criticized the divisions created by the other actors on the political scene. Its criticism was based on the incapacity of the ruling parties to manage the country and pleaded for “a government of experts” (an idea put into practice once in office, since most of his ministers were not politicians but experts, recently returned from abroad). In the core of NDSV’s appeal was the idea that thanks to a good management, ‘all the problems can be solved in 800 days’. Electoral promises of this party included extraordinary measures like reducing taxes while increasing social welfare and stabilizing the budget. The other specific feature of the NDSV’s strategy was to present Simeon as “the new savior” of Bulgaria, who behaved as a unifier of the nation but stayed rather distant from the people.

The party became weaker after its first term in office since most of its promises were not kept and put into practice. The internal structure of the party- created mostly around its charismatic leader Simeon II, made of complete newcomers on the political scene and without stable links with the electorate, perpetuated the fall of the party after 4 years in office. The lack of clear ideological position also contributed to its decline, since NDSV defined itself as centre-right party but after 2005 entered the coalition lead by the left BSP. The typical populist message of Simeon the Second, combined with the weak structure of his party and its blurred political profile can explain the crisis and the final collapse of this movement (NDSV benefited from 62 % of popular support in 2001, which dropped to 21 % in mid 2002 and stayed between 20-30 %, with a short peak of 39 % during the elections of 2005 until it dropped below 20 % in 2007 and stayed similar since (see Annex II. a, table 2). Never the less, it represented a party with a “democratic” populist rhetoric

⁴ The party NDSV was created on 6th of April 2001 and the elections were held on 17 of June 2001.

⁵ Public speech, Btv, October 2001, see <http://www.ndsv.bg/content/2804.html>

and a catch-all message without any anti-systemic elements (Andreev 2009; Krastev 2007).

b) GERB

GERB was created in 2006 by the ex Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior and then Mayor of Sofia Boyko Borissov. Starting his career as fireman during communist times he later became a bodyguard of Simeon II in the beginning of 90ies and once NDSV came in office he obtained the position of Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior. His popularity grew rapidly thanks to his media presence and the campaign against organized crime. While being Mayor of Sofia he continued to benefit of huge popularity and after the creation of his own party in 2006, GERB came second at the European elections of 2007 and gained a good score on local elections. In 2009 he won the legislative elections with 43 % of votes and formed a minority government with the support of other right wing formations in the Parliament.

The reasons for the success of GERB are related to the figure of its leader Borissov. His discourse as well as his personal style reflected the opposition between “the people” and “them”- the corrupt and incapable elites, ruling the country. During his electoral campaigns as well as while being Mayor of Sofia, he traveled all over the country to meet and speak with people and created an image of someone ready to solve people’s problems and staying close to the ordinary man. He emphasized: “While the others are talking, I was working and solving problems”⁶. His behaviour completed his image: he underlined his proximity with the people in all possible ways: the dress code, the manners and the way of speaking.

The core of his rhetoric was a critique of the lack of effectiveness and the mismanagement of the main political parties⁷. In the same time he put forward simple solutions to concrete problems without expressing a clear ideological stand or a long-term vision for the future of the country (De Waele 2008). In this way, he is just as populist (applying our criteria) as Simeon II, while constructing an opposite image: being a true “Bulgarian” while Simeon is of foreign origin, being “one of the people”⁸, while Simeon is an ex-king, not making promises but concrete actions etc. Indeed, the two parties (NDSV and GERB) differ from each other especially as it comes to the style of populism they represent. While Simeon was building his image as the “saviour” of the nation, beyond all cleavages and divisions, Borissov was much more critical to the governing parties and the establishment in general. Simeon was the first one pleading for a positive electoral campaign and emphasized the professionalism of his party members, while Borissov was much less oriented

⁶ Interview, “Trud”, 23 April 2009, see <http://www.gerb.bg/bg/events>

⁷ Interview, Btv, 14 April 2009, see <http://www.gerb.bg/bg/events>

⁸ Interview, “Dnevnik”, January 2009, see <http://www.gerb.bg/bg/events>

towards this technocrat view, emphasizing the fact that he is aware people's problems since he is one of them. Basically, we can conclude that NDSV's populism was based on well educated and competent "European style" people (the ex-king being popular because of his European background and links with famous Western politicians), while Borissov was counting on common people and their concrete problems, admitting that "even if I'm not as competent as others I learn from the people who are more intelligent than me and listen to them, but without forgetting the main priority: people's needs"⁹.

On the other hand, as it comes to party structure, GERB is somehow similar to NDSV: the party is created around a charismatic leader, most of the leading figures are newcomers on the political scene, which guarantees the control of the leader over the party (recent changes in the government like the dismissal of the Minister of Health is confirming this logic). Another particularity of Borissov's strategy for success is the fact that he follows public opinion tendencies very carefully and often changes his mind according to the (dis)approval of his decisions. This characteristic is also part of his populist strategy, based mainly on the popularity of the leader.

c) Ataka

The party Ataka was created several months before the 2005 elections and provoked a huge surprise obtaining 8 % of the vote and becoming the fourth party in the Parliament. Formed around the charismatic Volen Siderov, once an editor-in chief of the unofficial newspaper of the right-wing SDS 'Democratia', he then started a TV show called 'Ataka' from which came the name of his party. Ataka rapidly became popular with Siderov's anti-Roma and anti-Semitic stands and most of all with the radical nationalism and his critics of the European integration and NATO. After Ataka entered the Parliament, the party stayed radical and organized several manifestations against the ruling tripartite coalition. The party even quit the Parliament at the end of 2008, accusing the government of lack of respect for the institution. The party kept its score on European elections 2007 and managed to stabilize it at the legislative elections of 2009, backing the government of GERB (Annex I). Since Ataka officially supports the ruling formation, it softened its critiques and lost a great deal of its public support recently.

Contrary to the other two parties- GERB and NDSV, Ataka developed a radical right political discourse not only against the establishment but also against the minorities, utilizing nationalistic rhetoric of defense of national interests (and against NATO and the EU). This fundamental difference between this party and the other two populist parties we identified earlier, comes basically from the fact that a part from having a populist discourse this

⁹ Interview of Btv, January 2010, see <http://www.government.bg/cgi-bin/cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0215&n=38&g=>

party is developing a clear extreme right ideology and anti-systemic attitude. The discourse of “Us” vs “Them” was the most explicitly pronounced one, compared to the other populist parties: “they are corrupt and will ruin the future of our country”, “they work with the mafia and steal our money”, “they are all enemies of Bulgaria”¹⁰. This radical attitude was not only demonstrated in the speeches and appeals but also included some actions- as we mentioned the party left the Parliament in the late 2008 and decided to organize public meetings with its supporters outside the Assembly building.

The party was an outsider during the period before 2009 elections, not only in terms of discourse (all the other parties condemning its radical standpoints), but also in terms of coalition-building. There was a sort of *cordon sanitaire* from all mainstream parties, which completely isolated Ataka inside the Parliament. This outsider position, admitted by the party itself, reinforced its anti-establishment appeal and was instrumentalized in order to create an image of a victim of the political elite. Ataka’s position of an outsider comes also from the fact that this is an anti-systemic party in its origins. It criticizes not only the political elite as such but also the organization of the political system: its leader defends (at least during the first period of party’s lifespan) the idea of direct democracy, a “greater control on the politicians and judiciary monitoring of their actions”.

If we summarize, we have three fundamentally different types of parties: a radical right and populist party – Ataka; a party without a clear identity but tending towards “elitist” populism (see above) – the NDSV and a catch-all populist party based more on its proximity to the people- the GERB. If we put them on an axis showing their degree of radicalism (towards minorities and establishment as such), we will obtain the following classification:



The fact that Ataka and GERB gained electoral weight after NDSV (in 2005 and 2007 respectively) may indicate a radicalization of the public perception over time. In some ways, GERB attracted some of the Ataka dissatisfied voters (Annex III, table 2) while radicalizing its stands on some issues like the Turkish minority in Bulgaria or the Roma, while at the same time staying enough moderate to obtain the median voter’s support¹¹.

¹⁰ See speech transcription from 25 April 2009 on the official website of the party http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=28&Itemid=61

¹¹ We must underline that in Bulgaria there haven’t any been strong anti-Semitic or racist tendencies not only after 1989 but also between the two World wars, this country being the only one who saved its Jewish population from deportation even though it was part of the Axis. This

The short overview of the specific features of populist parties in Bulgaria and the development of their rhetoric can help us understand their populist identity. In order to complete our analysis we will now turn to the question of the success of these parties in the first place: what factors could explain the rise and triumph of populist parties in Bulgaria during the last decade?

6. Reasons for populist parties' success

In order to account for populist parties' success, we will focus on the explanatory factors on both voters and parties' dimension. In the literature on populism in Bulgaria, authors have pointed out several possible explanations: the lack of confidence in institutions and parties, the decreasing popularity of the ruling parties' elites, the overall disappointment from the political system and democracy as such (Smilov 2008; Karasimeonov 2008), the weakening of existing cleavages (Todorov 2008). We will focus on the two dimensions separately and will try to observe if the raise of populist parties corresponds to such tendencies in the public opinion and party system development.

a) Voters' dimension

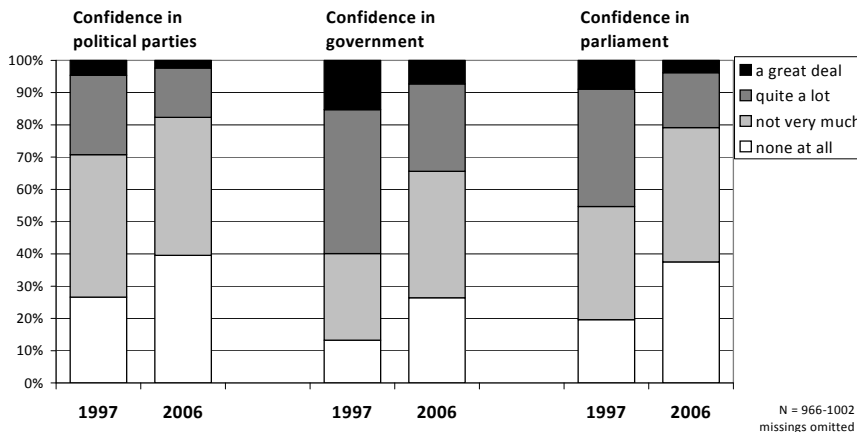
First, let us examine the voters' dimension and account for the trust in institutions and parties before and after 2001. According to the existing sources, confidence in parliament, government and political parties tends to decrease at the end of the 90s (figure 1).

As we can see from the tables, the levels of trust decrease over time and attain rapidly critical levels of 70-80 % of distrust. If we concentrate on the fluctuation of these ratings on monthly basis, we can observe that the success of populist parties (in 2001, 2009 and to lesser extend 2005) corresponds to higher levels of dissatisfaction with traditional parties (Annex II, table 1, 2). Therefore, one of the possible reasons explaining populist parties' success is that they capture the "protest vote" and use the anti-establishment rhetoric to mobilise dissatisfied voters. With such levels of non-confidence, a populist discourse, instrumentalized by a newcomer on the political scene (and therefore a party who still didn't loose its legitimacy because it never had any governmental responsibility) can have a definite success. If we take a closer look at tables (Annex II, table 1 and 3) we can see that after the elections of 2001 and 2009 (when populist parties win the scrutiny), the confidence in the government raises to 80 % and then gradually falls back to its previous level. This indicates that when newcomer parties come in office, people believe in a renewal of the political system and they trust their new government. After some period the public gets disappointed from the results and the confidence

might explain why the radical discourse of Ataka didn't allow this party to gain a mainstream position.

rating drops (Annex II, table 1, 2). All in all, we can notice that there is a clear tendency of decreasing levels of trust in all institutions over time (Parliament and government included (figure 1). Even though we cannot establish a clear link between the public opinion and the success of new parties using populist rhetoric, the lack of trust in government, combined with an overall lack of trust in institutions can account for their success because they use an anti-establishment rhetoric.

Figure 1: Confidence in political institutions in Bulgaria



Source: World Value Survey (3rd and 5th wave)

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rating drops (Annex II, table 1, 2). Overall, we can notice that there is a clear tendency of decreasing levels of trust in all institutions over time (Parliament and government included (figure 1). Even though we cannot establish a clear link between the public opinion and the success of new parties using populist rhetoric, the lack of trust in government, combined with an overall lack of trust in institutions can account for their success because they use an anti-establishment rhetoric.

Figure 2: Unemployment in Bulgaria (% of labour force), 1990 – 2008

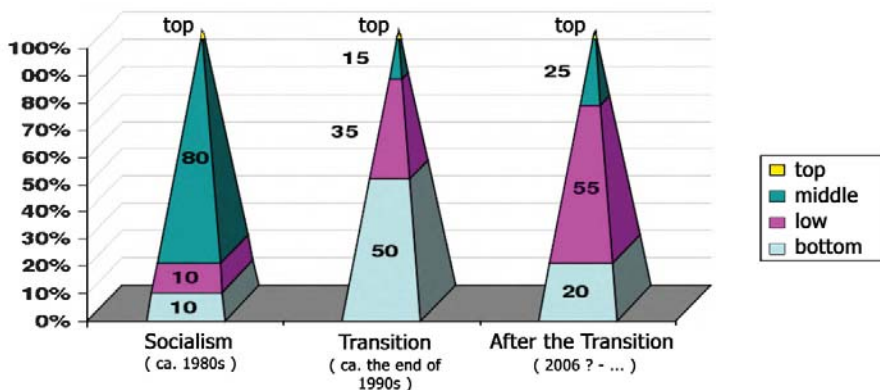


Source: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Selected Economic Indicators. (2008: Estimate.) (see Cholova and Boschler, forthcoming)

In order to explain this feature we can turn to the economic situation in Bulgaria during the last two decades. If we focus on unemployment, we see that the first wave of populist parties coming in office (2001) corresponds to a peak in the level of unemployment in the country (figure 2). This can indicate one of the possible reasons for the disappointment with (traditional) parties and the entry of newcomers. Even though the level decreases rapidly in the second half of the 2000s, the perception of voters on the mismanagement of the parties stays strong. We can add to this data another aspect, an indication of the way people perceive the economic development of the country (Annex IV). The peaks in the level of (perceived) worsening of the situation in the country correspond to the electoral breakthrough of newcomer populist parties. This data can contribute to the structural explanation of the party system turnover and the entry of newcomer parties with populist and anti-establishment discourse (Cholova and Boschler, forthcoming). We can add to this the process of loss of social status among the middle class population (figure 3) which reinforces the perception of economic crisis and mismanagement even after the most turbulent years of crisis (Raychev 2004). The fact that most of the

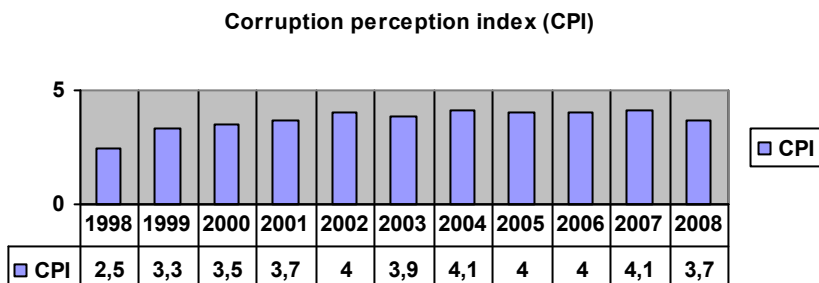
population perceives the whole transition period as an impoverishment process may explain the reluctance of supporting the traditional parties, which have taken part in this process.

Figure 3: **The change in social class status in Bulgaria over time**



Source: Gallup international, published in Raychev, 2004

Figure 4: **Index of corruption perception in Bulgaria**



Source: Transparency international

If we focus on party ratings (satisfaction with parties: Annex II.a) we observe the same tendency: all traditional parties (BSP, SDS,) have negative scores during the last decade (2001 – 2009). The NDSV benefits of great support only in the beginning of its creation (in 2001 when it wins the elections) and afterwards it rapidly declines. This context allows newly created parties to benefit from the disappointment of the electorate and to occupy the niche left by traditional parties. This tendency is lasting even during elections

when parties mobilise all the possible instruments in order to consolidate their supporters.

Another important issue, especially when it comes to the victory of GERB on the last elections, is the index of corruption. The public perception of corruption is provoking the low level of confidence on parties and contributed to the success of Borissov as he was the symbol of the “fight against corruption and organized crime’ before coming in office (furthermore, he kept his promises while in office and started several investigations for corruption on high political level). The index of perceived corruption (CPI) is rising during the last decade (figure 4).

These two dimensions of the political landscape in Bulgaria: the lack of trust in institutions, in parties in general and traditional parties in particular is one of the possible explanations for the rise of populism. The other one may be found in the fragmentation of the right-wing space since the traditional right (SDS) suffered a great defeat in 2001.

b) Party dimension

If we want to understand the success of populist parties in Bulgaria, we have to take a closer look on the right wing parties and their failure. There are two reasons for this approach: the first one is that all populists (NDSV, GERB, Ataka) are defining themselves as centre-right or right wing parties. There could be several reasons for the “rightness” of the populist parties in Bulgaria. First, as Karasimeonov (2008) and Smilov (2008) argue, there was a “niche” in Bulgarian political space on the right, and these parties occupied it (Taggart, 2000). There can be other explanations, such as the stability of the left-wing electorate and its loyalty to BSP (there have been splits and attempts to divide the voters but they failed) or the pro- European and liberal attitudes of the electorate on economic issues, which make right-wing parties more successful. The electorate of BSP is much more disciplined and there are no other “rivals” on the left-wing spectrum, since the Socialists usually create big coalitions, when they run for elections gathering all small radical and other (agrarian, for instance) leftist formations and therefore have a catch-all position, dominating the left.

The second reason to consider the failure of right-wing parties as possible explanation of populist parties’ success is the transfer of votes (Annex, III, tables 1, 2, 3). If we take a closer look at the data, we see that most of the votes for NDSV in 2001 and GERB in 2007 and 2009 come from the SDS (and then NDSV). How could we explain this lack of loyalty? One of the possible reasons is the fact that there were internal splinter groups inside SDS even before the loss of the 2001 elections (like the party of the ex-mayor of Sofia Stefan Sofianski- SSD or Evgeni Bakardjiev, minister of regional development who creates BDS). Two camps started to emerge: one around the leader Ivan

Kostov and the other around Nadejda Mihaylova (Minister of external affairs) and the (then) President Petar Stoyanov. These splits were accompanied by several changes in the government (the dismissal of several ministers who then quit the party) and a media campaign against the authoritarian style of Ivan Kostov. Internally divided and weakened by the lack of support, the SDS suffered a severe defeat and then split in two in 2003 (see figure 5). In this weakened position, divided by internal scandals, SDS could not mobilize its electorate against the newcomer party NDSV in 2001.

On the other hand, NDSV itself suffered different splits while being in government (figure 5: Novoto vreme and BND) and its divisions allowed GERB to gain most of its electorate in 2007 and 2009 consequently. If we compare the vote transfer we see that half of the electorate of GERB was actually voting for NDSV on the previous elections (Annex III, table 3). The lack of stability inside NDSV surely contributed to this shift of electoral preference after 2006.

Figure 5: **Splits**

Political parties	Splinter parties	Period of splits (position of the party)
SDS (1989-	SSD BDS DSB RZS	2001 (in opposition) 2001 (in opposition) 2003 (in opposition) 2005 (in opposition)
NDSV (2001-	Novoto vreme BND	2004 (in office) 2007 (in office)
BSP	Evrolevica (Euroleft)	1997 (in opposition)

This brief overview of the two dimensions- the electoral and the party dimension allows us to explain the success of new populist parties after 2001. Since this phenomenon is common for other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, in the last part of this study we will focus on the particularities of the Bulgarian case and the dynamic perspective of populist movements.

7. Observations and analysis -- what can we learn from Bulgarian case?

After the analysis of the characteristics of Bulgarian populist movements after 2001, we would like to address the particularities of Bulgarian populism. The first part of our analysis will take into consideration the change of appeal and discourse over time (as well as the change in the locus of political parties), the second will present the other specific features of the Bulgarian case and their possible consequences.

a. Populism in dynamic perspective- do parties stay populist?

If we look at the development of the three populist parties presented above we can observe that two of them- NDSV and GERB came in power after short or relatively short period (for NDSV it was couple of months, for GERB couple of years). Their populist rhetoric changed over time, especially after coming in office. While being in opposition, they were using an “us versus them” appeal in order to gain votes. Once in office, they gradually changed their discourse even though they tried to preserve the linkage with the electorate. After they came in power, they could not apply their populist rhetoric no longer in terms of appeal, because they were themselves responsible for the government. The opposition “Us” vs “Them” gradually disappeared from the speeches of both leaders over time since they become (after the election) a part of the political elite, which needs other types of justifications. That is why they not only change the type of appeal and identity but also the locus- being not only integrated in the political system, but also staying on top of it. While in office, they both tried to elaborate further their position on the political spectrum searching allies in both left and right camp. However, they still had to choose a side and therefore to quit the classical populist discourse in order to defend their position facing their rivals in opposition and because of that- choosing a left or right-wing policy and identity.

The case of the other party – Ataka is different. It was never part of the government, staying in opposition for more then one term. Still, recent developments made it change its appeal and present a more moderate discourse – Ataka became a partner of the governing party GERB after the 2009 elections. The party abandoned its most radical stands and softened its criticism of the minorities and especially as it comes to the role of international institutions. This doesn't mean that it changed completely its appeal but it shifted from the typical “Us” vs “Them” rhetoric and became defensive on some issues, while still proclaiming a nationalistic ideology (for example proposing a referendum on the news on Turkish on the national television).

We can summarize these conclusions as follows:

- 1) Populist parties tend to abandon the populist rhetoric (people versus the elite) once they come in power or participate in it in indirect way.
- 2) Since they change the locus and become insiders to the political system- they cannot mobilize the protest votes and represent the unsatisfied public, given that they become responsible for the government and the policy-making.
- 3) They may keep their close ties with the electorate but they also develop further their program and party structure in order to insure their durability as a leading party. Even if they still mobilize plebiscitarian linkage, they tend to move towards electoral one or combine the two, while also relying on clientelistic links.

This conclusion confirms not only the expectations evoked by R. Barr but also the conclusions of other authors (Mair 2002; Mudde 2004; Keman and Krouvel 2005) on radical right parties. The only parties that may stay populist for a longer period are these not involved directly in government.

b. Other particularities of Bulgarian case

There are other two main aspects concerning populism in Bulgaria- the first one is that it is right-wing populism. The second one is that the populist parties are real newcomers on the political scene. We will analyze the two aspects separately.

b.1. Right-wing parties The case of populism in Bulgaria is interesting in a sense that the right-wing spectrum of political scene was dominated by populist parties during the last decade (2001 – 2009). After the fall of the traditional right-wing party SDS and its split some years later, we can observe the emergence of new actors, competing for the right-wing space (NDSV defined itself as centrist but more right-wing centrist; GERB pretended (or was said) to be the “new centre-right”; Ataka occupied the radical right spectrum), as we have already explained earlier.

b. 2. New parties The second and even more important characteristic of Bulgarian populist parties is that they are newcomers on the political scene. There were all created recently (during the last decade). They gather figures well known to the public who have never been directly involved in politics as party officials (apart from some administrative functions). This is a very important characteristic of the Bulgarian case because it is precisely their non-political background that makes them legitimate representatives of the people and allows them to use the “us versus them” rhetoric. Since the attitudes of the electorate are revealing a lack of confidence in democratic institutions and especially in parties and also a negative vision of politicians as corrupt and inefficient, this reinforces the power of newcomers who can claim their distance with the “clique” involved in politics. This is why only a newcomer can persuade the electorate, capturing both protest votes and the volatile electors.

b.3. The decline of populist parties

We will end this section with the question of durability and stability of populist movements. In the Bulgarian case there is an important characteristic of voter behaviour, common to all Central and Eastern Europe- parties most often lose elections while being incumbent and there are very few examples of a political formation, which stayed in office for two consecutive terms (Cholova, forthcoming). This tendency is important if we focus on the decline of NSDV after its first term. While being in coalition with the socialists and staying a second term in office, the party lost completely its electorate (Annex I). We can make a hypothesis that since the party transformed itself from a populist to a

traditional centre-right party, it lost public support not only because of the lack of trust in its leader King Simeon II but also because it didn't manage to elaborate a clear identity or party structure. This can suggest that if a populist party fails to transform itself after being in office, it can hardly keep its electoral support. This transformation is needed and unavoidable for strong and successful parties such as NDSV and GERB, which forms the government after winning elections. But for small parties like Ataka, the shift in political discourse may appear less dangerous in terms of support because either they are not involved in government directly and can quit or radicalize once again their discourse when they start losing support (as Ataka did).

On the basis of the Bulgarian case we can conclude that if a populist party, transforms itself to an insider (enters the political system) it has two possibilities: either it declines (failing to elaborate a clear identity, based on existing cleavages: NDSV), either it leaves the government (and confirms its outsider status: Ataka, RZS), either it transforms to a "classical" party and no longer stays populist (we do not have a clear example of this type of party in Bulgaria but Slovakia's Smer can be one example).

Conclusions

In this article we tried to answer two main questions: which are the populist parties in Bulgaria and how can we explain their success? In order to answer these questions, we first chose a definition of populist parties in order to distinguish them from the other political actors who simply mobilise anti-establishment rhetoric. The second step was to present the main characteristics of those parties and to account for their role in the political system. The third step of our analysis was to identify the possible reasons for their success: the lack of trust on political institutions and the low level of satisfaction with the mainstream parties, the economic situation, the internal splits on the right-wing spectrum and the vote transfer.

In the last section of our analysis we presented the dynamics of development of the populist movements and the particularities of Bulgarian case. Indeed, all populist parties who become mainstream and win elections are gradually changing their populist rhetoric over time. This usually provokes an electoral decline and can even account for the "death" of those parties. The particularities of Bulgarian case include the fact that all populist parties are right-wing parties and newcomers on the political scene. Without strong partisan structure and clear identity, they are successful mostly thanks to the charisma of their leaders and their anti-establishment discourse. The elections of 2009 confirmed this tendency.

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ANNEXES

Annex I Electoral results 1990-2009: general elections

	1990		1991		1994		1997		2001		2005		2009	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
GERB	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	39,7	116
NDSV	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42,7	120	19,9	53	3	-
SDS	36,2	144	34,4	110	24,2	69	52,3	137	18,2	51	7,7	20	6,8	15
DSB	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,4	17		
BSP	47,2	211	33,1	106	43,5	125	22,0	58	17,1	48	31,0	82	17,7	40
DPS	6,0	23	7,6	24	5,4	15	7,6	19	7,5	21	12,8	34	14,5	38
Ataka	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8,1	21	9,4	21
RZS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4,1	10
BE	-	-	-	-	-	-	5,5	14	1,0	-	-	-	-	-
BBB	-	-	1,3	-	4,7	13	4,9	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
NS (BNS-2005)	-	-	-	-	6,5	18	-	-	-	-	5,2	13	-	-
BZNS	8,0	16	3,9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BSDP	0,7	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
OPT	0,6	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ind.	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	1,3	-	19,7	-	15,7	-	7,7	-	13,5	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	400	-	240	-	240	-	240	-	240	-	-	-	-

In populist parties

NDSV: National Movement for Stability and Progress; SDS: Union of Democratic Forces; BSP: Bulgarian Socialist Party; DPS: Movement for Rights and Freedoms (1997: Alliance of National Salvation, ONS); BE: Bulgarian Euro-Left; BBB: Bulgarian Business Bloc; NS: People's Union; BZNS: Bulgarian National People's Union; BSDP: Bulgarian Social Democratic Party; OPT: Fatherland Party of Labour. BSP & SDS traditionally campaign in alliance with minor parties. Source: Central Electoral Commission, Bulgaria

Annex II. Attitudes towards government (source: Alpha research, Bulgaria)

Table 1

Public attitudes towards the government 2001-2005

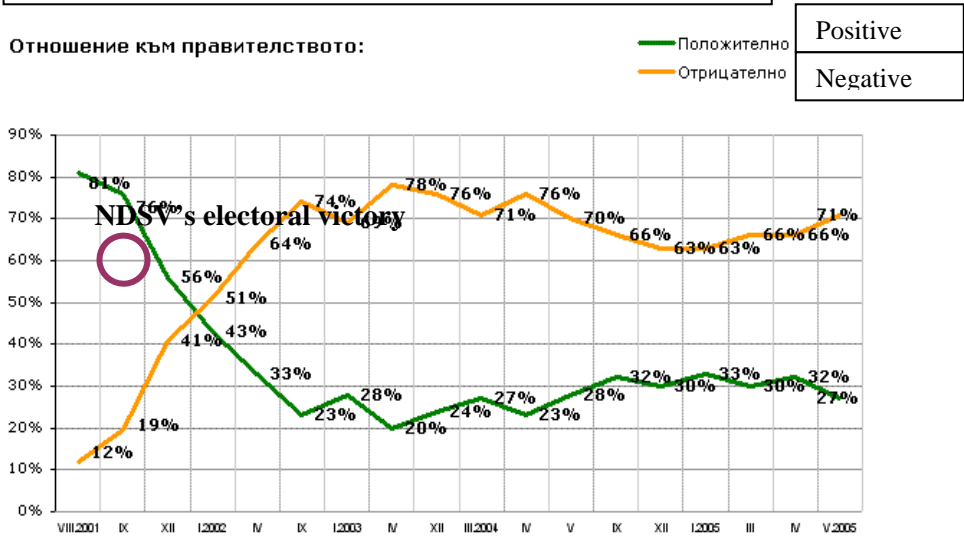


Table 2

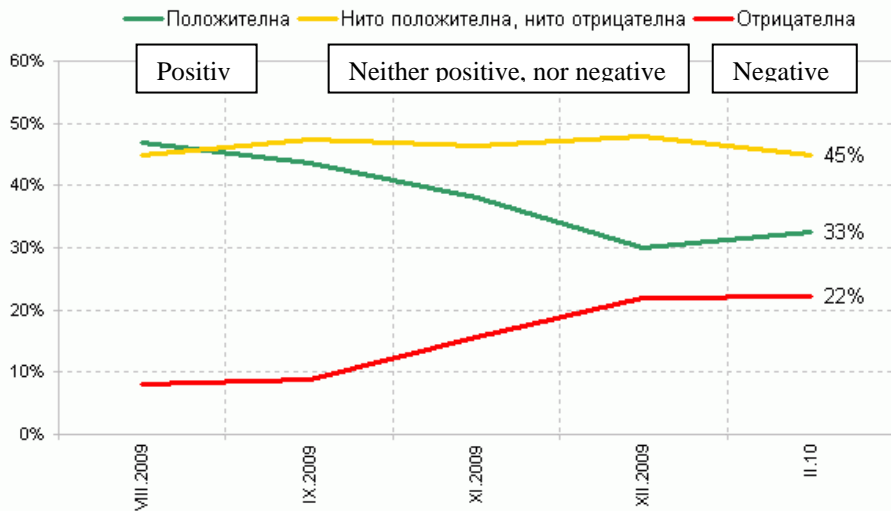
Public attitudes towards the government 2005-2008



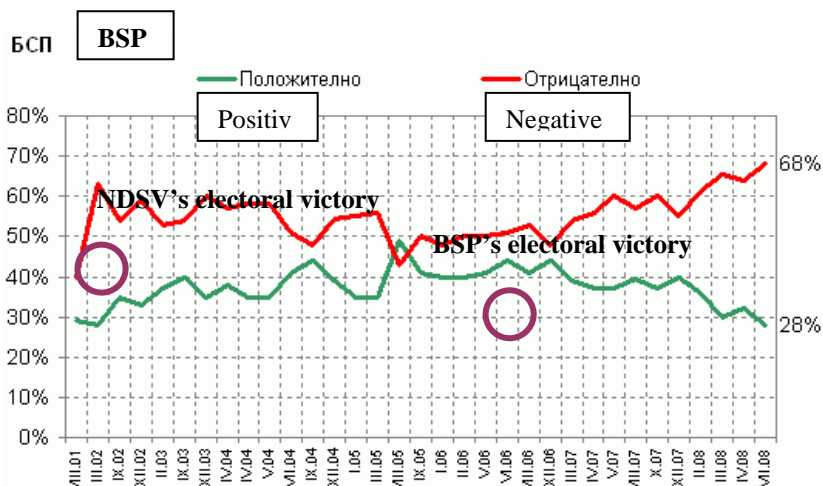
Table 3:

Public attitudes towards the government 2009-2010

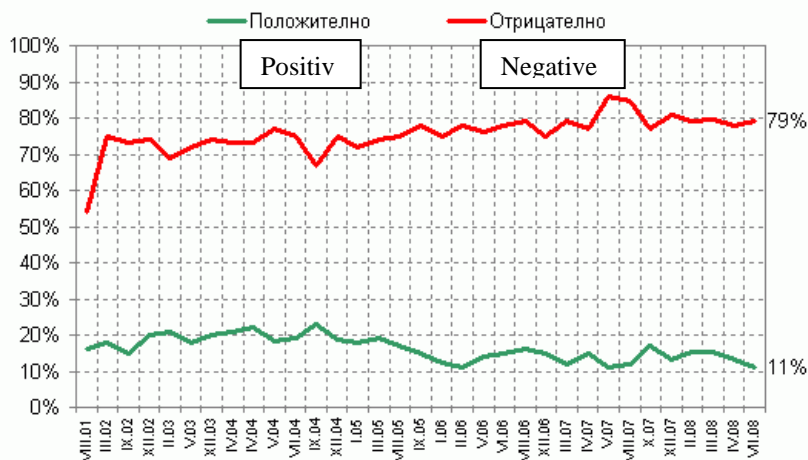
Оценка за дейността на правителството:



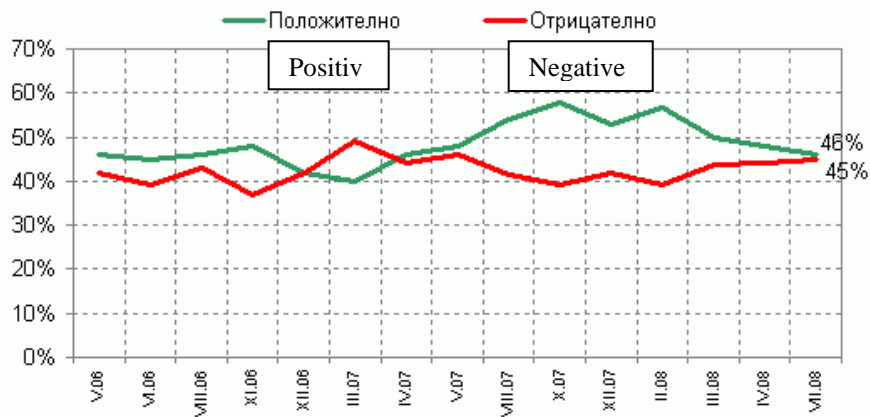
Annex II.a: Attitudes towards parties (from 2001 on) (source: Alpha research, Bulgaria):



СДС



ГЕРБ



Annex III. Vote transfer

(Source: exit polls by Alpha research and Gallup international, Bulgaria)

Table 1: 2001 legislative elections

2001										
	SDS	Gergiovdan -VMRO	BSP	NDSV	DPS	Coalition Simeon II	Others	Abstained	Total	
1997	BBB	0,0	4,0	0,0	81,5	0,0	0,0	14,5	0,0	100
	SDS	37,2	7,1	0,0	53,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	0,7	100
	Euroleft	0,0	0,0	12,6	31,5	0,0	2,5	4,2	49,2	100
	BSP	0,0	0,0	80,3	5,0	0,0	0,0	7,4	7,3	100
	DPS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	96,0	0,0	1,2	2,8	100
	Others	0,0	0,0	0,0	90,0	0,0	0,0	10,0	0,0	100
	Abstained	0,0	0,0	0,0	6,2	0,0	4,1	5,8	83,9	100

Table 2: 2007 European elections

2005	BSP	NDSV	DPS	Ataka	SDS	DSB	BNS	other	Abstained
2007									
DSB	1,0	1,2	0,2	0,3	5,5	71,3		0,9	2,4
BSP	67,8	2,1	0,7	0,8	1,7	3,1	11,3	3,0	7,5
SDS	0,4	1,2	0,3	1,1	43,3	3,5	4,2	2,4	2,7
GERB	9,3	43,9	1,4	14,9	29,5	12,6	25,4	62,5	45,6
NDSV	1,5	39,0	0,3	1,7	2,0	0,4	1,4	1,2	5,9
Ataka	3,7	5,7	0,6	77,0	5,9	2,4	7,0	5,8	9,2
DPS	2,1	1,9	94,9	0,4	3,5	2,8	2,8	1,8	14,0
Others	14,2	5,0	1,6	3,8	8,6	3,9	47,9	22,4	12,7
total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

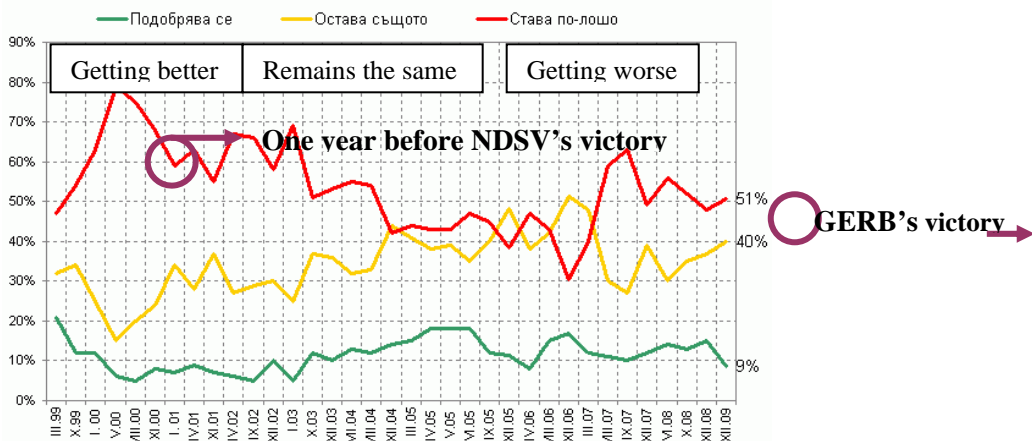
Table 3: 2009 legislative elections

	GERB	BSP	DPS	Ataka	NDSV	SDS+DSB	Lider	RZS	Other	Abstained
RZS	2,2	1,0	0,2	2,2	1,9	1,3	1,5	74,0	14,4	5,7
Lider	1,2	1,8	0,3	1,0	2,8	0,7	72,4	2,1	2,7	4,7
GERB	92,7	3,3	1,8	8,2	25,8	10,5	16,7	16,5	21,2	47,4
DPS	0,3	1,2	95,6	1,7	1,6		0,4	0,4	1,4	8,3
Ataka	0,9	0,7	0,2	84,6	3,0	0,9	3,6	1,7	8,2	8,0
BSP	1,4	90,0	1,3	1,2	5,1	0,5	2,5	1,2	8,2	14,6
NDSV	0,3	1,0	0,2	0,1	55,7	0,4	0,4	2,1	3,4	2,6
Greens	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,3	0,7	0,4		0,4	19,2	1,2
SDS+DSB	0,8	0,7	0,2	0,6	3,2	81,7	1,8	1,2	6,2	6,2
other	0,1	0,2	0,1	0,1	0,2	3,6	0,7	0,4	15,1	1,3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Annex IV. Evaluation of the economic situation of the country (source: Alpha research)

Evaluation of the economic situation in the country

Оценка на общото икономическо състояние на страната:



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