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Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe

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Populism is a dynamic phenomenon. Yet scholars studying populism in post-communist Europe have often treated their topic as static. For example, in the 1990s researchers concentrated on the idea of a politically scary marriage of populism with nationalism, without allowing for variation or complexity among individual cases. This text contends that populism in East Central Europe (ECE) should be treated as a dynamic phenomenon in which radical ideological components are becoming overshadowed by pure anti-establishment appeal. It explores ECE populism through Western-developed populism frameworks. Finally, it argues that in this context populism's strong anti-establishment posture is based on blaming the post-communist mainstream for its political and moral misconduct, rather than on the challenges inherent in the democratic transition.

Tackling an Elusive Concept

It has become a tradition to open a text on populism with a discussion of the term's elusiveness and ambiguity. Commentators have referred to populism variously as a political or economic philosophy, a rhetorical style, a principle, a mentality, even a pathology. Indeed, a cursory look at the literature suggests that populism is overused as a term and overstretched as a concept.

But while attempts to provide a global definition of populism have largely failed, several contemporary scholars have successfully pinned down the term by confining their work to particular geographic regions or political substructures. For example, Margaret Canovan, Paul Taggart, and Cas Mudde¹ make the concept tractable by giving up global aspirations and considering populism in the context of established Western liberal democratic societies.

For Canovan, populism is an ideology of democracy, “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structures of power and the dominant ideas and values of society.”² Or, as Mény and Surel, commenting on Canovan, put it, “[d]emocracy (as it works) is challenged in the name

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of democracy (as it is imagined).³ For Taggart, populism is a reaction to representative politics and its pathology. He suggests that “populism has its roots in a primal anti-political reaction of the ruled against the rulers, and it is only under the conditions of representative politics (as both the set of institutions and a type of politics) that this political instinct can be systematically expressed.”⁴ Finally, Mudde treats populism as a distinct ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁵ This interpretation of populist ideology, as moralistic rather than pragmatic, sets up a normative Manichean distinction between the people and the elite. Moreover, Mudde argues, as a “‘thin-centred ideology’, exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts,’” populism may be easily combined with more complex ideologies such as nationalism or socialism.⁶

This paper explores these Western-developed populism frameworks in the context of party-based politics in post-communist East Central Europe (ECE). Westerners tend to see populist movements as efforts to

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alter fundamentally the existing political and social paradigms. Indeed, populist parties in ECE during the 1990s advocated several radical ideologies, including socialism, authoritarianism, and nationalism. However, since the turn of the century, these themes seem to have given way to a new, “centrist” form of populism that

channels its anti-establishment zeal into party platforms of government transparency and accountability. New populism, this paper argues, is essentially an ideology in the service of a power-seeking political strategy.⁷

This text contends that populism in ECE should be treated as a dynamic phenomenon in which radical ideological components are becoming overshadowed by pure anti-establishment appeal. The following section begins by mapping the ideological spectrum of populist parties in ECE. It is followed by an analysis of the rise of the new centrist, anti-establishment populism, and a discussion of the progression of several new populist parties across the region. The paper concludes with a tentative assessment of new populism’s impact on ECE political establishments.

Mapping Unorthodox Politics in ECE

Parties analysed in this text are assumed to have employed populist mobilization. But to avoid confusion, the text attempts to map the space of unorthodox politics in the region. As a result, the emphasis of further analysis is on the parties of the new “centrist” populism.

Grigore Pop-Eleches provides a useful framework by contrasting orthodox political parties with a residual category of unorthodox ones,⁸ which tend to reject the constraints that modern liberal democracy, through its values and norms, imposes upon the content and form of politics. Populism plays a prominent role as the most natural alternative means of mobilizing those in a modern democracy who deviate from the prevailing consensus. Indeed, as it challenges liberal constraints within democracy, populism is common to the vast majority of unorthodox parties.

Pop-Eleches defines an orthodox party as one whose “electoral appeal is based on a recognizable and moderate ideological platform rather than on the personality of its leader and/or extremist rhetoric.”⁹ According to Pop-Eleches, East European mainstream parties developed their own orthodoxy when they “generally agreed on the broad parameters of their countries’ trajectories . . . the need for market reforms, a democratic form of government, Western integration, and—in line with the requirements of the last two goals—the moderation or exclusion of nationalist and/or racist electoral appeals from their political agendas.”¹⁰

However arbitrary it may sound, unorthodox parties, then, significantly deviate from the consensus of orthodoxy as they trespass the limits mainstream parties imposed upon the content and form of their political conduct. The nature of their trespassing may be manifold; they may be anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, anti-Western, or despise liberal facets of democracy and disdain moderation. Usually, they combine several of these “vices.”

One of the possible versions of organizing the variety and patterns of unorthodox parties is presented in Table 1. This is a preliminary mapping. Its primary function is to contrast the ideological base of the 1990s populist parties with the relative lack of ideology exhibited by the new, centrist populist parties.

The radical left category consists of unreformed Communist parties and orthodox splits from reformed parties. They are effectively anti-capitalist and maintain that an alternative social and economic order is possible.¹¹ The essence of their appeal is a combination of populism, nationalism,¹² and authoritarianism with socialism. Many of these characteristics are shared with the radical right, but the latter (with the exception of the PRM and its admiration for the Ceausescu era) tends to reject previous regimes.

The East European radical right is a counterpart of the Western populist radical right.¹³ In their appeal, these parties combine populism, nationalism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. Usually, they refer to the legacy of pre-war nationalism in their countries. Typically, these have been smaller formations, operating from the margins of the party system but sporadically gaining prominence. Occasionally, they have allied with their national-populist counterparts in anti-transformation coalitions, but have never dominated them.

Parties classified under social populism constitute a marginal category of the remnants of the traditional agrarian populism which in its classic instances was based on “an anti-elitist ideology in which the peasant was

**Table 1. Unorthodox Parties in East Central Europe
According to Ideological Components of Their Appeal**

Core components of ideology Parties	SOC.	AUTH.	XENO.	NAT.	POPUL.
Radical Left (early 1990s) BSP (before 2001); KS M; KSS; ZRS	×	×		×	×
Radical Right (throughout 1990s) PRM; PUNR; SNS (Slovak); MIÉP; LPR; TKL; SRS; SNS (Slovenian, before 2000); HSP; ATAKA		×	×	×	×
Social Populism (mid 1990s) FKgP, SO, ERL	×			×	×
National Populism (up to 2000)		×		×	×
SPS	×	×	×	×	×
PDSR (before 2001)	×	×	×	×	×
HDZ	×	×	×	×	×
HZDS	×	×		×	×
New (Centrist) Populism (late 1990s, early 2000s) SOP, Smer, ANO, JL, RP, NDSV, DP, LDP, VNDPS					×

Note: SOC = socialism; AUTH = authoritarianism, XENO = xenophobia; NAT = nationalism; and POPUL = populism.

Party acronyms stand for the following: ANO—Alliance of a New Citizenry (Slovakia); ATAKA—Coalition Attack (Bulgaria); BSP—Bulgarian Socialist Party; DP—Labor Party (Lithuania); ERL—Estonian People's Union; FKgP—Independent Smallholder's Party (Hungary); HDZ—Croatian Democratic Community; HSP—Croatian Party of Rights; HZDS—Movement for Democratic Slovakia; JL—New Era (Latvia); LDP—Liberal Democrat Party—Order and Justice (Lithuania); LPR—League of Polish Families; MIÉP—Hungarian Life and Justice Party; PRM—Greater Romania Party; NDSV—National Movement of Simeon II (Bulgaria); PUNR—Party of the Romanian National Unity; RP—Res Publica (Estonia); SNS (Slovenian)—Slovenian National Party; SNS (Slovak)—Slovak National Party; KS M—Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia; KSS—Communist Party of Slovakia; PDSR—Social Democratic Party of Romania; SOP—Party of Civic Understanding (Slovakia); SPS—Socialist Party of Serbia; SRS—Serbian Radical Party; SO—Self-Defense (Poland); TKL—Movement for Latvia; VNDPS—Union of Farmer and New Democracy Party (Lithuania); ZRS—Slovak Workers Association.

considered the source of morality and agricultural life, the basis of well-functioning society."¹⁴ These were parties resenting the impact of industrial capitalism on traditional farming.

In the 1990s, the mildly transformed remnants of the agrarian populism (those which did not merge into the mainstream) tried to find a place

on the ‘anti-capitalist’ side of the political spectrum, becoming similar to the radical left. This was namely the case of SO in Poland, with its origins in peasant trade unions and with its action-oriented, radical protest activities.

Other cases, namely Hungarian FkGP, came closer to the nationalist conservatives (the Hungarian Democratic Forum, later Fidesz in Hungary). After decades of collectivisation of agriculture they were clearly losing the support of the farming population (post-communist parties and various interest groups were the beneficiaries of their support). Thus, their politics grew to be a vague but aggressive political populism estranging them from other actors in the national politics.

The national-populist group is rather heterogeneous. These parties differ from those classified above in that they do not appeal as much to xenophobia or praise of previous regimes to garner support. National-populist parties differ from the radical right by a notably stronger emphasis on legacies of “existing socialism.” Unlike the radical right, national populists are more often than not large formations occupying the center of political systems, capable of attracting substantial popular support and dominating ruling coalitions. Their strategies have been markedly shaped by post-communist conditions.¹⁵

National populists “feature nationalism as a prominent element of their electoral appeal and claim to represent the interests of an often mythical and idealized national collectivity,” but they refrain from radical actions, and “in ideological terms, nationalism is often supplemented by a broader non-nationalist policy agenda aimed at specific groups . . . or social groups disadvantaged by economic reforms . . . rather than being the party’s only *raison d’être*.”¹⁶ Their success is therefore attributed not only to pure nationalistic tendencies, but also to the national populists’ appeal to citizens whose lives were shattered by regime change. The national populist parties address the people as members of a national community, and contend that their misery is caused by external enemies and treacherous local anti-national elites who push through reforms demolishing the living standards of the masses.

When in power, the national populists resort to authoritarian-style adjusting of the rules to their advantage, but they certainly cannot be considered foes of democracy. They accept democracy, but in a populist manner try to legitimise its extreme majoritarian versions. Typically, their dominance in the 1990s was brought to an end by opposition coalitions of largely orthodox parties leaning toward the liberal-democratic mainstream.

The prototypical parties of new populism are non-radical challengers mobilizing disappointed electorates against under-performing and morally failing established parties.

Rise of the New Anti-Establishment Politics

The final category in Table 1, new “centrist” populism, emerged around the turn of the century. The prototypical parties of new populism are non-radical challengers mobilizing disappointed electorates against under-performing and morally failing established parties. Particularly in their initial periods, they shy away from ideological pledges and label ideology as harmful to true democratic politics. Their appeal contains numerous references to common sense and rational solutions on which political decision-making should be based. Frequently, these parties are based on dominant leaders who present their political projects and solicit public support.

These parties are in no case anti-democratic, anti-capitalist or anti-Western. In a true populist vein, their tough anti-establishment appeal is directed against *all* previous configurations of the ruling elite (although in some cases, proponents of the new anti-establishment politics may have been part of this elite). Dominance of anti-establishment posture over ideology in political projects may be the grounds for considering them “the ‘purest’ populist parties, since they are almost completely unencumbered by ideological constraints, and are therefore free to tell the voters what they want to hear (and maybe even more importantly, avoid telling them what they do not want to hear).”¹⁷ In other words, it is possible to see them as a moderate manifestation of populist ideology, only lightly attached to more complex ideologies and indulging themselves primarily in the critique of the establishment.

In their appeal they blame the entire establishment, in all its manifestations since regime change, for misrepresentation, immoral conduct, and poor governance. They offer “to square the transition circle”¹⁸ by increasing living standards, safeguarding Western orientation, stopping radicals, and fighting corruption—all tasks in which the previous establishment failed. The central themes of their message are curbing corruption, improving responsiveness, and promoting economic development.

Their political opportunities are determined by the conditions in which they grew, which were largely defined by the mainstream parties. Periods of original anti-communist movements were, after their early disintegration, replaced by an era dominated by pragmatic liberals (Slovenia, Latvia), national populists (Slovakia, Croatia), or alternations between the post-communist left and pro-reform right (Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria). As the dominant liberals and national populists were eventually defeated by opposition coalitions, by the late 1990s populations in post-communist countries lived under two major versions of post-communism—and were disenchanted by both.

Because of transition costs, notorious failures of parties to deliver on promises and policies, and unbridled favoritism and corruption, certain significant groups of voters became attracted to new actors promising an alternative way. Disillusioned with the traditional actors and their conduct, and feeling neglected and betrayed, voters faced a choice between resignation and protest. For those who believed the option of a mainstream protest

vote was exhausted,¹⁹ an offer of the *homini nuovi* with their “new politics” came to be seen as a solution. Under these conditions, the benign populist call for honesty and common sense became a promising and inexpensive strategy to marshal popular support.

Thus, as we move from an initial outburst of pluralism in the aftermath of the regime change toward the turn of the century, ideological components in general, and nationalism in particular, are losing importance

for characterizing new instances of unorthodox politics in the region. East European new populism is largely free from nationalist mobilization; what matters more is the anti-establishment appeal. It is a politics of newcomers who opt for a strategy based on discrediting a post-communist establishment that is hardly a decade old.

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Specific Illustrations of New Populism

The narrative here departs from the prototype and considers real-life manifestations of the recent anti-establishment mood. A summary of the argument is presented in Table 2.

The emergence of the *Party of Civic Understanding (SOP)* before the 1998 elections was a prelude to the rise of new anti-establishment politics in Slovakia. In the midst of conflict between the ruling national-populist camp and liberal-democratic opposition, SOP came with a message blaming both sides for damaging policies. Calling for civic understanding, the party positioned itself as a mediating force and presented itself as a ‘third way’ between the two ideological bullies. Even though it partly redefined its mission as defeating Meiar’s regime and safeguarding the country’s Western orientation, its non-ideological distance from the mainstream was clearly the source of its success in obtaining support.

A year later in 1999, with the creation of *Smer* by the maverick leftist politician Robert Fico, a much stronger anti-establishment appeal entered the stage. While he remained in the ranks of the ruling coalition, Fico called for the renewal of elites. After departing from his Party of the Democratic Left, his critique of traditional politics grew more vocal and more complex.

Upon forming a full-fledged anti-establishment party, he denounced ideology as a distraction from real problems, criticized partisanship, denied any differences within the political establishment and portrayed its performance as a failure. Against the backdrop of traditional ideology-based politics, his party subscribed to rationalism, pragmatism, and common sense.

The concept of the ‘third way’ played an important role in *Smer*’s early appeal for some time. While claiming to reject ideology, Fico tried to capitalize on left-wing interpretations of *Smer* as a Slovak version of “The

Table 2. Political Projects of the Anti-Establishment Populist Parties

Breakthrough strategy		General ideological inclination			Parties	
Purifiers	Prophets	Prolocutors	LIB	CON		None
×			×		×	Party of Civic Understanding—SOP (Slovakia; in campaign)
×					×	Party of Civic Understanding—SOP (Slovakia; in power)
	×			×	×	Smer—Social Democracy (Slovakia; 1999-2003)
	×				×	Smer—Social Democracy (Slovakia; 2003 -)
×			×			Alliance of a New Citizen—ANO (Slovakia)
		×	×		×	National Movement Simeon II—NDSV (Bulgaria)
		×		×		Liberal Democrat Party—LDP (Lithuania)
		×		×		Labor Party—DP (Lithuania)
		×		×		Union of Farmer and New Democracy Party—VNDPS (Lithuania)
×			×		×	Res Publica—RP (Estonia; in campaign)
×				×		Res Publica—RP (Estonia; in power)
×				×		New Era—JL (Latvia)

Note: Breakthrough strategy directly refers to new parties' political projects. Prolocutors are parties that claim to advocate interests (particular ones or those of general population) without a direct reference to and pledge for any ideology. Purifiers, on the contrary, come with ideological projects; they assert their ideology was "diluted and betrayed" by the established parties. Finally, prophetic parties present their own ideologies or a mix of ideological elements. As the classification was taken over from Lucardie¹ in its entirety, we have not excluded a prophetic category even though we have not found its instance among the researched parties. This, however, can not be excluded in case of future challengers.

¹ Lucardie, Paul. "Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors. Towards a Theory on Emergence of New Parties." *Party Politics* 6, no. 2 (2000): 175-185.

Third Way.” However, *Smer* mixed lukewarm leftist socio-economic policies with a harsh stance on law-and-order issues.

What both SOP and *Smer* had in common was accusing mainstream parties of putting ideological squabbles before solving real problems. They claimed to be non-ideological actors protecting the interests of a general public that had been abandoned and mistreated by the elite. Before the 2002 elections, a new anti-establishment player, the *Alliance of a New Citizen* (ANO), brought a different type of critique.²⁰

ANO portrayed itself as a more effective and honest force in politics, capable of implementing reforms introduced by the post-1998 government. It appealed to people who did not consider themselves the victims of reforms, but merely alleged that they were slow and prone to corruption and clientelism. Doing away with Meiar-era clientelism was one of the most appreciated pledges of the new party. *Smer* and ANO’s critique of the establishment’s conduct benefited from this sense of stagnation. ANO, however, appealed to disenchantment with the ruling class’s political conduct and an economic liberalism point of view. Founded by television mogul Pavol Rusko and thus blessed with considerable media support, the party has often been likened to *Forza Italia*-style ‘business-firm’ parties.

All three parties managed to win seats in parliament, but then their fortunes began to diverge. SOP lost popular support soon after abandoning its anti-establishment platform and losing credibility as an opponent of corruption. After an agonizing period of flirting with the “third way” and social democracy it eventually merged with *Smer*. *Smer*, after failing to make electoral gains in 2002, veered toward conventional left-wing politics. It positioned itself as a ‘socially radical alternative to the right-wing government’, and after a series of mergers with small social-democratic parties it came to dominate left-of-center political space in Slovakia. This paved the way to its electoral victory in 2006. The party, however, remained a kind of hybrid, resorting regularly to its traditional anti-establishment rhetoric.

The Slovak case is an illustrative example of using centrism as a means of differentiation from existing parties. Splitting the ideological space between parties, which need not coincide with the ideological center of the spectrum, allowed new parties to take advantage of polarized political systems. Newcomers found a middle ground between antagonistic camps. Centrism in the service of anti-establishment appeals offered an opportunity both to overcome or bridge conflicts and to bring new faces and policies forward.

In Bulgaria, popular protests against the BSP-led government in the mid-1990s paved the way to power for the right-of-center opposition. In 2001, widespread disillusionment with its governance created an opportunity for the most spectacular breakthrough of a new challenger in the region. Created three months before parliamentary elections by the former Bulgarian monarch Simeon, *National Movement Simeon II* (NDSV) launched an anti-establishment appeal intended to capture discontented voters.

Promises to quickly improve living standards and eliminate corruption resonated among the impoverished majority of Bulgarians, and NDSV garnered almost 43 percent of votes and exactly half the seats in the 2001

parliamentary elections. During its largely ineffective period of rule (in a coalition with a Turkish ethnic party and with tacit support of the Socialists), NDSV suffered from factionalism and policy indecisiveness and rapidly lost popular support. Ideologically, it attempted to woo the conservatives of the European People's Party, but after being rebuffed by them it ended up in the camp of the European liberals (ELDR).

NDSV failed to live up to expectations. It functioned much like a mainstream party, and after the dissatisfying tenure of this former anti-establishment mobilizer, Bulgarians seemed open to more trustworthy critical voices in politics. The radical nationalists of ATAKA, who scored an unexpected success in the 2005 elections, and a new champion of anti-corruption populism, General Boyko Borissov, have stepped forward to fulfill these roles. Despite the notable failures of NDSV, the party did manage to end a pattern of bipolar competition in Bulgaria.

In the Baltic countries, the common feature has been an alarmingly low rate of popular participation in politics, and low election turnout in particular. This trend began to appear in the 1990s, earlier than most of the other post-communist states.

In Lithuania, the social democrats (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, or LSDP) and the conservatives (Homeland Union, or TS) alternated power through the 1990s. Their polarized conflict was to a great extent overcome in the 2000 elections when the LSDP-led coalition took power on the strength of a platform of open markets and Western orientation. The surge of populism after the year 2000²¹ can be read as a profound disenchantment with this result²² by the impoverished rural population of “the elite-abandoned, long-suffering, divided, and depressed Lithuania, longing for something like the equality-in-misery it knew in the Soviet Union.”²³

In 2001 Rolandas Paksas, an unscrupulous politician with a disappointing record as two-time prime minister but strong personal charisma, parted with mainstream politics in an effort to propel his presidential ambitions. His *Liberal Democrat Party* (LDP) lacked ideological substance. It was a mix of “liberalism towards business, social policy based on labor, and order in the state”²⁴—a vague marriage of anti-establishment critiques. Paksas won Lithuania's 2003 presidential election, but illicit financial connections to a major campaign donor led to his impeachment in 2004. Paksas continued his anti-establishment crusade with the LDP re-characterized as the “Order and Justice” party.

The *Labor Party* (DP)'s emergence in 2003 was a different kind of opportunistic reaction. It represented a shift from a call for an “iron order” towards the exuberant promises of economic development for ordinary Lithuanians—promises by no means restricted by considerations of public finance stability. A strong social—but not socialist—appeal by DP was oriented toward rural voters, and articulate in its anti-establishment critique. DP refused to identify itself with any ideology, considering ideological parties to be “the old-fashioned way of party engineering.”²⁵ The tendency of Lithuanians to trust challengers rather than established parties resulted in a populist zeitgeist in the 2004 parliamentary elections. The three parties

considered populist—DP, LDP, and the *Union of Farmers and New Democracy* party (VNDPS)—won nearly half of the vote. Two of them, DP and VNDPS, formed a ruling coalition with the social democrats and social liberals.

In general, Lithuanian anti-establishment populism lacks a coherent and consistent set of principles. Its ability to mobilize voters depends on appealing to their disenchantment, rather than offering a viable set of alternative policies. There is a tendency for “gray populists” to “simply paint a gloomy picture of the present-day political and social situation.”²⁶

Estonia’s case was somewhat similar to Slovakia’s. In the late 1990s, its political system became bogged down in conflicts between the ruling coalition of disparate liberal and conservative parties and its traditional powerful challenger—a personalistic vehicle of the Center Party. In 2001, *Res Publica* (RP) emerged in an effort to take advantage of political stagnation and the unpopularity of the conservative-led government’s economic policies. RP called for increased transparency, political reforms, and greater popular participation in the political process. It labeled traditional parties as outdated. This message resonated among youth and urban voters, and the party used various social issues to solicit popular support.

Although refusing to define itself ideologically, RP, in retrospective assessment of its founding chairman, was a “purifying bridge.”²⁷ It claimed its superior ‘democratic competence’ over traditional parties and sought a middle ground between the two existing approaches (uncompromising liberalism and social populism) that allegedly polarized the polity. After its electoral victory, however, RP succumbed to many of the vices it previously ascribed to the establishment. When the party largely failed to achieve the reforms it promised, its anti-establishment appeal vanished. *Res Publica* drifted toward economic liberalism and a conservative social stance, eventually merging with the conservative *Pro Patria Union* in 2006.

Latvia experienced its first wave of political populism in the mid 1990s. The success of the *Movement for Latvia* (TKL) and the *Democratic Party* “*Saimnieks*” (DPS) in 1995 was a popular reaction to post-independence reliance on neoliberal economic solutions. TKL and DPS proved to be transitory forces. Their supporters were partly co-opted in 1998 by the *People’s Party* (TP), a new project initiated by the established elites in response to calls for political reform. TP soon became a major mainstream party.

The traditional vices of Latvian party politics—government volatility, opportunism, and privatization scandals—seemed to coalesce before the 2003 parliamentary elections. In this environment a fresh party, *New Era* (JL), entered the political scene. *New Era* was unusual among other challenger parties in the region in that from the beginning it defined itself as a center-right party. Its anti-establishment appeal was articulated bluntly and in a conspicuously messianic manner. *New Era* called for transparency and accountability of ruling elites to the public, claiming that corrupt parties had betrayed Latvia’s national interests.²⁸

This platform found a receptive audience, and *New Era* won the 2003 parliamentary elections and joined the ruling coalition. Unusually, the party retained its sharp disrespect for establishment politics while in power, which

constrained its relationship with coalition partners and eventually led to the government's downfall. *New Era* continues to interpret this result in conspiratorial terms, as a reaction by entrenched elites to the new party's success in eliminating corruption. Despite these complications, the party retained its popularity and remained the top competitor in Latvia's 2006 elections.

Benign and Transient Populism?

Post-communist populism is a dynamic phenomenon. Broadly speaking, the region has experienced a shift from radical forms of populist politics blended with nationalism and authoritarianism to more benign variations. Parties of the new populism mobilize voters across a range of issues, particularly in assailing the conduct of the post-communist establishment. Although it could be argued that the rise of ATAKA in Bulgaria, SNS in Slovakia, and SRS in Serbia marks a resurgence of ethnocentric populism, these are country-specific exceptions rather than the norm.

New anti-establishment parties embraced 'pure' populism as an essential tool in realizing electoral gains. Unlike their radical counterparts on the left and right, they largely succeeded the national populists of the 1990s in attracting popular support and shaping governments. Although some of them turned out to be short-lived (e.g. SOP, ANO, and *Res Publica*), others persisted even at the price of blunting their anti-establishment edge and being subsumed into mainstream politics (e.g. *Smer*, NDSV, and possibly *New Era*).

The deadly sin of unorthodox politics in the region seems to be not a refutation of democracy, but rather a lack of moderation and self-restraint by both challengers *and* the mainstream. Populist parties have employed a multitude of strategies (not only challengers but also mainstream parties toying with populism). They have variously served as acceptable coalition

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partners for mainstream parties (Slovak SNS, SO, LPR), entered the mainstream (HZDS, NDSV, *Res Publica*), adopted populist rhetoric in political competition to defeat opponents (*Fidesz* in Hungary), and displayed a stubborn unwillingness to compromise (*Law and Justice* in Poland).

Grigore Pop-Eleches conjectured several years ago that, barring a spectacular change in the domestic and/or international parameters of the post Communist transition, electoral politics in Eastern Europe are likely to navigate the turbulent waters between the Scylla of opportunist mainstream parties and the Charybdis of unpredictable and possibly extremist unorthodox parties. Faced with these choices, the most palatable outcome seems to be the benign anti-politics of new centrist populist parties.²⁹

In retrospect it seems clear that benign populists have impacted national politics in several ways. They gave a warning signal to stagnant established parties and in many cases pushed them to accelerate changes. Undoubtedly, they influenced patterns of party competition and coalition practices in their countries. They also expanded voters' choices and served as an outlet for disenchanting voting publics. They channeled discontent toward support for their own moderate political proposals.

However, the new populists proved vulnerable to the same weaknesses and failures as their mainstream predecessors, perpetuating the cycle of disappointment and perhaps only postponing real political crises for the future. They demonstrated to electorates that hopes attached to promises of the forerunners of 'new politics' should not be very high.

New strains of populism did reveal the vulnerability of traditional parties. Emerging challenger parties' emphasis on honesty, transparency, and accountability in politics threatened the political establishment. Despite their many shortcomings and inconsistencies, the new wave of populist parties succeeded in challenging the status quo and testing the post-communist establishment in East Central Europe.

The question remains how electorates will read the results of these tests. Preliminarily, the 2006 series of elections in Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Latvia witnessed the continuation of the trend of falling turnout. More importantly, with the exception of the Czech Greens and Latvian Harmony Center no new party made it to parliaments; certainly none campaigning on articulate anti-establishment appeal. In this respect these results sharply differ from Polish and Bulgarian elections in 2005.

Could it be read as that the era of populist challengers is over? Or that other kind of challengers than benign populists will win the trust of disaffected voters in the near future? Or even that these voters—former supporters of 'new politics'—came back to support the mainstream or retired definitively from politics leaving establishment in safe position for a time being? All these questions will have to be addressed in future research in order to assess accurately the impact of 'centrist' populism on national politics.

Notes

¹ Canovan, Margaret. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16; Taggart, Paul. "Populism and Pathology of Representative Democracy." In *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Ives Surel, 62–80. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002; Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 3 (2004): 542–564.

² Canovan, op. cit., 3.

³ Mény, Yves and Ives Surel. "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism." In *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Ives Surel, 62–80. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, 8.

⁴ Taggart, op. cit., 74.

⁵ Mudde, op. cit., 543.

⁶ Mudde, op. cit., 544.

⁷ For example, Vladimír Tismaneanu sees populism as "a political strategy to generate mass mobilization and enthusiasm for a leader and a party (or movement) among heterogeneous

social groups by opposing the established political arrangements and pledging their fundamental regeneration, often at the expense of minority and human rights and liberties, social, economic, and political life.” Tismaneanu, Vladimir. “Hypotheses on Populism: The Politics of Charismatic Protest.” *East European Politics and Societies* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 11.

⁸For the purposes of this article, I accept the idea of contrasting orthodox and unorthodox parties, even though we may not fully agree with the characteristics of orthodoxy and the resulting taxonomy of parties.

⁹Pop-Eleches, Grigore. “Radicalization or Protest Vote? Explaining the Success of Unorthodox Parties in Eastern Europe.” Paper presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Pittsburgh, November 21–24, 2002: 4.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹For a full definition, see March, Luke and Cas Mudde. “What’s Left of the Radical Left? The European Radical Left After 1989: Decline and Mutation.” *Comparative European Politics* 3, no. 3 (2005): 25.

¹²Although in the West the radical right is essentially internationalist, in Eastern Europe it holds true as far as the critique of capitalism is concerned; the local radical left, however, to a different degree, is not immune to ethnic nationalism.

¹³For more on the Western radical right, see Mudde, Cas. “Anti-System Politics.” In *Developments in European Politics*, edited by Paul M Heywood, Erik Jones, Martin Rhodes and Ulrich Sedelmeier, 179–195. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006.

¹⁴Mudde, Cas. “In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populism in Eastern Europe.” In *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, 214–232. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, 215.

¹⁵Although often considered the Communist successor parties, they are not, certainly not *de jure*. They are survivors of the initial anti-communist movements (SPS, HDZ) or their successors (PDSR, HZDS). Often they resulted from an effort of former Communist cadres to remain in power and obtain new identity and legitimacy by adopting nationalist ideas (SPS, PDSR), but they were also vehicles for people who were not significantly engaged in the previous regime (HZDS).

¹⁶Pop-Eleches, op. cit., 6.

¹⁷Pop-Eleches, op. cit., 7.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Pop-Eleches, op.cit., 16.

²⁰For a detailed account of appeals of the three parties, see Učeň, Peter. “Centrist Populism as New Competitive and Mobilization Strategy in Slovak Politics.” In *Party Government in Slovakia: Experience and Perspectives*, edited by Olga Gyárfášová and Grigorij Mesežnikov, 45–74. Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2004.

²¹Actually, Lithuania’s prelude to the populist wave was the electoral success of the New Union (NS) in 1998, which was created as an instrument for aspiring leader Arturas Paulauskas and his presidential campaign.

²²For a refinement of this statement and for more factors leading to changes within Lithuania conducive to populism in 1998–2000, see Adomenas, Mantas. “The Failure of the Conservative Project in Lithuania.” In *Why We Lost. Explaining the Rise and Fall of the Center-Right Parties in Central Europe*, edited by Peter Učeň and Jan Erik Surotchak, 51–70. Bratislava: International Republican Institute, 2005.

²³Donskis, Leonidas. “The Autumn of Lithuania’s Discontent.” *Transitions Online* (December 5, 2003), <http://www.tol.cz>.

²⁴RFE/RL Newline, Vol. 6, No. 46 (March 11, 2002).

²⁵Seputyte, Milda. “Labor’s Populist Promises Fraught with National Bankruptcy.” *The Baltic Times*, September 2, 2004.

²⁶Lang, Kai-Olaf. “Populism in Central and Eastern Europe—A Threat to Democracy or Just Political Folklore?” *Slovak Foreign Policy Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 11.

²⁷Taagepera, Rein. “Meteoric Rise: Res Publica in Estonia, 2001–2004.” Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine, Working Paper, no. 2 (2005), 7.

²⁸See Ozoliņš, Uldis. “What’s So New About New Era?” *Latvians Online* (September 30, 2002), <http://latviansonline.com/index.php/site/print/1245>.

²⁹Pop-Eleches, op. cit., 25.