

## **Populism and the Logic of Party Rotation in Postcommunist Europe**

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## Introduction

The three letter suffix “-ism” lends a dangerous cast to any word; when appended to the Latin root “populous” it somehow becomes both dangerous *and* ambiguous. In common political usage, *populism* is quite often simply the dark side of *popularity*, a mystery ingredient that explains why a rival political leader has inexplicably large support. In this usage, populism is not only mysterious but also tainted, deriving from the weaknesses and limitations of “the people” rather than from their strengths.

Given populism’s strong normative flavor, there is a good argument for discarding the term altogether in favor of better-defined and more neutral alternatives. But “populism” does capture *something* that is not as easily expressed in other words, and political science research is currently engaged in one of its periodic revivals of non-normative standards for defining and identifying the term. Current events have contributed to this revival: recent developments in postcommunist Europe in particular provide some exceptionally clear and accessible examples of populism.

This chapter builds on the work of other authors, including others in this section of the book, to addresses definitional questions with regard to the effective operationalization of the concept of populism and to identify a theoretical logic that may define the life cycle of populist parties. That logic offers grounds for treating “populism” as quite similar to existing issue dimensions rather than as a disruption of “normal politics” and also helps to explain the institutional characteristics of populist parties that tend to hide populism’s “dimensional” characteristics. In reality the transitory nature of populism as an issue dimension lies not in the brevity of its duration or in an ephemeral populist “style” but in rather a paradox of success. The populist parties within postcommunist Europe offer some preliminary evidence of this pattern at both - the level of party system and the individual voter. Recent developments in the party systems of Slovakia, Bulgaria and the Baltics offer institutional evidence that the nature of the populist appeal prevents a party from using it successfully over a long duration.

## Toward a Useful Definition of Populism

Many definitions, even those from academic sources, identify populism inextricably with such pathologies as “overpromising,” “oversimplification,” “exaggeration,” and “false reality.” While such definitions are emotionally resonant and do capture genuine concerns about the effects of populism, they prove difficult to operationalize since “falsity” is difficult to measure and “excess” (usually denoted by the prefix “over-”) remains highly subjective. More useful are normatively neutral definitions that point to specific phenomena. Without engaging in a detailed comparison and contrast of contemporary definitions—a necessary exercise but one for which there is too little space here—it is possible to lay out a rough conceptual framework by looking at the areas on which prominent scholars agree. Margaret Canovan defines populism in part as “appeal to the people, against the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” (Canovan 1999, 3). Along similar lines, Cas Mudde defines populism as an

“ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’”(Mudde 2004, 543).<sup>1</sup> These definitions conform closely with those used in this volume: Lang’s “type of politics in which what are called the legitimate interests of the ordinary people are contrasted with the supposed dishonesty of political, social and economic elites” and Učeň’s “division of society into two internally homogenous groups—the people and the elites” and elevation of popular interests on the basis of popular sovereignty and the virtue of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Many works on populism attempt to apply these and similar definitions to the political party systems of postcommunist Europe. Mudde’s early work on the topic defines three categories of populism: “agrarian,” “economic,” and “political,”(2000) and Lang in this volume goes even further, defining two degrees of intensity (hard and soft) and six programmatic categories of populism (far-right/national, agrarian, anticapitalist/left-egalitarian, moderate social, national conservative/national liberal and centrist). It is useful at this point to take a step backward and view the question from a slightly higher level of abstraction. Rather than reify particular subsets of populism (which in reality have significant overlap), it is useful instead to identify the *degree* of populism within the appeals of a particular party (along the lines of Lang’s “hard” v. “soft” but with more gradations on the scale) and to understand the degree to which populism overlaps and reinforces other political appeals or stands on its own. Citing Mudde’s more recent work and a still-unpublished work by Stanley, Učeň argues that populism is an ideology which can (and perhaps must) ally with other ideological positions. Similarly, Canovan notes that populism opposes not only elites but also their ideas and values. She briefly traces the shift of populism in the United States from calls for redistribution on the socio-economic left (against market-oriented elites) to calls for radical marketization on the socio-economic right (against New Deal-era redistributionist elites).

To the extent that a considerable degree of effort in democratic campaigns involves characterizing opponents as “insiders,” nearly all political parties can be understood as “populist” but the importance of this characterization in party appeals varies considerably as do the characteristics associated with insider status. Evaluating a party’s populism—whether in postcommunist Europe or elsewhere—thus requires at least two questions: how deeply does the party oppose elites (in opposition to the united “people”) and for what reason. In Latin America populism has tended to unify its base by opposing elites on the basis of their social class and their opposition to distribution (Weyland 2001). In Western Europe recent populist movements have focused on threats from immigrants and have targeted elites as willing accomplices in the

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<sup>1</sup> Weyland, though his work focuses on Latin America, reaches similar conclusions: “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers... The leader appeals to the people for help in his heroic effort to regenerate the nation, combat the privileged groups and transform the ‘corrupt’ established institutions” (2001, 14).

<sup>2</sup> These leave aside, for the moment, the more theoretical notions of Canovan (1999) regarding the opposition between populism and democracy or Rupnik’s arguments in this volume regarding the opposition between populism and the constitutionalist elements of liberal democracy.

fragmentation of social norms and the narrowing of employment opportunities (Bornschieer 2007). While postcommunist Europe has seen its share of anti-elite sentiment allied with nationalism and programmatic economic positions (interestingly both pro-state and pro-market) it is noteworthy that many of the most successful examples of populism in postcommunist Europe exhibit a lower degree of intermixed elements than the populisms of Western Europe or Latin America. The populism of many postcommunist parties' has paid surprisingly little attention to elites' ethnic or cultural identity or political ideology and has instead focused directly on the allegedly corrupt methods by which those elites gained and exercised their elite status. This relatively weak admixture of non-populist elements offers a useful opportunity to test long-standing hypotheses about the underlying nature of populist politics itself.

### **The Logic of Populist Competition**

Even precise definition cannot remove some of the ambiguities surrounding populism. One of populism's most striking characteristic is its ability to combine longevity with instability: populism never lasts long but it is somehow always around. The ever changing (but never disappearing) roster of populist contenders make it populism a difficult prospect for social-science research. Fortunately, the most astute observers of populist political movements offer insights into this apparent contradiction that may help to guide research. Weyland emphasizes the inability of populism to sustain itself in power and focuses on the alternatives faced by populist leaders: "Political success thus transforms populism into a different type of rule that rests on nonpopulist strategies. Populist leadership therefore tends to be transitory. It either fails or, if successful, transcends itself" (Weyland 2001, 14). Canovan likewise emphasizes the paradox of success for populist parties, but she argues that the failure simply provides opportunities for other populists: "for if a populist movement is so successful in appealing past the established political forces that it actually gets into power, its own inability to live up to its promises will be revealed, offering scope for further appeals to the people"(Canovan 1999, 12).

Understanding populism's pyrrhic victories and phoenix-like rebirths in terms of party system dynamics and voting behavior does oversimplify the question, but as long as the other elements are not discarded permanently, the simplification can yield useful insights. Essential to the process is an understanding of populism as a potentially enduring dimension of political competition in its own right, a response to unmet desires of voters rather than a political style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007) or the result of charismatic leadership. The desire to reduce corruption and increase elite responsiveness may be just as stable as the desire for national security or economic prosperity, and the replacement of old elites is as much a programmatic position as a changing the tax code, banning abortion or the restricting immigration.<sup>3</sup> As with other issues, voters must decide whether they think corruption is a problem worth voting on and

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<sup>3</sup> By these standards, populist parties achieve their main programmatic goal even before a new parliament convenes. Some populist parties (and voters) do not appear to think much beyond this point whereas others build in further programmatic demands for anti-corruption programs, referendums and similar measures.

whether they prefer the “replacement” solution over the rival anti-corruption programs of existing elites (who presumably do not wish to be replaced).

Populism differs from other issue dimensions not so much in the nature of the issue as in the interaction between the issue and political party institutions. More than any other major programmatic stance, the populist approach to corruption is a tool that a party cannot easily use more than once. As a result, a populist issue dimension will routinely (and almost by necessity) exhibit two types of variability that are unusual in competition on other issue divides: parties regularly changing positions on their primary issues, and issue ownership changing regularly from one party to another.

According to Weyland’s argument, the more that a party relies on strictly anti-elite appeals, the more it faces the challenge of finding an alternative basis for support once it becomes itself an elite party. Unless a populist party can refocus its appeals onto questions other than the governing elite (which now includes the party’s own leaders) it may disappear.<sup>4</sup> Whether the effort succeeds or fails, it leaves the party system without a representative of the populist position. This paradox of populist success, however, applies to only populist leaders and not to the populist issues themselves. If the initial populist success depended primarily on personality or style, populism will emerge and disappear without any long-term effect on the overall system, but if opposition to elite corruption remains salient, there will be opportunities for someone else to pick up the populist standard. Since it is more difficult for parties already in power (or even in parliament) to demonstrate incorruptibility, the result may be the emergence of a *new* populist party. The cycle, moreover, may repeat indefinitely, continuing until voters feel that elite abuse has diminished (or until they tire of finding new competitors in every election).

The issue-dimension approach thus neatly resolves some of the paradoxes of populism into a comprehensible pattern of political dynamics. The idiosyncratic nature of research on populism, however, provides all-too-little readily available comparable data for testing the applicability of this theoretical model to actual cases. The two sections that follow represent a tentative beginning of efforts to test the issue-dimension framework for understanding populism using data from postcommunist Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> In his parsimonious framework for understanding party appeals, Kitschelt identifies the three categories of charisma, clientelism and program (Kitschelt 1995). In most cases a purely anti-elite populism will involve some combination of charisma and populist programmatic elements. Appeals may also include a compatible non-populist programmatic issue, and evidence suggests that there are few programmatic positions that cannot be reconciled with a populist appeal (as long as the ruling elite is perceived to take a contrary position). Clientelism, however, has a more ambiguous relationship to populism since upstart parties may not have access to the kind of state resources that often support populism, and since clientelism itself may appear to contradict the “clean hands” message of populist parties.

### **Micro-Level Evidence of the Populist Issue Divide**

If populism does follow the pattern of other issue dimensions, it should produce certain telltale signs within the attitudes and political behavior of voters. Almost all theories of populism predict that those who vote for populist parties exhibit a higher-than-average disillusionment with the political elite and that those voters' feelings about populist parties will differ markedly from their feelings about more-entrenched parties. The issue-dimension model goes further to suggest that populist voters' disillusionment will not disappear even if their preferred populist party gains power.<sup>5</sup> To the contrary, populist voters should (after a moment of hope) return to their disillusionment and switch their party affiliation, if possible to another party with equally solid anti-elite credentials.

Unfortunately, the opportunities for exploring these individual-level dynamics are fairly limited since most of the postcommunist countries with major populist parties are either too small or have too limited a public opinion-polling infrastructure to provide for relevant questions asked on a regular basis. Fortunately, thanks to the foresight and strong resource base of certain research firms in Slovakia, surveys of that country between the mid-1990's and the mid-2000's asked excellent questions with sufficient frequency to hazard some initial conclusions about the applicability of the populist issue divide.

### **Association of Workers of Slovakia, 1994-1996**

A significant addition to Slovakia's party system in 1994 was the Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS) which emerged as an independent party only a few months before the election, achieved parliamentary representation, and joined government after elections. While not a "pure" populist party in the sense that its leaders also offered a strong and distinctive left-of-center position on socio-economic issues, ZRS clearly positioned itself on the populist issue dimension through sharp criticism of existing political elites across the political spectrum of the time.

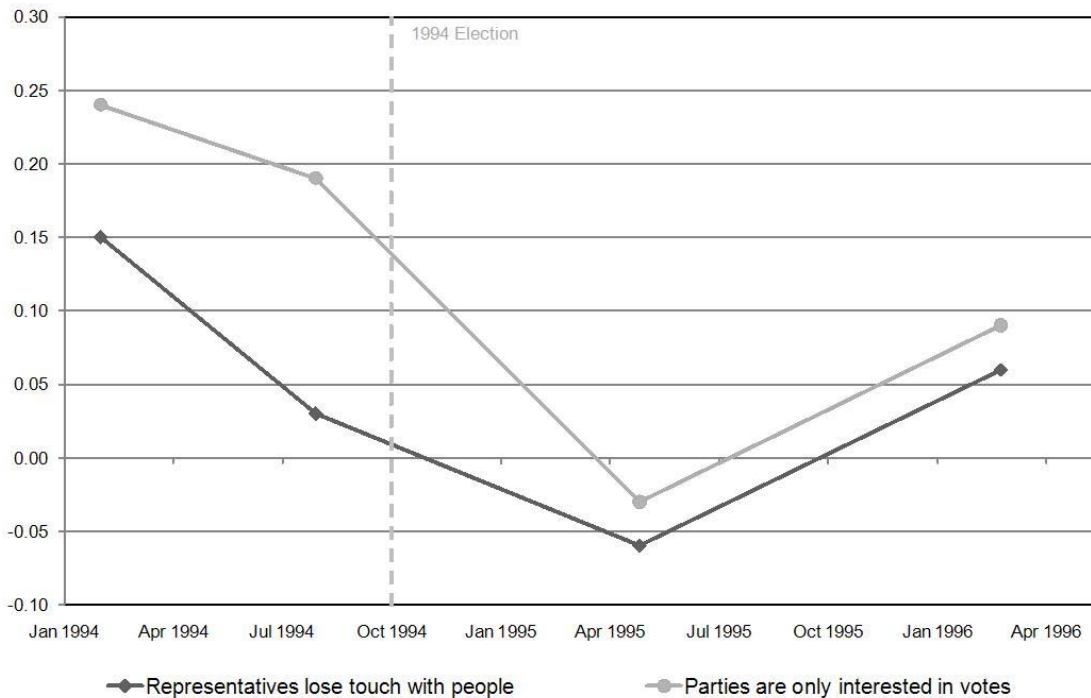
Surveys of public opinion during this period show that ZRS had significantly above-average support among those who agreed in surveys that "parties were only interested in votes" and that "elected representatives lose touch with the people." From this initial position, party supporters' attitudes on these questions follow predicted patterns. Distrust of parties among ZRS supporters ameliorated slightly as the party gained electoral momentum shortly before the September-

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<sup>5</sup> In discussing the moral economy of dissent, Mudde cites Hungarian dissident Györgi Konrád: "If the political opposition comes to power, antipolitics keeps at [sic] the same distance from, and shows the same independence of, the new government. It will do so even if the new government is made up of sympathetic individuals, friends perhaps; indeed, in such cases it will have the greatest need for independence and distance" (in Mudde 2000, 46). It is worth noting that a nearly identical dilemma may face the populist (which is to say in this context "anti-elite") voter: the success of a populist party will endow it with precisely the trappings of power and resources that caused the voter to reject the previous elite and force populist party voters to look elsewhere.

October 1994 elections and then moved dramatically to a position of elite trust when ZRS became part of the government. The trust quickly disappeared, however, and voters moved back toward their original cynical positions. As Figure 1. shows, ZRS supporters shifted from much higher-than-average cynicism toward parties before the election to lower-than-average levels for the year that followed. But within eighteen months of their party's election, they had returned to their position as the most cynical of major party supporters. That they were somewhat less cynical than before is a result that merits further study with additional data from the period. It may be that even some degree of success helps to reduce anti-elite sentiment, which suggests the possibility that the populist cycle may weaken over time. Since ZRS suffered a significant loss of voters during this period, however, it may also be the case that the survey results record only those who had not also become disillusioned with ZRS. Further analysis using voters' retrospective voting claims does not yield a clear answer on this point and more study is necessary.

Figure 1. Distrust of political party elites among supporters of the Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS), compared to average for all respondents in Slovakia, 1994 to 1996



Source: FOCUS 1994-1996

### Smer (Direction) and ANO (Alliance of the New Citizen), 2002-2006

Similar evidence of cyclical patterns appears in the attitudinal shifts of among supporters of two new parties that appeared in Slovakia shortly before the 2002 election: Smer (Direction) and ANO (Alliance of the New Citizen). Smer and ANO show many expected patterns for new parties, both in the sense of disenfranchisement among supporters and (at least for Smer) in the desire for anti-corruption and law and order:

- Surveys in 2002 produce a strong positive correlation between the belief that “People like me have no influence” and support for both Smer and ANO.
- Support for Smer in particular correlated closely with the expectation that the party would reduce corruption ( $r=.469^{**}$ ) and restore order ( $r=.467^{**}$ ), much higher correlations than for any other expectations about the party’s likely accomplishments.<sup>6</sup>

Smer and ANO also evinced different patterns of support than did other parties. Figure 2 shows the results of multi-dimensional scaling using thermometer scales for each party in 2002. The patterns reflect spatially the degree of affinity among support for the various parties and do not directly reflect any specific ideological considerations. As the figure shows the two new parties occupied distinct positions on the Slovakia’s primary (horizontal) dimension of competition, but on the secondary (vertical) dimension they stood closer to one another and well apart from the rest of the parties in the system, suggesting the existence of a new v. old or populist v. non-populist basis for competition<sup>7</sup>.

The course of post-election coalition-building introduced a new variable that allows for further testing of the populist issue dimension: ANO entered government as a junior partner whereas Smer remained in opposition. The resulting patterns of opinion follow the expected pattern precisely (though at moderate levels of magnitude). The ebb and flow of voters from Smer and ANO is particularly instructive. Those who claim to have defected from ANO between 2002 and 2005<sup>8</sup> were 16 percentage points more likely than those stayed with the party to believe that “those in power do not care about the opinions of people like me.” Those who left Smer, by contrast, did not differ from those who stayed in this regard. Disillusionment among ANO voters thus appears to bear some relationship to the party’s new power position, whereas disillusionment among Smer voters resulted from *other* causes that were not discernible among the many attitudinal questions available.

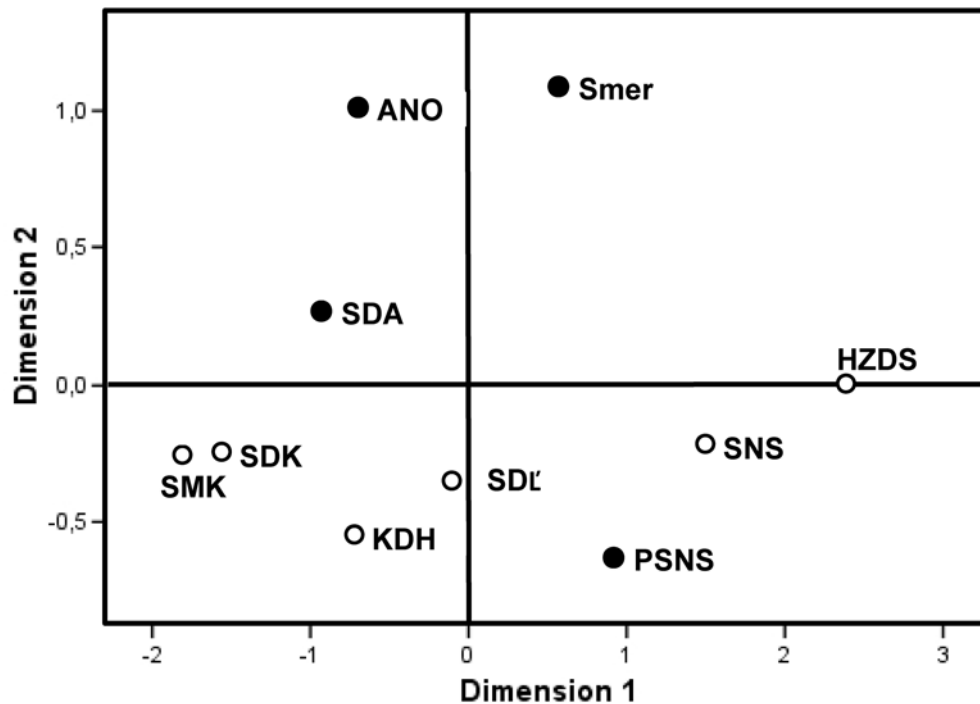
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<sup>6</sup> Preliminary analysis of party programs suggests that ANO took clearer positions on economic distribution questions during this period than did Smer, suggesting that ANO’s brand of populism was more clearly aligned with other issues than was Smer’s.

<sup>7</sup> The only other party above the 0.0 mark on this secondary dimension was another new party, Social Democratic Alternative, though this party contained many “old faces” from the disintegrating Party of the Democratic Left. The other new party, the Real Slovak National Party (PSNS), was even less “new” sense, since it had emerged shortly before from a split within the Slovak National Party (SNS) and was led by that party’s recently removed leader.

<sup>8</sup> The calculation of “defection” depends on survey respondents’ honesty in reporting their own vote in the previous election. As such, these estimates must be approached with some caution since surveys elsewhere have repeatedly demonstrated that voters may not remember their previous choices or may reconstruct their memories to fit contemporary events. In this case the relatively short period between election and survey may allow more than usual confidence. Furthermore, the one available panel survey of voters in Slovakia suggests an extremely high correlation between answers to the retrospective preference question and actual prior preferences (Central European University 1992-1993)

Figure 2. Two dimensional map of parties in Slovakia according to multidimensional scaling of party sympathy scores, 2002. (Solid circles denote new parties)



Source: FOCUS 2002

Other evidence also points to the same conclusions and suggests that at least some ANO voters responded to their party’s entrance into government by switching to the other main “new” party: Smer. Survey evidence shows that those who switched from ANO to Smer show the patterns that would be expected if “the taint of government” had caused them to lose faith in the party and seek an untainted alternative. According to a 2005 survey, those who switched from ANO to Smer were:

- Less likely than the average voter (by 16 percentage points) to believe that “parliamentary elections offer people like me the chance to influence decisions about Slovakia’s development.”
- More likely than the average voter (by 13 percentage points) to believe that “those in power are not interested in the opinions of people like me.”
- Less likely than the average voter (by 13 percentage points) to believe that “most of our politicians behave selflessly and morally.”

Here again the question will profit additional research, particularly through the investigation of other survey evidence that might make it possible to determine whether ANO voters fled

disproportionately to Smer as they sought out another populist party. It is striking that while the results above shows the arrows pointing in the expected direction, their magnitudes remain quite small. For ANO supporters, at least, other factors may have played a larger role than the disillusionment of populist voters.

### **Macro-Level Evidence of the Populist Issue Divide**

While individual attitudes and behavior are the most helpful source for discerning patterns of populist voting, appropriate data is all-too-rarely available and it is necessary to draw conclusions from more aggregated data. Such analysis cannot rely on voter attitudes about elites and therefore must make certain assumptions about what parties stand for and how voters understand party appeals.

For the purposes of simplicity (and at some risk of oversimplification) the analysis that follows will focus on six parties that are easily identified as “populist” on the basis of their political appeals and particularly their focus on the need for “new faces in government” as part of a major fight against corruption.<sup>9</sup> Pioneering work by Sikk (2006) identifies four of these in the Baltics; to these it is possible without controversy to add Slovakia’s Smer and Bulgaria’s National Movement of Simeon II. It is certainly possible to find strong populist aspects within other parties in the region (Slovakia’s ZRS, for example) but usually in alliance with other issue divides. Among the parties specified here, other issue positions appear to have played a smaller role, putting the question of populism in highest relief.

The parties in this category frequently bear names that emphasize the novelty of the effort—Latvia’s “New Era,” “New Union,” “Alliance of the New Citizen”—or of generic political ideals—“Res Publica,” “Direction”—or in at least one case—the National Movement of Simeon II—of a particular prominent individual disconnected from the postcommunist elite. For the most part, these parties fall into the category that Lang refers to as “centrist populists” and Sikk discusses in terms of “the project of newness”(2006, 23) Parties in this category emphasize corruption and abuse of power and in many cases offer as their primary qualification their own distance from the political scene. It is noteworthy that many of the leaders of such parties can certainly be considered elite in terms of personal wealth and prominence (without which they would have far smaller chances at electoral success) but at the outset were conspicuously distant from the contemporary *political* elite of their respective countries.

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<sup>9</sup> Only one country among the EU accession states—Hungary--has had no major new party entrants in parliament since the mid-1990’s. Four countries—the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovenia—have seen new entrants into parliament in recent elections, but in these cases the parties represented re-incarnations of previously-represented parties. Five other countries, however, (fully half of the accession states) have seen the emergence of parties that were both unquestionably new and indisputably large: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Each of the first four cases has experienced at least one election cycle in which the party with the most votes was a party that did not even exist in the previous cycle (See Haughton 2005).

The notion of a populist issue divide suggests that, all things being equal, those parties relying most exclusively on the anti-elite and anti-corruption messages inherent to populism (or at least those least successful in finding post-election alternatives) should be the most likely to suffer major electoral losses in subsequent elections and that their voters should shift not to other long-standing parties but rather to yet another new party.<sup>10</sup> The model also suggests that in order to avoid the significant loss of voters, a populist party should remain out of power (though in the long run this defeats the purpose of such a party) or should shift its appeals to a realm that is not so easily threatened merely by participation in government.

### Brief Lifespans

As Figure 3. shows, almost all of the main populist “new” parties of postcommunist exhibited a remarkable drop in support within a brief period after entering government. In fact the parties show a remarkable convergence in their electoral fortunes: by the two-year mark polls showed that four of the five parties had each lost almost exactly 80% of their respective initial supporters. These poll numbers may, to some degree, underestimate support since they include large numbers of undecided, but even factoring for these suggests a loss of at least 50% of initial supporters for each of these parties.

Although all of these did succeed in gaining seats in the subsequent parliamentary elections but with considerably reduced parliamentary delegations.<sup>11</sup> Although some of them even re-entered government, these did so only as junior coalition partners.

The mild rebound of many of these parties’ fortunes just before election suggests that they may be capable of using their incumbent position to preserve at least some political power. To the extent that incumbency indeed helps to explain the recovery (there is little analytical work on these recent elections), it suggests just how far these parties found it necessary to move in order to survive: anti-incumbent parties surviving largely on the basis of the resources provided by their incumbency.

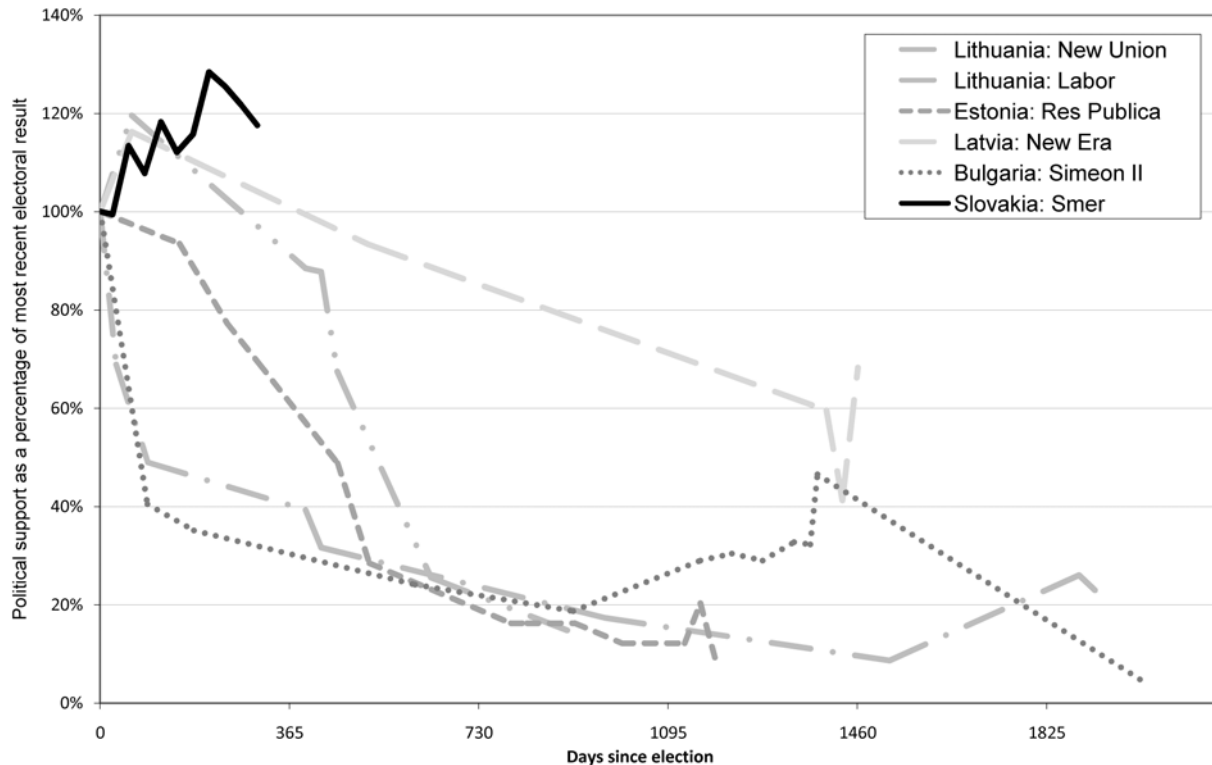
Further research, of course, is necessary to demonstrate that this drop is stronger in the case of populist parties than for other parties of power. The difference in the degree of electoral collapse—particularly the stand-out case of Latvia’s New Era—also raises important questions and emphasizes the need for close comparative studies of the sort begun by Sikk.

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<sup>10</sup> It is possible, of course, that the new anti-corruption party might actually prove less corrupt than its predecessor, but experience suggests that this is actually unlikely, and that second- and third-tier party officials tend to tarnish parties’ reputations for cleanliness even if top leaders remain innocent. Furthermore, the suspicion of party corruption in the region is currently so high that even an absolutely clean party would have trouble persuading voters of its rectitude.

<sup>11</sup> Lithuania’s Labour Party will not face its second election until 2008 but the party’s support in recent polls stood just below the country’s 5% threshold.

Figure 3. Support for selected populist new parties in postcommunist Europe over time as a percentage of most recent electoral result



Source: Translations of various local newspaper articles available through Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe

### Repetitive Novelty

If populism possesses the characteristics of an issue dimension as defined above, then the eruption and erosion of an anti-corruption party should not be one-time occurrences. While there have been too few elections to discuss robust *patterns* of populist party rotation, there are indications that the cycle can persist for at least two or three rounds of elections. Three successive elections in Latvia saw the emergence of a new party among the top three largest vote-getters (new parties averaging nearly 20%). In two successive elections in Lithuania, new parties were among the top two parties (new parties averaging nearly 25%). In Bulgaria the decline of the National Movement for Simeon II was accompanied by the emergence in the 2005 parliamentary elections of three new parties (which together nearly matched the percentage points lost by the previous new party). Furthermore, the largest vote getter in the 2007 European Parliament elections was yet *another* new party.

The pattern does not always continue indefinitely. The revolving door of anti-elite parties continued in Estonia and Latvia in the second half of the 2000s, but the newcomers were relatively small. Bulgaria also saw smaller newcomers, though their total added together represented a relatively large amount. Replacement did not occur at all in Slovakia in 2006, (the only truly new parties fell short of the threshold), and it does not seem to be occurring in

Lithuania (supporters of the imploding Labor party appear to have returned to older parties rather than leaping to the support new ones). Yet even a short-term pattern may have long-term consequences. Where a concern about corruption and elite-domination is pushes voters toward a major “new” party, it breaks ties to other parties. These ties may already be weaker in postcommunist Europe than elsewhere but they are not negligible. If the “new” party can manage to hold on to its voters, as Smer has so far done, the result is only a shift from one party to another, but where the new parties consistently fail to attract supporters in subsequent elections, the process may not only break the habit of voting for a particular party but may even break the habit of voting for the same party from one election to the next. As a result, a country may become susceptible to “new party” outbreaks in the future, though more data from more election cycles will be necessary to explore this question in full.

### Successful Conversion

To the extent that power undermines populist appeals, the most enduring populist movement may be the *almost* successful one. In the months before Slovakia’s 2002 election, polls showed Smer to be the party with the potential to be the country’s top vote-getter, but in the elections themselves the party ran third (though still with a significant 13% share of the vote). During the four years that followed, the party’s popularity grew substantially to the 29% that it received in 2006, more than twice as much support as any other party. While Smer likely owes much of its growth to its opposition status, Učeň points out that another important factor may have been the party’s decision to supplement (or in some cases replace) populist appeals with a less-volatile appeals to the programmatic elements associated with social democracy. This shift may also explain why Smer’s post-election popularity out paced that of any other governing “new” party in the region. Whereas nearly every other new party in postcommunist Europe experienced a decline in popularity after its first year in government (in some cases by as much as 50%), Smer’s popularity grew within six months to a point almost 30% above its electoral result, and polls from the first half of 2007 showed only a slow and gradual decline from that highpoint (ÚVVM 2007).

While it is dangerous to draw causal connections between potentially coincidental circumstances, it is worth elaborating on Učeň’s conclusions in this volume which suggest that Smer is a divergent case, one that that by its divergence supports the notion of a populist issue divide. Whereas in 2002 Fico’s Smer closely resembled the hypothesized “populist new party” with its focus on corruption and elite impropriety and limited party organization, there is evidence that the party took steps to strengthen its organizational basis and to shift from populist programmatic elements to non-populist programmatic elements related to economic redistribution.

Following Smer’s disappointing performance in the 2002 elections, the party made a series of organizational changes that suggested an effort to secure support from voters with redistributionist attitudes. Most notable among these were the party’s merger with—in effect acquisition of—smaller left-oriented parties including the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), the Social Democratic Alternative (SDA) and the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS).

These mergers offered little by way of electoral support (the parties in question together polled 0.7% in the month before the mergers, and Smer's average support in the three months after the merger was only 3% higher than in the three months before the merger) but the strong local organizational bases of these parties which had maintained some of the on-the-ground structures developed during the Communist period. There remained substantial mistrust between the representatives of the electorally weaker but better-organized SDL and those of the popular but weakly institutionalized Smer, but the mergers allowed Smer to take significant steps in the direction of better-organized parties and away from the volatile and chaotic patterns of the region's other populist parties.

The mergers also strengthened Smer's claim as Slovakia's sole representative of social democracy and as the only party in the center-left of the socio-economic scale. The party claimed this position quite literally in a new name—'Smer–sociálna demokracia' (Direction – social democracy)—and new party logo that shifted the party's use of orange toward a more social-democratic "red," and a pointed the party's "directional arrow" (once the only graphic element) toward a stylized rose, the symbol of social democracy (though for reasons of graphic design the arrow still ironically pointed to the viewer's right).<sup>12</sup>

Between 2003 and 2006 Smer's the left-right position of the average Smer supporter shifted in small but linear steps in a leftward direction. If respondents are to be believed when asked about their previous vote, this leftward shift can be attributed almost exclusively by an influx of new, slightly more leftist supporters. Other questions about programmatic preferences reveal a similar shift. Smer voters in 2006 were more likely to mention the party's position on conflicts between rich and poor than they were in 2002 (FOCUS 2002-2006). From the perspective of converting populist appeals, it is also noteworthy that Smer supporters were somewhat less likely to emphasize the party's position on conflicts between self-interested politicians and powerless voters.

Also consistent with a commitment to redistributive policy is Smer's coalition behavior after the 2006 election. The actual reasons for Smer's controversial choice of the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) as coalition partners is still unclear. Because SNS and HZDS share a number of key characteristics, it is possible that any of these (or several in combination) explain Smer's choice. The most obvious characteristics of these two parties involve their behavior during two coalition governments between 1992 and 1998, particularly their combination of national-oriented appeals and their acceptance of authoritarian methods of governing. The two parties likewise demonstrated an exceptionally strong desire to return to government and expressed willingness to make significant concessions to achieve that goal. While some within Smer may have found these characteristics attractive in a partner, it is

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<sup>12</sup> While other considerations must be taken into account, it is noteworthy that Smer pursued its mergers with small parties that had defined profiles on the socio-economic left than with other potential partners that had clearer profiles with clearly national profiles such as the Movement for Democracy (HZD) and the Peoples Union (ĽU)

worth noting that HZDS and SNS also brought with them the most redistribution-friendly voter bases of all parliamentary parties (FOCUS 2005-2006). Smer could thus have a greater degree of confidence that these parties would tolerate the repeal and moderation of the market-oriented reforms of the previous government and would thereby have a better chance to satisfy the preferences of its new and more leftward-oriented voters and maintain their allegiance until the next electoral cycle. Future research into Smer's internal decision-making process and the effects of its decisions on the minds of voters should help to clarify that this process of post-populist conversion—and not some other dynamic—explains the party's surprisingly enduring success.

### **Populism as a Useful Concept?**

In his 2000 article on varieties of populism, Mudde suggested that “much could be gained if populism were approached as a dynamic political phenomenon that can reveal much about its political and cultural milieu” (53). Since then a large body of rigorous, often quantitative research has emerged which transform theoretical approaches into specific propositions that can be examined using evidence from real-world cases. The issue-dimension model of populism developed here builds on the theoretical and definitional work of Canovan, Weyland, Mudde and, most recently, Učeň to make the assumptions explicit and to perform some initial tests. Though the initial results are in line with expectations, they are uncertain enough to suggest that this is only a beginning. The future of the concept of populism depends on further research in the areas suggested above and on many other areas that are now emerging in other contemporary research. Only the term “populism” proves to capture a set of dynamics distinct from nationalism or charisma or other related concepts, does it stand a chance of becoming a truly useful “-ism.”

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